

Against Nostalgia

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Against Nostalgia

by [HouseOfHurricane](#)

Summary

Fifteen years after the end of the second war against Voldemort, Hermione Granger is invited to Hogwarts for a one-year appointment as the professor for History of Magic, forcing her to take a break from a successful career at the Ministry of Magic.

Draco Malfoy, meanwhile, is Hogwarts' Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. He's a former Auror, despite the fact that he still bears the Dark Mark.

Though there's mutual distrust between them, sparks quickly fly between Hermione and Draco...sometimes literally. And although the war is long over, it doesn't take an interest in History of Magic to see that history is intent on repeating.

Between them, Hermione and Draco have the power to shatter the world they know. Or, maybe, they could make it into something new.

Imagine if they fell in love at the same time.

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Against Nostalgia is a novel-length dark academia Dramione fic.

Next update: January 2.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

The overall vibe of this fic is literary fiction + dark academia with semi-unhinged sex scenes. In other words, it takes a little bit to get where we're going, but we'll get there, and it will be hot.

The title of this fic is from Ada Limón's [poem of the same name](#).

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



DRAMIONE  FANFICTION

HOUSEOFHURRICANE

Against Nostalgia

Cover art by [Carol Pizarro](#).

He said, "It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us."

And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

— *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino

August 2013. Scotland. Fifteen years after the Battle of Hogwarts.

The Forbidden Forest is so dark around him that Draco moves on instinct alone, his Auror training leading him towards the scent of Dark magic. He ignores the burn in his forearm, the Mark that's hidden under his robes and the thick jumper beneath them.

Even in August, the land around Hogwarts is fucking freezing.

But then, Draco is used to the trees that blot out starlight and the pain that blurs the sharp edges of his thoughts. He's made these little jaunts for three years now, in colder weather.

What concerns him now, more than cold or darkness or pain, is the threatening tone in the barely-ciphered note he'd received in the early hours of the morning, Ulysses banging against the window in his haste to get inside, leaving gouges on the glass with his talons.

You'd better meet us in the usual spot, the letter had said, written in a jagged and vaguely familiar hand, the quill pressed deep enough to tear the parchment. Not exactly subtle, but the point was more than clear: he was in deep shit, and he'd more than likely be walking blind into a trap.

However stupid he might think the Faithful Hand are, they're the only group of Voldemort worshippers who have persisted longer than a year in the current peace.

It's possible he's gotten complacent. Usually his pedigree and the Dark Mark have been enough to dazzle anyone with evil aspirations. For the past few years, Draco has passed along half-true tidbits of little importance to the handful of loyal members to the Highlands cell of the Faithful, plastering the old sneer on his face, impersonating his father as much as he can stomach, and those mangy pretenders have lapped up every word, have stared so intensely at the tattoo on his arm that he feels their adoring gazes like the touch of fire.

The note tells him he might have to try harder from now on.

Finally, the trees around him thin, and as he approaches the clearing, Draco casts the subtlest detection spell in his arsenal, barely flicking his wand. There are the two wizards he expected, and a witch he hadn't anticipated, young enough that he didn't attend Hogwarts with her, old enough that he never had her in class.

But, as Draco allows his footsteps to crackle the fallen leaves on the forest floor, it's her voice that yells *Expelliarmus!*

There are counterspells, of course, which he mastered as an Auror in the field, but Draco simply lets his wand fall away, gauging its location from the sound it makes against the ground.

He fixes his eyes on the three people in front of him. He raises his hands, palms up. Surrender, or at least its postures, has become habit for him since Hogwarts. They still want to believe his cover, or he would, at minimum, be bound and biting back a scream.

“We know you killed Agnew,” Emerson Macnair says, approaching him with a wand in one hand and a knife in the other.

It’s stupid, to reveal so much without preamble. And anyway, it’s true, which means that Draco has already given thought to how to lie most effectively.

“What happened?” He gives the words a hint of desperation. The loss of the Faithful’s local leader would hit him hard, if anything he said were real.

“Kedavraed while he was walking to the pub,” the witch says, her fingers gripping tight to her wand. “We recognised your magic.”

It was a risk to use the Killing Curse. Not every wizard can cast it, and the strength of will required meant that, three days ago, he’d been in that Highland village without a way to properly disguise himself.

“He was giving us up to the Ministry,” Draco tells them, making the words sound forced, gritted through his teeth.

“Why should we believe you?” The shorter wizard draws up to him now, wand drawn. Caelan Wallace is a coward, though, and will not strike unless the others do.

Draco slumps forward, his palms back up.

“Because they came to me a week before I killed Agnew.”

“What did they offer you?” The witch looks him in the eyes, illuminating the tip of her wand to better discern the truth in his expression.

“Nothing I haven’t been offered before. Pain, mostly, or the absence of it.” Without quite planning it, his fingers brush over the thick scar that runs from his thigh and his kneecap, deep as the bone. “They made the mistake of training me well. Eventually I was able to convince them I knew nothing. That none of us knows anything.”

“Why bring us into it?” Wallace asks, the way Draco knew he would. Macnair only steps forward, knife raised before his wand, a quirk that would have made Draco certain he was a Squib if not for the fact that all three of them can summon some curse that activates the Mark on his arm. Something only Voldemort could do, once.

It’s an ability that keeps the Ministry very interested in the Faithful Hand. Despite Draco’s three years playing double agent in the Highlands cell, and the Ministry’s other monitoring

efforts, no one seems entirely certain as to what they're capable of, even with their leaders' periodic removal.

"The Ministry's Aurors came to me with your names. I denied each one in turn. But they had Agnew telling them everything already."

There's a shout and a flash of light, and Draco feels the binding hex biting into his wrists. If he hadn't worked so hard to deaden certain instincts, he might be afraid in this moment. Instead, he goes still and calm.

"Why should we believe you?" she asks, and he realises in that moment that he knew her once, long ago, at a party for certain Pureblood families with darker sympathies hosted at the Malfoy manor, where children were paraded around by their parents like trophies, bred for power and glory. She'd been a girl-child with a silver ribbon in her dark hair, her pudgy fingers snatching at the hem of his robes, still unable to pronounce his name without a lisp. He'd been caught up in his rivalry with Potter, obsessed with the new Firebolt in his room, but her name still comes to him across the years. Ruby Docherty, the youngest daughter in a minor Pureblood family, too unimportant to be Death Eaters.

Their saving grace, in the end, to be inconsequential. Even if Ruby seems insistent on discarding that promise of salvation.

He watches her nod, and then the knife is pressed against his neck. Better than the Cruciatus he expected, even if the dripping blood will ruin his jumper.

"We don't believe you," Wallace rumbles in his ear. "And if the Ministry is onto us, we can't just lie back and take it."

"What do you want, then?"

"Give us Hogwarts," Ruby says, and there's a light in her dark eyes, some conviction that made a clever witch from a decent family roam the Scottish wilds with known and hunted Dark wizards.

"Why?"

He expects a manifesto, and so Draco isn't entirely surprised by the rustling of paper. But when Macnair shows him a week-old edition of *The Daily Prophet*, he's thrown. There's nothing of note in those pages. In fact, he'd thrown that edition right in the bin. The headline was about fucking *kneazles*. As if there could be anything more prosaic, any greater indication that, to all intents and purposes, their world is at peace.

Then Macnair's grubby fingers turn the pages, again and again and again, until he reaches the middle of the newspaper, and thrusts it into Draco's field of vision so that he can't avoid seeing the woman in headshot. The witch who seems to know, even trapped in parchment, that she'd best avert her eyes from his.

"Hermione Granger is coming to Hogwarts. Do you know what it would mean, if we could take a member of the Golden Trio?" Ruby's voice wavers with the barely-repressed delight of

the true believer.

She's the most dangerous of them right now, but it's possible she could be swayed. True belief, undiluted by avarice or greed, is always the easiest to fracture. Granger herself would have some kind of inspirational speech about that. Draco hasn't spoken with Hermione Granger in years, since his stint in the rehabilitation camp, after the war, and still he's certain of this fact.

She did her level best to avoid his gaze that whole year. Of course, after everything, he'd deserved it.

He tries not to dwell on this as he says, "Killing Hermione Granger would only get you quashed like a worm by Potter and Weasley. Don't forget that thanks to Agnew, they know exactly who you are. What is it you really want?"

Ruby's lips purse as she considers. Macnair and Wallace shift from foot to foot, watching her.

"Hogwarts," she says, finally, in the kind of whisper that is louder than a scream.

"Why?"

"Hogwarts is where the Dark Lord fell. It's where the next Dark Lord will rise. Where we will raise his armies. Our children will know the way of things, and fight for them as we should have done."

For a moment, Draco sees a flash of himself at sixteen, his wand-hand trembling as he faced Dumbledore. That same boy who had left that particular failure, wand in hand, and had cast whatever horrors Voldemort required. He'd thought of himself as so old, then, so capable of anything. He'd thought he understood everything about the world.

He will never stop atoning for the wretch of a boy he was. For the nightmares he unleashed on the world.

He cants his chin toward Ruby, mindful of the way Macnair's knife presses a little harder against the skin of his neck. "Do you have a candidate in mind for your next Dark Lord?"

She watches him for a few seconds too many, and Draco wonders if she's going to offer him as a candidate. If all these threats were toothless in the end. Because he has no desire to lead this world, for dark or for light.

Then she shakes her head.

"How can he ascend without a throne? We'll give him the opportunity, and he will rise. Perhaps even from among the current students. I'm certain there are candidates in Slytherin. Give us Hogwarts, and we will make a new world together." Ruby pauses and her painted lips pull back to offer him a smile, dangerous and too bright. "Give us Hogwarts, and we'll believe you had a good reason for killing Agnew."

It's hardly more than blackmail, but Draco nods his assent as if the matter is already accomplished. Even though he knows that Hogwarts is a symbol, and a powerful one, of all

that this world has overcome, all it can be.

If this farce continues to its fullest extent, he will allow them to enter, he'll rend the wards if he has to, and then he will destroy them, damn whatever the Ministry might say.

And for all Hogwarts might imply to the wizarding world, the school is also a trap, a battlefield, a graveyard. Would it be so terrible if it were only a building?

"Make the Unbreakable Vow, then," Macnair says, the knife finding a new spot on his neck, one that's altogether too close to his pulse.

"What are we agreeing to, exactly?" He has no advantage in a negotiation, bound as he is, but the magic will hear a subtle turn of phrase better than these idiots.

"You will let us into Hogwarts and you will help us kill Hermione Granger."

He shakes his head. "I will let you into Hogwarts. You can kill Granger on your own."

"You will bring her to us when we ask for her."

Granger will kill them all with a flick of her wand, even after all her years behind a desk in the Ministry. He hasn't laid eyes on her in fourteen years, and still he knows this to be certain.

He nods his agreement to the terms, still playing at insouciance, and Ruby steps forward, speaking the Vow aloud, a thin ribbon of fire following the movements of her wand as she circles it around Draco's bound wrists, then Wallace's and Macnair's, and then her own.

He wonders, dimly, if the wizards only thought to bring her for the casting of this incantation, not even considering that they might have managed to expand their rotten schemes beyond the seedier corners of Inverness with Ruby leading them instead of Agnew.

He thinks, then, of Hermione Granger. What she could have been if she'd allowed herself to become the hero instead of Potter. If there had been no prophecy in play, only the strength of her will against the encroaching darkness of their war.

Then he feels Ruby's eyes on him, and he speaks the words that will bind him to this magic, the words echoing around him from the mouths of the Faithful. "I swear to honour this Vow," he says, "or forfeit my life."

The fire disappears, and the binding spell falls away.

"We'll write again when we're ready to meet," Wallace says, with a final little thrust of the knife, deep enough to send a spill of blood down Draco's throat.

"Use a better cipher next time," Draco says, with as much condescension as he can risk, given the placement of Wallace's knife.

Ruby waves her wand, and he barely hears her *Stupefy!* before he's waking up, hours later, the sunlight filtering through the trees and a headache throbbing at his temples.

By some luck, no one has stolen his wand, and he manages to apparate to the edges of the Hogwarts wards. It will be another week before the students arrive, so no one watches Professor Malfoy circle the lake, dodge the Whomping Willow, and enter the castle proper, all while stinking of dirt and sweat and old blood.

Once he's bathed and dressed and eaten, he writes a letter in a proper cipher.

Potter, he writes, the Hand wants Hogwarts and also Granger. I've sworn a Vow.

He details the meeting, with a few paragraphs devoted to Ruby Docherty, the threat of her and his plans to fix all of it. Once he's finished, he translates the letter into a secondary cipher, the way he'd always done in the field, and burns the first letter until it's nothing but dust that he quickly sweeps into the bin with the tip of his wand.

At twilight, his eyelids heavy, he sends Ulysses out with the letter strapped to his talon.

Sleep won't claim him, though, and he stares at the ceiling, his thoughts circling back to those years at Hogwarts, the smirk on his lips and all those curses and *Mudblood Mudblood Mudblood*. It's all he can do to keep from clawing at his skin.

Instead, with a muttered *lumos*, he makes his way to his desk, strewn with syllabi and half-read books, until he finds the letter he'd received three years ago.

I need to know what really happened when we were at Hogwarts, Hermione had written in her clear hand, the ink royal blue and the letters slanted in a way that reminded him of her hand flung into the air during Charms or Transfiguration. Someone else is going to write our history, and it will be wrong. Because they didn't see what we saw. And when I think about it now, I realise that it must have been more awful for you than I'd ever allowed myself to consider. Do you think you could ever tell me about those years? Because I'm trying to write it all down. To write something true.

At the time, Draco had thought the letter was a mistake. Granger had never unleashed so many words on him unless she was in the middle of some righteous tirade.

Then he'd tried to answer it, planning to say, *Of course I will not participate in this fucking interview, Granger, I have no intention of reliving those years, it's already hard enough to lay eyes on my father when I'm required to do so. It's already got so I've started avoiding mirrors.*

Even as he thought about her in the rehabilitation camp after the war, the anguish in her voice as she'd said, *I don't understand why it has to be this way, even you deserve better.* Her dark eyes enormous in a face gaunt from war and the anxiety of witnessing what came next for the villains.

Despite the fact that he knows better, Draco couldn't fully dismiss the possibility that she'd held on to that horror.

Which was why he kept writing bullshit like, *history isn't only about the victors, and I'll do it if you won't look at me with pity or judgement in your eyes, Granger, and I think that would*

be impossible for you, and I'm not sure telling you what happened will make a difference but fuck it, nothing else has helped, and all kinds of variations of I'll do it.

Each new piece of parchment was reduced to scraps before he could summon Ulysses.

Still, even now, he thinks of writing to her, letting his story unspool until it doesn't take up quite so much space beneath his skin. Even if that minor torment is the least of what he deserves.

To suppress the temptation, he spreads out the old copy of the *Prophet* which he'd retrieved, damp from the hours on the Forest floor, and turns the pages until he reaches the article that the Faithful had shaken in front of his face.

Hermione Granger is taking a break from her lauded career in the Ministry of Magic in order to teach History of Magic at Hogwarts for the coming school year. Though it's an open secret she's considered the top candidate for our next Minister as soon as Minister Shacklebolt has had his fill, our sources tell us that this is something of a passion project for Miss Granger, who has always had a fondness for a good library. She's confirmed to be teaching a Contemporary History of Magic course as well, with her recent book as the main text. Though Magic In The Twentieth Century is quite a dense volume (was Miss Granger bent on delivering a longer page count than Hogwarts, A History?), this writer is sure that this year's Hogwarts students will be clamouring to learn from a member of the Golden Trio.

The rest of the piece is stuffed with the obligatory and treacly paragraphs about Granger's career achievements, her post-Hogwarts studies at Oxford, her heroics during the war, even her OWLs and NEWTs. Draco has read all of it before. The papers can never resist blathering on about Granger, Potter, or Weasley when they so much as walk down Diagon Alley.

Even in the candlelight, the photo of Granger won't look him in the eye, gazing off into the distance like she's spotted something far more worthy of her attention. A breeze tousles the chignon that can't quite tame her curls, drawing a ringlet across her neck, pulling her robes snug against the curves of her body.

"They want to kill you." The words feel foolish and clumsy as soon as he speaks them to the paper in front of him. They're so unlike the way he used to address her, sneering and cruel and *MudbloodMudbloodMudblood*, the words ringing in his ears until they drowned out every other thing. He hates feeling so discomfited, particularly in front of a photo of Granger. Even though he knows he deserves much more from her. Still, he adds, "You should stay away."

As usual, Hermione doesn't seem to be listening.

Thank you so much for reading the first chapter of Against Nostalgia! I hope you enjoyed 🧡

Special thanks to my betas—Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy—for making this fic so much better. You all are such insightful editors and wonderful friends, and I am endlessly lucky to know you.

An extra thank you to Farrah who, when I told her that I wanted to write Dramione, spent a whole morning voice memo-ing with me until I was able to start writing. This idea may have originally been COVID brain, but you helped shape it into something real, and I'm so grateful.

For sneak peeks of future chapters, thoughts on the books I'm reading, and to hang out, you can find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), or watch me as I try to figure out [TikTok](#) in real time.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

September 2013. King's Cross Station to Hogwarts.

Hermione had insisted on taking the Hogwarts Express. She knows that as a new professor, she can apparate into the castle directly, but she hasn't taken the train since the end of her sixth year, dressed all in black and barely able to meet anyone's eyes with all the grief and horror inside her. And then of course there had been her seventh year, spent in the woods, and her eighth year, studying for her NEWTs while she interned at the Ministry and worked at the rehabilitation camps, too busy helping to reform Death Eaters and Dark Lord sympathisers to allow for her regular class schedule, no matter how much Harry and Ron had tried to convince her otherwise.

She hasn't returned to Hogwarts at all since that final battle against Voldemort, and Hermione still isn't sure why. She's only certain that returning now, as an adult, is important.

Which was why, at dinner last night, when they were all half-drunk on wine and Harry and Ron and Ginny and even Ron's wife, Leonor, had offered to walk her to the train, she'd laughed and turned them down.

"The *Prophet* already wrote that silly article," she'd said, taking another generous sip of wine. "Can you imagine what would happen if we all showed up at Nine and Three Quarters? Nobody would be able to board the train."

Now, though, as she waits on the platform, she realises that she's surrounded by children and their parents, and she feels a hundred years old. She has books in her trunks that are significantly older than the students who are milling around, loud and happy and so, so young.

She had always felt so old and wise, boarding the Hogwarts Express, as if all the knowledge she could ever require was at the end of the train ride. In a sense, she wasn't entirely wrong, even if she never wanted to learn so many of the things she discovered at Hogwarts, all that gore and bloodshed and death.

Still, the scent and vibrance of it all is just like her childhood, before she gained that knowledge, and that fact makes Hermione's stomach twist inside her, that she could be inside this familiar moment and see it all so differently, with anything but her old rapture.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so awful to arrive here with her best friends, even if everyone would stare.

Still, Hermione is used to going it alone, especially in an unfamiliar crowd. She gives a small smile to everyone who meets her eye, careful not to make the gesture warm enough that strangers want to chat, and pulls the cart loaded with Crookshanks and her trunks through the

crowd, trying to recapture that old September feeling of hope and new books and all those fresh notebooks just waiting to be filled.

She thinks, just for a fleeting moment, of Ron. The way he would've pulled her into a compartment first, his eyes bright with something that neither of them could name.

But before she reaches the first empty car on the train, she feels a gentle hand on her arm and a familiar voice saying her name.

When she's sure there's no trace of a grimace on her face, Hermione looks up at Luna Lovegood's still-dreamy expression, which clashes with her saffron robes and the gold dangling earrings in the shape of waving hands, that clack against the deep blue frames of her glasses.

"Neville said you might be here." Luna's hands have fluttered to rest on her rounded belly. "Did he tell you I spent the summer researching Mediterranean merkind for the *Quibbler*? He fretted because of the baby, but the mer are very hospitable once one learns their customs. I've never felt safer."

Hermione offers up a smile and an indistinct murmur of assent. It's not that she dislikes Luna, more that she has never understood this woman well enough to have a conversation, let alone one that spans the whole train ride to Hogwarts. At parties, she tends to gravitate to other corners.

But Luna, it seems, will be her companion, and Hermione once rode the Hogwarts Express without a friend. So she injects some real warmth into her smile—a skill she's had to perfect, working at the Ministry for all these years—and reaches out for Luna's hand.

"Are you and Neville excited?"

"Mostly," Luna says, her dreaminess receding slightly. "His gran is ecstatic. But we are the ones who actually have to care for the baby, and some of our human customs are so *strange*."

"Is that why you went to the mer?"

Luna nods, the gesture a little shy, and it's like they're in school again for a moment, Hermione this time the one who is more assured, who comes with a set of friends.

They push their way to the train together, this part exactly the same as in her memories, and a porter helps her load her trunks and boxes. Crookshanks begins to hiss at the unfamiliar presence, so Hermione takes him in hand and leads Luna to the first unoccupied compartment.

"They all look like little ants to me," Luna says as soon as their things are settled and the door is closed. Crookshanks is already prowling around the room as Hermione unwinds her scarf. "Do you think my baby will seem so... small?"

"I've been told they'll feel like the whole world," Hermione answers as she turns her face to the window for another glimpse at the waving parents. In the back of the crowd, she spots

Bill and Fleur, focused on the compartment where Victoire and likely Teddy are seated. There's Lavender and Cho and their respective partners, two tall Nordic-looking wizards who appear to be brothers. "I didn't realise how many parents I'd recognise."

"We did all partner off rather quickly."

"Now you sound like Neville's gran." The minute Hermione says it, she wonders if she was too cruel, but Luna only laughs.

As the train pulls away from the platform, the conversation between them turns light and easier than Hermione expected, but before an hour has passed, Luna has fallen asleep, her cheek mashed against the window and Crookshanks purring in her lap.

Hermione had planned to spend the trip looking out the window, taking in that once-familiar journey, but after a while it's the same old English country towns, and she turns to her lesson planning. The classes for her Contemporary History of Magic will be easy after spending all her spare time the past four years researching and writing on these topics, but History of Magic makes her think of Binns with a shudder.

What might they have prevented, if they'd actually understood their own history? If it hadn't all seemed like a terribly dull series of names and dates and locations with no implications for their lives?

And what might they have done if anyone had bothered to document the histories closest to them—she thinks, increasingly, of Dumbledore with an anger that troubles her—and they'd known the truth? If the villains from Voldemort's first rise to power had not been silently shut away in Azkaban or allowed to remain lurking at the corners of their world, clutching their secrets and plotting their rise to power?

Despite all the work she's been able to do since the war, all the projects and laws and paradigms that Hermione has been able to enact from her various positions within the Ministry, she keeps circling back to these questions.

She thinks of her years at Oxford, fresh from her NEWTs and longing for a classroom where no one she knew had been killed or cursed, of the classes spent arguing political theory and learning the patterns of Muggle history until the present seemed so predictable and yet totally miraculous.

When she'd begun her work on the book, beginning with those first late-night sessions after her work at the Ministry was finally complete for the day, she had never felt tired even as she went almost without sleep. Instead, it had seemed to Hermione as if all of it, the research and the ideas and even the sentences themselves, had simply been there, waiting for her, for all the years of her life. Nothing else has ever felt so simple.

But now the book is written and published and she is off to Hogwarts for the year, McGonagall's invitation accepted the moment the headmistress appeared in Hermione's fireplace, before she'd even finished hearing the terms of the offer.

When she looks up from her notes on ancient wizards and the first known spell, created by a witch named Hecuba, Hermione sees the Scottish wilds blurring past and wonders what might be next for her. Because for the first time she can remember, the next accolade or Ministry post doesn't seem like quite enough.

Perhaps she'll stay at Hogwarts, she thinks with a bemused little twist of her mouth. Someone will need to keep Neville and Luna's child from mortal peril.

She's finished her class notes for the first two weeks and settled Crookshanks into his carrier by the time the train comes to a stop, the thestrals clustering around the train. Hermione knew about the creatures but she'd never seen them until now, and she tries not to react to the great silent beasts that pull them to the carriage, even as she thinks about their flight to the Ministry at the end of her fifth year, suspended over London with nothing visible beneath her, only the sound of beating wings and her thundering heart.

Beside her, Luna yawns serenely and says she'll be heading to the greenhouse before dinner, and Hermione only nods at this, studying the castle that was her heart and her battleground, the grey stones clotted with night and the weight of so many memories.

And then she is in the Great Hall once again, with its ceiling like a starry sky and its thousand candles, walking towards the faculty table while the students file in. Distantly, she can hear her name being murmured, and this is the moment where Hermione feels most like her old self, at the precipice of a new year and already a dozen rumours to her name, sliding off her like so many raindrops.

As she reaches the table, Flitwick waves at her, then Professor Sinistra, down from the Astronomy Tower, and then Hermione looks straight into Draco Malfoy's eyes. She does her best to conceal her flinch at the sight of him. She knew he'd be here, though why he is teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts is one of the greatest mysteries of her current existence. But all that knowledge doesn't stop some visceral feeling from passing through her as she meets his grey eyes.

Especially after what happened in that year after the war ended, in the rehabilitation camps. The moment that passed between them, which she can never forget.

"I'm surprised the *Prophet* isn't here to cover this," he drawls now, sweeping a hand around the room, the Malfoy signet ring catching the candlelight. As if he's in control, here.

She answers him with a roll of her eyes. But a part of her, the bit that always loved duelling practise in spite of her lack of talent, sits up at attention.

"Jealous?" she asks.

"Disappointed. I wore a new set of robes on the assumption I'd end up in the background of a photo."

Half a second is all the time she allows herself to look at the robes in question, the deep green wool draped better than the finest suit against the breadth of his shoulders, his lean muscles

implied by the fall of the fabric, the crisp shirt beneath fitted against his chest like a second skin, with the top button unbuttoned to show the line of his throat.

She allows herself another glance at his face, those grey eyes and white blond hair and his cheekbones and the lips full enough to suggest kisses.

Since she was a little girl, though, Hermione has been familiar with the concept of poisonous snakes, the way the most beautiful animals are generally the ones coiled in wait for an unwitting victim. And for so long, it seemed that Draco was always lying in wait to strike her.

So she does not bother to look apologetic as she sweeps past him, wrapping Neville in a real hug and pointing out the smudges of dirt on his cheek before a student realises they have the same dimensions as Luna's fingers.

By the time McGonagall makes her entrance, Hermione has settled into the kind of chat she'd dreamed of when she accepted the position, talking with Professor Vector and Neville and Luna, with some interjections from Flitwick and a great sweeping embrace from Hagrid, complete with an invitation for tea once he sets her back on the ground again.

Then the headmistress clears her throat.

"I am pleased to welcome all of you to another year at Hogwarts," she says, the smile on her face, as always, looking somewhat at odds with her habitual stern expression. "And I am thrilled to welcome one of our own this year as a professor. I'm sure you all need no introduction to Professor Granger."

The students burst into applause along with most of the faculty, Hagrid's clapping booming over every other sound.

Hermione gives her Ministry smile and a little wave. There's no point in faking humility. She's learned that the hard way. She sweeps her eyes across each House table, to the line of first-year students who openly stare at her.

There's that twist in her stomach again, looking at the forty children swimming in their new school robes. She had never felt so young when she'd been asked to save their world again and again, and yet of course she was.

Suddenly she wants to whirl on McGonagall, on Flitwick and Hagrid, on all the adults who were here and made Harry face it all, with her and Ron thrown in if they could help. As if a prophecy meant they would all survive intact.

She hates these feelings, hates the way they rush up inside her. She would rather spar with Malfoy instead.

McGonagall has launched into the rest of her speech, about the value of knowledge and magic, the responsibility of power and the beauty of collaboration. There are a few talking points which Hermione recognises from the Ministry, which she herself had helped refine and circulate to institutions of power and influence across the European magical coalition. Though there's something comforting about knowing the script, she still finds herself missing

those first hours back at Hogwarts when the very air was suffused with possibility and Hermione had no idea what Dumbledore might declare in his speech.

Still, she applauds when McGonagall finishes and settles in for the Sorting Hat's song, wishing she had Harry and Ron next to her in order to whisper about which of the terrified first years would be sorted into which House. She spots Cho's daughter, and a Prewett cousin Ron mentioned at last night's dinner, and the nephew of a coworker, but when she turns to them, Neville and Luna are whispering to each other, and Professor Vector is scribbling something on a napkin. Hermione contents herself with her own last-minute predictions over which student will go to which house, trying to look professoral even while cheering when a new member of Gryffindor is announced.

She might know better, might be grown, but Hermione can't help this one indulgence.

By the time the food appears in front of her, her goblet filling with wine, the discomfiting anger has ebbed away. The faculty conversation resumes, McGonagall joining in with them, far warmer than she was when Hermione was a student, telling Hermione about the wages the house elves now receive, the new courses in Muggle appreciation and magi-technology, the exciting applications for magic that have necessitated updates to the wards.

"Of course, cellular telephones still have no place at Hogwarts, the nasty things," McGonagall says, cheeks flushed from her wine.

"The mer are developing their own versions, did you know?" Luna says from a few seats down, reaching for a pumpkin cake. "They saw the value in tracking beacons."

"The mer can't cast a honing spell," Hermione snaps.

Luna's face falls and immediately, Hermione regrets being sharp. Especially when she watches Neville fold himself into her while the other professors look away. Even after this afternoon's conversation, she still hasn't acclimated properly to Luna. To the fact that she is seated amongst her colleagues, not her subordinates. To the new rules of her world.

"I'm sorry," Hermione says, but the words hang in the air even after Luna nods and gives a little smile, and they all finish their dessert with strained small talk while the students before them become increasingly more animated. Hermione fills her mouth with treacle pudding to avoid having to speak.

She thinks dimly of the handful of conversations she'd had with Kingsley after she'd told him she'd be accepting this position for the year. He'd insisted the Ministry was the place for her. He had no idea what he'd do without her, he'd said, especially with the Muggle Summit coming up in May, which Hermione had planned almost entirely on her own.

At the time, she'd only been thinking of those late nights of work, had only noted the fact that all the praise didn't make her head spin the way it used to. She'd become inured to the fact that the Minister himself found her invaluable, that she was actually Doing Something—Hermione Granger, the daughter of dentists, at the helm of wizarding Britain.

Now she thinks about her cosy warren of an office, filled with bookshelves that she installed herself (the charm required to hold that many books had been her own creation, of which she'd been inordinately proud), even the Muggle Summit, she feels a kind of deep longing for the life she was living until yesterday.

Finally, McGonagall dismisses them all to their Houses, and Hermione realises that, for perhaps the first time in her life, she doesn't know where she's headed.

"Come on, your apartments are in the same wing as mine," says a voice above her that she only gradually accepts is Draco Malfoy's.

"I would have thought they'd throw you in the dungeons and make you head of Slytherin."

She doesn't rise from her chair, not yet. In all Hermione's imaginings about her first night at Hogwarts, she had never thought that Malfoy would escort her to her quarters.

"McGonagall thought it was too much of a risk, and the Ministry agreed," he responds, the words too smooth, like he's said them at least a dozen times before. "Anyway, there's the curse on this position. Nobody thought I'd survive the first year."

"I certainly didn't." There's no reason not to be honest. She'd audibly snorted when Harry had told her about the appointment, days before it was announced in the *Prophet*, and then she and Ginny had made bets on how many weeks it would be before Malfoy got sacked. "Are you actually good at it?"

"You haven't read the monthly evaluations? I would have thought you'd love reading through the Ministry's paperwork in your spare time."

"I was otherwise occupied."

"Ah yes," he says, and his smile is as cold as January. "You were writing that book."

"I was." Her voice has slipped into that timbre she uses in long meetings when the men have become foolish, even as she feels her cheeks heat at the memory of that moment in the camp, and then the letter she'd written to him, when she'd bolstered her courage with a few fingers of scotch and then gone on, maudlin, with the world's longest request for an interview. He'd never responded.

He doesn't say anything, and Hermione realises that the Great Hall has emptied out, that it's only the two of them below the starry sky. Even the golden plates have been cleared away.

Years ago, if they'd ended up like this, she would have been certain that Malfoy was about to kill her. Even so, knowing all that's happened since, Hermione reminds herself of the pocket that holds her wand before she rises from her chair.

They make their way through the castle in silence, Hermione cataloguing all the changes since her last time at Hogwarts. Not only the repairs, and the movements of paintings and tapestries, but the changes to the architecture, the windows that let in the light. As if the very castle was aware of the way all those secrets had rotted into evil and death. The ghosts wave

to her, and the portraits in paintings call out greetings, but Draco's pace is too brisk to allow for any chat. Not that she minds, particularly.

She's about to make the turn toward the Gryffindor common room out of habit, but Draco pulls on her sleeve with two fingertips.

"How's your duelling?" His words spring from nothing, but the question sounds like one he's been considering.

"Probably worse than it was fifteen years ago," she says, even as she wonders whether this was smart to tell him. Despite having personally supervised his rehabilitation, despite all those years he spent working as an Auror alongside Harry and Ron. "The Ministry isn't exactly fond of duels between departments."

"You should practise. I'm shocked your precious Ministry would let you risk yourself like this, let alone Potter and Weasley."

"Why would you say—" Because her duelling ability aside, she is still a formidable witch, and who is he to pick at her life, when she was the one who built all this from narrow victory and scorn and the kind of dead-set determination that has been the closest thing to grace in her life?

Draco's hand is on her arm, and she shrugs it off. She doesn't want to know what he sees on her face.

"I didn't mean it like that," he says. "Though I can see why you would think so. I actually—I understand why you wouldn't want to practise."

"I'm sure you don't," she says, her mind working in a hundred different directions. Mostly, she doesn't want to talk about her life with him, the kinds of things she only talks about with Harry and Ginny and sometimes, when she's feeling lonely, Ron.

Because Malfoy seems, now, a thousand miles away from the boy who called her *Mudblood*, but all of the rules and logic in Hermione's mind tell her he is still that person, and she doesn't trust him with anything beyond barbs and small talk.

Even if she might want to. She has reason, after all, to feel lonely. Her parents living in Australia with no memory of her. Her best friends all coupled up, holding hands under the table when they have dinner together. While her own life is a blur of work and work and work.

It's almost enough to make her want to confide in Draco Malfoy. Instead, when he reaches the door of her apartments, she thanks him with what she's sure is no more than half a smile, and lets herself inside.

As soon as she hears his footsteps recede, she allows herself to sink into a chair near the door, inspecting the room. For the first time, she doesn't feel any regret about this year at Hogwarts.

She'd thought she'd be getting Binns' old rooms, but if these are his, then they were redecorated recently, suiting her perfectly. The walls are filled with sturdy bookshelves, including a few volumes Hermione has been meaning to read. There's a wide desk just beneath the window which she can tell will give a lovely view of the grounds. The art on these walls is all landscapes rendered in vivid detail, tall grasses swaying under mountains, the stars spanning overhead. Someone has even left a vase of anemones on her desk, though Hermione runs a detection spell over it as she's learned to do, to ensure that it doesn't bear a hex.

There's a large bed in another room covered with a tufted white duvet, and a bathtub with claw feet. Perhaps the year will be horrible, but at a minimum Hermione could spend every spare moment in the bath.

All the tension of the past fifteen years seems to descend on her all at once, coiling in her shoulders, and she unpacks only the essentials, starting the bath water as hot as it will go.

Only later, when she's lying in bed, Crookshanks batting at the duvet, her book of Muggle poetry discarded and the nape of her neck cool from the lick of the bath water, does she think about what Draco said.


How's your duelling? You should practise.

As if he knew about a threat to her.

Knowing she'll regret it in the morning, she moves Crookshanks aside. She sits down at her desk and begins to write. Not a letter to Harry or Ron, or Kingsley, or even the letter she can already imagine sending Ginny—*they have me in a room next to Draco Malfoy, of all people, and the worst of it all is I think he's grown quite handsome, please feel free to say there's something horribly wrong with me*—but notes to herself. Because if there is something substantial to Draco's warning, it's a threat that no one has mentioned to her.

And though it has been years since anyone seriously attempted to end her life, Hermione was never very good at ignoring even the remotest possibility of doom.

Chapter End Notes

...Now you've met Hermione and Draco, and they've met, and everyone's at Hogwarts.
Let's get this started 

So many thanks to my betas—Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy—for all your insights and corrections. You're the real dream team. All mistakes are my own.

For sneak peeks of future chapters, thoughts on the books I'm reading, and to hang out, you can find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), or watch me as I try to figure out [TikTok](#) in real time.

See you on Thursday for the next chapter!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which we see Professors Malfoy and Granger in action...in the classroom.

Chapter Notes

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

The first years in particular always stare at him, and so Draco starts the first day of the school year the way he's started the past three: by shoving up the sleeves of his robes and revealing the Mark on his forearm while the Gryffindors' and Hufflepuffs' eyes go round as saucers.

"I can tell you about defending yourself against Dark magic from experience," he says, once he hears the first student squirm in the silence, "both as the good wizard and the evil one. I've met many of the creatures we'll be learning about in your course of study, and called them friend or foe at different times. And what I know is this: what seems very clearly evil to you now will not always remain so. Goodness and evil may seem, at different moments, like their own kind of traps."

One of the Gryffindors, Alfie Prewett, scowls at this. Draco stares at him until the boy is forced to meet his eyes, his lips nearly the scarlet of his tie.

"I am not here to instruct you in morality," he continues, "rather my goal is to ensure you're prepared for whatever you might face. But I will tell you that your fears are instructive."

The Ministry and McGonagall would have him finish his opening salvo with a paean to light and goodness, but they're not watching this class and Draco's frankly not in the mood. Not when he's playing Dark wizard on their orders.

Instead, he tells them about the origins of Dark magic and the creatures they know as monsters.

"You need to know that there are times when you may use these spells and feel as if you are causing harm to someone or something that doesn't deserve it. Trust your instincts and keep going."

A witch with deep brown skin and close-cropped curls raises her hand into the air, her Gryffindor tie catching the light with the motion.

"So if a vampire is bent on sucking our blood, we should think about offering our necks?"

The tone of her question, the certainty in it, reminds him so strongly of Hermione that Draco has to bite back a smile.

“Generally speaking, no, Pérez. Unless you’d like to get out of exams in the bloodiest way possible,” he says, pausing to watch a few hesitant smiles. “But what if they were someone you recognised?”

“Vampires don’t turn people nearly as often as the films suggest,” adds a surprisingly deep voice from the Hufflepuff corner, his pale skin and blond curls catching the light. “We’d probably end up fresh meat for all our troubles.”

“But everyone needs to eat,” Yasmina Pérez points out, with a sideways nod towards Draco.

A hand goes up in the front row, a Gryffindor wizard whose eyes are still wide, as if he’s afraid to blink. Adam Jackson, Draco confirms with a quick glance at his parchment.

“Is that how you ended up with the Dark Mark?” Jackson asks, his eyes immediately turning back to his desk.

It’s the question that comes up in every first class with new students, one way or another, and perhaps it means that he’s made progress, that the question is asked openly instead of in whispers and nudges.

“It was a choice I made by degrees,” he says. “I believed a lot of nonsense, most of which was in fact evil and prejudiced. Because there is a difference between Dark magic, which has its utilities, and hatred, which only corrodes. But I was raised for both things. I thought they were one and the same. They aren’t.”

This is the part of the speech McGonagall and the Ministry like, and it’s why in spite of all the whispers and all the fearful looks, Draco is bloody excellent at his job. Because he knows exactly what lesson he learned, all those years ago, and even if it were not forced on him by Ministry decree and by the terms of the Pax, he would still cling to it desperately.

He will not end up a shell like his father. Even if he still feels doomed to somehow become Lucius, no matter what he does.

Instead, he tells his class about the monsters they’ll learn to face, beginning with the boggart and its mirror for all their fears, and although their eyes are just as round when he finishes the lecture, the look on their faces is different now, curious and suffused with a different kind of fear that’s almost excitement.

When they stream out, dismissed, Draco isn’t surprised to hear McGonagall’s footsteps on the stones.

“Another admirable lecture,” she says, crisp, as if she hadn’t spent the past hour eavesdropping.

“You’ve approved all my lesson plans. I’m surprised you bother listening in.”

McGonagall fixes him with a stare over her glasses, and he nearly falls into the old habit of shrinking away from her. But he is facing a day of being stared at like some awful creature,

and the fact that it's the bare minimum of what he deserves isn't enough to keep Draco from contrition, not when he's taught a bloody excellent class.

"You surprise me sometimes, Professor Malfoy," the headmistress replies, her eyes still fixed on him. "I would have thought—but you do like to reserve all your options, don't you?"

"I'm still doing the Ministry's odd jobs, if that's what you mean."

"How is your leg?"

"It's going to rain tomorrow."

McGonagall lets out what one might call an elegant snort. "We all gain that knowledge after a certain age. But you'll let me know if there's anything I can do?"

Because Madame Pomfrey will not treat him without explicit permission from the headmistress. As if he will hex her to hell for the indignity of a healing charm.

"I will," he says, but it's not sincere, and he can tell she hears that in his voice. She sweeps out a moment later, leaving Draco to welcome the Ravenclaw fifth years who have started entering for their first class of the year, ready to ask a thousand questions about the more complex counter-curses he's promised to teach them.

There's a joke among the faculty that one prepares a lesson plan for Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin, and another one entirely for the Ravenclaw students of the same year. Only Flitwick ever mentioned the fact that Hermione Granger required similar consideration, with a look at Draco that was too fleeting to be accidental.

Not that Draco spends so much time considering Granger. Rather, she seems to symbolise something in everybody's minds, that contrasts sharply with whoever they imagine him to be.

Nevertheless, the class continues without incident, all of them working through the finer points of counter-curses. They were afraid of him when he took them on as second years, particularly Priya Thakur and Marlo Thompson, both of them going so pale he could see the network of teal veins under their skin. Now they all throw their hands in the air, eager to learn, to reveal all the hidden facets of this world.

He disappears inside their questions, inside their eagerness, so fully inside this moment that the past drops away entirely.

Until, forty minutes into the lecture, when the Mark on his arm begins to throb.

Weasley was set to kill off the leader of a cell of the Faithful Hand in South London today, he remembers too late, casting a curse for the class to take their turns deflecting. It's weakly formed, and they bat it away with hardly a swish of their wands.

"Give us something harder, Professor," Priya calls, with an earnest smile that holds no fear, and he tugs his sleeve, tamping it against his wrist, before his wand explodes with light.

This time, they have to bat the curse around for a quarter-hour, slowing it down and misdirecting it, building an armature of spells to diffuse it just in time for the end of class.

“By the Christmas holidays,” he tells them, “you’ll be able to deflect that yourselves.”

For just a moment, all their questions are silenced.

The Mark throbs again, burning now. It seems his circle of the Faithful will not wait until nightfall for an explanation, and word has travelled quickly. There are a few hours before his next class.

Draco makes his way towards the grounds, to the Forest beyond.

Hermione’s first class, just as she requested, is with the seventh year Gryffindors and Slytherins, and they stare at her above the stack of textbooks she added to the course list, her attempt to make up for all the time they’ve lost inside this classroom, listening to Binns make all the stories of their past insufferably dull.

Given those stares, she doesn’t bother with an introduction. Instead, as she’s so often done, she begins without hesitation. “History is often poorly taught as a series of names and dates with minimal, if any, relevance to your daily lives. Be honest, how many of you have wondered why History of Magic is required for all of your seven years at Hogwarts?”

A few hands raise, a few heads nod.

“My goal this year is to teach you history as it really is, by which I mean, a story that is deeply connected to the way we live today. We will explore why we witches and wizards have chosen to live in secrecy, how our magic has developed, how the founding of schools like Hogwarts contributed to our understanding of magic, and we will spend significant time discussing the conflicts of the past century that led to the rise of some of history’s most dangerous Dark wizards. I know I have assigned significant reading, but I think that you’ll find the insights you gain to be of key importance to your lives from this point forward.” She pauses to draw breath, tries to meet each of their eyes in turn, is a little startled when they don’t quite meet her gaze, that they haven’t so much as reached for their quills to take notes.

People have been staring at Hermione since she first came to Hogwarts, and they’ve never stopped. Though she’s never courted the attention, she’s grown used to it. And frankly, she had counted on it in the classroom, had been sure that once she prepared her lecture notes, her students would be instantly enchanted.

Towards the back of the classroom, a Gryffindor named Melinda yawns without much subtlety, and if she wasn’t sure it would be entirely the wrong first impression, Hermione would take ten points from Gryffindor.

Rather than embarrassing herself, she decides to give the students their moment, and then she asks, “What are you particularly looking forward to studying this year?”

There’s a silence, heavy and awkward, and finally Melinda puts her hand in the air. Hermione, giving her a nod, decides that perhaps she was wrong about Melinda after all, maybe she was up late last night studying and she will be a star pupil.

Instead, Melinda asks, “Do you ever find it disappointing that you worked so hard to save the world and you ended up alone?”

The question itself is awful, but worse still is the fact that Hermione can hear titters of laughter at the corners of the room. As if everyone is wondering the same thing, and that’s all they see when they look at her. Nevermind the fact that her life is busy and she has dear friends and that her brief romances, whenever they’ve happened, end up documented at embarrassing length in the *Prophet*, so that Hermione has done her level best to give the impression that she’s given up entirely.

“I find,” she says, with all the depths of dignity she can muster, “that after I saved the world, as you so crudely put it, I found that all the reward I could ever require. Which is, of course, the fact that none of you will have to endure what my friends and I did.”

Then, into the silence, Hermione proceeds to lecture for the next hour. She hears herself droning and she doesn’t care, because this tone is the only one that will keep the angry tears from being heard.

To think that she had ever thought that she could make a difference, that she could be better than Binns. What she hadn’t counted on, what she’d never even *considered*, was the fact that anyone else could have been lecturing, and it would not have mattered. That the whole epic and intimate sweep of history with all its implications for all of them will pass them by without attracting any attention.

As soon as the class ends and each student has left, murmuring things Hermione makes every effort not to hear, she sweeps out of the classroom, making a beeline for her rooms. There is only a half hour before her next class, and she needs to collect herself.

An unfamiliar witch blocks her path, her skin a flawless copper brown and her hair pulled to the crown of her head in an elaborate series of twists that resemble a cascade of blossoms. Hermione has never seen this woman before, and no matter how welcoming her smile looks, she still braces herself.

“Professor Granger, I was looking for you,” she says, reaching out her hand, and the gentleness of the words and the gesture makes the tears swim in Hermione’s eyes.

“I was headed—I left a book in my room,” she stammers as she’s never stammered before, her throat clotted. She, who writes personal letters to the Minister of Magic, cannot manage a simple conversation in a hallway with a colleague. Which is who, she’s realized, this witch must be.

“Can I walk with you?” the other professor asks, which is when Hermione notices the musicality of the other woman’s accent.

Hermione only nods, and the woman nods along as they walk, giving an impression of conversation that allows Hermione to collect herself well before she’s reached her apartments. Even though the other witch is a head shorter, she feels like a bulwark against the milling students whom Hermione had watched with completely different feelings only an hour ago.

“I’m sorry,” she says, once she trusts herself to speak, “I never even asked for your name.”

“Professor Rebeca Saraiva. I used to teach at the Academia in São Paolo, but Professor McGonagall invited me to Hogwarts just last year. I’m a magi-technologist.”

Hermione must look stunned, because Professor Saraiva’s face goes wry.

“What,” she asks, “did you think Brazilian witches only communed with the rainforest?”

Hermione is about to protest before she realises that she’s never thought much about Brazil at all, really, and so before she can say anything truly stupid, she asks, “How are you liking Hogwarts?”

“The students are brilliant, but all of you are so used to doing things the same old way. I sometimes think that if I stopped trying to fight against all of your traditions, I would have had some truly brilliant ideas.” She draws her fingers towards her palm in a little wave, precise as spellwork.

“What are you working on?”

“I am trying to capture the action of a spell within a medium—I think a magically-augmented microchip could work, but I haven’t found quite the right material or binding spell—so that it can be called upon even more reliably than a wand-cast spell. Perhaps so even Muggles could use them.”

Hermione feels a flash of her old school self at that last statement, wants to remind Rebeca that such a development would be contrary to the entire establishment of the Ministry of Magic as well as dozens of international treaties, but then her mind really begins to grasp what the other professor has been saying, all the implications for wizards with inconsistent or weak magic or for instances when there can absolutely be no fluctuation in the magic.

“How can I help?” she asks, the words passing her lips without effort.

“I have some ideas,” Rebeca says, drawing a breath as if to weigh her words, letting out a sigh instead as they reach the corridor outside Hermione’s apartments. “The first day of class is always difficult, Professor Granger, particularly if you yourself were an excellent student.”

“We’ll talk this weekend, Professor Saraiva?”

The other witch smiles, her robes fluttering around her as she heads toward her next class, and Hermione feels much lighter as she steps into her rooms, surrounded by the scent of her

books and the anemones on her desk.

She's teaching Ravenclaw and Slytherin third years in twenty minutes, but a figure out on the grounds catches her eye.

Draco Malfoy is headed straight for the Forbidden Forest, his black robes billowing around him, no subtlety at all.

He teaches Defence Against the Dark Arts, Hermione reminds herself, even as she reaches for her wand. The Ministry and McGonagall evaluate him every month. There is a protocol in place.

Still, she watches him until the trees seem to swallow him up and she has to run to her class.

"What do you already know about the history of magic?" she asks the class, still slightly breathless.

For a moment, and then another, they stare at her, and Hermione wonders if perhaps she was never meant to be a teacher. And then she thinks of Professor Saraiva, of Draco, of all the things she doesn't know.

"I realise that that's a big question," she adds, filling the silence. "Perhaps you could tell me, what do you find interesting about the history of our world?"

A wizard from Ravenclaw, Grover Wright, raises his hand, and says, "The only things we learn about the founding of the school are what the Sorting Hat sings every year, and they sound like myth. But shouldn't we learn the history of the place where we live?"

A Slytherin witch, Mei-Ling Shyu, speaks as her hand raises, saying, "I think everyone is too quick to believe that all Slytherins are villains. Although maybe you believe that, Professor?"

A murmur of acknowledgement from the Slytherins that is not quite threatening but which reminds Hermione of the sound Crookshanks makes when he thinks someone might be mildly dangerous.

"Not all Slytherins are evil," she says, bracing her fingers on her desk. "In my time at Hogwarts, there were many members of Slytherin house who grew up hearing ugly lies about the importance of blood purity and the necessity of Dark magic in order to cultivate it. As children, they were conscripted as soldiers in their parents' war. This school became the frontline. I think that those students, who grew up hearing evil praised, were more likely to indulge in it and to let it rot their souls. But I don't think that any of them were truly evil, deep down. The older I get, the more I doubt that any of us is truly evil at our core."

"Not even the Dark Lord?" Grover asks, a hint of worry in his voice.

"I'm tempted to call him the exception," Hermione responds, trying to keep her voice from shaking. None of this was in the lesson plan. These are the thoughts that circled in her mind as she was writing the book, the ones that follow the accounting of history. "We know from

the historical records that Tom Riddle had an awful childhood. What if he had known love at an early age, particularly from the Muggles who surrounded him?"

"You're saying that if the Dark Lord had been hugged more, he would never have become Voldemort?" A Ravenclaw witch, Lucie Vesper, asks, flatly incredulous.

"No, it's more than that," Mei-Ling responds before Hermione speaks. "The kind of abuse he experienced...I can understand how it would change a person."

"Of course you would," Lucie sneers, and Hermione holds up a hand.

The class goes silent.

"It seems as if you believe the myths," Hermione says, in the too-sharp voice she used with Luna last night. "Now let me teach you history."

There is an uncomfortable silence for the next ten seconds, and Hermione creaks into a lesson she'd planned for the fourth years, to be delivered three days from now, but soon Mei-Ling's hand is in the air, and the witches of Ravenclaw chime in with their questions and observations, even a chastened Lucie, and Hermione feels herself slipping into this role as if it had been tailored to her exact specifications.

A row of students clusters at her desk after class, Mei-Ling in the centre with a stack of books in her arms, the pile so high that her Slytherin tie rests on it.

"What was it like," she asks, as soon as Hermione meets her eye, "during the war?"

An expectant silence falls over the room. Even the students crossing the threshold pause in their steps.

"Why do you ask?" Hermione is careful to meet each of the students' eyes, to keep her tone polite. Of course she should have anticipated the question, but she'd thought that it would be of no interest to students born years after the second war against Voldemort had ended.

Though this would have given them plenty of opportunity to romanticise the battles and the horror, never having seen the Killing Curse cast before them, never winding a Horcrux around their own necks, never knowing if her parents would be safe or if she and her friends had any chance of survival.

There is no way to convey that dread and terror in a single sentence, so Hermione looks at the children who surround her, waiting for their answer.

"Nobody talks about it," Mei-Ling says, finally. "Nobody who was actually there. It's only people droning on about how we have the power to avoid Dark Magic and be good and keep the peace. About how we're all entitled to it, no matter who our parents are."

"And do you believe it?"

"My parents are Muggles," Mei-Ling responds, her voice like a lit match.

“Mine were as well.” Hermione speaks without considering the words. Out of the corner of her eye, she watches concern tighten the corners of the students’ eyes, the students in the process of leaving slinking into the hallway to avoid whatever they fear she will say.

She hardly knows, herself.

“War only seems glorious in retrospect,” she continues, into the silence, “mainly to the people who were never in danger. It’s why Minister Shacklebolt does not tell you fairy tales about the battles we fought. Because when you’re cold and aching and terrified, and you’re not sure your mind can focus enough to cast the dozen spells required to keep you alive for another hour, you aren’t thinking of glory. You’re wondering if there was a way to avoid all of this that wouldn’t end with people like you and me, people with Muggles for parents, rounded up and caged like animals, or Hogwarts turned into a school for monsters.”

“I wish you’d written that in your history,” Mei-Ling says, her chin tilting, almost defiant.

“I wasn’t writing a novel.”

“But how will we do anything different, if we had no idea what it was really like?”

The sensation that runs through Hermione is like a ghost, cold and clenching. Because she had barely slept for four years to avoid this kind of question, had worked so hard to create a history that would protect the future.

Mei-Ling’s golden eyes blaze full of objections.

She had thought this class was better than the first.

“One book is only a starting point,” Hermione manages, stretching her mouth into her Ministry smile as she dismisses the class.

The students obediently turn to leave, though Mei-Ling trails behind, an expression on her face that Hermione can’t read. She knows only that the girl’s eyes are still undimmed, that the expression feels familiar.

When the room is finally empty, Hermione heaves a sigh that echoes in the room, her shoulders throbbing with suppressed tension. Slowly, she fills her satchel with her books and notes, trying to gather herself.

Outside the window, there’s a flicker of movement at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, a splotch of black, and Draco Malfoy’s gleaming white-blond hair. Hermione moves towards the window, her bag thumping against her hip.

There’s a witch following him, maybe five years out of Hogwarts, her cheeks flushed and her fingers wrapped around Malfoy’s forearm. She’s pretty, even with her deep brown hair whipped around by the wind and her pallor interrupted by whatever emotion roused the flush on her cheeks.

Even though of course there’s a simple explanation for the tableau—Malfoy’s entangled in some forbidden romance with a too-young witch—Hermione can’t look away from them, the

snarl on his face and the emotion she recognises as blazing anger on that young witch's face. He looms over her and she leans in towards him, but there's no eagerness in her posture, no arch to her spine.

Hermione realises two things simultaneously: this isn't a lover's quarrel, and the witch's hand presses over the place where Malfoy's Dark Mark was. As if she knows that the gesture will cause him pain.

She remembers Harry during their sixth year, how he was obsessed with Malfoy's whereabouts. Almost, she'd thought then, to the point of madness. Only Harry had never been wrong.

"What are you conspiring about now, Malfoy?" Her words are far too loud in the empty room, nearly ridiculous.

Her eyes still on the argument between Malfoy and the witch, she pulls out a scrap of parchment and begins to write. Because even after everything, Harry worked with Malfoy for years in the Aurors' office, has formed enough of a friendship to defend him occasionally to Hermione and Ron.

I saw him walking into the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the day, Harry, she writes as Draco wrenches his arm free, turns away from the witch, like he didn't even feel the need to hide. And now he's coming back with a witch, in the middle of some awful row, and I can see her pressing her fingers on his Mark. What do you think Malfoy is doing in the Forest? Should I notify the Ministry?

She feels very dull asking that last question, the shrill and friendless girl she remembers from her first days at Hogwarts, always ready to inform the professors of anything amiss. Now she is the professor and the Ministry, and somehow it feels wrong to reveal what she's seen.

Not when she'd seen the anger on Malfoy's face, the way he'd wrenched his arm free.

Not while she watches Malfoy storm off only for a few paces, and then, though his pace remains the same, his movements grow more graceful and fluid. As if he'd been putting on an act, but still trying to escape the woman who held him as quickly as possible. As if that could be the only true thing.

She thinks of the look in Mei-Ling's eyes when she'd asked why Hermione hadn't written a book of history that could actually save them. And she wonders if she knows anything at all.

Outside, Draco has disappeared from view, hidden by the bulk of the Hogwarts castle itself.

Turning away from the window, Hermione fists her hand and her letter to Harry becomes a dense crumble of parchment. She closes the classroom door behind her, locking the door with a charm keyed to her magic, then slowly makes her way back to her apartments.

In truth, she is searching for a distraction, Rebeca or Professor McGonagall, Neville or Luna or Hagrid or even a ghost, anyone who will coax her out of her gloom.

But the halls are mostly empty, and instead Hermione decides to keep walking towards her rooms. She will draw a hot bath before dinner, she decides, and take an hour to read one of the romance novels Ginny likes to send her on occasion, the pages folded at particularly sexy scenes. *I like to give Harry ideas*, she'd written when Hermione had asked her about the system, years ago.

Hermione decides she'll write her friend a letter as well, full of confidences she knows Ginny would appreciate best. Even after all these years, she's remained a little afraid that Hermione will disappear, after the possibility of romance between her and Ron had passed.

It's always been flattering, that Ginny would think she has so many friends as to leave any of them behind.

"Are you following me, Granger?"

The voice, like a blade emerging from dark silk, startles Hermione from her thoughts.

"I saw you on the grounds, Malfoy," she says, but the words aren't as biting as she'd hoped they would be. They come out twisted around a central question.

"Are you jealous of Ruby, then?" A taunting smile on his lips, turning Malfoy into the little prick she'd always known at Hogwarts. But there's a strain around his mouth, a pallor around his knuckles.

"You were running away from her." This time, she keeps her voice even. "Why?"

"Should I be flattered that you asked me instead of running to Potter?"

"Harry seems to think you're not as rotten as the boy we used to know," she says. "Maybe I can help you."

She braces herself for some acid retort, but Malfoy only shakes his head.

"I think you may want to believe that, Granger." There's something soft about the look in his eyes. Hermione is sure she's not making it up. And it changes his appearance entirely, makes her want to draw close to him.

"Why were you running away from her?" The words are low.

Malfoy steps closer, and Hermione realises she cannot decipher the expression on his face. He should be smirking or scowling, but instead he's biting his lip, looking as if he almost wants to answer her.

When he reaches out his hand, she takes it without another thought, and then he is pulling her through the open door of his apartments, casting a shielding spell as soon as he closes the door behind them, his limp barely noticeable. To the unknowing eye, Draco Malfoy moves like an Auror in his prime.

Finally, he leans against the door, crossing his arms over his chest, his wand still clutched tight in his fingers.

“Witches and wizards with Dark aspirations have a tendency to reach out to me, because of the position my family and I held with the Dark Lord. Because of the Mark on my arm. Most of them are trying to recapture some idea of former glory. They think they might get riches or fame. But Ruby seems to be a true believer. I think it’s possible she could be turned back to the light.”

“Why are you telling me?” She’d never anticipated a confession of any kind from Draco Malfoy, let alone in his apartments, surveying the neat stacks of parchment on his desk, a knife glinting in the candlelight where it might go unobserved by an untrained eye. The leather-bound volumes on his shelves look unopened, too beautiful for a reader of her type of enthusiasm. Hermione had never thought that she’d know any of these details about Malfoy’s decor, that she’d know anything which might hint at some submerged truth about him.

She’d also never imagined she might find these infinitesimal revelations compelling.

“Potter and Weasley already know,” he’s saying now, the ghost of a smirk on his lips. For a second or two, he looks like the schoolboy she remembers. “But I think you might be able to help, Granger, if you’re interested in a project.”

She had been offering to help, only moments ago, but Hermione feels her head shaking slowly as she thinks.

“Why me,” she says, finally.

“Because Ruby reminds me of you,” and, before Hermione can object, he says, “Entirely too clever and idealistic. And I think she views you as a symbol more than a person.”

“A symbol of something she seems to loathe,” Hermione points out, smoothing her voice against the recognition she feels towards that description of her: *a symbol more than a person*.

“Nevertheless, you managed to change our world.”

She can feel the moment his eyes land on her, and when she meets his eye, it’s there before her, the rehabilitation camp, those stolen moments when she’d been alone with him, when she’d wondered if all that terror and pain had been for nothing at all.

She manages a nod.

“What do you need from me?” she asks.

“Be ready to tell her why she shouldn’t blow her life apart. Make it convincing.”

Perhaps Hermione should be thinking of herself at the end of the Battle of Hogwarts, when she knew they’d won, or giving a speech on behalf of the Ministry, all her practised words with their certainty and quiet triumph. But instead she thinks of herself as she was today, in front of a classroom with students whose minds were completely opaque to her.

How will we do anything different, if we don’t know what it was really like?

“I’ll try,” she finds herself saying.

And for all that there is no plan, for all that she knows nothing about this pretty, clever witch except for what Malfoy has told her, Hermione moves towards the door.

She’s painfully certain that today she is incapable of saving anyone.

But before she has a chance to grip the doorknob, charm her way through the shield, Malfoy shoulders her aside.

“There’s another thing,” he says, not quite meeting her eyes. “I need you to start duelling practice with me.”

“Why?”

“The Auror office has signed off on it.”

“Is Hogwarts in danger? Or just me?”

“Meet me by the lake at sunrise on Saturday,” he says. “I’ll bring coffee from the new place in Hogsmeade.”

She opens her mouth to speak but he holds up a hand to silence her.

“You’re either about to keep asking more questions that I will not answer,” he says, something like amusement in his voice, perhaps even fondness, though Hermione tells herself she must be imagining it, “or you’re about to tell me that the official position of Hogsmeade is that coffee is a vile, Muggle drink and they have a centuries-long edict against serving the stuff. You’ll be pleased to hear that they’ve dropped the edict at last.”

“And if I ignore your invitation?”

Now she sees the amusement on his face, transfiguring his smirk entirely.

“You’re entirely too curious for that, Granger. I expect that you’ll arrive lakeside an hour before the sun rises, on the off-chance you can wheedle me into some untimely revelation.”

In spite of herself, in spite of the danger and her day, in spite of the fact that she’s in Draco Malfoy’s private rooms, Hermione laughs.

“Bring me a flat white,” she says.

This time, Draco lets her through the door.

“I want a new world,” Ruby had said, when he’d met her in the forest at her summons. Her wand skimmed a point between Draco’s eyes.

“Why?” Draco had asked, trying to focus his mind enough for the wandless magic required to disarm her.

This time, he’d concealed and shielded his wand inside his robes, but as soon as he entered the Forbidden Forest, just beyond the Hogwarts wards, Ruby had bound him, her dark eyes shining too brightly.

“Bring me Hermione Granger and I’ll tell you.”

He’d shaken his head, thinking the gesture might be subtle enough to stall her, but Ruby had cast a hex that pummelled his bad knee, hard enough that Draco had been forced to bite back a groan. He wondered if she knew the curse that sliced into him then, if she knew that the magic, which only the Faithful Hand seemed to possess, had been intended for Harry Potter instead. That a man with the Mark on his arm had saved the Boy Who Lived.

Then she’d aimed that same hex at his heart, and Draco had been unable to think for moments at a time, sinking to the ground as the world around him blurred.

“What is so special about Granger?” he’d asked when he could breathe again. He’d thought that Ruby would be angry about the killings of the Hand in South London, not asking more questions about Granger. He wasn’t sure if that made her more or less dangerous.

“Don’t you see that our world stands on her shoulders?” Looming over him, she nearly blots out the sun.

“I should think that Potter and Shackbolt, at minimum, would object to this assessment.”

Another bolt of pain, this time in his good knee. Draco grits his teeth.

“Who else has that kind of vision?”

“She wrote a book of history and works as an underling of the Minister.”

“Hermione Granger will reshape our world if she’s not stopped.”

“I thought your priority was Hogwarts.”

“That’s the Hand’s priority. And you promised that you would bring us Hermione Granger.”

“Do you have a plan for what you’ll do with her? Because the moment she is missing, a team of Aurors will go looking for you.”

“I’ve learned the secrets of the Faithful Hand.”

Draco thought of the burning Mark on his arm, the pain in his knee well past the point when he should have made a full recovery, the curses that nobody in the whole department of Aurors could quite comprehend.

“I’ll bring Granger when you need her,” he’d said, “but I’d suggest you make a plan that can withstand the Ministry.”

It had taken too long, Ruby looming over him, her wand poised, but finally he’d managed to rise to his feet, trying to formulate a plan that would put Hermione in a position to defeat this witch without effort.

Then he realised that Ruby was following him, blasting away the branches around them with magic..

Draco had thought, with no little resignation, of the students in his classroom this morning, how eager they’d been, how easy it had been to slip on the guise of a caring and competent professor. There had been no need to weigh every gesture, every risk.

No wand aimed at his retreating back.

“You swore a Vow,” Ruby said, her face too angry for what the moment had required.

And then Draco had realised the truth.

He’d always known he could overpower Ruby, or outsmart her. But he never thought that Ruby believed the same thing.

The tone of her voice made him realise that she knew she could be overpowered. Which would make her far more dangerous, of course.

But there was also the potential that Ruby could be made to fear a greater power, that she could be convinced. Even at the edges of the Hogwarts grounds, the thought had centred him. He’d found his control over her.

“Of course, I swore that Vow, and I will be true,” he’d said, and then, as he’d watched her face relax from its snarl, he’d asked, “What was it, Ruby, that made you want to join The Faithful Hand?”

He’d thought that her face might soften further at the question. He’d always had this kind of impression on members of the Hand. They were grateful for any scraps of attention from a former Death Eater, especially one with ties to the inner workings of their world.

Instead, Ruby had lunged forward and clutched his left forearm, her fingernails digging into the sleeve of his robes. Into the Mark.

“Don’t ask stupid questions, Malfoy,” she’d said, the anger rising on her face again, so that she did not look entirely human. “Bring me Granger. Give me Hogwarts.”

When he stalked away from her, he let his anger show. Hoped it would cover up the hint of fear that thunders through him.

Because for all Draco once believed otherwise, for all he sought a world of Dark Magic, he had come to realise the lie of it. The necessity of Hogwarts, and goodness, and all the things that Dumbledore had prattled on about.

He'd hoped, still hopes, that he was not too late.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the love you've shown Against Nostalgia! I started writing this while dealing with COVID during the fall (I literally woke up one morning and just wanted to write Dramione), and it's wild to see you all reading it. Thank you so much for your support and encouragement. I hope you enjoyed this chapter 🧡

Many thanks and flowers to my betas—Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy. You're simply the best, better than all the rest.

For sneak peeks of future chapters, thoughts on the books I'm reading, the occasional art commission, and to hang out, you can find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), or watch me as I try to figure out [TikTok](#) in real time.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

Steam is rising from the lake as Draco approaches, the coffee warm in his hands despite the insulation charm he'd performed in Hogsmeade. Granger's back is to him as she takes in the view, the sun rising up over the forest, the waters offering a hazy reflection of the violet and fuchsia of the sky.

He should correct her for this elementary tactical error, but instead Draco slows his stride and studies her. In this moment, Hermione is unlike the manicured photo of her in the *Prophet*: the curls that fall in a riot down her back, the robes looser than the close-cut sheaths she's favoured in class and at the Ministry, and the knit oversized she's pulled on over them, an earthy green that hangs almost to her knees but which leaves her pale shoulders bare.

When was the last time Hermione Granger saw the sun? Her skin is so white its almost ghostly. She never looked like this at Hogwarts. Even in the thick of the war, Granger always seemed *alive* to him.

He wants and does not want to think about this, the effect that she seems to have on him, particularly since she returned to Hogwarts. There are a thousand things that Draco would love to be distracted from, and yet Granger is exactly the person most likely to turn an otherwise pleasant distraction into a series of complexities and existential crises.

Even if he cannot stop mooning over the way Hermione looks in the sunrise.

Before he can analyse the matter any further, Draco makes his steps louder in the grass. She turns toward him, her satchel thumping against her hip, a book in her free hand.

Of course Granger would bring a dozen books to a duelling session.

"You should have your wand in your hand," he says, the expected smirk already on his face.

"I could tell you the same thing." She's trying to sound imperious, but the effect is ruined by the fact that she's already reaching for her wand, a frustrated blush staining her cheeks.

He'd provoked that blush a thousand times in school with so many petty cruelties.
Mudbloodmudbloodmudblood.

"I was required to bribe you with coffee." He hands her the flat white she'd requested, her fingertips just brushing against his as she wraps her hand around the mug.

Granger makes a little sighing sound as she inhales and lifts the coffee to her lips. Draco has to pull his gaze to the horizon.

There are no Dark wizards on the Hogwarts grounds, not now, but he forces himself to tear his gaze away from the workings of her lips and throat, the ink stains on her fingertips.

Perhaps not beautiful, not in the way Draco was trained to appreciate. Still, he's having difficulty looking away from Granger.

"Are you going to drink your own?" she asks.

"Once I'm sure it's safe."

She mutters something that sounds like *Aurors*, and then, once he's taken a gulp of his Earl Grey, he asks, "When's the last time you duelled?"

"The last time I was here."

He can imagine her amidst the rubble, blood-streaked and running and screaming out her spells. Still with that precise wandwork that made her top of every class. "Does it scare you to try again?"

She narrows her eyes at him, another expression he knows too well. "What are you getting at, Malfoy?"

"I want to know why you came back."

For a moment, seeing the tension coil in Hermione's limbs, he thinks she is going to spring towards him the way Ruby did, on the edge of the wards.

Instead, Hermione sets her coffee and her satchel on the ground and takes her wand in hand.

"I'm not afraid of you," she says. There's a ferocious spark in the expression on her face. "I always knew I could rip you apart if I wanted."

He takes his wand in hand, bows his head in a mocking imitation of the opening of a duel. "You've been behind a desk for fifteen years, Granger, not counting the time you went to that Muggle uni—"

His wand is blasted from his fingers, the casting so neat that his fingertips sting from the heat of the spell.

"Never tell an Oxford graduate she's under-prepared," Hermione says, giving her wand another little flick. Draco's mug of Earl Grey vanishes from his hand and appears in her own.

Before she can take a sip, he casts a minor wandless spell. As the tea arcs out of her hands and lands at his feet, Draco casts a disarming spell, simultaneously building up the magic for a stunning spell in his wand-free hand. Meanwhile the tip of Hermione's wand has gone an electric pale blue.

"No serious harm?" she asks, grinning. She looks like some apex predator in its prime, her hair gilded by the morning light and her eyes the colour of Firewhiskey.

"If you can't repair it, don't cast it," he says, letting the stunning spell explode from his palm, dodging neatly away from the blast of icefyre she unleashes on him.

The healing spells for icefyre are incredibly complex, but of course Granger would try something needlessly difficult.

Draco slashes his wand to try and stun her again. The spell grazes the shoulder of her wand arm. He can see Hermione fighting the effects, but her fingers open and her wand falls to the grass.

Those old childhood instincts have not deserted her, because Hermione immediately drops to a crouch, picking up her wand with her un-Stunned hand. She's indignant when she rises to face him, and Draco has to bite back a smile at the look on her face.

It would not do for either of them if Granger knew what he thought of the expressions on her face. Especially now that she's pointed her wand at him.

"Have some more of your coffee," he says before she can swish or flick, "and I'll tell you how to avoid that mistake in the future."

"And you'll un-stun me?"

"Once I'm confident you won't hex me the moment you have use of your wand arm."

"You should never be too confident of that, Malfoy. Especially now that I've proven my duelling skills."

She jams her wand in the pocket of her sweater and reaches clumsily for her mug. When he's watched her take three swallows, he says, "Your eagerness to prove yourself is the problem, Granger. You could have cast two simpler spells in the time it took you to conjure the icefyre."

"If I'm duelling someone without Auror training, they won't be able to dodge it so easily."

"The point is to win against me so you can win against anyone who threatens you."

"And who exactly will be threatening me?"

"Potter and Weasley don't tell you anything, do they?"

She scowls, as he knew she would. The best way to insult Granger is to call her stupid. Draco keeps his eye on her wand.

"I know there are still Dark wizards," she says, her fingers clenching around her coffee mug. "I just didn't know they were particularly interested in me. Especially after all those years behind a desk."

"Everyone knows you're next in line to be Minister."

"I would have thought you'd be putting in a dozen objections, right alongside your father."

"I would have thought you'd be aware of the fact that my father no longer has any Ministry contacts, especially since you supervised the regulations that stripped him of his influence."

“Would you like me to apologise?”

“Not for that,” he says, the words out of his mouth too quickly. “Not for the things you were right about.”

She bites her lip, and he un-Stuns her before the gesture can wreak havoc on him. They have work to do.

Because if anybody in their Hogwarts class is going to run the Ministry, it should be Hermione Granger. Even if she'll release dozens of proclamations and programs before her first day is done.

“This time,” he says, assuming the opening stance of a duel as she sets down her coffee, “try simple spells you can cast without speaking.”

“You were using wandless magic, weren't you? While your other hand was casting?”

“It's not as quick as using my wand. But the technique can be useful in the field.”

“I want to learn,” she says, as he knew she would.

“First get in a proper duelling stance. You shouldn't leave the shoulder of your wandless arm open.”

Her eyebrows draw together and her lips purse as if Hermione has heard this before, and likely she has, from Potter back at Hogwarts. Though Draco doesn't understand why Potter and Weasley have let Granger go without duelling for so long.

Especially when he takes a moment to really consider her. Because Hermione looks alive in some fundamentally new way as she bows to him and whips out a disarming spell and then a stunner, all in the time it takes Draco to set up a reasonably powerful shield.

Granger casts a hex, and it rebounds on her before she can dodge it, the skin of her throat going red and angry, boils sprouting before he can take down his shield.

She waves her wand but they don't disappear.

“What did you cast?” he asks, approaching her.

She stuns him before he can take another step, but he throws it off with a wave of his wand at just the right moment. It's one of his favourite counter-spells, one he invented on his own.

He watches Hermione's eyes light with curiosity at the spell, before they cloud over with pain.

The boils at her throat are large now, and angry, blossoming red on her collarbones. There are already tears in Hermione's eyes as he approaches her.

“It's a hex I made up,” she says. Her voice is ragged, and he wonders if there are boils inside her throat. “I haven't come up with the counter yet.”

“I’m taking you to Madame Pomfrey,” he says, picking up her satchel and throwing it over his shoulder before he pulls her to her feet, braces her against his body.

She lets out a little whimper.

“The spell takes advantage of the bio-rhythms of the human body.” Her voice is hoarser now, a rasp in her throat. “The effects multiply with each heartbeat, every breath. I might need—there’s a Muggle way to shock the body out of its rhythm and restart it. Do you think you could—?”

“I’m not going to kill you today, Granger.” Let her think that’s still an open possibility.

Though Draco knows, leading her toward the castle, that there’s not a chance he would harm her. Even as she stops walking and turns toward him. The boils are a deep scarlet now, stretched tight, and there’s agony in the lines of her face.

“I need you to stop my heart,” she says. “Or stop me breathing. However you can. Because I don’t know if—”

She rasps out a breath, and Draco’s not sure if she can even speak any more. How much longer she’ll be able to stand. His mind goes racing, wracking through all the magic he knows, anything that might help Hermione survive through the next two minutes.

There is one curse that he has used occasionally in the field, one that will terrify the recipient to death if cast too strongly.

Draco meant it when he said he wouldn’t kill her. But as he scours his mind for alternatives, he thinks of the way he felt under the curse, as if his breath had been stolen from him.

Without letting go of her, he gives his wand a firm slash through the air, pointing at Hermione’s throat, and says, “*Timore.*” The two syllables firm and urgent on his tongue. Enough, hopefully, to terrify Hermione’s heart and lungs out of rhythm.

For a moment, all he sees are Hermione’s eyes, wide with terror.

Draco has to fist his fingers tight around his wand to keep from reversing the spell.

Then, bit by bit, the boils at Hermione’s neck become less angry and inflamed. She takes a deep inhale that presses her closer to him, all while her skin calms to the too-pale complexion befitting a senior Ministry official.

“I’m sorry,” is the first thing she says, stepping out of the circle of his arms, the fear dissolving from her eyes.

“About what, exactly? The fact that you shot that hex at me with no way to reverse it? Or the fact that you were so bent on proving your abilities that you made a truly stupid error in judgement?”

Draco doesn’t realise how angry he is until green sparks shoot from his wand.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione says again, her voice still low, still rough. She hasn’t moved away from him, and this only makes Draco angrier, because she should know better than to face down an Auror on a tirade without so much as a basic Shielding Charm in place. “It felt so good, just to try something. Not to know how it would turn out. It felt like being here again.”

“You’re not some awkward bookworm anymore, Granger,” he says. He sounds far too appreciative of this fact, and he steels himself, changes his voice into something more stern. A tone that conjures only harsh realities which cannot be debated. “You need to start with the basics. You’re strong and quick enough that that alone can take out nearly any opponent.”

“Not a fully-trained Auror.”

“That’s why I’m here with you,” he says, holding out her satchel. “Come back next week, and I’ll show you how to use the basics better.”

Her eyes light up, the way they had during the duel, and Draco almost feels the years slipping away again. “I could—”

“If you can’t think of a way to get past my shield, you’re going to end up hurting yourself, and at this rate, I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to repair it. We’ll try again next week.”

He expects her to stomp off, but Granger only sighs as she heaves the satchel on her shoulder.

It’s depressing in a way he can’t describe, that he could get the better of her so easily.

But then, Draco is still the awful person he’s always been, so he watches her make her way to the Hogwarts castle without calling out to her.

He can’t stop thinking of the terror in her eyes. *Timore* makes its victim consider images that would make them afraid. As he paces the grounds, he wonders what conjured up that fear.

In his mind, it all circles back to questioning why, exactly, Hermione Granger is so awful at duelling, when she has Potter and Weasley as her best friends. Is it only a matter of long hours and the demands of bureaucracy at the Ministry?

Or has Granger really become so isolated?

He thinks of the way she’d snapped at Lovegood at the opening feast, like some idiotic subordinate. As if it were the most natural thing. Beyond Potter and Weasley, is there anyone Granger confides in?

Then again, now that Potter and Ginny Weasley have paired off, and Ron Weasley has married the kind of generically chic Beauxbatons graduate who’s fawned over him since the war, Granger likely goes home at night to an empty flat. He’s never asked either of his coworkers about the whole Golden Trio dynamic. His tentative understanding with Potter, his relative lack of hostility with Weasley, are not enough to erase the weight of all he’d said and done in the years when he’d first known them.

Draco accepts this truth even as it burns in him: that he will never be able to atone, not really, for all he did before his eighteenth birthday.

Though he would have thought that clinging to goodness, the way Granger did, would come with a reward. Instead, she seems just as isolated as Draco has allowed himself to become.

There's something appealing in that realisation, something dangerous. Because Hermione Granger would never give him a second glance if she weren't lonely, and even that wouldn't be enough to hold her if she knew his gaze on her was anything more than an Auror's assessment.

He watches as she pulls the great wooden doors of the Hogwarts castle open and disappears behind the thud of old wood against ancient stone and tries to think about anything but the way Granger had looked in the middle of their duel, like some ancient, scheming goddess, all that power in her fingertips, suffused with radiance.

Such thoughts, after all, are not befitting to a Malfoy.

Hermione runs her fingertips over her throat. She had stared at herself in the mirror for far too long once she returned to the castle, reassuring herself that the boils had vanished, murmuring *stupid* as if it were a spell that could remove all her horrible instincts.

She knows she has never been at her best in a duel or on a battlefield. Her intelligence is the kind that works best in quiet rooms with stacks of books and endless coffee, when she can analyse every facet of a puzzle until the pieces lock into place. Her competence in the field, her ability to save Harry and Ron, had mostly come from the fact that her mind seemed to work more quickly than either of theirs did.

Still, Hermione hates that Malfoy's remonstrance was right. Hates that she wanted to prove herself—to *Malfoy*, of all people—so badly that she broke their stated rules and cast a curse with no known remedy.

Even if part of her is still fascinated by the way the spell worked, how it had crescendoed through her with every heartbeat, every indrawing of her breath. The terror, too, of that unknown spell that Malfoy had cast on her. She can't stop thinking about it.

Hermione hasn't been afraid for years, not in that visceral way. Part of her felt alive in that moment, the way she had during the duel, at the very frontier of her capabilities.

All the more disappointing, then, that she'd fallen short. That Malfoy, of all people, had been witness to her failure.

She's already taken *The Basics of Magickal Duelling* from the library shelf, concealed in a stack of books and parchments about the various epochs in magical history which she plans to cover in the coming weeks of class.

Now, as she waits in a corner of the library for her meeting with Professor Saraiva, Hermione surveys the spread of papers before her, her fingers at her throat again, seeking anything unnatural, any pain that would signal the return of the spell. Because when she really considers it, wasn't it too easy, that the spell would just—

“Have you found anything interesting about the goblin wars yet?” Rebeca's voice is laughing as she interrupts Hermione's thoughts.

She settles herself across from Hermione, reaching out and stacking her volumes and parchments in front of her. The thin gold rings on her fingers catch the light, the scattered gemstones a glimmering rainbow.

“They're actually fascinating,” Hermione says, unable to help herself, “if you consider the fact that we're always taught to think of goblins as subhuman creatures, and the actual historical record proves that that's not true at all.”

“Not to mention their monetary system makes far more sense than the wizarding one. No need for logic when most things can be conjured,” Rebeca says, the kind of comment Hermione wishes her students would make, the opening to the kind of conversation she'd always hoped to have at Hogwarts. “Though I suppose I shouldn't say that to the next Minister of Magic.”

Hermione shakes her head, allowing herself a little smile. “Anything can be changed if it's worth changing.”

“I am glad you said that, Professor Granger. Because I want to talk to you about Muggles.”

Only now, too late, does Hermione notice the way that Rebeca has steeled her spine, set her shoulders back, the way her gaze is levelled squarely on Hermione. Even her hair is arranged in a braided crown. If this had been a duel, Hermione would already be dead.

She doesn't allow this realisation to show on her face.

Instead, she keeps her smile pleasant. It's easiest, she's discovered in her years at the Ministry, to allow a potential opponent to reveal themselves fully. “Tell me more,” she says, low and sweet, and then watches in surprise as Rebeca rolls her eyes.

“You don't need to placate me.”

“Then tell me why you've come ready for battle.”

As soon as she says the words, she's worried they're too harsh, too brittle, but there's a flash of a real smile on Professor Saraiva's face, like a part of her has been unleashed. And Hermione should be terrified, but just as she was with Draco this morning, she finds herself more intrigued than anything.

“I think we need to tell the Muggles about our existence.”

“You realise that we've spent centuries doing exactly the opposite?”

“Yes, and your Ministry wastes most of its efforts on concealment. What could you be doing if all of that useless effort were used for a better purpose?”

Hermione waves a hand toward the spread of old books. “I don’t have to remind you of the history of witch burnings, do I?”

“They went on even longer in my country, like so many other horrors. But you should know as well as I do that this is the legacy of Muggle empire.”

“Muggles have real reasons to fear us,” Hermione says. She’s thinking of her parents’ faces after she’d modified their memories, pleasant but almost unseeing, calmly asking the now-strange young woman to please leave them for their packing, as they were headed to Melbourne in a matter of hours. With two flicks of her wand, she’d uprooted their lives completely.

“Muggles have evil in their own lives, too. And weapons which are too easily wielded. Their own form of magic.”

Hermione bites back the indignant comments that rise in her at the implication that she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Because, she reminds herself, she had no idea that a magi-technologist fit to teach at Hogwarts could come from Brazil, she’s become terrible at duelling, and she’s not very good at teaching, either, and somehow Draco Malfoy has managed to get the upper hand on her. Perhaps it would be best to assume that she is wrong.

“What are you proposing, exactly?” she asks.

“Nothing as radical as all that,” Rebeca says, resting her ringed hands lightly on the table.

“Not yet, at least. I want to raise the idea at your Muggle Summit in the spring. And I’d like your backing.”

“You’ll need to create a formal proposal. A timeline, a thorough consideration of the implications for your actions...And I would need to review all of this in plenty of time before the Summit.”

Rebeca reaches into her bag and pulls out three rolls of parchment. They’re covered in writing on both sides. She recognises the blots and tears that come from being wrapped up in thought.

“I’ve made a start, Professor Granger,” Rebeca says, pushing the parchment across the space between them.

“I can see that,” Hermione says, resting her hands on the scrolls, and then, “You can call me Hermione if you want to.”

“Does that mean you’ll be helping me with this?” There’s real hope in the other professor’s deep brown eyes.

Hermione breathes deep. “What does this mean to you, beyond intellectual curiosity and the implications for your work?”

“Why, do you need some sad history in order to help me?”

“No, but I did spend a sleepless month with nightmares about what Voldemort might have done with an atom bomb.”

“Touché, Hermione,” she says, and then, “You should call me Rebeca if we’re going to be working together.”

“I never said—”

“I know,” Rebeca says. “But I think if you consider this start to my proposal, you have a good chance of being convinced. Especially as a Muggleborn witch yourself.”

“I thought sad histories weren’t a requirement.”

“Yes, but everyone already knows yours.”

Hermione manages something like a rueful grin, even as she thinks that nobody knows the true extent of her sad history.

The disappearance of her parents has been concealed in rumour, with the general assumption being that they were killed by Death Eaters and left to rot. Hermione has never revealed the fact that she apparates to their Melbourne neighbourhood once a year, watching them lock up the house holding hands and walk to their dental practice. That she learned how to use a Muggle computer in order to find the rave reviews from patients, to follow her parents’ occasional online updates, the neighbourhood parties and the gardening club they joined three years ago, her father’s newfound passion for raising orchids and the photos her mother takes of the two orange cats they’ve taken in, who look like Crookshank’s distant cousins.

And, of course, nobody knows how alone she’s become. Hermione herself didn’t recognise it fully until she was back at Hogwarts, gawked at by students and without Harry and Ron to confide in and laugh with. Even Neville’s dinner invitation for tonight was tentative, as though he can still remember the way Hermione had snapped at his wife.

Perhaps some of this shows on her face, because Rebeca’s next question is, “How were the rest of your classes this week?”

Hermione tries not to wince.

“Surely they weren’t as bad as you thought,” the other professor says. “My first weeks teaching at the Academia—”

“I have to lecture constantly. If I ask for their questions, my students only want to know about my life.”

“That’s the danger of being a person of historical significance, Hermione.” There’s sympathy in Rebeca’s voice, though. As if she might understand.

“But how do you make them focus on their subjects?”

“How many of your teachers ever succeeded if you were focused elsewhere?”

Hermione thinks of Professor Trelawney, the stifling air and the ridiculous notion that all of them could see their futures if they just looked a little closer. Somehow Hermione has been able to avoid her old Divination professor in the corridors. Even after all these years, it's a relief. She shakes her head. “So should I just tell them everything?”

“Or tell them to stop asking questions. But stop dodging them with history if you actually want them to learn it. Just be honest.”

“You make that sound so easy.” Though Hermione is smiling as she says the words. It's been so long since people weren't overawed by her or focused on her past. Rebeca seems to only want to work on what is right in front of them, at this moment.

Strangely, she thinks of Draco, the way he'd held her as he cast that spell. How even in the midst of her magicked terror, Hermione had been aware of the strength of his arm around her, as if she were the princess in a fairytale. Even if she's long known that these stories are untrue.

She's still unwilling to admit how frequently her thoughts circle back to Draco, let alone the fact that, perhaps even more than Rebeca, she might consider him a friend.

“Do you want to go over your lesson plans with me?” Rebeca says. “It's only fair if you're going to be reviewing my scrolls.”

Hermione finds herself nodding, reaching for her satchel.

She'd befriended Ron and Harry over a mountain troll in the girls' loo, but no threat of death is required with Rebeca, who looks at Hermione's lesson plans, riddled with additions and cross-outs from all her second-guessing, and helps her put her first three lessons in reasonable order before asking if Hermione would like to hear about her own work.

Even if she wasn't genuinely interested in the implications of magi-technology, Hermione would acquiesce. She wants to keep the conversation going. Because she doesn't have a dozen meetings scheduled for the rest of the day and as many memos to draft and review. Because she finally has time to think and talk and perhaps become friends with someone who didn't call her Mudblood when they were both students here.

By the time Hermione excuses herself to eat lunch, it's possible to forget that Rebeca wants something from her.

She's almost reached her room when Draco passes by.

“I have to admit, Granger, I'm impressed you waited a week before you attempted to bring the entirety of the Hogwarts library to your apartments. Though I suppose you'll need to read up on duelling.”

She thinks of the library and all the things she doesn't know.

“Thank you,” she blurts out before she can talk herself into something more caustic. “You saved me, I think.”

“I know,” he says, flexing his fingers so that his signet ring catches the light. “Has your throat healed enough for lunch?”

She nods, feeling a blush on her cheeks. It takes all of her Ministry training to resist the urge to press her hands to her face and hide it.

Then again, he’s already seen her covered in boils today.

“I can eat,” she says.

“Has Madame Pomfrey signed off on you?” There’s the hint of a smile curling the edges of his lips. It’s such a strange feeling, not to deeply regret giving Malfoy anything to smile about.

She shakes her head, feels an answering smile on her lips.

“Let me put my books down.” She needs space from him, just for a moment. Long enough for her to remember why it would be a bad idea if she and Malfoy were ever friends.

When she walks into her rooms, there are new flowers on her desk, a bouquet of white anemones and ranunculus, fragrant and elegant. Still, there’s no card, and Hermione makes a mental note to write to Ginny and Harry, who are the likeliest to send her flowers, even if neither of them is likely to keep the gift such a secret.

Still, after she performs her customary detection spells, she buries her nose in the blooms. Crookshanks winds his way around her ankles, purring. For a moment, even in this place with all its history and secrets, hopes and disappointments, Hermione feels nearly at home.

Draco is waiting for her when she emerges, her satchel left behind, her shoulders throbbing as the blood returns to them. “Were those books really all about duelling?” he asks.

There’s actual curiosity in the question, not a sneer. And Hermione thinks about the fact that Harry and Ron have worked with Draco Malfoy for over a decade, somehow without complaining about him for at least the last five years.

“Only one. The rest are primary sources for next week’s classes.”

“I would have thought you’d have finished all your lesson plans for the term by the first of August.”

“I thought I had, but—” She hesitates, not sure how much she wants to reveal. “Do your students want to know about your life?”

He waves her through a tight corridor, pulling back the tapestry that clings to her on a phantom breeze. “I’m a former Death Eater teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts,” he says, once they’ve reached the landing. “The day I don’t get any questions is the day there’s a new Dark Lord in power.”

He says it like the possibility is real and almost expected, and Hermione's jaw clenches with some mixture of anger and fear. Because everything she's done is to try and stop that.

"Don't joke about that." She feels every bit the Head Girl she should have been as she crosses her arms over her chest.

He sucks in a breath.

"My point, Granger, is that there will always be questions about the things you don't want to discuss. You will always be viewed as a curiosity of sorts. But did you ever think of McGonagall or Flitwick as a person, someone as complicated as you?"

"I would never ask them—"

"Only because they were Hogwarts institutions, same as Binns or any of the portraits."

"Why are you being so reasonable?" she asks, waspish. It's very trying when Draco Malfoy is giving good advice.

"I don't know," he says, and now there's a smirk in the words. "But I suppose that after saving your life, I don't particularly want to see you make a hash of things. You know what getting driven out of Hogwarts would do to your glorious Ministry career."

"I am nothing like Umb—"

It's comforting to slip into that old indignation, and when Malfoy holds up a hand, his long fingers bent just slightly towards her, Hermione is already coming up with her next retort. "She would shudder at your choice of cardigan," he says. "And to be clear, Granger, you should take that as a compliment."

Hermione has no idea what to say next, so instead she follows him to the Great Hall. Above them, the candles pale next to the illumination of the sun in the painted sky. The students around them go quiet as they pass, a wave of curious silence following in their wake.

"They're waiting to see if one of us will destroy the other, I expect." Malfoy isn't looking at her as he speaks, his eyes fixed on the high table. Rebeca gives them a wave, and each of them returns it. Hermione files a series of questions away for later.

"Imagine if they'd seen us at the lake," she says instead.

"They'd be worried you were trying to off yourself."

"I'll be ready for you next time."

"Not even if you practised with Potter."

Hermione has to bite back a smile that she doesn't entirely understand. She'd spent her years at Hogwarts arguing with Ron, but she had always been angry at him. This sparring with Malfoy is more like a ball batted between them. There is anger still, at the remnants of their past, but it is distant in this moment, as if the present could be something new entirely.

The realisation makes her breath catch in her throat. Because this is Malfoy, and the history between them is more than simple aversion or some misunderstanding that time alone can wash away.

He delighted in tormenting you, she reminds herself, choosing a seat between Rebeca and Professor Flitwick.

She does not rise until Malfoy is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like Hermione is making friends and having complicated feelings about that. Can anyone else relate?

Big thank yous to Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy—your editorial advice is truly so helpful, and I think you have hacked into my brain. You are the readers I always dreamed of having, and I'm lucky to call you all my friends.

For sneak peeks of future chapters, thoughts on the books I'm reading, and to hang out, you can find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), or watch me as I try to figure out [TikTok](#) in real time.

I also made a [Twitter](#) this week, so you can pretty much find me anywhere.

See you next Thursday, friends. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I can't wait to share the next one with you. I know it's a slow burn right now, but I promise it won't stay slow forever 🧡

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Hermione discovers a new room at Hogwarts. It's occupied.

Chapter Notes

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

Draco thinks of writing to the Dochertys. Even now, they might accept his letter with something like reverence. But he cannot figure out a way to phrase his questions or to gain the truth he's after.

Why would your daughter want to gain control of the Hogwarts castle? Why is she bent on capturing and likely killing Hermione Granger?

The words are a waste of parchment.

But then, too, the Hand are a similar waste. They might outnumber the Death Eaters, but each cell operates independently, without a singular vision to unite them. The Auror's office barely breaks a sweat containing them, generally, though there are exceptions—the wizard, for instance, who threw the curse meant for Potter, which shattered Draco's knee instead.

Even those are quickly eliminated.

He should report this second meeting with Ruby to the Auror's office, but instead, while he plans his lessons and reads through essays from his NEWT students, he thinks of how to manoeuvre around his Vow to her, how to get Ruby in a room with Granger without either of them winding up dead.

It shouldn't matter. He'd killed Agnew with half a thought. The vast majority of his compassion for Dark wizards has been extinguished, first in the camp and then in Auror training, and then, finally in the field.

But something about Ruby reminds him of Granger. The way she outclassed the two men around her, maybe, or the strength of her resolve. Even her fervour recalls S.P.E.W. or the slew of memos Granger is famous for unleashing at the Ministry.

It seems like such a waste to kill Ruby Docherty, when she could do something worthwhile.

Perhaps all his teaching has made him soft. Still, something curdles inside of Draco at the thought of killing her.

Even if the thought of Granger earnestly lecturing a zealous Dark witch on the merits of goodness and light borders on hallucinatory. There might be the possibility of connection, or protection.

He thinks of himself at Ruby's age. How he'd already been so different from the boy he was just a few years before at Hogwarts, full of inherited convictions and spite. Though all that darkness was still clotted inside of him, he was still given the opportunity for something better.

Part of that was thanks to Granger. Even all those years back, when she had every reason to despise him.

Still, as the sun dips below the horizon, Draco has no idea how to save Ruby from the clutches of the Faithful Hand.

Dinner with Neville and Luna is pleasant, but Hermione doesn't want to linger. They still seem apprehensive about her, and when the conversation eases, Luna begins to say a thousand things which Hermione is entirely convinced are false. She has no idea how Neville nods along, looking proud, twining his fingers through hers across the table.

And when they talk about their future, the baby and their plans to turn the small office in their apartments into a nursery, Hermione feels a pang. Something like jealousy, which she does not even want to admit to herself.

Hermione has had relationships with all sorts of men, all of them mostly satisfying, but still the thought of domesticity had always felt like a binding, a weight on her. But now she thinks of her rooms and wonders if Crookshanks and her books are company enough.

She manages to excuse herself graciously, returning Luna's hug and accepting a potted Moly plant from Neville while they make plans for dinner next weekend.

As soon as she leaves their apartments, stepping into the cool September night, Hermione heaves a sigh and then scans her surroundings for any being that might have heard her.

Once, she would have thought that such habits would disappear after the war. Now, as she watches the stars high above her, Hermione is still listening for the sound of unknown footsteps.

She doesn't linger on the dark expanse of Hogwarts grounds. She doesn't want to know what could come out of the Forbidden Forest, looking for her.

Inside, the castle smells as it always has, stone and old books and a hint of cinnamon, and she tries to let that comfort her. She'll explore, she thinks. Her lessons for the week are planned and the students haven't yet turned in their first assignments, and Hermione needs to believe there is one place in this world where nobody wants to hurt her.

Out of habit, she turns toward the library, but once she passes the landing with the ancient spinning globe, she doesn't take the right turn toward the library or the left turn toward Gryffindor tower, but instead, moved by some instinct, she pushes aside the tapestry just beyond the landing and unveils a spiral staircase.

Hermione has never seen this pathway at Hogwarts, and she wonders if it was a new addition to the castle or if she was just too afraid of Filch to roam the hallways without a definite goal or the cover of Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

As she ascends the staircase, she hears music, a piano playing in the heavy evening silence. Hermione stops in her tracks, unable to quite believe what she is hearing.

For the past few years, she's taken piano lessons with a local Muggle instructor, installing an upright piano where most Muggles keep a television and spelling it soundproof. She had played the piano as a girl and been diligent if untalented, and no new talent has surfaced. Still, there is something comforting about entering into that wordless space, in forcing her mind to twist itself into a new shape, where melody and harmony evolve between her ten fingers and the instrument beneath them.

Her first thought, then, is something between joy and anticipation at the possibility of a piano at Hogwarts.

There was never much music at Hogwarts when she was a student. Phonographs and cassette players didn't work amidst all the magic, and so Hermione had always enjoyed playing music in her apartment in the evenings after long days at the Ministry, whether on her own piano or from the Muggle laptop and speakers she'd bought solely for that purpose.

Then her adult mind surfaces, and she's conscious of the possibility of threat. When she was growing up, nearly everything that's lurked in out-of-the-way corners of the school wanted to destroy her in one way or another, much as she longs to remember it otherwise.

Still, the possibility of a piano is too tempting. She keeps ascending the stairs, her wand held tight in her hand, and opens the door with a whispered *Alohomora*.

There's a short dark hallway, the stone walls covered in ornate tapestries which only slightly muffle the sound. The weavings of leaves and branches give Hermione the sense that she is listening to a concert in some ancient forest.

It's Bach, she realises as she moves forward, and whoever is playing is more talented than she would've ever expected a Hogwarts student to be. Each note is struck cleanly and without hesitation, two hands becoming a world of music, melancholy but almost shimmering, like light through a stained glass window.

At the end of the hallway, Hermione comes to a halt.

Even in the candlelight, she recognises that white-blond hair, the light grey eyes half-focused on the music in front of him, falling shut as he arrives at a cadence.

Draco Malfoy is playing a Bach fugue in the heart of Hogwarts.

He is lost in the music, and Hermione does not make a sound either, not as he moves through each phrase with a precision that suggests years of training. A natural talent, even. Enough to make the kind of music she could lose herself inside.

For a moment, she cannot breathe.

Who is this person? And why does she want only to move towards him, in spite of all their history, all the memories where there was nothing but disgust in Malfoy's eyes?

Somehow, she forces herself backwards, silently retreating into the darkened hallway and through the door, her footsteps soft on the spiral staircase and her breath as short as if she'd just seen a monster.

She does not continue her exploration. Instead Hermione walks straight to her room, as close as she can get to running, bolting the door shut and performing three locking and sealing spells before she lets out a loud sigh.

The first thing she notices are the beating wings outside her window. As soon as she unlocks it, three owls fly in, perching on the window sill and holding out their taloned feet. There's Harry and Ginny's owl, Perdita, and the great horned owl Kingsley favours, and Ron and Leonor's long-eared owl, Chou Chou. Each of the letters looks thick, and Hermione's mood lifts a little.

Whatever's in those messages will put Draco Malfoy out of her mind.

She unbinds the envelopes and feeds each owl a treat. Hooting softly, they disappear into the night.

Normally she would begin with Kingsley's letter, work before her friends, but now Hermione reaches for Harry and Ginny's letter first. Her friend has spelled an assortment of their old favourite candies into the envelope, so that by the time the letter falls on her desk, Hermione has a whole pile of Chocolate Frogs and Fizzing Whizbees and Every-Flavour Beans awaiting her.

I always had a feeling I'd one day be writing to Professor Granger, Ginny begins, and Hermione can hear the teasing lilt in her voice just from those words on the page. How does it feel to be back? I'm glad you have Neville and Luna for company, though I'm sorry we can't all be back with you and have a lazy afternoon around the lake. (Then again, did you ever spend a lazy afternoon at Hogwarts? I can't remember one.) I'm sure the students absolutely love you, especially the brainy ones. Do you have a fan club in Ravenclaw yet?

Then again, I might be able to find out all about it without you writing. Madame Hooch has been trying to get me to visit and work with the Quidditch teams for ages. I've been putting

her off (I don't particularly fancy coming all the way to Hogwarts to work with Slytherins) but I would love to see you. What do you think about an October visit?

Hope you're staying clear of Malfoy. I know Harry says he's changed, but he had plenty of opportunities when we were at Hogwarts. Anyway, the less said about that git, the better.

I want to know everything, Mione, so write me a nice long letter when you're not grading papers or writing your next book or saving the Ministry in your spare time. I'm sure they're in shambles without you, even if it's only been a week.

Hermione smiles as she tucks the letter away, already half-composing her response as she pulls out the letter from Harry. She won't mention Malfoy to either of them, she decides. She'll keep things nice and light and do her best to convince Ginny to visit. Probably then she would start feeling more like her old self.

Hope everything is well at Hogwarts. We're already missing you, at home and at the office, even all those memos you love to send. How are your classes going?

I wish I could write to you about easier things, but you need to be careful. We've been informed about a threat at Hogwarts. Malfoy has provided some initial intelligence, but Ron or I will be in Inverness sometime soon to investigate. It may be too risky to visit Hogwarts directly, but we'll be in touch. If you notice anything awry, write to me immediately. There is a larger threat that we're monitoring and containing, and any information is crucial. No need to take extraordinary precautions, though, the Auror office has you covered.

Now that all that's said, I hope you enjoy the candy. Ginny hoped it would remind you of evenings in the Gryffindor common room, though as I recall you mostly spent that time studying. However, if possible, I would like to request some treacle pudding from the kitchens at the next possible opportunity.

She unwraps a Chocolate Frog and pops it in her mouth, thinking about Harry's letter as she contemplates Albus Dumbledore's face, his eyes twinkling from the card. It's unlike Harry to tell her about a real threat by owl. He still remembers the way all their owls were monitored during the war. And Harry rarely speaks about his work in the Auror office, unless it directly impacts Hermione. Even then, he's as vague as he can be. Hermione usually assumes it's a policy of the department.

But Harry has never gotten over his habit of secrets.

Still half-lost in thought, she opens Ron's letter. The parchment is covered in his expansive scrawl.

Hermione, I think the only surprising thing about you teaching at Hogwarts is that it took you so long. Have you found anything to add to Hogwarts, A History yet? It's only a matter of time. Stick around if you want to be headmistress after McGonagall, but you should know that Shacklebolt is at loose ends without you. Well, he looks calm and composed, but we're all missing you.

Harry and I are busy at the office, but it's nothing we can't handle. I do miss seeing you, even if it was only for a moment at a time, or a lunch. There's something special about you, Hermione Granger. I never seem to tell you that enough.

I hope that you're enjoying the first few weeks at school and that you'll give Neville and Luna my love. And I hope that Malfoy's not treating you like he used to. He seemed mostly reformed at the Auror office, and Harry seems to think he's decent, especially after Malfoy took that curse to his knee, but I still don't trust him, especially around you. Keep your wits and your wand about you and you'll be all right, though. You've always been the cleverest of us.

I would not complain if you would send along some custard creams from the kitchen. Let me know if there's a good time for me to come and visit. I'd love to see what's changed at Hogwarts over the years, but most of all I'd love to see you, Professor Granger.

We all send you our love and wish you the best.

Hermione sets the letter aside, wishing she'd waited to open it. There's a longing in the words, something more than nostalgia, and she thinks of all those times when the arguments with Ron had seemed to be leading up to *something*.

She'd been the one to leave him, after the war. He'd married Leonor a few years later.

But it has never been simple between them, despite the dinners with their group and the hours with his wife and children, despite all her trying. He always compliments her too thoroughly or looks at her a little too long, and, when she's feeling lonely, Hermione doesn't look away quickly enough, doesn't stop it. It's never become enough for anybody to address, but she knows that Leonor has cooled on her, preferring her own Beauxbatons friends.

It's one of the few things she and Ginny don't discuss.

Ron had gone a whole letter without mentioning Leonor by name, let alone his children.

She tears open the letter from Kingsley, not caring if it means additional work so long as it provides her a distraction.

Hermione, the Minister had written, I'm sure everyone has already told you that the Ministry is not the same without you. We are managing, of course, but while I hope that you thoroughly enjoy your year at Hogwarts, I'm frankly wishing that you have a terrible time and return before the end of next week. Please know that I've informed Minerva that she is by no means allowed to poach you.

As I'm sure you're well aware, Draco Malfoy is teaching at Hogwarts. While his history is complicated, he passed all the rehabilitation requirements, as well as three years of Auror training and exams, so I am reasonably certain that he alone is not a threat. My colleagues in the Auror department, Harry and Ron included, have further assured me that this is the case.

However, I have recently obtained intelligence that suggests that another member of the Hogwarts faculty may be dangerous. You should keep a wide berth from Professor Rebeca

Saraiva, who teaches magi-technology. Reports from colleagues in South America have given me reason to believe that she may be part of a radical fringe group that will not hesitate to use Dark magic. Not on the level of the old Death Eaters, mind, but not worth tangling up in, particularly for a future Minister.

I've provided some additional details on Saraiva, as well as Malfoy's files, for your review. They have all the concealment spells required, though I suspect you'll find a few more to cast.

In addition, what follows are a few questions about the Muggle summit. You'll note that I disagree with your recommendation to accommodate the American president's security requirements. For all the threats he may face in his own country, the wizarding world views him as a beacon of hope and will not cause him harm. I myself will guard him if need be.

Further, I would...

Hermione carefully marks up the rest of the letter with notes on her own responses for the letter she'll draft to Kingsley in the morning, then pulls out Rebeca's file from the envelope. Unsurprisingly, given Kingsley's revelation, it's thick, with photos and press clippings and what look like a handful of published papers.

On some stubborn instinct, Hermione turns to the papers first, and though her expertise is not in magi-technology, she can tell within paragraphs that Rebeca is indeed brilliant. And the group that she joined, A Mão Fiel, which Hermione's translating spell renders as the Faithful Hand, seems to be focused on integrating the Magical and Muggle realms.

Their pamphlets, translated magically from the Portuguese, seem a bit too idealistic to her, but there's nothing in them to cause concern, necessarily. Even in her photos, Rebeca looks just as she does in the hallways of Hogwarts—pretty and poised and intelligent, with an expression that suggests she's just about to ask an excellent question.

Something isn't fully adding up to Hermione.

She makes a note to ask Kingsley when she writes him tomorrow, but A Mão Fiel and all its promise stay with her as she turns to Draco Malfoy's file.

Hermione pages through his old school photos and a photo from his year in the rehabilitation camp, his hair too long and falling into his face. A photo of his Mark. Pages of exams and evaluations from the camp and from the Auror training afterwards, and a heavily redacted record of his years as an Auror.

The only portion with any substantial information chronicles his reason for leaving the Ministry three years ago: he'd dived in front of a Dark wizard's curse that was intended for Harry Potter, a curse that had badly mangled his left knee and forced his early retirement and employment at Hogwarts.

Harry had never told her why Draco had left the Aurors' office.

Hermione doesn't know what to think about that omission. So much of their work, Harry and Ron's and her own, too, is secret.

Still, she'd been complaining about Malfoy's appointment as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor for years now. Surely Harry could have mentioned it .

She goes back to Draco's file, to his Hogwarts hiring paperwork and another ream of evaluations from each month since he started the position. Every single report is glowing. Professors, students, Ministry officials all praise him. Even McGonagall appears enthused about his teaching. Apparently it's Malfoy who's the natural teacher, not Hermione.

She wants to tell herself that of course he can be charming, he's well-accustomed to lying, but even she can't believe that explanation. Hermione has faced enough Dark wizards and liars to know that Draco, at minimum, believes the majority of what he's saying.

But how, if he has apparently been so thoroughly reformed, was he so awful at Hogwarts? And why, when she knows so much better, can't Hermione keep herself from thinking about Draco Malfoy?

Why can't she stop thinking about the way he'd played Bach, the way his face had looked at the piano, softer than she'd ever seen it? As if the life he'd been born for were not the life he'd been born into. As if, like Harry, he'd been trapped inside a destiny that was uglier than he could have imagined.

She thinks about his arms around her, the way the terror from her spell and his own hadn't overwhelmed her because somehow she'd been sure that she'd be all right. The way his face had come alive when he'd duelled her, when they'd spoken on the way to lunch.

Who is this person? And why can she not reconcile his present with the taunting, spoiled boy she'd known here years ago? Why does her desire for him—and here, in the quiet darkness of her room, Hermione can admit that this is what she feels towards Malfoy—keep warring with her better instincts? She saw the Mark on his arm, heard him call her *Mudblood* so many times that she'd given up fighting him at the sound of the word on his lips.

But then, why can't she look away from him?

She falls asleep at her desk, the questions circling inside her mind.

Chapter End Notes

Who has two thumbs and has been listening to Bach fugues nonstop since drafting this chapter? Couldn't be me!

Huge thanks as always to my beta readers: Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy. You all make me smile with my heart.

Extra gratitude to Fitz, for convincing me to keep the piano arc, and to Carter, who told me this fic needed more Draco. Both of you were correct as usual.

For sneak peeks of future chapters, thoughts on the books I'm reading, and to hang out, you can find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), or watch me as I try to figure out [TikTok](#) in real time.

I also recently made a [Twitter](#), in case you want to follow me everywhere.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

This chapter puts both the dark and the academia in dark academia.

Chapter Notes

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

The Malfoy eagle owl is flapping outside the window. Draco lets Titan beat his wings against the glass few more times, stretching in his bed, before he pulls on a dressing gown and lets the owl inside his apartments. Titan doesn't meet his eyes, only extends his leg and flies off as soon as Draco has his hands on the letter.

He's expecting the usual wan update from his mother, her regular entreaty to visit—the idea of being at the Manor, facing what his parents were and have become once again, the creature he used to be, all of it makes his skin crawl—but instead the letter is addressed with his father's slashing handwriting.

I heard you're making interesting contacts, his father writes. And to think I had given up on you.

The rest of the parchment is empty.

Draco curses quietly as he casts a spell on the parchment for hidden messages or invisible inks. Ruby hasn't kept quiet.

He grabs a fresh piece of parchment and drafts his own letter.

Potter, it seems possible that the Hand has been in contact with my father. Your lot should start checking in on former faithful.

He tucks his note around his father's missive, dresses quickly, and heads to the aery and Ulysses.

Granger isn't lurking near her apartments, and Draco tells himself that he's glad of this, that seeing her would be more complicated. Particularly when he's not sure what she'll make of the parchment in his fist.

He's nearly made it to the aery when he hears footsteps behind him, and he's turned around, wand out, before he realises that this Auror instinct is unsuited for the hallways of Hogwarts.

It's Professor Saraiva, the expression on her face a little too surprised to be genuine.

In theory, Draco should like Rebeca Saraiva, who is brilliant and beautiful and, according to his mother, pureblooded enough to make his own bloodlines look like swill. But it's his mother's endorsement that has made him avoid her. There's always danger lurking in whatever his mother admires, like a knife in the centre of an orchid.

"You were looking for me, Professor?" he asks, letting his voice fall into the smirk that was habitual at Hogwarts. Let Saraiva know it's best to keep her distance.

"I was hoping to speak with you, yes," she says. "I had some questions about the Hogwarts wards. They're not allowing all of the electronic frequencies that I need. And I think it would be helpful if, in my classroom at least, we could have electricity and access to the internet."

"You'll need to check with McGonagall," he says dismissively, as if he hadn't started listening closely when she mentioned the wards. He's reminded of Ruby and her insistence on capturing Hogwarts, though the younger witch has never mentioned a specific method.

"She said that you're the one who works the spells on the wards."

"I've made the most recent modifications." Which had included the last alterations Saraiva had needed when she'd started at Hogwarts two years ago. There had been no small uproar among the faculty, who'd been too used to English witches and wizards filling the faculty, not to mention the incursion of Muggle technology on the ancient castle. Though Draco has no particular enthusiasm for Muggle advancements, he'd taken a perverse delight in watching his old professors squirm over the tide of innovation. "But McGonagall needs to approve them."

"I'd like to understand what's possible before I speak to her." There's a rueful smile on Saraiva's face. "She often makes me feel like an idiot child when I ask questions."

"She does that to everyone but Gran—Professor Granger." He runs a hand through his hair. "I have to post a letter, but we can talk later."

"I'll see you at breakfast?"

Draco nods and continues to the aery, giving Ulysses a handful of treats before tying the letter to Potter to his foot. Though for all he knows, Potter might be deep undercover in the field, and it will take him a month to respond.

When he arrives at breakfast, Granger is sitting next to Saraiva at the high table, and the two of them are looking cosy as they laugh at something Flitwick tells them.

Draco thinks of lunch the day before, when he and Granger had settled into a comfortable rhythm of sparring, some ease in the conversation, some tension that made him want to pull her close enough to feel her breath on his mouth as she spoke. And then she'd turned away from him as if he were a student and the bell had rung to dismiss him.

He'd spent the rest of the day trying to distract himself, wandering the grounds and reading the old Muggle poetry he tells no one about and finally retreating to the forgotten room where a piano waits, unused, for him.

He'd played Bach until midnight, every one of his preludes and fugues, his thoughts filled with chords and counterpoint but still Hermione Granger's face had loomed in his memory. Her exposed collarbones, the curls of her hair, her ink-stained fingers curled around her wand.

Now, he takes a seat next to Saraiva and, for the sake of defiant experiment, dips close to her and whispers, "Can we talk about the wards in front of others?"

Granger's eyes narrow, and Draco has to hold back a triumphant grin at the expression.

"Of course," Saraiva murmurs, already turning to explain her problem to Granger and Flitwick, the former already looking fascinated instead of jealous and the latter not trying to conceal the look of suspicion on his face.

Saraiva outlines her requirements, namely a reduction of the layering of magics in the wards, which should allow electricity to function a bit better, and allow for the interception of the transmissions she requires for her work.

"There's some new research on warding spells," Granger says, inserting herself into the solution. "Carton-Murray, an American witch in Massachusetts, is doing some extraordinary work with personalisation and detection in a single cast. There are—"

"Show me the papers later, Granger," he says, waving her off as he turns back to Saraiva. Much as he's actually curious to know more, and much as, to his own bewilderment, he'd like to hear Hermione Granger talk about something that clearly interests her, he knows that she could easily spend the next three hours lecturing them on this new magical development. He needs to know what else Saraiva needs from him. "Can you tell me what else you'd like, Professor Saraiva?"

"I will need increased permeability in my office and classroom. They are already insulated from the background magicks of the Hogwarts campus, but I need some kind of conduit that will allow me to access wireless fidelity. And, if it's possible, the radio and satellite transmissions."

There's silence for a moment as Malfoy tries to absorb what she's said, and shockingly Granger hasn't thundered in with a theory that she is unable to restrain herself from sharing with them all.

Instead, it's Flitwick who speaks into the silence, and he looks grave. "What you're proposing, Professor Saraiva, would more than likely require the disabling of the Hogwarts wards."

"I don't think—and anyway it would only be for those two spaces—" Saraiva holds out her hands, and the jewels on her rings sparkle in the light of the sun on the painted ceiling. "I understand the importance of the wards, but there must be a way to make them flexible. Otherwise it is difficult for me to accomplish my own work, let alone to teach my students."

"I can imagine that it's difficult to engage your students when they can't see the full extent of things," Granger is saying. "When I took Muggle Studies, it was impossible to make a

telephone work.”

“Please tell me you hadn’t forgotten how to use Muggle technology after three years at Hogwarts,” Draco says, unable to resist the taunt.

“I’m only saying,” she says, bristling just as she used to, her nose scrunching in the same way it did when she was thirteen, “that Rebeca’s more complicated work needs to be demonstrated to its fullest extent, particularly given the increasing importance of Muggle technology in the development of magic.”

“So you’ll help me with the wards?” Saraiva looks delighted at the possibility.

Draco wonders if this had been her plan all along, and then wonders why he’s so suspicious of her. There’s nothing wrong with Muggle technology. He’s learned over too many years. And Saraiva is legitimately brilliant. If she’s working with Granger, they very well might engineer a more elegant solution to the wards than the spellwork that, with revisions and additions, has kept the castle safe for centuries.

Still, there’s something too collected about the way Saraiva reacts to everything. As if she’d planned it all in advance.

He files it away to think about later, letting himself think about nothing more important than breakfast while Granger and Saraiva talk about the wards, pulling Flitwick in until he’s debating new findings from a collective of Paris witches who say they have invented a network of spells to locate and stabilise pocket universes.

“The theory is ill-considered,” Flitwick says, flinging his fork so that a bit of scrambled eggs land in his coffee. “They could be using disorientation spells to make the viewer feel as if they are moving at a great distance, when in fact they’re only in another room!”

“They say the air is different in a pocket-universe,” Saraiva muses, her mug in her hand. “Apparently it’s more difficult to breathe.”

“Then what is the use of such a discovery?” Flitwick mutters.

“Wouldn’t you like to know what would have happened if you’d made a different choice?” Hermione asks. For a moment, her gaze lands on Draco, and there are too many emotions in it to categorise. As if she could have made a whole constellation of pocket-universes with her choices. Draco knows he could have, if the theory is true. If there truly were whole paradigms in which he’d done things differently.

But the comfort in such an image is mere illusion. Draco doesn’t know how he could have been anything but the boy he was at Hogwarts.

“Choice is an illusion, sometimes,” he says, reaching for his mug of tea.

The conversation stops. Draco adjusts the sleeves of his robes to ensure the Mark on his arm is covered. It hasn’t burned since the first day of classes, but it’s still clearly visible, a smoky blue-grey against his skin.

After a moment, Granger asks Saraiva about a paper she's recently published, and Saraiva's delight makes it easy for Draco to turn back to his plate.

As soon as he's finished breakfast, he nods a goodbye and rises.

Then another chair scrapes against stone and Hermione is following him out of the great hall.

"I didn't know you were close with Rebeca," she says as soon as they've passed the students who, once again, have taken the opportunity to stare.

"Jealous, Granger?"

She huffs a laugh, but her hands are clutched together, her fingers twisted, and Draco is suddenly grateful for those brutal years of Auror training, for the way that Hermione is now laid bare before him.

"She's pretty and clever and pureblooded," she says, and he can tell she's working hard to keep any trace of bitterness from her voice. Even though she's failing. "I see why you'd be drawn to her."

"I wish it were that simple."

Hermione stops walking, her head tilted, as if he is a complex piece of art which she's trying to understand.

"Why?" she finally asks, and there's an admission in the question.

Draco would be relieved, almost happy, if he didn't see the disgust on her face. An expression he knows all too well.

"I've always wanted what I shouldn't," is all he allows himself.

He can practically hear Hermione rolling her eyes.

"Nobody forced you to call me a Mudblood over and over and over. Nobody forced you to bully me all those years at Hogwarts. Don't play the sad prince now, Malfoy. Not to me. Not when—" She stops, dragging her fingers through her curls, and his hands twitch with the desire to follow their motion, pull her closer. In spite of everything.

"What haven't I done?"

"You've never apologised! Not for any of it. You think your parents are the only reason you became Voldemort's little henchman? You always such a rotten, snivelling little leech."

The hallway is empty of students, but Draco still takes Hermione by the wrist and pulls her into an alcove. Because, for some fucking reason, he wants her to believe what he's about to say.

"If I apologise now," he asks, "would you believe me?"

“That would be too easy,” she says. She hasn’t moved her wrist out of his grip.

“What do you need, Hermione?”

A thousand emotions pass over her face as she considers him. And it occurs to Draco, in the moment when she draws breath to speak, that Hermione has seen his files. That she knows everything he’s done in the years since they left Hogwarts. None of it is enough for her.

He wishes it didn’t burn inside him to know it.

“I don’t know!” she says, finally, and there is anger etched into every feature on her face. “I just—I want to be able to look away from you.”

Now she does pull away from him, and he lets her go, thunderstruck.

Hermione has not been able to stop thinking about the way that Draco Malfoy said her name. He’d always called her *Granger* or *Mudblood*, so that when she heard him say *Hermione* in his posh accent, no sneer at all in his voice, she had wanted to stop their row and kiss him. If for no other reason than to swallow up the sound of her name in his mouth.

In the days since, she has tried to think of anything but that conversation. The way it led nowhere. Because she didn’t want him to apologise. She wanted the tension of the weeks since she arrived at Hogwarts to vanish, for everything to be decided. She didn’t even want him to kiss her, not really. She wants him to be obliterated from her mind as if he’s never existed.

Except for the fact that she cannot stop thinking of the moment where he’d said her name like his mouth savoured every syllable.

Now, though, standing in front of her Contemporary History of Magic class, she tries to collect herself, to focus on her lesson plan. Particularly because most of the class is N.E.W.T. level students who could flatten her with a single question if they really wanted.

Luckily, they are still somewhat in awe of her.

When the bell rings, Hermione fixes a smile on her face and begins her lecture on the rise of Gellert Grindelwald. She’d debated skimming over his relationship with Dumbledore, but it had become public knowledge when the former headmaster’s memoirs were published a decade after his death, and she’s gratified that her students do not tense up or snicker but take diligent notes.

Already, the class seems to be going better than last week.

Then she sees Mei-Ling Shyu's hand in the air. She's here with special permission from McGonagall, and Hermione knows that she is bright, but she has to suppress a sigh as she calls on the Slytherin witch. Because Hermione already knows that she is a kindred spirit and therefore sees too much.

"Professor, I think I understand why Dumbledore would turn away from Dark magic. He'd seen the cost. But why would he be seduced by it in the first place?"

"There's a certain allure to power, Miss Shyu, particularly for a wizard with abilities like Dumbledore." She pauses, long enough to see that this answer hasn't fully satisfied Mei-Lee. "In this school, for example, you will only be taught spells that are registered and approved by the Ministry. But, for example, what if you develop a powerful spell that allows you to capture the hearts of those you desire and destroy the fates of those you detest? Would you be able to keep from using it?"

Mei-Ling nods distantly, the answer having satisfied her, but Celina Bushwick, a sixth-year Ravenclaw, raises her hand and says, "But this is all hypothetical, Professor, correct? Surely you wouldn't choose to use the spell."

She wouldn't, over and over in her life she's proven as much, but admitting it aloud makes her feel, all of a sudden, like the worst kind of Ministry stooge.

"Perhaps you should ask Professor Malfoy that question," she says instead. A clear insinuation.

Instantly she knows she's said exactly the wrong thing. The room is silent.

Marlo Thompson, a fifth-year Ravenclaw who has been able to easily answer Hermione's every question in History of Magic, thrusts her hand into the air.

"Professor Malfoy has been nothing but honest with us about his history. And he is an excellent teacher."

Hermione would need cotton stuffed in her ears not to hear the implicit accusation in those words, particularly as the majority of her class nods along. She can feel her cheeks flushing.

She thinks of him, their first year after Hogwarts, after the war, that one moment when they'd spoken and she'd thought that maybe she'd been wrong about all of it. Just one moment, before she'd turned away and never looked back.

And then she does what she could not do on Sunday, when faced with Malfoy himself, with a look on his face that she's never seen before—something like wanting, like softness.

"You're right," she tells Marlo. "Professor Malfoy is an exemplary professor. And it is no small thing to turn away from Dark magic. We know that Dumbledore struggled to give it up until his sister's life was lost."

She swings them back into the lesson, and the students follow her, thankfully, asking questions and answering her own. Last week, struggling through her first History of Magic

sections, she would have been thrilled with this response.

But now she thinks of Malfoy, of what she'd said to him. Whether she would have accepted his apology, if she'd given him a chance to make it.

And she wonders, as the class ends and she teaches the second-years from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw about the ancient traditions of the giants, whether it's her own fear that sends her fleeing from him, over and over. Because, aside from Harry and the Order and perhaps herself, there is no one in the Ministry's employ with a record like Malfoy's. And yet she cannot accept the fact that he could be heroic.

In her mind, Malfoy must remain a snivelling little ferret with an evil heart. Which is why, when confronted by the reality of him, the handsome face she cannot bring herself to look away from, Hermione has grown increasingly horrified.

Somehow she makes it to the end of the lesson.

When she reaches her room, she starts a fire, takes a fistful of Floo Powder, and calls for the Auror office.

Harry's door is closed but she bursts in anyway. It's only Ron in the corner of the room, his long legs kicked out and one of Harry's silver instruments spinning between his fingers, their laughter still floating in the air.

"I was wondering when you'd drop by," Harry says, shuffling a folder on his desk as if he's been interrupted in the middle of a strenuous session of work.

"Though you could be bothered to knock when some of us are in the middle of an important meeting," Ron says with a grumble that does not reach his smiling eyes. "Or to bring custard tarts."

"I'll do both those things when you tell me why you never mentioned that Malfoy lost his place in this office because he was trying to save you from a deadly curse."

She had meant to sound nonchalant, but this is simply not Hermione's habit. Already her arms are crossed over her chest, and Ron and Harry gape at her as if she's ordered them into some unwinnable battle.

"Well?" she asks.

"Would you have believed me?" Harry asks, already infuriatingly calm. She'd almost prefer that he shout at her, the way he did during their fifth year. At least she would feel as if he'd heard her.

"I might have dosed you with a mild truth serum," Hermione admits, and Ron snorts.

"The only thing I don't believe is the word *mild*," he says. "You would have insisted on inspecting Harry for any trace of a curse."

"It's only—Malfoy can't have reformed, can he?"

“You were the one who helped the Ministry build their rehabilitation program,” Ron points out. “You lot signed off on Malfoy after ten months. Which was faster than most, wasn’t it?”

Hermione tries very hard not to think of that camp. How she had felt to see her former schoolmates living there, after everything. It hadn’t felt like justice, not to see them jeered at, questioned for hours, ground down. She’d been the one to recommend Malfoy’s release as soon as possible, him and his mother, who wailed and confessed and swore oath after oath that she would never use Dark magic, would never consort with Dark wizards.

She’d extended no such grace to Lucius Malfoy. It had taken him nearly four years to leave, at which point Hermione had graduated Oxford with a first in political science and accepted a position at the Ministry as the junior minister of Muggle-Magic relations. Already senior enough, from her first day, that nobody with the surname Malfoy could touch her.

“You never saw the camps,” Hermione says, watching her friends’ eyes cloud with worry. She’s rarely spoken about that year after the war, when Harry and Ron went back to Hogwarts and she accepted a position with the Ministry, so eager to begin her adult life and leave the battlefield behind. “Even Malfoy—”

She’s not sure what to say next.

But Harry only nods and says, “They was brutal, those years after Voldemort’s fall. Even for those who could be redeemed. We needed to believe it could never happen again.”

“And we’re working to make sure it never does,” Ron adds, reaching out to squeeze Hermione’s hand. Part of her wants to protest that she’s not some scared little ingenue in need of the Aurors’ reassurance, but the other part of her wants to linger here with him, the way she did only weeks ago, when they were in the office and she had a break between meetings. Something on the verge of forbidden, but sweet, too. Like she was still the Hermione they’d always expected her to be, when they were all in school.

“Do you have time for lunch?” she asks, and they grin at her.

“Only if you’re treating,” Ron says with enough fervour to make her laugh.

“Ron’s been working up an appetite in the hopes you’d appear in the grate,” Harry adds, rising from his desk. She can’t help but stare, just for a moment, at the scars on his hands.

There are secrets in every department of the Ministry, especially after Voldemort’s final defeat. But right now, watching Harry’s hands, and Ron’s crooked nose, thinking of the limp in Malfoy’s gait, Hermione is bothered by the fact that she knows so little of what happens in the Aurors’ office.

Still she lets herself relax into their company, accepting their vague answers about work and answering all their questions about Hogwarts—though she does not mention the room with the piano, and she tries to avoid talking about Malfoy as much as possible.

Though she does ask about the Hogwarts wards, leaning forward in her chair. “Do you know of any reason why they shouldn’t be recast? I’ve been reading the latest research on magical

security and of course reviewing the school's editions of *Hogwarts: A History*—”

“Only that my dad will show up the day you lot figure out how to make Muggle technology work at Hogwarts and he'll never leave,” Ron says, cutting her off as he drizzles vinegar on his chips. “If he were our age, he'd be gunning for the magi-technologist professorship.”

“Is he familiar with Rebeca Saraiva's work, then?”

Ron and Harry share a look.

“Malfoy's got some reservations about Saraiva,” Harry says, too careful. There's something he's concealing. “And she has some affiliations—”

“You mean The Faithful Hand?” Hermione thinks of the files from Kingsley, the translating spell. Wonders if she should have been suspicious about Rebeca's questions about the wards instead of intrigued by the intellectual challenges of magi-technology.

Ron scans the restaurant and mutters a spell. Instantly the room around them goes muted.

“You do realise that now everyone will have more questions about this group?” Hermione asks, instantly peevish.

“No, they'll hear me saying that this was a rock band that Saraiva was a part of during her impressionable youth,” Ron says, a grin on his face. “I developed that spell a few years back.”

“It's dead useful,” Harry adds. “You know how people like to stare.”

“Tell me about The Faithful Hand,” she insists.

“They sprung up in the United States during Voldemort's second rise,” Harry says. “A sort of support group for Death Eaters and sympathisers in case their lot won. Or, as actually happened, if they needed to flee.”

“Didn't we catch the lot of them?” Hermione asks, thinking through the names and faces at the camp. Years have passed but she still remembers each one.

“There were always people who kept to the shadows or were minor enough to escape notice.” Harry flexes his scarred hands over his plate, something restive in his green eyes. “Once they began to flee, other magical communities took notice, and the movement spread.”

“But it's decentralised compared to the Death Eaters,” Ron adds. “Without a charismatic figure like You-Know-Who, the Hand's aims and beliefs morph on a regional or national level. Which makes it difficult to forget a cooperative strategy on keeping them in line. The chapter Saraiva was a part of in Brazil was focused more on revealing magic to Muggles.”

“So was Voldemort,” Hermione points out. “So long as he could rule over them.”

“A Mão Fiel is different,” Harry says. “More focused on cooperation and using magic to help better the lives of everyone involved.”

“Kingsley sent me some of their literature. But it’s a bit too idealistic, don’t you think? Cooperating with Muggles is a messy business. And the risks...” She trails off, not wanting to talk about her parents, because she knows exactly the looks that Harry and Ron would give her, the pity they can never hide.

“Magic is viewed differently in portions of South America, according to our contacts,” Ron explains. “The Brazilian Ministry already isn’t as focused on concealment as our lot are.”

“Surely that has to factor into some of the conflict in the region,” Hermione insists. She’s the one who reads the papers, even now.

“Actually, there’s not as much as you would think,” Harry says. “Muggles there tend to see the positive aspects of magic along with the bad. Their enforcement and concealment offices are quite a bit smaller than ours, even in a bigger country, and they see a lot fewer problems than we do, as well.”

“But Kingsley still has concerns,” Hermione insists. There is too much uncertainty and hesitation in her mind, and it’s easier to focus on Rebeca instead of Draco and the way he’d said her name.

“It’s natural that he’d have heightened concerns about a member of the Faithful at Hogwarts, even if A Mão Fiel is quite different than the local flavour. We’ve still got Malfoy keeping an eye on Saraiva.”

Harry takes a bite of his sandwich, and Hermione realises how skinny he looks, the way his shirt hangs off his shoulders. Wonders what it is that’s keeping him busy, even though she knows it’s likely a secret beyond her own clearance.

“The Faithful Hand is a threat locally as well?” she asks, her voice as light as it possibly can be.

“Yes,” Ron says. “But we’re countering them differently to how the Ministry did the Death Eaters. We’re not letting them skulk off into their manors and caves and things. And you have to keep in mind that The Hand are nothing like the Death Eaters. They’re squabbling internally all the time, with all these competing visions. There’s no hope of them getting a purchase like before.”

“Because if they ever centralised—”

“We won’t give them a figure to rally around,” Harry says. “And anyway, they’ve never been particularly aligned. It would be difficult to imagine Saraiva being recruited by the Highlands chapter of The Faithful Hand.”

Right away, Harry looks as if he’s realised that he’s revealed too many things. Hermione’s mind goes to Draco, on the edge of the forest with that pretty young witch, furious and clinging to him.

“And is Malfoy in contact with The Hand?” Hermione’s question is merely a formality.

Ron darts a look at Harry, the kind that's a whole debate in a glance. They used to have that shorthand between the three of them, when they were still at Hogwarts.

"Sometimes," Harry says, finally. "Not lately."

Another lie, Hermione thinks, but she still has questions and so she still persists. "Is that why you have him teaching instead of in the field? Because he can walk better than Moody or Scrimgeour could after they'd been Aurors for decades, and nobody ever talked about putting them out to pasture."

Another look between Harry and Ron.

"There's a faction at the Ministry that wasn't thrilled about Malfoy being in the Aurors' office," Ron says, sounding a bit like Percy at his most political. "I was never a fan of him being there myself, even if he proved himself to be bloody useful in the field."

"I imagine he knows how Dark wizards think," Hermione puts in.

Ron nods, a grin on his face. "He does at that."

"The point is, he's still useful to the Ministry at Hogwarts," Harry adds in a quelling tone. "However long he wants to stay there is up to Malfoy and McGonagall and the incoming head of the Aurors' office."

"Which will be you, of course." Especially when Hermione had spent the better part of the past six months waging a fierce internal campaign for Harry.

It hadn't been particularly difficult—no one has forgotten what Harry sacrificed for all of them, and his work since the war has been vital, not only in capturing Dark wizards but in making the Aurors' office what it always should have been. A team of heroes. Still, Hermione had worked between her meetings to make sure these facts were top of everyone's mind.

Harry only smiles, flushing with pleasure. Meanwhile Ron meets her eye with a grimace.

"Don't encourage him, Hermione," he says, a sideways grin twisting his lips, "or he's going to be even more insufferable. Did he tell you that he's already planned what he's going to do with the big corner office?"

"It has its own loo!" Harry sounds sheepish but he's smiling. "And you're going to get my office if I get the offer."

"As if Ron won't be in yours whenever the two of you aren't in the field, distracting you from work." Hermione makes a show of rolling her eyes.

"I expect I'll be having all kinds of meetings. Probably with you once you're back from Hogwarts. You think you'll be named Minister as soon as you walk through the doors, or will Kingsley wait a week to make it look proper?"

Now it's Hermione's turn to grin and blush. Of course she's heard these rumblings for years now, but it's different when Harry says it, truer and grander and more exciting.

"Maybe I'll be Minister in time to officiate your wedding. Which will be when, exactly?"

Ron turns to her with a commiserating smile and she takes a chip off his plate. This is one of their old pet jokes. Harry and Ginny have lived together for over a decade, since he finished his Auror training, but while she's gone on to play Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies and for the English national team, not to mention leading both teams to various trophies (making her very nearly more famous than Harry) Ginny has so far refused to accept his repeated proposals of marriage. Hermione thinks it's become a game to them.

"She says she's not finished shocking her mum yet," Harry says with an easy smile. As if Mrs. Weasley would be scandalised by anything Harry would ever do. "Anyway, don't you have another class to teach? Or are things easier at Hogwarts these days?"

Hermione looks at the clock on the wall. "My next class doesn't start for another hour, and I don't think the students will mind if I'm late."

"Surely they recognise that you're an improvement on Binns," Ron says, loyal. And it's this confidence that lets Hermione know she can grimace and tell her two best friends the truth.

"I'm a terrible teacher," she says, trying not to meet their eyes.

Again, Ron reaches out to squeeze her hand. This time, he doesn't let go of it.

"Hermione, you're brilliant, but you're used to dealing with people who are nearly on your level," Ron says. "They're probably overwhelmed."

"It's not that. They just want to know about the war and what it feels to fight Dark wizards, and meanwhile I'm trying to explain to them why the goblin rebellions and witch hunts and troll culture are all relevant to their lives. And they don't want to hear that."

"Lupin never told us he was a werewolf," Harry points out.

"I don't have Dark creatures to distract my students with."

"You actually convinced me that the goblin rebellions were interesting once or twice," Ron says, running his thumb over the back of her hand. "You're capable of the occasional miracle, Hermione."

She pays for lunch.

And when she heads back to Hogwarts, she feels more settled, more sure. Even if, when she thinks about it, after the afternoon classes have ended, neither Harry nor Ron really answered her questions.

You should come to Hogwarts, she writes Ginny that evening, hoping Harry won't open the letter and realise what she's done, that she's gone over his head. *I need you to tell me if anything's amiss and I know you'll be honest.*

On Friday night, Hermione finishes dinner and is disconcertingly aware of the fact that she has no plans but to review Rebeca's proposal and grade her students' homework. By habit, she heads towards the library. And then, grateful that as a professor she has constant access and can bypass Madame Pince, Hermione simply pushes the door open.

She had expected darkness, but the room is already candlelit, and Hermione grips her wand tight as she walks through the stacks. Likely it's a student like the one she used to be, or another professor caught up in research, but instead, as Hermione reaches her old favourite reading corner, she sees the candlelight gleam on Draco Malfoy's white-blond hair.

He quickly moves the slim volume in his hands under a boulder of a book, *Ye Wizarde's Gyde to Comonne Potiones*. When he turns toward her, his face is a careful blank. She thinks of the small smile he'd given her as they walked to lunch the week before, the way she'd walked away from him, and her cheeks heat. It's just shame at her rudeness, she tells herself.

"What were you reading?" It's a question she would ask anybody. An old habit.

"Concerned it's Dark magic?"

There's a real bite in the question. She hasn't spoken to Malfoy since their row.

"I don't think you would be so stupid," she says, doing her best McGonagall impression.

"Leave me be then, Granger."

The words are almost pleasant, an easy dismissal that she's used quite often herself. The kind of thing a colleague would say without consequence. But coming on the heels of their argument, they feel entirely insufficient.

"I think I probably owe you an apology," she says.

"Oh?" One eyebrow is perfectly quirked.

"You were horrible in school, absolutely awful—"

"This is a terrible apology, Granger," he says, holding up a hand as he interrupts her.

She can't tell if he's actually angry or not, and she hates that, the fact that she can't read him. "What I mean is, there are real things you need to atone for, but it seems as if you're actually trying. And meanwhile I keep doing my best to throw it in your face, including to the students—"

“I heard.”

“So I’m sorry. That was unbecoming, speaking about a colleague like that.”

For a moment, he doesn’t speak, and then he reaches for the slim volume under *Ye Wizarde’s Gyde to Comonne Potiones* and holds it out to her.

It’s T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and Hermione thumbs through the pages to find the poems underlined and annotated in various shades of ink.

“I didn’t know you liked Muggle poetry,” she says.

“We had to do Muggle studies in the camps, do you remember?”

Hermione had helped select the curriculum, one of the few bright spots of her year spent working on the Death Eater rehabilitation program, listening to her favourite Muggle music and rereading all her favourite Muggle works.

“I never thought—I’m glad you held on to some of it,” she says, knowing that the words aren’t enough.

“It was the only thing that made sense of it all. At first everything felt so...I think the word is glorious? And then it was awful, following the Dark Lord, and then it was all gone and I was supposed to live in a new world.” Malfoy’s voice sounds faraway, and Hermione wonders if she should stop him talking, whether these revelations are too private for her. “And all of that was in these pages, only I could hardly understand it.”

“I know the feeling.”

He snorts. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“During the war, especially when I was on the run with Harry and Ron, I tried to think of all the poetry I loved. I’d only memorised little fragments, and it turned out a lot of them were wrong, but just to know that that kind of beauty was possible and I could hold it in my mind, it helped sometimes.”

“I just tried to make my mind blank.”

“Well, Voldemort could read your mind, that only made sense.”

“It was always my best trick,” he says, looking faraway again, and Hermione wonders how much he had to use it before the war. If perhaps he should be slightly pitied for having to grow up with Lucius Malfoy and all those lies about blood purity.

The silence hangs between them, not uncomfortable, and still Hermione begins to turn away from him. Surely he wants to be alone with all these thoughts.

But then he says, “Hermione,” and she stops.

“Yes?” Her voice is a little too expectant, almost breathless.

“I accept your apology. And I apologise, too. For how horrible I was in school. I know you don’t believe it—”

“I want to believe you,” she says, and then, instead of leaving, she pulls out the chair across from him and settles in for a long night of work.

Just as she’s opening her book, he looks up from his scroll. “This is very Gryffindor of you, bursting in and insisting on making things right.”

“Old habits,” she says, trying to make a joke of it. Because she meant it when she apologised to him. He offers a nod in return and goes back to his reading, the smallest smile on his face.

At first it’s difficult to fall into the rhythm of work. The candlelight gilds his hair, turning him golden. She only allows herself to look at him every now and again, between pages.

For a long while, Malfoy’s hand rests on the desk. She thinks, only for a moment, of Ron squeezing her hand a moment too long, how it had felt familiar and sweet and wrong. How she hadn’t thought of Leonor and how the scene might appear to her.

And then Hermione wonders what it would be like, if Malfoy took her hand in his. How his fingers would feel against the inside of her wrist, or the centre of her palm.

He doesn’t touch her, though.

Hours pass before either of them rises, and they walk to their respective apartments without speaking, Hermione yawning into her palm, but the silence between them is comfortable, easy.

It feels like the beginning of something.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Your messages make me so happy—I’m thrilled that you’re enjoying Against Nostalgia and I can’t wait to show you where we go from here. Especially now that Hermione and Draco have both fought and made up.

Also, welcome to the chapter where I realized Hermione could easily leave Hogwarts now that she’s a professor...I reread the series right as I was writing the first few chapters and really had it in my head that nobody could ever leave the castle.

So much gratitude, as always, to my betas—Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy—for all of your help with this chapter and with the fic as a whole.

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

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

This time, Hermione is looking for him when he appears at the edge of the Hogwarts grounds, mugs between his hands.

“I need to beat you before I can have that, is that right?” There are shadows under her eyes after their late night in the library, but the question is eager. Instinctively, Draco feels for his wand.

“I’ve re-evaluated my abilities and decided to amend my criteria. You can have your flat white if you get close to overpowering me,” he says with a smirk.

“Bow whenever you’re ready,” she says, getting in her duelling stance. It’s improved since last week. Her feet are lighter and her wand is looser in her fingers. She wants to beat him, and if Draco hadn’t spent three years in Auror training and nearly a decade in the field, she might well do it.

Still, he keeps his wits about him as he bows, and she mirrors the gesture, bending exactly as low as he does.

Knowing Granger would anticipate a shielding spell, he’s decided to go on the offensive, wordlessly casting a stunner and following it up quickly with a freezing spell, which will only give her the impression of the kind of cold that steals the breath, not the actual harm.

She dodges each, setting up her own shield and sending a Disarming Spell around it.

He blasts through with a Jelly-Brain Jinx, just to see if it will startle her. It catches her ear, and for a moment, Hermione looks at him, goggle-eyed, before she mutters the counter-jinx and blasts him with her own stunner.

“Worried you hurt me?” she calls as he neatly dodges the blast of red light.

“I was curious about what you’d look like with jelly-brains,” he says, half his concentration on the wandless spell in his left hand, layering the magic until it nearly singes his palm.

He releases the spell while she thinks of what to say next. In an instant, her robes are on fire.

Draco is not prepared for the way he feels when Hermione’s face radiates shock and pain, and he shouts *aguamenti* as he barrels toward her.

“Draco—” she breathes, and then, with a flick of her wand, he’s falling to the ground, Hermione dousing the last of the flames on her robes and muttering another spell that relieves the tension around her mouth.

“I might not be an Auror,” she says primly, “but I can handle myself.”

Then the sky is clear above him as she walks away, the grass sighing beneath her feet. When she reappears, she's holding her mug of coffee in both hands. He reverses the stunner himself, wordless and wandless—a necessity in the field—and Hermione starts a little as he rises.

“Teach me how to do that,” she says.

“What, no more gloating?”

She takes a pointed sip of her coffee. “This is enough for me.”

“Beat me again and I'll show you.”

She takes another sip from her mug and shakes her head. “Let me finish this first,” she says. “I want to savour my victory.”

“Never reveal your weakness to your enemy, Granger.”

“You think someone's going to try to lure me somewhere with a flat white?”

He summons his own mug of tea and shrugs. “It worked for me.”

“We're in full view of the castle, and I've demonstrated the fact that I can incapacitate you if I really put my mind to it.”

He only sips his tea, knowing that would infuriate her most.

Sure enough, less than a minute passes before Granger uses her wand to gently deposit her coffee at the edge of the lake.

“Again,” she says, bowing her head.

He keeps the tea in one hand, just to bother her, and as soon as he bows back, he levitates her, shields himself, and then swings her struggling body upside down with a second spell before she can wave her wand.

He has to dodge her stunning spell before he can take a sip of his tea. Once he's swallowed, Draco twists his wand so that Hermione begins to spin in a slow circle, her face going redder and redder.

Still, he's impressed with the timing of the hexes she attempts to lob at him. Not a single spell is flung out uselessly towards the lake. If he'd been more poorly trained or had celebrated his victory, she'd have him cursed by now.

Finally he undoes the spells, setting her on the ground again. Hermione sways on her feet but stays upright, pushing her curls away from her face.

“How—” she starts, and then she goes green.

On instinct, Draco reaches for her, and she leans against him, taking a deep breath. He helps her to sit in the grass and summons her coffee, her scent of lavender and parchment surrounding him.

“I can show you how to get out of that position,” he says. He braces his hand on the grass behind her, and she leans into it, just slightly. He’s not sure if it’s an accident or a necessity of the aftermath of the duel.

“I felt like—” Hermione lets out a sigh. “That’s how the Death Eaters used to torment Muggles.”

“I’m sorry.” He says it even before the shame hits him. Before he can think about why making her recall this evil history is so reflexive for him.

“Just show me how to get out of it.”

“All you need is *finite incantatum* and you’ll be free. You can learn how to do it silently and wandless.” This had taken him six weeks to achieve during Auror training, Potter and Weasley laughing at him while his face went purple before he’d pass out. At the time, he’d been caught between anger and thinking that they were right to laugh, that they were right to hurl jinxes at him every day if they wanted to. And yet they hadn’t, really, despite everything.

“I was worried I would lose time.”

“It’s worth the lost time. When you were spinning, you could barely hit me. I saw you coming every time. Better to set a shield and get yourself in a good position.”

“You used to be far worse at duelling.”

“I was twelve,” Draco says, and then, the truth: “Potter has always been better at duelling than me.”

Granger wisely takes a long drink of her coffee instead of commenting. “Why did you never answer my letter?” she asks, finally.

Draco had expected her to gloat at his admission, and instead he stares at her for a long moment. “I didn’t want to talk about it,” he says, which isn’t quite the truth.

She turns towards him, her eyes boring into him. As if she knows. “You can’t just put it all behind you,” she says. “Our history—it repeats if we’re all not very careful.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

Hermione nods, then takes another sip, draining the mug. It promptly vanishes, back to the coffee shop. She looks delighted as she realises what’s happened.

Draco finds himself trying to soak in that expression, the way joy lights up her face, turning her brown eyes golden and revealing her neat white teeth, the pink tip of her tongue.

He wants to take her hands, to tell her everything, pull her close against him, but he resists the urge. Because it isn't only the fact that, the last time they were at Hogwarts, he would have turned her over to Voldemort without a second thought. It's the fact that he's made a Vow to turn her over to Ruby and The Faithful Hand as soon as they make their summons.

The truth is that he will never not be a danger to Hermione Granger, the threat against which she needs to arm herself. No matter how much he enjoys the sight of her smile.

Draco sends his still-hot tea back to the coffeeshop with a tap of his wand and rises. He does not extend his hand to Granger.

"I want to see how fast you can get out of the position I had you in," he says in exactly the same tone he'd use on an Auror trainee.

There's a flash of some complex expression on Hermione's face, and Draco tries his best not to break it down into its component parts.

Instead, they practise. At first he allows her to keep her wand, and she drops easily to her feet, a combination of fitness or perhaps magic dropping her into a crouch.

Then he makes her try a wordless incantation. It had taken him a week in training, and though Hermione can move herself in the air within the hour, she hasn't yet mastered the manoeuvre.

"The students will be out of breakfast any minute," he says as he lowers her.

"It's probably best if they don't think their professors are trying to harm each other," she agrees, pocketing her wand and rising with a deep breath.

He can feel his palm itching with the desire to help her up, but he ignores it.

"If you want to practise the spell this week," he says, "knock on my door before dinner."

"That's very generous of you, to offer to curse me as often as I'd like."

"I'm only worried you'll be trying to curse yourself otherwise, Granger." He makes his tone a little more sneering than he means. Because it's one thing to call a truce, to stop fighting with her, and another to outright flirt with her, to touch her the way he'd like, twining those curls around his fingers and tugging them until she moaned against his mouth. To realise the way this desire has crept up on him.

Her lips form something between a smile and a grimace as she shoulders her satchel. This time, the bag is so full of books and scrolls that she hasn't even bothered to fasten it.

"You're probably right," she says, and then, "I'm hoping to have an answer for you and Rebeca about the wards by next week. There are some papers I'm having trouble accessing, and I want to see if Kingsley can put in a word. Though I have to say, I'm surprised McGonagall hasn't made this decision on her own."

“She thinks Dumbledore kept too many secrets,” he says, trying to keep his voice neutral. After all these years, he’s still not sure how he feels about Dumbledore, still replays their last conversation in his mind over and over, those last moments when Draco had thought he might be free of all of it, all the darkness he’d accepted so thoughtlessly, before the Death Eaters had stormed in and Snape had extinguished that possibility.

Even now, Draco isn’t sure that Dumbledore could have kept his word and kept him safe from Voldemort. Part of him doesn’t want to believe it, because then what would have been the point of the rest of it?

Hermione’s voice cuts through his thoughts.

“I think she’s right about that,” she’s saying, moving towards the castle. “If we had known—there were so many things that could have been tried. And I know that concealment was important, to give us any advantage on Voldemort, but I can’t help thinking...”

She trails off, biting her lip.

“What?” he asks.

Granger only shakes her head and keeps walking toward Hogwarts, all her own secrets held tight within her.

Draco would never return to the Malfoy manor if not for his mother. She has never entirely recovered since the war, the trauma becoming pain that wracks her body at seemingly random intervals. Narcissa will be walking through the garden, the sun bringing colour to her sunken cheeks, and hours later she will be laid up in bed, where she’ll linger for weeks, hardly able to rise without his father or a house elf to help her.

This week has been a good week, according to her letter, and even still, when he hears Granger in the hallway outside their respective apartments, he nearly turns away from the fire in the grate. Even if he would only exchange collegial pleasantries with her or ask her about the wards.

Instead, Draco steels himself, throws his handful of Floo powder, and steps into the flames.

His father is the one waiting for him, hands clasped behind his back like an ancient squire, his long pale hair framing a face that still bears the scars of Voldemort’s torture. Somehow, though Draco hates to admit it, they have only made Lucius Malfoy more handsome. Though inviting others to his bed against his wife’s wishes never was one of his father’s many faults. Instead, when Narcissa is too weak and pained to even speak, he paces outside her room, nervous and raging, cursing all the healers St. Mungo’s can provide.

There was a time, two years into Draco's Auror training, when a healer, at his wits' end, had suggested that Narcissa visit a Muggle doctor. "There doesn't seem to be a magical component to her ailment," he'd said, very carefully.

His mother had written about the scene in great detail, so that Draco can precisely imagine his father chasing the healer around the room and into the hallway, fire blazing from his wand-tip, all while shouting that his wife had been gravely injured by the Dark Lord himself, of *course* such an ailment was magical.

In the letter, his father had seemed almost comical. All of the menace of him, all of his petty cruelties, disappeared in his mother's telling.

Draco had been the one to sneak her into a Muggle hospital under the guise of a visit to Diagon Alley for new robes to fit her too-slender frame, only to find that the Muggle doctors were as useless as the healers, diagnosing Narcissa with something called fibromyalgia and offering her pills which she could never take without arousing Lucius' ire, telling her to reduce her stress levels as if she didn't spend most of her days in bed already, doted on by house elves and her husband.

His mother has never again spoken of that visit, their walk through London in Muggle clothing. She'd looked so hopeful in her pale pink suit. She'd held herself as if the slightest jostling by a passerby might shatter her bones. Draco had tried to angle himself between her and everyone that passed them on the sidewalk.

For that moment, at least, before they'd walked inside the hospital, it had seemed possible that things would improve.

Now, in the Malfoy manor, his father approaches him, saying only, "She's waiting for you in the family parlour."

Draco nods. The good week is fading already if Narcissa, who once hosted purebloods at parties like elaborate confections, has retired to the only room in the manor with a comfortable couch.

An elf appears at his elbow, bearing a tray with blancmange and three tea settings, and Draco takes it with a little nod of thanks. The elf mirrors the gesture with a look of surprise in his bulging blue eyes, and Draco thinks of Hermione despite himself. It's her legislation on house elf welfare that led to the freeing of all the Malfoy elves, to the gold they're paid regularly every month.

The elf disappears with a crack back to the kitchens, and Draco follows his father into the bowels of the house.

"You haven't written her enough," Lucius says without turning his head.

"I've discovered that grading student papers takes quite a bit of time," Draco retorts without thinking. Maybe it was thinking of Granger that made him speak so freely.

Lucius stops, his shoulders going rigid as he whirls back toward his son.

Draco has a choice: to dodge his father's curse or drop his mother's blancmange.

He can feel the blood soaking into the fabric of his robes as the curse slashes his skin open in a dozen different places, holds his breath at the sensation of bruises forming on his chest and stomach.

Always, his father's curses are aimed precisely to cause pain but not to leave a permanent mark on anything he deems precious. The blood will never drip onto the floor, and he will sit on the couch next to his mother to find that the fabric repels any stain. Every gesture in demonstrating who is the master of the manor from a man who still thinks he lost everything during the war.

No matter the manor, the wife and the son who survived, the large vault in Gringotts still full of gold and treasure.

When Lucius begins walking towards his wife, Draco follows. The blancmange does not wobble and the tea does not slosh in the pot.

His mother greets him with a wan smile, wrapping her arms gently around his neck and pressing her lips into his cheek. "The elves are still putting you to work, darling boy," she says, love and scorn in her voice. "You need to use a firm hand with them."

"Next time," he tells her. He knows she'd rather hear it than his protest that he would gladly do this, would do anything for her. Too much emotion has always alarmed his mother.

He manages not to wince as he takes his seat next to her, the cuts and bruises complaining at his contact with the couch.

Across the coffee table, Lucius settles into his leather armchair, his robes billowing around him as Draco pours his mother tea and offers her the blancmange. He does not allow himself to show too much excitement when she accepts it with both hands, swallows one bite after another.

She would only feel diminished by his excitement at her eating.

"Draco says they're keeping him quite busy at Hogwarts," Lucius says, all tenderness, as if he and Draco had had a pleasant chat just outside the door.

"I still think you should have gone to Drumstrang, darling." His mother taps the blancmange spoon against her lips, her usual sign that she's finished eating. "They would have known how to appreciate all your fine qualities."

The part of his skin that doesn't sting or ache begins to crawl. If he had grown up in some Muggle-loving household where children were allowed to be insolent, Draco might have asked to which qualities she was referring.

Instead, he tips a lump of sugar into his mother's teacup. She prefers it sweet but she'll never ask for anything but a splash of milk, which Draco adds next, passing her the cup of tea the way a pureblood heir is meant to: with wordless, wandless magic.

She rewards him with a real smile.

He can see the strain of effort in her eyes, hates to think that such a small gesture costs her so dearly.

“You’re tired, darling,” Lucius says, rising from his perch to take the tea from Narcissa, both her hands clutched in his fingers. “I’m sure Draco needs to return to his charges.”

“Dearest,” is all she says, exhaustion in every syllable. She frees a hand from Lucius and holds it out towards Draco. “I’m glad you came.”

He smiles at her, bobbing his head in assent, not sure what she wants him to acknowledge. What is allowed, with his father looming over them and his mother’s face going grey.

Lucius leads Narcissa from the room a moment later, bracing her against his side. Draco rises, ready to apparate back to Hogsmeade, when his father aims a pointed look in his direction. A quick disappearance will be punished, then, and in a way that maximises pain. Lucius does not have sufficient ways to occupy his hours.

Draco busies himself with his teacup and the blancmange his mother did not finish. The house elves at the Malfoy manor have their own recipe, handed down throughout the generations. Likely they have a whole set of dishes in the icebox, waiting for the next moment Narcissa feels well enough to enjoy the confection.

By the time his father returns, Draco has scraped the edges of the bowl, recited all the headmasters of Hogwarts, and mentally reviewed the week’s lesson plans for half his classes.

“You’ll forgive your mother for over-exerting herself,” Lucius says as he enters, his voice turning the backhanded compliment into something sweeter.

He wants something, then. Draco thinks of Eliot in the library, of Hermione’s fragments of half-remembered poetry during the war. *All time is irredeemable*, underlined in that slim volume, copied onto a scrap of parchment in the penmanship his father insisted must carry the look of refinement.

It feels better than making his mind go blank.

“I’m sorry she’s feeling poorly,” Draco responds, careful to avoid any movement that would reopen the cuts along his chest.

His father drums his fingers against his thigh, and an elf appears with a new tea tray. There’s a decanter of whiskey next to the teapot, and, once the elf vanishes, Lucius pours himself a glass, downing it in one swallow before Draco can reach for his own.

“Your friend wrote to me,” Lucius says, too casual. “He’s offered me an interesting opportunity to invest in a quality venture. I wondered if you had any information.”

Theo Nott, then. He’s made a fortune over the past decade as the wizarding world’s equivalent of a venture capitalist, creating the job first as a way to show the Ministry he’d properly reformed, and then turning it into an empire with gold from all the old pureblood

families. They're grateful, Draco thinks, that one of their own can make their wealth multiply faster than even magic.

"I'm sure you've heard from Theo more recently than I have," Draco demurs, injecting regret into his voice. His father is easier to deal with if he believes he has the advantage. "We haven't spoken in months."

They'd passed each other in Diagon Alley over the summer holidays, Theo arm in arm with a pretty blonde witch who couldn't be more than a couple of years removed from Hogwarts. As Draco had said hello, he'd wracked his brain trying to remember whether she'd been one of his students. Theo had looked quite pleased with himself, though that had always been his default expression. They'd mentioned getting dinner, one of those obligatory conversations, though nothing had come of it.

"A pity," Lucius says, though his voice suggests anything but disappointment. "And you haven't heard anything from former colleagues?"

Something Dark, then, if Lucius is concerned about Aurors.

"We've barely kept in contact since I left that office," Draco lies smoothly. The bitterness in his voice isn't difficult to feign, even if it has another source.

"Perhaps the Granger girl knows something."

It's a lucrative opportunity, then, if Lucius would think to involve Granger at all, let alone restrain himself from calling her *the Mudblood*.

"I doubt it," he says. "The minute anybody presented a remotely compelling scheme to Granger, she'd run directly to Shackbolt."

Lucius scowls. "Despite being told it was foolish, I assured myself having a son at the Ministry and then Hogwarts would eventually provide some value. Even in light of what the institutions have become."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Draco says, letting the words fill with sarcasm.

"You haven't," Lucius says, too quickly. "Not once I heard the Faithful counted you among their number."

"What do you want?" Draco asks. Much as he would prefer to disappear before Lucius can curse him again, his father is getting too close to the truth.

"You think I'd be content to moulder away in obscurity while the world moved on?" Lucius lets out a scoffing little breath. "I want to know precisely how you managed to fool everyone."

Draco has prepared for this, of course. Each year of Auror training escalated their counter-interrogation techniques, their ability to conceal. He has practised, again and again, in the field, until lies feel like second nature emerging from his mouth.

Still, lying to Ruby or Agnew was worlds away from sitting before his own father, the curse-cuts sticking to and then tearing away from his robes with each breath.

Draco tries to still his body, to perform a subtler form of Occlumency than he'd practised against Voldemort. Lucius cannot read his mind, but he's watched Draco since childhood, and he knows exactly the residue a lie leaves on his visage.

"I have played a long game, Father," he says, spreading his fingers wide. Emphasising their emptiness, even as the Malfoy signet ring glimmers on his finger. "I am still playing it. If the Auror's office knew of my...allegiance with the Hand, they would eliminate me without thought."

"That's not what your friends tell me."

A pause, during which Draco allows his mouth to draw into a line, his head to droop. Let his father think that he has the upper hand.

There are only a few options: that Lucius is involved in some way with the Hand, that a third party like Theo has offered him something, or that the Auror's office has been infiltrated. Each possibility fills him with its own particular dread.

"Why are you speaking with my friends?"

"We occasionally have interests in common, you and I. Only I would not content myself with a set of rooms in the Hogwarts castle, no matter the perks."

Still too opaque. Though it's unlikely that he would mention Theo only to prevaricate now, unless some curse prevents him from speaking. "Surely you're not envious of all my lesson planning."

"I'm told you've vowed that you'll deliver Granger to the Hand."

There it is, the answer and the gleam in Lucius' eye. This is what he wants: Hermione Granger captive and under the control of whatever forces favour him.

He levels a smile at his father, filled with the promise of pain. "Granger is mine."

He disappears as soon as he pronounces the words, landing in the middle of Hogsmeade with such force that Flitwick and Vector, out browsing the shops, have to scurry away from him.

Draco tries to control his face as he stalks towards the Three Broomsticks, completing a field patch of his injuries as he goes. He's had years of experience mending Lucius' little curses, but without a healer, there are a host of little white scars across his chest and back and thighs. A reminder of all the times his father has been disappointed.

He doesn't want to think about how much truth was in his words or what the Hand has planned for Granger. Or the fact that his father, once again, is in the thick of it, grasping for glory or power or whatever Voldemort was supposed to have given him all those years ago.

And for the first time in a long time, he doesn't want to write to the Auror's office. Instead he decides he wants to keep this afternoon tea close and secret. Draco doesn't know what to do with the instinct that gnaws at him, urging his silence.

Draco knows his father is a piece of shit. Still, he'd thought he could somehow reform himself and leave his parents out of it. That his work would act as a shield. It was a stupid though, of course. He's had plenty of those lately. He wants to erase them all.

Once he's inside the pub, he orders three firewhiskies in quick succession, Madame Rosmerta's face growing more concerned with each order. The expression, the pity in it, draws his attention. She's never trusted him since he held her under the Imperius Curse for a year. Not that Draco particularly blames her.

He had always thought that at some point he might be free. Not that it would be easy to atone for all he'd done or that there would be some award—he's long since given up on such childish fantasies—but that there would be a point where his father didn't expect him to reveal he'd somehow remained a Death Eater this whole time and the rest of the world didn't agree with him.

It would be easier, of course, if Draco himself didn't agree with their perspective. How much better, he thinks, feeling the burn of the alcohol against his tongue, if he wasn't haunted by the people he'd tortured, the people he'd allowed to be killed.

Easier to end up in Azkaban, his soul pulled through his lips by a hungry dementor.

He needs to write to Theo, he thinks as he walks back to Hogwarts. This will be a delicate operation, one he should wait to complete until tomorrow, when the world hasn't taken on a faraway, hazy quality.

The Hogwarts hallways are deserted when he enters. Draco's footsteps echo against the stone. He tries not to think.

Then he comes across Hermione Granger in the hallway outside their respective apartments, a scowl pulled quickly across her lips.

"What, Granger?"

"I thought you were going to curse me before dinner." She pronounces each word as if she's very aware of how ridiculous a complaint it is.

"It's not too late for cursing," he says, trying to summon a sneer to his lips. They only partially obey.

"You're drunk."

"Surely you've seen such a thing before, what with your illustrious Ministry career."

She rolls her eyes and waves her wand. A bit of clarity returns to him, the ancient stones going more solid under his feet.

“What happened?” she asks, and though it’s shit for defence, with her arms crossed over her chest and her knees clearly locked beneath her robes, he’s reminded of her duelling stance. The readiness in her. She’s prepared for him to lash out.

“The last thing I want to do is discuss this with you, Granger.”

He expects her to scowl, the way she would have done in school, but instead there’s a strange expression on Hermione’s face. Something soft.

“Tell me the next time you want to get pissed, Malfoy.” She reaches out a hand, but her fingertips extend towards empty air, too far away to make contact. “Maybe I’ll join you.”

He’s too drunk and astounded by the invitation to do anything but nod and then retreat to his apartments, where he falls into bed. The dried blood on his robes sticks to his skin. The ceiling spins, lazy, over his head.

An hour later, there’s a knock at his door. He ignores it and falls back into darkness.

In the morning, bleary-eyed despite the spell he’d done for his hangover, he nearly falls over a plate full of last night’s dinner, meatloaf and roast potatoes and a salad that looks entirely too nice for Hogwarts fare.

He sets it all inside his room before Hermione notices.

When class finishes and every other student has trailed out of the room, Mei-Ling walks up to Hermione’s desk. “Why did the witch burnings stop?” she asks, twiddling her Slytherin tie between her fingers.

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask during class.”

“It didn’t seem—” she stammers, and then, taking a breath, continues, “I suppose that with a whole term, at least, of witch huntings and burnings, I didn’t want to spoil the end for everybody.”

“There were a combination of factors,” Hermione says, trying to meet Mei-Ling’s eyes. It’s unusual for her to be so hesitant. “Witches or wizards could cast a spell to avoid being harmed, so none of these hunts ended up being truly effective. But more than that, this persecution was used to root out anyone in the community who was different. Magic or no, there will be people who are different in any community. Calling them witches and killing them won’t ever change that.”

“So eventually people realised the error of their ways?”

“And we did manage to create some institutional concealment statutes. That was why the Wizengamot was formed. To keep us safe.”

“I thought we could get away.”

“Not always. Muggles are more ingenious than most people realise, Miss Shyu.”

“My parents are doctors,” Mei-Ling says, each syllable crisp. “But I read your book over the summer, and Grindelwald and Voldemort both wanted to reveal the existence of magic to everybody. It just—it didn’t seem so wrong to me, Professor. It still doesn’t. And I wonder if being in Slytherin house...”

She trails off and Hermione considers the situation. Imagines what it would have been like, to be in Slytherin during her time at Hogwarts. As ambitious as any of the students there, and perhaps more so, and constantly enduring their slights and insults about her parentage.

The Sorting Hat had considered the possibility for a moment, though, and now, so many years later, Hermione understands its rationale. Even if it still makes some childish part of her shudder.

Slytherin is supposed to be different now. Professor Archibald Leach, McGonagall’s successor in Transfiguration, is now head of the house after completing a rigorous screening process. Muggleborns are Sorted there more and more, have been made prefects and Quidditch team captains and even, a few times, Head Boy or Girl.

“Are they treating you all right?” she asks. “Because a transfer to another house isn’t impossible.”

“It’s not that. Everyone is perfectly pleasant.” Though something aches in Hermione’s chest to hear them described that way. Acquaintances are perfectly pleasant, not friends. “It’s just—sometimes I think about that, being out in the open, and it doesn’t sound so wrong to me. And I wonder if that makes me evil or something.”

“Over the past century, evil wizards wanted to reveal themselves in order to rule absolutely,” Hermione says. “Why do you think Muggles should know about magic?”

The expression on Mei-Ling’s face changes completely as she considers the question, her anxiety lifting like a veil. “I remember what it was like, when Professor McGonagall came to my house with my letter in her hand. It was like my whole life suddenly made sense. All those strange occurrences, all the things I thought were madness or imagination. Things nobody would believe. It just felt like the world was so much *bigger* than I had ever thought possible. I think that would be good for all of us, if we knew that. And maybe Muggles would have things to contribute, too. We—I mean, they have learned to succeed without magic for so long.”

“I don’t think you’re evil,” Hermione says, feeling something settle inside her as she speaks. “And I wonder if you’ve been able to speak to Professor Saraiva about all of this. I think the two of you might have some interesting conversations on this topic.” Because she doesn’t believe Kingsley when he suggests that Rebeca is dangerous.

“I’m not very interested in magi-technology.” Mei-Ling wrinkles her nose, and Hermione wonders if this is the result of being in Slytherin house, some distrust of Muggle tech, and then she wonders if she’s the one casting judgement too quickly.

“She’d still be happy to talk to you. And so would I, if you prefer.”

The younger witch flushes. “I know you’re probably so busy—”

“If you find it useful, I’ll find the time,” Hermione says, wanting to apologise for every time she’s held in a groan at the sight of Mei-Ling’s hand in the air.

“Thank you, Professor Granger. I’m sorry for asking about the war in our first class.” Her flush goes even deeper, so that her cheeks look almost bruised.

“No need to apologise,” Hermione says, meaning it. “It’s only that it’s difficult when what people most want to discuss is the most awful period of your life.”

“But it was worth it?” The question spills out like Mei-Ling can’t help herself.

And Hermione wants to say that it’s the wrong question, that she doesn’t want to talk about it. Though it seems wrong to her right now, this hiding. As if she is still terrified and helpless. So instead she says, “We didn’t have much of a choice.”

“What about the Order? Couldn’t they have helped you?”

There’s that gnawing, again, in Hermione’s stomach, as she thinks of Dumbledore, about practically every adult in her orbit during those years. The way they’d spent that last year insisting that they couldn’t tell anybody about Horcruxes or Hallows, the way she and Harry and Ron had to wander off in the woods. The seventh years still look so childlike to her, now. And Hermione wonders at the fact that anybody entrusted them with the saving of the world.

Would it truly all have gone wrong if they had all stepped aside? If the Order had taken a closer hand in helping Harry? If Dumbledore had actually trusted them enough to reveal everything they needed?

In her mind is that Gryffindor girl who can’t stop thrusting her hand into the air, the questions burning on her tongue. But everyone who can answer them has either died or will not listen to the questions.

“They did what they could,” Hermione says, which perhaps is not untrue. All three of them survived. So many others didn’t.

Mei-Ling nods and thanks Hermione again before she leaves, her pile of books almost up to her nose.

As Hermione walks back to her apartments, those old questions surround her, so that she only makes it to her rooms on muscle memory, hardly even seeing what’s in front of her.

Which of course leads her to walk straight into Malfoy, who nearly skewers her with his wand.

“Here I thought we were making progress in duelling,” he says, sounding like a completely different wizard than he had last night, when he’d come to her with a blank expression on his face and the scent of whiskey on his breath.

“Have you heard from Ruby?” The words leave her as if summoned. She’d planned to say something cutting, but Mei-Ling’s face lingers in her mind. *And I wonder if that makes me evil or something.* The hesitation, the dodge, the expansive possibility of all the ways her future could go wrong without her willing it.

“Why are you asking?” There’s a harshness to the question. She’s struck a nerve, though she has no idea why.

“Better sooner than later for me to speak with her.”

“Because you think I’m only going to convince her to pursue the path of Dark magic?” There’s no expression on his face. She thinks of what he’d said in the library, the way he’d kept his mind blank when he worked as a Death Eater. Feels her hands balling into fists. Because she’d thought they were becoming allies, at least.

“No, but you did ask me to help,” she says, not bothering to soften her tone.

“You’ll need to improve your duelling first.”

She barely sees his wand move before she’s suspended upside down. Her mind races, her blood pounding in her ears. She’s at that first Quidditch World Cup and running through the darkened forest; she’s in the Malfoy Manor and Bellatrix has decided that the Cruciatus Curse isn’t enough, better to flip her, show her what a weak little girl she is, exposing her to the room.

Then she realises that her robes have stayed fixed around her ankles, a defiance of gravity that makes her raging thoughts calm, just long enough to draw a breath.

“I’m not interested in seeing your knickers that way, Granger,” Malfoy says, back to the usual drawl. Something in her, buried deep beneath the panic, takes notice of the two words, *that way*. “Try getting out of the curse without words.”

She closes her eyes and focuses on the countercurse, the action she wants to take. Desire is key in a wordless cast.

Her blood pounds in her temples. She can hear Bellatrix in her mind, the snickers of the Death Eaters who stood by. Can see Draco’s pale face, so much younger and almost as afraid as she was. Even surrounded by his so-called allies.

And then Hermione tries to bring herself into the present. To the concentration on Draco’s face, the lack of fear. The robes, still around her ankles. *That way*.

She still can’t summon the magic required to free herself, but the fear that clutches at her chest subsides, bit by tiny bit as she hangs suspended.

Then, suddenly, she's upright, and the world swims for a moment. Draco's hands are on her shoulders, steadying her, his wand pressing into her cardigan. Those grey eyes fixed on hers as if he's assessing her for injury.

"You really did change?" she asks. Her heart is pounding in her ears.

"I hope so," he says, and for a long moment, he doesn't look away.

Draco knows he has to do something. Hermione Granger has overwhelmed him.

He cannot pinpoint the moment when he began to think of her so much. He'd noticed her since she walked into the Great Hall of Hogwarts with the posture of a returning queen, her hair gilded by the candlelight, and certainly he'd been attracted to her, but in from the moment when he'd righted her from his curse, his hands clutching her shoulders, he had been unable to banish her from his mind.

Cannot stop thinking, for example, about the way her hair would feel, wrapped around his hand. The way she might moan when he pulled at it and applied his mouth to her neck. The way his name would sound on her lips.

Draco, she calls him in his mind. No fear or disdain in either syllable.

Normally Draco can push these thoughts out of his mind, but they have become unmoored inside him, overwhelming him, so that, at night, he has to wank off before he can sleep.

He thinks of her, suspended in the air and upside down. And this time, there is no fear on her face. Instead, she reaches for the hem of her skirt herself, reveals herself to him, the lace of her knickers, the curve of her ass.

Halfway through the fantasy, his release thunders through him, its remnants sticky between his fingers.

He thinks, then, of the way he'd said her name in his father's house.

Granger is mine.

Granger is safest if she's far away from him. There are too many people in his life who would use him to claim her and all she represents. He learned long ago that he is not a hero. He cannot keep her safe alone.

Somehow the fact of him, of all his history, is no longer enough to drive her away. And there are too many awful secrets he cannot tell her.

But perhaps, Draco thinks, wiping himself off, he can scare her with the fact of his desire.

Even as he thinks of her during their row—*I want to be able to look away from you*—and hears the unspoken truth. She knows he is a monster, deep down. She wants to look away from him.

All she lacks is a convincing reason.


Let him show her the blood on his fangs, then, when he leers at her.

Chapter End Notes

A little spice, a little banter, a lot of angst—I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Things only heat up from here.

Many thanks to my betas: Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian and Ivy. I hadn't really worked with beta readers before this fic and you all are making me retroactively regret that decision. Thank you for taking the time to make this fic better!

Special thanks to Farrah for recommending that last Draco section.

Thank you all so much for reading. I can't believe how many of you are reading Against Nostalgia and I'm so grateful for your encouragement and support. There are so many things you could be reading instead, and I'm honored that you decided to spend the time with this fic 

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Everyone in this chapter is some degree of hot and/or bothered.

Chapter Notes

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

The next few weeks fall into a rhythm that, if not quite ideal, is more than bearable. Hermione settles in to teaching, trying to be contented with the fact that approximately half of her History of Magic students are listening. She consoles herself with the fact that she's given some really good lectures in Contemporary History of Magic, with McGonagall sitting in, actually rapt, when she spoke about the duel between Grindelwald and Dumbledore, the specifics and the implications for the years between the war. Her next lecture, about what Voldemort learned from Grindelwald, is even better.

Every evening before dinner, Malfoy uses a spell to hoist her in the air by her ankles, and Hermione works to break herself out. Within three days, she's learned to master her panic, and a day later, she can reverse the spell wordlessly. But casting the countercurse without a wand proves more difficult. Another week passes, and then two, and Hermione's mind goes bright and blank.

"Why don't you try thinking of your poetry?" Draco suggests as they walk to dinner after two weeks of unsuccessful effort.

"Didn't it take you a month to figure out how to break these curses without a wand?" she asks, adjusting the bag on her shoulder. She's caught up on her grading, and she's made her recommendations for Rebeca's proposal on Muggle relations, and she's somehow still waiting for the literature on security wards. So despite the fact that Hermione still has plenty of books in her satchel, tonight it is mostly filled with sheet music.

She's going to slip off to the piano room as soon as dinner is over.

Malfoy looks bemused at whatever he sees on her face. "I would have thought hearing about my record would make you want to beat it in half the time."

"I'm planning to catch you off your guard," she informs him with unearned asperity. She hasn't bested him in any more duels. That hasn't stopped her from practising diligently. Not only spells, either: Hermione has begun rising early in the mornings to run around the Hogwarts castle in the exercise clothes she bought with Ginny in Muggle London last year. Her bright yellow trainers look more than a bit ridiculous on the castle grounds, but she's been able to dodge nearly all of Malfoy's spells since she started her runs.

“That will take longer than the time you have left at Hogwarts.”

She frowns, because it suddenly seems as if her return to the Ministry in July is too near. Then she changes the subject. “Have you heard any more about this threat against me?”

She had wanted to ask about Ruby Docherty, about whether Draco deemed her ready for a conversation. But she still remembers his anger. Only a few weeks have passed. And somehow, even though it shouldn't matter, Hermione doesn't want to press him.

Anyway, she's sure that Ruby is connected to this mysterious threat.

“Nothing urgent, not at the moment,” Draco says, replacing his wand inside his robes. The lesson has ended for the day.

“So I should continue practising my wandless magic?” she asks, trying to keep her voice even. Because if Ruby isn't the threat against her, exactly, she's connected to it as well as the duelling lessons. Hermione is already sure of this.

“The fact that you've never mastered wandless magic should be considered a crime, frankly. Potter besting you, I can understand, he was always adept against Dark creatures, but Weasley?”

Hermione feels her ears growing pink. “Not everyone needs to be a champion duellist.”

“You've been a target of Dark witches and wizards since you were at least fifteen. Not every Ministry grunt needs magic at all, frankly, but I'm surprised you've let your guard down this much.”

“You should see the wards on my flat in London,” she says, a bit too sharp, though her tone doesn't change the expression on Malfoy's face, which bears more than half a smile. “And I can cast a complex detection spell without a wand if I need to.”

“What would happen if some Dark creature bound you with a curse?” His voice is low all of a sudden, soft as velvet against skin, and she has to bite her lip.

She turns toward him, not sure of what she's about to say, when Neville and Luna walk up to them, on their way to dinner.

“Neville has been repotting Mandrakes all day,” Luna says, almost yelling the words as she waddles serenely towards them, her hands on her belly.

“I made Luna cover her ears.” Neville's smiling still but his eyes dart toward Malfoy, as if expecting him to strike.

“And he wrapped my belly up as a precaution,” Luna adds.

“Of course he did,” Hermione says, shooting a vaguely apologetic glance at Draco as she moves toward her old friends, twining her arm through Luna's. “I hope he used some warding spells, too.”

Luna declaims the spells—which could perhaps be instructive to the students who goggle at their entrance into the main hall—and they make their way to the head table, where Hagrid is seated, waving and calling Hermione’s name.

Despite the fact that she’d like to figure out where her conversation with Malfoy was headed, she cannot refuse Hagrid anything, and so she leads Luna and Neville towards the groundskeeper. She doesn’t miss the fact that Draco heads to the other side of the table, where Rebeca is deep in a conversation with Veronica Corbyn, who’s been teaching Muggle Studies for the past decade.

She isn’t jealous of Draco’s attention, Hermione tells herself. No, what she wants is to be inside whatever conversation he’s having. Purely as a matter of intellectual curiosity.

She swallows this feeling as Hagrid sweeps her into a hug that crushes the breath from her.

“Been meanin’ ter catch yeh one of these mornin’s, Hermione,” he says as he releases her, a broad grin on his face. “But yeh run pretty fast these days!”

“I’m only trying to stay fit,” she says, unable to hold back a grin. Even if she dreaded his classes and still loves monsters with a passion she will never understand, Hagrid will always feel like Hogwarts to Hermione, warm and welcoming even when nobody else much liked her.

“Well, if yeh ever want ter have a cuppa tea, just race over to my cabin.”

“I’ve been meaning to visit, Hagrid, it’s just—” She gestures to the satchel she’s hung over the back of her seat.

“Yer a new professor, I get it. I was there and you all helped me out of a few tough spots. But if you’ll listen to an old man’s warning, Hermione, I don’t know about this duelling business with Draco Malfoy. I know Minerva trusts him, and the Ministry is much more careful these days, but I still hate to see him coming at yeh with curses. Reminds me too much of the war.”

“He says there’s a threat against me,” Hermione murmurs, swallowing a spoonful of soup as an excuse not to say any more for a moment. She should have known that Hagrid would see anything that happened on the grounds.

“Yeh don’t need Malfoy when you have Harry and Ron,” Hagrid says. “I see him going into the Forest sometimes, and yeh know no good can come of that.”

She just raises an eyebrow and Hagrid lets out a laugh that, to someone who didn’t know him, would sound more like a roar. Beside her, Luna startles.

“Well, yeh know why I go in the Forest,” Hagrid says, his voice low.

“I know your intentions are good,” she says. “But Malfoy’s been cleared by the Ministry and by Hogwarts. Even Harry seems to think he’s reformed.”

“And what do yeh think?”

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes are trained on her, and Hermione feels as if he can see right into her mind, into that moment, weeks ago, where she practically leaned back into Draco Malfoy's arms and watched the sun rise, coffee in her hand. Before he'd risen and gotten them back to duelling, his manner completely changed. Speaking to her as if she were a student, an acquaintance. As if she were anybody at all.

But just a few moments ago, steps from the Great Hall—Hermione shakes her head against the sound of his voice inside her mind and fully turns toward Hagrid. "I think he's trying to be better, at least."

"Just be careful," Hagrid says, with a shake of his head that belies the warmth in his voice. "And don't forget about yer old friend Hagrid. Especially not now that I've bought some new teas for you from Hogsmeade."

"I'll visit you this weekend," she promises, turning back to her plate with a smile on her face.

Soon enough, Luna asks a question about snorklacks and Skrewts, and she and Hagrid and Neville are wrapped up in a conversation that Hermione is almost completely certain is factually incorrect on a number of very important levels. Still, she knows better than to voice her objections, and instead tries to convince herself that this is all a pleasant and known fiction between friends.

When the pudding is finished and Hermione excuses herself, she feels a presence at her elbow.

"I was waiting to see if you'd pull off an escape," Malfoy says, the usual smirk on his lips.

"They all mean well." Hermione adjusts her bag on her shoulder, wondering how she'll put him off so she can sneak up to the piano room without him suspecting. Even as some traitorous part of her brain wonders if, now that he's here, she might want to change her plans for the evening.

Even after she looks him full in the face and reminds herself that this is Malfoy she's considering, while he says, "Still, Granger, the look on your face while that lot were going on—do you write corrections in the margins of novels, too?"

"I'm perfectly capable of reading fiction in the proper context!"

Malfoy's smirk has definitely grown more pronounced.

"I know," he says. "I've seen the stack of romance novels in your room."

"Those are from Ginny," she protests, regretting that he's gotten even a glimpse of her apartments. "I would never—"

He holds up a hand, the Malfoy signet ring gleaming on his finger.

"I can believe you thoroughly enjoy those books as they were intended," he says, and once again his voice is velvet, so soft that only she can hear it. "I think you come home from that

cramped little office sometimes, and all you want is one of those books and a full glass of wine and one hand between your legs. Tell me if that's true, Hermione."

Her heart stutters in her chest.

There is something wrong with her, because, despite knowing better, Hermione nods. Then she watches his grey eyes move across her face, cataloguing the pink on her cheeks and the pulse in her throat. His gaze intent, his lips parting just slightly as he studies her with something beyond interest.

She doesn't want to give that look a name. Doesn't want to think of the throb between her legs.

"I have to go to the library," she says, turning herself away, nearly running as soon as she's out of view.

But instead of heading towards her books, she climbs the spiral staircase without thinking of a single step, only the look on Draco's face. By the time she reaches the door to that darkened hallway, the piano beyond, Hermione barely has the will to cast her detection spells, to ward the door shut, before she rucks up her robes and touches herself.

She thinks of Draco's face, those elegant fingers splaying her open and those grey eyes studying her, cataloguing each reaction as his hands and mouth move across her skin. She cannot think of anything else, her breath going ragged as he calls her *Granger* and then *Hermione*, his callused fingertips against her clit—

She covers her mouth to trap her moan as she comes, hard, against her own fingers. The hallway swallows up all sound as she puts herself to rights, takes a deep breath and undoes the wards. She walks to the piano, her thoughts still on Draco, and already she's aching again, imagining his mouth on her skin, his hands touching every place where no one has touched her in years. Every place that fabric touches makes her shiver with the ghost of him.

Hermione barely makes it to the piano bench before she casts the wards again and fucks her hand, pushing her underwear aside as she rocks her hips. Dimly she hears herself moan his name. She's too far gone to blush, not as her back arches and her toes curl and she can swear she feels Draco against her as she comes again, harder than before. There are stars at the edge of her vision.

"What are you doing to me," she murmurs as she neatens herself. As she spreads the music across the stand, she searches herself for signs of a potion or hex, something that would explain this rush of need.

One hand between your legs, he'd said, and she had been unable to resist imagining him there instead. His voice and his hands and his body against hers, invading her entirely.

It's been years since she's felt this kind of desire. Not since she was at Oxford, pretending to be normal, pretending she hadn't left the magical community with the scars from the war on every block.

Ron had been furious, of course. Hermione still wonders at how easy it was to leave him, the boy who was always supposed to be her future. He'd sent her owl after owl during her first term and she'd shooed them all away. She hadn't been able to tell him what she wanted, but it wasn't him.

Still, part of her wonders now, flipping through the music she brought, whether he wouldn't be preferable to Draco. Even considering Leonor. One fuck in some Muggle hotel and then this ache might dissipate. Perhaps all she needs is to be touched by someone who might look at her as if he's unable to look at anything else the same way.

Then she thinks of her name in Ron's mouth, his breath on her throat, and she shudders. She thinks of Leonor, of their two children, and her eyes press shut. She shakes her head, hard enough to clear it. She will not become this person.

Instead, Hermione turns to the music, pulling out *Clair de Lune* and placing her fingers on the keys for the opening chord. Though the piece isn't difficult for a real pianist, it is challenging enough to occupy her mind for its duration, and when she finishes, she plays it again, drawing out each chord a bit too long, just to allow herself to occupy the music, this wordless space without feeling or thought or even sensation beyond the sound.

As she finishes the second repetition, there's a movement behind her and she startles, casting *lumos* with half a thought.

There's a gleam of white-blond hair at the doorway, disappearing into the Hogwarts night.

If Hermione were to follow Draco, she knows, she wouldn't be able to stop herself from reaching for him. And she has no idea where that would lead. Whether she would ever let him go. What it all would mean.

Instead, she plays through a Scarlatti sonata, letting the precision of the music make her forget everything but the sound and the slips of her fingers.

Later, when she arrives at her room, there are two owls perched on the ledge outside her window.

Ginny has written, *I'm coming next week. Want me to stay in your room or at Hogsmeade?*

And Ron has written, again. *I keep thinking about you alone at Hogwarts. I can visit if you want. I think there are things worth talking about, between us.*

She writes to Ginny and sends Chou Chou off without a message, then falls back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. She only realises how quickly she's fallen asleep when she wakes, hours later, to pre-dawn light and an open window, Crookshanks curled on her chest.

Aside from duelling and the curse breaking practice, Draco hardly sees Hermione after he finds her at the piano. He should be glad of this.

Instead, he finds he can't stop thinking over the way her fingers had looked, lingering on the keys.

There was a scent in the air, like the remnants of sex, and it haunts him, slipping in and out of his dreams. He tells himself that it was probably some amorous pair of students, that Hogwarts is full of such couples in search of privacy, but Draco has never seen another person at that piano.

It's rare for witches or wizards to receive that kind of training, and a shameful habit amongst the pureblood families, which is why his mother never advertised the fact that one of London's best piano tutors visited the Malfoy manor twice a week, her memory modified whenever she saw anything unusual.

But Draco had loved the piano, the way he could press the keys and leave the world behind. He always knew how to be better, though sometimes the sound in his mind was as elusive as magic.

When he'd left for Hogwarts, his father had given the governors enough gold to install the piano down an unused hallway without telling Dumbledore, had bribed them again to install enough soundproofing charms that no one would ever know his son had a fondness for this one Muggle pastime.

And now Hermione Granger has found the room.

He wouldn't mind explaining to her, not now, after everything, but she will barely meet his eyes. He thinks of the words he said—*your hand between your legs*—and he can no longer think of the plan he'd made to scare her out of his presence. Instead, he only thinks of her expression after he'd said it, her cheeks flushed and her pupils wide and her lips just slightly open. He cannot stop thinking of pressing his thumb against her plump lower lip, of licking down the line of her throat.

Despite the fact that he'd wanted it, that he has rarely found any satisfaction greater than a well-executed strategy, her avoidance is driving him mad. He's snapped at two separate classes, and he knows he's grading their essays harder than usual.

In semi-desperation, he writes to Theo and then to Blaise. They haven't kept in close contact. Communication between Slytherins and Voldemort sympathisers and Death Eaters was regulated by the Ministry for years. Still, Draco thinks they could advise him on his current troubles. Even if Theo has caught Lucius Malfoy's attention—Lucius is always looking for a new tool. And Blaise Zabini has found himself, somewhat incredibly, at the Ministry, working in the department of International Magical Cooperation, which Draco thinks appeals to him on the basis of the wizards and witches he is able to seduce on his travels.

Can't stop thinking about a bint. How do I get her out of my head?

Theo's reply arrives days later, with a detailed itinerary for the both of them to fuck their way through London over the course of three weeks. The list of establishments is certainly up to Theo's standard, and Draco is tempted mainly by the possibility of food beyond the Hogwarts usual. But when he imagines a woman in his bed, she always has Hermione's curls and her scent of lavender and parchment and that musk he scented in the piano room.

The situation has clearly escalated despite Draco's best efforts to the contrary.

He makes do with wanking off before classes and after dinner, casting a half-dozen soundproofing charms around the room as he retreats to the shower. It's got to the point where he can't help grinding out Hermione's name as he comes, his release sticky on his knuckles. He can almost feel her hair against his skin.

He's practically turned into a mooning schoolboy by the time Blaise writes back.

I'm coming to Hogwarts tomorrow, he's written. Had to get it cleared with McGonagall but will be giving a presentation on my department at the Ministry in exchange for a lad's night. You clearly need it.

That morning, Draco performs his usual rituals—meaning he comes twice in quick succession at the thought of Hermione's mouth on his dick—and when he reaches the great hall for breakfast, he sees Granger already deep in conversation with Ginny Weasley. It's been years since Draco saw that kind of smile on Granger's face, and he's instantly and stupidly jealous.

Ginny aims a reluctant wave in his direction. He returns it with as close to a pleasant expression as he can muster.

He takes a seat on the other side of Granger, who barely turns from Ginny in order to give him a good morning, still not meeting his eye. Ginny, meanwhile, is looking at him a bit too closely, and he returns the favour by noting the fact that she's got more freckles across her nose than ever, along with an emerald ring on her finger, two diamonds on each side of the generous stone.

"I take it Potter's finally proposed?" he asks, helping himself to oatmeal.

"I've finally accepted, more like," Ginny retorts, "though he was worried that this ring was a little too Slytherin."

"And here I thought Potter had gained some taste as well as a fiancée."

He feels a swat on his arm, but neither Hermione nor Ginny has turned from their coffee. Though there's a little smirk on Granger's face that suggests she's been practising her wandless magic.

From across the hall, the great wooden doors open, and McGonagall walks through with Blaise. Even at the high table, Draco can hear the giggles of young witches as they take in Blaise Zabini, who only raises his eyebrows at Draco in greeting.

Then he swings around the table to Granger, who has already risen from her seat, and squeals *Blaise!* as she wraps her arms tight around him.

He hadn't known that Granger knew Blaise, figured that she would've taken the blanket anti-Slytherin stance that most of their old classmates have adopted. Instead she greets him like they're old friends with jokes and perhaps even secrets, and Draco wants to gnash his teeth, wondering if there are Ministry parties with drinks and dark corners and whether Granger and Blaise have ever taken advantage of them together.

Thankfully, his old friend sits down next to him before Draco can start contemplating the more creative kinds of murder, and murmurs, in an undertone, "Now I see the bint you were talking about." His eyes dart toward Granger.

"What a delightful greeting, Zabini," Draco mutters back to him, grateful for the strength of the tea in his cup.

"I have to admit I'm surprised. She's not your usual type."

Draco does not point out that he's hardly got a usual type any more, with all his time in the field and the fact that Hogwarts hasn't exactly presented a wealth of options.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Ginny Weasley's gaze fixed him, her mouth set in a line. He wonders why Granger summoned her.

"I didn't know you still associated with the likes of Malfoy," Ginny says, and it takes Draco a moment to realise that she's speaking with *Blaise*.

"Needs must," Blaise offers, a politician's smile on his face. "Are the rumours true about this being your last season with the Harpies?"

"You'll find out one of these days," she says, then turns away to exclaim over Neville and Luna as they take seats next to her.

Draco had forgotten how gatherings at Hogwarts, particularly between Gryffindors current or former, could be such a parade of hugs and squeals, all of them flopping around like puppies.

Except that Granger turns to him and he sees a bit of his own scepticism reflected in her eyes.

"How's it been, taking over Binns' classes?" Blaise asks her.

"I'm not sure how much of an improvement I am," Granger says ruefully.

"Nonsense, I'm sure you'll replace our Draco here as their favourite professor by Christmas."

"Sucking up to the future Minister, are we?" It's easier to smirk at Blaise than it is to watch Granger's cheeks go pink with pleasure.

Thankfully, Saraiva chooses this moment to enter the hall, and Zabini actually sweeps around the high table to greet her.

“I’ve never seen him move that quickly for love or money,” Granger says as she watches them. Blaise drops three kisses on Saraiva’s cheeks, which seems to be a Brazilian custom but might just be Blaise turning up the charm.

“Saraiva has both. You know, the gossips have always been appalled that she came to teach at Hogwarts instead of marrying some wealthy warlock and furthering his empire.”

“That sounds like an awful life.” There’s a faraway look as Granger says it, and he wonders what she’s thinking of. “Rebeca is brilliant. She could work anywhere she liked.”

“So you’re saying you wouldn’t rather have a life of luxury than drag yourself out of bed every morning?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

Blaise is still lingering with Saraiva, and Ginny is in the middle of telling the story of Potter’s shockingly successful proposal to the Longbottoms, and Hermione is watching him as if she’s asked an important question.

“I couldn’t spend that much time with my father,” Draco says, eventually.

“And if you’d married?”

He thinks of Astoria and Pansy and Daphne, the women his family would select for him. Of Rebeca, an alternative they’d consider somewhat shocking but eventually acceptable. Though they are all pretty and sometimes charming and could likely find a way to make him happy, the expectations that come with them feel like the brand on his arm. Exciting until he knew the full extent of what was required of him.

He ignores the fact that Granger seems to be holding her breath and says, “I spent most of my time with Potter and Weasley and the other Aurors, and now I’m at Hogwarts. Surely you can imagine the obstacles. Not every one of us is like Potter and Ginny Weasley.”

“No, I suppose not,” she says, turning back to her coffee. The expression on her face is too sad to fit their conversation, Draco thinks, and despite knowing better, he’s about to try and find the words that will make her smile, when Blaise finally circles back around the table, Saraiva following him, looking somewhere between happy and sheepish and dazed.

“You’ll be all right without me for a few hours, yeah?” Blaise asks, the hungry glint in his eye leaving no doubt as to the general direction of his plans. “Rebeca and I—we have some history from the last time I was in Brazil. Some things to discuss.”

“I’m sure you have a lot of things to talk about,” Draco deadpans, hoping Blaise realises he’s not convincing in the slightest. “As long as you’re free tonight.”

“Of course, of course,” Blaise mutters, snatching his bag from the back of his chair.

Behind him, he can feel Granger trying to smother her laughter.

“He timed his visit with Saraiva’s free morning, didn’t he?” Draco asks after a moment, resigning himself to his tea and the fact that he will likely be spending the evening alone.

“Blaise is incredibly efficient when he wants to be.” Granger’s snicker echoes inside her mug of coffee.

“I don’t suppose you know from experience.”

Granger gives him a prim smile as Ginny returns to the table.

“Madame Hooch wants me on the pitch before classes start,” she says, ignoring Malfoy entirely. “Are you going to come down with me?”

“I have class soon,” Granger protests, but she follows anyway, the two of them chattering like they’re students again.

This leaves Draco surrounded by empty seats, Longbottom and Lovegood showing no inclination to move any closer. Not that he blames them. He makes quick work of his breakfast and is out of the Great Hall before his Mark begins to burn.

Classes start in twenty minutes, not nearly enough time to scamper into the forest and tell Ruby off, so Draco tears off a scrap of parchment and writes, *It needs to wait until tomorrow night*.

Ulysses insists on his weight in treats, and Draco barely makes it back to his first class in time. Luckily, they’re still fascinated by the hinkypunk in its glass tank, and the lecture is something of a disappointment in comparison, particularly as the misty beast thumps its lantern in just such a way as to break Draco’s concentration.

There’s a movement at the window. Ulysses has already returned from his errand in the Forest. There’s no return letter tied to his leg, though the look in his eyes is all expectation.

Draco dismisses the owl with a wave, ignores the residual burn in his forearm, and continues.

“You know Malfoy fancies you, right?” Ginny asks, her eyes aimed upwards, where Hermione’s students are flying.

The Gryffindor and Hufflepuff second years had stared out the window for the first twenty minutes of her lecture, and Hermione surrendered and escorted them onto the pitch. Ginny had given them some pointers and then proceeded to take a seat next to Hermione in the stands, while the students more or less approximated a game of Quidditch.

She watches the Beaters for a moment, trying to think of what she wants to say. She can't believe that Ginny would offer up the possibility so casually.

The question itself makes something warm and solid settle inside Hermione. But it's still Draco Malfoy, her old bully turned Death Eater, and she's still now sure how she feels, or how she wants to feel.

"I wondered," Hermione says finally.

"I don't like to think of you all alone." Ginny's moved her hand over Hermione's, her engagement ring glinting in the autumn sunlight. There's the barest trace of pity in her voice, the largest quantity that Hermione can endure at the moment.

"I'm not, though! I have Neville here, and Luna, and there's Rebeca—I hope you'll meet her at dinner, she's wonderful—and all the other professors have been lovely too. We have really interesting conversations, the kind of thing I always dreamed about when I was a student. And of course there's you and Harry and Ron, I can see you all by Floo as often as we'd like."

"That's lovely, Mione, but that's not quite what I mean." Ginny pauses to break up a fight with a wave of her wand and some shouted instructions that would never be permitted from a Hogwarts professor, but which, coming from the mouth of a world champion Chaser, leave the students gawping at Ginny with hearts in their eyes.

"It's been an interesting job so far," Hermione starts when Ginny turns back to her, hoping to change the subject.

"And who do you talk to at the end of the day?"

"I have Crookshanks," she protests.

"It's a miracle that that cat has survived all these years, but all the same, would it be so bad if Draco Malfoy wound up in your bed on occasion?"

Hermione's mind is on Draco's mouth, on *your hand between your legs*, on her warded moans in the hallway to the piano. She can feel her cheeks growing hot, as if she's a schoolgirl.

And it isn't as if she's been celibate since she ended things with Ron. There were a couple of Muggle boys in her classes and then the physics professor, all at Oxford. She was bored and sad and scared. They made her feel like someone with no past.

There were the three years she'd been with Viktor before he'd proposed to her and she'd said no. What she'd liked best, all along, was how easy it was between them, even when everyone stared.

There was the kiss with George Weasley, late at a Christmas party at the Burrow, which had held the promise of more until Victoire crashed into the room. The moment had shattered

before it could begin properly. In the morning, they'd both chalked it up to an excess of wine and had gone on as if nothing had happened.

So it's not as if she's some dried up spinster. Even if she was! Hermione is *happy*. She has passion and talent and purpose.

Though she thinks of Ron's letters. How she hasn't responded and instead allowed herself a reassuring limbo.

"You know all those things he called me in school," she tells Ginny. "And what would all of you think?"

"Oh, Harry knows that Malfoy's saved him at least twice."

"Malfoy still owes Harry a thousand favours," Hermione says, thinking of what should have been their last year at Hogwarts.

"Please don't tell me you're staying unfucked on account of Harry." Ginny casts her a look out the side of her eye, almost scowling, and Hermione can't help but laugh.

"I'll let him know you said that."

Ginny only waggles her eyebrows.

Beyond her, there's movement at the edge of the Forest. Hermione looks for Draco's white-blond hair but she can quickly tell that it's not him. Even from a distance, she recognises the witch she saw with him weeks ago—Ruby Docherty, the one he wanted her to help at some unknown point in the future.

She barely gestures goodbye at Ginny before she hurries down the endless steps to the grounds, around the lake, and to the point where this Dark witch is waiting, right at the edge of the Hogwarts wards.

She eyes Hermione with such hunger and wrath that, despite the ward between them, Hermione still casts a quick *protego* before she gets any closer.

"What are you doing here?"

"Leave me be, Mudblood." Again the anger on the witch's face, an echo of what she aimed at Malfoy, but it's as if the expression were summoned by the slur. An attitude she's been taught, and badly.

Hermione gives her the same smile she offers to struggling junior workers at the Ministry. "I know you lot believe that word is the worst thing you can say to me," she says, each word as pitying as she can make it. "What do you want?"

"I'll have everything soon enough."

The feral grin on Ruby's face would be more effective if the wards didn't hold her fast. And maybe it's that impotence that drives Hermione to ask the question she really wants answered

instead of what Draco would want her to find out.

“What do you need him for?”

Ruby’s grin grows brighter. “You know he’d never let you touch him with those dirty hands of yours.”

“Have him, if you want him,” Hermione says, pocketing her wand. Tries to imagine this young woman in her classroom, light shining on her through the window as she focuses on taking notes or answering a question. In that posture, it’s easier to summon a shred of empathy for Ruby. “But you don’t need to take him like this. You could have anything, if you wanted.”

For a moment, Ruby hesitates.


Then she sweeps away from the wards and disappears into the forest, her robes fluttering.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a lot of fun to write, and not only because it introduces Ginny Weasley, my favorite, to the fic. I feel like if I have an agenda as a writer of romance, it's trying to make masturbation sexy, so I hope you enjoyed that attempt here.

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who epitomize squad goals for me. I'm so glad to know you and honored that you take the time with my fic, including all my missed British spellings. Here and always, all mistakes are my own.

Many thanks to the pianists in my life for giving me enough material for this fic, especially the ones who asked me to page turn while we were at music school. I have no idea how you managed that many notes at once.

Finally, thank you to all of you for reading this fic and for all of your kindness and support. There's so much you could be reading, and I'm very grateful that you're here 

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

A curse is broken, a visit is planned, and everyone angsts.

Chapter Notes

CW for this chapter: There's the brief possibility of an emotional affair.

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

The parchment has been lying on Draco's desk for a week, ever since the night when Blaise abandoned him for Saraiva. Draco had come back from a solitary dinner at the one decent restaurant they'd agreed on in Hogsmeade to find an unfamiliar and ragged owl beating against the window.

Never send that Mudblood bitch Granger to do your dirty work again. If I find out you've been working with her, I'll make you watch while I turn her into a pile of flesh and bone.

He'd run to Granger's room. He'd pressed his ear against the door for a horrible second, until he'd heard Ginny's voice and Granger's answering laugh, some drivel about bridesmaid dresses that had nevertheless made him grin with relief that Granger was still alive.

If he hadn't been absolutely certain that she'd detect it, he would've put a tracing spell on her right then. Instead, he'd kept as close to her as possible, incurring a week of pointed looks and smirks from Ginny Weasley.

"Are you going to start going to Hermione's classes as well?" she'd asked when he'd followed them from the great hall after breakfast.

"That might not be the worst thing, to get your perspective," Granger says, with unusual self-consciousness. "I'm getting better, but—"

"You were born to be a professor," Ginny said, cutting her friend off. "I'm sure you don't need pointers from Malfoy."

"It's hard to be worse than Binns, after all," he drawled, feeling too gratified when Hermione offered him a scornful little smile. Ready to play.

"Such confidence in my abilities," she'd said, challenge in every syllable. He'd noted the change in her demeanour and savoured it. "I'm lecturing on Grindelwald's fall in

Contemporary History of Magic this afternoon, if you want to stop by.”

“And if I were to follow you to your first class?”

It had not mattered that his own class began in ten minutes. Dimly, he’d been aware of Ginny rolling her eyes.

“Goblin wars with the fourth years from Hufflepuff and Slytherin,” she said.

“By far the worst year in History of Magic,” he told her. “I thought you would skip it.”

“Goblin culture is actually fascinating. There’s a lot of nuance to it. My theory is that with their ability to work gold and gems, alongside their capabilities for wandless magic, wizards felt threatened.”

“And witches?”

“Likely also threatened, but we don’t appear in the historical documents nearly as often.”

“I’m tempted to cancel my class. My sixth-years might actually learn something about goblins.”

The blush on Hermione’s cheeks had brought his cock to full attention.

It was only relief, he’d told himself as he made his way to his own class. He couldn’t—can’t—let go of his certainty that Ruby has more up her sleeve than a threatening letter.

Even if, as soon as his classes let out, he’d jogged to his rooms to beat himself. Over and over, he imagined Hermione blushing, until he’d been sticky and spent.

Alive, he’d told himself. *As long as she was alive.*

He’d been unwilling to parse the situation any further.

But now, Ginny has left Hogwarts for London and Potter, and, after a night which he’d spent grading essays and trying not to think of her, Draco is knocking on the door of Hermione’s apartments.

He can hear her padding around her room, the rustling of paper and the sigh of fabric, silk and something heavier, and then Hermione Granger is opening the door in her dressing gown and bare feet.

“What do you want, Malfoy?” She smothers a yawn behind her hand.

“Why were you stupid enough to speak to Ruby on your own?”

He’d meant to smirk, to drawl out some clever insult or subtle flirtation, and instead all the fear and rage he’d held in for the past week comes tumbling out.

Hermione's warm brown eyes go wide and she crosses her arms over her chest. "I'm perfectly capable of facing Dark witches. Or have you forgotten?"

"It's impossible to forget what you accomplished by the age of eighteen, Granger, not for anyone who reads the *Prophet*."

"So tell me why you woke me up to scold me. A whole week, I might add, after I kept a known Dark witch from lurking on the Hogwarts grounds, which I should think would be the responsibility of a professor. Tell me, Draco. What is the sudden urgency?"

He might have been able to summon a reasonable retort. Then she'd called him *Draco*. And the truth spilled out of him.

"I have been bloody terrified that a Dark witch with no sense of fear or proportion was going to kill you. Do you think I really wanted to follow all your comings and goings for the past week?"

Hermione stares at him for a moment. The remnants of his outburst are still ringing in his ears.

Then she reaches for him and her mouth is on his, her lips soft against his own, the scent of lavender and parchment all around him. Before he can think, he's moved towards her, circled his arms around her shoulders and buried his fingers into her hair. His tongue is on the seam of her lips, insistent, her breath in his mouth, hot and sweet. Hermione's hands are on his waist, her fingers moving up his back.

He can imagine, so easily, how he would ease her into her apartments, lead her to bed and undress her, splay her wide open and then thrust inside her. The sounds she would make, the soft moans that would build to something like a scream when she came.

It's all there in the way she holds him, in the way her hips rock against his thighs, her dressing gown brushing against the hard length of his cock. Hermione Granger, determined as always, is stealing his breath.

And superimposed on the sensation of her, her scent and her touch and the soft noise from her throat, all in a rush of guilt and reality, is his father asking about *that Granger girl*. Ruby making him Vow to bring Hermione to the Hand. Bellatrix's laugh as she'd tortured a teenage girl who had always been more clever and more powerful. All those times he's stood by while other people used her, while they made her scream.

What has he ever been to Hermione but an ill portent, a schoolyard creep?

Somehow he manages to wrench himself away from her.

"I'm sorry," she's saying, her fingers covering her lips. He wants to move them away and kiss her again. Even though he knows better, even though he should banish all the thoughts of her that have crowded out every rational thought in his mind.

“I’m a danger to you,” he says, steeling himself. “Just—stay away from Dark witches or wizards until your duelling has improved.”

“You’ll keep practising with me?” He can hear her trying to wrest her voice under control and almost managing.

He nods.

“Thank you,” she says, stepping back across the threshold of her rooms. He can see a sliver of her desk, covered in scrolls and parchment, and for a dizzy second, he’s thinking how he likes knowing that Hermione’s desk is like her curls, disordered and glorious.

Then he forces himself back into his right mind. “We’ll meet before dinner tomorrow to practise the countercurse?”

She nods. “I think I’m close to getting it.”

He’s not sure if it’s a dismissal, but he leaves her anyway, before he can lose his grip on himself.

It’s for the best, he knows. There’s a Dark Mark on his arm and a horrible legacy that, try as he might, he cannot erase. And even if it were possible for him to become someone different, someone truly good, there will always be his father, his old contacts, all the Dark citizens of their world who will come crawling back to Draco the moment they think he might have leverage on the future Minister of Magic.

As much as he would love to turn around, break through her door, and keep kissing Hermione Granger, he knows full well that the greatest threat to her isn’t Ruby Docherty or The Faithful Hand or any Death Eater crafty enough to escape full reform. It’s him.

But the next evening, when she finally does break from the curse with no more than a thought, Draco has to jam his hands into his pockets to keep from taking her in his arms and whirling her around in celebration.

Instead, he curses her again, and again, and again, just to make sure she’s learned her lesson.

Every time, she breaks free of his hold.

In spite of herself, in spite of the fact that he pulled away, Hermione cannot stop thinking about kissing Draco. She dreams about his breath on her lips and catches herself thinking about his hands cradling the back of her head as she talks through changes in the warding

spells with Rebeca and Professor McGonagall. Even when Draco is right there in front of her, she has to drag her eyes from his mouth.

And as October turns crisp and then cold, Hermione touches herself at every opportunity, thinking of Draco. His name on her lips, those pale fingers stroking the insides of her thighs, his mouth on her clit. Over and over she imagines him, pleasuring herself, and still she isn't close to sated.

She thinks of writing to Ginny, *please find me someone without a complicated history*. She thinks of going to Hogsmeade in a set of clinging robes, glamourised by a dozen cosmetic charms, and going home with the first wizard who shows an interest.

Instead, she throws herself into her lessons, into the wards, into her early morning runs, and into duelling. She goes to the piano room at least once a week, playing Mozart and Scarlatti until her fingers cramp, all fugues and counterpoint, avoiding any piece that would leave space for an emotional response.

When she meets with Rebeca, she tries to gently pry any information she can get about Blaise. Because while Rebeca had seemed distracted during his visit—and Malfoy had certainly seemed disappointed when his old Slytherin compatriot had gone off to London again—she hadn't evinced the kind of dreamy happiness that Hermione suspects would be standard in a woman having a tryst with a lover. Which means, perhaps, that things are complicated.

But Rebeca gently pushes off any attempts to commiserate.

"We need to figure out the wards," she says, again and again.

As much as Hermione is researching, going over Malfoy's old notes and Hogwarts lore and the latest findings in security magic, she keeps reaching dead ends. Punching a hole in the wards will leave Hogwarts open to attack, but it seems to be the only way to get the access that Rebeca requires for her classes and her research.

"Remind me how the Muggle Studies wards work," Rebeca says, one evening when they huddled by a library window, a chilly wind beating against the glass.

Hermione turns to her notes. "There's a magic disabling spell keyed to everyone but Veronica. It's a fairly new addition to the wards, and it allows electricity to work without issue. So long as there are no spells involved."

Rebeca grimaces, then says, too carefully, "I asked Professor McGonagall if I could have a space in Hogsmeade. But she wanted me at Hogwarts."

"McGonagall rebuilt the wards from scratch after the final battle with Voldemort." Hermione keeps her eyes on Rebeca as she speaks, trying gauge her response. This information isn't particularly revelatory, but she thinks fleetingly of Kingsley's letter. "She wants to keep the students safe."

Rebeca only changes the topic to another fruitless path of inquiry.

Hermione makes more progress in duelling, even when she can barely look at Draco. She spends far too much time staring at his hands, at the Malfoy signet ring on his pinky, only to realise that they too have begun to feature in her dreams. It's all very embarrassing.

However, she has learned the way his wrist twitches just before he casts a curse, and, when she can't dodge in time, she's learned to throw off nearly anything that lands on her. Even when Malfoy gets her upside down, she can escape within seconds.

The Saturday before Halloween, when their duelling session ends, he says, not quite looking at her, "I think perhaps you've learned enough to win in a fight."

"I still haven't beaten you." She's clasping her wand too tightly. It lets out a thin stream of sparks in protest, crunching against the frosted grass.

"Most people aren't me, Granger." She can hear the smirk in his voice and, in spite of her numb fingers and their awkwardness together, she can't help her smile.

"I thought you said I would have to keep practicing."

He doesn't say anything for a moment, and the world around her is so silent that Hermione masters herself enough to look at him.

Draco's jaw is clenched and his wand is fisted tight in his fingers and his eyes are fixed on her as if he's studying every detail of her. As if she might disappear. The only part of him that moves is a lock of his hair, falling against his forehead with the chill wind off the lake.

Funny how Hermione only notices the cold now, when she realises he could be touching her.

"Why are you a danger to me?"

There's a low noise in his throat. "Do you think every Dark wizard or witch disappeared when Voldemort fell? They didn't all die at the Battle of Hogwarts."

"I know that as well as you do," she insists.

Her mind is at the camps, snagged on a moment, at the end of a long day at the close of winter, when Draco Malfoy had intercepted her before she'd apparated home.

"How are we supposed to live like this, Granger?" he'd asked her, then, appearing suddenly out of the darkness.

She still remembers how thin he'd been, how dark the circles under his eyes were. They were fed in the camps, she'd argued herself hoarse to ensure it, but the food was nothing particularly good. The dormitories held thirty people each. There was never quite enough for anybody.

To say nothing of the times when the former Death Eaters were interrogated, dosed with Veritaserum and asked to confess the names of associates, caches of weapons and curses, the people Voldemort had been in contact with abroad, the complicit members of the Ministry.

Whether any Death Eaters had gone free. Hermione had watched most of those sessions, had had to curse interrogators when they became unnecessarily cruel.

Still, she'd heard stories of the way they screamed in their sleep. Whether out of fear of retribution from their old compatriots or long-buried remembrance of the horrors they'd endured under Voldemort, she didn't know.

Didn't ever consider, then, that they might be afraid of what would befall them at the hands of the Ministry.

"How are we supposed to let you go back to your normal lives, Malfoy? What will you do if you get your wands back? Slit our throats in our sleep?"

She still remembers the blank look on his face. How different it had been, already, from the sneer habitually worn by the boy he'd been at Hogwarts. The petty monster who seemed to love nothing more than calling her Mudblood.

"Do you think I'd ever go back to that life after what I saw?" He'd heaved a breath, his boots crunching in the snow. He'd taken a risk, being out at this time. The curfew was strict and readily enforced. "We were all just pawns to him. And I started to think, wouldn't it be better if I just *wasn't*?"

"Only you had your whole family trying to keep you alive."

"Have you seen what happened to us? My mother's going mad and my father—Granger, this place is killing them."

"I spent the past year in worse conditions." She'd thought of the Horcrux around her neck, and Ron's leaving them, of screaming his name into the trees. The way the fear and horror had turned into the grinding weight of everyday.

"You were on some hero's mission with Potter and Weasley."

"We thought we were going to die at any moment."

"So did I. And I knew I deserved it. And now—" He waved a hand as if he's forgotten his wand has been confiscated.

"What, Malfoy?"

He'd looked at her as if he were trying to hold the words in, and even though she'd observed the day's interrogations and knew better, she wondered if he'd been dosed with Veritaserum. After the months of observations, the expression on his face was too familiar.

"Can you honestly say that you lot won't slit our throats when you're done with us?"

Hermione's breath had caught loud enough to echo. Because she'd thought it was all very clear, their cause and their good intentions. She'd thought they were so different.

"Does everyone feel this way?"

“Enough of us do.”

She had worked through a dozen scenarios within seconds, trying to imagine what could happen if this state of fear continued. What would happen if they knew there would be an end to this time, to the camps. Trying to imagine what might be best for their world. All in the space of a few breaths.

She still remembers how it had felt as if the whole world rested on her shoulders. How she hadn't been able to look away from Malfoy's face, gaunt and shadowed and still arresting in the moonlight.

For once, there had been no derision in his eyes, no scorn. And maybe it had been the shock of realising it that made her relent. Just slightly, but enough.

“You'll all be released when we're confident you've been rehabilitated. That you won't use Dark magic again, or associate with former Death Eaters. Or kill any of us.” She'd swallowed, trying to condense her swirling thoughts into something he might understand. “And you will need to apologise to a member of the Order of the Phoenix, someone you harmed.”

She'd insisted on this provision. Had needed to believe that there was a way they could all come together.

And then he'd reached out and squeezed her hand. She'd been so aware of the closeness of him, the angles of his face. How, for the first time in her life, he wasn't a threat to her, even while he blotted out the moonlight.

“Thank you,” he'd said, and then, just as suddenly, he'd gone for her. His steps hardly made a sound against the snow as he'd walked back to his dormitory.

Her flat had seemed so empty. She'd fallen into bed but hadn't slept. She'd never admitted to the way she'd spent so many of those sleepless hours thinking of Draco Malfoy's face. Not only the fear in it. There was something she hadn't been able to bring herself to hate.

He'd made his apology to Harry, two weeks later, and Hermione had pushed through the paperwork. His mother had been out before the summer.

Now, when she looks at him, she realises that she is still trying to determine who she sees in Draco Malfoy's face. Whether it's the pompous, sneering boy of her Hogwarts years, or the young man who'd taken a risk in the camps, already changed. Or whether he's become someone else entirely.

“I remember how scared you were,” she says. “You thought we'd kill you.”

He scoffs. “You think this is some personal vendetta? I could have ended your life long before today if I wanted.”

“I haven't forgotten any of it. And I worry—I think we were trying to learn from the mistakes of the past, but—” she feels herself biting her lip, like the schoolgirl she hasn't been in so

long, “I can see how it could have encouraged resentments and fear to fester.”

“You did what you thought was right, Granger. You always have.”

“Do you think that matters?” All the emotions she’s tried to ignore for the past weeks flood through her. “Is that what you lot told yourselves when you joined up with Voldemort?”

He shakes his head. “I thought I would get some of that glory Potter had showered on him with no effort. And then it was too late. I had already done so many horrible things. You have no idea, Granger, how depraved the inner circle was. There was no coming back from it.”

“So why did you try?” She’d come to Hogwarts with this question burning inside her, she knows now. Ever since he’d started Auror training, she had wondered why Draco Malfoy had made such a show of his redemption. Why he hadn’t been content to slink off into the shadows like so many of his associates.

“I had to attempt to undo it.” He makes a slashing motion with the hand not holding his wand. “Not that I could. Not in any way that mattered.”

She should roll her eyes at those words. Tell him to stop pretending he was hurt worse than anyone who lost their lives, who had to run from their world because of a simple accident of birth.

But she can’t turn away from the despair in his voice. The quiet way he speaks. As if he’s all but given up.

“You bought us time when they brought us to your family’s house.”

He shakes his head, as blank now as he had been then. “It’s never enough, Granger.”

For a moment, she holds her breath and wills him to say something else. Then she stops herself. She is twisting herself into knots over *Malfoy*.

Malfoy, who sneered at her and threatened her and insulted her. Who was threatened by all that she was.

Even if she knows how many other things he’s become since then, even if she suspects there’s more good in him, now, than in many people sorted into Ravenclaw or Gryffindor or even Hufflepuff. He doesn’t believe it.

“Have it your way,” she says, and there’s anger in her voice.

It had been in the *Prophet* and the *Quibbler* when he’d made his apology to Harry. But it was Hermione he had threatened, again and again. *She* was the one he’d called Mudblood until it sounded like her own name on his lips.

She makes it back to the castle before she accepts that he won’t follow her. Tries to tell herself it doesn’t matter.

There’s an owl waiting when she returns to her rooms. It’s from Ron.

I was thinking of visiting for Halloween, he writes, but only if you'll save me a pumpkin pasty.

She should think of Leonor, of their children. She should be good the way she's always been.

Instead, before the owl can fly off into the horizon, she writes back, *I'll save you two, at least.*

Draco nearly runs into Neville Longbottom in the hallway before he sees him. He doesn't miss the way that Longbottom's eyes dart around, as if he's looking for an escape route.

"How's the greenhouse?" he asks, his voice pleasant.

Longbottom's shoulders stiffen as though he can hear a threat beneath the words. His fingers reach for the pocket where his wand is concealed. Then he seems to remember himself.

"The same as always," Longbottom says, his smile approximating calm. "Do you need anything for your lessons?"

"Nothing unusual," he says, and there is something in Draco that wants to change this conversation, make it one he would have with a colleague who had never known him before he started teaching. Even if he can vividly remember at least fifty times he was a snotty little shite to Longbottom. Even if the Mark is still on his arm and Longbottom's parents are still rotting in St. Mungo's. "How are you and Luna feeling about the baby?"

"Hermione gave us a crib. She said she would help us paint the nursery, too, when we were ready."

"That was kind of her." Draco speaks as if Granger is an acquaintance.

"That's because Hermione is kind," Longbottom says, the slightest edge in his voice. His cheeks are flushed. "We see you, Luna and I. The way you talk to her."

"What do you think you see?"

"What do you want her for, Malfoy?"

He thinks of revealing the least dangerous part of the truth, that he's tried to avoid Hermione for weeks, that in spite of his best efforts, he can't stop thinking about her, blooming behind his eyelids, making him hard whenever he so much as spots her in the hall.

Instead he says, "Nothing at all."

Perhaps it's the truth. Not that he does not want Hermione, but that he does not plan to use her.

For a moment, Longbottom considers him, and the fear drops away. Perhaps he can sense that, at long last, he has the upper hand. "I saw you duelling at the lake," he says. "Hermione looked—she didn't look lost."

Draco shakes his head. He doesn't want to think about the implications of what Longbottom is saying.

"I'll need gillyweed for May," he says, changing the topic. Wrenching his mind to his fifth-year students, their annual trip to the mer in the lake.

"I have plenty."

"See that you don't find a way to destroy it before then." This is unfair, because Longbottom has made advances in gillyweed development, creating longer lasting hybrids, even a certain variety that allows for breathing both above and below water. Even so, it's a pleasure to watch his old classmate flush. As if all the years have fallen away, and Draco is still only a bullying child.

Longbottom gives a tight little nod, moves in an arc around Draco. He can feel the moment that Longbottom looks back at him, to make sure he won't be attacked.

Hermione has never put much stock in Halloween, and the day moves in a rhythm like any other: breakfast, morning classes, lunch while avoiding Malfoy's eyes, afternoon classes. She does not think of Ron until she watches him enter the ancient wooden doors of the Hogwarts castle.

He's always taller than he remembers him, his red hair vivid as ever and his blue eyes fixed on her as she walks toward him, her satchel bouncing against her hip. She wants to look away, but she doesn't. Instead, she moves close enough that he can wrap her in his long arms. His breath sighs against her hair.

"You smell like Hogwarts," he says, and she laughs, stepping away.

"What," she asks, "like old stone?"

"More like books and something sweet." He's too earnest by far, the subtext of his visit laid bare. She'd planned to drop her satchel off in her room, to give him a little tour and maybe a little tease, her hand on his arm, but when faced with the reality of the fact that she'd invited her old Hogwarts sweetheart to visit her on Halloween, she feels squeamish.

The idea of Ron is always more alluring than the actuality of Ron. She's known this since they were at school together, and yet Hermione never remembers when it's most important.

"Why don't I show you around?" she asks, her voice annoyingly chipper in her own ears. How much easier it would be, she thinks, if this were a meeting with a colleague.

"Have you found any new secret passages?" he asks.

She doesn't think about the piano room, though she'd spent an hour there last night, stumbling all over the Scarlatti because she kept thinking she'd heard the door open, until she'd given up and graded papers until nearly midnight, hoping such a sober activity would make her feel like a rightful professor instead of a dithering schoolgirl with a hopeless crush.

"Harry didn't loan me his map," she says instead, leading him towards Gryffindor Tower.

She is a restrained version of her usual self, telling him about the students and accepting his avoidances about his work more easily than usual. From the outside, it's all pleasant and normal and likely a little boring. But there's an uncomfortable tightness between Hermione's shoulders as she points out the portraits on their usual haunts and fills him in on some aspects of their history which are new to her, all while he pretends to listen. They could be sixteen again, roaming the halls, only without the threat of imminent death.

Still, halfway up a staircase that's empty aside from the two of them, Ron runs his finger over the shoulder of her cardigan. She can feel the heat of his touch even through the thick layer of the knitting.

"I thought you were lonely in this drafty old castle," he says, gently, as if he's afraid the moment might break between them. His tone making this more than some horrible pickup line.

"I am, sometimes," she says, and he moves closer. Her name is a sigh on his lips.

What Hermione wants is to want this, Ron about to kiss her, his fingers on the lapels of her jumper.

Instead, she's thinking about his wedding. How she felt nothing but happiness as he'd kissed Leonor, vowed his life to her. She hadn't been jealous, then. The jealousy had only begun years later, when she came to the end of a long night and knew she would be going home to an empty flat. It was never really Ron himself that she'd missed, more the idea of him. She'd invented another version of Ron Weasley over six years at Hogwarts and one year dodging Dark wizards. He'd disappointed her so many times and then apologised clumsily but so sincerely that she'd been unable to refuse.

She thinks of all those old Rons and all those old Hermiones, and how they'd never really fit.

How she'd only lingered because, deep down, she'd always been so afraid of ending up alone.

She takes a step away from him, and then another, and when Ron's face goes pale and then a bit green, she thinks it's because he sees the finality in the gesture. Then her feet collide against something.

Something solid and only slightly yielding.

Hermione whirls around, her books bursting from her satchel. She's barely able to avoid slipping in the blood on the floor. The blood that's soaking through her books and parchment, staining her quills.

Which is when her lagging mind finally realises there's a body sprawled before her, bloody and unseeing. Dimly, she's aware of Ron's hands on her shoulders, bracing her.

She can hear Ron's voice as if from a great distance, but all Hermione can do is look at the body of the dead woman, her long dark hair and her face blue-white, a face Hermione had last known twisted with rage.

Ruby Docherty is dead at Hogwarts, and as the ringing in her ears begins, all Hermione can think is that she was too late to save her.

Chapter End Notes

Small behind-the-scenes on this chapter: I *hated* writing it. I struggled the whole time. Then I reread it while editing, and I didn't loathe it? Sometimes angst is more fun to read than to write.

So hopefully you feel the same. Also, I hope you won't hate me for the Ron of it all—it's Dramione endgame, I promise.

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who told me when to add scenes and cut commas, and everything in between. All mistakes are my own.

Thank you for taking the time to read *Against Nostalgia*, and for all your encouragement and support. I'm so glad you're here 🧡

If you want to get sneak peeks at future *Against Nostalgia* chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

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

Draco doesn't mean to watch the little tête-à-tête between Granger and Weasley. He's been putting off going to the Halloween feast. He didn't want to pass by his rooms or the library or the piano room or, really, any room where Granger might appear, which leads him to a portion of Hogwarts he rarely visits: the corridor that houses the classrooms Muggle Studies and Magi-Technology.

The two of them are locked in some kind of too-close conversation, and Draco instantly forgets all the reasons he's ever thought Ron Weasley was a decent bloke, all the times over the years that, in spite of everything, Weasley has saved him in the field or helped him with a particularly draining report.

Instead, Draco hates him, purely and viscerally, for looking down that long and crooked nose into Hermione's eyes like he's ever deserved her.

When Weasley had reaches out for Granger's fucking cardigan, Draco forces himself to look away. Which was how he sees the body just above them on the stairs, the blood dripping beyond the stretch of its limbs.

He knows right away that something is awfully wrong. Wizards rarely kill with blood unless they wanted to send a message.

He starts running towards the magi-technology classroom, the one place in the castle where the warding spells are purposefully weakened, but the door is locked and a cursory detection spell reveals that nobody is in the classroom. Some nameless emotion fills him, a combination of relief and disappointment and dread. Only a handful of people have enough knowledge of the Hogwarts wards to get past them.

He runs back toward the landing where the corpse is, his wand held out.

Draco doesn't know who's dead or who's killed them or why they've done it. Why their body had to be left at Hogwarts, leaking blood.

There's so much he doesn't know, but the wards have been breached and somebody is dead and there is enough blood to slick the stairs. His gut heaves at the possibility that he could know the person who's been killed, but he masters himself as quickly as he can. He thinks of his students.

The most important thing, more vital than finding the killer, is ensuring that no one else is harmed. Best if the students stay in the great hall, with the professors watching over them, while he hunts for whoever made Hogwarts into a battleground once again.

He summons a Patronus to report to McGonagall. With a wave of his wand, his dragon goes soaring off in search of her, and Draco returns to the staircase, where the two would-be lovers have finally stumbled on the body.

Hermione's books have scattered everywhere, soaking up the blood, and Weasley is holding her shoulders as she stares at the corpse.

"Do you know who this is?" he asks, but Hermione is only staring at Ruby's face.

In the back of his mind, he'd always known it was a possibility that Ruby Docherty might end up dead. He'd only thought she'd be killed with a clean *Avada Kedarva*, not with pain so clearly etched on her face. For a second, he feels something like pity and then pushes it aside.

When he approaches Weasley, his wand out, Draco is only thinking of Hermione, the terror on her face. He has to remind himself to consider Ruby's attacker, the possibility that they're lurking in some corridor.

"She's a local member of the Hand," he says in an undertone as he moves toward them. Weasley jumps at the sound of his voice. "Was there—"

"I have no idea who she was," Weasley responds, too quickly but also too earnestly to be lying. His teeth are chattering.

Draco wants to tell Weasley to pull himself together, remind him that they've handled far worse, but he knows why this is different. This is Hogwarts. After the war ended, there was supposed to be no place safer.

But Hogwarts has failed them again.

Before he has to say something soothing or cutting enough to make Weasley collect himself, McGonagall's Patronus appears before them.

"The students are safe and all accounted for," the cat with its spectacle markings says in McGonagall's prim Scottish accent. "Go with Professor Granger and Mr. Weasley and secure the premises."

"How does she—" Weasley asks, which is somehow not the most useless he's ever been.

"I had to get her approval to key you in through the wards," Hermione explains, her eyes going into focus. "Did anyone else know you were coming?"

"Leonor thought I had to stay late at the office." Weasley stares off into the distance, and Draco has the distinct impression that Hermione's sigh is accompanied by an eyeroll. There isn't time, now, to ask the questions that have arisen in his mind, nor to summon the proper disgust.

"We need to secure the castle," Draco says instead.

"The wards in this area?" Hermione asks, glancing towards Saraiva's classroom.

“They need to be examined. Start there. Look closely, Granger.” Hermione can keep herself safe inside a classroom. And anyway, the killer would likely have wanted to put space between themselves and Ruby’s body. He needs her to survive the night unharmed.

“You don’t have to protect me,” she says, her wand already in her hand. “They’re my students too.”

“We’re Aurors,” Weasley says, as if it was his idea.

“You know the warding spells better than either of us,” Draco offers.

Hermione sighs at this, letting the argument end.

As soon as she’s headed off in the direction of the classroom, Draco points Weasley towards Gryffindor tower. He sets off towards the Slytherin common room on the other side of the castle. As he strides through the hallways, he sets off a barrage of detection spells, ducking into every classroom and moving aside the curtains and illuminating the dark corners. The portraits whisper about what they’ve seen, but so far no painted eye has a report on the young witch who was killed, or why.

Within an hour, he’s swept through the majority of the castle, including the still-ruined remains of the Chamber of Secrets, Moaning Myrtle giving him a cheerful greeting.

“Someone else has died at Hogwarts?” she asks as he emerges from the sink empty-handed. She sounds unusually thoughtful, no hint of the usual petty teenager, gleeful in the face of someone else’s tragedy. “All the ghosts are talking about it.”

“Let me know if she comes back as a ghost.”

“Too late for that, I think.”

Still, Draco doubles back to the Slytherin Common Room in search of the Baron, who shakes his head at the question. There are no new ghosts in Hogwarts tonight.

The only place still left unchecked in his half of the school is the library, and the piano room above it.

Instinct drives him towards that tapestry, the spiralling staircase. As soon as he takes the first step, he hears footsteps above him and stops, listens. He knows Weasley’s stride, and these aren’t his long steps. They’re Hermione’s.

There is no gap between the moment he recognises her tread and the moment he starts running up the stairs, his wand out.

When he hears her gasp, he is already summoning magic into his hand. Because he will not allow her to be harmed tonight.

In this moment, Draco knows he will always try and keep Hermione Granger safe.

When he reaches the top of the staircase to find her unharmed, he almost grabs her tight in his arms, beyond caring what the fear such a gesture might rouse in either of them. Then he sees she's fixated on a spot on the floor, a place where the ancient stone gleams weirdly in the candlelight.

Outside the door, there is a drop of blood.

He pushes Hermione behind him, illuminates his wand, and steps carefully into the hallway.

The only thing in the room is the bloody knife, laid out on the centre of the piano bench. It's nothing ancient, nothing special, a steel blade and a pommel wrapped in leather.

He casts a half-dozen more detection spells just to be certain. They all confirm that he is alone in this room with Hermione and a knife covered in what is very likely Ruby Docherty's blood.

Draco casts around for footprints, remnants of a Portkey, even some tiny hole in the stone. Anything to explain where the killer has gone.

"They left the knife as a message," Hermione says. Her voice is low but it echoes against the stone, the strings of the piano humming a resonant echo. "They knew I came here."

"Or that I did," he says.

Even in the darkness, in the presence of blood and death, Draco still savours the flush on Hermione's cheeks at the admission.

Then he remembers himself, his fear at hearing her steps on the stairs.

"Why did you come here?"

"I had already worked my way through the library," she says, some combination of imperious and sheepish that only Hermione Granger can summon. "It was empty."

"You were supposed to check the wards."

"I did." She tugs her fingers through her curls. "I found something. A tiny hole. Only big enough for someone who knew about its exact location to apparate through. I tested it myself before I sealed it."

"Who caused it?"

"Only four people at Hogwarts understand the magicks of the wards well enough to perform such a precise unravelling." She looks at him too long, the hesitation stretching into expectant silence. Before them, the knife gleams in the candlelight, the blade dulled by drying blood.

"You, McGonagall, Saraiva, and me." He shakes his head. "I didn't do this."

"You'd say that under Veritaserum?"

Setting his jaw, Draco pulls a bottle from an inner pocket in his robe and holds it out to her. It's an old habit from his time as an Auror, but even before her fingers close around the small glass bottle, stoppered with white wax, Hermione shakes her head.

It means something, that she's decided to believe him.

"The killer is probably still inside the castle," she says. "And Ron—" Her eyes go wide, and Draco feels jealousy like a lick of fire inside his chest.

"Weasley would have signalled if he was in danger."

"You act as if you don't care that he might be fighting for his life."

Draco is fully aware of the fact that his students are huddled in the great hall, that his colleagues are guarding the doors, and still he rounds on Hermione and asks, "Why did you invite him here?"

"For all the horrible reasons you think." Each word she speaks is crisp, perfectly inflected. "As soon as I saw him, I realized what a mistake it was, all of it. I should never—I thought I could make it right this time and instead I've brought the war back to Hogwarts. I should have stayed at the Ministry."

He shakes his head, moving close enough that his fingers can circle her wrist. Within seconds, her pulse is pounding. He only holds on tighter.

"We don't know who did this yet," he says. "But my contacts—they never wanted you here. Ruby was furious once you arrived at Hogwarts. You cannot underestimate what it means to them, your being here. Especially the way the war ended."

A dozen emotions wash over Hermione's face, another dozen questions forming in her mind, visible in the spark in her dark eyes and the quirk of her lips, as if she cannot possibly contain them all. And Draco knows that if she asks him anything, in this moment, he will not deny her.

So he hurries to fill the silence between them.

"We'll get Weasley," he says, "then McGonagall and Saraiva. We should all go to the headmistress' office."

With a flick of her wand, Hermione levitates the knife and moves towards the door. He takes his place beside her, the blade spinning lazily before them as they emerge from the dark hallway and descend the stairs.

"We'll need to send the blade to the Ministry for analysis," Hermione says when they're halfway down the stairs. He wonders if she fears this silence between them as much as he does, if she knows all the places it might lead.

"The killer could still be in the castle."

"You would have kept running, if you thought that."

“I’ve seen what Weasley can handle. Some exercise is good for him.”

Once he’d heard her footsteps on the staircase, no one else had mattered.

“I wasn’t going to—” she’s saying as they descend the final steps, moving the tapestry aside, and then she stops, because Weasley is running through the hallway below, calling her name.

She doesn’t answer him until they’re in front of the library.

Weasley sweeps her into his arms and Draco watches her shoulders stiffen. He fists his wand tight against the emotion that rises in him.

“My half of the castle is clear,” Weasley says when he’s let go of her, Hermione retreating from him. Something about her posture suggests, not the woman everyone expects to be the next Minister of Magic, but an anxious schoolgirl.

“Mine was as well.”

“Except for the knife,” Hermione says.

“You found it?” Weasley asks, turning a scowl on Draco. “Where?”

“We need to get to McGonagall,” Hermione says, slipping past him and towards the great hall. Not a particularly subtle evasion of the question. “The castle is secure, isn’t it?”

“As secure as it can be, thanks to you,” Draco says.

He can feel Weasley’s eyes on him and resists the urge to acknowledge the look or the question in it.

Instead, he begins to formulate the plan. As much as Draco has learned to believe in unlikely heroes and disguised villains, he cannot believe that McGonagall was responsible for killing Ruby Docherty. Even if she wasn’t such a bleeding heart, the headmistress is hardly cunning enough to pull off such a murder.

Which leaves Saraiva as the likely culprit.

When they enter the great hall, he can feel the students staring, their gazes quickly resting on Weasley and Hermione, their fear turning into hero-worship. At least, until they see the knife.

Draco waves his wand to draw it towards him, tucked in the shadow of his robes.

He murmurs an update to McGonagall while Hermione goes to Saraiva, Weasley trailing her, his wand at the ready.

“The castle is truly secure?” McGonagall asks, her eyes fixing on him over her glasses. And still it doesn’t pierce him like Hermione’s gaze.

“The students can go to their houses,” he says, knowing she’ll hear the dodge in the answer. “I need you to join Professor Saraiva in your office.”

“She was here the whole time,” McGonagall protests, more fiercely than he’d expected.

“There was a problem with the wards,” he says, trying to make the words gentle. “Does anyone else know them well enough to make a fracture in their magicks?”

“I believe you do, Draco Malfoy.”

She glances towards his left forearm, the gesture so quick he knows it’s involuntary. His stomach still lurches with shame and old guilt.

“Dose me with Veritaserum if you want to believe my denial,” he says, reaching for the bottle he held out to Hermione.

He expects one of two reactions from his old Transfiguration professor: either she will shake her head and dismiss the possibility that he would defile the only home where he’s been happy, or she will draw her lips into a thin line to demonstrate that she still considers this a reasonable possibility.

Instead, McGonagall’s gaze has shifted away from Draco. Her eyes are on Saraiva, who’s turned away from Hermione and now stares at her cup of pumpkin juice, her hands clasped together so tightly that her knuckles have gone yellow-white. Her lips are working with some combination of fear and intention.

He’s seen that expression before.

Draco yells *Protego!* and a silver shield locks into place between Saraiva and Hermione before he can realise the implications of his actions.

Every student is staring.

He thinks of his years at Hogwarts, of Quirrell and Moody and Umbridge and the Carrows, all the teachers who wanted to harm instead of teach. And for a moment he regrets the shield, his haste and fear. Then Saraiva looks at him with resignation in her eyes.

Before the scene can spiral into chaos, McGonagall rises and silences the students with a shower of scarlet sparks from her wand.

“I am happy to say that Hogwarts is safe again. Prefects, you are to lead the students of your houses directly to their common rooms, where you will find Halloween puddings awaiting you. Tomorrow’s morning classes will be cancelled to allow you to celebrate a little longer.”

Hermione’s eyes widen as the students cheer. It’s a new tradition, started in the years since they left Hogwarts.

Now it will allow their investigation to continue for a few more hours.

As soon as the students leave, McGonagall murmurs news and instructions to the other professors, and once they file out, their wands at the ready, the headmistress leads their small group towards her office.

Ron and Draco keep their wands on Saraiva, Hermione behind them. She hasn't spoken a word since Draco cast the shield on her.

As soon as they enter McGonagall's office, Hermione marches up to Saraiva, her face blazing.

"What did you do to the wards?" she asks. There's no wand in her hands but power crackles around her, lifting her curls and lighting her skin.

"I had to do it," Saraiva says. She sounds resigned.

"Why?" Hermione asks, moving closer. Draco tries to reach for her, to pull her back behind him, but she dodges his hand.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Tell me why I wouldn't."

"I know what you did to your parents."

Hermione's face grows pale, her power dimming. It's not a secret, exactly, but the only reason Draco knows that her parents have forgotten her is because Potter let it slip during some late night at the office. Weasley had quickly silenced him. Draco had pretended to hear nothing.

"I kept my parents safe," she says, and there's hurt in the words as she turns away, as if she can't bear whatever she sees in Rebecca.

"They have my brother."

"Who?" Weasley asks, as Draco holds up a hand to silence him. It doesn't matter what sob story Saraiva offers. Not when she's put them all in danger.

Instead he asks, "Why did they want Ruby Docherty dead?" He's all but certain that the Faithful Hand is involved, somehow, and they cannot afford to waste time or sympathy. Not when there's a corpse in the halls of Hogwarts, a knife dulled with drying blood.

Saraiva only shakes her head.

With a wave of his wand, Draco binds her wrists and ankles, then says, "We'll have to dose you with Veritaserum if you don't answer."

"Malfoy—" Hermione starts, but he waves her off.

"She killed a woman."

"I didn't kill anyone," Saraiva insists. "I would never have—"

"Fine, then." Draco crosses his arms over his chest, draws closer until he's looming over her. "What did you do?"

Saraiva takes a breath, then says, “I opened a pinhole in the wards.”

“You knew no good could come from opening Hogwarts to the world. You had to know that one death would be the least of it. What did they offer you?”

“Unlike you, I cannot be bought with the promise of glory.” Saraiva doesn’t raise her voice, but the calm way she speaks enrages Draco. He raises his wand.

He’s stopped only by a scarlet shield and McGonagall’s pronouncement of his name.

“Professor Saraiva is still under the employ of this school,” McGonagall says, her voice crisp, “and I think you’ll find that she’s bound securely. So that will be quite enough menace for one evening.”

She holds out her hands to Weasley and Draco.

“I believe you both carry Veritaserum on your persons?” They make quick work of depositing the small glass bottles in her palm, and then McGonagall turns back to Saraiva. “I’m afraid that, in order to ensure the security of the school, we will have to administer the truth potion.”

Saraiva’s only reaction is to cup her bound hands before her face.

“They’ll kill me,” she says, low enough that Draco’s not sure she meant for any of them to hear.

His time as a Hogwarts student included multiple professors trying to kill or harm their students, and still he doesn’t want to believe that a fellow professor is manipulating him. Even if he’s had his suspicions that there’s more to Saraiva than her brilliance at magi-technology, he wants them to be wrong, a byproduct of too much time in the field.

“We can protect you, Professor Saraiva, but you will need to cooperate with us fully,” McGonagall says, her voice more gentle than Draco is used to hearing it. For a moment, he thinks of Dumbledore atop the Astronomy Tower, how his wand had trembled in his fingers. How foolish, to think he’d been on the verge of glory.

“My brother’s life is also worth saving.” Saraiva’s voice is even.

“We can rescue him,” Weasley offers, a Gryffindor to the core.

“Do you even know where he’s being held?”

“Doesn’t matter.” The way Weasley says it, the words are beyond arrogance, and Draco is reminded of all the times in the field when Ron Weasley has surprised him, far more quick-thinking and strategic than he’s been tonight. “We’ve fought longer odds and won. If you help us, I’ll make it a priority to get him out.”

“History is filled with British wizards lying to get whatever they want,” Saraiva says, and her words, too, are beyond spite or fear or pettiness.

“I’ll make an Unbreakable Vow, if you like,” Weasley says, even as Hermione murmurs his name with enough worry to make Draco’s heart stutter.

“Let’s wait until after we get the information we need.” Draco crosses his arms over his chest and lets the knife fall onto the floor, well within Saraiva’s eyeline. “For example, it would be helpful to know who, precisely, contacted you.”

“They identified themselves as a member of The Faithful Hand.”

Draco nods, giving the appearance that he’s digesting this information. In reality, Saraiva has confirmed his suspicions.

“There was no other identifying information?” Weasley asks.

“They appeared in my office at Hogsmeade,” Saraiva explains, darting a glance at McGonagall, whose frown has only grown more thunderous. “I began renting it during the summer in order to further my experiments.”

“Anything else you haven’t told us about?” Hermione’s question sounds more curious than confrontational, and Draco thinks of the stories he’d heard, in the rehabilitation camps, where she would watch the interrogations for hours without intervening. Unless she thought someone was being harmed.

She was never in his sessions. At the time, he’d been grateful for her absence.

Now, Saraiva shakes her head. “I’ve been experimenting with the spell battery. Progress is slow, but possible outside the Hogwarts wards. I’ve made some discoveries about how to make technology work in the presence of all of the magic in Hogsmeade—”

“Which you should have reported your headmistress.” McGonagall’s burr has emerged, making her seem more cat-like than he’s ever seen her.

“I knew about them,” Hermione protests. “We were exploring some of Rebeca’s theories with regards to the existing magicks of the wards.”

“I wanted to present my findings once they were complete.” Saraiva’s jaw is set. “The knowledge didn’t belong to Hogwarts, anyway. It was mine.”

“Did you use it to break through the Hogwarts wards?” McGonagall asks, stretching up to her full height. Now she is fully the terrifying professor at the front of the Transfiguration classroom.

Saraiva nods. “I didn’t know that anyone would die.”

“What did you think they wanted to break the wards for?” Hermione asks. For a moment, Draco thinks her voice is far too gentle for an interrogation. Then he recognises the strategy. He wonders how many people she’s unravelled with this tone.

“I didn’t think. Anything the Hand requires, I am bound to give them. This is widely known.”

From the looks McGonagall and Weasley are giving him, Draco knows that such knowledge wasn't available to them. And certainly the local chapter of the Hand had never mentioned Saraiva.

How much of this is British insularity and arrogance? How much is their own lack of insight? He thinks of the *Prophet* in the years after Voldemort's return, how it had become page after page of desperate fiction.

He can tell from the thin set of Hermione's lips, the twist of her fingers, that she's thinking of those same years and wondering if her own Ministry has stayed wilfully blind. If Hogwarts is complicit. How far, exactly, all this goes.

"Who approached you?" Weasley asks, cutting through Draco's memory and angst.

"They were dressed in black robes and heavy boots and gloves and a thick veil. They'd used a spell to disguise their voice. They had clearly gone to a lot of trouble to keep from being recognised."

"How did you know they were from the Hand if you couldn't identify them?"

The amount of effort Saraiva exerts in an effort not to roll her eyes would be comical in another setting.

"They drew the symbol in the air."

"Draw it for us," Weasley says, a quill and parchment from McGonagall's desk appearing in front of Saraiva, who aims an incredulous look at Weasley and then at her bound wrists.

Draco drops the binding with a wave of his wand, alert to any hint of motion that might indicate Saraiva's reaching for her own wand or the knife. He wishes, too late, that he had disarmed her.

But Saraiva only takes the quill and draws the intricate loops and whorls that come together to become the symbol of the Hand, each finger drawing closer to the palm, as if something precious has just been released.

He and Weasley have known the symbol for years, of course, but the way Saraiva renders it confirms that, at minimum, she was once a member of the group. The symbol takes skill to draw, particularly with a wand, often requiring weeks of practise from initiates. MacNair can still barely render it.

There's a knock on the door. Hermione casts a detection spell, then pulls it open.

Ruby Docherty's body floats in the air, wrapped in a sheet. Flitwick emerges from behind the corpse.

"Argus is blocking off the area," he says in his high voice, shutting the door with barely a twitch of his wand. "I thought it best I handle the body myself."

"Were there any spells on it?" Hermione asks.

“Nothing that I could detect,” Flitwick says, taking in the scene. Draco catalogs the precise moment when his eyes snag on the knife. “Though I’d advise having a member of the Auror office skilled in such things analyze the body and—I suppose this is the weapon?”

“We think so.” Weasley summons the gravitas he’s always used on senior Ministry officials when they stop by the Auror office. It sounds even more ridiculous to Draco’s ears in the presence of their old professors. “Shall I go and sound the alarm?”

“I think that would be best, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall says. Rather than exasperation at the fact that he hadn’t realized the fact that he was largely unneeded here, she shoots him a proud little smile. She’s always been happy that so many of her House have gone on to the Auror’s office, never mind the fact that it’s killed most of them.

Weasley moves towards the fireplace with a look at Hermione.

“Do you need to let Shackbolt know about the attack?” he asks, but Draco can imagine the invitation in the question. Thinks, in spite of himself, of the Ministry building late at night, nearly empty except for the Auror’s office and the guard at the Department of Mysteries and, of course, Hermione Granger, diligently working at her desk to improve their world.

“Send him an urgent memo once you arrive at the Ministry,” Hermione says, as if she were talking to a dim subordinate. Draco doesn’t bother to conceal his smirk. “He can reach me by Floo.”

Weasley steps into the fire, ducking around the grate. Hermione’s shoulders visibly relax as he disappears.

Draco turns back to Saraiva as Flitwick excuses himself.

“Why does the Faithful Hand hold your brother over you?”

For a long moment, filled with the delicate chimes of the silver instruments McGonagall inherited from Dumbledore, Saraiva says nothing.

Draco considers the options before him. The two small bottles of Veritaserum on McGonagall’s desk, each one enough for twenty minutes of questioning. The headmistress tilts her head towards them. The gesture is more than suggestion.

Years have passed, but Draco will never forget what it felt like to be dosed with Veritaserum against his will. In the camps they poured it down his throat before every interrogation, enough to get him to speak true for hours. They said that Slughorn had the N.E.W.T. level Potions students at Hogwarts making the stuff nonstop during that first year after the war.

The immediate effect felt like that point of drunkenness when an experience is untied from its consequences, when everything is easy, when thought and action are immediately connected. It was the aftermath, with all its amplified guilt and horror and throbbing headache, worse than even the presence of dementors, which Draco dreaded.

Despite the fact that it was, and still remains, Auror protocol, he always avoided questioning with Veritaserum whenever possible. After years of living among monsters, it became easy to detect a lie without the assistance of magic.

Then, finally, just as the silence stretches out long enough that Veritaserum seems inevitable, Saraiva speaks, staring off into the middle distance, as if it's her memories that surround her instead of her colleagues with their wands pointed directly at her heart.

"We thought it was a blessing, at first, a kindness. My younger brother has never been entirely well. Davi was born with an unpredictable magic which could not be controlled by training. We tried everything. There were rumours of spells that would erase magic from the blood, potions that would make wizards into Muggles. I was kept at home, rather than being sent off to school, so that I could assist in his care and our attempt at training him."

"You must have been so isolated," Hermione says, again with that tenderness.

"No more than our students," Saraiva counters. "You think this is natural, to rip children from their families? And yet your lot view it as the pinnacle of learning and magic. My parents taught me all they could. It didn't stop them being killed when my brother threatened a prominent wizarding family in our city."

"How did your brother survive?"

"I was able to apparate with him alongside. It was a near thing. I was sixteen and he was eleven, but my parents had known that escape might be necessary. We relocated to São Paulo, where my parents had old friends who were convinced by memory and loyalty to let us stay in a small home on the edge of the sprawling city. There were rumours that it was haunted, but after the things we'd endured in the journey, we didn't mind the ghosts. Once we had a place to stay, I made a meagre living repairing Muggle technology by magic. I was afraid for the magical community to discover our presence, afraid of what they would do to him. But the grief closed magic inside Davi. He was no longer such a danger to the people around him."

Saraiva takes a deep, uneven breath.

"Within a year, it became clear that the magic inside him was eating my brother alive. No matter what I fed him, what potions I poured down his throat, he grew worse. By his thirteenth birthday, I could see the bones of his skull beneath his skin. That was when A Mão Fiel came to our doorstep, the group you know as The Faithful Hand. They offered us a world where my brother would be safe, where we wouldn't fear Muggles or the wizarding world.

I confess that the Muggle world has rarely held terrors for me. They were not the ones who killed my parents or who hunted my brother. They were the ones who helped me rebuild my life when it was ashes. But A Mão Fiel promised me more. They promised a world where everyone was safe and happy, where magic would be used to make a better world for all. They promised us a home that wasn't haunted. I still remember the witches who came to us. They sat in our parlour every Thursday afternoon and they never minded that the furniture was rotting. I should have known that they were too kind, too insistent.

It wasn't until we'd been at the A Mão Fiel compound for a year that I realized it was a prison. I was just so relieved to be cared for, to have Davi safe. They gave him a potion and administered a series of spells that managed his magic, held it inside of him without pain. I'd never seen his face the way it was in that first year. It was the kind of happiness that isn't a bright flame but instead an ember. Something that could grow. I didn't think about the fact that we were held on the edge of the jungle with a hundred other witches and wizards. I was allowed to ask more questions than most because of my abilities. They made me a makeshift laboratory and let me continue the tinkering I'd started in the favela, and I realized how much I loved it, putting together magic and Muggle innovation into something that was more than either could be alone.

An older witch, Conceição, who'd come to the compound with a true believer son, whispered to me that the Academia might accept me as a post-graduate student. Such abilities were just being noticed and appreciated at that time, and I suppose she thought my talents were such that the Academia might look past my lack of a conventional education. She filled me with dreams, bigger than I'd ever had, and I realized that it all might be possible, if I simply kept working.

Then I tried to apply, and my owl was intercepted by A Mão Fiel."

She pauses at the expression on Draco's face.

"You're surprised we use owls in my country?" she asks. "There are owls everywhere."

"You know I was a Death Eater, don't you? It is difficult to shock me." It would be wrong, at this juncture, to reveal his own membership in The Faithful Hand. It's a technicality, for one thing. But he needs Saraiva to understand the point of commonality between them. Even if his motives were never as pure as hers.

His eyes are on Saraiva, focused on the subject of his questioning, the lead suspect in Ruby's murder, but he can still feel the weight of Hermione's gaze as it lands on him. Tries, just for a moment, to divine her thoughts through his peripheral vision.

Even in the overtures of an interrogation, he cannot escape her.

"You went to the Academia eventually, however." McGonagall is the one who breaks the silence. "What did it cost you to get out?"

"My brother."

"He's still at the compound?" Hermione asks.

"He's *powering* the compound," Saraiva's voice is brittle. "Those spells, that potion—I know they felt like a miracle to Davi, when he was rid of the burden of that awful magic inside him. But the amount of raw power inside him makes him the most powerful wizard in the organisation. They will never let him go."

"At least, not without a replacement. Like your battery."

“Even then.” Saraiva swallows. “I haven’t been allowed to see him in years. When the position at Hogwarts was offered to me, I was told I had no choice but to accept if I wanted to see Davi again.”

“I appreciate the significance of your brother, Professor Saraiva, but you endangered hundreds of students when you came to Hogwarts under these conditions. Even now, a dead body has appeared in the hallways of my school for some Dark tableau.” McGonagall has crossed the room to loom over Saraiva. “Tell me why I should not dismiss you in disgrace.”

To her credit, Saraiva doesn’t answer right away.

“I have tried everything to free my brother,” she says. “Blaise Zabini has been assisting me with a proposal to the Ministério in my country. But you must remember that Davi technically does not exist. I myself, now, am little more than a creation of A Mão Fiel.”

“How can you believe that?” Hermione asks. “After everything you’ve accomplished.”

“You are lucky to believe that good can ever fully triumph.” She turns to Draco, and then McGonagall. “I have hardly been in contact with your English sect of A Mão Fiel until now.”

“But you have no idea who contacted you?”

“I cannot recognise the person who approached me. They were thorough in concealing their identity.”

“You didn’t see their wand?”

“The wood was dark. Perhaps inflexible? Wandlore is not my specialty. If I remember anything else, I will tell you.” Still, even at this moment when she’s ostensibly at his mercy, her shoulders are set back and her hair looks like a crown of flowers on her head. Her eyes remain fixed on him, and Draco realises, embarrassingly late, that it’s not because Saraiva is afraid.

No, she does not look away from him because the worst has already happened to her, and she’s managed to survive.

For a moment, Draco is back atop the Astronomy Tower, willing the Killing Curse in his mind, silenced by the look on Dumbledore’s face.

The next time he came back to Hogwarts, he was a professor.

“There is nothing more you can tell us?” He is able to insert a promise of hurt into his voice. All that Auror training, just under his skin.

“Dose me with Veritaserum if you want.” A bit of steel in the words, a reminder that Saraiva has her own priorities.

Draco looks to Hermione, already shaking her head, and then to McGonagall, her fingers braced on her desk.

“I do not think truth serum is necessary, Professor Saraiva,” she says. “In fact, I will be content to allow you to resume your usual duties on three conditions. One, you will allow everyone present in this room to enter your offices at will. Two, you will cooperate fully into the investigation which Professor Malfoy and his colleagues in the Auror office are doubtless launching imminently. And three, you will swear an Unbreakable Vow to me, that you will protect this school for as long as you are a professor here.”

“I will swear to all of it if you will ensure that Davi is safe.” Saraiva levels the condition at the headmistress as if she has been the one giving conditions.

McGonagall does not so much as flinch.

“I will make the considerable resources of Hogwarts available for his rescue and protection. Professor Granger, if you’ll bond us?”

There’s an elegance in the way Hermione performs the Unbreakable Vow, that precision to her wandwork and a tenderness on her face as she lists out the conditions and, as they’re accepted, wraps the fiery golden tendrils of her spell around her wrist, then McGonagall’s, and then, finally, Saraiva’s.

When the spell is completed, Hermione’s eyes move to Draco’s for an instant, and he doesn’t look away from her. He has spent too long, tonight, afraid for her safety, and it is something beyond pleasant, something he will not put words to, watching her in her element, clever and brave and setting out on some bold scheme for a greater goodness among them all.

Then he turns towards McGonagall, already settling herself behind her desk.

“I’ll be needed in Inverness,” he says. “You should plan for a substitute professor for a few weeks, at least.”

“I’ll inform the Ministry when they arrive,” the headmistress says, “and in the meantime, I would like to trust that everything we’ve discussed here will remain between us?”

The three of them mutter their assent.

“I’m simply to go to my rooms?” Saraiva asks, incredulous.

“We trust you,” Hermione answers, even before McGonagall. A Gryffindor to her core.

“You shouldn’t,” she answers. And still, for the first time in hours, the smallest smile has appeared on her lips.

“That’s why,” McGonagall says. “We can tell, Professor Saraiva, that you feel the weight of the faith we’ve placed on your shoulders.”

Saraiva nods her thanks or assent or some emotion she’s managed to make equally inscrutable and moves towards the door, leaving with barely a sound. Hermione takes a step in the same direction, but lingers on the threshold of the office.

“Will you need me, Professor, when you speak to the Auror’s office?”

“I’m sure Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley will know how to reach you if any questions arrive. Though I would ask if you have a recommendation between them for a temporary Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.”

“Harry, definitely.” Hermione speaks without hesitation, and once again Draco regrets the fact that he never sought her out in the Ministry. That commanding voice practically undoes him, especially with the slightest hint of a blush on her cheeks. “He’d love to be back here.”

“I thought as much.” She sighs. “I think that will be all tonight, from both of you. Professor Malfoy, I wish you a speedy return to Hogwarts.”

He thanks her and follows Hermione out of the office. Her shoulders slump as soon as they leave the headmistress’ office.

“Did you want to go to the Auror’s office?” he asks as they walk towards their respective apartments. He’s unable to help the question, the sneer in his voice. “Want to let Weasley know why you wouldn’t recommend him for the Hogwarts job?”

She stops walking and he nearly crashes into her, clutching the bannister to keep from falling.

“Asking Ron here was a mistake. He keeps—it doesn’t matter.” She bites her lip. The blush still stains her cheeks, deeper now. He wants, more than anything, to trace it with his fingers.

“Then why?”

“You won’t even look at me.”

He takes her by the wrist and all but pulls her across the castle, until they’re standing in the hallway that links their apartments.

“I am about to convince the local cell of The Faithful Hand that I am a member in good standing and that I would love nothing better than to infiltrate Hogwarts as they apparently insist on doing.” All this he whispers in the barest undertone, drawing so close that he can feel the heat of her skin against his lips. Still, he does not touch her with his mouth. “I am going to do everything to assure them that I have always been a Dark wizard, that my employ in the Auror’s office and at Hogwarts has been a clever ruse. That I have never, in all my life, had a thought of being good. And do you know what I am thinking, Granger, as I approach this mission?”

“Enlighten me,” she breathes. Each syllable hot against his jaw, laced with tension and the beginnings of anger.

“Instead of considering my strategy, instead of making my plans or preparing my spells or even consulting with the rest of the bloody Auror’s office, I’m wondering how many times I could fuck you before disappearing in the morning.”

She only stares at him for a moment, and then her lips are on his, hot and sweet and insistent, all Gryffindor, all Hermione, twining her arms around his neck. No fear, only desire.

This time, he can’t convince himself to pull away.

Chapter End Notes

You've waited so long, and now things are heating up. I can't wait to share the next chapter with you 🔥

Rebeca's story was inspired in part by the stories of the Jonestown victims in *A Thousand Lives* by Julia Scheeres. The people who went to Jonestown were inspired by the original message that Jim Jones preached and valued their community... only to realize, often too late, that they were being held by a cult. I'm excited to unpack Rebeca further in this story and loved having her reveal herself more in this chapter.

Also, yes, it was only a matter of time before I brought colonialism and empire into this. More to come on that.

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who give the best advice. All mistakes are my own.

Thank you for taking the time to read *Against Nostalgia*, and for all your support. I read every message and you all are so kind and generous 🧡

If you want to get sneak peeks at future *Against Nostalgia* chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, things take a turn for the smutty.

Chapter Notes

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

Draco reaches his hand around her waist and Hermione is tumbling into his apartments, her satchel thumping against his hip as she rights herself. The contents are still sodden with blood.

“Are you always carrying this many books?” he asks, his thumb on the leather strap. As if the past hours never happened.

Instead of answering, she covers his mouth with her own again, making a silent agreement with his proposal. She doesn’t want their ordinary lives to intrude, doesn’t want time to think about this coupling and why it’s wrong. Why she wants it so badly anyway.

Doesn’t want, most of all, to think of Ruby Docherty’s dead body in McGonagall’s office, all the history it evokes and the actions it requires. Right now, Hermione wants to imagine that the rest of the world has fallen away.

His tongue is tracing the curves of her lips as he takes her by the waist and leads her towards his bookshelves, the books stacked neatly, so unlike hers. The room smells of cedar and leather and soap, and on sheer instinct, Hermione breathes it in deep.

There will be one night before he disappears into the Forest.

He pulls her satchel off her shoulder and sets it on the floor, then smooths her curls away from her face. His eyes are intent on her face, the only place where emotion cannot be tamped down. Already, she knows what that must cost him.

“You have one last chance to go back to your room,” he says. “Only say the word.”

“I’m staying,” she says, and his mouth covers hers, his fingers twisting in her hair, tugging just hard enough that she lets out a moan.

“Eager, then.” He bites her lower lip and then replaces his teeth with his tongue. Already Hermione can hardly think. “When was the last time you were kissed, Granger?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she insists, running her fingers over the soft fine wool of his robes, following the lines of the collared shirt beneath. All perfectly pressed, still, despite the

running and the interrogation. She undoes a single button, then adds, “And I’d prefer if you called me by my name. Just for tonight.”

He sucks on her lip, tracing through her hair with his fingers. Each tug and caress is lightning against her skin, and Hermione wonders how she ever stayed in her own rooms for all these weeks when this man was so close.

“What does it do to you,” he asks, after a moment or a hundred years, “when I call you Hermione?”

With someone else, she might offer up a little smile. But this is Draco Malfoy, and so she only arches her body against him and savours the way he shudders when her belly makes contact with his cock.

“What does it do to *you*, Draco?”

By way of answer, he pushes her cardigan off her shoulders, the cold air seeping in through the thin fabric of her close-cut robes. Draco’s mouth is on her throat as his fingers work the zipper of her robes down, baring her spine. She thinks of those broad, elegant fingers—pianist’s hands—so near her skin, and she shivers.

He runs a finger down the line of her vertebrae, his grey eyes intent on her. She waits for him to speak, to claim or tease her, but there is only his index finger, mapping out her bones, the light scrape of a callus against her skin.

When she bites her lip, it’s because she wants him there, too. Close and then closer. Urgent and, she hopes, quickly forgotten afterwards. She doesn’t want to consider whether she’s lying to herself, or how badly.

Instead, Hermione reaches for his robes.

He shakes his head, wraps his fingers around hers. Scars, barely visible, gleam faintly on the skin of his hands.

“Wait for it,” he says and moves his hand further down her back, beneath her zipper, his fingers stroking at the seam of her stockings and the lacy line of her knickers below, barely dipping under the fabric to the skin beneath.

“Did you imagine me seeing these?” he asks, the words a kiss to the shell of her ear.

She shakes her head and he whispers, *liar*, and then he does bite her lip, just hard enough to sting.

Before he can pull away, she shrugs her shoulders and lets her robes fall so that she stands before him in her bra and stockings, her heeled boots and the curls that riot down to the space between her shoulder blades.

His hands fall from her skin. His eyes work over the length of her.

Hermione has grown used to thinking of herself as a middle-aged civil servant with too much work and too little time, or lately, as a professor struggling to get her footing. But when Draco studies her body, she forgets all of it, only the feeling of desire coiling around her bones, too insistent to be contained by her skin.

“Take the rest of it off,” he says, smiling like he knows exactly what she’s thinking. As if he believes she’s at his mercy.

The wandless cast is easy when she wants it this badly. With half a thought, the rich green wool of his robes is unfastened by her magic. She’s revealed his shirt and undone the buttons at his throat before he pulls her toward him by the elastic of her stockings.

“I wanted to feel you do that with your fingers,” he says, pulling the stockings down and following the fabric with his fingers, his mouth, sucking and biting at the skin of her hips and then her thighs. The lines of his throat work with the motion.

Hermione is so wet already, and when he looks up at her, she feels it like a touch, molten in the core of her. Right now, she doesn’t understand why she ever hesitated.

The moment he’s stripped her to her underthings, she tangles her fingers in his hair and pulls him up to standing.

She’s half expecting the scowl of a pampered schoolboy, but the grin on Draco’s face is almost feral, the way he looks in the middle of their duelling sessions. Hermione crushes her mouth against his and unfastens the buttons of his shirt, the soft fabric falling away from her fingers.

There are scars across his chest, deep enough to notice with her fingers but faded enough to be covered by his crisp blond hair, by the candlelight. Every Auror is marked by their own particular battle scars, but Draco watches her too closely as she looks at them, at the faded Dark Mark on his left forearm.

“It’s impossible to remove,” he says. There’s no emotion in his voice, and when she looks up at him, his face is a careful blank.

“I know,” she tells him, the truth, and pushes his shirt to the ground before moving to his belt buckle.

“I should—” he starts, and she covers his mouth.

“No apologies.” This is something different, tonight, and no explanations or prevarications belong. Nothing of their ordinary lives. This is raw and urgent and only once.

“And if I want to make you come first?” He says it in a voice like velvet, and Hermione can only nod, flushing, her hands reaching for the fastening of her bra.

He covers her hands with his own, undoes the hooks with a practised grace that makes her eyebrows raise. He stares right back, as if to say *your move, Granger*.

Her magic pulls the bra away from her arms, nestles it amidst his books, but Hermione's smirk disappears when Draco cups her breasts in his palms, circling in an unhurried loop with his thumb. Her head arches back and his mouth is on her throat and Hermione can hardly breathe as he works his hands and his mouth just enough to make her frenzied.

She makes a strangled sound, clutching at Draco's bare shoulders, and he lets out a low laugh. "Should I assume you like that?"

She wants his mouth between her legs so badly that her thighs clench at the thought.

But Draco only watches her.

"Tell me," he says. There's the barest hint of steel in his voice. She throbs with it.

"I like all of this." She doesn't bother to hide her pleading tone. Let him think he's in control, so long as he gives her what she wants.

His mouth closes over her breast, his teeth scraping lightly against her furred nipple, the sensation spreading out over her skin. His finger pauses between her breasts, dips lower, along her belly and down to the elastic of her knickers. He barely parts the seam of her, and she feels the change in his expression against her skin.

He lifts his mouth and considers her. His finger's poised just over her clit, twisting in the material of her knickers while his other hand braces her hip. Keeping her caught.

"So wet for me already, Hermione," he says, all consideration. "How often were you thinking about this, before tonight?"

"You keep asking," she manages, as prim as she can be while trying to arch herself into his touch. His eyes glint as he pulls his fingers just slightly too far away from where she needs him.

"Tell me your tally and I'll tell you mine."

Hermione studies him, lit by the firelight, the golden glow barely adding warmth to his pale skin or to the silver eyes that watch her with equal parts amusement and concentration. As if she were more than a conquest or a puzzle to be solved. For a moment, before her desire can overtake her, she studies the marks on his skin, which look less like the battle marks of an Auror and more like dozens of small cuts. Too many small cruelties.

"Stop looking at me like that, Granger," he says, using her surname like a shield. And wasn't that what she wanted, a night with no connection to the rest of their lives, their histories or their futures?

She turns her gaze to the fire in the grate. Lets him see exactly what sort of smile is playing on her lips.

"I thought of you all the time, for weeks," she tells him, the words easy once she's decided on them, standing before him in nothing but her knickers, his fingers so close to her clit. "I

would have to touch myself twice a day in order to focus on anything. Three times, when we duelled.”

“It must have been difficult when Ginny Weasley was visiting.” His fingers skim the curls between her legs. Already Hermione knows better than to move.

“She thought I’d started taking very long showers.”

“Twice a day?”

She bites her lip. “Sometimes I snuck off to the piano room when she was working with the Quidditch teams.”

“What would you do?” Each word pressed into her skin. She hadn’t noticed when he bowed his head.

“I’d try to make it to the piano before I touched myself.” She stops for a moment. Even now, humming with lust, she can hardly believe she’s saying this. He licks the skin of her shoulder, applies his lips to the spot. Still his fingers do not touch the place where she requires him. “I liked to rock against the piano bench and imagine you there instead of my hand.”

“I’d splay you out on the instrument and make you moan loud enough to set it ringing.”

She’s so fixated on the words, the fantasy inside them, that she hardly notices the motion of his finger, circling her clit, until he begins to press.

“I thought you’d only moan like that when I filled you up,” he says, his lips against her throat.

The edge of his fingernail grazes her clit and her head falls back as she moans. It is so simple to fall apart in his arms.

“What sounds will you make when I’m inside you, Hermione? Will you scream my name?” He moves his thumb inside her, his finger still circling, his mouth on her throat. Three parts of her body set alight by his touch.

She clutches his shoulders as her legs wobble.

He moves her knickers down, his fingers slick on her thighs, until she’s bared to him, a small puddle of black fabric at her ankles. He lifts his face, considering her as if this is only the first of a thousand nights.

For a moment, Hermione wonders, she can’t help herself: what would happen if he never returns?

And it must show on her face, a fraction of the feelings that detonate inside her, because he kisses her again, his mouth hot and insistent, and instead of teasing, his fingers are relentless, finding the place that makes the world give way beneath her. All too soon, she is moaning, her fingers tangled in his hair while he thrusts two fingers inside her, his thumb rubbing her

throbbing clit until she's all sensation, moving against him, her own rhythm, coming and coming and coming.

His grip on her is tight enough that Hermione can feel the beating of his pulse.

Before her orgasm has fully subsided, she reaches for his belt buckle. This time, Draco doesn't stop her, doesn't laugh as her fingers stumble against the metal and leather.

Finally, his belt is undone, and Hermione watches him, transfixed, as she unfastens his trousers. She will never remember, later, if she used magic or her own hands, will only remember the working of the lean muscles around his hips as her fingers brush against the revealed skin. His cock springing free as she pulled away his boxer briefs, rigid and weeping at the tip.

Her whole body seems to pause in anticipation.

And then he takes her against the bookshelf, lifting her into his arms and seating her thighs around his hips, his eyes fixed on hers. She can feel the tip of his length at her entrance, poised and weeping but still not moving, not until she gives him a sign. He's waiting for her, those grey eyes watching for a sign, the rest of his face so handsome and impassive. A statue with a molten pulse.

He doesn't want her to know what he's thinking in this moment, she realises. Understands the feeling.

She only nods, daring him to look away. Let it happen now, she thinks, before they can convince themselves otherwise.

Without warning, he thrusts inside her, pushing her against the shelves. Filling her completely, pleasure and friction so exquisite it is almost but not quite pain. When he pulls back, he's intent on her, eyebrow raised. As if he knows just how he's undone her.

She shifts her hips and watches his eyes darken at the sensation. His thumb swipes her clit as he pushes into her again, and her head falls back against the books, the scent of parchment surrounding her, the scent of well-loved leather, the scent of sweat and sex all coiled around Draco deep inside of her, in and out, relentless and sure. The pleasure building inside her.

His mouth on her neck, again. Hermione knows there will be bruises, but she wants them. Wants to be marked by this. She scrapes her fingernails along his back, hears him murmur her name, desperate and amused.

"You want this," he says.

She answers, "You do too."

He thrusts inside her, and she answers with the arching of her hips, her inner muscles clenching around his cock. Another swipe of his tongue at her throat, his fingers flexing at her hips.

It's this small sign of his fraying control that nearly overwhelms Hermione, and she lets herself surrender to the mounting thrum, the echoing of her pulse and the heated pleasure in her core. Draco's breath at her neck, nearly a growl.

"Come for me," she says, barely able to make words with all that pleasure building inside her, coiling tight. She's not sure if he'll resist.

There's a gleam in his eye before he pushes deeper inside her, books falling somewhere behind them. Distantly, Hermione is aware of herself crying out his name as she comes, holding him tight, the world gone molten.

Then he follows her, *Hermione* a groan on his lips as he surrenders with a last thrust, spending himself inside her.

Draco holds her against him for a long moment, breathing hard against her neck. Beyond them, the fire crackles. She settles her thighs against his hips, thinking only of the heat of him, the texture of his skin.

Then he moves away from her, leaving her to stand against the bookshelf. She cannot read the expression on his face.

"Should I go back to my room?" she asks, trying for nonchalance and failing, even as she feels his come sliding out of her, sticky on her thighs. He will be gone in the morning, she reminds herself, and it's not as if she is some damsel. She has always known that this was something of a game between them.

Then she realises that he's staring at her. That his clothing is still discarded on the floor.

"No," he says, and there is nothing dismissive about what she sees in him, "don't leave unless you want to."

She shakes her head and lets her hair fall over her breasts. She can spell all her clothing on her body in seconds, she thinks, but instead she braces herself against the bookshelf and watches him, the way the firelight gilds him in silver, outlining the hollows of his face, the lines of his muscles and all those scattered remnants of his life. The signet ring gleams on his pinky, the only thing she hadn't removed from his body.

"You're going to ask about my scars, aren't you." His arms are crossed over his chest, his back hidden from her. Instinctively she knows he's trying to hide them, trying to mask the effort at the same time.

Anyway, she knows that to ask about the scars would be met with silence or an answer that would break this moment wide open. Hermione is too clever, and perhaps too scared, to open up those possibilities.

"The ring," she says, probably too nonchalant.

He smiles a little at that. Takes a step closer to her.

"I stole it from the manor before my father returned from the camp."

“He never tried to get it back?”

“It was meant that Voldemort would give it to me. Once the war was won.” His voice is distant, and she wonders if he’s imagining the possibility.

“Why did you want it, then?”

He shrugs, then pads over to his leather couch and seats himself, facing the fire. He rests a hand at his side and turns to her.

“Sit with me, if you’re going to ask me all these questions,” he says, and she settles herself next to him, the fire warm on her skin. Half a thought, and a blanket appears across her lap, Malfoy smirking as she wraps herself up.

“Do you want a drink too?” he asks.

Vaguely, Hermione is aware of the danger of the moment. How easy it could be between them, cosy in front of the fire, dazed and easy from sex. Still, she settles closer to him, the length of her leg pressed against his. “Wine, if you have it.”

Two glasses of something red appear at the table before him.

“Why did you steal the ring?” she asks.

“It would’ve been mine anyway.”

“But you didn’t have to lead that life.”

He takes a sip of wine. “There are certain expectations, Granger, for a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight.”

“Then why haven’t you married a pureblood witch?”

The question was meant to be offhand, the first thing that had entered Hermione’s mind, but it hangs in the air. He considers her.

“Do you want the real answer,” he asks, stroking his hand along her thigh, once and then again, “or do you want me to distract you?”

She nods, spreads her legs a little wider.

Hermione’s legs fall open beneath the blanket, and Draco pulls it away. He wants to stare at her until he memorises each line and curve of her, knows the angle of each curl. These

thoughts belong to a lovesick schoolboy he's never been, and he dismisses them. Reaches for the wine and allows a drop of the best vintage in the Malfoy cellar to fall onto Hermione's clavicle. He watches as it falls down her breast, collecting at the tip.

When he licks it away, her fingers tangle in his hair. He savours the taste, the sensation of her rosy flesh pebbling under his tongue. The soft sound in her throat.

He suspects that Hermione is holding back, trying to keep him from knowing how he's affecting her. He runs his fingers over her shoulders, half a touch, and she moves against him, the sparse curls at her sex brushing against his cock, hard and straining again.

He had assumed that he would end this night alone. Weasley or the weight of the night or the mission to come would drive her to her own apartments. But Hermione hadn't given an inch, had kissed him and then fucked him as if she'd been thinking of it as much as he had.

He thinks of the light in her eyes when he'd spoken of taking her on the piano. How her thighs had clenched. Already wet for him. He'd known even without touching her.

He pulls his mouth away from her breast just to look at her, her skin limned golden by the fire and the freckles across the bridge of her nose and those curls everywhere. Draco feels as if somehow, despite growing up alongside her, he'd never actually seen her.

Tonight, he decides, letting more wine drip against her throat, he'll let himself believe that lie.

This time, he lets the wine fall lower, licking at her breasts, at her navel, cataloguing the sharp little inhale when his mouth approaches her sex—

And for all that Draco enjoys these little power plays with Hermione, loves winning them, he decides, just this once, to give her exactly what she wants.

The wine is gone but he moves his mouth lower, parting her sex with his fingers. She sucks in a breath, smothering the sound with her palm, like she's afraid he might stop if he knew how much she wanted this.

Instead, he runs his tongue over her clit. The taste of her is heat and mineral and musk, and he licks at her, wanting more.

Soon, her panting breaths become little cries, and when he sucks at her, she moans his name, canting her hips against his mouth. He strokes his hands down her thighs, and then, as he feels the tension mounting in her muscles, he pushes two fingers inside her.

He's barely seated before she comes, clenching around his fingers. She's delicious like this, the taste and scent and sound of her, and he keeps his mouth and hands working through one orgasm and into another, until she's nearly screaming.

"Malfoy—" she starts when he finally moves his mouth from her. Her hands are shaking. He's seized with the desire to cup them in his own, to kiss from her wrists to her fingertips, and knows he needs to banish the impulse. It is already too difficult to consider leaving her.

“Can you take me again?” he asks.

She’s all focus, nodding as he lays her back against the couch, reaching out to stroke the hair off his temple as he positions himself at her entrance.

He thrusts inside her completely, no easing in, and she takes him with a moan that he feels like electricity in the base of his spine. “Fuck, Granger, I’m going to come if you keep making sounds like that.”

She wraps her legs around his waist and grins at him like he just told her she’d won an all-access pass to his private library.

He pulls out almost completely and slams back inside her, and Hermione only gets louder, and fuck if it doesn’t make him even more desperate for her, knowing that the teacher’s pet of his school days can get off like this, wild and lovely in his arms.

He moves in and out of her, ignoring the pain in his knee, focused only on the increasing abandon that overtakes Hermione, the need in him becoming light and sound and motion, her heat like the centre of a flame surrounding him until he comes, growling her name again and again.

This time, he does not move away from her. Instead, as their breathing calms, he lets himself fall next to her on the couch, pulls her to rest on his chest, summoning their discarded blanket with half a thought.

“I’ve never—” she starts to say, and this time, he covers her mouth.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had better,” he says. “I don’t want to think about your depressing Ministry-sanctioned existence.”

For the rest of his life, Draco thinks, he will remember the pretty way she rolls her eyes at him, the way her curls moved across his skin.

“You never told me how often you thought of me,” she says.

“I’ll give you this, Granger,” he says, trying not to notice the way her expression dims when he uses her surname, “I never thought to use the piano room to wank off. That was clever.”

“I’d worry, sometimes, that you’d catch me. That you’d know exactly what I was doing.”

“I did, once.”

In the days since, he’s sometimes regretted the fact that he left. But all the regret vanishes in the wake of the hot flush on her cheeks. He sweeps her up in his arms, pleased to find that the blush has spread to her shoulders and even to her breasts.

“We’re not going to the piano room,” she says, her tone immediately shifting. As if she’s waking from a spell and realising whose arms are holding her.

“The Aurors’ office will be there.” He hoists her higher. “I’m taking you to my bed.”

He should attempt to understand the quality of relief in her smile, but instead he just walks faster, moving aside the duvet with a wandless spell and slipping her between the crisp white sheets. The fire crackles to life.

“Malfoy—” she starts to say, again in her Ministry voice. And Draco is coming to like that voice more and more, but he stops her with a kiss.

“You have to teach tomorrow,” he says, settling her against his chest, her hair like an enormous halo and her cheek over his heart.

“How long will you stay with the Hand?”

“As long as I’m required,” he says, resisting his impulse to explain where he will go. There’s a part of him that feels cut open to her already. “You’ll have Potter here. I’m sure no one will miss me.”

He can feel her straining to sit up, to argue. He strokes a hand down her hair.

“Sleep,” he says, and by some miracle, she settles against him.

He expects to hold her quietly for an hour and then prepare his things. It would be best to leave at dawn, to make the Hand think he needed to escape Hogwarts in a hurry.

Instead, he is pulled into sleep by the rhythm of Hermione’s breath, and he surrenders.

When Hermione wakes, it is dark and she is kissing Draco, moaning against his mouth. His hands soft on her shoulders. The sheets are warm from the heat of their bodies.

“Hermione,” he says, so much longing in his voice. She can feel his cock against her hip, hard again, and her sex clenches at the thought of him inside her.

She straddles him instead of answering, running her thumb over his lips.

For a moment, lowering herself onto his cock, it still feels dreamlike, to move without hesitation. And then she begins to rock her hips, taking him inside her, and it becomes real, this pleasure coiling between her legs, the dying fire in the grate, the way the lines of his body are carved by the moonlight.

He runs a finger from her throat to her navel and she shudders at his touch, at the way his fingers seem to wake up her skin. He cups her breasts in his hands and she arches, pulling him in with each motion, trying to memorise what it feels like when he touches her, each

point of contact spangling out like a new star. And all the while, he watches her, his eyes deep grey, his lips forming the shape of a kiss.

Sooner than she expects, she is panting, rocking against him, so close already. She'd woken up half-gone for him. He shifts on the bed, sitting up to wrap his muscled arms around her, and the angle changes, deeper and just *more*, and Hermione barely knows what's happening as the pleasure strikes her, a heady wave that pulls her under as he thrusts inside her, filling her as he pronounces her name in her ear.

Hermione, he calls, quiet and desperate, clinging tight to her as he surrenders to his own release.

She takes his hand and kisses it, hardly knowing what she's doing. Only wanting her mouth on him.

He pulls her down to the bed with him, arranging the blankets over her. For just a moment, he hesitates, then rises.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"You know I can't tell you."

"Tell me anyway." Once, Harry and Dumbledore had trusted Hermione with secrets deadly enough to win a war. "Maybe I can help."

"You need to work with Saraiva," he says, settling a dressing gown over his shoulders, a deep green silk, because Draco would find luxury even in a critical moment, and of course it would suit him, would make Hermione want to reach out and stroke both the fabric and the skin beneath, even now, when she doesn't want to be distracted. "I think she's in earnest. McGonagall is formidable, but she isn't equipped to help Saraiva play double agent. You'll have to do what you can. And of course there are the wards, here and at that office she's got in Hogsmeade."

"Did you know she was part of the Hand?"

Hermione had put off asking this question, knowing what it could imply.

"I didn't."

It would be an easy lie, but there's something haunted in the way Draco says it, in the way his fingers pass over the Mark on his forearm. He knows why he wasn't told.

"Kingsley never told me about the Faithful Hand," she says, and it's more than a complaint or an admission of weakness.

"The Auror's office briefs him on the threat as little as possible. The goal is to contain the threat."

"Harry wouldn't agree to that."

Draco's face is a careful blank.

"Potter drives our strategy with the Hand," he says, crossing the room and extracting vials of potions from his wardrobe. "The Ministry has been infiltrated before."

"So he's allowed everyone to think that the Hand is only a threat outside Great Britain?"

"We've done a fairly good job of managing it until now."

"Did you know that the cells were in communication?"

"We thought it was a loose affiliation. But if a member of the Hand can get to Saraiva in Hogsmeade..." He runs a hand through his hair. "If Voldemort had been smart enough to recruit Death Eaters internationally, he would never have fallen."

"He couldn't have held that much territory," she says. The past is easy to consider, now, when she feels she's overcome it. "Not when his leadership was so unstable. Power alone couldn't hold the entire wizarding world."

He turns his face from her, and she rises, letting the sheet fall away. She wants to see him biting back a sneer.

But by the time she reaches him, his face is impassive, and he rests his hand over her hip. His fingertips at the dip of her waist.

"There's more than power, Draco," she says. She barely touches his chin, and he moves his gaze to her.

"It's easy to make children fight if they believe it means something real."

She shakes her head. Though she's thought of this, of course, so many times, and wondered how much consideration it would take in order to make the so-called glory of her past unravel entirely. "There was a prophecy. Voldemort would have come after Harry regardless."

"Then it should have ended and begun with Potter," he says.

"You think any of us would have stayed on the sidelines?"

She'd never seen Draco up in the Astronomy Tower, had been fighting Death Eaters in the halls of Hogwarts, but she can imagine him now, his wand poised to kill and trembling in his fist. And there is the usual anger, but there's also a tenderness inside her. The possibility that he might have become someone different, given half a chance.

Even as she knows she never would have made a different choice. There had never been a moment when she'd thought of booking herself a flight to Australia alongside her parents. Because it had never felt certain that they would triumph, that they wouldn't all fall to Voldemort. She'd had to do whatever she could, as long as she lasted.

"Why were we so necessary?" Draco asks, bringing her back to the present.

She shakes her head. His eyes follow the motion of her curls, and in another lifetime, it would be sweet to think of him watching her so closely.

“The students seem so young,” she says instead. “Younger than we ever were.”

“We were just like them once, Granger.” He moves away from her, stacking a handful of parchments and robes alongside the potions.

“Should I go back to my rooms?” she asks as he reaches up into his wardrobe and pulls out a sheathed dagger.

“Nothing I’m carrying is confidential.”

She pulls a sheet from the bed and winds it around herself. “You were going to leave me in the night, weren’t you?”

“I fell asleep instead.” A brief flash of a smile, while he stuffs dark clothing in a bag. “When I woke up, you were kissing me.”

“I could say the same thing.”

“Must have been some dream, Granger.”

How easy it could be, with no history between them, she thinks, allowing herself a smile in his direction. But what lies between them is too solid to ignore.

“How can I help?” she asks.

“Charm my bag to fit all of this.” It’s a small pile of parchment and potions, weapons and a few books, and only enough clothes for a few days. Though of course he can always acquire more by magic. “Make it undetectable.”

“That’s not difficult,” she says, moving towards the front room where her wand lies safely in the inner pocket of her robes.

When she returns, she’s efficient, casting the Undetectable Extension Charm on the leather bag and then tipping in everything Draco has piled up with a flick of her wand.

“You could take more, if you wanted.”

He crosses over to her and lifts the bag, considering. “You’re going to have to teach me how you cast that so well.”

“Just make it back safely, Malfoy.”

He watches her for a moment, and Hermione is sure he’s going to laugh at her, but instead he tugs on the sheet until she stands before him, completely exposed, and he’s kissing her with the same desperation he had hours ago. As if they’d never touched.

“I know you can’t come back for me,” she says, pulling away to snatch a breath.

“My father alone—” He presses his mouth to the soft skin along her ear, interrupting himself. “I will find a way to destroy you. Believe me.”

“You never—” she starts to say, but his fingers are on her mouth.

“Oh, I wanted to hurt you very badly, Granger, and you’re a fool if you believe otherwise.” He kisses her and it’s furious, desperate. Her lips are throbbing when he pulls away. “And every force you want to blame for all the things I did? Each one still exists.”

“Voldemort is gone and you’re a—”

He pulls her toward the bed, hard enough that she stumbles against him.

“My last contact was murdered in the halls of this school.” The words are ragged. “Didn’t you write the history for all of us, Granger? Don’t you see it repeating again?”

Hermione reaches for him, and this time it’s her mouth that is desperate, claiming.

“I have to believe things can be different,” she says, against his lips.

His fingers scrape over her back, and probably it should hurt. Instead, it feels to Hermione like a claiming, and she presses her mouth against his throat, marking him with her teeth. Beneath her mouth, she can hear the low laugh rising in his throat.

When he pushes her back against the bed, she lets him, spreading her legs wide. The green dressing gown slips off his body only an instant before he pushes inside her, and for a moment Hermione thinks it might be too much, and then that itself, the overwhelm and the stretch, all of it turns her on more than anything.

She hooks her ankles at his back, rocks her hips to urge him on, and she watches his expression shift.

He didn’t think she’d want this. He was trying to scare her, and instead she can barely hold back the sounds that tear at her throat. She will catalogue it all later, Hermione decides, as pleasure rises inside her at his unrelenting rhythm, the clutch and press of his hands.

Draco will not look at her. He buries his face in her neck, his mouth finding the place that makes her twist the sheets in her fingers. When she moans his name, the sounds feel pulled from her mouth by the onslaught of sensation he’s wracked from her.

When she comes, she feels wrung out, collapsing against the bed even as he thrusts into her again and again, coming moments later with a sharp breath.

He kisses her with something like anger, still. He runs his hands over her body as if to erase the memory of his touch. And still somehow Hermione only pushes herself against him, pulls him closer.

Later, she tells herself. She will consider this and regret it all when he is gone. She will become the person she has always been.

He does not settle, exactly, but he pulls her against his chest, and she listens to his heart race until she's half-asleep. His arm is tight over her chest, his other hand tangled in her hair. As if he's afraid someone will pull them apart.

The sky has gone grey by the time he rises from the bed. Hermione hears the sound of the shower, the sound of wet feet against stone. Eventually, though she's half-asleep again, the sheets pulled warm around her, she hears the deep rustle of fabric and forces herself to rise, to pull on the robes she'd discarded on the ground.

When he emerges from the bathroom, hair wet from the shower, his shirt clinging to his still-damp skin, she is dressed and waiting, her wand within reach. The thing between them poised to strike.

"I didn't know if you'd still be here," he says.

"I should go."

He moves toward her and she thinks, for a moment, that he might kiss her or drag her back to the bed, but Draco only takes her hand in his.

"I'll send a report if I find anything," he says, and she doesn't miss the significance of that promise. She is not a member of the Auror's office, not even in the employ of the Ministry at this moment. Almost certainly there are laws against such things.

She only nods.

"So will I," she says.

"Use a cipher." His words are murmured low, and before she can ask which, he adds, "I'll find a way to break it."

A moment later, and her hand is on the doorknob of her apartments. Draco's footsteps are nearly silent on the stones. Nothing moves inside Hogwarts, Hermione thinks, apart from the two of them.

She watches him from the window until he disappears into the outskirts of the Forest.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the smut! More is coming, I promise.

This chapter concludes the first arc of the fic, and the next arc is bigger, steamier, and more fast-paced. New characters and familiar faces will take the stage...and of course, Hermione and Draco will be figuring things out. I can't wait to share these chapters with you.

On a housekeeping note: Against Nostalgia will be taking a short hiatus. I will be posting chapter 12 on Thursday, April 13.

There's no need to panic—I am not abandoning this fic. I'm taking some time to increase my buffer and edit future chapters. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have questions! I love hearing from you.

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who give the best advice and found all the places with terrible sex logistics. All mistakes are my own.

Thank you for taking the time to read Against Nostalgia, and for all your support. I read every message and you all are so thoroughly wonderful ❤️

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley come to Hogwarts.

Chapter Notes

Against Nostalgia is back with a new chapter! Thanks for waiting so patiently while I was on hiatus—things get moving in these chapters, and I hope you'll enjoy 🧡

Please note updates to the tags, which have been updated to include new content warnings that apply to this chapter.

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

Hermione spends only an hour in bed before she realises that she will not sleep. Admitting defeat, she changes into her running clothes, feeling exposed as she walks through the castle without the concealment of her robes and the bulky jumpers she's favoured since coming to Hogwarts, her body sore in a half-dozen unusual places.

The corridors are all silent.

The students don't have class until the afternoon, she reminds herself as she passes the turn for the Gryffindor tower. Better if they're still sleeping, no dead women in their dreams. Even if she knows from experience how she would have launched into a flurry of research and worry.

Would have done the same, now, even knowing the cause and her next steps, if she and Draco hadn't ended up in bed together.

She waits for shame to come but finds her cheeks heating from an entirely different emotion, one she hurries to smother as she pushes open the Hogwarts doors and begins her run. The sun has hardly risen and the Scottish countryside seems to know that it's November now, the cold hitting Hermione like a fist to the gut. It's a distraction as she strides forward, pulling in air and windmilling her arms.

Still, even as she speeds her pace, feels her body warming, Hermione keeps thinking of Draco. Not only of the moments when he touched her, when she lost all control, but those last minutes before he left the castle.

There was a promise in them that felt far bigger than one night. More significant, she suspects, even than some grand romance. There is something in it that she doesn't yet fully grasp.

By the time she's completed a lap of the castle, the cold has eased, and she's returned to a modicum of sense, so that only half of her thoughts are about Draco's mouth on her sex or the way he'd pushed inside her, how he'd filled her.

The rest of the time, she is able to think about strategy. About why Draco would want to write to her over the Auror's office. Harry will be here, probably by tomorrow, and it is strange not to think to ask him for more information before she does anything else.

By the time she's passed Hagrid's cottage for a second time, Hermione has begun to wonder whether this is all some awful mistake, some underhanded plot of Draco Malfoy's, to seduce her and make her his primary contact in order to destabilise the Ministry. If all the conversations and duelling practice and all that had passed between them had been meant purposely, in order to bind her to him.

But what would he gain from it?

He already stands to inherit considerable wealth, and he's cleared his name with the majority of the wizarding world, between Hogwarts and the Auror's office. He could likely gain more power if he wanted.

Unless he wanted more than the Ministry would allow. Unless he was tired of playing at redemption.

Unless he'd killed Ruby himself.

Then she thinks of his face when he'd agreed to take Veritaserum. As if he'd expected the demand. There had been no need to dose him with the truth serum when she'd seen that look of resignation, almost disappointment. He'd wanted something different from her.

And if Hermione is honest, in that moment she was also disappointed with herself.

Because when he had thought that there was the possibility of danger, he'd wanted to protect her. She'd felt the tension in his arms when she'd tried to push past him, had seen how quickly he'd worked the detection spells, the ones she would have thought to use and the ones she'd never heard of.

She thinks of the way he'd said her name in the darkness, in the middle of the night. The longing in each syllable.

Hermione keeps running, circling the castle again, until her lungs burn and her thoughts begin to settle. By the time she reaches the ancient doors, she's made a plan for the day.

Then she nearly knocks over Ginny in the main hall.

"Since when are you a runner?" her friend asks, her laughter at odds with the dark circles under her eyes.

“Why are you back at Hogwarts?” she retorts, in between gulping air.

“Harry’s starting as the D.A.D.A. professor tomorrow. I heard you recommended him, by the way, and we are going to be having a discussion about that. He’s decided we’re moving here until Malfoy takes back the position.”

“Did he say why?”

“Nostalgia, I think,” Ginny says with a laugh. This time, Hermione wonders if there’s something forced in the sound. “He was jealous when I spent that week with you. Kept asking where everything was.”

“Is he here now?” Hermione asks, knowing she sounds too impatient. But it’s clear that Ginny has no idea what happened at Hogwarts last night, and Hermione knows that if she lingers, she will tell Ginny far too much, beginning with Ron and ending with Draco, and with a hundred essential secrets in between.

“He’s signing papers in McGonagall’s office. I decided to explore. Want to—”

“I need to ask her a question, Gin, I’m sorry. I tried earlier but she wasn’t awake yet.”

Ginny’s hand wraps around Hermione’s wrist, stronger than anticipated. Hermione forgets, too often, that this is a woman who has won the Quidditch World Cup for England.

“Don’t leave me out of this,” she says. “Harry does it enough.”

“If he can’t tell you—”

“I give him hell and he usually does tell me, eventually. But you’re not working for the Auror’s office, Mione.”

Hermione thinks of all the secrets she has to carry, and the way that Ginny never factors into any of them. Ginny is the best friend of all her easy hours, shopping and meals and the kind of office gossip with no real implications.

She’d never questioned any of this, had thought the arrangement benefitted Ginny too. Surely she heard all kinds of awful things from Harry.

But now she thinks of Ginny in their school days, always fighting but always relegated to the fringes of the group, even after Harry admitted he was in love with her. Ginny has always kept their secrets, no matter how inconsequential.

And so Hermione tells her everything she knows: “There was a hole in the wards last night. I need to see what the Aurors found, if there was anything, but I need—I want to help. I was researching the spells anyway.”

She expects Ginny to insist that there must be more, but instead her friend goes a little green. “After Voldemort... McGonagall must be beside herself at a problem with the warding magic.”

Before she can say anything else, Ginny stumbles a little and Hermione catches her, wrapping her arm around Ginny's waist.

"Are you all right?"

"Halloween isn't easy for Harry. I don't have a match this weekend, so we made a night of it. We were sloshed out of our minds when he got the summons, I think Ron and Orla Quirke had to handle it. But Harry wanted to come to Hogwarts as soon as he woke up this morning."

"Do you want to sit in my room for a bit?"

"I thought you had to go to McGonagall's."

"She can wait a tick," Hermione says, more firmly than is technically true, but there's a sheen of sweat on Ginny's brow, and she's in no mood to remember which spells will actually remove vomit.

When she pushes open the door to her room, Crookshanks bolts for them, letting out a loud meow.

"He knows who will give him attention," Ginny says with a smile, all while Hermione realises that her cat has missed spending the night by her side, that she'd barely petted him in the hour between Malfoy's departure and her run.

"He definitely missed you," she lies smoothly, offering Ginny the bed or her armchair, feeling no small relief when Ginny takes the bed, toeing off her shoes before she slips under the blankets. Crookshanks immediately curls up next to her, shooting Hermione a disapproving look.

"I'll be in the shower if you need me," Hermione says. Ginny barely murmurs a response, already half-asleep.

In the bathroom, Hermione shucks off her running clothes and sees all the places where marks have blossomed on her body. There are bruises at her throat and at her hips, left from Draco's mouth and fingers. Long scratches down her back. She runs her fingers over them, not quite ready to spell them away.

Instead, she turns the water as hot as it will go and washes off all the remnants of her run and the night before. She's aware of her mind still churning, working through the ways the next hours and days could go.

She's not sure what she'll tell Harry or Ginny.

When she catches herself wishing that Draco were here with her, to tell her what to say, she presses the bruise at her throat until her eyes water with the pain.

She's generally been smarter than this.

Ginny is snoring softly when Hermione leaves the bathroom, dressed in close-cut black robes and an oversized knit cardigan in a golden-flecked cream. Her hair is still warm from the quick-drying spells she's cast on it, and she's begun to feel so much like her ordinary self that she nearly walks into the corridor with a bruise visible on her neck.

Harry is yelling at McGonagall when Hermione reaches the headmistress' office, the door propped open so that she doesn't need to give a password.

"She should never have been allowed to leave your office!" he's saying, pacing before McGonagall's desk.

"Rebeca swore a vow," Hermione says instead of hello, taking a chair. Harry isn't as prone to temper as he was during their Hogwarts days, but over the years, she's learned to let him argue himself out before jumping into the fray. And so, it seems, from the blank expression on her face, has McGonagall.

"How do you know that it will bind her?"

"I performed it myself."

She can feel Harry considering this information.

"Tell me the conditions."

"She has to protect this school."

"She could still run."

"Has she?"

The question is a gamble. Rebeca could have left during the night, risking death or perhaps finding some obscure method to appease the Vow. But Hermione knows she's won when Harry's eyes slide away from hers, the bright green gaze dimming just slightly. He gives a little shake of his head.

"You can question Professor Saraiva if you like," McGonagall says, "though I will insist that either Professor Granger or myself are present. I have, of course, provided you with my memory of all that transpired last evening."

Sure enough, there's a vial filled with shimmering liquid on the headmistress' desk.

"And you will take back control of the wards immediately?" Harry asks, and it's clear to Hermione, as soon as he begins the question, that this was his concern.

"That's a decision for the headmistress to make," Hermione answers, not bothering to hide her annoyance. Rebeca is merely a prop for Harry's outrage. Hogwarts is his real concern.

McGonagall raises a hand.

“I think you’ll find I can fight my own battles, Professor Granger,” she says, though her voice is not nearly as stern as it could be. “And, Mr. Potter, I am happy to provide you any information you would like regarding the security magicks on the castle.”

“Enlighten me,” he says, every bit the Auror as he settles himself into what Hermione now recognises as a duelling stance. “How could you have lost control of the wards so badly?”

“Albus Dumbledore held all the warding spells himself at the time of his death. Quite apart from the vanishing cabinet, and the handful of methods that the Order used to sneak into the castle, his untimely death left those wards destabilised, particularly after Snape became headmaster. While I would like to pretend that I am immortal and that the forces of evil are forever vanquished, I have found that the warding spells are stronger and more difficult to break when the Hogwarts faculty holds much of the warding magic as a collective. In fact,” she says, her lips twisting, nearly a smile, “Professor Malfoy has made significant contributions to the wards since he joined the faculty.”

“I expect that his connection to the wards will be severed immediately,” Harry says.

“Weren’t you the one who said we could trust Malfoy?” Hermione is aware, too late, of how sharply her voice forms the question. She’s giving away too much.

“You have no idea what work he does, Hermione. At a minimum, his connection to the school is likely to be exploited while he’s in contact with the Hand. Particularly with both of us at Hogwarts.”

You’re a target, he’d said, right from the beginning. What does Draco know?

She thinks, not of strategy or odds or even history, but of his fingers tangled in her hair, his mouth at her throat. Of the way he’d looked when he’d found her at the top of the staircase, an instant of terror in his eyes before he’d smothered it and pulled her behind him.

Then Hermione shakes her head, willing the thoughts away. She will not be foolish.

“I have access to the history of the warding magicks,” she says, pretending this is simply an annoying meeting, not a minefield of half-made mistakes, another faceoff between Hogwarts and the Ministry. “I’ll see how Malfoy can be cut out.”

“I’d also like to know how Saraiva was able to puncture them.”

She can imagine him speaking in that tone to a junior in the office, an Auror who has made a mistake. But Hermione isn’t an Auror, and she is certainly not his junior.

Letting the silence drag on, she raises a single eyebrow at her oldest friend. To his credit, Harry seems to hear himself and bows his head.

“Perhaps you should join our next research session.” Each syllable is purposefully clipped.

“You’ve been researching the wards with Rebeca Saraiva?” Again his temper rises.

Hermione shoots a look over at McGonagall, who gives her a little shrug, just this side of amused.

So Hermione explains the requirements of magi-technology, the interference from the wards and the research she's been doing with Saraiva.

"It sounds like she has you doing all of the work," Harry points out. It's not unreasonable, given all of Hermione's inquiries, but she still feels her hackles rise. Especially considering all the papers she wrote for him over the years.

"As Professor McGonagall said, you're free to question her. We haven't dosed her with Veritaserum, if you'd like to do the honours."

"Once I get Gin settled in," he says. "If I'm allowed to cancel her afternoon classes? And Hermione's?"

"I am allowed," McGonagall puts in, rising from her desk before Hermione can protest the disruption. "I don't think their students will object, given the circumstances."

"They should not be informed of what happened at Hogwarts last night."

"I think you'll find, Mr. Potter, that you and your friends were not the only students who liked to know when they found themselves in danger."

"The Aurors' office—"

"Was notified immediately and invited to have a presence at Hogwarts in recognition of the danger. Professor Granger thought you would be best suited to fill in for Professor Malfoy during his absence. I happen to agree with her recommendation. But the Aurors' office does not have jurisdiction at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter, no matter how valuable your recommendations may be."

Harry nods.

To anyone else, it might seem to be a gesture of acceptance, but Hermione has conspired with Harry since they were eleven years old. She knows he's only buying time.

"Professor Granger will show you to your rooms," McGonagall says, her voice a bit softer now. "But I'd like to speak with her alone for a moment."

Hermione can feel Harry looking at her, knows that he wants her to insist that he can hear anything the headmistress will say to her. Instead she waits until he retreats past the door, until McGonagall casts a ward around herself and Hermione, the spell a dull roar in her ears.

"You will keep what I'm telling you close?" McGonagall asks, her tone almost tender. Confiding.

"Of course," Hermione says.

“Even from the Minister and the Aurors’ office?” McGonagall’s eyes dart in the direction of the door.

Hermione wants to say yes. Because of everything that Hogwarts has been to her. Because she is aware of what an honour it is, to be the person that Minerva McGonagall trusts inside a ward. But for all that she’s angry at the way that Harry spoke to them, and uncertain about the implications of what Draco did not say before he left for the Forest, still Hermione is sure that the Ministry she knows is far different from the Ministry that nearly destroyed wizarding Britain when she was at Hogwarts.

“You know why I can’t promise that, Professor,” she says, finally.

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

Abruptly, the ward drops. McGonagall’s face reveals nothing, not disappointment or pride, and Hermione is all but certain she’s failed the test.

“Mr. Potter’s rooms are just south of the Gryffindor tower. The room has been unused for a few decades but the house elves have been freshening it since dawn, and I think that he and Miss Weasley will enjoy the view of the Quidditch pitch. I’ve created an informal map.” McGonagall pushes a square of parchment across her desk. “I also wanted to tell you how pleased I am with your work thus far.”

“I feel like I’ve been struggling. Half of the students aren’t listening during my lectures.”

“I assure you that the ratio was not nearly so favourable in my earliest classes.” McGonagall actually smiles, and Hermione feels the burn of tears starting in her eyes. She wills them off. “Have you given any thought to remaining at Hogwarts?”

“Surely Professor Binns wants to resume his post.”

“I think he could be convinced otherwise if he thought we’d found a suitable replacement. You are surely essential at the Ministry, but I think you may be vital here at Hogwarts.”

Harry is listening, outside the door. This litany of compliments is no accident. Still, Hermione’s vision blurs with the tears that will not obey her silent commands. She used to dream of a moment like this, of all the places her hard work and cleverness might one day take her.

“I’m honoured,” she says, her voice unsteady. “I’ll consider it.”

McGonagall presses the parchment into her hands, and as it crumples at the contact, she sees that there’s a string of numbers. A rudimentary cipher, one she can solve in her mind.

MALFOY CAN BE TRUSTED, is all it says. Nothing about Rebeca or the wards. Still, it feels as if a great weight has been lifted from Hermione’s shoulders. The message is a sign that she can be trusted, too.

She gives McGonagall the shallowest nod as she looks over the map, then throws it in the fire.

Outside the office, Harry's hair is wild, and his robes are rucked up around his trouser legs, a sure sign that he's been pacing.

"Ginny was asleep in my room when I left," Hermione says by way of hello.

"How was she?"

"Not well. What happened last night?"

She'd been too distracted to think too much of what Ginny said, about Halloween being difficult for Harry, and had taken it at face value, but the more she considers it, Harry still bristling at her side, the more something is missing. She's spent a dozen Halloweens with Harry, mostly focused on some kind of feast.

"Gin has been—it hasn't been a good time, lately."

"Should I not congratulate you on your engagement?" She'd owled him, of course, but already Hermione is regretting her anger in McGonagall's office. She should have hugged him.

"It's the one bright spot," Harry says, raking his fingers through his hair. "Though with the World Cup this summer, who knows when Ginny will let me marry her."

"I suppose that's the difficulty in loving someone famous." The smile comes easy to her lips.

Sometimes, with Harry, it is so easy to slip back into that old friendship. Then she thinks of Draco's admission, Harry's anger in McGonagall's office, the ward on the door. There is something she's being told in only hints and flashes. She tries to keep her expression unchanged.

"Did she tell you?"

Hermione shakes her head, the smile fading. "What?"

"She—there was a baby." He sucks in a breath. "That was why she finally accepted when I proposed. She said the timing was shit but she was happy, we were both so happy. We wanted it to be official. And then, right after she came to Hogwarts, we lost it."

Hermione wraps her arms around him, all her thoughts emptying as he rests his head against her shoulder and begins to let out ragged breaths, his shoulders shaking.

A couple of Hufflepuff second-years pass by, gawking, and Hermione fixes them with her best professorial glare, hoping it will scare them enough to keep the story from spreading.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs when the students are gone. Already he's started controlling himself, breathing normally again. "That's awful, Harry."

"I just thought everything could finally start," he says, stepping away. He wipes his glasses against his robes. She squeezes his shoulder.

They walk in silence for a few minutes, Hermione looking away while Harry wipes at his face.

“How do you feel about being at Hogwarts?” she asks as they near the corridor that will lead them to the Gryffindor tower.

“I’ll be glad to get away. Though I’ll still have to Floo into the office. And I hear the students actually quite like Malfoy.”

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Hermione agrees, playing her part. She’s not sure whether the ire to Malfoy is wrapped into Harry’s grief and anger, or whether there’s something she’s missed. For years, Harry has been the one to defend him against her and Ron. Either way, this is not the moment to ask.

When they reach the rooms, Harry opens the door and lets out a satisfied smile at what he sees inside.

As McGonagall promised, the windows open on the Quidditch pitch, gleaming in the autumn sunlight.

“The first match should be in a few weeks,” Harry is saying, looking about the room, which is similar to Hermione’s own except for the historical prints of broom designs which are framed on the walls, zooming prettily in their frames. On the desk, in the spot where Hermione’s flowers rest, there is a plate piled high with treacle tarts.

“Gryffindor against Slytherin,” Hermione adds. She thinks, for a moment, of watching with Malfoy in the stands. Wonders if he’ll return in time for her to aim a smug smile in his direction every time Gryffindor scores.

Harry walks around the rooms, providing Ginny’s report on the two teams, and Hermione nods along as if Ginny hadn’t provided the same report during her visit, weeks ago. She has only ever liked Quidditch as it’s recounted to her by her friends.

“I’ll go get Ginny,” she says, finally, when Harry has largely finished opining at the strength of the Ravenclaw team. “We can have lunch together before we meet with Professor Saraiva.”

Thankfully, Harry says nothing to this.

It is remarkably easy not to think of Harry as she walks through the Hogwarts corridors, her satchel bumping at her hip. As if today was ordinary, her only concern the classes she will teach.

As if she can’t feel each bruise from Draco’s fingers, the residual pain making her sex clench. Even sore, even aching, she still wants him.

She tells herself that this must stop. There are more important considerations. She has to keep Rebeca safe, has to manage Harry’s temper, has to get the information she needs.

When she reaches her apartments, Ginny sits up in bed, her red hair falling like a sheet of fire down her back.

“Harry must be beside himself.”

“He knows you’re here.”

Ginny shrugs, rising from the bed. “He was furious when we Flooed here. You know how he can get.”

For a moment, Hermione can taste the words on her tongue. *He told me*, she will say, and Ginny will cry, and they will talk, and eventually everything will be all right. But this is selfish, she thinks, a desire born of her own want of comfort and exhaustion.

Beyond the window, a few scarlet leaves swirl in the wind. Smoke puffs from the chimney of Hagrid’s hut. The trees are nearly barren now. She thinks how cold the Forest must be, with the trees blocking out the light.

Too soon, Hermione will have to observe another interrogation, and she needs to prepare. She needs to work carefully, even if she feels as if she’s fumbling in the dark.

She reaches her hands out to Ginny.

“Harry’s in your new rooms. I’ll take you there,” she says, and her friend rises, manages a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Harry and Ginny are going *through it*... and what about Rebeca? You'll be seeing more of her in the next chapter, along with Draco. Professor Malfoy may have left Hogwarts but neither Hermione nor I have forgotten about him.

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who not only point out the times I miss British spellings, but also when I'm holding out on these characters. You keep making this fic so much better. All mistakes are my own.

Thank you for taking the time to read Against Nostalgia, and for all your support. I'm so excited to share the rest with you 🧡

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

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

At lunch, Harry asked them to meet in a room near McGonagall's office, and Hermione had only been grateful, watching Harry stab at his roast potatoes, that he hadn't selected a room in the dungeons.

She arrives first, is arranging her papers when Rebeca walks in. She looks drawn compared to last night, her cheeks puffy and dark circles under her eyes, but she's elegantly coiffed, a golden flower in the twists atop her head, her robes a deep teal. She offers Hermione a little smile.

"There are more questions, then?"

"The Aurors' office is launching their own investigation," Hermione says, not knowing how much she's allowed to say, and then deciding to trust her own judgement. Harry can scream at her later if he likes. "I'm here to make sure you're treated as befits a Hogwarts professor."

"How much worse can it be than A Mão Fiel?"

Hermione is debating her answer when Harry sweeps into the room. His wand is tucked into its leather holster at his hip, but his energy is bristling, and Hermione feels her shoulders rising towards her ears.

She sat in interrogations like this in her year of rehabilitation work. By the time she drew her wand, the subject had already found themselves cursed.

But those sessions had happened immediately after the war ended. They were all still reeling. Some questioners still bore visible wounds inflicted by the residents of the camps.

Hermione braces herself anyway.

"You're early," Harry says to Rebeca.

"I thought it was good manners not to keep my questioners waiting," she responds, pleasant but firm.

"I will be recording the interview." Harry's turned a fraction more solicitous. "I believe this magi-technology was pioneered by your mentor at the Academia?"

"Yes, João was suspicious of Pensieves. He thought that memory was too subjective to be trusted wholesale."

Hermione has read, briefly, about João Almeida, a pioneer in magi-technology who, only ten years ago, had made the crucial breakthrough required to make technology work in the

presence of significant ambient magic, which had transformed the field overnight into a course of study the wizarding world found legitimate.

Rebeca's name had appeared on that paper as a first assistant. She'd been in her second year of study at the Academia.

"Did he have any affiliation with A Mão Fiel?" Harry asks.

Rebeca shakes her head. "I'm not aware of any. João is mostly retired now, though."

"Yes, he lives in his estate outside Canela, correct?"

There's a slight twitch in Rebeca's fingers, the only hint of alarm. Hermione wants to tell her that it will be all right, that gathering this information was likely the matter of an hour for the Aurors' office, but the look on Harry's face permits no interjections.

"His discoveries made him a rich man."

"Your own advancements have made you quite wealthy as well, according to our records."

"You know where my money goes, then."

"You've disguised your contributions to A Mão Fiel quite effectively. Though there are a few shells which don't seem to lead to any known entity in Brazil."

"I have a few hiding spots. My brother will require significant care once I'm able to secure his release."

"And how were you planning on securing it?"

"My brother's magic is siphoned off him in ways I still don't fully understand. I think some spells and potions have been invented specifically for that purpose." She looks towards Hermione, as if willing her to intervene.

Trying to sound expressionless, Hermione asks, "I believe you have been working on a magical battery of sorts, correct? One that would be strong enough to power the compound."

Rebeca looks too grateful when she nods, just long enough for Hermione to notice. She feels Harry watching her, the silence interrupted only by the scratch of Hermione's quill against the parchment before her.

"What were you promised in exchange for puncturing the wards?" he asks once it's clear that no one else will speak.

"It is not a system of rewards, but a lack of punishment."

"And you must comply with any requests from The Faithful Hand, not just A Mão Fiel?"

"They are more alike than I think you realise." Rebeca pauses, but Harry does not speak.

"Yes, I am required to take orders from The Faithful Hand. This was made very clear to me

when I was offered the position at Hogwarts.”

“By being here,” Harry says, his fingers clenched into fists, “you have endangered countless students and professors. Was this not also made clear to you?”

“I swore a Vow to your headmistress.”

“She should not have allowed it.”

Hermione knows that something is wrong when Harry says the words quietly. He’s learned, over the years, to master his temper in the field. She’s heard this much from Ron, in awed tones. The worse the threat, the more impassive he becomes—until he launches himself at the enemy.

It’s the calm in his voice that makes Hermione reach for her wand.

“I bonded the Vow,” she says, drawing his eyes away from Rebeca. “We’ve discussed this already, Harry. What would you like to know, the mechanics of the spell?”

“You and McGonagall agree that an adherent of the most dangerous cult in the wizarding world should be trusted with our children?”

“We were hungry every night,” Rebeca says, before Hermione can answer. “I would like to see what you would do, Harry Potter, if the person you loved most in all the world was slipping away from you, starving and in pain and half-crazed with the magic that could not be fully contained within them, and the only magical people who didn’t want to destroy him were offering you solutions.”

“You have a rare talent, Rebeca Saraiva. That much is clear from even the brief look I’ve been able to take at your files. You can’t expect me to believe that you are so thoroughly under the power of A Mão Fiel as to break the Hogwarts wards after a simple request, yet would agree to work against the organisation after the lightest questioning.”

There’s an expression on Harry’s face like the cousin of a smile. It suggests the expression of a wolf, some dangerous and hungry creature.

“They have my brother.” Rebeca’s voice is steady, but her fingers are twisted in her lap. “I cannot deny a command. That does not mean I don’t recognise exactly what kind of evil they are.”

“Yet you will not tell us who made you open the wards.”

“I don’t know them,” she says, and there’s steel in her voice. “I have done everything that you have asked of me. I have answered every question. I swore a Vow to my headmistress. I have agreed to put my life in danger, to put Davi’s life in danger. You think I do not understand what I’ve done? A woman is dead in my place of employment.”

“Apologise, then.”

“I owe you nothing,” Rebeca says. “I will answer any question you ask of me, but I will not be tormented under the guise of questioning.”

Harry’s wand is in his hand before Hermione can blink, wrath etched into every line of his face. Still Hermione she doesn’t hesitate. Before he can cast a spell, he is falling to the ground, his wand clattering against the stone, his face all shock. At the last second, she casts another spell to slow his descent.

“You should not have done that,” Rebeca says, rising. “He will think I cursed him.”

“He was going to throw some awful hex at you.” Hermione’s voice is grim. “I will be here when he wakes. So he knows exactly who Stunned him.”

“You believe me, then.”

“I want to,” Hermione says. “You should go to the headmistress’ office and tell her what happened. Take Harry’s recording in case she asks for proof.”

Rebeca plucks up the small machine, turning it about in her hands. Inspecting it as if she can’t help herself. “I thought your Aurors would be like Malfoy. Angry but honourable.”

“Harry—I don’t think he’s normally like this. He’s one of my best friends.”

“Have you ever seen him at an interrogation?”

Hermione shakes her head. “I’ve seen him fight. Too many times. This wasn’t like him.”

“Are you sure?” Rebeca’s eyes move over Harry, scorn carved into her features.

The question is a fair one, but what Hermione knows of Harry, mostly, are the easy moments: holidays and weekends and lunches, the moments between meetings when she’d steal away to his or Ron’s office for a bit of a moan. She’s seen his temper flare, and she’d seen him in McGonagall’s office, at occasional tense meetings, but generally, even when she’s disagreed with him, she’s understood his anger.

Even Draco Malfoy has never mentioned Harry acting like this: vengeful, almost cruel.

“He won’t hurt you here,” Hermione says instead of answering. “But you should go to McGonagall’s office for now.”

“I want to be free of them.” Rebeca’s voice is distant even though she hasn’t taken a single step. “Sometimes I think it would have been better if we had been killed with our parents.”

“There’s nothing noble about dying. The only people who will tell you that, who want you to believe it, are the people who think their own lives are more valuable than yours.”

Rebeca gives her a long look, and then leaves the room.

When Harry begins to stir an hour later, Hermione is finishing her lesson plans for the week.

“Where’s Saraiva?” he asks, already springing to his feet.

Hermione mentally checks the location of her wand but keeps her gaze on the parchment in front of her. “I told her to go.”

“She’s dangerous.” Harry runs his hand over the back of head, testing it for injury.

“I was the one who Stunned you, Harry.”

He looks at her for a long moment. Finally, she turns towards him, considers the unhappy set to his jaw, the bleakness in those green eyes. The way each muscle seems primed to strike.

“The Ministry has no jurisdiction at Hogwarts,” she reminds him, holding up her hand as he tries to speak. “You have no right to harm another professor in the name of questioning.”

“You have no idea—”

“I was the one who watched the interrogations after the war ended.” The words are jagged on her tongue. “I know what happens when it goes wrong. You walked in wanting to harm her. What curse were you going to throw? Did you expect that I would just watch?”

“You saw how she spoke to me.”

“She was right.”

He turns for the door, his robes sweeping behind him, but Hermione flicks her wand, and a shield of hard air blocks his path.

“I know this is a hard time for you,” she says, willing herself not to flinch as he takes out his wand, flushed with anger, “but if this is the way you’re going to act here—”

“You didn’t even dose her with Veritaserum!” The words explode from him. “You should know how even an Unbreakable Vow can be twisted with enough determination. You saw what happened when professors were trusted without question, Hermione! Or have you forgotten that this school wasn’t ever as noble as you like to pretend?”

The sigh that leaves her is so deep it startles both of them.

“Believe me when I say I know that. I think about our years here more than you know. The way we were—we were *weapons*, Harry. We were soldiers more than students.” She stands, pushing herself away from the desk and all her papers. “I don’t know the man I’m seeing today. What’s happened to you?”

His face crumples, his shoulders heaving as his hands come up to cover his eyes. In three steps, Hermione is before him, pulling him into her arms.

“Everything is going wrong,” he says, around the tearing sounds that escape his mouth.

“It’s gone wrong before, and we survived it,” she tells him, her arms held tight around him. The frames of his glasses dig into her shoulder.

“There was always someone else who could fix it.”

Maybe that’s what he needs to believe in this moment, and so Hermione says nothing, only moves her hand in circles over his back until he stills.

She thinks of Moody and Barty Crouch Junior, inhabiting his skin. Of Voldemort on the back of Quirrel’s head, the basilisk roaming the castle. The way Dumbledore had never noticed until Harry was nearly dead.

How Harry still remembers that, somehow, as love. In part because, once, she’d believed it too, insisted over and over, so that it became truth.

“I still have questions for her,” Harry says, in a voice wrung dry.

“Next week, after classes are over.” *When you can control yourself*, she doesn’t say. “She won’t run.”

“She’ll have time to change her story.”

“Talk to Blaise, then. He’s been helping her.”

“Ron should be finishing the interview any minute.” Harry sighs, reaching for his wand. “He’ll be tracing Malfoy as soon as he ties up loose ends at the office.”

“I thought you trusted Malfoy.”

Harry’s jaw clenches. The remnants of tears are still wet on his face.

“Since when are you so keen to defend him? A woman was found murdered, and he left in the dead of night without a report. How’s he gotten you under his spell?”

“You always were too keen to throw off all your allies, Harry.” Hermione does not so much as flush under his gaze. “Go talk to Ginny. McGonagall can cancel your classes for the week.”

Something flashes in Harry’s gaze, but only for a moment. He leaves the room without another word, with no expression on his face, and Hermione follows him at a distance, her papers still scattered on the desk, to make sure he doesn’t storm into McGonagall’s office.

When she’s satisfied that he’s gone in the direction of his apartments, she gathers her things and makes her way to the headmistress’ office.

McGonagall and Rebeca are both there, each reading a different book. The headmistress’ desk is strewn with parchment, half of it bearing Ministry letterhead.

“I was told we should wait for you,” McGonagall says when Hermione stands before her, “and not to let Harry Potter into my office.”

“Something is wrong,” Hermione says. “I think Harry means well—”

“I disagree,” Rebeca puts in, setting her book on her lap. “He acts like a man who has not heard no in years.”

“He saved our world,” McGonagall says, her words surprisingly crisp. Only a few hours ago, Harry was shouting at her. “Meanwhile, Professor Saraiva, you opened the Hogwarts wards. I should think you’d expect a bit of questioning.”

“It was more than that,” Hermione says, watching Rebeca bristle and feeling the strangeness of it, to trust someone else over Harry. To believe Rebeca and Draco instead of her oldest friends. “I’ve seen interrogations, Professor. This was—Harry came in with a score to settle. If I hadn’t Stunned him, he would have cursed Rebeca.”

McGonagall draws in a breath, and Hermione can see she’s torn.

“You know there was a reason you insisted that you or I be in the room when Harry questioned Rebeca,” she continues, pressing her advantage. Thinking of the expression on Harry’s face when he’d reached for his wand, something that cannot be explained by the desire to ignore his own pain. “This was nothing like Malfoy last night. Harry didn’t want answers. He wanted to cause pain. And it doesn’t make *sense*.”

McGonagall and Rebeca both watch her, and Hermione, her mind working, opens her mouth as if hoping that the answers will emerge from it.

Instead, there’s only silence. More questions.

“We need to find out more,” she says instead, reaching for her books and parchment. “And we need to strengthen the wards to buy us time. Because Ruby Docherty was a sign for someone. I think things only escalate from here.”

McGonagall rests her hand on the Ministry parchments.

“What do we do about Potter in the meantime?” she asks. Hermione can hear the test in the question. “Given your suspicions, I’d think you’d want him thrown out of the castle.”

“Let him interrogate Rebeca in a week, when he’s more in control—”

“No,” Rebeca says, rising to stand before McGonagall and Hermione. Her hands are balled into fists and her eyes are angry. “Give me your Veritaserum and let Harry Potter ask me whatever questions he likes. Observe me yourself, headmistress. Finish it tonight. The longer you wait, the more my name is discussed and known in connection with The Faithful Hand. Davi is in danger, don’t you understand? I do not want to wait until a man can control himself. Until your rules of conduct can be observed. Perform the counter-curses that are required. If he—if anything happens to my brother, all this was for nothing.”

“Don’t they need him to run the camps?” McGonagall’s voice is sharp, suspicious. And perhaps that’s reasonable, but Hermione still stiffens, prepared against a threat.

“He only needs to be alive.” Rebeca steps forward, placing her hands on the desk, covering the Ministry’s demands with her outstretched fingers. “Please. Let this end tonight.”

McGonagall reaches into her desk and pulls out the small bottles of Veritaserum which Ron and Draco had provided the night before.

She turns to Hermione, her face unreadable. Once more, Hermione feels as if a test has been administered, and she has no idea if she passed or failed. All she's left with is a sinking feeling in her stomach, a dizzying exhaustion.

"Professor Granger," the headmistress says, "fetch Potter and send him here. I will see to it that Professor Saraiva is unharmed."

Hermione does not trust herself to speak.

Once Harry is shut inside McGonagall's office, Hermione goes directly to the piano room. Her exhaustion is a burn behind her eyes, a roaring in her ears, but Hermione ignores it all as she moves the tapestry aside, ascends the spiral staircase.

When she enters the room, the scent of old blood is thick against her nostrils, rotting copper. She can barely breathe without wanting to retch.

Then she lights her wand.

The room is as empty as it's always been. Yesterday's blood is spattered on the stones. Beneath its scent, she can detect the remnants of spells.

What Hermione wants is oblivion, sex or sleep or music, and instead she's surrounded by the scent of death. Still, she crosses the room, careful to avoid the spatters of blood—was Ruby killed here, she thinks and does not think the question—and takes a seat at the piano.

She lifts the keylid. There is no blood on the keys.

She does not remove her music from her satchel, only presses her hands to the instrument and surrenders. The music that rises from her is a mixture of all the things she's learned, the chords discordant as she moves from Scarlatti to Mozart, Chopin to Debussy, dragging tempos so that the passages ring in her ears, drawing her from the day and its concerns, death and exhaustion and awareness all falling from her as she spirals away with the sound.

By the time the sun begins to fall on the horizon, Draco has searched every meeting spot in the Forest.

It was futile, he thinks as he apparates towards Inverness. The Hand hasn't summoned him. The Mark on his arm does not burn. They found a way to get into Hogwarts without him.

But why leave Ruby Docherty's dead body?

The Hand, last Draco knew, had wanted Hermione and Hogwarts. Ruby's power, the Vow she'd managed to extract from Draco, had been their best hope of success in years. Even if he'd been working to circumvent their plans.

There is another possibility he's considered ever since he identified the body: that the Hand has decided that it believes none of his promises from the summer, and that Ruby was complicit. Or that somehow, they'd realised his plan to extract her from this life with the promise of something better.

It is a disgrace for a pureblood witch or wizard, to be killed by a Muggle weapon.

Draco wonders, descending into the streets of Inverness, what Ruby saw in those last moments of her life. Her throat an agony of pain, her vision growing dark, her screams reduced to gurgling.

There is no reason he should sympathise, especially with Ruby Docherty. She chose a lost and evil cause. She would have killed him if she'd known his true allegiance, would have made killing Hermione into some drawn-out horror show.

Still, even as something in him burns at the thought of Hermione in pain, Draco imagines that little girl with the silver ribbon in her hair, her pudgy fingers on the hem of his robes. She was only a few years older than his seventh-years, as sure and awful as he himself had been at sixteen.

There's a noise behind him, and Draco palms his wand.

A door scrapes open. A young couple spills into the night, their scarves pulled high and their mittened hands intertwined. They only stare at his robes for a moment before turning back to each other, and Draco, too late, casts a concealment spell, just strong enough to make Muggles look away from him.

He's hunting the Hand tonight.

He approaches Wallace's home first, one of the old row houses. Draco has never been inside, but the Auror's office has been aware of Caelan Wallace for years. Forensic teams have been inside the house and catalogued its contents, but he's always been considered too much of a coward to be a real threat.

Draco's chosen him because he's likeliest to talk.

There's no answer at the door, but he'd anticipated this. He apparates to the other side, quick enough that any Muggle watching would soon convince themselves they'd imagined him.

The smell of blood hits him, the scent of rot enough to make him gag, the body only steps away, splayed out at the bottom of the staircase.

Wallace's throat was cut, the same as Ruby's, the wound stark against his pale skin. But Wallace had lived long enough to run. There's a trail of blood down the stairs, crusted and clotting. His fingertips are darkened with it, his shirt ruined.

Draco stares at the body too long, his brain trying to gather the information and short-circuiting instead. He thinks of Hermione, only, of his mouth at her throat, the bloody knife, the Vow in the Forbidden Forest, cold seeping in against his knees.

He apparates directly inside Macnair's house on the other side of Inverness, finding his body laid out on the bed, arms splayed out, his feet bare, the sheets stained through with his blood.

There's a scent underneath the stink of Macnair's blood, sweet and bracing. Lavender.

Bring me Hermione Granger.

Her scent on the air, purple flowers tucked inside a scroll of parchment.

Draco breathes through his mouth and collects himself enough to find the source, a sleeping draught tipped over on the bedside table, a little dribble at the corner of MacNair's mouth, purple-tinged. Too obvious to be accidental.

Bracing himself, he examines the body. Aside from the knife wound to his neck, there are no signs of struggle. Did Macnair submit to death willingly? Did he kill himself?

Did he kill the others first? It's unlikely, given the bloody knife, the approach to Saraiva when they'd already extracted the Vow from him, especially Macnair's general incompetence. But not impossible, given Macnair's known affinity for the knife.

Or was it possible he knew his killer? That he'd been seduced or tricked is possible, given his position.

He thinks of Hermione again, a nightmarish moment where he rearranges everything he knows and lets it spell out her name. She likely knows the wards better than anybody at Hogwarts, knows the piano room as only he does, had met Ruby and scared the witch enough to drive her to write threats.

She was with Weasley before the body was found, Draco reminds himself, she was with him afterwards.

And even if she were unaccounted for, without an alibi, there is no world in which Hermione Granger would be stupid enough to bring her victim back to Hogwarts.

Still, there is a part of him that wants her to be the architect of all this horror. The monstrous core of him insists that if she were evil enough, then he could claim her without guilt. How

gladly he would wipe up all the blood she spilled, that part of him whispers, ghastly and seductive, if only she were his alone.

But he has spent too many years pushing that part of himself back into the shadows.

He scours Macnair's house for clues and finds nothing, no letter and no leftover trace of magic. Wallace's house is the same, only blood and rot.

He disappears before they have a hope of being found, before the stink of their corpses can fully penetrate his robes.

For a moment, the space of a phrase, Hermione thinks she hears footsteps behind her. A gleam of light in the corner of her vision.

When she turns from the piano, the long dark hallway stretches before her. She sees nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Draco is back and he's going through it. Speaking of which...how are we feeling about Harry in this chapter?

I have to admit: I love writing this version of Harry and there's a lot in store for his arc. (Hermione is definitely not going to back down from him any time soon.)

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who tell me when I stop in the middle of a phrase (sorry about that!) and when I'm showing and/or telling too much. You keep making this fic so much better. All mistakes are my own.

An extra thank you to my husband, who read a few sentences of this chapter and now is hype to read the full thing. Let's see if he's ready for the smut 😊

Thank you for taking the time to read Against Nostalgia, and for all your support. It truly means the world to me ❤️

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Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

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

Two days later, Harry waits for Hermione outside the great hall before breakfast.

She'd woken early and gone running, circling the castle with her eyes trained on the Forest. It's absurd, of course, to think that he would return so quickly. Still, she can't help herself from searching for the glint of his white-blond hair in the thin light that escapes the cloud cover.

"How are your classes going?" she asks now, while Harry hesitates.

"I think I owe you an apology."

She waits, lets him shift from foot to foot. She knows that he controlled himself during the second interrogation. The recording was left outside her door, her name written in Harry's hand. She's listened to it twice, and each time it makes her angrier.

"You never cared about Auror protocols or security. I thought—"

"I care about how an interrogation is handled," she says. "You have no idea what I saw in the camp."

For a moment, his brows furrow, and Hermione braces herself for another argument. And then Harry holds out his hand.

"I know," he says. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

She wants to say that it isn't enough, not for the way he's acted, but the look on his face is wretched. And she thinks she knows what it meant to him, to lose a baby, to think he might have lost his future with Ginny. She'd stood next to him while he read the names off his parents' graves for the first time.

She takes his hand and squeezes it tight, turning to lead him into the great hall. She can smell bacon and coffee even through the oak doors.

"We're all right," she says. "How are you settling in?"

"The students all stare at me." His hand is at his forehead, like he's still trying to cover up his scar. She tries and fails to stifle a laugh.

"How is that any different to when you were at Hogwarts?"

"Sometimes, back then, people thought I was losing my mind," he says, offering her a smile. She returns it.

He's told her, mostly over owl post, how difficult that last year at Hogwarts was for him. Everyone looked at him like a saviour aside from the other DA members, and most of the professors. So many of the places held memories of death and blood and destruction: the place where Lupin and Tonks and Fred had been laid out, the spot on the grounds where Dumbledore had fallen from the Astronomy Tower. He'd hidden in the library, fully aware of the irony, and she'd written him all the best spots to study while concealed. It was one of the few times she'd laughed during that year.

"It gets better," she says as they push the door open. A hush falls over the hall as the students spot them. Somewhere along the Gryffindor table, she sees a flash of a camera. Harry's hand tightens around hers, his fingers wrapped at the base of her palm.

"Can you imagine what would happen if Ron were here?"

Before she can answer, there's another murmur and the doors open again. Hermione feels her heart pounding at the possibility that Draco has entered.

Instead, it's Neville with Luna braced against him, her belly enormous.

"Are you all right?" she murmurs to Harry while they're still out of earshot.

"I have to be, don't I?"

She takes him to sit on the edge of the table, where Professor Vector is immersed in her book and Hagrid rises from his seat, far away from where Rebeca debates a laughing Professor Flitwick, to the place where Hermione and Draco would normally sit. Harry shoots her a grateful look as he goes to greet Hagrid. Even the bone-crunching hug doesn't dim his smile.

"Where's Ginny?" Hermione asks as they say goodbye to Hagrid and take their seats, ignoring the students who peer up at their plates. What a strange thing it is, even after all these years, to be observed.

"She decided to go to practice with the Harpies. She was in Hogsmeade at dawn to apparate. She hasn't been since—" He gives his tea a glare.

"That's good, then, isn't it?"

"They've told her to take all the time she needs. But she wants to play for England this summer."

"She qualified the team, didn't she?" Hermione had screamed when Ginny had scored the goal against Croatia that ensured, no matter who caught the Snitch, that England would have the victory.

"And she made you a Quidditch fan," Harry says, bemused. "Have you made any progress on the wards?"

It's the tentative way he asks, as if he understands why Hermione might not want to discuss this with him, that makes her decide to tell him the truth.

“I’m meeting with Rebeca over the weekend. In my classroom, with shields, so don’t start fretting about security, all right?”

“Can I join? I’d like to know more about the warding magic.” Harry’s interest seems sincere but Hermione doesn’t quite trust it.

“I doubt she’ll speak to me with you there,” she says, trying to keep the expression from her voice.

“We left things on better terms,” Harry says, and then, after she’s stared at him long enough, “I’ll apologise. And bring treacle tarts.”

“I’ll think about it.” She’s still not sure what to make of Draco’s promise to report back to her before the Aurors’ office. And despite his apology, she’s not sure what to make of Harry, either. Especially when she considers all of Draco’s half-admissions, wonders what he would have said to someone who wasn’t so close with Harry. But before Harry can read the uncertainty on her face, she brightens her smile. “I’m not sure you have the stamina for all that studying at your age. But I’ll tell you what I would like. I want to practise duelling.”

“Why?”

“Someone was desperate enough to break into the Hogwarts wards. I want to be able to fight if I’m required.”

He nods, his fingers resting absently on the leather holster that holds his wand. “Let’s meet early on Sunday at the Quidditch pitch. I don’t want any gawkers.”

Hermione refrains from pointing out the fact that they’ll be beneath the stands. She’s glad they won’t be at the lake’s edge, where she’d duelled with Draco. And probably a change of scenery would be good practice.

“Let me have this session with Rebeca,” she says, hoping she sounds sufficiently conciliatory as she takes a sip of coffee. “I think I can make progress with her.”

“You’ll tell me what you learn?”

“Of course,” Hermione says, hoping he can’t read the possibility of a lie on her face.

Draco wakes in his too-small bed in Edinburgh, his eyes scanning around the dingy room until he can assure himself that no one, magical or Muggle, has penetrated the wards and defensive spells he’d cast when he arrived back at the hotel.

He’s been apparating around Scotland over the past few days, checking all of the Hand’s usual haunts, but they’re empty. There is no blood, and no more bodies.

The Inverness cell was mostly harmless, requiring minimal observation from the Ministry and only occasional work from Draco. And even that was mainly due to the group's proximity to Hogwarts.

Unless Ruby had transformed them into something dangerous.

He's closing in on her flat in Inverness, night by night, following the traces of her magic. She'd laid traps, though, and Draco has found himself unravelling curses and silencing disembodied screams.

There's a tap at the window, and he rises from the bed with his eyes focused through the glass, his wand at the ready.

A Hogwarts school owl looks balefully back at him. He rushes forward to open the window, scanning the street for any observers.

He recognises Hermione's handwriting on the parchment and closes the window before the owl can leave, smoothing his fingers over his name. The school owl bleats for a treat and Draco offers one up, unrolling the parchment to reveal a jumble of letters and numbers and runes.

The cipher takes him half an hour and seven decryption spells, and in the end the message is simple.

Should I trust Harry?

She's described the way he questioned Saraiva, his anger in McGonagall's office, and he can detect the understatement beneath each word.

He can still remember, vivid as if it were an hour ago, the way she'd smile with Potter and Weasley. Something about her becoming effortless when she was around them, in a way she never was, otherwise. Even when she knew every answer, Hermione was always thrusting her hand in the air with all the force her body could muster.

He thinks, then, of her hands on his body, her breath hot on his neck, and he's hard already.

After a moment, and another, Draco masters himself enough to think of what to write. Because nothing will ever be so effortless between them, not with the Mark on his arm and the endless weight of his history. Hermione deserves a future that allows her to be happy as the schoolgirl she once was.

Be careful, he writes, tweaking her cipher just enough to require an additional decryption spell. *Potter means well, but he's terrified that the Hand will gain control. It makes him ruthless and unthinking.*

Maybe Saraiva will convince him otherwise. Anyway, Potter may be right. He usually is.

As far as I can tell, the rest of the Hand's Inverness cell has been killed off. Knives to the throat for all of them. I'm looking into it but trying to dodge other interested parties.

Potter should know I'm not guilty, but he may suspect me anyway. Let him. I'll tell you more when I can. When I know it.

Keep working on the wards. You should remove all my magic and all the keys to me. They could be used against you.

He realises, as he seals the letter, casting one last binding spell, that he may never see Hogwarts again. Not if his instinct about what will be required of him is true.

In spite of his intentions otherwise, he thinks of Hermione's face in the darkness, the angle of her nose and her lips swollen from kissing. Her eyelashes resting on her cheeks. Almost luminous and so lovely that it had required all of Draco's control not to wake her.

It had been so easy, in those stolen moments, to imagine them extending far out into the future.

He thinks, now, as he watches the owl soar over Edinburgh, not of that night, but of the task before him. Of Ruby's corpse. Of the dead bodies of Wallace and Macnair. He thinks of Hermione in the hallway outside their apartments weeks ago, when he'd asked her to help. How he'd never figured out a way to bring her and Ruby together without combustion.

It would have been easier, maybe, if Ruby hadn't reminded him of Hermione. If she hadn't looked like she could have been his student.

He buttons his shirt, selecting the deep green robes he'd worn on the first day of the Hogwarts term. He combs his hair off his face, polishes the Malfoy signet ring against a towel. In the mirror, aside from the darkness beneath his eyes, he looks every bit the pureblood heir.

This is the part that he will have to play from now until he has, at minimum, the information he requires. He tries to imagine what he would have been like, if reality had not so thoroughly claimed him, tries to think of the sneering way he would speak and the manner in which he would enter a room.

He apparates out of Edinburgh before he can think of how much he does not want to be that person.

His boots crunch into the gravel outside the Docherty home. It's no mansion, but a large brick home in the English countryside, ivy climbing up the front.

Draco knocks on the door, bracing himself. He hasn't spoken to the Dochertys in years, doesn't know their alliances, only hopes that Ruby's death has affected them. In a pureblood family, such things can never be assumed.

A house-elf answers the door, bowing so deeply that her nose skims the ground.

"I came to pay my respects," Draco says in a bored drawl, his gaze fixed on a spot on the wall where human eyes might be. The way he was always taught to address house-elves. He hates that it comes back to him so easily.

The house-elf squeaks her assent and leads him into the house, turning into the formal parlour.

She has barely announced his name when the Dochertys rise to greet him, pressing his hand and then running their fingers over his left forearm, lingering over the spot where the Mark was burned into his skin. Still the same as before, then.

“I’m here to offer my condolences,” he says, imperious even as he meets their eyes, bows his head. “By all accounts, Ruby was a talented witch.”

“The Ministry refuses to investigate the manner of her death,” Tristram Docherty says, bombast amidst the gloom. “They say a *knife*—but surely, Ruby would never...”

Violet Docherty presses her hands over her face, her shoulders shaking.

“Of course not,” Draco says, settling himself into the nearest armchair, upholstered in a rich russet leather. He can tell from the twist of Tristram’s mouth that this was his chair.

There are advantages, occasionally, to playing a distasteful role.

“Ruby was a good girl,” her mother says, from behind her handkerchief. “She knew what was expected of her. She would never associate with the kind of creatures who would wield knives because their magic wasn’t sufficient to the task.”

“You can call them Mudbloods.” Draco’s head pounds at the words, even as he smooths his voice. He thinks of Hermione—of Granger. He does not even want to think her name in this place, with these people.

“What would your colleagues at that school think?” Tristram asks, sing-song.

“My colleagues will never know I paid this call,” Draco says, then wonders if it was a mistake. If his absence at Hogwarts has made the *Prophet*.

Violet only nods appreciatively.

“There are rumours,” he continues, trying to sound the way his father would in these circumstances, on the brink of an opportune discovery, “that Ruby could have been involved with a...society of like-minded wizards.”

“They’re nothing like the Death Eaters were,” Tristram says, disappointment in his voice. Of course, for a pureblood wizard on the cusp of relevance, he would have wanted his daughter’s Dark affiliations to come with more social cachet than the Hand could provide. “We told her it was a waste of time. But Ruby imagined herself to be a leader, building her following.”

Draco thinks of what she’d said in the Forest, that night in August. She was waiting for a new Dark Lord. For someone to follow. She only wanted the benefits of the staunch supporter, he thinks.

Still, he nods sympathetically, hoping for a useful revelation.

“Your parents are well?” Violet asks, something fervent in her eyes, almost coquettish. Draco steels himself against the press of her fingers on his arm.

“As well as can be expected,” he says, admitting nothing at all. “They send their condolences.”

Tristram’s eyes linger on the Malfoy signet ring.

“We hoped they would call on us themselves,” the older man says, “though one supposes, given all the demands upon their time, that they could not spare an afternoon for those such as ourselves.”

Draco can barely hold back a smirk, thinking of the way his father lurks around the manor. And then he wonders. “You’re right, of course,” he says. “Though I suppose you see them often.”

“We were invited to their Christmas party.” There’s a smile on Violet’s face, not a hint of sadness in it. Only pride at receiving the invitation. “They were even so kind as to invite our Ruby.”

“Perhaps they thought she’d catch your eye,” Tristram says, too hearty, his hand on Draco’s shoulder.

As they’ve spoken, the Dochertys have drawn close to him, making escape difficult. Draco finds his egress, summons the intention required for an instant wandless cast.

Even as he wonders why the hell his parents have decided, for the first time in over a decade, to host a Christmas party, particularly one with a guest list large enough to include minor purebloods like the Dochertys. His mother could barely walk the last time he saw her. And Lucius, for all his faults, would never make her suffer through it. Not unless there was something to be gained.

Which means his father wanted Ruby in the house. That his father knew about her connection to the Faithful Hand. She would not have been very important to him, otherwise.

None of the Dochertys would have been.

“Do you think we’ll still be invited?” Violet asks. She sounds like a wallflower preparing for her first society party. Her daughter is dead. Draco can still imagine the way she looked on the stairs, the way her blood had pooled around her body.

“My mother selects the guest list well in advance. I’m sure they’ll offer their condolences in person,” Draco says, the lie emerging smoothly. “But I should be going before I’m missed. I’m sorry again for your loss.”

“We’re only sorry you couldn’t stay longer,” Violet says, her fingers reaching, once again, for the Mark. This woman loves to touch him.

“I don’t suppose your students would mind a cancelled class?” Tristram asks, at his other shoulder. “We could have a proper tea.”

“I’m afraid McGonagall watches my comings and goings all too closely. I’ll see you at the party.”

Only later, when he’s apparated back to Edinburgh, does Draco realise that the Dochertys were probably used to the dismissal in his voice. That they wouldn’t have expected anything else from him.

Before she’s even settled into her seat, Hermione turns her most imperious face to Rebeca. “It would be helpful if you were actually honest with me about what you’re trying to accomplish with the wards.”

“I did not lie to you about that,” Rebeca says. There’s only the barest note of pleading in her voice, but it rings out like a bell, discordant. “I need to do my work.”

Hermione had spent every spare hour of the past two days reading about that work, about Rebeca’s contacts and professors at the Academia, until her back ached and her eyes burned and she could only think of the progress of magi-technology, of Rebeca’s mind.

It had been a relief, almost, not to think of Malfoy, of his ciphered letter. Not to wonder where he might be.

“You will not be alarmed if I make other changes to the wards?”

“Tell me what you’re planning, Hermione.” She speaks, now, as she’d spoken in the interrogation. No fear or threat in her voice. The calm reminds Hermione most of Draco, and then she begins to think about what might have caused each of them to learn to use this tone of voice when they were threatened.

“We need to take Malfoy’s magic out of the wards,” Hermione says. Harry would object to the revelation, but Harry has not seen Draco’s letter. And right now, for some reason she can’t yet name, despite all her history, Hermione trusts Rebeca more than her oldest friend.

“Who is tracking him?”

“I believe they are the same people who are so concerned with you.”

“It’s naive of me, but I’m surprised,” Rebeca says. Her fingers press lightly against her cheeks. The gesture makes her thin gold rings gleam in the candlelight that’s necessary even now, close to noon.

“You thought he had reformed?” Hermione could be asking the question of herself.

“I think that most people, when they see the beating heart of evil, either become inured to it, or else they turn away completely. They do not play at both extremes for their own amusement.” She pauses, her gaze intent. “I think you will agree with me if you truly consider the matter.”

“I suppose you believe you have something in common with him.”

“And I think you care for him more than you are willing to admit.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Hermione says, rolling out a strip of parchment before her. The paper booms against the table. Around them, the students shift in their seats, their robes rustling. When she speaks next, Hermione lowers her voice, “I thought we could be friends. Despite your—I thought your association with A Mão Fiel was benign.”

“I hoped it would be. But it didn’t matter. Not while they have Davi.”

Hermione thinks of Draco diving in front of Harry to save him from a deadly curse. She thinks of Ruby with her hands over his Dark Mark. Of the way he’d spoken to her in the darkness before dawn, all his scars visible in the moonlight.

And she knows that if she let herself really consider everything she knows, she would believe that he’d reformed.

“I want to talk about the wards,” is what she says instead of admitting anything.

“One thing first,” Rebecca says. “I want to be a friend to you. I admire what you did in the war against Voldemort. What you have tried to do in your country. I think we could do good work together, if we wanted. But my allegiance will never be to you. Not fully.”

“As long as A Mão Fiel has Davi. I know.” Hermione dips her quill in ink, considering. “What would it take, do you think, to rescue him?”

“Impossible luck.” But Rebeca’s eyes dart around the library, cataloguing the position of each student, as though she thinks Hermione might possibly reveal some brilliant plan.

“Do you know, I broke into Gringott’s once.”

Only the slight upturn of Rebeca’s lips reveals that this is not a surprise to her. Still, she asks, “What did it require of you?”

For a moment, Hermione is in Bellatrix Lestrange’s skin, speaking with her voice. How every moment had brought back Hermione’s own screams as Bellatrix had laughed, binding her with terror and pain even as she tried to do her best impersonation of the woman who haunted her nightmares.

Then she forces herself to think about the dragon, about the moments when there had been only freedom and the sky and the feeling of returning to her own body.

“We planned for weeks,” she says, studying every movement of Rebeca’s face, the quality of the sounds around them, “and we were able to strategize with a Gringott’s goblin. An insider.”

“What do you require of me.” No question in Rebeca’s voice, only a plea that seems to come from the centre of her body, the place where her heart is beating.

“The students are listening,” Hermione says, and the confirmation of this fact is instant, the nervous laughter and the shuffling of parchment. “We can’t talk about the war here.”

“But we can discuss securing the castle?”

“Come to my apartments.” The invitation is spontaneous, but it’s the only room she is sure will be unoccupied. And whatever Harry might say about security, about the threat that Rebeca poses, there’s something in her honesty that makes her think that her colleague might want a friend at least as much as an ally.

Either way, Rebeca quickly gathers her things and follows Hermione across Hogwarts. The only sounds are their shoes against the stone and the greetings of the portraits.

When they reach the door to Hermione’s rooms, Ginny is pacing outside the door. She’s still wearing her Quidditch uniform, tendrils of hair falling around her face.

“Harry had to go to the Ministry and I just got home from practice.” There’s something wild and raw in Ginny’s voice, as if she’s not sure what might emerge from her. Her eyes dart between Hermione and Rebeca. “You’re busy, aren’t you? I can go.”

“We’re talking about the wards,” Hermione says, shooting a look at Rebeca. She only inclines her chin, the barest acceptance. “Do you want to join us? It will probably be boring.”

“I could use boring right now.”

Ginny had looked so different the last time she’d visited Hogwarts, so happy and sure. And now, for all her windswept beauty, the emerald ring still on her finger, she looks lost. Hermione can’t help but reach out and squeeze her hand before she opens the door to her apartments and lets the women in.

A wave of her wand, and the room is set to rights, the twisted knot of books and papers on her desk becoming neat stacks. Another spell, and a tray of hot tea and pastries appears.

“First, Rebeca, tell me how you broke through the wards,” Hermione says, pouring the tea the Muggle way, letting the warmth seep into her fingertips. The sensation steadies her even as Rebeca tenses, her eyes on Ginny, who studies her in return, the way she might analyse the Quidditch pitch before making a play. “I’m not familiar with these particular techniques.”

“I thought you were concerned with security,” Rebeca says. Her bag of books is still in her lap, her posture immaculate.

“I trust Ginny.”

Perhaps she shouldn’t, given her uncertainty about Harry, the vague admissions from Draco. But as far as Hermione knows, Ginny has never shared a single one of her secrets.

“I told you,” Ginny says, reaching for a pastry. “I plan to find all discussions of warding magic very, *very* boring.”

“Don’t you have a room where you can eat, then?”

Hermione is ready to insist that Ginny is welcome, to repeat that she is trusted, when Ginny starts smiling for the first time since she came back to Hogwarts.

"I like you already," Ginny says, her lips dusted with powdered sugar. "Maybe I could help you with the wards."

Rebeca casts a pleading look at Hermione.

But an idea has taken root inside her mind, wrapping its tendrils around the two women in her room. Hermione can't quite hold back her smile when she looks at Rebeca, holding out a teacup. "Don't you think it might be useful to have a Quidditch champion on Davi's rescue team?"

Rebeca takes a sip of tea to hide her face. When she lowers the cup, she turns to Ginny. "How good are you, really?"

Still poised, no emotion revealed. Even towards a woman who might help her free her brother. Hermione feels something claw at her chest from inside, some old ache making itself known. How would she hold herself, if this nascent plan could bring her parents back?

"About three times better than you're thinking," Ginny says, reaching for another pastry. "And as it happens, I have experience in rescues. Though I think you wanted to talk about the wards first. Preferably with me gone?"

"Nothing we discuss can leave this room." Hermione holds out a mug of tea as she says it, and Ginny takes it quickly, so that the liquid almost sloshes out.

"Who are you worried I'll tell?"

"I'm concerned the Aurors' office won't approve," Hermione says, knowing Ginny hears Harry's name and then her brother's in the words. "I don't know if it would make sense, having so many people involved."

It's too simplistic an explanation, but Ginny nods, looking at Rebeca and then at Hermione. "Harry says I shouldn't trust Rebeca. But you do?"

"She will do anything to keep her brother safe." Hermione says, "She's been honest about that, and she swore a Vow to McGonagall that she would protect the school."

"You bound her, didn't you?" Ginny smirks. "There's no getting out of that."

"Unless Davi comes to harm," Rebeca says, taking another sip of her tea. Each movement fluid, graceful.

"Then we'll have to rescue him," Ginny says, her wand in her hand. A flick of her wrist and the door is warded, the spell powerful enough to change the way the air moves in the room.

Rebeca's gaze turns appreciative. "Perhaps you have some thoughts about the wards?"

“I’m sure Hermione has encountered all of them in her research,” Ginny says, lifting her own teacup to her mouth, “but tell me what you know already, and I’ll let you know if anything comes to mind. After that, we can talk about the rescue.”

Smiling, Hermione pulls out her scrolls, and they begin.

If Harry Potter is being honest with himself, he could use a good duelling partner. Unfortunately, he thinks as he walks towards the Quidditch pitch in the grey November dawn, Hermione is unlikely to be that person.

It’s not that Hermione isn’t clever or powerful. But she has never had quite the instincts for a duel. Hermione knows the right answer and she reaches for it every time. That makes her predictable and easy to beat.

Still, he woke with more excitement this morning than he has since Ginny woke him up in the middle of the night, blood staining their sheets. A scene that had felt like an old nightmare at first, except for the fact that he could not force himself to awaken. Every day since then has felt similarly bleak.

Still, despite his misgivings about duelling Hermione, she is the one waiting for him, ready like some eager Auror in training, her wand already in her hand.. She’s wearing the ridiculous yellow trainers she’d bought in Muggle London with Ginny, the rest of her clothing designed for running a Muggle marathon, all close-cut spandex.

He would have expected her in her usual Ministry robes and heels, books still clutched in her hands. Her wand tucked away somewhere difficult to reach. And all of this would have seemed ridiculous in a way that is specific to Hermione, earnest and stupid in a way only someone as intelligent as she is can be.

It would have been like Dumbledore’s Army again, when he’d known exactly what to tell her. How to teach all his friends to fight against the looming darkness.

Instead, Hermione looks poised to spring.

“You’re early,” he says as he walks toward her, surreptitiously checking the stands for uninvited guests.

“I didn’t want to leave you waiting. You’re needed in the Aurors’ office, aren’t you?”

Something is off. Hermione looks relieved to see him, usually, and happy. She looks as if she’s in the middle of a meeting with another high-ranking Ministry official. Too careful by half.

“They’ll let me know if they need me.” Harry shucks off his jacket and adjusts his glasses, the way he always does for a duel, settling them securely on the bridge of his nose. “What rules are we agreeing to?”

“No spells you don’t know how to reverse, no aiming for the head.”

“I guess we can’t be walking into classrooms with our brains scrambled.”

A little smile on Hermione’s lips. “It wouldn’t matter so much for you.”

“I don’t know,” Harry says, thinking of the days he’s spent in the classroom. “So far they seem afraid to talk much.”

“It can’t be more nerve-wracking than learning from a former Death Eater.”

Once again Harry studies Hermione. Because she pronounces the words with her usual scorn, but there is something too rigid in it, in the way she holds herself. As if she’s trying to prove a point. He’s spent too many years needing to read people, in the field and in interrogations and even at bloody wizarding society parties, and anyway, Hermione is one of his best mates. He knows when she’s trying to conceal something, or to convince herself.

Right now, she’s doing both things, and likely more. And even if Harry can’t understand what, exactly, has wrought this change in Hermione, it makes sense to him, because his own life feels like it’s been smashed to pieces over the past few weeks. It seems right that nothing would be left unchanged.

“Malfoy’s a good teacher by all accounts,” he says, which is true but pitched so he can watch her reaction, see the way she tries to smother a smile and is almost fast enough to avoid him noticing it.

“You certainly weren’t so complimentary towards him the other day.”

Harry runs a hand through his hair, which only makes it more unruly. “The situation with Malfoy is complex.”

“How can it be, with all the Ministry regulations?” Regulations that Hermione herself wrote, he thinks but doesn’t say. She’ll stop talking if he baits her like that.

“His allegiance is split between Hogwarts and the Ministry.” He knows she’s thinking of the dressing-down McGonagall gave him in her office. “And his work—I can’t discuss it, but suffice it to say that none of us should be entirely comfortable trusting Malfoy. Still, his students seem to like him.”

“They certainly seem to,” Hermione echoes, drawing herself into a duelling stance and ending that portion of the conversation. “Any other rules you’d like to propose?”

“Winner buys the loser drinks in Hogsmeade next weekend.”

“And here I thought you were a respectable pillar of the wizarding community,” she says, grinning at last. “I should warn you that I have expensive taste.”

Harry only dignifies this response with an eyeroll.

Still, after they've bowed, Hermione hits him with a stunner even before he can cast a reasonable shield, another spell brewing in her wandless hand.

He casts a lightning hex, more for the flash of light than anything else, but she slams a shield in place before it can reach her, a variation on the usual *protego* that leaves her surrounded by shadow.

"You've been practising," he says, waving his wand to pierce the shield, a set of spells commonly known only to Aurors. The shield around Hermione only thickens, shifting so that she can aim an *expulso* at him, the power in the cursed explosion enough to knock Harry off his feet.

The spells aren't anything revolutionary, but they're cast quickly and precisely. And as Harry scrambles to dodge the next spell, he realises that he has no idea what Hermione will cast next.

"Who taught you how to duel?" he asks, aiming a stunner towards the small gap in her shield, the shoulder of her wandless arm.

The shield of shadows falls away from her.

"Malfoy thought I needed to learn," she says, fire roaring from her wand, encircling Harry. He wonders if she chose the spell for the distraction of it, but the heat builds too quickly to allow thought. He summons water and douses the flames with one hand, slamming another stunner at Hermione with the other, aiming for her wand arm.

She manages to dodge the stunner and fashion a rope of sparks with her wand, too quick to dodge. They sting and burn as they make contact with Harry's robes. He douses the sparks with water but they only strengthen. He tries to drown them with shadows, but they brighten.

Then he summons the earth beneath their feet in a wave, crafting a pocket of air for his mouth, and lets the great wave fall over him.

Somewhere in the distance, Hermione is screaming his name.

As soon as the dirt falls away, before she can aim another spell in his direction, he binds her in his own variant of the stunning spell, which puts darkness over her eyes and silences the world. She falls to the ground like a doll might.

When Harry reaches her, there are tears down Hermione's cheeks. Immediately he releases her from the spell, and then she is wheezing, retching, sobbing, crouched on all fours in the grass. Her hands are over her face, as if she's trying to contain herself.

"Are you all right?" he asks, feeling wholly inadequate to the moment. He had only wanted to win.

She shakes her head but the sounds from her mouth mean nothing, the quick breaths and the coughs and the groans. He doesn't know if he should touch her. If she wants anything to do with him right now.

“I thought I was ready.”

He hears her speak through her crying.

“You’re a good duellist, Hermione,” he says. “I’m starting to think you really are good at everything.”

He thinks this will distract her but instead she sobs harder, and it occurs to Harry, too late, that of course she’s been practising with Malfoy. That he must have done something to her, to make her want to fight like this. To make her so afraid of a spell he’d already promised to reverse as soon as the duel was over.

Finally, Hermione speaks again, her hand clutching at her chest. “I don’t like—I was completely helpless. It felt like...it was worse than anything that happened to us during the war. Even when the Death Eaters were torturing me, at least they liked to see me fight.”

He wants to tell her that it doesn’t matter how she feels, that if she’s met with a Dark wizard, they will not hesitate to consider her preferences and weaknesses. But Hermione is not his trainee.

Instead, Harry holds out his hand.

Eventually, Hermione takes it.

Hermione had planned to go to sleep early. All her lesson plans were complete, all her assignments graded. But every time she closed her eyes, she was back on the Quidditch pitch, falling into the grass, all sights and sounds pulled from her.

Harry had been kind enough not to gloat over his victory. They’d walked to breakfast together and she’d cleaned her face with a wand. When they’d reached the high table, Ginny had laughed at the dirt all over Harry and Hermione had thought that perhaps this could already be funny to her. After breakfast, Ginny had insisted on being escorted by Harry to inspect the damage to the pitch. They’d left hand in hand.

Now, Hermione pulls Crookshanks into her arms and settles herself at her desk.

When she begins to write, it’s a letter to Malfoy.

It would be easier if I didn’t trust you, she’s writing instead of a greeting. But I don’t think I trust Harry, either. I don’t quite know how to put this, but it feels as if none of us were supposed to survive the war; really. If we had died gloriously, we never would have had to figure out what it means to build a better world.

Harry and I duelled today and he stunned me with some variation I’ve never encountered. I couldn’t move, of course, and I couldn’t see or hear either. And I couldn’t bear it. I think I would rather he killed me. My oldest friend.

I don't know why I'm telling you this. I don't know if I'll send it to you.

Rebeca and I have removed your magic from the wards. We've tightened the spells a bit, made the weave thicker, so that nobody can repeat the same trick she did on Halloween.

We're thinking of a way to rescue Davi. Harry isn't involved. You probably shouldn't be, either. But I wanted you to know we're doing something. And of course, if we get Davi, then we have Rebeca.

I hate thinking this way, making people into pawns. Is this how everybody survives in the world, or is it just me, just our generation? And then I think of Dumbledore. Do you think we were ever really children to him? I hate to think this. I want—I don't know what I want, frankly, except to figure out a way to break free of that curse of Harry's, to rescue Davi, and to stop feeling so helpless. And I want to feel as if I know what should come next. I have this awful feeling that I'm missing something in a fundamental way.

Tell me how your own investigation is going. Tell me if I can help.

When she puts her quill down, Hermione rests her face in her hands, her mind racing. Crookshanks butts his face against her knuckles until she moves her hand away, then presses his nose against hers. He hasn't been like this since she was first at Hogwarts, rubbing his face against her cheeks, his front paws on her shoulders.

Crookshanks remains there, his furry head against her shoulder, while Hermione completes the ciphering spells, adding a variation that keys them into Draco's magical signature. He stays in her arms as she makes her way to the aery as if in a dream, jumping to the ground only when she needs to tie her letter around the leg of the school's owl.

The next day, at breakfast, the same owl circles her, dropping a letter in her hand.

The message is ciphered but it's the work of seconds to read it.


I need to see you. Meet me tonight, Draco has written, and then the coordinates for apparition.

She tucks the letter inside her satchel.

Chapter End Notes

To all of you who wanted Hermione and Draco to be reunited soon...see you next week!

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who have all the best suggestions. All mistakes are my own.

Thank you for taking the time to read this fic, and for all the encouragement and notes! I read and cherish every one 

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), [TikTok](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

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

The hotel on the edge of Muggle London isn't dingy, exactly, but it's seen its share of people in strange garments. Still, Draco wears Muggle clothing, denim and wool, when he checks in. He's spelled his hair and face so that he doesn't resemble himself.

The tired woman at the desk doesn't bat an eye as he checks in.

He's barely set up the necessary wards in the room when Hermione knocks on the door. For a moment the hallway is empty, and then she drops the Disillusionment Charm.

She's wearing a cream dress in a thick wool, which nevertheless hugs her body, and heeled boots up to her knees. Her hair is piled on top of her head, exposing the line of her neck. He thinks of the marks he placed there with his teeth, barely a week before, and his heart begins to pound.

"What have you found?" she asks as soon as the door is closed again, all focus on the task at hand. As if she hadn't noticed him staring.

He mutters three more warding spells and a silencing charm just to be safe, and then he says, "My father is aware of the Faithful Hand."

"Are any other Death Eaters are involved?" She doesn't say *former*.

"I've put out word to my contacts but I haven't heard anything back yet. They're afraid I might give them up to the Ministry at any moment."

Hermione cants her head. "Would you?"

"Not unless I had orders." Draco sighs, sitting on the bed. Hermione looms over him. Even this cheap lamp provides a light that haloes her. He wants to reach out and touch her but their night together seems far away already. "Except for Potter, none of us are briefed on everything."

"Even Kingsley doesn't know the extent of the threat of the Hand. But we knew this already. What else have you found out?"

"Nothing I haven't told you in a letter. The Inverness cell were all killed the way Ruby was. There was blood everywhere. But the rest of them were killed inside their homes."

"And your father? How did you find out about him?"

Between them is a stretch of carpet roughly the length of a corpse. Hermione does not move closer.

“I went to visit the Dochertys,” Draco says, holding his hand up when she starts to protest. “They thought I took a few hours off from Hogwarts to pay my condolences. They seemed more concerned about losing an invitation to my parents’ manor for Christmas than the death of their daughter.”

Hermione’s fingers are balled into fists. “The Dochertys were never Death Eaters.”

“They were too minor a family to attract Voldemort’s attention, though not for lack of trying.”

He watches her consider this, the subtle movements of her face.

“Was there anything else you found?”

“Not yet.” He wants to tell her his next movements but he cannot judge whether the disclosure is too large a risk. Not when he can’t bring himself to look away from her.

“I thought there must be something more if you were going to risk detection and set up a meeting. What aren’t you telling me, Draco?”

He lets out a breath, briefly allowing himself to savour the way his name sounds in her voice. “When you told me about that curse Potter put on you, I wanted to smash through the Hogwarts wards and hex him into jelly.”

Hermione’s mouth opens into the shape of a kiss. Quickly she regains her composure, smoothing her hands against her dress.

“We were duelling,” she says. “I pushed him and—I wasn’t ready for that, I think. I’ve only been practising with you for a short while.”

“I know that curse. He should never have used it. Not on anyone.” He’s watched Dark wizards go mad under that curse. Potter can hold it for days, when he wants to. Every Auror has since learned to cast it, but Draco has never used it in the field.

“I should have been able to bear it. To break it somehow.” There’s a note of panic in her voice and he wonders what horrors she’s imagining. Whether it’s the silent darkness or the creatures who inhabit it.

“I can show you,” he says, his voice low. “The technique is similar to the one we practised earlier in the fall. Once you’ve mastered your fear, you have all the power you need to break the curse.”

Hermione nods, and then says, “I want to trust you. Rebeca thinks I should. But if I believe everything you’ve told me—” She bites her lip.

“I’ve barely told you anything.” This is cruel, Draco knows, but he can’t help it. He’s thinking of the letter she wrote him, the one he never answered. All the things he might have told her now rise at the back of his throat.

“I can bear it,” she says. “Start by teaching me how to break the curse.”

“We won’t be able to meet often. The owls will be detected before long. And if you don’t trust me, none of the rest of it matters.”

“Tell me why you’re doing this. Why you’re playing double agent.”

He rests a hand behind him on the bed and tilts his face upward so he can look her full in the face. “Because even when we were winning the war, I felt as if I were being destroyed. I was only trying to save myself, in the beginning.”

She takes one step toward him, the knit of her dress drifting up her thighs with the movement. Then she moves closer, until she’s standing between his legs.

“Why are you doing this now?” she asks, bending toward him. Her breath against his mouth. “Tell me the truth.”

“It’s going to happen again, isn’t it? Unless we do something. What did we really learn after Voldemort? What changed?”

For an instant, the impact of those words is visible in the pain on Hermione’s features. And then she’s kissing him, her lips soft and insistent against his own. He reaches for her thighs, pulling her until she’s seated in his lap, her legs bracketing his hips. Her dress already rucked up enough to show the white lace of her knickers.

“I thought I had done something.” She says the words against his mouth. “It never feels like enough.”

He runs his knuckles against her cheek, where her skin is soft and smooth. “There was never any reason for you to change, Hermione.”

“What do I do?” Her hands splay on his chest, pulling at the black cashmere of his jumper.

“I thought you didn’t trust me.” Still, he doesn’t draw away from her.

“I’m worried it’s foolish.”

He presses a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “It’s the height of idiocy to trust anyone. Me more than most.”

“That’s what bothers me,” she says, and reaches for his belt buckle. There is an entire conversation they should probably have, spanning their histories and their futures, but Draco shoves it all aside when her fingers wrap around his cock.

“What I know is that I want this,” she says, palming his length. And it’s the only thing he needs to hear, to shove her knickers aside and push into the wet heat of her.

She rocks against him, her mouth on his neck, licking and biting as she cants her hips to take him deeper. All the horror, all the barbed social niceties and the blood, all of it falls away as he presses his fingers into her hips. He wants to hold Hermione right where she is and never let her leave.

“Do you think of me?” he asks her, one finger reaching out to stroke her clit. Light enough to make her want more.

“When I’m alone,” she says, the words a bit ragged, nearly moaned, “I think about you more than I should. Given everything.”

Right now, Draco would make her any promise she required to keep her moving against him, holding his cock tight inside her, but Hermione gives him exactly what he needs, her breaths ragged and her hair falling out of its bun, curling around her face.

“I think about you too much.” He presses the words into the skin of her neck. “At night, I dream about you. I worry they might find you that way.”

Her hands are under his jumper, her fingernails scraping against his spine. He pushes into her, as deep as she’ll take him, and just as the first syllable of his name escapes her lips, he covers her mouth with his palm.

“We’re in the field, pet,” he says. “You can’t go screaming my name.”

Hermione bites his hand, her eyes flashing as they do when they duel. He grins down at her. He doesn’t know if it’s the makeshift gag or being called *pet* that provoked her response, and Draco doesn’t care, just thrusts into her, over and over, until there’s a roaring in his ears and he has to bite his lip not to groan at the feeling of her body against his.

She is moaning against him, and Draco brings his fingers to her clit again, stroking and pressing, moving with the rhythm of his thrusts. Her cheeks are flushed and her lips are open and she arches against him, as if she wants him closer still.

He wants to swallow up each of her ragged breaths.

It feels as if time is suspended for a moment, locked into rhythm and heat and want. Then Hermione begins to clench around him. His control evaporates and Draco is pounding into her, over and over, until her hand is over his mouth and she’s moaning against his neck as they both come.

He holds her longer than he should, past the time when their breath is even.

Finally, she sits up just enough to meet his gaze.

“Who are you worried will find me?”

He wants to lie to her. It would be the right thing, probably, to keep her from worrying. Instead he says, “My father. The Faithful Hand. All the old terrors who haven’t actually changed.”

“I’m careful,” she protests, but he shakes his head.

“I don’t think you understand the depths of depravity that my people can reach.”

There's something in her eyes, something searching, and all he can think is that she was a child in a war, too. They were both children who were asked to do too much. Only, Hermione was always brave and intelligent enough to choose the right side.

"It must have been difficult for you to break free of all of it," she says.

And Draco wants to say yes, wants to tell her all of it. Everything he's done in the years between the camp and this moment, and all the reasons why. Wants to set up a hundred meetings like this one, to ignore the Faithful Hand and the blood and the darkness.

He wants, most of all, to have Hermione in this secret place between both their lives.

Then he thinks of the way she'd almost moaned his name so that anyone could hear it. For all her power, her formidable mind, Hermione isn't used to dealing in half-truths and shadows. She doesn't deserve to carry his secrets. She was always meant to be haloed by light.

He wraps his hands around her waist and lifts her off him, making sure her feet are on the ground. Her hair has fallen in a cascade of messy curls and her dress is pushed up against her hips and she is gorgeous.

He thinks of his mother. She was so beautiful in the old photos that hang on the walls, laughing at the camera. He thinks of the shell she's become, after two wars and a marriage to Lucius. How frail she is, how utterly overcome by the world.

His father would have destroyed anyone who laid a hand on Narcissa. For all his faults, for all the evil in him, Draco cannot deny that his father is a devoted husband. If his mother had ever written that she'd been put under Potter's curse, Lucius would have stormed the gates of Hogwarts itself.

Just as Draco was so tempted to have done. Instead he summoned her here without thinking of the harm it could cause Hermione or to their larger aims. All the ways he himself could hurt her.

She's too perfect to be marred again.

She was already a child in a war, once.

"I haven't really broken free of anything," he says, as he tucks his cock back into his trousers. The sound of his zipper is too loud in the room. "Should I show you how to break Potter's curse?"

He knows the moment when she hears the dismissal in his question. Her eyes widen almost imperceptibly. Her fingers flex. And then her face resumes the expression it had when she walked through the door.

"Yes," she says, smoothing down her skirt. With a flick of her wand, her hair in its knot on the top of her head. Every curl is tucked away. "Show me how to break it."

He waves his wand.

Within seconds, she is sobbing. Still, Draco waits to break the curse.

Hermione is teaching the second years about the Scottish troll battles of the thirteenth century when Malini Singh raises her hand.

“Professor Potter mentioned the two of you fought a troll together when you were at Hogwarts?” The Ravenclaw is one of the few who’s still, two months into the school year, overawed by Hermione. Everything Malini says sounds like a question. “I was wondering if you could tell us about that battle?”

“First, Miss Singh, tell me what stories Professor Potter is telling you. I’d like to clear up all the rumours at once if I can.” She passes a hand over her neck and tries not to react to the bruises Draco left. Tries to push him out of her mind. The look on his face as he’d lifted her off his lap.

Robbie McMurtry, another Ravenclaw second year, pushes his hand in the air. “It’s only that he was talking about trolls as well in our class yesterday. I was the one who asked.”

Malini shoots him a look, her cheeks flushed. He pulls the end of her long dark braid and offers her a little smile.

And maybe it’s that little kindness between them, but Hermione ends up telling them the full story, not only her terror in the bathroom and the way she and Harry and Ron had managed to save themselves, but also about Quirrell, about what they learned later. How Voldemort was lurking under his turban. All the things she’d left vague in her history, quelled under a short paragraph about Voldemort’s first attempts to attack Harry at Hogwarts.

When she finishes, her students’ hands are in the air. First they ask about the troll in the girls’ loo, but then they’re asking about the battles in the Highlands, showing more interest in trolls than they have in weeks. They’re eager and curious, as if this story has connected the dots in their minds and made this history come to life for them.

“You were younger than we were, weren’t you?” Malini asks, towards the end of the hour. “You weren’t scared?”

“I was terrified,” Hermione tells her, “but it was either fight or end up dead.”

Malini nods at that, resting her fingers on her wand. But Hermione can tell she doesn’t quite understand the words. These students have never known a world at war.

Hermione turns back to her notes before she can think too closely about all of this. She focuses on her students, on the lesson, until the bell.

She tells herself that what she's feeling is grateful. Only the emotion sits uneasily against her shoulderblades, an itch she can't quite master.

Ginny Weasley had always assumed that at some point Quidditch would begin to feel like a proper job, but it never really has. Joy still rushes up inside her when she kicks off the ground and launches herself into the sky. She dreams, still, of stealing the Quaffle from the other team's Chaser and launching it into a hoop.

Harry might grumble about waking up for the office, or about long hours in the field, but Ginny just offers him a cup of tea brewed in the slowest Muggle way imaginable. She savours the way he smiles at her over the mug.

Because the feeling of loving Harry, of being loved by him, has always made what she feels about Quidditch seem dull by comparison.

Until a few weeks ago, when she woke up bleeding and everything went horribly wrong.

But Ginny doesn't allow herself to consider this now, as she and the rest of the Holyhead Harpies kick off from the Quidditch pitch and into the air. They always begin practice with an hour of drills, more than anyone else in the league, and it is easy not to think of anything as they run through their formations, repeating them over and over until every motion is perfect.

When the whistle sounds from far below, Ginny is sweaty and aching and she doesn't want to stop. Still, she's the captain. She follows her team to the ground.

Their coach, Brenner, looks around at each of them, hands crossed over her chest. Even on a cold November day, Natalie Brenner doesn't use a coat or a warming charm. She keeps herself warm in a black shirt and trousers, a neat braid down her back, looking to all the wizarding world like a Muggle art teacher. Which is probably why she's won more championships than any other coach in the league.

"It took you too long to settle into a rhythm," she says, blunt as always. "What are you thinking about?"

Ginny can feel the team looking at her. She hates the way her cheeks flush, wants only to kick up into the air again, to leave all of this behind.

"This isn't the first time one of you lot has been out for a few weeks and it won't be the last. Stop treating Weasley like an animal in a cage."

"*Pero* she's distracted also," Yeniset puts in, rubbing her hands together. The cold is difficult for her. "We are only trying to help."

“Better if you caught the Snitch faster,” Ginny mutters. Brenner gives her a dark look but lets it pass. The Harpies always take the piss out of each other, and sure enough Violet is cuffing Yeniset on the shoulder.

They’re all still looking at her, though, the way they’ve been looking at her for the past few days, ever since she came back to practise with no explanation for why she’d missed two games and a dozen practices. Only a discreet owl from St. Mungo’s to Brenner.

And maybe she owes them an explanation, but right now Ginny is tired of all of this. She needs it to stop.

“I just want to fly, all right?” Ginny’s fingers are clutched tight around the handle of her broom. She can hear how ragged her voice is. It doesn’t matter, as long as this moment ends soon. “Are we going to sit around talking, or do you think we could shut up and play?”

Before she can reach for the Quaffle, Brenner takes her wrist. Her touch is gentle but Ginny feels it like a brand.

“Get some water,” her coach says. “Weasley and I are going to have ourselves a chat.”

Normally there would be all sorts of speculative noises and mutterings, but as Brenner leads Ginny off the pitch and into her office, there is only the heavy silence that means the Harpies are watching the retreat intently.

Ginny has only heard this silence from them when they’ve suffered an embarrassing loss.

In her office, Brenner takes a seat behind her desk. Ginny stays on the threshold, still standing, her broom clutched in her hands.

“St. Mungo’s wrote to me,” Brenner says. “You don’t have to rush back.”

“The World Cup is this summer,” Ginny says. The thought of the Cup, of another run with England, had been her only regret when the pregnancy potion had come back positive. She had shoved it aside in an instant.

“I saw you out there, Weasley. You’ve never talked to your teammates the way you did now.”

“I was—”

Brenner holds up her hand. “And your flying is reckless. You’re not afraid of falling.”

Ginny doesn’t know what to say. This morning, she’d woken up with her back against Harry’s chest. She had only been able to think that his breath was too hot against her neck. His arms had felt like a cage. Still, she’d remained still in the darkness until her alarm had blared and she’d had an excuse to rise.

The whole time, the thought of practice was the only thing to keep her inside her skin.

“I lost a baby, once.” Her coach speaks, finally, into the silence. Each word is pitched low, as if it has the potential to cause them both pain. “Abby and I were ecstatic. It happened, or I

suppose it started, really, during a match. I never flew again.”

Brenner and her wife have two daughters, still young enough to come to every match and fidget when the keeper prevents enough scoring. Ginny has always admired the way they never look overwhelmed by their children, the way they always seem alternately patient and delighted. She’d never imagined herself being a mother with such grace.

Now, when she looks at her, Brenner’s mouth is drawn into a thin line. Though she knows she could look up her coach’s last match as a player, Ginny is too afraid to ask. She doesn’t want to know how long this pain, this dim view of everything around her, could hold her in its clutches.

“I want to fly,” Ginny says. She can hear the panic in her voice and still she continues. “I need it. It’s the only thing that makes my head feel clear.”

“I think you need some time, Weasley.”

“Just because that was what you needed—”

Brenner holds up a hand again, and maybe it’s old habit, born from seven years with Brenner as her head coach, but Ginny stills.

“I think you need time,” Brenner says. “And I think you should talk to someone. I can arrange for a Mind Healer to meet you here during practice.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You were flying like it didn’t matter if you fell off your broom. And then you spoke to your teammates like you didn’t care if they hated you.”

“That was just today.”

Brenner gives a little shake of her head, her grey-blonde ponytail skimming the collar of her jacket. “I wish I could agree with you, but it wasn’t.”

The thought of time without Quidditch, of weeks in their apartments at Hogwarts or their flat in London, all those hours when Harry will be working and she’ll be alone with her thoughts, settle like a weight on Ginny’s chest.

For so long, everything had seemed easy. And now, the stack of romance novels, the nearness of Hermione, even the possibility that she could coach Gryffindor into a team that will destroy Slytherin, all of it feels grey and useless in comparison to the prospect of hurtling through the air.

But the thing is, Brenner isn’t wrong. Because the sensation she craves isn’t flight, exactly. It’s the weightlessness of falling. Because it’s happened to her. It’s happened, once or twice, to every Quidditch player who’s on the pitch long enough at this level.

Each time she was caught, the referee’s spell or her coach’s coming well in time to keep her from splattering on the ground.

What she keeps circling back to, though, is the moment she'd accepted the fall. How weightless she'd felt, how free. Her body simply moved through the air, as if it had always been meant for the sky.

"I need you to take some time," Brenner says again, and this time, Ginny nods.

She doesn't change out of her Quidditch kit, though, or lock her broom away. When she floos back to the Hogwarts faculty commons, she's still grimy and clutching her Firebolt in her fists.

Rebeca Saraiva looks up at her from her scattered parchment, brows raised. "Is there something about locker rooms which you find unappealing?"

Ginny grins back at her. She can't help it. She knows Rebeca doesn't much trust her, maybe even like her, that her courtesy is merely out of respect for Hermione, and still somehow the feeling is not mutual at all. Especially now.

Because Rebeca Saraiva is the only person who doesn't look at Ginny with pity in her eyes.

"I suddenly find myself with a lot of time on my hands," she says, settling herself at Rebeca's table, aware of the fact that she stinks of sweat.

"Perhaps you could start by taking a long bath." Rebeca's eyes are already back on her parchment.

"I was thinking you could tell me about the place where your brother's housed." She has the good sense to lower her voice. Still, Rebeca's eyes flash around the room before she casts a warding spell on the door. It's thick enough to cause serious problems for anyone else who tries to enter. Even McGonagall.

"I don't have access to the maps of the compound."

"Then we need to get them, don't we?"

It's a conversational feint, Ginny knows, a move worthy of a seeker in her prime. She holds the grin on her face like she's capable of such a thing. When in reality she knows almost nothing about A Mão Fiel, let alone where in Brazil their compound is located.

For a moment, Rebeca's face shutters, as if she knows all this. Ginny feels her fingers gripping tight to the table. For a million reasons, she *needs* this. The distraction or the adrenaline or maybe both. Then, finally, Rebeca lets out a breath. "Blaise has been trying to use his Ministry connections to acquire them," she says.

"I saw the way he looked at you when he visited." Ginny can't help but push. *You were flying like it didn't matter if you fell off your broom.*

"He's not in love with me." Rebeca tips her quill to her full lips, and it occurs to Ginny how beautiful she is. How, if she had ended up in an entirely different life, if she weren't in love with Harry in this particular unending way, she might have been rejoicing at that statement. "We were strategizing."

“I’ve been involved in quite a few hastily conceived plans,” Ginny says. “This didn’t look like that.”

Rebeca casts another ward. “He’s in love with Davi. The feeling is mutual.”

“When did it happen?” Ginny needs to know every detail of this story immediately. The way Rebeca talks about her brother, Ginny had imagined him strapped to a cot, bound with spells to siphon away his magic. This wouldn’t be a scenario that appealed to Blaise Zabini. Ginny knows him well enough to be certain of that.

“Davi is kept closely guarded, but he was trotted out the first time Blaise came to visit the compound. Apparently there was instant attraction. Blaise extended his visit as long as he could, pretending he was interested in joining A Mão Fiel. He’s been back as much as he dares.”

“They think he’s a likely convert?”

“It would be a coup to count a British Ministry official as a member.”

“Has he brought this up with the Auror’s office?” Harry would likely welcome the additional eyes. He and Ginny don’t often talk about his work. Still, she knows this much.

Saraiva shakes her head. “I can’t talk about this with you.”

“I’m a humble Quidditch player on leave,” Ginny says, “and I’m offering my services. Why don’t you lot trust the Auror’s office with this?”

“What we need is more information.” Rebeca waves her wand and turns back to her parchment as the wards fall away. “But I believe you’re in need of a bath, Weasley.”

Flitwick pushes the door open just as Ginny offers a two-fingered salute. He wants to talk to Ginny about the upcoming Harpies game, to assure her that Greta Ziegler, while competent, was no comparison.

She finally smiles her way out of the conversation and makes her way to her apartments. Harry is somewhere else, the Ministry or teaching, but there’s a tray of food on her desk, a sandwich that startles Ginny with its depth of flavour. As if she hadn’t tasted anything in quite a while.

While she chews, she is thinking. About all the time that stretches before her and how she’ll fill it.

What we need is more information.

What Ginny needs most, probably, is a bath. But first she pulls out a piece of parchment.

P, she writes, are you still able to get information via unofficial channels? I have need of that particular talent. Also, I have some time on my hands. Maybe I could visit you in Paris.

When she sends Perdita off, full of all the treats Ginny could fit into her beak, she feels a little better than she has in a while. Even with her feet planted firmly on the ground.

“We want to turn the magi-technology classroom into a pocket universe,” Hermione says, into the expectant silence. Next to her, Rebeca is smiling.

Harry is still pacing the room, a scowl on his face, but McGonagall considers Hermione and Rebeca.

“You’d like to create an alternate universe inside one of my classrooms?”

“This would allow us to create the precise conditions where magic and electronic technology can coexist with no interference,” Rebeca says. “It occurred to Hermione in a dream, apparently, but we’ve done the research and the magic works out.”

McGonagall only looks warier, and Hermione wonders if it would be best to clarify that it was not a dream, on account of the fact that she has hardly slept since her encounter with Malfoy three days prior. Instead, when she lays in bed, forcing her thoughts away from him and the dismissal on his face after she’d been stupid enough to fuck him, her mind has ended up in strange places. Which was how, two nights ago, she’d thought of the pocket universe. She’d stayed up all night reading case studies, mapping out the spell-casting required. All of it precise and architectural and lovely. A perfect distraction.

“We would need assistance from the other professors at Hogwarts,” Hermione says instead, and when Harry scoffs, still pacing, she adds, “We believe it’s the only way to keep the wards intact while still allowing Rebeca the latitude for her work.”

“There’s no place in the world without any ambient magic,” McGonagall says, but Hermione recognises her tone as curiosity.

“This would allow Hogwarts to pioneer magitechnological research,” Rebeca offers.

Harry stops pacing and McGonagall’s face becomes difficult to read. Because they do not want more people to come to Hogwarts. They want the wards thick enough to insulate them from the world. It is too easy to forget the impact of the war on all of them.

“The world is changing,” Hermione adds. “Besides, I admit, I’d like to create our own pocket universe.”

“You’re sure it won’t destroy the wards?” Harry asks. His fingertips inch closer to his wand and Hermione thinks of her letter to Draco, *can I trust Harry?* He’d told her yes but since she asked the question, she’s never felt convinced.

“We can repair the wards,” she says, and then, “I think we need to do this.”

“You trust Saraiva?” Harry asks.

“The price of her allegiance is very clear,” Hermione says. “She thinks this could help us get Davi back.”

“*She* is in this very room, as a matter of fact,” Rebeca offers, and Hermione can tell she’s smothering the vast majority of what she feels. “This solution will secure the castle, allow me to do my work, and it will allow Professor Granger to perform the kind of magic she apparently dreams about. It will, as she said, allow me to save my brother. Why are you hesitating?”

“What will it do for A Mão Fiel?” Harry asks. His fingers are almost touching his wand. He could cast a spell in the time it would take to blink.

“That depends,” Rebeca says. Again, her regal calm. “How quickly can they be eradicated?”

“I am not going to tell you how the Ministry plans to deal with a major threat.”

He rounds on McGonagall, but the headmistress only shakes her head.

“I’d like to see this pocket universe. Make a model to review and we’ll discuss the possibility.”

Hermione can see the objection rising on Rebeca’s features. She reaches out to cover her friend’s hand with her own, shoots her a look that she hopes conveys the fact that this is as much of a victory as could be expected, given their lack of tangible proof that their idea will work.

Still, she can practically hear Rebeca saying, *But did you see the Paris papers?*

When she turns to go, Harry grabs her arm. “Can we talk?”

“Of course,” Hermione answers, letting Rebeca out of McGonagall’s office as Harry waits.

She thinks of the way he’d been at lunch only a few weeks ago, easy and smiling. She’d thought this was how he was, now, after Voldemort and the war. And now she wonders if it were only ever a front behind which he holds everything else.

When Rebeca has disappeared from view, he begins to walk through the castle.

“I thought you said you’d be careful,” Harry says.

“Why doesn’t Kingsley know the full extent of the threat from the Faithful Hand?” Hermione asks instead of answering. Somehow she manages to keep her voice low. “I know you’re keeping secrets, Harry. Why?”

“She wants to know too much,” he says, as if Hermione hadn’t spoken.

“And, what, the Minister is too curious as well?” She continues in the same way, crossing her hands over her chest.

“The Ministry has been infiltrated before. You know this, Hermione.” He says it so patiently, as if he is talking to a child.

“You don’t even trust your own office. Malfoy didn’t know about Rebeca’s affiliation with the Hand until we found Ruby’s body.”

“Malfoy should only be trusted so far.”

“I thought you said—”

“I thought it would be best if you could be friendly colleagues. I didn’t think you would fuck him.”

Hermione feels her cheeks flushing.

And then she remembers herself. Who she is. Not only the rejected woman in some dingy hotel, her knickers sticky from the remnants of a tryst. Not simply the lonely spinster or the struggling professor, with her elderly cat and her trunks full of books.

She is Hermione Granger, who fought and won against an army of Death Eaters in spite of the so-called inferiority of her blood. She is the Ministry darling, with enough power to shape this world into something better. And she is learning, all the time, to be more than she is. To be less afraid.

All of this hits her like some internal thunderclap, striking her to the marrow.

She rounds on Harry, her robes swirling around her legs. Wandless magic shimmering in her palm, all power and intention.

“Draco Malfoy dove in front of some Dark curse to save you,” she says, each word spoken quietly and precisely, so that he cannot misinterpret a syllable, “and furthermore, although it is none of your business if I’ve fucked him, I assure you that I am more than capable of assessing the threat he poses. Which, from my perspective, is far less than the fact that your policies will make the Ministry absolutely useless in the event that the Faithful Hand does seize power. What are we supposed to do, wait for you to save us again?”

And then Hermione stops speaking. Because it dawns on her, another realisation, this time one that threatens to sweep her away: this is exactly what Albus Dumbledore did to all of them.

Harry only stares at her. Her mind is reeling.

“We walked into that forest alone,” she is saying, without thought. “We wore that Horcrux around our necks. We kept secrets from everyone—from everyone who had fought against Voldemort in the first war.”

She's not sure Harry has so much as blinked. Hermione can feel a sob rising in her throat, but she manages to swallow it down.

"I was so crushed when Ron left," she continues, her fingers in her hair. She's surrounded by stone and silence on all sides.

"I remember," Harry says, and somehow his voice is almost rueful. "You were screaming at the trees."

"What if he was right to leave?"

"Who would have done it if we hadn't?" Harry's wand is in his hands, held loosely between his fingers. It reminds her of the way he'd fidget during class. "It had to be me, Hermione."

"He left you alone." She isn't speaking about Ron. But she doesn't know what will happen if she mentions Dumbledore, and Hermione hates that her oldest friend feels so far away from her, and dangerous.

"You were there with me," Harry says. And then, "You and Ron both. I wouldn't have survived without you."

"He could have—"

Harry holds up a hand. "I don't want to talk about Dumbledore." His voice is strained.

"Then talk to me about the Ministry," Hermione says, biting her lip. "We can fix it, if we want to. Between us, we can change things."

"You don't understand the Faithful Hand." Now he looks the way he has since he came to Hogwarts, too sharp.

"You made every effort to keep me from knowing anything," she snaps. She thinks of all those pleasant conversations, over the years, and now she can't help wondering how many secrets lurked on the edges of the words they said. How many times did Harry decide that he didn't trust her? "I could have helped."

Instead of answering, he turns his face away from her, and then Harry disappears down the hallway, leaving Hermione alone.

She could go to McGonagall or to Rebeca, could even try and find Ginny or Neville or Luna, but instead Hermione settles her bag against her shoulder and climbs the stairs into the piano room.

What she wants, more than anything, is to drive her fingers into the keys until she no longer needs to think.

When Hermione pushes aside the tapestry and walks down the long hallway, she immediately knows that the blood has been cleaned away. The air smells cool and mineral, with the heavy quiet of a place that has not been disturbed for a long while.

Hermione could not explain why she'd stayed away since the time she'd come and played amidst the blood. Then she begins to play *Clair de Lune*, one of the few pieces she knows from memory, and feels the tears burning in her eyes, spilling onto her cheeks.

She is thinking, not of the beauty of the music or of the possibilities of the pocket universe, or even of Draco Malfoy, but of the weight of the Horcrux around her neck, that year they spent wandering the forest. Those days had begun with the usual fear and anxiety, but the minute the locket pressed against her breastbone, Hermione had felt a rage inside her, coiled like an adder.

Half her time had been spent trying to tamp that anger deep inside her.

But now her rage rises inside her until Hermione is pounding the keyboard and the music does not sound like Debussy at all, until it is far from its original wistful melody. When the song finishes, she stands and begins to slam her palms against the wood of the piano, until the strings ring against the stones.

Only when the ringing fades does Hermione realise she's sobbing, nearly screaming with the anger that she can no longer contain.

She was a *child*, all those years, surviving all those dangers, unravelling all those secrets. Parsing those ancient runes from Dumbledore, all because he couldn't deign to tell anyone his secrets. She was a child in the midst of a war, sending her parents away, thinking of every eventuality, because she'd known, even then, that nobody would help her.

It's easy to make children fight if they believe it means something real, Draco had said.

And oh, she misses him, she misses him. Even thinking of the look on his face as he'd pushed her away from him and onto her feet, Hermione knows that he would understand what she is feeling in this moment. Knows that if she screamed that Albus Dumbledore had used her years at Hogwarts to form her into a weapon, he would not turn away from her, or disappear.

But he is not here, and Hermione doesn't know if he'll ever return. If he'll ever want her the way he did on Halloween, or speak to her as if there is no distance between them.

The war is long over, but Hermione feels alone with all these thoughts and this sharp bright anger, filling her chest and burning in her throat. She doesn't know where they will lead her, only that they can no longer be tamped down.

Eventually her sobs quiet. She wipes her face against the sleeve of her cardigan, and then she sits her fingers against the keyboard.

The music is not a distraction, this time. It is an admission that a part of her is still lost in the woods.

Chapter End Notes

We had Draco and Hermione together, crushing amounts of angst, and a Ginny POV, so you know I had a good time writing this chapter. I hope you enjoyed it 🧡

Also, hope you spotted the Cuban character, Yeniset! I was so excited to sneak her in. I'm Cuban-American and write a lot about Cuba in my original fiction; the only reason there aren't more Cuban characters is because I have a hard time reconciling the Harry Potter magical universe against the actual history of Cuba. (To be honest, Cuban history on the whole is probably more compelling.)

Thank you as always to my beta readers (Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy) who have made this fic so much better. All mistakes are my own.

Thank you for taking the time to read this fic, and for all your kind messages and support. It means the world to me.

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

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

It's instinct that tells Draco not to share his plans with the Auror's office. Potter will figure it out eventually, or perhaps McGonagall will take him into her confidence, and then Draco will have to explain what he's doing and why. He may also, at that future point, get access to the Ministry's intelligence on his own.

In the meantime, he's planning an infiltration of the Faithful Hand on his own. The project keeps him from thinking of the way Hermione had looked in that hotel room a week ago, stricken and trying not to let him see.

When she'd screamed under the curse, when she'd retched onto the carpet, he had hardly been able to bear it. It had taken everything in Draco not to draw her into her arms, to apologise and then explain and then kiss her thoroughly so that she opened totally to him.

Instead, he had feigned calm and instructed her until she was able to break the curse within a minute. Then she'd asked him to curse her three more times.

By the time she'd disappeared back to Hogsmeade, it had been nearly morning. Draco hadn't slept. In the morning, he'd gone back to Edinburgh and started reconstructing everything he knew about the Faithful Hand.

Last he heard, there were five principal cells in London. Draco would bet his entire inheritance that, if his father were granted membership, he'd paid his way into the central London cell, the one covering the poshest neighbourhoods and most powerful wizards.

For the most part, the Hand has avoided former Death Eaters in their ranks, but then, they've never turned up their noses at Draco. They've been awed by the Mark on his arm.

Still, he knows that it would arouse suspicions to show up at the cell's next meeting so soon after, presumably, his father has joined. And there's the fact that he has no idea where the Hand meets.

Finally, he reaches out to Theo and lets him choose the restaurant.

Which is how he finds himself in a private room in a posh Muggle restaurant in Soho, sipping whiskey when Theo saunters into the room, wearing a shirt and trousers tailored so exactly to his body that Draco nearly forgets the purpose of this meeting in favour of requesting the name of his tailor. Theo Nott has always been able to distract him from the realities of the current moment, which is presumably why they're in Muggle London.

"Still need to get your mind off a bint?" Theo asks when he reaches Draco, his smile too perfect to be casual. "Or do you want me to introduce you to a lucky witch?"

“Fuck off,” Malfoy says, trying and mostly failing to layer a smile over thoughts of Hermione.

“Only if you ask me very nicely,” Theo shoots back, lowering himself gracefully into his own chair. Already a waitress is making her way towards them, pretty and chic in clinging black, and Theo orders without looking at the menu.

When she’s gone, Theo turns back to Draco, and again his smile looks too practised. Draco notes it, then shuts the knowledge deep inside his mind.

Theo is up to something. And Draco should mind the fact that his old friend is likely betraying him, but in this moment, all he can think is, *tell me everything*.

If he were skilled at Legilimency, he would try to extract Theo’s thoughts magically. Draco’s skill with the magic of minds, however, has always been in concealment. So instead he feigns another sip of whiskey, and says, “My father mentioned that you had reached out to him. Something about an investment. Should I be offended that you’d think of Lucius before your old friend?”

“I thought this one might be a little rich for your blood, mate.”

“I’m no longer at the Ministry,” he says.

“You’re at Hogwarts.” Theo’s smile is beginning to slip.

“And you can imagine what kind of salaries we earn.” The trust fund, the vault at Gringotts, all the wealth they’ve been born with, none of it matters that much, to Theo and his new set. The game is always acquiring more.

The waitress returns, swaying her hips as she crosses the room with Theo’s scotch. Draco watches him watch her out of the corner of his eye, his gaze fixed on his drink. Let Theo think he’s drowning his sorrows while the waitress giggles over him.

“There are groups of idealists,” Theo says, finally, when the waitress is gone, “who rose up after the Dark Lord’s fall. Not seeking power, exactly. They wanted a new way of living.”

“They don’t sound like people who will earn you any money.”

“They weren’t, for a long time.” Theo swirls the scotch in his glass. “Then the right people found them. Our people. We guided them.”

“When did this start?”

Theo waves his wand and the waitress appears, her tray laden with more food than ordered. She walks across the floor just as she had the first time. This time, though, her eyes are glazed.

Still, not a bit of food falls on the table.

Draco forces himself to bite back the words he wants to say—*she's not a fucking puppet*—and all the curses he wants to cast on Theo. He forces himself to leer, even as all of it makes him lose his appetite entirely.

Theo summoned the waitress as a distraction. He didn't yet trust Draco, or his line of questioning. He has probably been too eager, Draco thinks, as he runs his eyes over the waitresses' body, trying not to think of Hermione. Trying not to think at all.

He needs to fashion himself, for the next few hours, into the pureblood heir he was always supposed to be. The guise has rarely felt so constraining.

"I thought you were mooning over someone else," his old friend says over the rim of his glass. Appreciative.

"I'm always happy to appraise the available merchandise," Draco offers, as the waitress leans closer towards him, her lips forming the shape of a kiss. Only he can see the panic in her eyes. Theo was never quite strong enough to cast an impenetrable Imperius.

He reaches his hand up in what he knows will appear to Theo to be a caress, his hand cupping the young woman's jaw, his thumb hovering over her lips. Close enough that even Theo will look for the stain of her lipstick on Draco's skin.

In that instant, he weakens the curse enough that she can turn away from him, maintaining just enough hold that she exits slowly, her hips swaying.

"I don't think she liked you very much," Theo says, as if he had dismissed her himself.

"I'll find another." How smooth the words are, Draco thinks, how rancid in his mouth. He lifts the whiskey to his lips and downs it all, refills it with a wave of his wand. Lets Theo see the twist of his lips.

While they eat, Theo speaks about the girls he's seeing, the country house he's building, the money he's made. He talks about the clients he works with, and past ventures. In these stories, which are uniformly amusing, Theo is always the hero.

Draco only encourages him, sipping his whiskey slowly, eating just enough to avoid feeling its effects. When Theo finally asks who he's been shagging, if not the bird he owled about, he has a flash of inspiration. He begins to describe Ruby Docherty, precisely enough that, if Theo is indeed involved with the Hand, he might know her.

It's a gamble, of course, because Theo might also know she's died. From what Draco can gather, Ruby's obituary wasn't featured in the *Prophet*—suspicious deaths at Hogwarts almost never are—but someone with Theo's connections would have his own sources.

"Is it love, do you think?" Theo asks, and Draco cannot read his expression.

"I doubt it. She's gone bloody silent on me."

Theo reaches across the table and squeezes Draco's shoulder. For a moment, he's reminded of Hogwarts. Theo was the only one in their set with the capacity for any tenderness, any real

warmth. Draco had always thought, especially in those first years after the war, that Theo would be the one who found his way to the light.

Instead, Theo says, “I suppose that’s why you called me. To find you someone better. I can bring you the waitress.”

“There’s no sport in bedding Muggles,” Draco says. Theo raises an eyebrow. He should have said *Mudblood*, of course.

“No sport, perhaps, but they are so very eager if you play it right.”

“Let’s have a drink in Diagon.” It’s a stupid move, as far as getting information goes. They will be watched. But he wants Theo away from the waitress. At least in Diagon, everyone will have their wands about them.

Theo shakes his head. “Too many people want things from me there. And not Knockturn, either. It’s even worse. Even my club—”

He stops, and Draco graciously allows him to take a moment and collect his thoughts.

“Why don’t we go to mine?” Theo asks, finally, downing the rest of his drink in a determined swallow.

“Trying to get me in your bed?”

“Something like that,” Theo says, a signal Draco can’t quite read. Even before they apparate to Theo’s townhouse, Draco’s wand is at the ready.

As soon as they materialise, Theo tosses a curse at him. Draco blocks it without much effort. Theo aims another, a slightly amplified binding spell, and Draco lets himself be bound at the wrists and ankles. The rug is thick enough that the fall of his wand barely makes a sound.

“What are you going to tell the Ministry?” Beneath the anger on his face, Draco can see real concern. And something more curious: relief.

“I don’t work at the Ministry.” Draco keeps his voice calm. Trying to get Theo to reveal more of himself.

“They never let an Auror leave alive.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“I know Potter. And you know him even better. Does he have you working undercover to investigate the Hand?”

“It would hardly suit my cover to tell you,” Draco says, drawling the words out. There’s something a little charming about Theo’s panic.

“I’ll tell them what I know,” Theo says, drawing his wand up. “I’ll tell my contacts everything.”

“What do you want out of me?”

“I saw you bend the Imperius.” Theo’s breath is ragged, as if he’s been running.

“You were treating the woman like an animal.”

“The Malfoy I knew in school wouldn’t have been bothered.”

“Perhaps I learned something in the camps.”

Theo shoots him a look like this is profound bullshit. He’d been in those camps alongside Draco, had made an apology to Neville Longbottom a month after Draco got out. “They want to destroy us.”

Draco says nothing to this. Because sometimes he believes it, and sometimes, most of the time, he’s convinced that he ought to have been destroyed.

Then Theo’s mouth twists. He runs his hands through his hair. Somehow it looks even better when dishevelled. And Draco feels the old envy he knew at Hogwarts, for this boy who knew warmth and even kindness. Who was able, sometimes, to be weak.

“Then again,” Theo says, his voice almost rueful, “our lot doesn’t mind if we’re destroyed either. As long as they get theirs.”

Draco’s first thought is that he understands why Hermione scoffed at his self-pity. Then he begins to strategize.

“The Muggle restaurant, the waitress, all of it was a test,” he says, calling his wand to his hand but leaving the bindings in place. It’s best if Theo thinks he still maintains a shred of control. No matter what his old friend says, Draco still sees the glazed look in the waitress’ eye as she bent towards him, the terror beneath every gesture.

“I need to get out,” Theo says. “I needed to know if you were truly a bleeding heart now. If you would actually help me.”

“I can’t promise you anything other than more ways to die a grisly death.”

“What if I give you access to the Faithful Hand?”

Draco lets the bindings fall away, then says, “You’ll have to offer me more than that, Nott.”

“I won’t take Veritaserum,” Theo says.

“And if I ask you to make a Vow?”

Theo shakes his head.

Draco sighs, passing his wand through his fingers. Lets Theo think he is considering, that Theo, not Draco, is still the one with the power, the one who could leave at any moment and

leave his old friend. As if there were something Draco needed so badly he hardly dared to speak its name aloud.

He thinks, for a moment, of the way Hermione's face had looked in that hotel room, right before she'd come. The soft pink of her lips and her curls slipping from their bun. She'd been gorgeous and undone and it had taken every bit of his control to let her go.

In spite of everything, Hermione Granger is all Draco wants.

All the obstacles that make such a connection impossible flash through his mind, large and glittering with malice. And yet. He wants to conquer them. To be the kind of person who could one day stand at her side. The person who would not make her live through more horror simply because she can bear it.

Even if doing so might make him more of a monster than he already is. If Hermione is safe, if he can look her in the eye and know he'd atoned for all he'd once forced her to endure, he will find a way to bear the consequences.

So he steels himself and surrenders to all the ugliness that lingers just below the surface. Even if Theo believes him to be good, Draco knows exactly how dangerous he can be. Now he wants to let it show.

"How am I supposed to trust you, Theo, when you won't take the most painless options?" The words a sigh, laced with dark amusement.

"They leave traces," Theo says. His voice is a little higher, with none of the assurance with which he'd spoken in the restaurant. Still, his shoulders are set. "Put a Cruciatus on me if you need to."

Draco slashes his wand and puts Potter's version of a stunner on Theo instead. He falls to the ground, panic making his unseeing eyes wide, his breath loud and quick.

Instead of removing the curse, Draco leaves the room, working a detection spell and following the answering echo of Theo's wards. The one on the study has markers from Gringotts, and Draco moves on without touching it. Goblin spells are almost impossible for a wand-user and he doesn't want the wrath of Gringotts descending on him.

Draco continues to the next-strongest warding, which is under Theo's bed. Lucius always liked to keep certain Dark artefacts in the bedroom, and so when Draco removes the warding, he sets up a half-dozen shielding charms before pulling up the floorboards with his magic and summoning the object.

A set of ledgers and a trunk of gold slide out onto the rug. The whole barrage of detection spells comes back clear, save for one of the strongest known truth spells, the kind which take days to properly cast.

And when he flips through the pages of the ledger, the value of its contents and the spell both become immediately clear: Theo has been very precise in documenting who has given him money. There are no code names or attempts to obfuscate their connections to Dark magic.

Further along, there are references to the Faithful Hand. If he were to present this ledger to a Ministry official, it would buy his immunity in the space of two pages. If one of his clients threatened him, Theo would have enough leverage to run.

Apparently, Theo has been plotting his own escape. But somehow this ledger is still not enough.

The other wardings protect small safes filled with Galleons, jewels both cursed and safe.

He returns to the ledger, transfigures some political thriller on Theo's nightstand into a near-identical copy. Less identical when he conjures ink and writes a note in his own hand, for whoever finds it. When he finishes transfiguring the real ledger, it's the size of a matchbook and fits easily into the pocket of his robes.

Before he returns to Theo, Draco completes a thorough sweep of the flat, spelling open every drawer and cabinet. Everything is silent and subdued except for the sound of Theo's breathing in the other room.

He's moved to sobbing, the closest the modified stunner will let him come to a scream. Draco is almost sorry. Then he thinks of the waitress. The ledger. All the things Theo has done to pay for this flat and the gold and the suits.

Even so, he barely hesitates before removing the stunner, and when Theo proceeds to vomit all over the floor, he spells the sick away before it can leave a stain.

"Where the *fuck* did you learn that?" Theo asks when he's managed to raise himself to all fours. There's a dribble of sick at the corner of his mouth.

"The Aurors' office," Draco demurs, flipping through the transfigured ledger with his thumb. Theo's eyes widen. He hasn't realised that it's a fake, or perhaps he knows that it doesn't matter, now.

"I would've preferred the Cruciatus," Theo says, seemingly beyond comprehending what Draco holds in his hands. All his charm has vanished and now he sounds exhausted.

Then, finally, his eyes fix on the book in Draco's hands. He staggers to his feet, his teeth bared.

"Where did you find that?"

"In the same place all the old families keep their treasures," Draco drawls. "You've been trying to get out, haven't you?"

"What do you need from me?"

"I need to know what the Hand is plotting, and I need to get into their central London cell." He thumbs the pages of the ledger so they give a little *thwack*. Theo flinches at the sound.

"You're hunting Lucius."

There's less than a second to consider his response. If Theo knows that Draco is after his father, it will be so easy to alert Lucius.

But on the other hand, if Theo betrays him, it would be easier to take his father down than an entire organisation he doesn't fully understand yet. And in spite of the power he's demonstrated, in spite of Theo's desperation, there's always someone who could offer more: safety, or its likeness.

Better to offer up a partial truth.

Draco nods.

"Tell me how to find my father," he says. It is not a question. It's an order, delivered in the posh voice of the pureblood prince he was always supposed to be.

Theo begins to speak before Draco has to ask again.

There's darkness all around them, but Harry can hear his students' clumsy attempts to be as quiet as possible.

He'd spent the week turning his classroom into an obstacle course like the one he'd encountered during his Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL exam. Hermione had performed the charm to extend the room, and she and Saraiva and Flitwick had woven the spells which allowed the various obstacles to flicker in and out of existence to match the capacities of his students.

The whole time, the three of them had been going on about pocket universes, citing obscure papers and theories, and Harry had simply kept his eyes on Saraiva's wand. She had barely looked at him. Hermione had avoided him as much as she could, too.

Still, the magic had worked just as intended, making boggarts disappear when the third years finished their class, and some of the more dangerous and powerful curses in the spellbooks take aim at his fifth years. They'd all absorbed the lessons with eagerness, demonstrating their lessons with panache, and Harry had felt the years slipping away, until he could have been in the Room of Requirement again, teaching his friends how to save themselves.

But all his certainty had faded away moments ago, when the first years from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff entered the classroom. Their eyes were wide with fear, and for a moment, Harry had considered walking them to the library. He'd risk Madam Pince's wrath and lecture them about some abstract theory of Dark magic, sprinkling in enough stories about his own experience to distract them.

He'd thought, if these were his children, wouldn't he want someone to protect them?

The question had brought him too close to Hermione, to their row in the hallway.

He left you alone, she'd said, and Harry had felt something in him duck for cover. He hasn't been alone in a room with her since then. He doesn't want to know what Hermione might say.

Now, when his first years shiver in the darkness, he waits for the darkness to strike.

He wants to see how they decide to fight against it, he tells himself. He'll intervene before they're truly harmed.

Ginny had only told Hermione that they were going to Paris at breakfast, after Harry left for some mysterious Saturday work at the Ministry.

"Shouldn't you be preparing one of the Quidditch teams?" Hermione had asked, but there was no bite in the question. Not when Ginny looked excited. "I have essays to review, and spells for the wards—"

"She finally told you?" Rebeca had said, cutting Hermione off as she took her seat at the high table. Instead of her usual robes, she was chicly dressed in close-cut denim trousers, a cream silk blouse, and a camel coat that could pass for robes. There were new beads in her hair, the exact shade of gold as the rings on her fingers.

At this point, Hermione had finally seen Ginny's black jumper, the deep vee of the neckline and the way the cashmere lay close against her skin. The gold at her neck and ears and the red on her lips.

Looking at her friends, Hermione had thought of the loose dress and thick cardigan she'd donned with the idea that she'd spend the day working, and knew that she had nothing stylish enough in her wardrobe to stand next to Rebeca and Ginny on an impromptu trip to Paris.

And anyway, since that row with Harry, since she'd screamed and sobbed in the piano room, Hermione hadn't much wanted to be around anybody. She'd felt distant, even when she was teaching or meeting with Ginny and Rebeca about the rescue attempt. She only felt like herself when she was working on the wards, trying for complex magic just beyond her grasp.

She had meant to find an excellent excuse to beg off.

Then Ginny had followed Hermione to her apartments and selected the white sweaterdress she'd worn to fuck Draco in that dingy hotel, and worked a half-dozen charms so that her hair behaved, and applied cosmetics as if Hermione were a wayward child. She'd then offered up

a shopping bag with knee-high boots and a scarlet coat that fit Hermione as if it were made for her.

“I forgot your birthday,” is all Ginny says when Hermione gapes at her friend, then at the mirror.

Ginny had, in fact, sent Hermione a large package of books for the occasion, and Hermione is the one who has forgotten her friend’s birthday not once but thrice, but she wraps her arms around Ginny and says *thank you* with enough fervour that there are tears in Ginny’s brown eyes.

“How are you feeling?” Hermione asks, knowing it’s not enough. Still, she wants to offer Ginny something.

Because right now, she looks and feels nothing like a beleaguered professor or a harried Ministry official or a woman stupidly pining over a man who does not want her. Even if she’d felt the weight of his hands when she pulled the dress over her body. Now, in the mirror, Hermione smiles as if the only thing she’s felt since the war is happiness.

As if any of this, any of their lives, could ever be so simple.

Still, she laces her fingers through Ginny’s. The emerald ring on her finger has twisted so that the stone presses into Hermione’s palm.

“Sometimes I’m all right,” Ginny says, finally. Her eyes are still on the mirror but she look at anything in particular. “I thought—Pansy might be able to help us with the Hand, if we play it right—but mostly I want to be *away*.”

“We can stay the day, if you like.”

Ginny’s grin widens. Hermione knows it’s a performance but she smiles back as her friend says, “You don’t have a choice in the matter, Mione. I’ve made all kinds of plans.”

By the time they reach Rebeca and apparate to the point Ginny offers them on a scrap of parchment, Hermione is filled with an unfamiliar anticipation. For once there is nothing wrong with what she wants.

Hermione’s been to Paris before, of course. Her parents took her as a small girl and then the summer before her third year at Hogwarts, and then, after the war, she and Viktor made a habit of visiting the apartment he maintained in the city, with a view of the Eiffel Tower. She’d felt safer out of the country, in those first years after Voldemort’s fall. She’d never admitted it to anybody, the way it was so much easier to breathe when she’d left wizarding Britain behind.

Now Ginny leads them through the city until they finally reach a block that isn’t thronged with tourists. She murmurs something directly at the alley between shops and it expands into what appears to be a glass-fronted café.

Then Hermione notices the bookshelves, the expansive desk in the corner, the flurry of activity which does not suggest a leisurely morning of coffee.

Leave it to Pansy Parkinson, she thinks, to make her empire of gossip look effortless.

Pansy had left England, after the war. Her parents were in the camps, but though Pansy had attracted suspicion, she'd been able to flee the country and set up shop in Paris with enough of their money to start a small gossip magazine.

In the years since, she's reported on every major scandal in the wizarding world, every romantic intrigue or political headache or Quidditch rumour. According to the *Prophet*, who frankly lags behind her in reporting on these topics, Pansy is now one of the richest witches in Europe.

Next to her, Hermione can feel the weight of Rebeca's stare. At first, she's bemused, because surely Rebeca has seen buildings appearing from nowhere, but then she realises that Rebeca's eyes are on the devices in all the journalists' hands. Their silver keypads and gleaming screens look practically Muggle, sleek and efficient.

"Pansy only has an hour for us," Ginny says, tugging them towards the door.

But perhaps Pansy Parkinson is curious about the meeting, too, because she unfolds herself from her desk chair and makes her way to them, the sound of her heels against the floor leaving behind an echo. There's not a single crease in her pencil skirt, and her gleaming black hair falls to her shoulders like a bolt of silk.

Hermione expects some sharp remark pointed at herself, something cutting about Gryffindor or Hogwarts or maybe England, but Pansy stops in front of Rebeca, her eyes running over the coat, the body inside it. Every angle of Pansy's body suggests a cool appraisal, and yet she does not look away. Only the motion of her golden, almond-shaped eyes separates her beholding from outright staring.

"Where did you come from?" Pansy asks, finally, in a voice that wants to be sharp but comes out appreciative.

"That's what we came to ask about," Rebeca says, in a close approximation of her habitual elegance. But there is something in her voice that makes it new, something warm and pleading.

"Have you two met?" Ginny darts a glance at Hermione as she says it. There's a smile forming at the corners of her lips.

Pansy shakes her head. Her eyes are still on Rebeca. Beyond them, people are glancing up at their desks and staring at the knot of them. Their fingers poised over gleaming keys.

"We need to speak somewhere private," Hermione says, trying for prim and overshooting by a mile.

Still, Pansy looks away long enough to scowl at Hermione. Then she lifts her wand and draws it into a slow spiral over her head. The air moves like a sparkling curtain around them.

“What do you want?” Pansy asks when the spell is complete.

“How do we know the ward is secure?” Hermione counters.

“I may not have been top of our class, but I know my business,” Pansy says, voice sharp even as her eyes drift back to Rebeca. As if she can’t help it.

“My brother is being held by A Mão Fiel,” Rebeca says, taking a half-step towards Pansy. “Ginny thought you might have contacts who could help us free him.”

Hermione tries not to gape. Rebeca has never offered up so much information without being pushed.

“First of all,” Pansy says, “I don’t write sad smut and I try to avoid it whenever I can. This is sad smut. And second of all, the Faithful Hand in any of its guises is dangerous. More than any of you realise.”

“How do you know?” Rebeca asks. Her voice is low, but not for secrets. Hermione watches a blush pass over Pansy’s pale cheeks, there and then gone again.

“My mother has contacts in the organisation.”

“In China?” Hermione asks. Pansy’s mother, Li-Ming Parkinson, was the heiress to the richest magical family in Beijing before she married Pansy’s father.

Pansy rolls her eyes. “In Britain,” she snaps.

“The Ministry would be on high alert if the Hand had access to that much power.”

“I have no desire to debate what your Ministry is capable of,” Pansy says, turning away from Hermione and giving Ginny a brief appraisal before turning back to Rebeca. “Tell me why you want your brother free.”

“He’s all I have,” Rebeca says. Her hands move through the air, her rings catching the light.

“You used to believe that. Tell me what’s true now.”

“You said you wouldn’t help us.”

“I said it’s dangerous,” Pansy replies, taking another step towards Rebeca. “There’s a difference.”

“Which is?”

“I’ll put up with danger for the right price. Or the right person.”

Ginny holds up her hands. “Will you help us or not, Parkinson?”

“Why are you helping her? Aside from being the same fucking do-gooders you’ve always been.”

“We need her on our side,” Hermione says, not sure if it’s the right answer. Pansy is too sleek for her, too much of an operator.

“Why?” Pansy asks. Her eyes drift back to Rebeca. This time, Rebeca’s lips kick up into a smile.

“We’re trying to figure that out.” Hermione presses her hands over her eyes quickly, just long enough to collect herself. There are dozens of people like Pansy at the Ministry, but they’ve been cowed by her for years. She’s nearly forgotten how to manoeuvre around them. “Do you have any contacts in Brazil?”

Pansy draws her lips into a thoughtful pout, considering each of them. She looks out beyond her wards to the bustling office, the writers who have returned to their desks, typing diligently. A queen surveying her empire. Her hair falls like a curtain around her face, so that her expression is shielded from Hermione.

“I’m familiar with A Mão Fiel,” she says, finally. “What will you give me in exchange for information?”

“I’ll upgrade the spells on your styli,” Rebeca offers. “This version will freeze in the presence of too much magic.”

Pansy makes a swatting motion with her hand. “I had a magi-technologist in months ago to fix it. Take me out for dinner, though, and I’ll tell you everything I know.”

Rebeca turns toward Hermione and Ginny.

“You swore a Vow,” Hermione says, while Ginny is saying, “You don’t have to unless you want to.”

Then Rebeca asks, “What do you know that Blaise Zabini doesn’t?”

“Blaise is in love with your brother, isn’t he? That makes him desperate.” Pansy says this all in a little purr. Even as she fights her frustration at not knowing that particular secret, Hermione sees it all fitting together, the architecture of a romance without any of its residue. The click of a key fitting into a lock. “And Zabini works for the Ministry. He has to observe certain proprieties. Whereas I can do what I like.”

“We need the plans for the compound. The exact coordinates for apparition. The guard shifts.” Hermione recognises this tone in Rebeca’s voice. She’s trying not to show how much she wants this.

“Dinner will be a bargain for all that,” Pansy says, then looks up at Hermione and Ginny, “I’ll think of something I want from the two of you.”

“I’ll give you an exclusive story.” Ginny’s expression is perfectly pleasant but her voice is flat. “Hermione isn’t offering you anything.”

“I suppose the future Minister doesn’t want a gossip columnist to have any power over her.” But there’s a flash in Pansy’s eyes that reminds Hermione of the way Malfoy looked in the middle of one of their duels. And then she thinks of the absence of stories about her in Pansy’s magazines. The negatives, moving and half-clothed, of herself and Viktor on one of those Paris evenings, which had been owed to her London flat. There had been no signature but she’d recognised Pansy’s handwriting.

Perhaps it’s reckless, but she trusts Pansy and that hidden streak of kindness.

Still, Hermione crosses her arms over her chest, reminding herself of the exact location of her wand. “Tell me the extent of the threat that the Faithful Hand poses, Pansy, and I’ll give you my first interview as Minister.”

“They’ve counted on you lot thinking they’re not powerful,” Pansy says.

“I’ll need more than that,” Hermione counters, “my contacts at the *Prophet* will be angry I didn’t come to them.”

“I’ll give you a stylus and send you a full report that way within a week. It’s more secure than owl post.”

“Give us five,” Ginny says.

“Why?”

“We’ll pay the cost to you.”

“I’d rather know why you need so many,” Pansy says. This time, her golden eyes linger on Hermione longest, and she understands, holding back a shudder, why Pansy has been so successful in her chosen business. Her gaze seems to penetrate deep beneath the skin, into the unseen parts where all the unspoken hurts and mysteries reside. “What are you planning?”

“A rescue mission,” Hermione says, raising her chin. She’s made the gesture a thousand times in the Ministry.

“Then I’ll admit that I’m confused,” Pansy counters. Her index finger taps at her chin in an elegant caricature of thought, a delicate gold ring gleaming between the first two knuckles. “Why not ask dear old Draco about the Hand? Since you’re so hard-pressed as to require the assistance of a lowly gossip columnist. According to my sources, your colleague has much better access than I do.”

“Malfoy encountered the Hand while working as an Auror, years ago.” Hermione can feel Ginny’s eyes on her, and Rebeca’s, but she focuses on Pansy. “His information is more than likely outdated.”

Pansy’s smile is brilliant white against her red lips. “My sources saw him having dinner with Theo Nott in Muggle London three days ago. And let me offer you one secret for free, Granger: Theo’s in some deep dark shit. I’m not so sure your Draco is as reformed as you think.”

“Tell me what you know,” Hermione breathes. She doesn’t take the time to calculate, let alone to think. In her mind, there is only Draco Malfoy, and the expression on his face when he’d pulled her off of him and set her on her feet. She had thought he hadn’t wanted her.

But maybe he’d known he would be going straight into the darkness and he’d been trying to spare her.

Or perhaps he’d never changed, never reformed in the slightest, and she’d been an utter fool to trust him.

Either way, she needs to know the truth.

“What is it worth to you?” Pansy asks, a smirk on her lips. As if she knows she has Hermione by the throat.

But Pansy does not know, cannot know, about all those hours on the night of Halloween. Everything that happened in Draco’s apartments is an invisible band around Hermione’s chest. She can brazen this out, as if it is simply a project of some significance.

So Hermione keeps her shoulders squared, her feet in a duelling stance, when she says, “It depends, of course, on what knowledge you can offer me. But you should keep in mind that I’m willing to make the danger worth your while.”

“You’ll give me safe passage back to England?”

“That’s easy,” Hermione says. She can feel her smile becoming genuine.

It’s a mistake. She knows this as soon as she sees Pansy’s expression.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Pansy says. Now she’s all business. “Take the styli you need. I’ll be in touch with the information you requested.” And then, turning to Rebeca, Pansy says, “I’ll tell you where to meet me for dinner.”

“If you bring any harm to my brother...” Rebeca begins. This is the first time anything but elegant resolve has coloured her voice.

“You won’t want to cause me harm,” Pansy says, almost tenderly, as if the words are a real promise.

She waves her wand and the ward falls away like a curtain. The bustle of the office is suddenly loud. Pansy waves her wand again, and a boutique bag with her initials appears on the closest desk.

“I believe you’ll find everything you need inside,” she says, all pleasant courtesy, a queen among commoners. “You can stay for coffee if you’d like.”

A moment later, they are out in the street. None of them had thought to cast a warming spell and the cold wind cuts through the wool of their coats. Ginny clutches the thick paper bag to her chest, ignoring the ribbon straps.

“We should go home,” Hermione says, barely comprehending the street before her. She’s only thinking about what she promised away to Pansy, where Draco might be, all that could come next.

“I made three different appointments,” Ginny counters with a sliver of her usual resolve. “We’re not leaving here without going shopping.”

“I’m happy with the styli,” Rebeca offers, though she sounds dazed.

“You have a date with Pansy Parkinson,” Ginny points out. “You’re going to need something nice to wear.”

“She seemed to like me perfectly well,” Rebeca says, though her cheeks have flushed crimson. There’s the hint of a smile at the corners of her lips.

“You’ll want the upper hand, with Pansy,” Ginny insists, and then, turning to Hermione, she says, “And Mione, you’re going to have to tell me why she thought she could bait you with Draco Malfoy. Did you end up shagging him after all of your protests?”

Now Hermione feels the flush creeping up on her own cheeks. Then she banishes it.

Hermione was always waiting for something to change after the war.

“What if I did?” she asks, the words more fragile than she ever intended. She’s reminded of the essays her first-year students write, the way they don’t yet have the words for all the things they want to say.

“Then we’re going to need to get you some new dress robes,” is all Ginny says as she loops her arm through Hermione’s. “McGonagall decided there’s going to be a Yule Ball.”

“She hasn’t informed any of the professors,” Rebeca points out, and Hermione realises how expertly Ginny deflected the situation.

“None of you have as much time to be nosy as I do,” Ginny says, with a bright little smirk on her face, the one that makes her look most like George. “She told me I could help pick the theme if I wanted.”

They end up debating the theme while they walk across Paris. Rebeca and Hermione both propose something historical, though they can’t agree between Hermione’s idea of magic during the classical period and Rebeca’s inexplicable obsession with the ruffs popular in dress robes of the Elizabethan era. Ginny, meanwhile, insists on something more modern.

“Titanium means nothing to the wizarding world,” Hermione insists, laughing. It feels good to laugh with her friends in the streets of Paris, to debate something meaningless. She squeezes Ginny’s arm with her own. “I think that my theme is much more dignified.”

“Dignity means nothing to teenage wizards,” Rebeca deadpans. “And they will look ridiculous in chitons.”

“They’ll look worse in ruffs.” Ginny can barely get the word out through her laughter, as if all the young wizards of Hogwarts are arrayed before her in ruffs and scowls. Hermione starts laughing at the mental image, and Rebeca only manages one exasperated huff before she’s laughing with them, falling against Hermione.

They’re still laughing when they walk inside the door of the boutique. The two elegant women who work there glare at them until they get a good look at who exactly has walked inside their shop, and then they simmer over Hermione and Ginny, who makes a show of introducing Rebeca and asking them to help her find something chic for an upcoming date.

Once Rebeca has been herded into a dressing room, Ginny pulls Hermione over to a low chaise by the fitting room.

“Tell me about Malfoy,” she murmurs. “How was it?”

Ginny’s tone is so open, so warm, that Hermione can’t hide.

“It was...good enough to make me think it could be something more,” she confesses. “I was wrong.”

“What happened?”

“He wanted me to go to him and I did and we—but afterward it was clear he only thought of me as a colleague.”

“Malfoy is a prick, and quite frankly I’ve never really believed Harry when he said he was a model Auror and a decent bloke,” Ginny says, her imitation of Harry comically awful, “but I saw the way he looked at you when I visited last month. He was besotted.”

Hermione raises an eyebrow. “How very romantic of you, Ginerva Weasley.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it, except that I saw it with my own eyes. And nobody ever just shags once in the novels when they have feelings for each other.”

“It wasn’t just once.” Hermione’s cheeks are so warm she swears they could heat the whole boutique. “I should probably look at the dress robes.”

Ginny waves a hand. “The next shop is far more suited to you, I think. I picked this one for Rebeca. Stay and tell me what it was like with Malfoy.”

“It wasn’t like anything I’d ever experienced. Even with Viktor, and I thought he was quite good.”

“The fact that you used the word ‘quite’ to describe shagging Viktor Krum says everything I need to know.”

Before Hermione can insist that Ginny elaborate, Rebeca emerges in robes of deep plum that cut close to her body, and a cape that falls behind her in a train. Her brown skin gleams and her rings seem to shine a little brighter as she makes her way towards them.

“That’s too much for your dinner with Pansy,” Ginny says, loud enough for the other women to hear, “but you should get it in case you want to invite her to the Yule Ball.”

“It doesn’t have a ruff,” Rebeca retorts, pursing her lips like she’s holding back a laugh.

“Buy it anyway,” Ginny says, as Hermione says that it looks quite, *quite* nice.

When Rebeca goes back to the dressing room, Ginny turns back to Hermione. “Look, I know he was horrible to you in school, but Harry doesn’t trust anybody. If he thinks Malfoy’s reformed—”

“He’s not sure about that these days,” Hermione reminds her, thinking of Harry in McGonagall’s office and then Pansy’s suspicions, all of it seeming horribly definitive.

“Harry’s not sure of much, lately,” Ginny says. She sounds weary. “But you know how Aurors are. Malfoy probably thinks he’s being horribly noble by keeping you out of whatever he’s doing.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t always have to do that, Mione.” She lets out a rueful little laugh. Hermione shoots her a look, a question. Ginny only shakes her head. “Speaking of which, you’re going to let me pick your dress robes for you, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Yes, Molly,” Hermione answers, laughing at the face Ginny makes even before her friend’s expression changes.

Maybe, she thinks, things will come out right.

Chapter End Notes

Between Draco at his most morally gray, and Pansy Parkinson entering the chat, this chapter was a lot of fun to write.

Pansy is loosely based on Lainey Lui, the founder of Lainey Gossip. The line about sad smut is borrowed with all love and admiration.

Also...how are we feeling about Pansy and Rebeca? Because, personally, I have been so excited to get to them!

Thank you to my betas—Carter, Farrah, Fitz, Gillian, and Ivy—for all of your help and insight, and for convincing me that I should keep writing the Pretty in Paris scene. You all are the best. All mistakes, here and always, are my own.

Thank you so much for reading Against Nostalgia! I really appreciate all of your support and encouragement.

If you want to get sneak peeks at future Against Nostalgia chapters and hear what I think about books, find me on [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#), or [Twitter](#).

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

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

Draco has moved from the hotel in Edinburgh to a nondescript flat in Muggle London, close enough to tonight's meeting-place to allow for an easy escape on foot, but far enough out of the way to allow him to move about undetected.

He spent the morning putting up wards and security spells, on transfiguring himself a bed and sofa that are perhaps too similar to the ones in his apartments at Hogwarts. He charmed his face and hair to buy food, simple things he could prepare with a few spells.

By the middle of the afternoon, he is watching the sun dip behind the other buildings on his street, tapping his fingers on the kitchen counter. He pulls his old book of Eliot poems from his bag, but the lines fragment under his eyes. Each phrase becomes, in one way or another, a description of Hermione.

He forces himself to think through his strategy for the evening, from his entrance to his exit, all the spells and conversations and tactics he will need in between. This takes him an hour.

Finally, he submits to temptation, throws up a few extra wards, and pulls out a scrap of parchment.

I am thinking about that letter you sent me years ago, he writes, his handwriting slanting with his hurry to put the words on paper. I wish—I have no idea what I would have said in an interview with you, if it would have changed anything or even mattered. One day you'll realise that I'm exactly the monster you made me out to be when we were both at Hogwarts.

But I still wish I could have seen you sooner.

I think you are the centre of all my regrets. All the things I should have known. How could anyone look at you and call your worthiness into question?

I'm meeting with the Hand tonight. Theo has arranged for my introduction to the central London cell. My father is a member and I suspect there will be other familiar faces. It is possible, too, that Theo is sending me into a trap.

I thought that all of this was over, Hermione. I thought I could more or less escape it, living at Hogwarts, knowing the Ministry had a plan, that I was contributing in my small and secret way. I thought it would be enough to try and keep the other purebloods from believing the lies I was fed from birth. But Hogwarts is too late. All of it feels too late, too little.

When I saw you, I think that was when I had to realise all of this. Maybe that's why I avoided you for so long. Because as soon as I knew you, as soon as I couldn't ignore how much I wanted you, I had to acknowledge how much danger you were in from mere proximity with me. This Mark on my arm will always be a beacon, unless something changes.

Tonight, I hope, I can start making the required changes.

By the time he finishes, darkness has fallen and the streetlight falls on the parchment. He spells Hermione's cipher on every sentence, then seals the letter with wax, marked by the Malfoy signet ring.

Instead of summoning Ulysses, Draco leaves it on the desk. Maybe he won't return from tonight's errand. Maybe Hermione will never find what he's written. At least he's said it.

He dresses quickly in his second-best black robes, polishes the signet ring with a spell, charms his hair away from his face. In the mirror, he looks like a weapon. Like a prince.

Theo is waiting for him at the address at Stanley Crescent. His robes are black, like Draco's, but he looks wealthy. His hair has been newly cut. None of it can disguise his obvious nerves, his fidgeting fingers or the way he bites his lip.

"You're only in danger if you're leading me into a trap, Nott," Draco murmurs, watching for the hint of a glamour or a warding spell. There's nothing he can see.

"You need to draw the sigil with your wand," Theo says after a moment. His voice sounds faint. "They know you're already a member, or they'd be here to welcome you."

No doubt it would not be a warm welcome, in that case. For all that he still bears the Mark on his arm, his affiliations with Hogwarts and the Ministry will have raised eyebrows.

Draco assumes a bored sneer and begins to draw the symbol of the Hand in the air above him. With the first subtle scoop of his wand, the loops and whorls of the fingers and the palm appear in shimmering gold before him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Theo's shocked expression at the precision of his wandwork. It doesn't bode well for what he'll find inside the meeting.

Still, the warding falls away to reveal a glass-fronted building that only reflects the streetlights and the two of them. Though he knows it's a risk, tactically, Draco doesn't wait for Theo before he pushes the door open. He keeps his wand clutched tight in his hand. All his senses are on alert.

The parlour he enters could belong to any of the old pureblood gentleman's clubs, or in one of the older manors. The other men in the room—they're nearly all men—look as if they were made for such a place as well. Lucius stands towards the back of the room, holding court among men who Draco recognises as minor purebloods or the younger sons of Death Eaters.

There are a handful of former Death Eaters in the room as well, beyond his father. They are the ones who study Draco closer than anyone, as if his posture might betray him. When he's offered a drink, he knows better than to cast a detection spell. He makes a show of taking an appreciative sip of the firewhiskey, though it's a vintage that his own father would never allow in his cellars.

Not a single drop of liquid passes his lips. Particularly after he scents Veritaserum mixed carefully with the alcohol.

When he looks back at Theo, his old housemate looks just as nervous as ever. Which suggests that either he knew what was coming, or that he didn't understand the danger the Hand truly poses.

Then Draco thinks of the ledger. He takes another false sip of firewhiskey.

"London is quite the journey from Hogwarts," Horatio Mulciber remarks, turning towards him. He's rolled up the sleeves of his robes so that his Dark Mark is clearly visible, the ink as dark as if the Dark Lord had just summoned him. "I heard tell you were based in Inverness."

"Matters are well in hand there," Draco says, drawing the glass upward again. "I was told I was at liberty to work as I saw fit. I heard rumours of great works in the larger cells."

"You always did have an eye for glory." Lucius now stands at his side. His Dark Mark is also blackened and visible, and his toadies keep looking away from the conversation to stare at it. "I was concerned you'd lost perspective, up in that school."

"How else are we to find the worthy, Father?"

"Your headmistress will hardly allow anyone who isn't Ministry arse-kissed inside the wards. It's poor hunting, if you ask me," Lucius says. He takes a hearty mouthful of the firewhiskey in his glass, then looks pointedly at Draco, who copies the motion, letting a splash of the liquid fall against his robes. As if he might already be feeling the effects of the alcohol and the potion inside it.

"We've managed to fill our ranks with plenty of Hogwarts grads." This man speaks in an American accent, though he looks nearly as posh as anybody there. His hair is drawn into a bun at the nape of his neck and his robes are close-cut like Theo's. He's clearly studied the group well enough, though Lucius still sniffs in his direction by way of reply, his disdain evident.

Draco holds out his hand, and the American takes it.

"Jake Foster," he says, giving Draco's hand a firm squeeze.

"Have you been in London long?" He doesn't bother with an introduction, not when Jake approached him and now looks at him with something like expectation.

"A few months. We don't have anything like this in New York. I mean, of course the Hand has its largest chapter there, but everyone tries so hard to be *correct*. You all are actually doing things here."

"I'm sure your fellows in America do their best," Draco says, completing a quick scan of the room while Jake tells him about the six months that the New York chapter spent arguing about their charter and by-laws. There are thirty members here, and six former Death Eaters including himself. Another fifteen are mostly familiar to him, members of newer or more

obscure pureblood families, Voldemort sympathisers who were never given the honour of the Mark, or men like Theo who were a handful of years too young to play an active role in the latest war.

He doesn't recognise the remaining members, and they seem to be strangers to each other as well, wafting about the room and joining the knots of British purebloods. They bring their drinks up to their lips with gestures that are clearly practised imitations. Even their laughter mimics the sounds that Draco has heard in drawing rooms all his life.

He used to want all of this so badly. Just so long as the world confirmed he was important.

The conversation flows around him. Draco looks for Theo but doesn't see him. He doesn't want to make a show of canvassing the room—eagerness would be noted—and falls into nodding at the things his father and Mulciber say, as if they were clever at all.

Finally, as he's begun to think that he's been invited to some social hour for Dark wizards who never got very far in life, a bell rings in the distance. Suddenly, a large wooden table appears in the room, and chairs.

Draco knows that table and those chairs. He'd grown up with them, and then they'd changed for him during the war, when Voldemort had sat at the head of the table and Draco had watched him suspend corpses above the place where his family had always laid out their breakfast.

Of course Lucius looks pleased with this arrangement. Then again, he's just been surrounded by toadies and hangers-on who have lapped up every word, and he's always flourished in that kind of atmosphere.

He beckons Draco toward the head of the table, which remains empty. It reminds him so much of that last year of the war that he has to swallow down the bile in his throat.

When they're all seated, a figure in black appears. All the men incline their heads in deference.

Draco recognises the figure instantly. Or rather, he knows they match Rebeca's description of his contact, dressed in loose black robes and with a hood around their face, deep enough to be a veil. Their hands are covered in gloves and, just below the hemline of the robes, he can see a pair of thick black boots.

The only identifying feature is the wand held in those gloved hands, made of ebony. Between the leather-clad fingers, Draco can just make out a gleam of silver. But then, such a pattern was in vogue for the old pureblood families, particularly the ones who favoured Dark magic. The colour was thought to bring them closer to the forbidden magicks.

He still remembers how the vein in Lucius' jaw had pulsed when Draco's hawthorn wand had chosen him, brown and seemingly quite ordinary.

His father's eyes are on the black-garbed figure and his expression is caught between admiration and something very similar to love. He'd never looked at Voldemort like that,

certainly. In fact, Draco's not sure if he's ever seen that look on his father's face.

Perhaps it's the power that radiates from the black-garbed figure in waves. It's a waste, or it's a statement of the depth of their magic, to let loose so much just for show.

"Welcome," the figure says, in a voice that is deep and obviously disguised. It resonates in a way that does not suggest a human mouth. "We have a visitor among us."

Theo stands from his place, across and down the table from Draco. "Draco Malfoy is a years-long member of the Faithful Hand."

They'd talked through what Theo would say, but he still looks nervous as he recites his lines.

"Why does he seek to join our cell?"

Theo hesitates, and Draco rises, pushing his chair away. "I want to be where things are happening. To do what others hesitate to accomplish."

In the back of the group, he hears someone mutter, *he fucking hesitated once, and look where it got us*. The voice sounds like Mulciber's.

"There is a ritual welcome that all initiates of the Hand must complete," the figure in black says. "Will you allow us to initiate you?"

Theo's hands are knotted together. His knuckles are white. Whatever is coming is terrible and Theo had advanced warning.

There are too many people in this room, crowded too close. Fighting his way out is not an option unless he wants to catch a quick killing curse.

"I joined years ago," Draco says, steeling himself.

"This cell has its own initiation practices," the figure says back, absolutely unbothered and all the more frightening for it. "Others have adopted them, but not the group of you in Inverness."

A light disdain laces each syllable. There's a pure blood of some pedigree beneath all that black fabric, Draco is sure of it. No one else could master that tone so exactly.

"I ask you again," the figure continues, though they hardly turn towards Draco, "do you wish to be initiated into this cell of the Faithful?"

"Yes," Draco answers, opening his hands wide. A gesture of surrender. "I wish to become one of your number."

"There is, of course, the matter of your ties to Hogwarts and the Ministry. To our world, you appear to be on the side of all that is good and light. Your initiation means that you will turn your back on this world and turn to darkness."

“I believe I can be of better use for you if our world believes I am good,” Draco says. He tries to sound assured, the voice of an Auror when his Dark prey lies bound and bloody.

He barely detects the wand work in the darkness, only feels the bolt of pain at his chest. His heart is made of fire that explodes outward to consume his body.

“You do not believe anything but what we tell you, Draco Malfoy. Once you pass through this night, you belong completely to the Faithful Hand. Your life, your thoughts, your very breath—all of it is ours to wield.”

Only his training keeps him upright. The fire burns hotter. He bites back a scream.

“Throw your worst at him, each of you,” the black-clad figure says. The leader of the Faithful Hand. “If he survives it, he can be one of our own.”

The next curse hits his bad knee and Draco crumbles. He makes his body as small as possible, wrapping himself tight around the pain, trying to focus enough to create the subtlest wandless warding spell, to cast it just around the perimeter of his body.

Every time his magic begins to build, another curse hits him, and then another and another, burning and stinging and raging and twisting through him, until every part of his body alights with pain, until it’s all he can think of. Distantly, he hears someone screaming, and he thinks he should run, should grab his wand, but he is bound by the pain, a monster beneath his skin, the world entire.

He can feel his senses fading and Draco wants to hold on, wants to reach for the ghost Hermione, extending her hand towards him. He does not know why she is in this place but she is not pain and he is ashamed of how relieved he is to see her. There is the curl of something like music that exists beyond him, and then there is a wisp of light, but all of it goes grey and he is forced into the darkness alone.

Gradually, the darkness recedes and there are voices.

Should we take him to St. Mungo’s? Theo. Or at least Theo’s voice. In the distance, there are fingers tapping against his drink.

A trap, a trap, a trap. He knew all along and still he went.

His thoughts are everywhere. The words sprawl beyond him. He wanted to stop this.

We need to find a way— beyond him, someone is speaking—*Hogwarts, at least they tried in Inverness.*

They were never ready for the Granger girl. Or those wards.

—our weapon is there.

I look forward to meeting little Miss Mudblood again. His father’s voice, a knife wrapped in softest velvet. *She thinks she can take what’s ours.*

I want to hear her scream my name. Each syllable ringing in his head, all of it pain.

Draco is reaching for his wand. The world is dark and awful but at least he can move through it.

Another flash of light, and he is lost to the darkness.

All day, Ginny has found her eyes wandering toward the Quidditch pitch. Even at her meeting with Hermione and Rebeca in Hermione's apartments, overlooking the lake, she'd been angling towards the window for a view of the stands. She rarely plays Seeker but she's sworn she's caught a glimpse of the Snitch at least a dozen times.

They all walk to the game together, Harry and Hermione and Neville and Luna and Rebeca, and it almost feels like old times at Hogwarts, except that Rebeca hasn't yet realised that there's no point in arguing with Luna about everything, and Ginny is very politely refusing to look at Luna's enormous belly. Harry, too, has managed to stand as far away from Luna as he can, gripping Ginny's hand tight.

They haven't talked about the baby since Halloween. They'd barely said anything about it since the miscarriage, all the blood in the sheets, and Ginny pushes it out of her mind now, because Gryffindor is playing Slytherin and she's certain they have more than enough talent to win inside an hour.

Today, Ginny doesn't want anything complicated. She wants an easy victory.

Which might be why she can't quite keep the smile on her face as Ron and Leonor walk towards them, Gryffindor scarves around their necks.

When she sees Ron and Hermione's faces, pale and shocked, she can feel her lips twisting into a real grimace. This bullshit between them has gone on for years and today, Ginny wants none of it. All she wants is Quidditch.

Still, she kisses her brother and sister-in-law on the cheek and is ready to make polite conversation before Leonor makes a beeline for Hermione.

"What's that about?" Harry asks while Ginny watches Leonor murmur something in Hermione's ear. A moment later, they break away from the group.

Ron, still walking with them, only shakes his head. "Best not to get into it here. How's the team?"

Despite herself, Ginny lets herself be pulled into this conversation, laying out the strengths and weaknesses of the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams as they make their way to the stands. All around them, people are staring at Harry and Ron and probably at herself, too, but Ginny is too absorbed in the discussion, in the sight of the pitch, to pay it any mind.

The game starts off the way Ginny recommended, with the Gryffindor chasers immediately pressing their advantage and scoring two goals in quick succession. Unfortunately in doing so, they allow the Slytherin keeper to catch on to their style of play, and she manages to knock the Quaffle out of the hoops again and again, all while the Slytherin chasers make some promising attempts on the Gryffindor hoops.

Ginny doesn't realise she's shouting until Harry pulls her back into her seat. Down on the pitch, Madame Hooch is shaking her head.

"You'd be putting the team at risk in a regulation match, coaching in the stands like that," Ron says, fiddling with his wedding ring. Leonor still hasn't returned to the stands.

"They need to try a different play." Ginny's eyes are already back on the pitch. "Slytherin's on to them and they're too locked in. I should have told them—" There are a hundred things, more than Ginny can cram into a phrase. She wants to spare them this loss so badly. She doesn't want to see the Slytherins cheering.

Harry wraps his arm around her shoulders. "Madame Hooch says the teams have all improved a lot since you started coaching."

"She told me I was playing favourites."

"You're not working for Hogwarts." Harry sounds as if it's only a matter of time, though, and maybe it is. When Ginny looks around her, at the fourteen players on their brooms, at all the fans cheering in the stands, everything she's felt in the past month seems to float away. Maybe it could be this easy.

Then she spots the Snitch, well before anyone else. Ginny knows the moment Harry sees it too, because his fingers tighten on her shoulder.

The Slytherin seeker is close enough to grab it, but he's not paying attention. Meanwhile the Gryffindor seeker is soaring above the pitch, trying to see everything at once. Too far away to claim the victory.

By the time they spot the Snitch, it's darted away and disappeared. She's always hated the way that a Snitch can apparate whenever it likes. It feels like a cheat. Better a solid Quaffle in her hand.

Around them, the crowd groans, and Gryffindor presses its advantage to score another goal.

"Rosy needs to pay better attention," Ginny mutters, low enough that only Harry can hear. They're sitting near too many parents.

“I would have done the same thing,” he says. “There’s always a risk that the Snitch will appear where you want it least.”

Wrapped up in the game already, Ginny’s tempted to remind him that he’s not the one who plays Quidditch for England, but the fact is that Harry could have played seeker professionally if he’d wanted.

After the war, though, he’d been fixed on becoming an Auror, burying himself in his books the way Hermione always had. Ginny would lean back against him, glad she had another year before her N.E.W.T.s, dreaming up her own Quidditch plays. Before her second sixth year was half over, Harry had ceded the captaincy to her. They’d won the school cup easily, and the scouts had started sending Ginny owls.

“So you would have missed the Snitch too?” Ginny asks now, her eyes on the knot of Slytherin chasers who are trying to establish possession.

Instead of answering, Harry twirls his finger through her hair, and maybe it’s the adrenalin of the game or the lovely bite of the November air, but Ginny feels his touch all over her body as he gives the ginger strands a little tug. The smile on his face looks absentminded, but she can sense his green eyes watching her.

“Do you have plans with Hermione after the game?” he asks.

Ginny thinks of Leonor, the way she’d siphoned Hermione away, then pushes his brother’s wife out of her head. Whatever that was between them, she has a mess of her own to deal with, and healing to do.

She smiles up at him, and for a moment they’re at Hogwarts again, the first time, forgetting that they’re anything but students. “Harry Potter, if I didn’t know better, I would think you were trying to seduce me.”

He kisses instead of answering, swiping his tongue against her lower lip. His hands come up her cheeks, as if he wants to fix them both inside this moment. When she pulls away, for just a moment, Ginny forgets where she is. She forgets everything but this man, the person she’s been in love with as far back as she can remember.

Then Slytherin scores a goal and they both wince, but Harry takes her hand in his, his thumb stroking across her knuckles.

While the Slytherin fans are cheering, an owl descends into the stands.

Ginny wrenches her eyes off the game, and feels Harry reaching for his wand. Beside him, Ron is doing the same thing. Owls are a rare sight at Quidditch games—there are wards to protect them from interference and to keep the Snitch within certain bounds—and this one clutches a scroll limned in gold in its talons.

The owl circles the pitch, all eyes turning towards the silent flap of its tawny wings. Then, like a dart, it descends to Rebeca. The owl hovers in front of her, seemingly oblivious to the

fact that Harry and Ron have risen, wands drawn, as Rebeca takes the scroll and reads it, the golden light of the parchment illuminating her face.

Her features remain impassive as she reads, but as soon as she finishes, she rises, reaches across Harry and Ron, and pushes the parchment into Ginny's hands.

The owl swoops towards her, talons out. Ginny has grown up around owls all her life, but none has ever tried to attack her.

Dimly, she's aware of the fact that the parchment has stopped glowing. Whatever words Rebeca read have faded. But Ginny cannot think of this, because the talons are grazing her cheek, and she has to duck away.

Already Harry and Ron are loosing their spells at the animal, but Rebeca is faster. She bats them away, and as they whirl on her, she pulls the parchment from Ginny's hands and places it in the owl's talons.

Instantly the owl changes course, swift and silent, rising above the pitch again. Once again, the parchment glows with golden light.

A trickle of blood falls down Ginny's face, collecting at the corner of her lip. Around them, the stands have gone silent. Every player hovers in the air, and Ginny is aware, now, of the fact that their eyes have now turned on her.

"What was that?" Harry asks. His wand is pointed at Rebeca's throat.

"Exactly who you think," she says, too calm. No trace of the irritation she levels at Ginny and occasionally Hermione when they meet to discuss the rescue operation. "I've been summoned."

"We'll go with you," Harry says.

"The letter was tracked," Rebeca counters, and Ginny thinks of the owl swooping towards her as soon as she'd touched the parchment. The way the letter had stopped glowing. "Our friends may have already sensed your magic. You'll be expected. There's nothing they'd love more than to hold you captive."

"Then I'll go," Ron offers.

Rebeca shakes her head. "I swore a vow to the headmistress. I will return as quickly as I can."

"What did you want me to see?" Ginny asks, quickly, pushing between Harry and Ron.

"He's hurt," Rebeca says, too calmly, and for a moment Ginny's mind races and settles on Fred and the roaring in her ears begins. Then Rebeca mouths *Hermione's git* and the fog around her vision lifts. She thinks, finally, of Hermione, walking away from the stands with Leonor.

“She’ll want to know,” she says, careful with her words. Because Hermione cannot go to Draco either, not if the letter is being tracked. And Hermione will try, if she finds out the wrong way.

Rebeca nods, then turns to make her way past Neville and Luna. Ginny braces herself against Harry and Ron, to keep them from following.

“Do you trust her?” Harry murmurs.

Ginny’s not sure whether he’s talking to her or to Ron, but she answers before her brother. “Enough to let her go.”

She thinks of the talons, the glow in the parchment. Harry wraps an arm around her waist and she lets him settle her into her seat. Around them, the silence becomes whispers, and then the game resumes.

Ginny wants to sink into the rhythm of passes between chasers, to study their swoops and dives and turn them into a plan for improvement, but she’s thinking of Rebeca and Hermione. Of Draco Malfoy, hurt badly enough that the Faithful Hand would risk detection.

Or perhaps they wanted to show their power.

She leans against Harry. He runs his thumb over her shoulder, but she can feel his heart beating. He’s still on alert.

“They’ve gotten stronger, haven’t they?”

Harry’s arm tenses. Instead of answering, he looks over at Ron, but he’s occupied with Leonor, speaking in low tones, their heads bent together. He’s thinking of what to tell her. What’s permissible to share.

She’s always known it was part of his work, part of life in the Auror’s office, but all at once, Ginny *hates* it, all these secrets between them, the wall built by every omission and half-truth. She wants to run, to follow Rebeca out of the stadium. To leave it all behind her and find something new..

As if he senses it, Harry reaches for her hand.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” he says, “not on top of everything else.”

Gryffindor scores and Ginny lets out a perfunctory cheer. “I’m not going to shatter.”

“I’m concerned about my predecessor. Even before all this,” Harry gestures skyward, “I think he might be compromised.”

Ginny shakes her head, thinking of all she’s heard Harry say about his work. It’s precious little but Harry’s trust is hard-won and Draco Malfoy had managed to earn it. “That’s not it. What are you hiding?”

“Think of where we are, Gin,” he says. His eyes scanning around the crowd. “Wouldn’t want to cause any unnecessary worry, would we?”

“They managed to get past the wards of a Hogwarts Quidditch match.” Ginny pitches her voice low, hoping Harry is the only one who can hear it.

“I know.” He sighs the words. She twiddles the ring on her finger and she watches him track the motion, feels the tension in him return.

“I’m not leaving,” she says, darting glances at the people around them to make sure they’re paying attention to the game instead of this conversation. She lowers her voice even more, so it’s barely a thread of sound. “I want to marry you. It’s only that you have to tell me things. You have to trust me. Even during the war, my parents told each other everything.”

“I want to keep you out of this.” Harry says it so softly, but the words are loud in Ginny’s ears, and heavy with the weight of history. She thinks of her fifth year, during the war, when he’d left her. Right as Hogwarts turned into a battleground.

They live inside the castle again, she thinks. Her fingers are already reaching for her wand.

“What do you think is going to happen?”

“I want us to be all right,” he says, instead of answering. He twines their fingers together, his scars against the calluses on her fingertips. “I want it all to be over, finally.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to imagine this is something new,” she tells him, and for just a moment, he smiles, and he’s her Harry again, the boy only Ginny Weasley knows.

Above them, Rosy finally manages to get her hands around the Snitch, and Harry’s expression has already shifted, become watchful.

Ginny is cheering loud enough for both of them when he leans toward her, his lips soft against the shell of her ear. “We’ll get through this,” Harry tells her.

Later, she’ll realise he never asked her why Rebeca had handed her the scroll.

Now, her eyes on the sky, she only squeezes his hand.

“I’d like to talk to you about my husband,” Leonor whispers, and Hermione works to keep her face steady as she nods.

Rebeca and Luna are still wrapped up in an argument that Rebeca hasn't realised she will never win, and won't notice this conversation, but Hermione can feel Ginny watching.

"Should we speak now, before the game?" Hermione asks, her voice as low as she can make it.

She's not sure why this meeting has taken her by surprise, except for the fact that Hermione has barely thought about Ron since Halloween. When he's crossed her mind, she'd felt a pang of guilt, a vague desire to write to him some chatty missive as if they were only old school friends. She'd managed to stifle both impulses with work and all her worries, but now Leonor is leading her away from the Quidditch pitch and towards the lake, her mouth set in a line.

Even like this, angry and remote, Leonor is lovely, with her honey-brown hair and her thick eyelashes framing hazel eyes. She manages to make Ron's old Gryffindor scarf look chic against her navy coat and fitted trousers, an elegant fusion of magic and Muggle.

Under different circumstances, she would stop Leonor mid-stride and try to say these things. But Leonor wants to talk about Ron, and Hermione can only follow her in silence.

Finally, they reach the lake. Leonor still doesn't speak. Cheers erupt from the stands and the teams are introduced, player by player, and still Leonor waits.

Hermione is just about to chance an apology when finally the other woman asks, "Are you in love with Ron?"

"No," Hermione says, "I wanted to be, for a long time. But I'm not in love with him. I don't know if I ever was. It felt like what was supposed to happen, but I don't think we were ever the right people for each other." She stops, then, because she's not sure how much of this truth

Leonor passes a hand over her face and lets out a sigh. "You know, he screams your name in the night. Not—he is not fucking you in his dreams, Hermione Granger. Over and over, he watches you die. There is terror in his voice. And I thought I was all right with that. I thought perhaps I was imagining the rest of it. Then, a week ago, he told me what happened on Halloween. He said he thought I should know. But I should have guessed. He was acting guilty, guiltier than usual."

"I should never have invited him," Hermione says, though part of her wants to ask what Ron told his wife. Even as she knows it doesn't matter.

She knew what it meant, when she told him to come. It doesn't matter that she didn't have the stomach to go through with it. She'd wanted to know if he'd take the invitation.

"My husband tries to save you, in his dreams," Leonor says. "Nearly every night, I am woken by the sound of your name. And I tell myself that this is his memory of the war, but—he went to you. He was awake. He knew what he was doing."

"I'm sorry."

Leonor reaches out and places a hand, lightly, on Hermione's. "He is the one who went. He said he offered to visit, too. More than once." She sighs. "He asked me what I wanted to do. If I wanted to leave him."

"Do you?"

"He says he loves me. But also that a part of him will always love you as well."

"He left me, during the war." Hermione doesn't know why she says it, but she feels relief as the words slip out. "The Horcruxes, the uncertainty, it was too much for him. It was hard to forgive him after that. Even though I knew he did what he could." She shakes her head. "I should have ignored his letters. There's no excuse for what I did."

Leonor chews on her lip. The wind ruffles her hair. "I should be angry with you."

Hermione holds up her hands. "I won't stop you."

"I was jealous, for so long," Leonor says, unsmiling. "But now I think you must be very lonely."

"Sometimes." Hermione looks over Leonor's shoulder at the lake, at the reflection of the low grey clouds on the surface of the water. She braces herself for whatever Leonor will say next, knowing she deserves it.

Instead, the other woman asks, "What would you do if you were me?"

Hermione can tell that in spite of everything, Leonor actually wants her advice. And so she does not say the first thing she thinks, what Hermione herself would have and has done, which is to leave him.

She thinks of Leonor at their wedding. The way she'd looked up into Ron's eyes, all adoration. Ron had pulled her close. Like she was all he wanted in this world.

"What is it you want, Leonor?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want Ron, or the idea of him?" She can't use the word *love*. Instinct tells her that Leonor would reject that word from her mouth.

For a moment, Leonor is quiet, and then she says, "I was never the person who was going to save the world. I thought it was enough to make my portion of it a little kinder. And Ron...he is busy, you know, with his work, but when he is home, it feels like the sun shining. The way he is with me, with the children, I could spend my life inside those moments, just watching the smile on his face." She pauses, pressing a hand over her mouth. "But I will never be you, Hermione Granger."

"I think he told you because he wants to make things right. Because he wants to be with you."

“Because you don’t want him. He said you were the one who stopped it.”

Hermione shakes her head at this. She didn’t think that Ron would tell the truth. She expected him to bend whatever story he told Leonor to flatter himself.

Ron was a Gryffindor, though. And he’s been brave enough to give Leonor a choice.

“I think Ron always loved the idea of me most,” Hermione says. “We brought out the worst in each other, really. But I think the two of you could be happy together, if you wanted that.”

Leonor releases a sigh that lifts her hair off her face, revealing the perfect curve of her brow. Her eyes look even wider, more golden. “I wish I could stop believing that he would leave me for you.”

“I could stay away.”

“Who else do you have?” Leonor doesn’t say it to be cruel. She asks, though, as if she’s already considered the question.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione says. “Let me do this for you. Have the Burrow at Christmas. Have it all, Leonor. I’ll keep my distance.”

Leonor shakes her head. “If all it takes is the sight of you—I don’t want that. Only please stop summoning my husband to Hogwarts.”

It’s far more grace than Hermione deserves. Still, she wants to hide her face in her hands.

“I’m so sorry,” she says.

“He could have said no,” says Leonor, and then she is moving towards the stands. Hermione follows behind her, giving Leonor space. Neither of them try to talk over the distant sound of cheering.

They’ve nearly reached the entrance when Hermione sees Rebeca striding toward them, just short of running. The look on her face is grave.

Even without a word, when Rebeca turns her face towards her, Hermione knows it’s something to do with Draco.

Without another thought, Hermione begins to run.

When Draco opens his eyes, the light is a deep scarlet, thick as blood. For a moment, every joint in his body screaming, he wonders if he's died and woken up in some underworld reserved for people who have much to atone for. He manages to swipe his hand across his face.

The Malfoy signet ring is cool against his throbbing cheek.

"You're awake, then," comes the voice, soft and musical.

The sound of Rebeca Saraiva's voice makes Draco reach for his wand. Then he remembers what happened the last time he was conscious.

"Your wand is on the coffee table," she says. "I imagine the Hand left it there when they deposited you."

Even moving his eyes hurts, but Draco forces himself to scan the area around him, taking in everything he can see without moving his head. He knows this crown moulding. "We're in my flat."

"I only apparated to the coordinates I was sent. They should have taken you to see a healer. You were in a state when I arrived."

"They couldn't risk leaving me at the doorstep of St. Mungo's." Not when it would make everyone think, immediately, of the Death Eaters. It would be a declaration of war.

"There's no healer in their ranks?"

"Not in the central London cell, apparently." he says, trying to hold on to every detail of that meeting even while he wonders how much time he's lost. He doesn't know whether anyone thought to modify his memory, whether he can trust what he knows now. His mind has the logy, faraway feeling that accompanies a bad hangover.

At least they sent someone to tend to him. That suggests that the Hand doesn't want him dead just yet.

Rebeca sighs. He can hear her rising from her chair. "I tried my best to reverse all the curses on you, but it was difficult while you were unconscious. What still hurts?"

"How did you get through the wards?" He doesn't want to think about the fact that he can barely move for the pain. He'd prefer to catalogue every problem he's currently facing.

"There were no wards when I arrived. I assume you didn't remove them."

Somehow, despite the fact that every motion feels like a knife through his muscles, Draco manages to roll himself to all fours, then crawl to his coffee table. He manages to cast a three-layered ward, though he doesn't have enough command of himself to cast the spell that would create an alternate conversation. Anyone listening will only hear his and Saraiva's voices murmuring in the distance but will be unable to make out the wards—the kind of obvious ward that any Hogwarts graduate can cast.

They'll know he has something he wants to hide. Then again, they might assume that Draco is hiding from the Ministry or Hogwarts. He can find a way to play this to his advantage, if his body would only allow him to think.

"Lay down so I can try some more counter-curses," Rebeca says, her voice cutting through his internal debate. "You look awful."

"You're not a healer." But when Draco points his wand at himself, nothing emerges. He feels utterly drained.

"Hermione pushed a stack of books on me." She holds up a hand even before he can demand to know why Granger knows. "The Hand sent an owl to the Hogwarts Quidditch match. There was no way to avoid telling her. Though I didn't think your caring about each other's welfare was such a secret."

Before he can think of a witty retort, a river of silvery light cascades from her wand and envelops Draco. It's a reparative diagnostic, one of those fiddly spells that requires the quiet of an infirmary. As it works its way through his body, bringing the pain from a scream to an ache, he's grateful that Saraiva can work it.

"She wants to see you," Saraiva says, looming over him as she studies the results of the diagnostic.

"All they want is Hermione Granger." He thinks of those voices of the dark, tries to banish the Hermione who had appeared to him as he'd slipped into unconsciousness. "She needs to stay far away from me. And if I find out you sent her anyway, you'll wish the Ministry had found you first."

"Theo Nott seems to believe the same thing."

"How do you know?" He grits his teeth as she releases another spell, a half-dozen bones setting themselves. His ribs are agony.

"He was here when I arrived. He was very keen that you know he hadn't betrayed you." Saraiva sounds skeptical. "I'm concerned that some of these curses will have lingering effects. When I go back, I can arrange to have you meet a healer in a safe location. The sooner the better, I think."

"The Hand is watching both of us."

Saraiva pulls him to standing. Draco sways but manages to remain upright.

She points to a silver rectangle at the corner of his coffee table. "We can communicate with you through the stylus. It has a disillusionment charm on it that's keyed to the network."

"Who controls it?"

Saraiva smiles, almost wolfish. She heard the barb in the question. "Hermione does. Keep it concealed on your person. We'll communicate as we have information."

“I thought the only thing keeping you from joining up with the Hand was the fact that they wouldn’t free your brother.”

“Let’s assume that the truth of both our allegiances is too valuable to be discussed where the Hand might hear.” She tilts her head, regarding him. “Though you should know that Pansy Parkinson is aware of your activities.”

“Why are you in touch with Parkinson?” he asks, even as the words make his heart pound. Whatever Pansy knows is eventually known by the entire wizarding world.

“She wants to have dinner with me,” Saraiva says, her brown cheeks rosy even in the amber light of the sunset. He suspects this admission is the smallest revelation she can offer.

“So she’s finally established her kingdom.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve known Parkinson preferred women since we were at Hogwarts. Her father would not allow it. He threatened to cut her off if she were ever linked romantically to another witch.”

“So this is her idea of rebellion.” Saraiva can keep her composure under interrogation, can perfectly modulate the tone of her voice even in the face of Veritaserum and violence, and yet this possibility makes her frown.

He wonders what opportunities Rebeca Saraiva has had for romance. If her life has been only the laboratory and the classroom and the intrigues of the Faithful Hand.

“I don’t think so,” Draco says. “I think Pansy is finally doing whatever she wants. And it seems she found you impossible to resist.”

“She could be a valuable resource.”

“Don’t let her fall into the wrong hands, then.”

She smirks at the entendre. “Let Hermione see that you’re alive,” she says. “She’s sent you a message on the stylus. I’d be surprised if it wasn’t threatening.”

He manages to scoff. “What did you tell her?”

“I was told you required immediate attention. We weren’t sure what I’d encounter.” Saraiva shows him a small pouch. The slightest glimpse reveals a stack of books and the glint of silver. “I’ve never seen anyone cast an Undetectable Extension Charm like Hermione.”

“She had to master them during the war.” Though Draco isn’t thinking of the latest fawning article in the *Prophet*, revealing every detail of the Golden Girl’s life during Voldemort’s second reign. He’s thinking of the way she’d stood in his bedroom, naked and moon-pale and luminous, and cast that same charm for him before he’d left Hogwarts. “She’s safer if she has nothing to do with me.”

“You decided that for her, didn’t you?”

“They’ll use me to get to her. You know how they operate, Saraiva.” He thinks of the anguish on Hermione’s face when he hit her with Potter’s stunner variant. He thinks of his father saying her name. He thinks of the Vow he made in the Forbidden Forest.

“Don’t you think they’ll find her anyway?”

The question is grim. He wouldn’t have listened to her otherwise.

By the time Draco finishes reading Hermione’s message, Saraiva has vanished.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

A housekeeping note: I will be going on a six-week hiatus from posting Against Nostalgia updates, and will have an update on the posting schedule in early July. I talk more about why I've made this decision [here](#).

I have every intention of coming back to and finishing this fic—I have it all outlined—but I need to take a step back and find a writing practice that works for my life right now. I hope you can understand.

In the meantime, I ask that you not complete the fic in my absence.

Thank you, always, to my incredible beta readers, and to all of you for reading. You're the greatest and I treasure you.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

...And we're back! This chapter has what is probably the most unhinged smut I've ever written and I hope you enjoy it.

Join me after the chapter as I get earnest with my thank-yous and provide an update on what's coming next.

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

Three days after Rebeca returns to Hogwarts from Draco Malfoy's flat, there's a message from Pansy Parkinson on her stylus. It's been over a week since she returned from Paris and not a word from Pansy until now.

She offers no explanation.

We'll eat at this Brazilian steakhouse my associate editor recommended. It's all she writes. No hello, no compliments, but Rebeca saw the way the other woman had looked at her in the midst of her newsroom.

Rebeca knows fronts and she knows masks. She doesn't need all that knowledge to be sure that Pansy is holding back. That somehow, this poised and gorgeous woman wants more. And surely it would be advantageous to know the extent of her desire.

Try again, she writes back, her tongue running against her teeth.

I want to know if this place is good, Pansy answers seconds later.

You're the one with the spies, Rebeca retorts, seconds before she had to run off to teach.

When she returns from her lessons, Pansy has left three messages:

Oh, but you've been a spy, haven't you? Though I'm not sure I have the tense right.

We'll try a place near my office. New French. Very discreet. Clear your schedule tomorrow night.

And then, two hours after the other messages, just after Rebeca was sending off her last class of the day: *Wear something revealing.*

See you tomorrow, lover, she writes, just to see what Pansy will say. And because, for once, something in her life feels easy.

Oh, Pansy writes back, I'm going to have fun with you.

Despite the fact that she has things to do—Davi's rescue and the paper she's been working on and the proposal for the British Ministry's half-baked Muggle Summit—Rebeca keeps thinking about the way Pansy's mouth would look, forming those words. The perfect circle of her lips. Inside her mind, Rebeca runs her fingers across that soft pink ring of the *Oh*. Savours the tension that sits low in her belly.

This can never matter, she knows. There will be one night, one dinner, one decadent flirtation, and then the woman known as Rebeca Saraiva will return to her books and her plans.

Still, when classes let out the next day, she spells her hair into a crown of braids twisted to resemble flowers and puts on the plum robes that made Ginny Weasley whistle through her fingers. She daubs her favourite jasmine perfume behind her ears and at the hollow of her collarbone, then threads gold and citrine earrings in her ears, a spill of glittering flowers.

When she makes her way out past the wards, Hermione intercepts her in the hallway, her faraway expression instantly turning sharp. "You're meeting Pansy."

"She said she would give us information if I had dinner with her."

Hermione gives Rebeca a once-over, too proper and British to really tease her for the understatement. She thinks of the way her classmates at the Academia would have laughed, loud and bright and truly more than a bit grating. Still, she misses the sound, the person she'd been in those days, when the price for escaping the compound had felt so light.

"You'll be careful?"

"I won't tell her anything that needs to remain secret," Rebeca says. It's not a lie. She's prone to getting quiet when she drinks or when she wants something. "This isn't that kind of dinner."

"Regardless, try to uncover some secrets of your own. And make her pay the bill." Hermione's attempt to wink is horrible, but Rebeca manages to turn her laugh into an appreciative grin.

Soon she is walking through the streets of Paris, following the coordinates Pansy sent with a tracking spell that glimmers a faint gold in the night. Rebeca dawdles a bit, savouring the crisp air and the lights on the buildings. Not so long ago, she was sure she would never see the world.

Now here she is, walking the streets of Paris.

When she reaches the restaurant, she finds it empty aside from one central table. Pansy's hair falls in front of her face, an obsidian curtain, and from the entrance, Rebeca can freely admire the planes and curves of her body, her slender shoulders and the subtle flare of her hips. Pansy's posture is perfect. Rebeca wonders for a moment whether she had a bearing like this as a student, gliding through the Hogwarts corridors like some miniature queen.

The moment Rebeca enters, Pansy turns toward the door. Her golden eyes immediately land on Rebeca, lingering as she makes her way to the table, handing her coat to the hostess, who looks chic in her own right but is no match to the blaze that is Pansy Parkinson.

“You kept me waiting,” Pansy says, as soon as Rebeca is seated. She’s turned away from Rebeca now, her eyes on the wine list, her fingertips against the line of her jaw.

All of it is a performance. Rebeca knows this, and yet she finds herself resisting the knowledge, forcing the facts into an alternate narrative, one that better suits her desires.

“I have rarely had occasion to travel,” she says, honest in a way she almost never is. “I took my time in the streets.”

“I thought you might’ve decided to involve the Hand.” Pansy is still looking at the wine list, her finger hovering over the more expensive bottles of red. She smells of orange blossom and sandalwood.

Rebeca wants to move closer but she doesn’t. Not yet. “Wherever I might be, the Hand is involved.”

“Minerva McGonagall clearly doesn’t believe that. Or else she doesn’t know the truth of you.” Finally, Pansy is looking at her, her gaze more appraising than it’s ever been, as if she’s peeling back Rebeca’s skin and studying the deepest contents of her being.

Rebeca forces her expression into a semblance of calm, makes her voice even. Despite the beauty of her surroundings, it’s more difficult than she’d expected. “I thought you invited me to dinner because you found me attractive.”

“That goes without saying.” Pansy beckons the waiter, orders a bottle of cabernet, then chevre, caviar, and oysters. “And whatever the lady would like,” she adds, gesturing towards Rebeca. Her fingers are perfectly manicured, each nail painted the pale pink inside a shell.

“Champagne,” Rebeca says, not looking at the wine list. “Whatever you think is best.”

Pansy nods at the waiter and he disappears, silent.

“He’s going to give you something overpriced and pedestrian,” Pansy points out, as soon as they’re alone again.

“Then I’ll learn what pedestrian champagne tastes like,” Rebeca counters. “Why did you invite me to dinner?”

“You’re gorgeous and you’re dangerous. Exactly the kind of woman I prefer.”

“The people I love are often taken from me.”

“I didn’t know we were speaking of love.” Pansy makes a show of looking intrigued, her golden eyes wide and her berry-tinted lips pursed into the shape of a kiss, glossy and plump. Rebeca can practically feel their texture against her own lips. She presses her palms against the table, wrinkling the white linen.

“There are only a few ways this can go.”

“Then let me provide some context. I have not seen my parents in over a decade. Many of my classmates and their families were monitored and restricted for years after Voldemort’s fall. We were barely allowed to send each other owls without suspicion or threat of punishment.”

“You say that as if you were the ones most harmed by Voldemort and his followers.” She thinks of Hermione, raising her wand to remove herself from her parents’ minds. Of her friend, a child wandering the woods. The faint *Mudblood* scar on her wrist, which Hermione never mentions.

Pansy has grace enough to duck her head. “You’re right, of course.” She takes a sip of water. “But in the end, we were hunted too.”

“Sometimes I think your isle is rotten,” Rebeca says.

“Why do you think I left?” Pansy asks, just as the waiter arrives with their bottles of wine, the champagne in a silver bucket filled with ice.

He pours champagne for Rebeca and then, at Pansy’s nod, for her as well, then lays out the food they’ve ordered, small intricate confections that Rebeca wants to memorise.

Pansy holds out her champagne flute to Rebeca’s, then takes a sip. Rebeca follows suit, trying to take note of the bubbles on her tongue, the fresh taste and the hints of fruit, all while watching Pansy’s face, her appraising expression.

“It’s decent,” Pansy says. “Tell me about what brought you to Hogwarts.”

“Who are you going to inform?”

“I know the name you were born with, Rebeca.” She mouths it, and Rebeca hears the name nobody knows in her mind, slightly mangled by Pansy’s crisp English accent. “I haven’t told anyone.”

“The person I was never hurt anybody.”

“What are you planning on doing now?” Pansy takes a piece of toast, spreads butter across it, and sprinkles caviar on it. Once again, Rebeca is watching the way her fingers move.

“I only want to save my brother.”

“And then?”

“I’ll keep him safe.”

“Blaise will want to help, of course.” At Rebeca’s expression, Pansy adds, “This didn’t require spying. Blaise trusts me, particularly when it comes to his love life. He knows I won’t judge him.”

“I would think you’d be the last person he’d trust.”

“What most don’t realise about my line of work is that the keeping of a secret is often more valuable than the telling of it. My contacts need to trust me.”

“And your friends?”

“Is that what you want to be?” The pointed tip of Pansy’s pump traces a circle on Rebeca’s ankle, just above the place where her anklet rests. A shivering desire wakes under Rebeca’s skin. All the while, the champagne flute is poised at Pansy’s lips.

Rebeca collects herself. She takes a deep breath. “What are you offering?”

“To keep your secrets, for one thing.”

“Skip dinner, then,” Rebeca says, trying to make herself sound arch and in control. As if her heart is not pounding in her ears, her skin eager to be touched by Pansy. The possibility of danger does not diminish her body’s longings. “Take me to your flat. A hotel. Whatever you prefer.”

“I won’t be doing that.” Pansy sets down her champagne and presses her hand over Rebeca’s. “It will give you all the reason you need to disappear into the night. No, the most I’ll give you tonight is a kiss. Along with the information I’ve gathered. You’ll find it on your stylus when you arrive back at Hogwarts.”

The machine that Rebeca has taken apart and put back together three different times, thoroughly inspecting the mechanisms and the array of spells that allow the technology to function even in the midst of the magic. What she’s documented has inspired three new experiments, one of which seems to be working even inside the Hogwarts wards.

“You’ve decided to trust me, then.”

Pansy’s finger runs over Rebeca’s rings. “I’ve learned to take calculated risks.”

“Why did you wait a week to write?” It hadn’t bothered her at the time. Not exactly. After a day or two, Rebeca had assumed that Pansy had either forgotten or decided against the dinner. But now, if there will be more meetings between them, if Pansy will claim her like this, in the middle of some luxurious Paris restaurant, Rebeca wants to know.

Pansy takes a sip of the champagne, then drains the glass. “When you walked into my office, it felt as though I’d been waiting for you without even knowing. And I loathed it. Especially once you’d gone.”

“Why?”

“I hate to be at anyone’s mercy.”

Rebeca presses her free hand over Pansy’s, stroking her thumb across the back of the other woman’s hand. “I would protect you as best I could.”

Across the table, Pansy looks at her as if she knows the weight of the admission. A laden moment passes, and then she pulls her hand away. She prepares another of those little half-

sandwiches, then holds it out towards Rebeca.

“Try it,” she says, and Rebeca holds out her hand.

The rest of the meal is spent in easier conversation. Pansy speaks of her paper, of her time at Hogwarts. Rebeca notices that she doesn’t mention certain years, or speak of her family. But when she speaks of people Rebeca doesn’t know, there seems to be an implicit promise in each small revelation.

Then, as the rest of their food arrives, she pours the red wine and starts asking Rebeca questions. Not the pointed interrogation of moments. Easy questions. The kind that are asked on first dates in the telenovelas she watched in her years at the Academia. About her childhood, her work, her favourite things.

Already this is nothing like the furtive couplings she’s made in the darkness, never wanting to get close enough to feel the pain of loss.

Every moment feels easy and decadent, and when Pansy reaches across the table again, just after their plates are cleared away, Rebeca flips her hand over. Their fingers intertwine so prettily.

“Have you found a map of A Mão Fiel’s compound?” Rebeca asks. It wasn’t what she meant to say, but it’s the one thing she needs to know. Even now, full and entranced with Pansy, a corner of her mind is focused on Davi.

Pansy looks around. “What if we’re being watched?”

“I walked through the wards you set up around the door. The ones around the table feel like curtains.” She bites her lip, thinking through her next question. “How much of what you do is a performance?”

“You’re one to talk.” Pansy draws a finger across the centre of Rebeca’s palm. Her fingernail gently scrapes the skin, just enough to make Rebeca forget her purpose. *Caralho*, she’s gone for this woman. “You hadn’t mentioned the wards. I thought there might be a trace on you.”

“You were bold to ask all the questions you did, with those suspicions.” Then, watching the corner of Pansy’s mouth hitch up, Rebeca shakes her head. “There’s no trace that I’ve ever been able to detect, or anyone else who has looked. There have been conversations that would—they work through spies, I think, eyes where no one would expect. Much like you do.”

Pansy reaches out another hand, wraps it around Rebeca’s wrist. Her fingers pressed around the pulse point. “So you could say for example, *fuck the Faithful Hand*, and no one would be the wiser.”

Rebeca nods.

Pansy leans toward her, the curve of her breasts visible from this angle. But for the seduction in her posture, the fullness of her lips, her eyes are too sharp. “The map is on your stylus,”

she murmurs, reaching up a hand to follow the line of Rebeca's jaw. "There are three versions, each different enough to cause you problems. I haven't been able to work out which is the real one."

"Thank you," Rebeca says. It would be so easy to lean forward and kiss Pansy, but instead she rises, keeping her grip on Pansy's hand. "Would you like a walk through Paris?"

"We couldn't talk about anything important." The words are a test.

"Only from a certain perspective." Because right now, she can think of nothing more pressing than moving through the darkened streets with this exquisite woman. She cannot save Davi tonight. She says a little prayer to the old magicks and the goddesses who wield them, a plea that he will stay safe until she rescues him, and then she puts all her attention on Pansy. "I want you to tell me your favorite colour."

Rebeca hadn't realised she was cataloguing Pansy Parkinson's smiles until she offers up a new one, sweet and just a bit bewildered. "This exact shade of purple," she says, gesturing towards Rebeca's robes. "You play this game well."

"I understand what a good performance requires," Rebeca says, accepting her coat from the waiter, and then stepping out into the street. Pansy follows, one step behind.

For a moment, Rebeca tenses, summoning her magic for a wandless cast. She made herself learn once she left the A Mão Fiel compound, so that it's the work of seconds before the power thrums through her, ready to strike.

Then Pansy catches up, slipping her hand into Rebeca's.

"I wouldn't attack you while your back was turned." She's tilted her chin up so that she can murmur the words directly into Rebeca's ear. "I'd want you to see the knife."

Rebeca wants to think only of the heat of Pansy's breath against her ear. The scent of wine on her breath. Instead she thinks of Ruby Docherty's blood.

"Did you—"

"I have no idea who killed Ruby Docherty. I've been trying to determine her killer, though." Each word is soft enough to disappear into the sounds of the night: the restaurants closing, the occasional taxi cab driving by.

"Why?"

"Because for some reason, it matters that someone else has died at Hogwarts."

"I let them in." It hurts to admit this now, in a way that it never has before. Perhaps because she would tell a thousand lies to keep looking at Pansy Parkinson, her golden upturned eyes with their monolids and her skin luminous in the light of the streetlamps and that curtain of glossy black hair that she uses to hide her true feelings. Already Rebeca knows this. Already she wants more.

“Say you rescue your brother from their clutches,” Pansy begins, her fingers reaching up to stroke the inside of Rebeca’s wrist, “what would you do then? Would you still be their puppet?”

“I was always supposed to take care of him,” Rebeca says. “He is the one who matters.”

“I hope you know you’re lying to yourself about that,” Pansy murmurs, the words a breath away.

Before Rebeca can protest, can say that she’d gladly sacrifice herself the moment that Davi is free, that she would not mind oblivion so much as all that, Pansy’s mouth presses against hers, insistent. Rebeca forgets everything but the softness of her lips, the substance of them against her own, the way Pansy’s hand has come to rest on her waist, pulling her closer. As if they were not in the middle of the sidewalk, or else too far gone to care who saw them embracing.

Then she licks into the seam of Pansy’s mouth and Pansy opens to her, wine-sweet and sighing in the back of her throat. Rebeca reaches up until her fingers are tangled in Pansy’s hair, until she’s cradling Pansy’s head in her palm and Pansy’s breath is hot in her mouth.

“If they see us—” She barely has the presence of mind to let out a warning.

“Tell them you’re recruiting me,” Pansy says, dipping her fingers under the collar of Rebeca’s coat and running them across her neck. Too quickly, she finds a spot that makes it difficult for Rebeca to keep from moaning. In her twenty-eight years of life, Rebeca Saraiva has never been so easily undone. “Tell them I’m falling for it.”

“They’re not safe.”

“Neither am I,” Pansy says, before moving her mouth to Rebeca’s neck.

For a few moments more, the Paris street swallows up every sound they make. Even if Pansy is good as her word and keeps it to only a few moments of kissing. It’s still enough for Rebeca to feel as if her mind is dissolving into dreams and liquid.

She offers up another dinner invitation before pointing her towards the Eiffel Tower, more than a little wry. Rebeca nods her acceptance.

Even when she apparates back to Hogsmeade, she can feel her heartbeat in her swollen lips. It takes another hour before she remembers to check her stylus.

Before she apparates to the coordinates she provided Draco, Hermione tells herself she won't change from the robes she'd taught in all day. She knows he doesn't want to see her and still she insisted.

It won't do to look desperate, she tells herself, even as she works a minor cosmetic charm to clear the hollows under her eyes and make her skin a bit more radiant. She swipes a gloss on her lips.

Then she changes into robes she hasn't worn at Hogwarts yet, a black set she'd wear for important meetings at the Ministry, with squared-off shoulders and a scooped neckline, professional and still feminine. She steps into a pair of black pointed heels. She can slip them off easily if she needs to run.

Though Hermione isn't planning on running. Not even if the entirety of the Faithful Hand appears alongside Draco.

When she turns back to the mirror, the woman she sees radiates elegance and power. None of Hermione's worry shows on her visage.

Finally, taking a deep breath, she floos her way to the meeting place. She braces herself for Draco's absence. Or, worse, for the curses to be worse than Rebeca described.

But when she arrives in the fireplace of the nondescript flat she'd selected, flames swirling around her, Draco Malfoy is already waiting for her, sitting on the sofa. His ankle is crossed over his knee, revealing green socks the exact colour of the Slytherin ties.

For a moment, all she can do is stare at him, the perfect angles of his face and the lips already moving into the hint of a smirk. His white-blond hair tousled just a bit, a lock of it falling across his forehead. What Hermione wants most is to smooth it back. She wants to study every inch of him, with spells and eyes and her fingers, to make sure that he's all right.

"I see you dressed for the occasion," he says, before she can think up a greeting. But he doesn't tease her. Instead, she can feel his eyes on her like a touch, running over the curves and hollows of her body.

"Did you see the healer Rebeca recommended?" Already she's reaching for her wand. It's much easier to distract herself with practicalities and fears than it is to consider the fact that Draco is looking at her as a lover might. That he's looking at her the way she stared at him. If she thinks about it, it will hurt too much when his expression changes.

"Polyjuice really doesn't do Poppy Pomfrey any favours," he says. "I'm fine, apparently. She was able to work the counterurses with enough time to avoid lasting damage."

"What happened?" She knows the question is too vague. That she hasn't yet stepped out of the grate. Any moment, the fire will begin to burn her ankles.

He rises and holds out his hand to her. She takes it, stepping into the apartment and settling on the other side of the couch from him. She can sense the web of wards he's cast, but adds

another of her own, one that will make their speech sound like whispers just at the edge of human detection.

“Your limp is worse,” she says once it’s clear he won’t answer her question. “What does the Hand think you’re doing?”

He pulls a tiny scroll from his pocket. “This morning, the central London cell owled me my first assignment. I’m all theirs in three nights.”

“Why did they curse you?”

“Initiation, Granger.”

“Rebeca said you were covered in curses, more than she could remove without causing you further damage. She shouldn’t have left you alone. I wanted—”

“Saraiva was right not to let you come. They’re hunting you.”

“Someone is always hunting the three of us,” Hermione says, pushing her hair away from her face. She watches Draco observe the motion, even as he schools his face into a careful blank.

“They’re hunting *you*, Granger. Not Potter or Weasley. You are their trophy. In the Highlands cell and in the central London cell and likely every British chapter of the Faithful Hand, they want to capture you.”

“Then they’re more powerful than we suspected.” She holds up a hand to ward off the remark she knows is coming from Draco. “Think about it. Harry has more symbolic value than I do. If it’s me they’re after, then they want the Ministry. They want Hogwarts. They’re ready to build their new world.”

“Harry is prepared for them.” His eyes move across the room, scanning for danger.

“I’m not going to stay locked at Hogwarts like some terrified damsel,” she says. “I’ll start duelling practise with Harry again.”

“Saraiva says you’re trying to rescue her brother. You should know better than to trust her. To involve yourself in something this precarious. The Vow she made to McGonagall neutralises her.”

“Davi is the only person Rebeca has in this world.”

“Your bleeding Gryffindor heart is far from sufficient to prevail over the Faithful Hand, Granger.”

“We do this and we have Rebeca on our side.”

She watches Draco’s thoughts move across his face, the subtle motions of the muscles around his eyes and lips. She moves closer toward him, though they’re still not touching.

“I can take care of myself,” she says. “Tell me about the Hand.”

“The central London chapter is organised and international. I spoke with American wizards who said they’ve relocated just to join it. They wanted to be where things were happening.”

“All wizards, then?”

“As far as I can tell. Their leader is dressed like whoever compelled Saraiva to open the wards. No telling if it’s the same person.”

“Any former Death Eaters?”

“A handful,” he says, then lists them. He doesn’t look at her when he pronounces his father’s name. “And Theo Nott.”

Hermione feels the name like a sinking in her chest. The Ministry had always regarded Theo as a particular success story, alongside Draco and Blaise, proof that former Dark sympathisers could be reformed.

“He says he wants to get out,” Draco continues, resting his hands on his knees. His fingers are splayed and she can just detect the scars on them, their pale gleam in the light of the fire. “But he was too jumpy at my initiation meeting. I may have played it wrong, with him.”

“You’re not the only one,” Hermione says, catching her lip between her teeth. “Do you think any of it mattered? The rehabilitation and the camps, I mean. It all seems like such a waste.”

Draco reaches out and presses his hand over hers. She can feel the warmth of it throughout her body.

“I’m trying to keep you out of this,” he tells her. His thumb runs over her wrist. “All those years in the Auror office—this is what we train for, Hermione. Once the threat is minimised, you and your lot can determine how to make your better world.”

She shakes her head. “Who will it fall to, if I don’t fight?”

She thinks of Harry and Ron at Hogwarts. In her memory, they look so small, still chubby-cheeked. And still they had always fought. They’d had no choice, not if they were going to survive.

“Even if you don’t believe in my capacities, Granger, surely you believe in Potter and Weasley.” Draco sounds a bit too hearty.

“You and I both know better than to put our confidence in the Auror’s office,” she says, drawing her knees up so that she can turn toward him. “I want to trust Harry but—something’s wrong. He’s holding too many secrets and he’s so angry.”

“Not to mention your mess with Weasley.”

She feels the words like acid in her stomach. “Lemon spoke to me. He told her everything.”

“It’s more than I’d expect of him.”

“I shouldn’t have been surprised. I never—I never think of Ron enough. Or Leonor.” She sighs, pushing the heels of her hands against her eyelids. “I just want to start over from the last moment when everything was all right. When I hadn’t made so many mistakes.”

She feels his fingers on her back, the weight of his palm. The warmth of him seeps through the fabric of her robes. It takes everything in Hermione not to arch into his touch.

“You’ve been trying to make things better,” Draco says. “You can’t help yourself.”

“I’ve been so selfish.”

“You’re lonely, aren’t you?” His voice is close enough to surround her.

She raises her face from her hands. Draco is right there next to her, his thigh almost touching her knee. “What does it matter?”

“I pushed you away the last time.”

“I don’t want your pity, Draco Malfoy.” She meant to spit out the words but they’re far too tender. She can feel his hand reaching up into her hair, twisting curls around each finger.

“Whatever I feel for you, Granger, it’s not pity.”

For a moment, she only stares at him. The firelight dapples his face with light and shadow, and his grey eyes are fixed on hers. Waiting, with his fingers still tangled in her hair.

“We should talk,” she says, forcing herself to take a breath.

“Did you force me here to take a detailed accounting of our respective knowledge of the Faithful Hand?” His palm cradles the back of Hermione’s skull. He could move her wherever he likes and yet he just strokes his fingers through the mass of her hair, rubbing them against her scalp. “I can send you everything on the stylus. So long as you trust the way Saraiva’s wired it.”

“No one from the Hand has shown up here,” she says. “Rebeca’s made the price of her loyalty very clear. We’re paying it.”

“You’re scheming,” he says appreciatively, his earlier warning set aside. His thumb traces the shell of her ear.

“We’re making a plan,” she counters. “Would you—”

“I’d rather limit the extent of Occulumenty I have to practise.”

“Should I go back to Hogwarts, then?” But Hermione does not make to rise. Instead, she leans back further into his hand.

Draco brings his other hand to trace the neckline of her robes, his fingertips running against fabric and then skin. And then he turns his hand, so that his signet ring passes over her collarbones, over the tops of her breasts, the warm metal making her breathless.

“No one will ever see this but the two of us,” he says. “No one will ever know the way your face changes when I touch you.”

She presses her hand to her cheeks. They’re flushed. She should leave. Draco is alive and all the information she needs will arrive on her stylus. And she doesn’t want to step into the fire again.

Who else do you have? Leonor had asked. But she never feels alone with Malfoy, whether they’re kissing or arguing or silently grading papers. Perhaps they’ll never have those quiet moments again, the ease of Hogwarts.

They do have this, however: a stolen moment requiring a heap of lies and magic to conceal.

She reaches out. He takes her hand and raises the palm to his mouth.

“I won’t leave, then,” she says. She only notices that she’s moved toward him because their lips collide, because his scent surrounds her, cedar and leather and soap. His fingers, still tangled in her hair, pull her even closer.

His mouth is on her neck now, his teeth scraping against her skin. “What if I left a mark?” He murmurs the words over the sound of her breath.

“Bite me,” she says as he replaces his teeth with his tongue.

For a moment, there’s only the pain of Draco’s mouth. A pressure, a sting. Then it becomes something more than pain, an ache inside her that has Hermione clenching her thighs. She lets out a moan and he draws his thumb over her bottom lip.

Desire makes the wandless magic easy as thinking, undoing each of his buttons slowly. She savours the way his breath hitches every time the fabric of his shirt brushes against his skin. Then she replaces the fabric with her fingers, running it over the crisp hair on his chest. She takes the flat disc of his nipple into her mouth and draws it between her teeth, trying to memorise the hissing breath Draco takes as she swirls her tongue against the tip.

She’s so wet for him, for the evidence of his pleasure.

They’re kissing again, now, hot and sweet and insistent. He unfastens her zipper the Muggle way, with his hands, kissing the place where her neck curves into her shoulder. She reaches to pull her hair away and he says *leave it*.

As her dress falls away, he cups her shoulders. He looks into her eyes.

“Are you going to change your mind again, this time?” She’s been bracing herself for weeks now. Hermione realises it all at once. What a relief it would be, if she could surrender herself to him, if she could trust that he wouldn’t only look like this in the moments before he was inside her.

When Draco speaks, his voice is deep and soft, and Hermione feels the sound inside her body. “I never changed my mind,” he says, his eyes still fixed on hers. “You don’t deserve to be harmed because of this, Granger. Because of me.”

“This is the only time—” she takes a breath, thinks of what she’s confessing. “This is the only time I feel like myself. Not just this but all of it. The duelling and the arguments and just being with you, Malfoy. And I don’t know what to do with any of it.”

“Why?”

“Pansy said that you’d got in deep with the Hand.”

She doesn’t know why she says it. What Hermione wants, really, is to disappear inside this moment, until she and Draco are only bodies. But the things she’s said, the things she’s starting to want, won’t allow such a disappearance. Not if this is more than one night.

His lips lift in that familiar sneer. “What, did Parkinson invite you to dinner, too? Are you collecting all the old Slytherins so you can lord it over them, how much better you are?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Draco’s hands are still on her body, but Hermione braces herself for the moment he’ll remove them. How cold the air will feel on her skin.

“What do you mean, then? From what I can tell, you’ll believe anyone who tells you the worst of me.”

“They don’t have to tell me what I saw growing up.”

He stares at her as if he’s never seen her before, and then he lunges for her. His mouth against hers is searing, heat and teeth. His fingers press into her hips, the signet ring on his finger marking the Malfoy crest into her skin.

“Do you want me to call you that name that always made you flinch, Granger? Or are you waiting for me to whip out one of the Unforgiveables?” He draws his tongue over her lips. “What would give you sufficient reason to leave?”

She’s so full of want that she aches with it, so wet that she feels her arousal through her knickers.

This time, he doesn’t ask before leaving a mark on her neck, sucking and biting until Hermione moans with each movement of his lips. He raises his hand and spans her, once and then again, and Hermione has to bite back the sounds that rise up inside her.

Draco smiles as if he’s heard them all. As if he’s seen inside her and doesn’t know what to make of the view.

“I was trying to be nice before,” he’s saying, “but that’s not what you want, is it?”

Hermione doesn’t know what to say and so she reaches for him, tries to kiss him. He pushes her away, his hands braced on her shoulders, his fingers pressing into her skin.

“I’ll be a monster for you, Granger, so long as you admit that all you think about is fucking me.”

Slowly, Hermione nods her head.

Draco descends on her. His teeth against her skin, his fingers pressing into her flesh. The villain in the darkness, come to claim her.

Hermione does not surrender, though.

She claims him for herself. She leaves the marks of her teeth on his collarbone, scrapes her fingernails down his back, takes his hair in her fists and *pulls*.

And all the while, Malfoy's sneer has become something more appreciative, something hungrier. His hands moving to her hips, his fingers straying near her sex. Each touch makes her want it more, even as he shows her how he's taunting her: because every time his hands move near her clit, he finds another place to bite her, a place to hit or scrape.

No one has ever treated Hermione like this, with pain and desire. She's never felt more turned on. Later, probably, she will feel ashamed.

Now, though, she only presses closer, moaning as she rubs herself over his thigh.

"You're making a mess of these trousers," he says, watching her. There's scorn in his voice but his eyes are bright, his cheeks flushed. "Don't you think I should punish you for that?"

With her magic, Hermione rips the trousers from his body. The rending of that expensive wool echoes off the floorboards. A smile rises on her lips.

Then Draco hooks a thumb into the waistband of his black boxer-briefs, which do not hide the rigid length of his cock.

"I should make you watch," he says.

"But you want to touch me, don't you?" Hermione doesn't recognise her own voice, the way it purrs in her chest. "I think you were having a wank every night you weren't with me. You tried to get me out of your head but you couldn't. You can't possibly, no matter how hard you try."

She's speaking about herself, mostly, but Draco's eyes are glazed. He runs his hand over his length.

Hermione strides toward him and when he pushes her down to kneeling, she does not make so much as a sound of protest.

"Do you want to keep your knickers on?"

"Take them off with that smart mouth, Granger." His hand on her head, keeping her from rising.

She bites the skin of his hip in retaliation, and when he sucks in a breath, she runs her tongue over that same spot. Then she works her mouth down, over the fabric, until she reaches his cock. Draws her tongue across the hard length, so that he can only feel a hint of her warmth.

“Messy, Granger,” he says, pulling her hair, trying to position her lips at the waistband of his shorts.

She moves against him, back to tormenting his cock, but Draco holds her fast. “Do you need me to beg?”

“Tell me how much you want it,” she breathes against his skin.

“You think you’re so special,” he says, returning to that sneering tone. “I could find another bint to fuck me if I wanted.”

“I can tell you’re lying.” She nips again at his pale skin, pretending she didn’t hear *if I wanted*. That she didn’t relish the tacit admission buried in the phrase. “You’d take her to bed and imagine me the whole time.”

His fingers tighten in her hair. It’s the only admission Hermione trusts, and she rewards him by pulling off his boxer-briefs with her teeth.

When his cock springs free, she’s tempted to reach out and touch it. She resists, dragging the fabric down his thighs and then his knees, arching her back to give him a show. She’s never felt this wild or wanton, even as her hands meet the floor and the black cotton puddles at his ankles.

He pulls her up by her hair, positioning her in front of his length. She knows he wants her mouth and so she takes his cock in her hand, brushing her thumb over the head of his cock, smoothing the sticky liquid down his shaft. His hold loosens and she rewards him with a swipe of her tongue in the same place, tasting him, feeling him twitch against her lips.

“Does it bother you how much you want this?” she asks, positioning her mouth so that he can feel every syllable against his skin. “How much you want a Mudblood to let you fuck her?”

“That’s never been the problem,” he says, far above her. She can hear the change in his voice. He’s not sneering now. The question has made him earnest. Something curls in her stomach at the sound, a feeling beyond desire.

She takes him in her mouth instead of pondering it, deep enough that she starts to gag on his cock. His hands slacken in her hair. But this isn’t what she wants, some sudden realisation that makes him considerate. She wants this dance between them, the menace of it, the promise of darkness. The possibility that she is not too broken or too angry or too uncertain to feel whatever she feels with Draco Malfoy.

Hermione rests her hands on his hips, holding him tight enough that her fingernails dig into his pale skin.

“Fancy leaving your own set of scars on me, Granger?” Now he sounds like the pureblood heir again. She scrapes her fingernails against him, pulling her mouth away, and his breath catches in her throat.

This time, when she takes him deep, she sucks his cock, pulling in her cheeks until she holds him tightly. She nearly forgets how to breathe. His hips buck beneath her hands. Hermione repeats the motion, once and then again, before he pulls her off.

“As much as I appreciate the earnest attentions of the teacher’s pet,” he’s saying, his thumb tracing down her cheeks, “I’d prefer to come inside you.”

She opens her mouth to protest and he presses his palm over her lips.

“You’ll take what I give you, Granger,” he says, the tip of his tongue tracing the whorls of her ear. “The Ministry might think of you as their golden Gryffindor girl, and all of Hogwarts might swoon in your presence, but I’ll always know how all it took was a look from me to get you to spread your legs.”

With his one free hand, he pulls her up to standing, his eyes moving over her. Finally taking in the scarlet lace of her bra and knickers. She smirks against his palm.

Malfoy runs his hand over her bra, circling her breast until the nipple is stiff and peaked, until she can hardly breathe. “Is this how you go to teach your classes? You wear those Ministry robes and oversized cardigans, but beneath them, do you feel the lace against your skin and imagine a man with the Mark on his arm making you scream loud enough to be heard through the stone?”

Without warning, he pinches his fingers together, her nipple caught between. Hermione can’t hold back her yelp, or the way her thighs clench. Draco’s grey eyes catch every sound, every motion, the Auror training laying her more than naked before him.

She thinks of their duelling practice. The look in his eyes reminds her of those sessions, as if he can’t help himself. She thinks of everything he told her, how to think in the moment. Then, quickly, before he can clock her motion, she pushes him back on the bed.

Even before they land on the bedspread, he’s managed to flip their position so that she’s beneath him, splayed out in her scarlet lace.

Within seconds, the fabric lies in tatters beside them and Draco is splaying her legs open with his knees. He hauls her up by the shoulders, just slightly, and when he thrusts inside her, she moans with the sensation of it, as if he’s managed to touch her everywhere.

His face is impassive but his fingers are tight on her skin, enough to bruise, and as he builds a rhythm inside her, Hermione is mesmerised, drawn deep into the moment, the building pleasure, her feet flexing and her fingers reaching out to clutch at him. Draco bends to suck at her breasts, biting down with a sting that only serves to deepen the pleasure.

“Tell me how I make you feel, Granger,” he growls against her skin. “Tell me how it feels right before I make you come.”

“My mind stops,” she says, canting her hips. She wants him deeper and rougher, two monsters meeting behind closed doors. The monster he was forced to show the world, and the one she holds close and secret inside herself.

“That’s a lie.” He pulls himself out nearly all the way. His cock is slick now, and he works it between his hands. “Tell me the truth, Granger.”

“Call me Hermione.” Dimly, it occurs to her that she’s begging. She’s so close that nothing registers but the throb between her legs.

“Earn it,” he says, a taunting smile on his lips.

She reaches for her sex, but he traps her wrists with his free hand, pulling them to the side of her body. “Tell me how you feel,” he repeats. “When the man you always hated makes you forget everything but how much you want this.”

“I feel—it was like learning that magic was real,” she says, the words more honest than she intended. “As if the world were bigger than I’d ever imagined. I never thought I’d, that we could ever have moments like this. Where we forget everything. When all I crave is your touch.”

He pushes inside her then, his sticky hand on the base of her throat and his cock relentless inside her, pumping in and out, hitting deep inside her, so that in the space of a moment, Hermione is straining against him, panting, stars at the edges of her vision.

Hermione. Draco murmurs the word, his lips on the crown of her head.

It’s the tenderness of his voice, the contrast against his brutal movement, that unravels her. She moans out her release. The sound is ragged in her throat.

He falls against her, a flush on his cheeks. His breath is already even. Despite herself, Hermione turns him, looking for the places where she marked him, the ovals made by her grasp and the long scratches down his back.

“You’re all right, then?” she asks, and then instantly regrets the question. Because Hermione isn’t sure what it means, this last hour between them. Particularly because of how she’d responded, how much she’d liked it.

“I’ll be limping for a few more days. Maybe a week, now that you’ve had your way with me,” Draco answers, shifting so he faces her. He reaches out to trace the curve of her shoulder, then turns his hand so his signet ring grazes that same skin. She sucks in a breath.

“You don’t have to try and protect me,” she says.

“I know,” he tells her, drawing the signet ring across her body, drawing it on a lazy path toward her breasts. By the time the metal circles her nipples, Hermione’s thighs are clenching. “That’s not what monsters do, is it?”

He replaces the ring with his teeth, and Hermione surrenders to the moment.

Hours later, when the flat is dark and they’re finally something close to sated, she murmurs into the darkness, “I worry that I trust you far more than I should.”

Draco doesn’t pretend that he’s asleep. Instead, he kisses the column of her throat.

Ruby Docherty isn't sure why she wakes up in the Forbidden Forest. She only knows that when she moves through the trees, she can pass through them without effort.

For a few minutes, she thinks she has learned some new magic.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, thank you ***so much*** for all of your support when I announced my hiatus. The time off was really necessary and wonderful, and it helped me fall in love with writing all over again. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Moving forward, I will not have an update schedule for Against Nostalgia. While I do have some targets in mind, I'm not going to commit to a set day or timeframe for new chapters. I'm hoping this will keep me from burning out and will make it possible to complete the story while I'm also working on an original novel.

I will say that I'm a few chapters ahead of this one, and that I have nearly all of this fic outlined (there are a few chapters missing but I know the arc of those as well, including the epilogue). I really want to finish this story and to share it with you.

Thank you to Ivy and Carter for beta reading! I really appreciate your insights and reactions to this chapter.

See you soon for the next update 🥹

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

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

“What do we need before we can rescue Davi?” Rebeca asks when Ginny enters her apartments with Hermione.

“What, not even a hello?” Ginny gripes as she takes a seat on Rebeca’s couch, the only surface that’s not covered with parchment or complex circuitry of a sort that would distract her father for weeks.

“I thought you’d appreciate some efficiency,” Rebeca says, settling herself in a chair across from Ginny as Hermione busies herself unloading her own scrolls and books.

“I’ve reviewed everything Pansy sent,” Hermione says, brushing aside her hair. There’s a bruise on her neck. Ginny files that mark away for further questioning. “We know the location of the compound, but we need a definitive map. A guard’s schedule. The warding spells. And we need a better idea of what we could encounter once we’re there. What the collateral damage might be.”

“You want to know if you’ll die in this attempt, you mean.” The words would be a barb from anyone else’s lips, but Rebeca pronounces them so calmly.

“No one dies,” Ginny says, before Hermione can respond. “We go in, we get Davi, and we leave with him.”

“This isn’t some Quidditch play,” Rebeca snaps.

Ginny only grins at her, the way she knows would infuriate the captain of a rival team. “It’s exactly like Quidditch,” she counters. “Our plays never go as expected, no matter how much we practise. The point is that we have the training to improvise as needed.”

“And that the Seeker catches the Snitch at the right time,” Hermione adds, too thoughtfully. She’s scheming. “You should be the one who retrieves Davi, I think.”

Immediately Rebeca protests this plan.

“She’s never met him. He won’t recognise her,” she says, her hands clasped tight around each other, her knuckles going a sickly white. “He could be dangerous if he’s scared. We’d need an Auror, if you are serious about this plan. Someone who could defend themselves.”

Ginny’s eyes are on Hermione, who’s also staring at her.

“Malfoy could do it,” Ginny offers, but Hermione shakes her head. She hasn’t said a word about him since the weekend, when Rebeca disappeared after the Quidditch game. Ginny had found Hermione in her rooms, Crookshanks on her lap and a book dangling from her fingers. It was the first time she’d caught Hermione doing absolutely nothing.

“What about Harry?”

Ginny thinks for a moment that seems to stretch beyond the confines of ordinary time. She thinks about the clench of Harry’s jaw and the way he breathes in his sleep—not the heavy breathing of real rest, but the pants and gasps of someone running for their lives. She thinks of how he’d looked when she’d agreed, finally, to marry him. Of how he’d touched her at the Quidditch game. How much it matters to him that their lives become some version of normal.

How he wants to be the one who rescues her.

But that’s not what Ginny needs. Not now.

“I’m not just a Quidditch player,” she says. “I’ve duelled Death Eaters and survived.”

“Davi is stronger, and not even he can predict when his power will surge.” Rebeca sucks in a breath. “They’re very careful about administering the potions, but Blaise has said that Davi spends much of the day unconscious, in order for A Mão Fiel to better harvest his magic.”

“What are they doing with it?” Hermione asks. “They were already powering the compound.”

“I’ll make a note to ask Pansy,” Rebeca says, her lips twisting in a smile that she’s clearly unable to suppress. “Hermione, will you talk to Blaise?”

“I suppose I should canvas the Ministry while I’m there,” Hermione says, already making notes on parchment.

Ginny bites back a smirk. “You’re not sneaky, Mione. Maybe I should do that instead.”

“I’m the one with boundless reasons to be at the Ministry. Kingsley has made a hash of my files, and he has questions about the Muggle Summit which might be easier to answer in person. I’ll also want to show him Rebeca’s proposal.”

There’s no mistaking the gratified expression on Rebeca’s face. It’s endearing, how much these two speak their own swotty language.

“Bold of you, to use the Minister as your alibi,” Ginny points out. “What do you need from me?”

Rebeca and Hermione shoot each other telling looks. They’ve been debating amongst themselves, then.

“If you’re leaving Harry out of this,” Hermione says, hesitation in all her features, “then we’re going to need access to all the Auror records on the Faithful Hand and A Mão Fiel. I’m almost certain Kingsley isn’t briefed on everything.”

Ginny hesitates for a moment. As soon as she speaks, she will have to acknowledge the realities of the Auror’s office. Of Harry. And she wants to be the one who is getting better. The person who kisses her fiancé on the Quidditch pitch.

But she thinks, too, of the weight of the secrets between them. All the things he's never told her and that she's forced herself to accept. Because she was with Harry Potter, her old childhood crush, the boy who saved her from the darkness before he even knew her—and because, over the years, he's somehow become *her* Harry, which never stops feeling miraculous.

Ginny runs her hands over her arms, chilled even in her thick jumper. She thinks of Fred again, of Davi, of all the times her parents whispered their worries during the war and thought she wouldn't hear. All the times, during her later years at Hogwarts, when she'd been forced to fight.

If she ever does have a child, she wants to be able to send them to Hogwarts without being afraid for their lives. And when she imagines herself in the future, she doesn't see the wall of all those secrets between her and Harry.

An eternity has passed in her mind, her thoughts rushing in her head. But once upon a time, Ginny hadn't wanted to be left along the sidelines.

She asks, "Why?"

"He wants to keep everyone safe," Hermione says, biting her lip. "He wants to do it all on his own. The way Dumbledore did."

Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny sees Rebeca shaking her head. As if Hermione has said too much.

"If I'm going to do this," Ginny says, turning towards Rebeca, "you need to tell me everything. Even when it's hard to bear."

"You'll get the records for us, then?"

Ginny should say no. Because mostly, since the war, she has loved her life. And if she says yes to this, to betraying her fiancé and her Ministry, there is a good chance she will destroy all of it.

Instead she says, "Tell me about Davi."

She expects Rebeca to say that her brother is good. That she will weave a story that only feels half-true. Maybe that's what Ginny hopes for: an excuse to leave this room, to say no, to save herself.

But Rebeca says, "Sometimes, when the power was too much for him, he would just look at me, his hands clenched tight in his lap. And I would think, *I never knew anyone could have such beautiful eyes*. There's gold in them, and green, not only brown. In spite of everything, there was a forest in those eyes. It always felt like a promise."

"You always shielded him," Ginny says. She thinks of her mother, of Bellatrix. Of how strange Fred's face had looked in death, robbed of its motion. She'd never realised, until then, how many kinds of grins her brother had.

“Not always,” Rebeca says, staring at her hands.

For a moment, the silence descends.

When Ginny turns to Rebeca, there’s recognition in her eyes.

“What do you need from me?”

“Don’t tell Harry Potter what we’re doing,” Rebeca says, and then, “steal the files if Hermione can’t.”

“Harry defeated Voldemort,” Ginny says, not quite sure why these are the words she chooses. She only knows she can’t say yes right away. That something will be broken if she accepts this mission.

Harry might never look at her as if she is the sun reflecting light into his green eyes.

Rebeca says nothing, only tilts her head as if she is studying a piece of art. “Do you ever think it’s strange that Europe falls to a new Dark wizard with every generation?”

“There are evil people everywhere.”

“And yet A Mão Fiel has not taken over my country.”

Ginny crosses her arms over her chest. She sets her jaw, trying to imagine the way she felt before the Quidditch World Cup final started: as if she’d already won.

When she’d held the Cup over her head, beaming and crying, it had still felt unreal. She’s never truly believed in her good luck.

Which might be why she does not flinch away from Rebeca, why Ginny, as brazen as she’s ever been, drawls, “I suppose you know the secret.”

“We don’t respect your British hierarchy or your love of concealment. We don’t allow distrust to fester.”

“People have been trying to kill Harry since the moment he was born.”

She looks at Hermione for support, but her friend only shakes her head.

“You don’t agree with Rebeca, do you?” Ginny asks, a wild edge in her voice. She had thought she could bear whatever they would tell her, but she feels her resolve unravelling.

“He’s trying to save us all himself, no matter the cost.” Hermione doesn’t speak as if the words are dragged from her. This sounds rehearsed, easy. As if she’s said the words before. “If you think he could be convinced...but, Ginny, I wouldn’t confide in Harry. I’m not sure I know what will happen to the information.”

“Harry would never sell it to some Dark confederation,” Ginny says. She knows this truth deep as her bones. No matter how she feels, her sadness and frustration, she knows that he is

good, as good as he can be.

“No, but he might make the Light something terrible,” Hermione says. She passes her fingers over her throat, a strange gesture. “I don’t want to hurt you, Gin. Say the word and this ends now. We’ll leave you out of it. But if you remain, if you want to help us rescue Davi, you need to know the truth.”

“You’ll modify my memory, won’t you,” Ginny says, not bothering to make the words a question. Since Tom Riddle’s diary, she hasn’t wanted anyone to have access to her mind. Especially if there are gaps left in her recollections.

“We would have no choice,” Rebeca says. “What do you want to do, Ginerva?”

Maybe it’s the fact that she thought to ask the question, or the way Rebeca knows to use Ginny’s full name to rankle her. Maybe it’s because, for once, Ginny has the opportunity to do something that matters more than victory on a Quidditch pitch. Or maybe it’s because she will never let anyone change her memories again.

“I’ll do it,” she says. “Just tell me where you think I should look.”

Later, she’ll think about the fact that she doesn’t know Harry’s hiding places. Now, though, Ginny leans back on Rebeca’s couch while Hermione shuffles her papers, and waits for an explanation.

At first, Draco had thought he might never hear from Hermione or the Hand again. But on the afternoon after their coupling, just as the sun had begun to paint the white walls a rosy-tinted orange, Draco had received a new message on his stylus.

It’s reckless, I know, but what if we could do that again?

He’d thought of her splayed out for him in some luxurious hotel, her fingers making divots in the duvet. The threat of all the world contained outside. The only cruelty the glittering one they hold between themselves.

I’ll send you coordinates, he’d written back.

He’d spent the next three days reviewing everything he knew about the Hand and sending messages to Hermione on the stylus. Mostly he sent information that might be useful to her at Hogwarts, or for her impossibly Gryffindor decision to rescue Saraiva’s brother, but he also tempted her with locales and possibilities: Paris, Marrakesh, Antarctica, the centre of the Forbidden Forest, her own flat near Diagon Alley.

In writing, Hermione said yes to everything. He lost whole hours trying to imagine the expression on her face, whether she was blushing as she typed or whether her bottom lip was caught between her teeth.

He'd been caught in those aimless thoughts when the owl appeared at his window, parchment glimmering in its talons. A summons from the Faithful Hand.

We will be at the Ministry tomorrow at midnight, the parchment says. Draco cannot recognise the slashing handwriting. *Disguise your face*.

He studies the parchment, unrolling and flipping the scroll before running a detection spell. Aside from the tracker, studded with curses, it's only parchment. There are no hidden messages.

I'll be there, he writes, attaching the message to the owl's talons and locking a shield around his mind. He only drops it when the owl disappears into the clouds.

What does the Hand want at the Ministry?

Draco casts another ward and wracks his mind. Shackbolt will be out of his office well before midnight—he's far more prone to working from his home after hours, charming memos to fly long distances—and the Auror's office is equipped to handle an attack. Potter and Weasley always kept the floor under guard, and Draco has no reason to believe they've changed since he left.

He prepares his disguise for the rest of the night, darkening his hair and lengthening his nose, changing the colour of his eyes to a warm hazel. He takes off the Malfoy signet ring and puts on Muggle clothing: a jumper and jeans. In the mirror, he doesn't look like himself. He looks like some earnest do-gooder who might report to Arthur Weasley and traipse around the Muggle world with his wand hidden.

It doesn't sound like such an awful fate.

Still, Draco reverses the enchantments. He picks up his stylus. He should tell Hermione that he cannot meet her again. He should warn her about the message—but if she shows up, or the Ministry prepares overmuch, the Hand will know where his allegiances lie.

Then he thinks of the way she'd looked when she'd first appeared in the fire. Her close-cut dress like armour, a contrast to the soft fullness of her lips, the curves of her body, the intensity of her gaze. She had cared whether he was alive or otherwise. Even when she didn't want to trust him. Even after everything he'd revealed to her, all the petty cruelties he could summon into the bedroom.

He'd never been more honest, and somehow she hadn't so much as flinched. She'd shown him her fangs instead. Had pressed them to his throat.

It's reckless and stupid and a thousand other things besides to want Hermione Granger this much. He pushes back each feeling long enough to write to her. *The Hand has summoned me to the Ministry*.

We should talk, she writes back, moments later. He imagines her in her apartments, the darkness outside her window. She would be perched on the edge of her couch, her curls limned gold by the lamplight and her fingers curled under her chin, unable to hide the fact that she was thinking furiously.

They'll be watching me, he writes, *I can't move before tomorrow and you can't come here. I've told you everything I know. Exercise caution in your preparations or my value to you will become extremely limited.*

A long moment passes with no new message. He puts the kettle on for tea, lighting the burner the Muggle way. It's an excuse to stay away from the stylus, to measure out the tea leaves and wait until the water boils.

When he finally returns, there are two messages from Hermione.

I'll be at the Ministry tomorrow night, she writes in the first. Draco scrolls to the second, cursing under his breath. *Before you tell me to let Harry handle it, I have business with Kingsley and a meeting with Blaise that need doing. I still have my office. There are things I should take care of, so it won't look strange that I'm there.*

He writes to her without thinking of strategy: *Stand down, Granger. They're after you.*

They're after Harry as well, aren't they? Who would you prefer be left to protect the Ministry?

I won't let them do any serious damage. Though he can still feel the explosions of pain across his body as the curses hit him, and Draco already knows that this promise means nothing. The Hand has escalated beyond his ability to control, and they clearly want to show their strength.

You have a cover to protect.

I'll let it up if circumstances become dire. You would still have Saraiva in play.

A moment passes, during which Draco pours out his tea. He's taken the first sip when the stylus pings with Hermione's response. He'd imagined it to be a reminder that Saraiva cannot be fully trusted, but instead she's written, *It's reckless, I know, but I'm worried you won't be able to escape in time. You won't be able to disapparate from the Ministry. Pomfrey says that some of the countercurse she administered require weeks to fully take hold.*

I'm aware of my injuries, Hermione. I'll be more vulnerable if I'm concerned about your welfare. He sends the message and then, feeling unsettled by the implications, writes another: *Your duelling is still only adequate. You haven't managed to win against me.*

I'll be on alert and I'll stay at Hogwarts, she writes, seconds after that addendum, *so long as you swear to inform me the moment you return.*

I won't leave you to worry about me, Granger. I'll even send you coordinates for our next meeting place.

I'll expect you to meet me fully healed and with all your limbs intact.

He types out a response—*any particular limbs you're concerned about*—and then deletes it, offering up a bland promise instead. He sets aside the stylus and makes dinner for himself, though he hardly tastes a single bite. When he's finished, he seats himself at his piano and begins to play.

The Bösendorfer is best suited to Bach and Mozart, the crisp precision of the composers he favours, but tonight Draco indulges his melancholy, selecting one Chopin nocturne and then another, then pulls out the sheet music from the bench and works his way through the entirety of the Schumann *Carnaval*.

He falls into bed, finally exhausted enough to still his racing mind. As he does every night before sleep, he walls off his thoughts from the world, and then he surrenders himself to sleep.

In the morning, he swears that he remembers Hermione's voice, the texture of her fingers on his arm, the sensation of her lips over the Mark. He brushes all of it away and prepares himself for every eventuality at the Ministry.

By the time he apparates to the coordinates that the Hand provided, Draco has convinced himself that he's prepared for whatever might come.

Still, at the sight of Theo waiting at the corner between two posh Muggle buildings, he feels as if some malevolent fist has clenched inside his stomach.

"I see the Hand has decided to torment me," Draco says, knowing from the expression on Theo's face that his old friend recognises him despite the battalion of disguising spells.

"This isn't an official mission. It was me that summoned you," Theo responds. He makes a visible effort to wrench his eyes from his polished loafers to Draco's gaze. "No one else is coming. I needed to apologise and—"

"The owls were your doing, then?"

Theo nods, and Draco thinks of Saraiva's story about the owl on the Quidditch pitch, of the glowing parchment he'd received and the nexus of spells on it. That kind of precision work was never Theo's speciality at Hogwarts. But then, they've all changed since the war.

"I knew you wouldn't kill me on a streetcorner in the middle of Kensington," Theo says, though Draco can tell he's already reaching for his wand. "I wanted to explain what happened."

"You summoned Saraiva, didn't you?" Draco is still trying to unravel every thread. He wants to trust Theo, but he's already been played for a fool. No matter what he said to Hermione or demonstrated to her in the bedroom of that old Ministry safe-house, his joints still complain when he moves too quickly. Escape, if he required, could be difficult.

“I guessed that nobody would let her stay at Hogwarts if she wasn’t playing some kind of game with the Hand.”

“And what, now you’re going to use her as collateral to ensure I’ll do whatever you want?” Draco flexes his hand in front of him, feigning nonchalance. Even if he knows Hermione will dismember him if he fails to protect their colleague. The thought, foolish as it is, manages to steady him.

In fact, it’s Theo’s voice that shakes when he speaks. “Your initiation—I swear I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Don’t try to pretend you were surprised.”

“I need to get out, Malfoy.”

“You seem to forget that I’m now an initiated member of the Faithful Hand. What’s to stop me from turning you in to them?”

Theo’s lips curl upward, into a wan smirk. “You’re not initiated quite yet.”

“What, do we need to burn down the Ministry first?”

“You’ll need to provide some evidence that you’ve been there. Present a file or something.”

“You want me to stroll into the Auror’s office and lift a file off Potter’s desk?”

“I thought you were used to this life,” Theo says. “Surely you didn’t think the Hand would accept you without question. You’re a fucking Hogwarts professor. You were an Auror alongside Harry Potter. That Mark on your arm can’t shield you from everything.”

For one wild moment, Draco thinks of rolling up his sleeve and pressing his finger against the Dark Mark. Just to see what Theo might do.

Because he had been prepared for a fight. He’d thought through the ways he’d minimise the damage, the explanation he’d provide. But something in Draco cannot believe that he could be compelled to risk the life he’s built to calmly walk through the doors of the Ministry with Theo Nott.

Even though, of course, he’d been prepared for a situation like this for years. The whole Auror’s office has, in fact.

So in the end, Draco sounds the Aurors’ silent alarm as he walks through the doors of the Ministry, the one that will clear the building of any stragglers. He retrieves the dummy file with Theo at his side, moving through the illusioned office without hesitation. They’d trained for this eventuality, from the silent alarm at the entrance to the triggering of the spell that says that he does not require reinforcements.

He leads Theo out of the building and presses the file into his hands.

“Am I a member of the Hand now?” Draco asks, making a show of his empty palms.

“Tell me you’ll get me out.”

Draco twists his wand and Theo is hovering in the air upside-down, his feet kicking as his face goes red. The papers from the file have scattered on the wind. Theo’s expression is all shock, as if he’d forgotten his last meeting with Draco.

But clearly, Theo never thought this kind of thing would happen to him. He didn’t think that there would be a cost to any of this, as if all the harm he caused over the years could be wiped away clean.

“No surprises,” Draco tells him. “From now on, you tell me everything and you get me the information I need. Because you should know full well, Theodore, that this is the least of what I can do to you.”

He leaves Theo dangling until he sputters, “We were only informed an hour before you were set to arrive. The penalty for informing you—those traces I put on the owls and parchment, they’re only a pale imitation of what the Hand can do when it wants.”

“Stay with them, then, if you’re so afraid.”

Theo swallows, visibly. “I thought it would be easier, after the war.”

Draco thinks of the rehabilitation camps. Of the pain of the Mark, when Voldemort had burned it into his arm. He thinks of all those curses in the field and the weight of Hermione’s distrust.

“You already tried easy,” he says. “What is it you want now?”

Before Theo can respond, Draco waves his wand and sets him back on his own two feet, the file tucked neatly under his arm. Not a single piece of parchment, not a single half-truth or faded map, none of it is out of place.

Draco’s back in his own flat before he lets out his breath.

Contrary to what she’d told Draco, it takes Hermione three days to set a meeting with Kingsley. Then again, she was picky about the time, pointing to her class schedule to say she could only meet late, just as the offices were closing, when Kingsley would be in a rush to leave.

Sure enough, he does not question a single one of her recommendations, and only has a few questions for her, though Hermione can already foresee the battalion of owls he’ll send her throughout the week as he thinks of others.

Kingsley married Amity Grenville, an American witch, five years ago, and though he usually works late into the night, he never lingers at the office anymore.

This suits Hermione's purposes exactly. As soon as Kingsley leaves, all apologies, she finds her way to her old office and waits for Blaise Zabini to appear.

She'd brought essays to grade, but instead Hermione finds herself looking around, at the walls covered in books and the sofa where she'd fallen asleep reading proposals and memos and the beginnings of new laws. She can feel her old excitement in the air like the phosphorus of a new-lit match.

She thinks, too, of Draco. He'd returned safely from his mission at the Ministry, everything following the proper protocols, so that Harry had known Draco Malfoy's location an hour before Hermione received the first message on her stylus.

Within the first few messages of their exchange, Draco had mentioned Theodore Nott in a way that made Hermione ask whether he could be trusted.

I don't know, Draco had said. *I want to trust him, though. Even if I don't believe he's trapped the way he wants me to think. He could've got out if he'd thought the sacrifices were worthwhile.*

Maybe he didn't see anything worth fighting for, Hermione had written. There had been no answer for a long time.

Now, as she reaches for her bag, grabbing for the essay at the top, her office door swings open, revealing Blaise.

"You should really lock this," he says, though he casts no charm as he shuts the door behind him. There's a file tucked under his arm, a bit too tight for nonchalance. "You know there was a break-in last night, don't you?"

Hermione gestures toward the chair in front of her desk. "Kingsley mentioned."

Blaise smirks at her, crossing his ankle over his knee, revealing bottle-green socks. "So we're ignoring Malfoy, are we?"

"I don't know what you mean," she says, reaching for a locked drawer in her desk. "Do you have what I need?"

"I have guard shifts as of July. I don't know how helpful they are—my source was a former guard who managed to escape. Security has almost certainly tightened since then."

"What happened to the guard?"

"She disappeared. Hopefully of her own accord." Blaise holds out the file folder. "Anyway, what's likely to be more helpful is the map that Anitta provided."

Most of the documents inside, the guard shifts and the map and a lengthy scroll of parchment in Portuguese, are in the same handwriting, the same blue ink. There are other scraps,

smaller, in Blaise's handwriting, and other parchment pieces that look as though they've been pulled from newspapers in various languages.

"Has Rebeca seen any of this?"

"I just managed to get my hands on it last week. The Ministry still monitors my comings and goings."

Hermione considers this. She wants to ask a dozen questions, beginning with: why the scrutiny and whether it's general or targeted specifically at Blaise. Whether he's done anything to deserve it.

Once, Hermione would have asked those things outright, brazen and sure of her motives, the rightness of them. Now, she only picks up her wand, trying not to react at the ghost of a flinch from Blaise.

"We can get you a better means of communication," she says, running a detection spell on the file before disillusioning it and placing it in her bag.

"Parkinson has already offered me one of her styli," he says. "The price is too high."

"What did she want?"

"Access to the Ministry." Blaise raises a hand at the horror he must see in Hermione's expression. "Parkinson doesn't want power. She wants information."

"Isn't that the same thing?" Hermione thinks of the way she'd trusted Pansy over a few omissions, a few stories. Of the way she'd looked at Rebeca, with hunger and longing. It had felt so easy to trust her, so right. Had she been taken in like some first-year Hufflepuff?

And yet, Pansy has given them new information on the Hand. Paired with Blaise's file, they could be weeks away from rescuing Davi.

"How very Gryffindor of you to ask," Blaise says, but it's not cutting, laced with that smiling disinterest that has made him so effective at the Ministry. "Ask Malfoy that question, and let me know what he tells you."

"I want to know if I should trust her," Hermione counters, feeling the flush on her cheeks.

Because when she thinks of Draco, when she thinks of his mouth, it isn't forming words. His breath, instead, is hot on her skin, and even in her thoughts, she wants him closer.

Better to think of something else.

"It will be very difficult to draw Parkinson into any kind of mission or heroics," Blaise says. The disinterest in his voice has turned into something deeper. As if this isn't a mere attempt to spare Hermione a blush. And she remembers, belatedly, how much this rescue mission matters to Blaise. "But she seems to want to do good work, in her way. I think she's trying to understand our world."

“By tearing everyone of notice to shreds?”

“I’ve noticed that she’s never written anything about your Golden Trio.”

“Perhaps we’ve become too old and boring for her,” Hermione says, a simple skirting of the truth.

Blaise shakes his head. “At a minimum, I think Parkinson wants to maintain peace as much as you do.”

“What, you think there’s no use for gossip during a war?”

“No,” he says, and it’s strange to hear Blaise this serious, to watch his eyebrows furrow. “In a war, gossips turn into spies, or else they have to flee. They know too many secrets otherwise.”

Hermione thinks of Rita Skeeter, who tried to flee the Death Eaters and failed. Her death, weeks before the Battle of Hogwarts, was never made much of. While writing her book and trying to track down Skeeter’s fate, Hermione had been forced to scour the records of missing persons and then to conduct interviews in Azkaban under the watchful eyes of the Auror guards. Even though they were an improvement on the dementors, she can’t quite forget their coiled fear and anger, the way they reached for their wands at the slightest twitch, or the blank looks on the faces of the former Death Eaters.

She forces her mind back to Rita Skeeter. No one had ever mentioned the information she’d known, the hidden cache of secrets that a reporter with her access might have held. But then, no one had ever much trusted Rita, even as they’d lapped up everything she’d offered on the page.

Truth didn’t matter, so long as it provided a distraction from the horror.

“So Pansy wants us to defeat the Hand,” she finds herself saying. “You don’t think—she seems to have a fascination with Rebeca.”

“I understand the feeling,” Blaise says, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. It’s different from Blaise’s usual expression, more sincere, more easily harmed.

“Are you going to tell me how you came to know Davi?”

For a moment, Hermione thinks that Blaise is going to question her motives. Instead, he says, “My counterpart in the Brazilian ministry is a real wanker. I thought this before I knew he was on the take from A Mão Fiel. Eduardo said he would show me a marvel, and frankly, I thought if I brought something Dark to the attention of the Ministry, there would be fewer eyes on me.

Instead, he brought me to the compound. He dressed it up as something other than what it was, a commune of some kind, a model for the rest of the wizarding world to follow. But I’d been to the rehabilitation camps, after the war. I recognised the looks on their faces.

And then they brought me to Davi. I could feel the power coming off of him—and Granger, you’ve never met a witch or wizard with this kind of raw power ready to burst from them, even someone like Dumbledore knew how to keep it managed—but it was his eyes that affected me, right away. They’re different to Saraiva’s, green and gold and they look like a revelation on his face.”

Blaise wipes his hand over his mouth, lost in thought, and for a long moment, Hermione wonders if he’ll stop there. She’s never heard him say so many words at once. And yet it seems he offered them with something like relief, as if he’d been waiting for someone to confide in.

“I managed to speak to him a bit at dinner,” Blaise continues, finally, “and then I requested a private meeting. We walked along the outskirts of the compound. His guards were at a distance. I thought he might be a leader or a political figure, a reluctant ally held by force. It was only when I met Rebeca that I realised how he was being held. Davi was careful, you see, not to reveal the specifics. He knows the stakes.”

“Do they keep him drugged?”

“Not when I first met him. Nothing beyond the usual potions so they could keep siphoning off his magic. But after we’d—we came to an understanding rather quickly, and after I left, Davi attempted his first escape. The potions became more difficult to administer, and then, even when they forced the stuff down his throat, they didn’t work quite so well at controlling him. From what Anitta passed along before she vanished, they’re brewing him a triple strength Draught of Living Death and it’s barely enough to hold him.”

“He loves you, then.”

Blaise does not so much as blush. “I hope so. He’s... Tell me, Granger, have you ever come across someone and just *known*? You see them, and there’s the rest of your life, all spread out before you. That was how it went for me, meeting Davi for the first time. Even knowing all the ways it would become catastrophic.”

She thinks, of course, of Draco. Draco wearing those deep green robes at her first dinner, Draco duelling with her at the edge of the lake, Draco fucking her against the bookshelf. All of it a catastrophe in slow motion, and all of it glorious, like nothing she’d experienced before. “And what were they holding over Davi before he met you?”

“His sister, naturally.” Blaise hesitates, spreading his fingers over his knees. There’s a thin gold ring just below the top joint of his middle finger. It reminds Hermione of the rings Rebeca wears. She’d never noticed the jewellery on Blaise before. “I met him right after Rebeca’s appointment to Hogwarts was announced. I told him she was safe there.”

“She wasn’t,” Hermione says. The words slice through the air.

“She’s safer than Davi. The compound could be worse, but they all know they’re trapped. I spent months worrying that they would do something drastic to them all, especially after Davi’s first escape attempt.”

“How do you communicate?”

“Mind to mind, sometimes, when Davi’s awake.”

Hermione tries not to goggle. Legilimency has never been her specialty, but even so, the distance seems impossible.

“How?” she finally asks, her curiosity overwhelming her.

“We made a blood-bond,” Blaise explains, holding up his palm. There’s a scar there, a thick line of silvered flesh running down the centre. “Davi allowed a little of his magic to rise to the surface. It requires effort, especially on my part, but I can occasionally know things faster than a message could be passed from a sympathetic captive or doubting guard.”

“He couldn’t tell you the guard shifts, in other words,” Hermione says, hoping she’s succeeded in keeping her face blank. “But the power required to communicate over such a distance...”

She doesn’t allow herself to complete the sentence. She’d give too much away.

Because that kind of raw power seems dangerous, the more she learns about it, whether Davi learns to control it or not. It’s the kind of magic that creates tyrants and death. She’s beginning to wonder whether it was a mistake to try and rescue him, even if it would bring Rebeca to their side. And despite the Vow Rebeca swore to McGonagall, there’s no guarantee that she would fight against the Hand. All she promised was that she wouldn’t harm Hogwarts or its students.

All of her choices seem to spiral before her, making her ears ring.

“If Davi’s power could be extracted from him, he would give it up in an instant,” Blaise says, cutting through that haze.

“Then why is the Ministry watching you so closely?”

For a moment, seeing the stung expression on Blaise’s face, Hermione wants to clap her hand over her mouth. But if she’s finally going to take a risk, to move against the people she’s trusted all her life, Hermione reasons, it’s not wrong to ask for a little reassurance.

When Blaise finally speaks, it’s with bitterness etched in every feature. “You tell me,” he says. “Weren’t you the one who assisted with the Ministry’s rehabilitation protocols? Apparently I’ve never been contrite enough.”

“You work for the Ministry.” Hermione’s voice sounds very small. “The restrictions were meant to have eased.”

Blaise raises an eyebrow. “Tell that to Malfoy’s monthly evaluations.”

“He’s a former Death Eater. He was working as an Auror, and Hogwarts...” Hermione forces herself to look Blaise in the eye. “Is the Ministry evaluating you monthly as well?”

“Weekly.” He runs his thumb over the back of his hand, as if to indicate the colour of his skin. An unspoken indictment, but Hermione understands it, and she flushes with shame.

“Kingsley—” she begins, but Blaise waves her off.

“If Shacklebolt had stepped one toe even close to the line, he’d never have got close to the Minister’s office. Even now, you see how hard he works? The man is a legend, but there’s a reason he’s going to leave you the position as soon as you’re back. So long as he’s Minister, he can never make a single mistake. Wizarding Britain would destroy him, otherwise. They’d never give a moment of grace to a Black man.”

Hermione wants to protest. Because in her experience, this world has always cared more about the purity of blood than anything. Of course, she was familiar with the racism and bigotry of the Muggle world. They were made plain during her studies at Oxford, the way that the laws of the West had been rewritten for slavery and empire and conquest.

Still, even as she’d followed the recent protests in the United States, the way they’d rippled out to the streets of England, to the rest of the world, these had appeared to be principally Muggle concerns.

She’s always focused on magical concerns—the welfare of house-elves and goblins, werewolves and giants, the protection of dragons—and stayed silent on the issues that, she supposed, were merely the foibles of the non-magical world.

But now, she thinks with something very much like horror, that silence has become a weapon.

Not knowing what else to say, she only murmurs, “I’m sorry.”

Because she should have realised much sooner. She has held the power to make things better, the training that should have made all of these problems and injustices all the clearer.

And still, Blaise’s nod feels like a weight lifted off her shoulders. The grace of it, that small motion.

“I wondered if you’d ever noticed,” he says.

“I think I didn’t want to see,” Hermione says, her voice wavering. She steadies herself. She is the one at fault. “I’ll make sure your evaluations are stopped. There’s no reason to monitor you like this. You were never a Death Eater. Neither were your parents.”

She’s not sure what she expected in response, but Blaise does not receive these words with simple gratitude. He only lifts his chin.

“You don’t need to save me,” he says, “or any of us.”

Hermione bites her lip. “What’s the point of all this power and knowledge if I’m not going to help anybody but myself?”

A moment passes, during which she can hear the beat of her own heart.

“How very Gryffindor of you,” Blaise says, finally, and his smile looks different from the way it normally does, as if it turns up his lips despite his best efforts at concealment. “So you’ll save Davi, then?”

Hermione thinks of all she’s built since she first found out she was a witch: her reputation and her work and all her policies. She thinks of everything she stands to lose, of all those years of caution and striving.

She thinks of Draco, turning away from all he’d been taught. Of how difficult it must have been, to rebuild himself in the wake of censure and scorn from both sides, all the lingering distrust and guilt.

And then she thinks of implacable Blaise Zabini, standing before a young man and falling in love at first sight, even knowing all that it might cost him.

“I’ll do my very best,” she says, and Blaise’s smile widens.

“Thank you,” he says, the emotion in the words a thrum. “Shall I walk you out?”

He’s giving her an alibi, but Hermione shakes her head. Whatever might come, she doesn’t want any of the blame to fall on him. “I have more work to do.”

She gives herself a little time after Blaise leaves, gathering herself, thinking of the spells she’s going to work. She’s practised them on ordinary objects, on books she doesn’t like, but never on herself. Never with high stakes.

Never with the whole of her career on the line, with the very real possibility of destroying one of her oldest friendships.

She reminds herself of her conversation with Blaise. *I’ll do my very best*. It was easiest, always, to be brave when she felt she had nothing to lose, but she can be brave now, too.

Hermione takes one last look at her office, the place where she tried to build a new world. Then she casts her spells, the matrix of intertwining conditions, and, when the final parameter is cast with an outward flick of her wand, she disappears.

She cannot see her hand in front of her, but she can feel it. She clenches and unclenches her fingers experimentally. There’s no shimmer of a Disillusionment Spell, no indication that she’s in this world.

If her theories are correct, though, Hermione isn’t exactly in this world. She’d discovered this spell accidentally when researching the wards, trying to make a book both in this reality and in a pocket universe. After she’d cast the spell, the book had disappeared, but Hermione had been able to feel it with her hands. Then she’d pressed her fingers a little harder. Her hand had fallen through the book and into the table.

A book that was both there and not there simultaneously.

She’d been able to throw it through the Hogwarts wards without so much as a stray glimmer of light.

Now, she is the enchanted volume. So instead of turning the doorknob, Hermione attempts to walk right through it.

She passes through the wood with no resistance, as easily as if she were walking to Platform Nine and Three Quarters, only it's her that's enchanted.

The Ministry is nearly silent at this hour, but Hermione knows there will be a guard at the Auror's office after Draco's break-in. Sure enough, there's an Auror at the door.

Hermione walks through the wall.

Harry's office is empty—Ginny had promised to keep him at Hogwarts tonight—and once she's inside, Hermione casts a spell on all his detection charms, so that they vanish alongside her.

She's just making her way to his desk when she hears footsteps outside the door.

Despite the fact that she's invisible, Hermione still presses herself against the wall, lightly enough to stay in the room and watch Harry enter his office. He doesn't look towards the shelf she just emptied, but picks up a thick file from his desk and then his work bag.

For a moment, he turns right toward her.

Preparing herself to be discovered, Hermione can still only think about how tired he looks, about the angry lines around his eyes and mouth. She wants to smooth them away. She wants everything to be all right. She wants them to be friends again, the way they have been since she was eleven.

But she thinks of their duelling, of Harry's rage, of Davi locked up in his compound. She thinks of Rebeca, poised under the barrage of Harry's questions.

Silently, she makes her choice.

Hermione does not make a sound as she slips back through the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for waiting on this chapter — it has been a wild month but this one is special to me for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that Davi's eyes are based on my husband's, so it was extra fun to edit those scenes.

Many thanks to Ivy for the beta on this chapter, and for always being very nice about telling me I have forgotten at least half a sentence.

I'm traveling for the next few weeks but am hoping to sneak in some writing, because, as you might suspect, there is definitely some Plot coming up. Thanks, as always, for

reading Against Nostalgia and for all of your support.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

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

Harry knows that it was Draco who broke into the Ministry, and that he triggered all the alarms, followed Auror protocols down to the letter. Even so, Harry has issued a new protocol that leaves the Ministry guarded at all hours. He's filled in the gaps himself, after his classes at Hogwarts are over. All week, he's slid into bed well after midnight, wrapping his arms around Ginny and pulling her close.

Now, though, he is in his office, alert to any sound.

So far, the Ministry is quiet. The only sound in his office is the November sleet colliding with his window, which is spelled to replicate the weather outside exactly.

It's too quiet, Harry thinks. Even late into the night, there are the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries and the strivers like Hermione, putting in the hours. Any one of them could set off one of his silver instruments, replicated from Moody.

Wand out, he rises to examine them. They're silent and unmoving, but he can't detect any of the curses that would stop their working. He replaces them in their usual spots, and, taking his Invisibility Cloak from its peg on the door, sets out to inspect the Ministry.

Something is off.

The Auror's office is empty, every desk lamp darkened. The Department of Mysteries is sealed off, and Harry's detection spell reveals no changes to the wards. He sweeps the Minister's office and circles each floor, setting off detection spells. Each one comes back negative.

He's walking back to the office when a flash of silvery light catches his eye, a Patronus or a ghost. Harry follows it, silencing his steps with a wordless charm.

It's a ghost, he realises, as the figure resolves itself into the shape of a woman, silvery hair falling down her back. She's walking the halls of the Ministry the way he did before his fifth year at Hogwarts started, her head tilted back to take in every detail of the place.

The presence of a ghost at the Ministry is unusual. Unlike Hogwarts, ghosts don't congregate at the Ministry—Hermione has explained something about energetic frequencies and ley lines. Harry thinks the answer is simpler. Hogwarts is a home. The Ministry is a place of business.

He does not know what business this ghost has at the Ministry, and so he follows her down the stairs and through the hallways, keeping out of sight. A ghost can't harm him, but they all have enough sentience to cause problems.

She's almost made it to the Auror's office before he makes his presence known, banging his elbow against the wall. Willing her to show her face.

There are so many deaths that haunt Harry, but when the girl shows her face, he doesn't recognise her. She's pretty and young, only a few years out of Hogwarts, but she looks at Harry as if she knows him well.

He's used to this expression.

"What do you want?" he asks.

There's anger on her face, and bewilderment. "I was drawn here," she says. "I want to leave."

"Who are you?"

"Does it matter, Harry Potter? We were never on the same side."

"That didn't work out too well for you," he says, an attempt at grim humour.

She doesn't smile. Instead, she turns from him. He wonders if she knows that there are no spells that work on ghosts.

Though he thinks, making his way to the Auror's office, that this only makes her appearance stranger. He'll send a memo to the Department of Mysteries.

Ahead of him, the ghost girl shines like a beacon.

Ginny, curled up under Harry's desk, hardly allows herself to breathe. She counts to ten and then twenty, the silence of Harry's office ringing in her ears.

She'd scoured their rooms earlier today, after Hermione had told her what had happened in the Ministry, how someone would need to go back into Harry's office. She'd offered to go, but Ginny had insisted. She needs to keep moving.

It had been easy, once Hermione cast her spell. She'd apparated out of Hogwarts and into the Ministry, trying not to think about how many wards she was blasting through as she'd made her way to Harry's office.

She doesn't know how to cast the spell that Hermione worked, so she'd had to curl up at the base of his desk, listening to him as he'd written up reports, occasionally muttering in a way that would have been endearing if Ginny hadn't been questioning everything, her palms sweating between this version of reality and another.

She almost revealed herself a dozen times, but in the end she'd remained curled up and silent, just beyond the spot where his feet could kick out and touch her.

Finally, when she's sure he won't burst in, she rises and checks his desk for any files about the Faithful Hand or A Mão Fiel. Hermione said Harry kept them near him at all times, but at first all Ginny sees is a mess of parchment and memos, the usual detritus of Auror paperwork.

Then she sees one folder that's much neater than all the rest, fat with parchment. Her detection spell sets off three different wards, but Hermione's magic means that Ginny can simply reach through and grab the folder.

She flips through the parchment.

The Faithful Hand is written on the first piece of parchment at least three times. There are parchments in at least seven languages, two with alphabets she can't decipher.

She's caught the Snitch in record time, it seems.

Ginny takes the file in her hands and disappears to Hermione's apartments, where her friend springs up from the couch, wand out. It's only now that Ginny realises how strange she must look, a column of empty air and a thick file folder bobbing around.

"Copy these," she says to Hermione, holding it out. "Harry only stepped out of his office for a moment."

Quickly, murmuring low, Hermione unravels the warding spells and duplicates the file, flipping through it quickly and then duplicating it again. She casts another spell and one of the folders disappears in her hands. Then, after re-warding the original, Hermione casts the spell to make Ginny disappear, and pushes Harry's file into her hands.

As Ginny apparates, she's very aware of how she feels: bright and alive. She's not sure of the last time when she felt this way. She is doing something now. She is helping.

When she lands in Harry's office, an arrow through the wards, she hardly hears the whisper. *Finite incantatem*. But she does feel the force of the spell, wrenching the magic off her, like a skin pulled from her body with one strong jerk. Ginny has to grit her teeth not to scream from the pain of it.

Instead, clutching the folder to her chest, she tries to determine the spellcaster.

There before her is Harry Potter, his wand outstretched. Horror makes his face terrible and strange.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

It's only then that Ginny realises how often Harry has asked her questions with an expectation of the answer. She's never heard him use this tone of voice, as if he's lost.

She sets the file on the desk before she answers. "I'm trying to help someone."

For a moment, he says nothing, only lets his wand fall, and Ginny thinks that he might understand. Harry has his important secrets. Now she has her own.

But when Harry speaks, he reminds her of a growling wolf, poised to spring. All the shock and horror transfigured, now, to anger. “You stole confidential information from an Auror. You broke through the Ministry wards. You’re violating at least a dozen different laws. Tell me why I shouldn’t throw you into Azkaban.”

She could tell him. He might listen. He might even help. She tries to believe it, tries to will herself to explain.

But Ginny doesn’t recognise this man, with his wand held over her heart.

“I can’t tell you that,” she says, wrapping her arms around herself. Her wrist bumps against her wand, close enough to grab in half a second. “I wish—you have all these secrets, Harry.”

“So you thought you’d find some of your own?” Again, that growl. The disgust in his eyes. “I thought you were my whole future.”

Ginny doesn’t know what to say. Instead, she sets the folder on her desk, and she begins to run.

Perhaps it is some final act of grace that Harry doesn’t follow.

Crookshanks is curled up on Hermione’s lap when the pounding on her door begins. Instantly, they both jump up, Hermione’s wand held in the perfect position for duelling. Crookshanks, meanwhile, scratches at the door.

That’s when Hermione hears Ginny’s voice, the way her name is choked by Ginny’s sobbing. She pushes the door open and takes her friend into her arms.

“He found me,” Ginny cries against Hermione’s shoulder. She says the words over and over, ragged with her tears.

Of course it was always a possibility that their sneaking about the Ministry would be caught. But the consequences—Hermione’s mind races. She focuses on running her hand down Ginny’s back, on leading her to the couch and offering a blanket.

“What happened?”

When Ginny tells her about the *finite incantatem*, it’s all Hermione can do not to gasp. The spell is effective for minor enchantments, but requires an immense amount of power for

anything significant. To use it on a spell that placed Ginny between worlds would require an immense outlay, a force of will that makes Hermione want to throw up every ward and hide in the bath.

But that's not what the night requires.

When Ginny finishes her story, Hermione dries her friend's tears and unwinds the wards on her apartments. She leads them across Hogwarts, Harry's file folder disillusioned and clutched under her arm.

All the while, Hermione is watching for Harry. He won't bother with a subtle entrance, not with the might of the Ministry behind him, the love of wizarding Britain, but still she watches, her wand poised to strike.

If Harry manages to bring down the wards, he might be weakened enough that she can bring him down with a well-placed stunning spell.

But Harry does not appear by the time they arrive at Rebeca's rooms.

She ushers them inside without a word.

Hermione and Ginny are usually full of pleasantries and idle talk when they walk into Rebeca's apartments, but tonight they look haunted as they cross her threshold.

It's a look Rebeca knows well: the body's recognition of a plan gone awry.

Hermione, in particular, wears that expression with a particular discomfort. Rebeca isn't surprised by this. Of course the golden girl of wizarding Britain would be quite used to her plans working out perfectly.

But defeat has not made Hermione any less brazen. Already she's revealed a thick folder, which she opens on Rebeca's coffee table, spreading out the contents: notes and maps, timetables and testimonies. There are even the little discs that might fit inside a stylus to reveal recordings.

For a moment, all Rebeca can see is Davi, sitting in her favourite chair, turning toward her with a smile on his face, so wide that it turns his eyes into glistening crescents. *Mano*, he says in her mind, *you saved me! I did not think it was possible.*

"Ginny went to the Ministry," Hermione explains, when Rebeca can wrench herself away from the documents and dreams. "Harry found her."

Ginny looks more like a ghost than the woman who seems to take perverse delight in annoying Rebeca during planning sessions. Tears are falling down her face but she does not notice them, only wraps her arms around herself. Rebeca summons a blanket from her bedroom and drapes it across Ginny's shoulders.

"So the Ministry will come for us," she says, settling in her usual chair. She can tell that Hermione is startled by her lack of panic.

"Harry might—he might leave it be," Ginny suggests, her voice distant as a sleepwalker's.

"Has he ever harmed you?" Rebeca asks, trying to keep her voice from being too sharp. Ginny is in shock, or something like it.

Still, Ginny's eyes go wide. Her tears seem to stop mid-fall. "Harry has never laid a hand on me," his fiancée says.

"No curses?"

Now Hermione has turned to Ginny, who shakes her head.

"No curses," Ginny says, the slightest undertone of despair in her words, "only secrets."

"Then it will be the Ministry," Rebeca concludes. "Harry Potter will not want to harm his standing in this world. He will have an arrest warrant or something equally formal in place by morning."

"The Vow won't let you run, will it?" Hermione asks. Her wand is held in her hand, but it's pointed at the door, not at Rebeca. She feels too grateful for this little gesture, which Hermione likely does not intend.

"I could find a way around it, if I wanted." But Rebeca does not want to escape. She cannot explain why, exactly. Always she has been able to shake off the remnants of a life that no longer suits her, has been able to cover up the scars and hauntings of her various pasts. Now she braces herself. "If running was required to save my brother."

"I think I can get Davi out," Hermione says, and those words cut through all of Rebeca's thoughts, all her schemes.

All she can see is Davi's face, his smile, the green in his eyes. The scar on his cheek from a childhood accident, before they'd all known the truth about his powers. A reminder that at one point, they had all been so happy, so normal.

"How?"

"I discovered—there's a spell."

"Show it to me."

"I can't," Hermione says, looking pained and professorial, as though Rebeca is a student who cannot be entirely trusted. "But if we can get the coordinates for where Davi's being held, if

you and Ginny can create a distraction, the guards don't matter any more. I can get him out."

"Do they play Quidditch at the compound?" Ginny asks, just as there's a knock on the door. The sound of voices.

She can hear Harry Potter's voice beyond the door, the words sharp and clipped, all efficiency.

With a wave of Hermione's wand, the ward on the room is dropped and the coffee table is empty, without so much as the shimmer of a Disillusionment charm.

Rebeca is the one who answers the door. Minerva McGonagall stands on the threshold, Harry Potter and a handful of what Rebeca assumes are Aurors clustered behind her.

"The Ministry has issued a warrant for your arrest, Professor Saraiva," the headmistress says. Each word is clipped and gives no hint of what side she's taken.

"On what evidence?" Hermione asks, now shoulder to shoulder with Rebeca. She holds out her hand, every bit the entitled English witch. "Rebeca was here all evening."

"Do you have any proof?" Harry Potter's voice is sharp. Behind her, she can feel the rise of Ginny's shoulders—not fear, exactly, but its cousin.

But Rebeca is not afraid. Hermione says that she knows how to rescue David, and once Hermione Granger has figured out the solution to a problem, it is practically solved. Rebeca can rot in Azkaban for the rest of her life as long as her brother is safe.

Distantly, she thinks of Pansy. Of the promise of that first kiss. What it could portend.

She pushes the possibility away. In her mind she makes room for a wordless prayer to the old goddesses, to the first wielders of magic. She takes a step forward, ready to accept her fate.

Hermione pulls on Rebeca's robes so that she cannot leave the apartments.

"I can prove to you that Rebeca Saraiva could not have left Hogwarts tonight," she says. "Three days ago, I knitted her into the wards. She can't so much as step outside them at the moment, even to get to Hogsmeade. Now, do you plan to arrest anyone else?"

Harry crosses his arms over his chest, his wand clutched in his fist. "We'll need to thoroughly inspect the warding spells to determine whether you're telling the truth."

"Rebeca can't run," Hermione counters. "She hasn't left the Hogwarts castle for at least a week."

A week ago, Rebeca was in Paris. Now she cannot leave these walls. In spite of all she knows to the contrary, this doesn't feel like being saved.

"We're watching you very closely, Hermione," Harry says, then looks behind her. Ginny stills. "And all of your associates."

“Prepare my arrest warrant, then,” Hermione says. “You’re not leaving with Rebeca tonight.”

“We need to search her quarters,” one of the other Aurors says. Hermione’s mouth tightens with recognition.

“If you had a warrant to search, you’d already be going through her things. Let me guess: you were hoping to arrest her and that nobody would protest.” Hermione leaves a strategic silence, to make the answer very clear. “You’re welcome to come back when you have evidence and a warrant.”

She does not slam the door in their faces, but it closes with a decisive thud.

As soon as she can throw up a warding spell, Rebeca turns to Hermione. “Next time, tell me before you chain me anywhere.”

“You couldn’t know,” Hermione says, all the bravado leaked out of your voice. “But I saw your face, Rebeca. They believed me.”

“How long will I be trapped here?”

“We can relax the binding as soon as the Ministry finishes investigating. Tell Pansy it’s my fault if you’d like.”

“You two were the ones that stole this file,” Rebeca points out, anger lacing her voice.

“Can you imagine what they would have done if it had been you?” Hermione asks. There’s something in her voice that makes the question more than rhetorical. As if she’s been thinking about it for a while.

Behind them, there’s the sound of a sob, quickly muffled.

Ginny Weasley has always had the kind of effortless beauty that Rebeca attributes to white British women, fresh-scrubbed and slightly tousled and still some how luminous, but when Ginny cries, all that ease falls away. She hides her face behind her hands, her shoulders shaking with the force of her crying.

What game did you think you were playing, Rebeca thinks, even as she puts a hand on Ginny’s shoulder. Then Ginny leans toward her, rests her hand over Rebeca’s.

“I never thought he would look at me like that,” she manages to say. “I thought—I should have realised, but I thought he would understand. He has all these *secrets*.”

“You stole a confidential file from the Ministry,” Hermione says, taking Ginny’s other hand. Rebeca can tell she’s trying to be soothing.

And somehow, Ginny’s tears do stop. “Didn’t he do the same, once?”

“I’m sure he does not see it quite that way,” Rebeca offers, though she’s unfamiliar with the intricacies of Harry Potter’s history. She was on the run with Davi while he was being feted across the wizarding world.

“Do you think he knows about Davi?” Ginny asks. She sounds resigned, now, and resolved. “Do you think he’s afraid of what Davi could do?”

“We don’t know yet,” Hermione says, just as Rebeca says, “Even if he did, my brother is only one person. Hardly worth considering in the grand scheme of the British Ministry’s plans.”

“How do you know that?” Ginny asks. Rebeca wants to have something comforting to say, but she can only shake her head and turn to the coffee table.

Hermione waves her wand again, and the documents appear.

“Can you provide us with translations tomorrow?” Hermione asks. “I can stay and help you sort the papers in English.”

“When is your first class tomorrow?” It’s nearly midnight and the file is thick. Hermione and Ginny seem as if they’ve been on edge for hours.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione says. “I once went two days without sleep during my fifth year at Hogwarts. This is more important. We need to get Davi out as soon as possible. Especially with Harry closing in.”

“Why won’t you tell me about the spell?” Rebeca asks. She knows that she should accept Hermione’s help, but there will always be a part of her that bristles when someone else has the upper hand.

“I’m not sure it’s entirely legal,” Hermione says, linking her arm through Ginny’s and leading her to the couch. The two of them exchange a look, though the questioning look in Ginny’s eyes suggests that Hermione hasn’t told her everything, either.

Harry Potter has his secrets, yes, but so does Hermione Granger.

Still, as Rebeca takes her place in the chair, accepting the documents she’s handed, she tries and fails to avoid feeling grateful. It’s been a long while since she didn’t want to leave a place.

Even longer since she thought Davi might be free.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while. Thank you all for bearing with me. To say a lot has happened since my last update is an understatement, and I'm really grateful for all the messages of support, and to all of you who are still reading this fic. You are the greatest, truly.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, this fic has not been abandoned. I will be posting chapters as I complete them.

That said, I've realized that as originally conceived, the massive fic I planned for Against Nostalgia to be is no longer feasible for me. I'm currently trying to figure out how to finish this story, likely with a more truncated plot that will still bring everyone's storylines to at least a satisfying pause.

I will also be posting some new fanfic, but more to come on that later. In the meantime, just know that there is more to come for Hermione and Draco, for Ginny and Rebeca and Harry and Pansy and Blaise and Davi, and everyone else.

Thanks, as always, for your understanding and support. It means the world to me.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

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

I won't be able to see you for a bit, Hermione writes to Draco, her fingers hovering awkwardly over the keys of her stylus. She doesn't want to leave Ginny, and since they were able to steal the files, Rebeca seems charged with a spiky energy unlike her usual understated grace.

Meanwhile, Harry makes his displeasure clear. A day after their Ministry break-in, he'd obtained a warrant to search her apartments. She'd transfigured and hidden the files deep within her satchel and hadn't let it out of her sight, but it was still a shock when she came back to her rooms after class and found Ginny shouting at a pair of shamefaced Aurors, Harry looming over them all, tossing her books around. They hadn't found anything, hadn't taken so much as a scroll of parchment, but the next morning she'd found her classroom in a similar shambles.

Since the search, Harry only scowls at her at meals. She can feel his eyes on her when she's not looking in his direction, so fixed that Hermione has to stifle the urge to take her wand in hand.

Draco writes back within minutes.

Everything all right? he asks.

I'm being watched, she tells him. *That's all I can say for the moment.*

Send me a misremembered poem, then. Since I won't be able to see you.

Tell me about your misadventures with the Hand, she counters, a warding against tenderness.

Nice try, pet. She can feel the ghost of his hand against her skin.

In spite of herself, she's smiling as she writes to him, *Here's one*. And then she adds, on a new line: *Ah! as the heart grows older, it will come to such sights bolder.*

Hopkins should have hired you for an editor, he writes back. *What's the original?*

Ah! as the heart grows older/ It will come to such sights colder. She thinks of the woods, of repeating that incorrect line to herself while the locket hung around her neck, thinking that time was all that was required to make her brave. Then she writes, *Do you still trust Harry?*

It's a long while before Draco writes back, enough that Hermione wonders if the Hand have claimed him for a mission.

Should I not? he asks her, finally, after she's curled in bed with Crookshanks and a treatise on werewolf rights.

She doesn't know how to answer that question, and so she only writes, *I miss you*.

When Harry arrives in his flat, Malfoy has the gall to look surprised. It's all he can do not to point his wand at Malfoy's pale throat.

"Ron's had a trace on you since Halloween," he says instead, scanning the flat for any curses or enemies who might be looking.

"Why are you here, Potter?" Malfoy asks, still seated on his sofa like he's accepting an unexpected social visit.

"There was a break-in at the Ministry." Harry feels a tightness in his chest that chokes back the words, the specifics. He tells himself it's only to do with the fact that Malfoy's allegiances are cloudy and he's not sure how much he can say. "Key documents about the Hand and its syndicates were stolen."

Malfoy sighs. "I followed every Auror protocol, Potter. We've exchanged owls. Why are you here?"

Harry's angry now, nearly livid at the way Malfoy speaks so easily. As if he'd done nothing wrong.

He welcomes the anger. At a minimum, it's familiar. "How did you turn her?"

Finally, Malfoy has his wand out, and Harry slashes his own wand through the air.

His spell rebounds against Malfoy's quickly-conjured shield and he has to duck to avoid being mangled. There's a crash behind him, a sizzling sound as the magic hits the wards.

"I haven't turned Granger, you wanker," Malfoy says, his voice infuriating because it's so calm. Because he uses Granger's first name so easily. "Have you ever tried convincing her to do anything but what she wants?"

"I know you're fucking her," he spits out. The anger makes it difficult to form the spell as quickly as he wants, and Malfoy dodges him without so much as a shield.

"Is that what bothers you?" Malfoy asks, summoning magic in his wandless hand.

Harry dodges, trying not to let his breath become audible. "There was a break-in at the Ministry last week."

“I wasn’t involved, Potter. Didn’t you just say your lot were tracing me? You should know that much, at least.”

When Malfoy sat before Harry after a year in the camps, gaunt and missing any trace of the usual pureblood heir veneer, his apology to Harry had been too precise, too well-drawn to be real. It should have cost him to sit across from someone like Harry, who he’d fought against in school and on the battlefield, but Draco had delivered every line flawlessly, as if he’d practised before a mirror.

Still, the *Prophet* had captured every word in its next day’s edition. Because for all the reforms Kingsley and Hermione and the rest of the old Order put forth, and all the work Harry does in the dark of night, for all the blood that has been shed, Draco will always be that pureblood prince.

“I know you were behind it,” Harry says, sending a blast of magic in Malfoy’s general direction, not caring that it destroys his kitchen instead. “You say you didn’t turn her, but Hermione wouldn’t burgle the Ministry.”

He sees Malfoy’s face cloud with a thought. It passes within seconds.

“If you know it was Granger,” he asks, “why haven’t you arrested her?”

Harry pushes his hand through his hair and doesn’t answer Malfoy’s question. “The spellwork required—only Hermione knows the Ministry wards well enough to break through them.”

“There’s also the matter of Saraiva’s capabilities.”

“There’s an alarm at the Ministry specially triggered to her presence.” The junior Aurors are tasked with updating the wards at the Ministry so that no one of interest can get through without notice. The spells took years to develop after the war, but they’re easy to maintain.

Now nobody can get into the Ministry the way he and Ron and Hermione had got through, with Polyjuice and a half-baked plan. But Hermione knows all this, and found a way around it.

In dreams, in any moment when he’s not perfectly focused, he sees Ginny’s face in the seconds after she first appeared inside his office, when he’d ripped that cloaking spell away. There was pain on her face, and the shock of discovery, but no remorse. As if he’d merely interrupted her in the middle of a fucking Quidditch match that she was winning.

Harry doesn’t know what to do about the despair that roils in him when he thinks of that moment, the anguish at the fact that Ginny either did not understand the significance of her actions, or that she did and chose to take a battering ram to everything he’s built. The fact that their life together could mean so little to her threatens to shred Harry into unrecognisable bits.

He can barely meet her eyes in the Great Hall, and even a glimpse of her makes him feel as if he’s been set aflame.

“So you’re convinced that either Granger has done something impossible, or I have.” Malfoy sounds almost bored, even as he eyes the damage to his flat, which will take him hours to fix.

“Hermione is more powerful than you are.”

“She’s more powerful than you are, too, if it comes to that.” Malfoy holsters his wand, and then he says, “I don’t think you have any evidence of what you’re claiming. Otherwise Granger and Saraiva would already be in Azkaban.”

Harry shoots off a stunner and this time he’s angry enough that Malfoy’s shield can’t contain it. He falls to the floor, his eyes unseeing. Harry casts a thunder spell and Malfoy doesn’t so much as twitch at the cacophony. Malfoy can’t move or see or hear, held by Harry’s anger, his unflinching power.

Only then, armed with this certainty, does Harry speak.

“I’m losing all of it,” he says, not caring that his voice wobbles or that his vision has blurred from the tears. “Ginny couldn’t—I thought she understood what it meant, the work I do, but it was all a fucking game to her. As if I were a bloody Quidditch player on a rival team. And Hermione, and you...all of it comes so easily to you lot, you just determine how you think the world should be ordered and bend it to your ends. No matter that you still have the Mark on your arm. No matter what the rest of us have sacrificed—”

A hand covers his mouth, sealing it shut. There’s a tap on the window, the beating of wings.

“The Hand is coming,” Draco Malfoy says, having swiftly risen from the stunner that no Auror, no Dark wizard, has ever been able to break. “You need to go back to Hogwarts.”

“You’re worried they’ll see me with you.”

“They’ll capture you and ransom you to the highest bidder,” Draco says, pushing him towards the fireplace. “Go.”

Harry emerges from the whirl of the flames and into his apartments at Hogwarts. His books are scattered everywhere, a misguided attempt to cover the absence of Ginny and her things with chaos. He wants to throw the books around, to kick the furniture, to let out the rage that still snarls and paces inside him like some caged beast, but Harry is a trained Auror and he masters himself.

The Hand is sending owls in the middle of London. They know enough to make Malfoy drop his smirk. And if Malfoy’s fear is that they’ll hold Harry Potter for ransom, then the Faithful Hand is ready to announce itself.

He had not thought that they were so strong. He didn’t think that he would see a power like the Death Eaters rise in his lifetime. There are no whispers of some Dark wizard to lead them. This is the only thing that gives him comfort.

He works for hours before he will permit himself to sleep.

Even then, before the darkness claims him, what Harry sees is Ginny’s face.

By some miracle or trick of warding, the Hand doesn't realise that it was Potter in Draco's flat. They've only summoned him to New York City and told him to go in Muggle dress.

He hasn't been to a single meeting since that first one, which unnerves him. Whether the Hand doesn't yet trust him or he's only on the fringes, Draco needs more information.

He needs, apparently, to prove himself as essential. As he dresses himself in his denim and cashmere, the same clothing he'd worn when Hermione had appeared in that cheap Muggle motel, he runs through his options.

Draco hardly knows New York. The Malfoys—most purebloods, really—prefer to travel the Continent rather than the so-called New World. Their magic works differently across the Atlantic, with some jagged edge that has feels, he's told, like desperation, making any precision spells difficult for wizards not used to working in those conditions.

There are papers full of theories as to why, all skirting around the truth: all the magical blood that fell into the soil when the Americas were discovered by Europe and then conquered.

Draco has known for decades that the legacy he carries with him, in his blood and even in the soil beneath his feet, is one of death and grasping darkness. Still, he arranges his features with little effort, settling them into the mask of the pureblood heir who claims all of it as his own personal empire.

When he arrives at the apparition coordinates, Theo is there, along with Jake, the American wizard he'd met at the meeting of the Hand, wearing a smile that is equal parts eager and vicious.

"What are we doing tonight?" Draco asks, trying to sound as if he's already bored. In reality he's trying to scan his surroundings without giving away the direction of his attention. Around them, the streets are full of Muggles, pushing their way across the sidewalks as if they're being chased. Still, there's no sign of fear on their faces, no sign of an attack. "Meeting the New York City Faithful?"

"Better," Jake answers. "We're raiding the Bureau of American Magic. You're supposed to be a talented Legilimens. We're going to need that skill tonight."

None of the Muggles walking past reacts to the words, and Draco isn't sure if it's because they're used to hearing stranger things every evening, or because Jake or Theo have spelled them. He's not about to risk a detection spell to find out which is true.

Every time he's encountered the Hand since Halloween, he's felt as if he's falling into some bottomless pit. All Draco can do is try to make the eventual landing as painless as possible.

“I learned from the Dark Lord and his most trusted disciples,” Draco answers, leaving out the fact that he had to find a way to hide his plans from Voldemort himself. “Who is the target?”

“We’ll take you to her,” Theo says, a plea in his voice. Jake gives him a look that tells Draco he read the tone for weakness.

“How are we getting through the wards?”

“I have an in at BAM,” Jake says, fiddling with the zipper on his vest. “We all have security clearance for the night.”

“What happens when we have to leave? We’re going to have a woman in tow, aren’t we?”

“I have contacts who will make sure nothing we do is recorded.”

“And I’m supposed to trust you?”

“I’m a valued member of the Faithful Hand,” Jake says, turning to Theo. “Tell him why he was sent here, Nott.”

“The file you stole from the Ministry is useless,” Theo says, his hands in his pockets.

“Most of the Ministry’s files are useless.” Draco isn’t lying as he says it, but he’s reaching for a phrase that will buy him some time. Because Theo was with him and saw how Draco didn’t so much as search Potter’s desk, didn’t try Shacklebolt’s office or even Hermione’s. He would know by now that the raid on the Ministry was a sham.

Which means that there are only two possible reasons why the Hand hasn’t hunted him down: either they’re desperate for his particular abilities, or Theo has covered for him.

Jake is still looking at Draco expectantly, as if waiting for an apology or a confession. Whatever it is, Draco isn’t in the mood to offer it. He’d rather be curled up in his apartments at Hogwarts, the fire bright and hot in the grate and Hermione in some pleasurable state of undress.

Instead, he is on the cold and bustling streets of Muggle New York, trying to conjure up a plan and seal off his mind. He wouldn’t put it past the Hand to put two wizards skilled in Legilimency on this assignment. It’s what he himself would do.

It only takes seconds to strengthen his habitual Occlumency, and then Draco turns to Jake and Theo, a sneer spreading on his face.

“Take me to the Bureau,” he says, “I’ll steal whatever secrets you need.”

The side-along apparition is rougher than Draco remembered, a roaring void that makes his ears ring. When they land, Theo is mouthing something, but Draco only shakes his head.

Whatever Theo wants, his intentions will matter later.

Instead, he focuses on navigating the entrance of the Bureau, answering with a nod to the false name that Jake provides—though it's ludicrous, really, given that Draco hasn't disguised his features.

They will be caught tonight, unless the Hand is much stronger than he's anticipated. The Death Eaters could afford to be this sloppy in the first war, he's been told. Even in the second, with Dumbledore watching, they'd been relatively free in their power.

Now Jake strolls the hallways of the Bureau the way that Lucius Malfoy used to walk through the Ministry. Then as now, Draco follows obediently, a sneer fixed on his face.

"The Director's assistant is working late tonight," Jake says. "She graduated with a doctorate in something useless and has to make up for it."

Draco thinks of Hermione and her passionate speeches about the importance of history. He does not allow his pace to slow.

Jake knocks on a nondescript door with a confidence that makes it clear he will not wait for an answer. He taps his wand against the doorknob and enters the room.

The woman at the desk has barely grabbed her own wand as they crowd around her, filling the tiny office.

Her first glance isn't at any one of them, or at her wand, or even the doorway beyond. The woman that they've come to threaten and harm and steal from looks instead at the files on her desk.

Draco summons them with a flick of his wand.

Jake's appreciative chuckle is a hot breath of air from his nose, and it becomes a grin as Draco approaches the woman.

"Tell me your name," he commands, his accent sharpening.

She shakes her head, her mousy hair bobbing around her ears. Her fingers are caught in the sleeves of her jumper, imprinted with the logo of Salem University. She must have thought she was alone in the office, safe enough to relax.

He waits for Theo or Jake to offer up a threat of their own, but they only offer a silent menace behind Draco. Apparently this test involves doing all the evil convincingly and under supervision.

Still, he waits another moment, until he hears the witch's breath catch in her throat.

"I can pull it out of you, if you insist on making me wait," he says. He doesn't look at her as he speaks. Instead, he makes a show of studying his wand. When her breath catches again, Draco knows she's begun to imagine all the horrible things he could do to her with his magic.

He wills his face into a grin that is all malice.

“I’ll give you one more chance, darling. Tell me your name.”

She bites her lip and he raises his wand half an inch, just enough to make her eyes widen, her lips move, and finally she says, “My name is Melanie Campbell.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

There’s a pressure behind his eyes, the brute force of a Legilimens without the proper training.

He turns and gives Jake a long look. The pressure subsides. He resists the urge to push the American out. It would only raise suspicions even higher.

When he turns back to Melanie, her expression has calmed somewhat. There’s a pulse of calculation in her eyes.

She saw what Draco hoped she would: the division between them. He does not know if she will see a way through it.

But when he slips into her mind, he sends a message at the edges of her consciousness: *tell me half-truths*.

Melanie’s head gives a dreamy nod to his command. It’s a common response to Legilimancy, particularly in the untried. Bellatrix cursed it out of him by the time Draco was fifteen.

Can you speak inside your mind?

In Melanie’s mind, underneath the roil of her fear, there is warmth and curiosity. There are old memories, laid like a surfeit of books, each one warm and unimportant, capturing her school days and friendships and old romances. Aside from her current position, Melanie Campbell has never done anything worth the notice of governments or Dark wizards.

Finally, a voice comes, more resonant than the one Melanie used to grit out her own name. *I think so*, she says, and then, *I want to live more than I want to be brave. Ask me for whatever you need. Just promise me I’ll live*.

There’s no guarantee with our lot, Draco responds. He thinks of his former self, during the war and after it. He wanted to survive and he wanted to throw that in Harry Potter’s face, into the faces of all the witches and wizards who hadn’t followed the Dark Lord. All it got him was a Mark on his arm and a persistent roiling in his stomach. *I’ve been told that those who do the right thing are happier when they die*.

Who’s the one telling you that? Melanie asks. *Tell me what you need so we can end this. Wipe my memory if you need to. I just—*

Who are you trying to save? He could snatch the information from her mind in half a breath, but he wants her to say the words to him.

Her name is —does it matter? She’s having our baby in March. I suppose you’ll let her know why I’ll never come home.

Tell me something I can use. Even in her mind, Draco keeps from spelling out the salvation he wants to work. It could be that Jake only plays at incompetence.

Julie is about to request more resources to fight the Faithful Hand. She has proof you're a larger organisation than you claim.

How did you know what group we came from?

There are a lot of hate groups in this country. Magical and Muggle. That was what I studied at Salem. Do you think I don't know who you are, Draco Malfoy? What it means that you'd do this without bothering to disguise your face?

He feels as if the recognition settles on him slowly, then all at once. Not that he has ever seen Melanie Campbell before. Likely, if he's successful tonight, he will never see her again.

But this, he knows, is the point when he will choose his side forever.

Melanie, he says, I need you to give me the folder. Don't nod yet. He shifts deeper into her mind before he speaks again. As soon as you hand me the file, I need you to stun the man behind me. The one with the bun. But you need to make it look as if you were aiming at me. I'll guide your hand, if you like.

What's my guarantee that this isn't going to get me killed or tortured?

Whatever I'll do to you isn't nearly as bad as what he will do. Believe this, Melanie.

He almost mentions Hermione, almost tells Melanie what will happen if he causes too much damage. The curses and injunctions that will rain down on him. But it would endanger Hermione, even if Jake isn't listening in. She has her own plans spinning, and she hasn't agreed to any of this.

But before he can figure out his next appeal, Melanie's mind shifts. Her consciousness rises to the surface, almost as if she's preparing to speak her next words aloud.

I'll get you the file, she says, then she rises from her chair.

Instantly, Jake and Theo have their wands on her and on him. Draco holds his own empty hands up.

"She's going to get us the file her director prepared about an organisation of interest to us all," he says, conjuring up his most annoying old boys club voice. He can almost hear Potter laughing in the back of his mind. "Will you let her get it?"

"Where's the file?" Jake asks Melanie. He pushes in toward her, sparks flying from his wand.

Melanie flinches and he can't tell if any of the motion is for show.

Steady, he murmurs in her mind. *Get him the folder and then stun him.*

She reaches across the desk, picking up her wand. Draco can sense Jake and Theo bracing themselves for an attack, even though Melanie's wand is pointed at a small stack of paper. There's a murmur of spell-casting and the pile enlarges, tall enough that Melanie has to reach up to grab the thick file on top.

Jake reaches out his hand.

For a moment, Melanie clutches the folder to her chest. Draco shakes his head at her. He tries for an expression Voldemort sometimes wore, as if he almost hoped that his victim would disobey his orders. The destruction, the cries of pain and fear, those were always his favourite things.

Melanie holds the file out. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see her fingers clutching her wand.

Jake isn't Auror-trained, though, and he's focused on the folder. For a second, he doesn't see what Melanie's doing.

But before she can finish the word *Stupefy*, he tried to raise his own wand. Only to find that he's falling, blinded and deafened, his wand falling from him.

"What did you do?" Theo demands. His wand is still raised.

Draco disarms him, pocketing the wand.

"Is there an alarm you can trip?" he asks Melanie. She gawps at him, an impression he takes in the second before he whirls on Theo, his wand fully drawn.

He'd been the one to stun Jake, of course, with Potter's own variation on the curse.

There is fear on Theo's face.

"Melanie is more powerful than any of us suspected," Draco says, quellingly.

"What are you trying to achieve?" The fear has only intensified, and, as he bends to pick up the file, Draco realises there might be some sense in it. If he can out-manoeuvre the Hand, perhaps he is trying to compete with them for some kind of Dark supremacy.

If only, Draco thinks, it were so simple as all that.

"First, I am trying to keep this woman from getting killed in whatever dank hell the Hand have created for her." He turns to Melanie, hoping Theo is still afraid enough not to go running. "Do you feel safe going home? Or would you prefer I take you to a safehouse? Your hand-to-hand defence leaves something to be desired, so I'd advise you to consider the strength of your wards."

"What will happen to my partner?"

"I'll retrieve her as soon as you're secured."

Behind him, Theo clears his throat. So he hasn't run yet. "The Hand didn't bother to research Melanie's family. We have a little time?"

"How long?"

"An hour at most. You were supposed to take longer to question her. There's a team coming to clean up the blood."

Behind him, Melanie shudders.

Draco turns toward her, and when he's reassured himself that she isn't going into shock or grabbing her wand to curse him, asks, "What happens when they see us go out the door without Jake?"

"There's an alarm in place if you run in a way they can detect."

"There are tunnels," Melanie says. "You need a certain status. I don't know if the Hand knows about them. Julie didn't think so."

"We can't apparate out, I assume." Draco can't feel the wards but that only means they're not the magicks of wizarding Britain. Sure enough, Melanie shakes her head.

"The tunnels lead to Porkeys that lead to randomised apparition points. Unless your contacts know all of them, it's unlikely that they'll choose ours correctly."

"This was Jake's plan," Theo says, "I don't think it was that thorough. But it's possible he didn't trust me with everything."

Draco considers this. Theo is probably telling the truth, but all this feels too easy. He wishes he'd brought Veritaserum with him. He wishes he had time to properly interrogate Theo. Even as he knows what it implies, this desire to make his old school friend suffer the vertigo and regret of stolen truth.

Draco Malfoy has always been a monster. It seems he cannot help himself.

Especially to someone who seems to think it will be easy to choose this kind of life, to run from the Hand.

"I'm going to have to stun you," he tells Theo. "It's not going to be pleasant."

"They're going to think you ran off with Melanie."

"Give me an hour, Nott, and the Hand will be terrified of what Melanie is capable of." He raises his wand a millimetre higher, watches Theo's eyes track the motion. "Don't make me regret leaving your memory intact."

Theo falls to the floor mid-nod, and Draco holds out his hand to Melanie.

"I'm still not sure if I should trust you," she says. There's a flash of something in her eyes, the desire to fight or at least survive. He wonders what it cost her, all those years researching

the horrors of their world. He wonders if she might have learned to hide her mettle deep.

He says, “I understand entirely. But I’ll keep you from getting killed if you get me out of here. I would swear it with blood.”

She shakes her head and then she doesn’t hesitate. She takes his hand.

Two hours later, maybe three, Draco is woken from a cursed sleep in the middle of a forest far away from the safehouse he promised Melanie. His head is pounding, his vision is blurred, and even so he braces himself against his father.

“I should have known that school would turn you into a bleeding heart,” Lucius says, raising his wand again. “When did you hesitate?”

Draco shakes his head, preparing himself for the pain of a curse, but instead he hears his father muttering counters to all the spells Draco worked on himself. His vision clears. The pain in his head stills and then goes silent.

He remains where he fell, peering up at Lucius' silhouette against the trees. He tries to determine all the things his father could do to hurt him, but not one of those scenarios encompasses what happens next: Lucius crouches, his robes dragging on the earth, and begins to unbutton the cuffs of Draco’s shirt.

The gesture might be tender if Draco weren’t still laid out flat in a forest, the cold of the ground seeping into his skin.

“I didn’t hesitate,” Draco says finally, because he’s realising why his father has only unbuttoned the left cuff and is unrolling his sleeve to the elbow.

“Good,” Lucius says, and then, “you make the lie sound convincing.”

There is a twisted pleasure in making his own father simultaneously right and wrong but Draco quickly forgets it as Lucius exposes his Dark Mark to the air.

“You’ve never pressed it since the Dark Lord fell, have you?”

“Why?” He tries to lever himself up on his elbows, but Lucius holds out his hand, pushing Draco flat on his back again.

“The Edinburgh chapter was never worthy of you.” Draco is still trying to decipher the tone of his father’s voice when Lucius continues. “When you press the Mark, you’ll see the value of the Hand.”

“What happens?”

His father only nods at him.

For a moment, Draco is back in the Malfoy Manor. His father gave the same nod and Draco stepped forward, his wand held out towards Voldemort. It had been such an effort not to

shudder in the Dark wizard's presence. And then it had been easy, because he was screaming with the pain in his arm, all his effort focused on keeping himself upright.

Then he wrenches himself back to the present. He braces himself for whatever horror will come. He reminds himself of the location of his wand. He presses his fingers against the Mark.

The pops of apparition surround them, slowly at first and then insistent.

Within a moment, Draco and Lucius are surrounded by the rest of the Faithful Hand's central London chapter.

"My son has made a sacrifice for our cause," Lucius announces before Draco can speak. "He allowed the bitch at the American Bureau to think she had outsmarted us. But he contrived to steal the information we needed. One of our American contacts has procured it from Theo Nott's very fingers, all while Draco suffered at the hands of the American witch."

"She got free, didn't she?" It's Mulciber's voice, and murmurs of agreement follow the question. Draco starts looking for the seconds he requires to make his escape.

"She is nobody," Lucius says, his voice silky. It's a ploy, maybe, to gain control by acting if he already has it. "What do we care about a worthless Mudblood assistant? We have the documents. We know now that the Bureau in America knows hardly anything about our operations. And we know that my son is loyal to the cause."

Draco blocks the thoughts that rise in his mind. He doesn't think of the key documents from the folder, transfigured into a matchbook and clutched in the talons of an owl en route to Hogwarts and Hermione. He doesn't think of Melanie and the woman she loves, safe and securely warded in a small village in Wales.

Instead, he raises his wand and draws the symbol of the Hand in golden sparks, hoping the light will reveal nothing but the Mark on his arm, the creature they've always known Draco to be.

Blaise Zabini steps out of the fire in Rebeca's room as if he belongs there, and Ginny's mouth falls open.

"When did he become part of the rescue mission?" she asks, clutching at the blanket in her lap. She doesn't mind Blaise, but there's something about the stunning lines of his face and the precise drape of his robe that makes her feel particularly grubby in her pyjamas and greasy topknot.

“Turns out that you lot need a reliable Ministry contact,” he says, before his eyes soften and he adds, “and I told Hermione I insisted on helping.”

“He’s arranging the Quidditch demonstration,” Hermione adds, looking up from her new file of classified documents. She’s hardly done anything else for the past few days, other than compiling a staggering amount of notes on her stylus and sending messages to Rebeca and Ginny with updates to the plan. “He’ll be able to communicate better with Davi if they’re closer. It will be easier to reassure him.”

“We’ve cleared a date in two weeks,” Blaise says, pulling out what looks like his work diary. “Make sure to wear your summer kit.”

“How do you communicate with Davi?” Ginny asks instead. She’s been in on the plan since the beginning, and it’s annoying to be treated like a subordinate.

“Blood pact,” Hermione sighs. Blaise pulls a face and shows Ginny his palm, the thick slash of scar tissue running from the base of his index finger to his wrist.

“You really love him,” Ginny says, her mind lurching to Harry. She can see Rebeca and Hermione anticipating the direction of her thoughts, and so she adds, “You know you’re going to implicate the Ministry when this is all found out.”

“If everything goes as we’ve planned,” Hermione says, finally looking up from her file, “they’ll be forced to act against the Hand.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Ginny’s mind moves through the stages of the rescue like a sequence of Quidditch plays, trying to find the gaps. When they emerge, she looks up to see everyone staring at her.

“Well,” Blaise asks, altogether too composed as he takes a seat across from her, “how could this plan possibly go wrong?”

“A Mão Fiel could realise what we were doing,” Ginny answers, visualising and cataloguing the scenarios in her mind. “Blaise or I could be captured, or they could trace it back to Rebeca.”

“We put a trace on you and Blaise,” Hermione says, as if this is a question in an exam. “I haven’t been able to find the spell on Rebeca.”

“Neither have I,” Rebeca says. “But the trace is risky, you know. The guards will be able to detect it.”

“What security measures did you use when you visited the compound before?” Hermione asks, turning to Blaise.

Blaise shakes his head, his brown cheeks acquiring a subtle pink tint. “The Ministry always knew where I was. Anyway, the first time I didn’t realise the danger. And after that I didn’t care what happened, as long as I knew Davi was all right.”

From Rebeca and Hermione come little sighs. Rebeca reaches out to rest her hand on Blaise's arm. Ginny thinks of her family, the way they are during a Burrow Christmas when the children are asleep and everyone else has had just enough wine.

"Davi is a problem, too," she says, before her thoughts can move to Harry or to Fred.

"Hermione should be safe getting past the guards, but once Davi sees her, or he's back here—he's not going to know where he is and from everything you lot have said, he's an incredibly powerful wizard with minimal training. Can you even get him past the Hogwarts wards?"

"I'll be waiting in my office in Hogsmeade," Rebeca says, but she looks a bit grimmer than she did only a moment ago.

"We need the potion." Hermione has fully set aside her notes now. Her index finger is pressed over her lips. Rebeca and Blaise are silent, considering. They don't know how to solve this problem.

And it comes to Ginny, that blazing confidence that used to be her constant companion. Because in a room full of brilliant and beautiful people, she is the one with the solution. "I'll get Archibald to make the potion."

"How?" By some miracle, there's no scorn in Rebeca's question. No hint of doubt. She wants Davi free more than she wants anything.

But the plan that's formed in Ginny's mind is hers alone, something secret and precious.

"Just trust me," she says. "How long does it take to brew?"

"Three days," Blaise says, then, shrugging into their next question, "I would brew it myself if the Hand wouldn't know what it meant."

"So long as any of you can figure out how to store it, I should have enough within the week." She turns to Blaise, and this time the smile comes easily to her lips. There's space for both of them on the mission. "You can start brewing it yourself as soon as we rescue Davi. It'll be a romantic honeymoon for the two of you."

Blaise laughs, but there's something fierce in his eyes. Ginny thinks she understands it perfectly.

Chapter End Notes

In editing this chapter, I realized I forgot how much happens in chapter 21! There's a lot here! And, not to promise too much, but chapter 22 is one of my favorites in the fic so far.

I went rogue on my betas, so any mistakes you see are unquestionably my own.

Some news you may have seen elsewhere: I'm having a baby girl in July! I'm very excited and also hoping this won't impact updates any more than they've already been impacted. Still, if you've been with this fic for a while, you know that anything can happen, so thanks for bearing with me. I mean this: I'm so, so grateful for all of you, and all of your support and encouragement.

If you're looking for updates, to find out what I'm reading, or to see the occasional selfie featuring my baby bump, you can [find me on Instagram](#).

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Ginny asks for a potion and receives more than she bargained for. Meanwhile, Hermione and Draco make a little time for each other.

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes mentions of pregnancy loss.

And, also: we're back!

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

Archibald Leach had written Ginny letters over the years. There was nothing eye-catching about the thin scrolls of parchment or the owls that delivered them. Nothing distinguished Archibald's letters from those of any of the number of fans who would write to Ginny once she'd started playing in the league, praising her when she'd scored more than anticipated and sending a clever dig—or a list of things they would've done differently—when she and the team lost a game.

Most of them knew shit-all about Quidditch, when it came right to it.

But Archibald did.

I thought that Wronski Feint was really smart, he'd written in his first letter. *You played a little Seeker at Hogwarts, didn't you?*

He was encouraging and knowledgeable without being creepy, so of course Ginny wrote back to the nice man who took the time to understand what she was trying to do on the field.

She'd imagined him old and in his dotage, maybe a former player from her grandparents' era. Archibald would be too unsteady to ride a broom anymore, she'd decided, but he'd spelled his quill to hold steady when he wrote to her. She pictured him leaning over the parchment as he drafted his letters, his thin white hair gleaming slightly ginger in the light of a cozy fire in the grate.

After a year or two, she'd finally asked Ron whether Archibald Leach had appeared in any of the Quidditch histories. He'd goggled at her, and for a long moment she wondered if he'd been the Seeker who had won a major match for England.

Instead he'd said, "Archie was in school with us, Gin. He was in Ravenclaw, three years ahead. One of those quiet swots who nobody remembers until he's the one with the right answers in Potions. I'm pretty sure Hermione had a crush on him, actually."

Harry had laughed at the recollection and Ginny had found herself hoping that her jumper would hide the flush on her cheeks. She'd confessed her thoughts and insecurities to Archibald Leach, as if he were someone who wouldn't know who she was, who could never use those confessions against her.

I want to meet you, she'd written to him as soon as she arrived at her flat. *I had no idea who you were*.

When they met in Diagon Alley, three days later, Ginny's first thought was that Hermione was right to have a crush. Archibald was tall and broad-shouldered. His pale blue eyes were like crystals of ice in the sunlight. A curl of dark hair fell across his forehead.

As soon as he kissed her cheek in greeting, and then, within moments, they were laughing as he told her about the permanent pain in his neck from the doctorate in potions-making he was working towards at the University of Salem.

"I should've realised what slouching over a cauldron for years would give me a stoop," he'd said, smiling at her.

She had wanted to surrender to the particular charm of him, to call him a swot and tease him about the stoop she couldn't detect. Instead, she'd braced herself.

"Why did you write to me?" Ginny had asked, closing her mouth around the word before every other question could tumble from her, like why he'd come all this way to walk through Diagon Alley with a minor Quidditch player. Transatlantic Portkeys were expensive.

"Watching you—" He'd stopped talking and turned his eyes to her, as if he couldn't resist another glimpse. "Watching you play feels like home, Ginny."

"I thought you were some old Quidditch player. You were never even on the Ravenclaw team."

"If you'd like a laugh, you should see me on a broom. I barely passed my flying lessons, first year. My parents could hardly look at me. They were the Quidditch players, you see, but they didn't hold a candle to my gran. She was the Seeker the last time we won the Cup."

"Granny Leach must have been so disappointed in you," Ginny laughed, letting herself enjoy this, just a little bit.

He'd steered her in the direction of the new ice cream shop, and Ginny had had a vision of what could happen next: a beginning nestled into that sunny August afternoon, hours passing in no time, jokes and Quidditch references turning into something more.

She'd thought of Harry, off with a team of Aurors in Wales.

When Archibald asked if he could treat her to a cone, she shook her head.

“I’m afraid I have to watch what I eat in the off-season,” she’d lied, knowing she’d be at Hermione’s flat as soon as her friend deigned to finish her workday at the Ministry. She’d only just returned to the wizarding world from Oxford and Ginny hadn’t got over the feeling that Hermione might disappear again at any moment.

She’d thought something similar about Archibald as she looked over his shoulder to see the summer crowds of Diagon Alley. There was a sadness in the pit of her stomach when she thought of never seeing this man again, of the fact that he’d go back to his American university and brew potions until his shoulders did, in fact, become stooped.

“Would you be interested in a short walk?” he’d asked before she could step away. “There are some rarer potions ingredients I’d like to pick up before my return Portkey.”

It was only a minor errand, she’d told herself as she nodded and followed him to one of the minor Alleys and a string of apothecaries’ and potioners’ shops, each smelling more revolting than the last. But somehow she hadn’t minded because she and Archibald were talking about Quidditch and magical education in America, about why she loved the Harpies. He’d asked what those last years at Hogwarts had been like for her and she’d asked what the war had been like from his vantage, outside of England.

She hadn’t wanted to ask what side he’d been on. She didn’t want to know him well enough for that. And still the words had tumbled out of her mouth.

“I was accepted for advanced study in Potions at Salem before my N.E.W.T.s came in,” he’d said. The tips of his ears were red. “My parents wanted me out of the country. I should have stayed back and fought with all of you.”

She’d shaken her head, a little too emphatically. “I’m glad you survived the war, Archibald.”

“I’m glad you survived it as well, Ginerva.” A small smile on his lips, as if he knew the name would annoy her just enough to keep the moment from meaning too much. “I would ask to see you again—”

Aside from those last few weeks with Dean, Ginny had never been indecisive in her life. Still, she’d bitten her lip for a long moment before she’d said, “I have Harry.”

“Our whole world knows that,” he’d said, and then, instead of kissing her cheek goodbye, he’d held out his hand. “Good luck on the Quidditch pitch.”

She managed to say goodbye and apparate to her own flat before she started bawling, had barely stopped crying long enough to send Hermione an owl to cancel their plans.

Ginny had always thought, once the war was over and they’d both survived, that Harry was her future. She’d felt so happy in his arms, so safe and certain, a spark inside her coming to life.

She’d never expected to feel something similar with a completely different person.

It reminded her, somehow, of writing to Tom Riddle and seeing him write back: a dangerous, if compelling possibility, tantalizing and consuming.

Ginny told herself it was the reminder of that possession that had made her sob violently enough to leave her throat raw.

But then Harry had come back from Wales. He'd pulled her into his arms and kissed every inch of her face, and she'd pulled off her jumper within seconds so that he could kiss her everywhere. When she was with him, she couldn't think of anything else, only the light and golden thing between them.

Now, though, as Ginny walks the Hogwarts hallways towards the dungeon and Archibald's office, she can feel her heart pounding in her chest.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," he says to her, rising from his desk. His blue eyes shine just the way she remembered them. He wears his hair longer now, the curls thick and lush. She feels these changes in the pit of her stomach.

"And this whole time I was wondering how a Ravenclaw ended up the head of Slytherin House." She should be thinking of Davi, of the mission, of Rebeca and Hermione, but instead Ginny is focused on trying to sound arch and confident, the Chaser who won the World Cup for England, the woman who needs nothing but one insignificant potion.

"None of the Heads were part of the Houses they lead now," Archibald says. "Flitwick even stepped down as Head of Ravenclaw."

"How do you like it?"

"The Slytherins aren't as evil as I was led to believe," he says, bracing his hands on the doorframe. "What brings you to our dungeon?"

He's cordial as he says it, the way he was in Diagon Alley years ago, and just as it had then, the truth spills from her without any pretense attached. "I need a potion."

"Why are you coming to me?"

She can feel the flush on her whole face, instant and deep scarlet. She's thinking of Harry, of Archibald as he'd been a decade before, of all the choices she's made since then.

Perhaps Archibald has seen it all, because he reaches out and rests his hand on her shoulder. The weight of him seems to ground her in the earth.

"It's only that potions are often imbued with the subconscious and history of their brewer, particularly for anything complex or long-brewing. I can refer you to another potion-maker if it turns out I wouldn't suit for whatever you have in mind."

She's looking for hints of green in his eyes, she realises.

"I had a miscarriage six weeks ago," she says. "My magic has been strange ever since. Sometimes it feels—it's too much, and I'm struggling to control it. Hermione said you might

know of a potion that might help.”

“It sounds as if you need the Binder,” he says. He has not moved his hand, and the warmth of it seeps through her jumper. “I keep a few flagons brewed at all times. First years in particular have trouble controlling their magic, especially during their first few months in school.”

“I’d appreciate any you could provide. I thought I could manage on my own, and—” She trails off, because what started as a lie has become something dangerously close to the truth when Archibald looks at her as if he wants to move closer, to softly ask a hundred questions.

There’s a small expanse of silence. She doesn’t know how to fill it.

“What can I give you, Ginerva?” he asks, finally.

“It was Harry’s baby,” she says. “We were going to get married.”

“And now?” His thumb strokes the curve of her shoulder, the motion subtle enough that they could both pretend it was accidental. Though he must have seen the way she and Harry avoid each other in the great hall, the way she’s hollowed out in the last few weeks.

But Ginny doesn’t move away.

“I’m taking a leave of absence from Quidditch,” she says, letting out a little laugh which sounds too much like a sob, then adds, “and apparently from the rest of my life as well.”

“I hope you’ll get back on the field soon, if that’s what you want.”

Then he asks, “How are you feeling?”

And the question is more than anyone but Hermione and Rebeca have asked her in weeks. Ginny has to press her fingers over her eyes.

Because she feels emptied and sore and trapped in a dense and unrelenting fog, and she can never say anything about it to anybody. Nobody would understand the enormity of what she feels. Women lose unborn children all the time. Their relationships fall apart. They lose jobs or entire careers. She knows that all these things are possible to survive. Still she feels as if she is thrashing around in the darkness.

She is so tired and Archibald watches her as if he wants to hold her close. As if he wants more, if she would only give him the smallest sign of assent.

The future would be so simple with Archibald. He would tell her about his potions in excessive detail because she would say, days into their relationship, that she wants no secrets between them. He would come to every one of her matches wearing her kit, and he would be hoarse the next day from screaming her name. They would eat their meals in the great hall or in his Hogwarts apartments, sharing everything about their days and turning petty gripes into jokes only the two of them understood. Students would catch them kissing in the library, or near the lake, and Ginny wouldn’t mind because she was so happy with him.

It would be so sweet and easy, and despite all this, Ginny thinks, conjuring all of it in the space of a moment, she could feel that spark with Archibald for all the decades of their lives. Because the comfort and ease wouldn't be only a relief. They would be a sign of how perfectly they suited each other.

But even still, Ginny can't help thinking of Harry.

I used to think you were my whole future.

She thinks of his green eyes and the way he'd kissed her, when it was new and when it was familiar and when she didn't know, yet, that it would be the last time. She had thought that Harry Potter would be her whole life, that shimmering braid of light and darkness, all those secrets blocked out by the way he held her in the night and the way they could make each other laugh until they didn't realise they were crying. Ginny had loved Harry for so long because of the image of him, the Boy Who Lived, but all her adult life she's known the man who survived and held him close as her own skin.

But there is so much darkness around her. Everywhere she turns, she feels secrets skittering into the shadows. Mission or no mission, she wants to feel like something more than a ghost.

She reaches up and presses her fingers over Archibald's. Lets him feel the strength in the grip of her fingers.

"I don't know if I've ever wanted the right thing," she says.

He takes a step closer, his pale eyes intent, and for a moment Ginny is certain that Archibald is going to kiss her. Instead, he pulls his hand away from her and raises his thumb to her mouth.

When he draws his thumb across her lower lip, she can feel the calluses on the pads of his fingers, inhale scents of nutmeg and vanilla and sage. She wants to swipe her tongue against his skin, to know how it tastes. She wants to surrender to this, to call it inevitable. To pretend she never had a choice.

Instead, she meets his eyes with her own.

"Come back to me if you're free, Ginerva," Archibald says, then turns back to his office. He returns with a slim flask of the potion, an opaque grey liquid that's hardly disturbed by his movement.

Archibald gives her instructions on taking the potion—take it with food to avoid nausea, take it at the same time every twenty-four hours, come back in three days for another flask—and Ginny nods as if she comprehends the neatly-ordered words in their simple sentences. She can imagine him at the front of the classroom, the way he'd make each potion clear and possible, so unlike the way that Snape made everyone outside of Slytherin loathe their time in the dungeon.

She wants to ask Archibald if his time in Potions at Hogwarts was similar, if he'd become a potions-master in spite of Snape or because of him, but she doesn't know where the

conversation will lead. Doesn't know where her life goes from here.

Ginny half expects him to call her name as she walks away, but Archibald disappears inside his office with little more than a swirl of his robes.

Within a few steps, her vision is blurred with tears, and by the time she's out of the dungeons, she can hardly see the person she's run into, can only tell that they're taller than her and therefore are not a student.

"Careful there, Ginny," Neville says, his hands on her elbows. "Everything all right?"

"She's clearly experiencing a parkier allergy." Luna's voice drifts from somewhere behind him. Ginny wishes it were possible to disappear from this moment, from this evidence of their perfectly-composed lives. "Give her some air, Nev."

Luna thrusts a handkerchief in Ginny's face and asks, "Will you walk a little way with me? Nothing like movement to clear out the parkier. Neville has to teach a class, anyway."

Ginny cannot come up with an excuse, so she nods and follows Luna down the hallway, covering her eyes with the handkerchief. She doesn't want to see Luna's belly, doesn't want to know how many Hogwarts students are staring at her as she breaks down.

A few moments pass with only the sound of their footsteps, and then Luna says, "It's different for everyone, of course, but I had to take the Binder after my second miscarriage. It helped to mix it with my tea, and it didn't change any of the effects. Would you like me to show you?"

"I didn't know you had lost—" The words get clotted in Ginny's throat. She can feel Luna taking her hand.

"I didn't think this one would keep, either. Madam Pomfrey wasn't certain I could carry a child. That's why I went to the mer over the summer. I thought that if I were going to lose this baby too, at least I could spare Neville. And then...well, I was happy to be wrong." It's the least distant Ginny has ever heard her sound. "Now, of course, I worry that something will go wrong at the last moment, or that I'll be a categorically awful mother, but my father assures me that my mother did all right, and Neville says that I'll be miles better than his Gran was."

"I'm sorry," Ginny says, thinking of the fog inside her, the cramping and the blood on the sheets, and wondering what it must have felt like for Luna, experiencing this at least twice.

"How could you have known? I never told you."

Luna pulls gently at Ginny's wrists until her face is uncovered. As usual, her old schoolmate's eyes swim behind her spectacles.

"You don't have to be alright," Luna says, in a quiet voice that says that she, too, has seen what's happened in the great hall, that she knows most of what's happened to Ginny and

hasn't blamed it on creatures that almost certainly do not exist. "But will you let me tell you what helped me when it's been hardest?"

Ginny feels a smile tugging at her lips in spite of herself. "I could use your very best advice right now, Luna."

"Do the things you love. Treat yourself with kindness. Make yourself happy every day, as much as you can." She gives Ginny's wrist a squeeze. "The rest will come, eventually."

"I've made a mess of things."

"Maybe your life was too orderly, then. Maybe it needed a bit of mess." She says these things dreamily, sounding just like the girl that Ginny knew at Hogwarts. Only that girl had stood up to Death Eaters and Dark curses without flinching. It's always so easy to forget the deep well of Luna's strength.

They walk a little way together before Ginny realises that Luna has been leading her to Hermione's apartments. Luna says a short goodbye and tells Ginny to keep the handkerchief, and soon Ginny is closing Hermione's door behind herself.

Normally she would fall into Hermione's bed and stay there for the afternoon.

But today the clouds are high in the sky and the wind is mild. It's perfect flying weather.

I thought you were my future, Harry said. The words had left a brand on her, somewhere deep, and Ginny doesn't know if she will ever be the same person she was before these last few months splayed her open and aching and raw.

Still, Ginny changes into one of her practice kits and grabs her broom.

She flies until her ears are numb and her fingers can barely hold a grip and Hogwarts is hardly more than a blot on the horizon and something like magic seems to bubble beneath her skin.

Hermione is halfway through a lecture on Voldemort's first rise for Contemporary History of Magic when a hand goes up.

"I thought Horcruxes were supposed to be a big secret," Bhumika Sharma, a seventh-year Slytherin, says. There's an appreciative hum, the way there is whenever the pretty girl deigns to speak. "What's the motive in laying Voldemort's plan out for us?"

The question might have thrown Hermione a few weeks ago, but now she only tilts her head, smiling.. She's begun to anticipate the kinds of questions her students will ask, the ways they push and pull against the neat outlines of her lectures. They're almost comforting, now that she's finalising the plan to rescue Davi.

"I'm nearly certain you won't want to split your soul into pieces," she says to Bhumika.

"Why?" It's Mei-Ling who asks the question. This time, the silence is strained.

"Because the cost of making a single Horcrux, let alone seven, is the creator's humanity. A soul torn in that way can never know peace, even if it can live forever."

"That's presuming we have peace to begin with," Bhumika points out.

"A soul isn't a guarantee of peace or contentment. But the force required to build the Horcrux, the murder of an innocent, is trauma enough to change a person forever. To lose half their soul on top of such a violation could turn anyone into a monster."

"What if the person they murdered wanted to die? What if it wasn't murder, but an act of grace?" Bhumika asks. She sounds curious, not murderous, and still Hermione is tempted to put an end to the conversation, especially when the full class turns to her with curiosity. They're rarely touched on questions of ethics, only the nuances of history.

Everything they discuss in these lessons is too recent, too full of the potential to hurt.

Distantly, Hermione thinks of the fact that she will be meeting Draco as soon as this class is over. The thought makes it easier for her to breathe deep and answer Bhumika's question as well as she can. "Dark magic generally requires a force of will that noble intentions cannot supply. It's also difficult to work the Killing Curse in such instances, for example."

Before Bhumika or Mei-Ling can fire off another question, Hermione has another thought: Ruby Docherty's corpse, her throat cut, the blood pooling beneath her stiffening body.

What if whoever killed Ruby did it with noble intentions which made the Killing Curse impossible?

By the time the lesson ends, Hermione has managed to cover Tom Riddle's first Horcruxes and impress upon her students the harm in creating them.

She stops by her apartments, confirms that Ginny will spend the night with Rebeca, and tries to keep from wringing her hands. Ginny has seemed marginally better over the last few days since she secured the potion from Archie, but even so, she seems muted compared to her usual self.

Still, Hermione thinks about cancelling on Draco, debating a dozen times as she walks through the wards and to Hogsmeade, not willing to risk the interdimensional spell when a walk will let her apparate. Not when they're so close to rescuing Davi.

When she arrives at Draco's coordinates, she appears in a room that looks like his apartments at Hogwarts, so much so that she looks out the window, expecting to see the moon reflected

off the surface of the lake.

Instead, he pads out of the kitchen in grey sweatpants the colour of his eyes, his white shirt half-buttoned and rolled up to his elbows, a glass of wine in his hand. She wants to commit all of it to memory, especially the smile on his face.

Hermione should ask Draco a dozen questions, about the Faithful Hand files and Ruby's death. Even the American files he sent her way could occupy them for hours. And there was something else, too. She had meant to ask him about something, something her students had made her consider during class, but the place where that question lived is now occupied by blur and indistinct noise. As if it had been removed from her mind.

But somehow, this does not make her panic.

Instead, she kisses him.

"Missed me, pet?" he asks, biting her lip.

She wants to shake her head but he holds her chin in his hand, tracing kisses across her cheekbones, tucking her hair behind her ear.

She hooks her fingers around the waistband of his sweatpants and pulls them down. Before she can so much as expose his skin, Draco stops kissing her, his hand over hers.

"What aren't you telling me, Granger?"

She shakes her head.

He considers her, his grey eyes clear and searching, an Auror in the field.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

She says, "If I tell you this, I need to know that no one else will ever find out. That you'll hide it away inside your mind."

"Dose me with Veritaserum if you need to."

She pulls away for a moment, watching the corner of his lips for the hint of a smirk. But he seems to be in earnest.

It occurs to Hermione then, really punches her in the gut: she trusts Draco Malfoy. She wants to confide in him. Even with this.

She's not sure how it happened or if there's any reason to trust her instincts, but still she says, "Promise me."

"No one will know, pet."

It's that awful nickname that finally convinces her that she can trust him with this. Even though she knows the catastrophe that will follow if she's wrong.

“We’ve arranged the date for Davi’s rescue,” she says, the words like plunging into icy water. “We have everything we need.”

“How do you feel?”

For a moment, she doesn’t speak, and he draws her closer, until she’s nestled against him. She can feel his breath on her skin, the warmth of it. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a perfectly reasonable question.”

“Only for someone you care about.”

He bends closer, so that each word presses his lips against hers. “Tell me, Hermione.”

“And what about you? Will you keep me informed on the Hand?”

She’s stalling. He’s keeping her informed, likely beyond what’s safe. Still he nods without breaking contact or even acknowledging her manoeuvre. She does not pull away for a long moment, savouring the feeling of kissing him, the sensation of joy without consequence.

“I’m terrified,” she says. “With Voldemort, I felt like there was no other option. We would die otherwise. I just had to find a way to keep us alive, to find the solution. And now I’m so aware of everything that could go wrong.”

“You’re stronger now. You know more than you did then.” His hands are in her hair again. “You’re better at duelling.”

She huffs a laugh and he presses a kiss against her ear. It’s almost enough to make her forget the dizzying array of horrible outcomes that she hasn’t managed to eliminate, the sound of Ginny crying in her sleep. She dreams about the sounds of Rebeca and Blaise’s tears, of Davi screaming. She wakes up with the sheets clutched tight between her fingers, her breathing sharp.

Draco is kissing down the line of Hermione’s neck. He touches her slowly, as if he has infinite time and wants to spend it all with her.

“Did the American files help you at all?” He licks her collarbone as he asks the question. It occurs to Hermione that if anyone were watching them, the words would be difficult to parse.

“Not with this,” she says, circling his nipples with the tip of her finger, trying to copy his nonchalance. She likes the idea of them together with nowhere else to be. “I keep trying to connect the files Blaise provided to the ones we stole from the Auror’s office and now these, but all I can see is that the Hand is strong and has an international presence. But they don’t seem to be coordinated from what I can tell. Unless they’ve managed to conceal that part of their operations.”

He sighs deep in his throat. “Potter doesn’t know enough. The Ministry is operating blind. Probably every other governing body is as well. Especially if the Hand is bold enough to steal their findings outright. Which I’m sure they’ve managed before the other night.”

He draws Hermione's hair off her neck, presses kisses along her spine. "You have to be careful with this information, you know. This isn't the time to be a Gryffindor."

"Tell me why I shouldn't go to Kingsley as soon as Davi is secured."

"I'm trying to get Theo Nott out."

"You trust him?"

"He's weak, I think, not evil. But he's gained access to the inner circle and he hasn't told them that I'm playing double agent."

"He could be waiting for something. Doesn't he manage all their money? He benefits from their power, Draco."

His mouth moves lower, to the space between her breasts, and for a moment there is only the sound of his mouth on her skin, until he says, "I'd almost think you worried about me."

She cards her fingers through his hair and tugs. Just to remind him what's real between them, the pleasure and the pain.

Then she pulls him up so that he's kissing her, and soon their mouths are insistent and she's undone the remaining buttons of his shirt with a single wandless cast. She reaches down to ease his sweatpants over his hips. He wraps his fingers tight around her wrist before she can reveal his cock.

"There's more you're hiding, pet. Tell me why."

She debates lying, but there's no gain in it for either of them. "It felt—still feels—as though all of it depends on me. As though everything would fall apart if I let myself relax."

He tears at the buttons of her blouse, the silk straining at the force of his hand. "You cannot be the only one fighting the Hand, Granger. You need some real allies."

"I'll have Rebeca once we rescue Davi. Blaise has been a real asset, too. And Ginny wants to help."

"Potter has ripped her to shreds." The disdain in Draco's voice is marvellous, almost as good as the way his palm feels against the line of her back, all those muscles that she holds tense against the demands of her days.

Hermione crosses her arms, drawing the silk back over her breast. "She's stronger than you think."

His touch stills on her skin. She can feel the weight of his gaze on her.

"Hurt Gryffindors have a tendency to act like reckless children," he says. "They're the Aurors most likely to die in the field."

“It’s not recklessness. Not always. We understand that some sacrifices are necessary, and we have the courage to make them.” Hermione lets out a breath. “Ginny wants to do something. She understands the strategy, and she’s clever enough to improvise as needed. That’s never been my particular strength.”

His lips twist into half a smile, the kinder cousin of a sneer. “I’ve seen your lesson plans, Granger. I know that’s true.”

She thinks for a moment of visiting some proof of her powers on him, some quick little hurt or misdirection, but instead she surrenders to what she wants. She raises his hand to her mouth and kisses the palm, her lips brushing over the calluses and scars left from his work, his history.

Then she bites down, just enough to hear the sharp sound of his breath.

“If she lets you down—” he says, moments later, his own teeth against her neck.

“What will you do, Draco?”

He only pulls her closer. It feels like a promise of some kind, a claiming.

Perhaps it should bother Hermione, but instead of examining her emotions, she wraps her arms around him. She scrapes her fingernails down her back.

As soon as she returns to Hogwarts, there will be no room for error or indulgence. In two days, when she rescues Davi, she will need to do everything correctly. Anything else will lead to disaster. The fault will be hers entirely.

But for tonight, for this small expanse of time, she lets herself forget, lets herself claim Draco as if they could belong to each other.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for sticking around and supporting Against Nostalgia. It's been a wild ride over here—I had a baby, got diagnosed with postpartum depression, and went back to work—and I'm excited to be back and writing.

Please know that I have cherished all of your comments and messages. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Let's meet back here on January 2 for another update. In the meantime, you can find me on [Instagram](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!