

## Bound by Blood

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# Bound by Blood

by [snortinglavender](#)

## Summary

Hermione Granger has a price on her head. After the war, a new surge of Death Eaters is on the rise - their blood prejudice raging louder than ever before with the death of Voldemort. Their newest target? The Golden Girl.

Now as the main target of the Death Eaters, Hermione has been placed under the protection of ex-Death Eater Draco Malfoy in an attempt to keep her safe during their last year at Hogwarts.

In addition to being assigned to keep Hermione safe, the Ministry of Magic has also recruited Draco to spy on and dismantle the Death Eaters from inside their ranks with the promise of his record being wiped clean if he succeeds.

Together, they will navigate what it means to be bound by blood status, breaking those stereotypes, finding themselves through hardship, all the while discovering that maybe, they aren't that different after all.

## Notes

The time has come!! I'm so happy to finally be sharing this fic that's been living in my head for a few months now. It's been a long while since I've published a fanfiction or anything that I've written and I am just BURSTING with excitement.

Please keep in mind that this fic features explicit depictions of violence in some cases. Chapters with those scenes will be marked.

This fic will have a "HEA if you squint ending" which to me = Draco and Hermione are alive and together at the end. All other aspects of the ending may not be as happy, but neither of them die in this fic no matter how much it may seem like the story is trying to kill them.

There is a minor character death which is tagged.

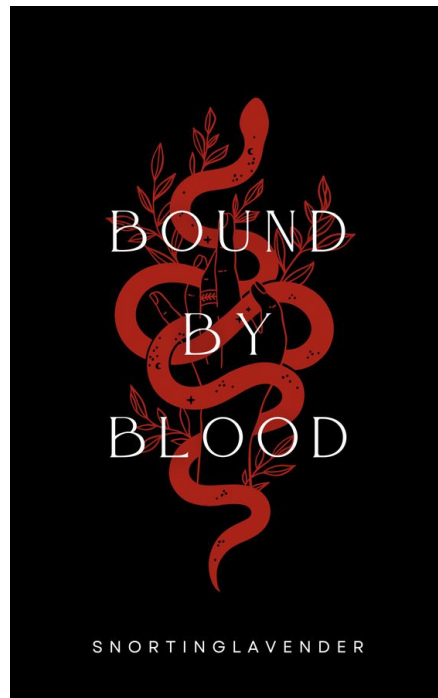
Lastly, it is important to note that this is both a character and plot driven story. Draco and Hermione will change A LOT over the course of this fic, so how you see them at the beginning of the story is not how they will always act, react, and be :) If you find yourself annoyed with them, it was most likely done on purpose.

With that being said, here we go! More rambling from me at the end.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

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



## Hermione

Hermione tried to smile, but found that forcing happiness upon her face was harder than winning a war, for the war within herself was much deeper and more turbulent than anything she had experienced in the last year trying to defeat Voldemort.

Hogwarts had been back in session for one term, and one would think celebrations would be in order after winning the war and successfully rebuilding the wizarding world. While there was an endless flow of butterbeer and firewhiskey, Hermione found herself sitting in the corners of pubs and parties anxiously looking over her shoulder.

It was the start of the spring term and her classmates were still basking in the holiday celebrations around her, but she couldn't find it within herself to join in. Reports of rogue, still-on-the-loose Death Eaters ran rampant following the Order's win of the war, along with a new resurgence of Dark Wizards who were unhappy with their defeat. Attacks on muggleborns had become more and more common throughout the fall term, and yet life continued on as best as it could, the wizarding world turning its collective eyes away from the new issue at stake. It seemed as if the wizarding world had enough of defending those who couldn't defend themselves, and now that Voldemort was gone, nothing else mattered.

Months and months of endless work resulted in a victory that only led to the Dark Wizards who remained to become even more vocal about their blood prejudice. The loss of their leader had caused them to become more crafty, working and plotting and moving about in secret, attacking muggleborn witches and wizards with the intent to capture and kill. What was done to those who were captured still wasn't known, but if it was anything like what Hermione experienced in Malfoy

Manor by the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange, she knew it wasn't good and something needed to be done. But no one would listen to her.

The first term back was a rocky one, with students still mourning the loss of friends, professors, parents, siblings, and more. The usual cheery Hogwarts halls were full of sorrow. The dining hall, once loud and full of chatter, had fallen quiet and contemplative. The Ministry insisted that putting students back into the same, familiar routine they had before would help them get over the war and the traumas of it. But all Hermione saw was how much everyone - including herself - was struggling.

As Head Girl, Hermione was tasked with keeping spirits up and positivity flowing. But that was hard when her own well-being was at stake at every moment, when every day she fought against the thoughts in her mind that threatened to drag her under.

Merry celebrations and oblivion at the hands of liquor weren't a possibility for Hermione. Harry and Ron already had positions as Aurors lined up at the Ministry after the year was over, their attendance at Hogwarts purely for formalities. Ginny was around, as was Luna, but they both were preoccupied with what everyone else seemed to be focused on - dating and rejoicing in being alive with no more threats on the horizon.

So try as she might to celebrate and live large with her classmates, she found the drunker she got, the darker and more desperate her thoughts became. The faker the smiles and laughs became as she dealt with the new reality of her world head on and alone.

Over the fall term, the Death Eater attacks on muggleborns became increasingly more frequent around wizarding Britain, but the news of these attacks was being kept from the public for now. *For the sake of peace*, Hermione had been told by her elders. She knew it was only a matter of time before they became public knowledge and sent the wizarding population into despair with the possibility of more death and destruction.

Hermione only knew of the ongoing blood prejudice and attacks because of the few Aurors they had befriended during their time in the war. They kept her in the loop of any ongoing issues, and in turn, she told any other muggleborns of the news, for no one was going to look out for them except each other.

It seemed as if the general wizarding population was turning a blind eye to this issue. Like it was just a small blip that would be gone in a matter of time.

They had won the war and defeated Voldemort and that was all that mattered.

Hermione sighed as she looked around the pub, taking in her friends who were beyond all control of any motor functions thanks to the refilling charm placed on their pints.

She had given up on trying to control and warn them about these attacks, that they should still be on high alert at all times. Ron and Harry just shrugged it off and said they would handle it if something were to happen, for they now "had the confidence of battle under their belts and could take on anyone." Their words - not hers.

Hermione knew this wouldn't be the case if they were caught off guard five shots of firewhiskey deep. But she looked after them regardless, jealous of their ability to be worry free and relish in their rise as war heroes.

She was one too, she supposed. But all Hermione wanted after the war was to return to Hogwarts and finish out her last year of schooling, get a good job and have free time to read as much as she wanted to. Maybe travel here and there and see the rest of the world that she so often dreamed about. Plain and simple maybe but happy and fulfilling nonetheless.

The idea of returning to Hogwarts after the war started off shaky when she and Ron had decided that they were better off as friends. She had suggested the idea, but it didn't stop things from being painfully awkward between their trio now. Long gone were the days of them hanging out for hours on end. Now when they hung out, Hermione was subjected to talks of who each of them were pursuing during the school year, who was hooking up with who and an optimism for the future she couldn't share.

She didn't allow that to stop her from excelling in her school work. Being named Head Girl was an accomplishment that filled her with joy and pride. McGonagall told her that she had been chosen because of her track record as an exemplary student all of her years at Hogwarts and her contributions during the war. Head Girl duties served as a distraction and excuse from the awkwardness that she would otherwise have to suffer through by hanging out with Ron and Harry. She filled any free time with her "responsibilities" to escape the interactions.

Being Head Girl allowed other students to look up to her and mentor them, to show them how to be strong and continue on when the darkness of the world seemed like too much. She coached the younger students in ways she wished she had been when she was a first year. Told them that they all had the chance in the world to be great wizards and witches regardless of their blood status and that Voldemort was gone now and there was nothing to worry about.

It was all a facade though, for she didn't believe her own words.

Even as she talked to the younger students and told them that everything was alright and safe now, she knew it was all a lie. The world was anything but safe, especially for the muggleborn children who were experiencing Hogwarts for the first time.

Hermione picked up her ale she had slowly been nursing over the majority of the night, taking a small sip. As the bitter taste washed over her tongue, she looked around the room once more, trying her best to drown out the thoughts of lying to first years for another term.

She had yet to bring up the issue of the muggleborn attacks to McGonagall again now that it was the Spring term but things had only gotten worse over the holiday, and she knew she couldn't put off talking to the Headmistress any longer. They had to say something, had to tell people what was going on. While the stress of keeping students and parents calm at the news of the attacks poured over her, Hermione also knew that Hogwarts was most certainly the safest place for them with its wards renewed and reinforced following the final battle.

Wizards from all over the world had come to rebuild the castle, restoring it within just a few months, all to be able to welcome students back for the fall term. The new wards were put in place to stop anyone who wasn't a student, professor or approved guest from walking through the gates. The trauma of the Death Eater attacks in sixth year still rang through the students, but never again would that happen, McGonagall proclaimed as they cast the wards in place. Never again, and never under her watch.

Just as Hermione convinced herself to try and enjoy the night a bit and chug the rest of her ale, the front door to the Hog's Head slammed open with such force that the walls shook, causing the small room to go quiet.

“Everyone up against the wall!” Yelled a dark and demanding voice from the entrance of the pub. The figure was shadowed with light coming in from behind them, their silhouette the only distinguishable thing about the person.

A swarm of wizards dressed in dark robes stood behind him, their wands poised and ready to attack if the patrons of the pub didn’t comply.

The students were frozen with terror, some scurrying to the wall out of fear of what would happen if they didn’t, some standing tall against their orders, trying to be noble and ready to fight.

Hermione stood frozen, her fight or flight instincts warring with one another as she assessed the situation. Stand up and fight or hide and cower?

The decision was made for her as a hand grabbed Hermione’s arm, pulling her from the booth she currently occupied. She gasped in shock and fear, because for all she knew, the person who grabbed her was one of the Death Eaters and had gotten past the entrance, somehow locating her in the crowded pub, sniffing out her muggle-born status immediately.

The captor's other hand clamped over her mouth to hold in the screams that were working their way up her throat when she heard a familiar voice in her ear say: “Be quiet Granger, and they won’t figure out you’re here.”

Hermione didn't know what to think, but she knew three things: Whoever had pulled her out of that booth and was now holding her hostage in the back room of the Hog’s Head had expertly hidden their face from her view, they were significantly taller than her, and she thought she recognized that voice, but the commotion outside took the forefront of her hearing, leaving her trapped with a wizard she didn’t know. Their cloak was pulled over their head like the dark wizards who currently stood outside, but it was obvious that they weren’t on the side of those who were currently attacking the Hog’s Head. If they were a Dark Wizard and knew who she was, she would already be dead, and yet here she was, being pulled from the view of the rest of the Death Eaters in the pub.

Commotion filled the front room that the hooded figure pulled her out of, the sounds of shouts and spells flying filled the air. There was a distant sound of dogs barking and growling, shouts of men guiding the animals inside, and students scurrying back as the growls filled the small pub.

A slight prick began to make its way up her left forearm as she stood as still as a statue, listening to Harry and Ron berate the dark wizards who had barged into the pub, wrestling them back into the streets along with the rest of the students who decided to fight back.

Hermione struggled to get out of the grasp of the hooded figure who pulled her into the alcove, determined to help and fend off whoever was inside attacking her classmates. She was not one to stand idly by: she was a Gryffindor and had fought courageously in the war. She needed to fight.

“Not a good idea,” the voice of the hooded figure hissed into her ear, their grip on her arm tightening, the hand over her mouth dropping. Scents of spearmint and parchment washed over her as they continued to speak. “They’re looking for *you* .”

Hermione froze at the person’s words.

“Is this-“ she started to ask.

“Yes,” the male answered. “It’s the Death Eaters who are now after muggleborns. And you are at the top of their list.”

“How did they know I’d be here?” Hermione asked, even though the answer was obvious.

“It’s the beginning of a new term. Where else would the illustrious war heroine, Hermione Granger, be? Now stop talking.”

Hermione listened to the sound of spells flying through the pub and it wasn’t long before the local Aurors were called. Hermione could only assume that Ron or Harry had stunned the dark wizards, because suddenly the room went quiet, followed quickly with soft cheers filling the room.

Hermione listened through the door as Aurors arrived, arrested the unconscious Death Eaters, and levitated the bodies out. They promised the students present that they would do their best to station more Aurors in the surrounding area, but that the Ministry was still short on Aurors following the war.

The front door to the pub closed and silence basked over the previously merry crowd before they all erupted into celebration of Harry and Ron’s bravery. Hermione’s savior relaxed and removed their hands from her arm before pulling back enough to allow her to be able to twist around and see who she needed to thank for pulling her out of the dark wizard’s view.

Much to her shock, she turned around to see the face of none other than Draco Malfoy under the darkened hood he wore over his head. Hermione gasped and found herself pushing him away, stepping away from the fallen Death Eater as fast as she could.

Why he was here, she had no idea. Why he hid her from the dark wizards who had just barged into the pub, she *really* had no idea. She knew the Malfoys had turned on the Dark Lord during the final battle, and that Draco had helped Harry, throwing him the wand that dealt the final blow, and that the lines between good and evil had been blurred for everyone; yet she thought it had been more about survival than a change of heart.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” She whispered aggressively to him while putting distance between the two of them.

He gave her an incredulous look. “Wrong with me? I just saved your ass. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Yes, thank you. But why?”

“Do you want to get taken by dark wizards? Do you have some sort of dark wizard kink I should know about Granger?”

“Get away from me, Malfoy,” she said as she shoved him away from her and walked past him, her arm grazing him as she walked around him and back to the pub.

Hermione weaved her way through the students who were now basking in taking down the dark wizards, the air of celebration greater than it was before they were attacked. Shots and pints were being passed around, the liquid sloshing out of mugs and onto the already sticky floor.

“You okay ‘Mione?” Harry asked as she sat down back at the booth she had been occupying before. His face was flush and full of excitement over the victory. “I can’t believe that there are still Death

Eaters running about even after everything that happened at Hogwarts. You would think they would know their place by now.”

“They seem pretty determined to achieve their goal of getting rid of any muggle-borns no matter what,” Hermione grumbled. “Even with Voldemort gone.”

“We told you we would handle it if something were to happen,” said Ron, wincing. “And we did.”

“Yes, thank you. I-“

“Where were you anyway?” Ginny asked. “They burst in and I looked for you but you were suddenly gone.”

“I-um,” Hermione stuttered.

What could she tell them? That Draco Malfoy pulled her out of harm's way? Not bloody likely. They would think she was insane and then go hunting down Malfoy, believing he has some ulterior motive. The more she thought about it, she realized that last term, he had done all he could to prove that he had become reformed. Few people believed it to be true, especially with his father locked up in Azkaban serving a life sentence. Hermione had a hard time believing it herself sometimes, but she had noticed how he acted all last term.

She had seen him in the halls, in the the library, and in classes and knew he wasn't the stuck up posh git from before. Something had changed in him, and she had noticed, but she decided to not treat him any differently, because after all she was a muggleborn and he was a pureblood. She was sure those prejudices ran deep, no matter how reformed he may seem now.

Malfoy had faced a similar trial as his father, but seeing as he ultimately turned on Voldemort and proved his willingness to leave the Dark side, Malfoy's punishment was reduced and he was ordered to attend Hogwarts as part of his sentence to prove his loyalty to the Ministry. Thus causing him to isolate himself, leaving everyone alone last term and keeping to himself. It was sad really, seeing him sitting alone in the library and in the Great Hall, reading and working by himself. Malfoy had always been popular before the war, but ever since it became common knowledge that his parents were Death Eaters, that popularity was limited to those with similar beliefs.

Although he and his mother turned on the Dark Lord in the final moments of the war, giving them some sort of saving grace, that didn't help the general population trust them again.

Most of the friends he had after his family's support of Voldemort were now dead, save for Blaise Zabini, Theo Nott and Pansy Parkinson. Who were, consequently, also court ordered by the Ministry to attend Hogwarts to complete their schooling. The four of them attending Hogwarts was an effort by the Ministry to show that they still had influence over those who strayed to the Dark side, and to “reform” those who came from Death Eater families with Ministry approved curriculum.

“I was in the bathroom,” Hermione lied finally.

She didn't know why she was protecting and lying for Malfoy. She *did* feel bad for him, and she knew that if she told her friends that he had just saved her from the attack, they wouldn't believe her. It wasn't a fight she was willing to take on right now.



Hermione looked back over her shoulder towards the alcove where Malfoy had pulled her out of harm's way, where she had left him without a second glance, and found nothing there but empty darkness.

## Chapter End Notes

And there. it. is!!!

HUGE thank you to the betas who read this for me and have continued to be amazing and get this fic to a place where I feel confident sharing it!

You can find them all on Instagram/TikTok:

Tesla.Ember

WeavingWindflowers

books.andknits

abookishbelle

fromtherestrictedsection

kaylamcgrathbooks

duchessofdude (TikTok)

ASLO huge shoutout to my writing group, who continue to be the most supportive group of women I have ever come in contact with. I love you all so much!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

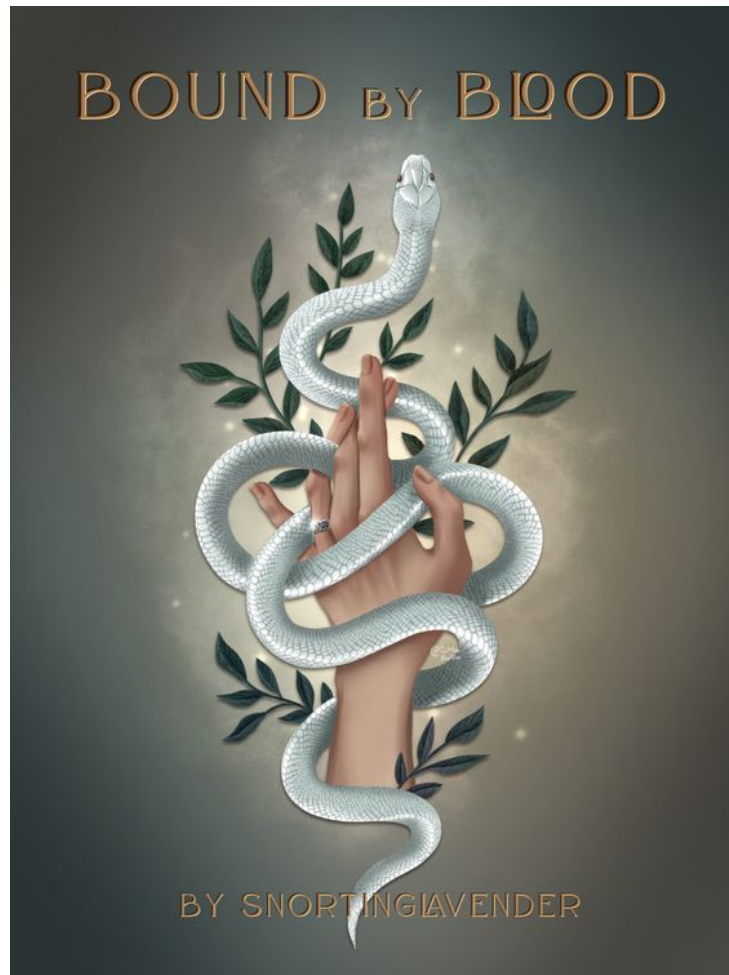
You can expect weekly updates on Thursdays 😊

Comments and kudos are appreciated!!

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

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



(Thank you to the incredible [@ivmaruva](#) on Instagram for this beautiful cover art for Bound by Blood!)

### Hermione

It was the first feast of the spring term and all of the Hogwarts students had gathered in the Great Hall. Hermione sat at the head of the Gryffindor table, looking down the long row of students she was to lead for another term, her stomach rolling at the knowledge that things were about to get much more interesting.

Before supper, Headmistress McGonagall pulled Hermione aside to tell her that the Ministry had finally decided to make the ongoing attacks public knowledge, saying that the Death Eaters had gone too far with attempting to attack students so close to Hogwarts and that Hermione was lucky that she got out of the situation unscathed.

It was then that Hermione confessed exactly *how* she had gotten out of the situation unscathed and who had helped. McGonagall didn't hide the surprise on her face at the mention of Malfoy's name,

but nonetheless nodded her head and replied that thanks to Malfoy or not, she was lucky to not have been in sight of the Death Eaters during the attack

So now here Hermione sat, enjoying the last few minutes of calm before her final term of school was turned on its head more so than it already was. While she was relieved that she would no longer have to hold the burden of the attacks and keep them secret alongside all of the other muggleborns, she was more worried about how this would affect the emotional climate of the country and population. A population that was still very much in the beginning stages of healing from such a gruesome war.

“What’s got you so quiet today, Hermione?” Padma asked from the table beside her. While the Great Hall and corridors of the castle would never be what they were before the war, Hermione could feel a positive change throughout the student body that wasn’t there last term. Maybe it was the comfort of no major attacks happening on the castle last term, or maybe it was the merry demeanor still echoing off the walls from the holiday break.

Regardless, it was a feeling that Hermione knew wouldn’t last long.

“Just a lot to think about,” she answered Padma with a weary smile.

“It’s mental that we’re in our last term of school, isn’t it? After everything, I never thought we would get here,” Padma exclaimed with a wide smile across her face.

Hermione nodded as she tuned out the chatter around her, playing with the food on her plate, finding herself unable to eat while the thought of the news that was about to be shared swirled around her head. She felt envious of Padma and the other students' excitement for the new term, for none of this really affected.

If she was being honest with herself, she was jealous of everyone’s ability to relax and lean into what should be the best time of their lives, especially following the victory of a war. Last term was already a struggle for her with the attacks on muggleborns, but now that they had gotten so close to her and Hogwarts, she had a dreadful feeling that the Hog’s Head attack was only the beginning.

Hermione took a deep breath as she watched McGonagall stand behind the podium at the front of the Great Hall, bringing her wand to her neck to amplify her voice.

“Students! Your attention please,” she started. “Welcome to another term here at Hogwarts. I’m delighted to hear that everyone had a restful holiday break.” McGonagall took a pause as she surveyed the students before her, taking in their faces and cheery demeanor, knowing she was about to change that.

Headmistress McGonagall’s eyes met Hermione’s before she began again. “I would like to address the rumors that have been swirling around about the attack that happened at the Hog’s Head a few days ago,” McGonagall’s voice rang out over the Great Hall. Dead silence followed. Word of the attack had spread around the castle at lightning speed yesterday upon everyone’s arrival, causing rumors to mill about why the Death Eaters were here and what this meant for the term.

“The rumors are true,” McGonagall continued. “Death Eaters are rising up once again and are strictly focusing on attacking muggleborn witches and wizards. They targeted the Hog’s Head while some of you were in attendance, and for that, I am very sorry.”

Shouts echoed through the Great Hall and Hermione looked around, taking in the reactions of the student body. Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Luna had of course known of these attacks, so it didn't come as a new revelation to them at all. But looking at the expressions on Neville, Cho, and the Patil twins, Hermione could feel their shock from across the house tables. They had all sacrificed so much, only to discover that it was all for naught.

Her eyes bounced to the other house tables, observing the reactions of the house Prefects at the announcement of what they would be dealing with this term. The tension in the room became palpable as the volume rose over the disdain of this news. Just as Hermione had expected, the joy that had been filling through the halls beforehand quickly dissipated and dissolved into something much darker, much more grim.

Finally, her gaze ended up on Draco Malfoy, sitting a distance away from the other Slytherins at the table, save for Pansy, Blaise and Theo; the lot of them looking stiff at the announcement of this news. Malfoy's shoulders tensed and his face was drawn taut at the public announcement of the rise of the Death Eaters once again. She knew what this meant for him. What people would think of him, now that Death Eaters were making their station known once more.

She felt a stir of pity deep within her, for his actions at the Hog's Head had truly proven to her what kind of wizard he was now, whether everyone else knew it or not. But while she was grateful for his help and what he did for her, she still shoved that pity way down within herself - for she once again had to remind herself that he would be safe, even if the Death Eaters were back. He was a pureblood and that would always be his saving grace.

McGonagall commanded the attention of the room once again. "Tomorrow morning this information will be known to the whole wizarding population via The Daily Prophet. When the news comes out, I ask all of you to remember how much work was put into reinforcing this school's walls and wards, and that nothing out of the ordinary happened last term. For now, Hogwarts is the safest place for all of us to be."

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The next morning was a cacophony of chaos with a plethora of owls, howlers, and worried parents trying to breach the wards around Hogwarts to get to their children now that the news of the Death Eater attacks was common knowledge for all of Wizarding Britain.

Hermione spent her morning running between consoling sobbing first years and easing the nerves of distressed parents of muggleborns outside of the wards of the castle. She gave them comforting words and a shoulder to cry on, telling the parents and students that there was nothing to worry about as long as they stayed inside of the castle wards and followed protocol if they were to leave castle grounds.

This was the role she always played - the strong support system that didn't need a shoulder to lean on. The person who always had answers and who was always there for everyone. No one had stopped to ask how she was faring, if there was anything they could do for her. Not that she would ask anything of anyone anyways, but it would be nice to be considered.

She was in the middle of reassuring a particularly upset pair of muggle parents just outside of the Hogwarts wards when an owl dropped a note in her lap, demanding she report to the Headmistress' office immediately.

Hermione felt her heart drop into her stomach for it was a short and terse note, giving no details as to why her presence was so urgently requested.

As Head Girl, Hermione knew there was no chance she was being called in for anything she had done wrong, but rather for something that was *going* wrong, and something she would have to deal with and fix.

She closed her eyes as she let out the deep breath she had been holding, a new wave of stress washing over her, and excused herself from the family she was with before heading into the castle.

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Hermione fidgeted as she sat in a chair in the middle of McGonagall's ornate office. The headmistress wasn't in the room when Hermione got there, leaving her with unwanted time to sit and dwell on her anxious thoughts on what more could possibly be wrong. *Had someone died? Was the Ministry in trouble? Were her parents okay?* All of these questions plagued her mind in the silence of the office.

Looking around at the relics in the room for a few more dreadfully quiet moments, her head snapped up as the door opened and in walked Draco Malfoy followed by the headmistress herself. Hermione did not know what she expected from this impromptu meeting, but seeing Malfoy enter the office wasn't it.

Malfoy met her eyes for a flash, looking as confused as she felt, before he quickly glanced away, eyes steadfast on the room around them.

McGonagall had a look of sheer determination on her face, eyes crinkled with stress as she gestured for Malfoy to take a seat next to Hermione. McGonagall sat down in her own chair and faced them both, her eyes bouncing back and forth between the two of them before she spoke.

"I'm sure you both are wondering why I pulled you in here," McGonagall said, breaking the tense silence that filled the room.

When the pair of them didn't answer, the Headmistress pulled a piece of paper from the pile on her desk and set it before them.

It was then that Hermione's world tilted on its axis — everything that she had ever known and ever wanted flew out the window. Every single thing she had planned for this year went up in flames at the sight of the poster before her.

The poster that McGonagall had set down on her desk in front of her and Malfoy, read:

"MUDBLOOD DESIRABLE #1. PRIZE ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND GALLEONS."

Below the words, was a picture of Hermione.

Her world stopped spinning.

A ringing filled her ears as the room swayed around her as the panic rose up within her. Her throat became tighter, her head lighter, and her eyes stung with the beginnings of tears.

"As you can see, things have escalated since the night at the Hog's Head," McGonagall said in a somber tone.

Hermione had to fight with all of her being to focus on what McGonagall was saying, to keep it together, and to not have a full on mental breakdown in front of Malfoy. The last thing she wanted

was to show him — or anyone, for the matter — that she couldn't handle this. As much as she might think she wanted someone to lean on, she was self-reliant to a fault.

“Why me?” Hermione choked out, working past the tightness in her throat. She refused to let them spill over. She had worked her whole life to be good, to do what was right, and still, it was all for nothing. It seemed for as long as she was alive, she would be hunted for something she was born with and something she couldn't change about herself.

“Your absence was noticed at the Hog's Head by the Death Eaters, and apparently they were after you specifically for reasons we do not yet know. They have taken their efforts public in an attempt to get to you more quickly, since they could not find you there.”

Hermione's eyes snapped to Malfoy's, for he had told her those exact words when he had hidden her that night. *How had he known? And why had he helped her?*

“I still don't understand wh—”

“What does this have to do with me?” Malfoy asked with a bored tone, interrupting her thoughts.

Anger rose up through Hermione at his words, because of course he would make this about himself. Here she was, sitting and panicking over now being the target of the most deadly wizards of their time and he was wondering how *he* would be affected.

“Miss Granger tells me you helped her during the attack at the Hog's Head,” McGonagall answered. “That you pulled her out of harm's way when Death Eaters showed up. Is this true?”

Hermione raised her head to look at Malfoy so she could see his face when he tried to explain his reasoning for his incredibly out of character actions at the Hog's Head. As much as she didn't want to admit it, she was thankful for him pulling her out of the way. Especially if the Death Eaters were now particularly targeting her and her alone and were willing to pay such a hefty sum for her to be handed over. She shivered at the thought of what could have happened if he hadn't been there.

“I wasn't in the right state of mind,” he scoffed. “It'll never happen again, trust me.”

Any feelings of thankfulness that Hermione felt towards him flew out of the window. Just when she thought she was starting to see the good in Malfoy and see how he was reforming, he went and channeled the prat he had been for all of his childhood.

“Regardless of your mental state at the time Mr. Malfoy, you have proved yourself a perfect fit for the assignment I have for you. Miss Granger also said that you knew they were looking for her — information that I'm not sure how you obtained, but that you used to help her nonetheless. Seeing as Miss Granger is now personally being singled out by the Death Eaters, we need her to be guarded at all times. That is where you—”

*No no no*. Hermione could tell where this was going and she would not be having it. This term was already in enough flames.

“Headmistress McGonagall, I appreciate the effort but I am perfectly capable—”

“I know you are about to say you're perfectly capable of protecting yourself and you are indeed, Miss Granger,” McGonagall answered, cutting Hermione off in return. “But have you stopped to think about what could have happened at the Hog's Head if Mr. Malfoy hadn't pulled you out of the

view of those Death Eaters? And this was before this price was placed on your head and you were singled out amongst all muggleborns publically. We have no idea what they are planning and we cannot take any chances, especially with you being such a public figure."

Hermione *had* thought about what would have happened if Malfoy hadn't pulled her out of the way. She had lost sleep over it for the last few days if she was being honest with herself — she had tossed and turned at night over the fact that whether he realized it or not, Draco Malfoy had a habit of saving her when she was in sticky situations.

When she, Ron, and Harry were running from the Snatchers and hunting Horcruxes, it was always her looking out for them. Not once did Ron or Harry try to protect her when she found herself in trouble in those woods. Not once did they help her come up with solutions. And when they found themselves in Malfoy Manor, Malfoy could have easily sold them out because deep down, she *knew* he recognized them, recognized Harry...yet, he had protected them.

He had watched his aunt torture her yes, but she had glanced at him from across the room and had seen the agony on his face at Hermione's screams. It was a blur in her mind, the pain being at the forefront of her memories, but she knew that at some point while Bellatrix carved the slur on her arm— the pain of it ricocheting through her whole body— she and Malfoy had locked eyes, and she somehow knew he could feel her suffering — for it was only moments later that that pain became slightly more bearable with the use of legilimency on his end.

She thought about that night often, going back and forth between the trauma of being cursed and the confusion as to why Malfoy had helped her. He had protected her then and he had protected her again at the Hog's Head.

It didn't matter though, because even though he had helped her, it was apparent from his attitude in this room that he would continue to act as stuck up as he always had.

"So what are you suggesting, Headmistress?" Hermione asked.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "I'm suggesting that we assign Mr. Malfoy to look after you this term. He has insight on the Death Eaters and their operations from his time with them that we do not. We will rearrange your schedules to coincide with one another to make things easier."

"Do I get any say in this?" he asked from beside her in an annoyed tone.

"We will have a deeper discussion about this assignment privately, Mr. Malfoy. But for now, it would be in your best interest to go along with the conversation."

Hermione had to bite back her smirk at McGonagall's berating of Malfoy. As much as she wasn't thrilled about this arrangement either, knowing that it would be a nuisance to Malfoy brought her a small amount of joy. But the joy was short lived as she thought through the logistics of how such an arrangement would work.

"How will this affect my classes? I am taking several that I know for a fact he isn't qualified to be in," she said matter-of-factly.

"And how did you manage to weasel your way into those, huh Granger? Pull the war hero card? You missed just as much schooling as I did last year," Malfoy mouthed back. She knew the comment would get under his skin, for other than a blood rival, Malfoy had always been her number one academic rival.

“I continued my studies while we were out, I’ll have you know,” she snapped back, even if it wasn’t one hundred percent true. She did her best to study during the war and to catch up over the summer before the fall term, so she was slightly ahead of her fellow students, but nowhere near where she wanted to be. Something she fully planned on remedying this term.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Of course you did. Not even a war can keep Hermione Granger from her swottiness.”

“And what about my Head Girl duties?!” Hermione exclaimed, ignoring his comment on her *swottiness*. Who cared after all?

“Sad that you won’t be able to boss people around with me by your side, Granger? An ex-Death Eater will definitely take away all of your credit.”

Hermione felt the slight control she had over her last term of schooling slipping through her fingers more and more by the moment. Handling sobbing first years she could deal with — had been dealing with them all year already. Dealing with Malfoy being around her all the time? She wasn’t so sure.

“Hush you two!” McGonagall reprimanded them. “Hermione, your Head Girl duties will remain as they are with the accompaniment of Mr. Malfoy when appropriate. Mr. Malfoy is being moved to your academic schedule Miss Granger, for his O.W.L.s were neck and neck with yours when tested during fifth year. You are both equally qualified for the classes, Mr. Malfoy just didn’t opt into them. Everything is being arranged for you as we speak and I will hear of no more bickering from the two of you unless you want to spend extra time together in detention.”

The two of them glared at each other— but didn’t say another word.

“So do I get a say and whether or not I accept this arrangement?” Hermione asked, turning back to face McGonagall.

“This has gone beyond you, Miss Granger. This is Ministry mandated because of your status as a war hero so no, you don’t have a choice.” Hermione took a deep breath, forcing the tears that pricked her eyes to recede as McGonagall continued. “Having you in danger and hunted by the remaining Death Eaters does not look good on the Ministry. Keeping you safe is essential to them. You two will report here tomorrow morning for final information and new schedules.” McGonagall turned to face Hermione. “Miss Granger, you are free to leave. There are some things I need to speak about with Mr. Malfoy in private. Please report back here tomorrow at nine in the morning.”

Hermione swallowed and nodded before standing up and collecting her things, desperate to get out of the room and curse the heavens for giving her such bad luck. On top of being hunted by the Death Eaters, she was now a scapegoat for the Ministry and a means to show off the power they obviously no longer had. The Ministry’s success during the war had been by the skin of their teeth, but they didn’t want anyone knowing that.

“Thank you Headmistress,” she said, not daring to cast a gaze back at Malfoy and the sneer she knew he wore on his face, for he would no doubt say that all of this was her fault.

And as Hermione stepped into the breezy hall of Hogwarts, barely making it to a private alcove before she leaned her head against the wall, shaking in despair for what her life had become, she was inclined to agree with him.



## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of the comments and love on the first chapter! I super super appreciate it!!

Another big shoutout to [@ivmaruva](#) for the amazing cover art!!

Once again HUGE shoutout to my betas:

Tesla.Ember

WeavingWindflowers

books.andknits\_

abookishbelle\_

fromtherestrictedsection

kaylamcgrathbooks

duchessofdude (TikTok)

Comments and kudos appreciated :)

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

This is Chapter 2, but from Draco's POV :) Enjoy!

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

### Draco

Draco sat at the end of the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, doing his best to not draw any more attention to himself than he was naturally getting, for it had not been a good morning for him. Now that all of wizarding Britain knew that Death Eaters were back, and were after muggleborns, the sneers and choice words he received throughout the day had increased tenfold. Everyone, *of course*, thought he was involved once again. Did the students here really think the Ministry would just let him walk freely about if they had even a fleeting thought that he could be involved with the Death Eaters again? Idiots, all of them.

At least he knew he wasn't totally alone in the berating. Blaise, Theo, and Pansy were also greeted with unfortunate responses with the announcement both last night and this morning. The lot of them had been sentenced to Hogwarts after the war last year by the Ministry to prove their allegiance, showcasing that they no longer followed Death Eater ways.

Not that they ever had followed or become a part of the Death Eaters by choice.

Draco had put on a brave face when McGonagall sprung the news on the student body last night, and didn't let the chastising get to him. Publicly at least. The moment he arrived back in the Slytherin common room and found himself in the privacy of his bed with the curtains drawn, he let his emotions wash over him.

He wasn't an overly emotional person before the war. He had no reason to be. Up until sixth year, everything he had ever wanted had been given to him and life was easy. His only troubles until that point were making his father proud by being a good Slytherin, and excelling in his schoolwork.

His father's expectations continued on in the summer before sixth year, but his demands became steeper. He expected Draco's morals to line up with his own - which they did not and that fact had become a big pain point in their relationship. Regardless of how Draco felt, he was still forced to become a Death Eater and follow in the footsteps of the great House of Malfoy and take the Dark Mark.

It was then that Draco's life began to spiral and the lack of control he had over himself began to slip. It was then that anxiety took over Draco's being and followed him around every second of the day.

Throughout his sixth year at Hogwarts and the war, he found himself entering a mental space which he had never faced before. Every moment felt like a nightmare, like something he had no control

over, but had to witness anyway. He felt as if he couldn't control his actions, and that he was a puppet whose strings were being pulled in all of the wrong directions.

And now, he could feel himself slowly crawling out of that space since the defeat of Voldemort. The world around him had started to heal, and he could see hope at the end of it all.

And then, the attack at the Hog's Head happened.

"I'm going to drink until I'm making out with my reflection tonight, lads," Theo said while stuffing his face. "Care to join me?"

Pansy sat next to him and scoffed. "Gross, Theo. Don't talk while you eat."

"I'll take you up on that," Blaise replied, sitting down next to Theo, already holding a steaming hot mug of tea. Blaise pulled a flask from his coat pocket and poured it into his mug. "I'm way ahead of you actually."

"What about you, Draco?"

As awful as being sentenced to attending Hogwarts as punishment had been, Draco was grateful to have at least some of his friends enduring the torture along with him. None of the other Slytherins or students who had called themselves his "friends" wanted anything to do with him after the war.

Not that he could blame them. If he could, he wouldn't have anything to do with himself either.

So he was thankful for Blaise, Theo and Pansy because they understood him. They understood what it was like to have to please your parents by joining a group of wizards who were known for terrorizing all of wizardkind. They understood the psychological torture that was forcing yourself to act in accordance with beliefs that you no longer ascribed to anymore. For Draco, he felt himself slipping out of his blood prejudice beliefs at the end of fifth year- just in time for him to be thrust into the depths of the Death Eater ranks and ordered to kill Dumbledore.

Just as Draco was about to answer a 'hell yes' to Theo's invitation to drink away his consciousness, he heard the words:

"Mr. Malfoy, please follow me to my office."

He turned to find Headmistress McGonagall standing behind him, looking unusually grim.

He tensed at the sound of her voice, for usually when he was called to her office, it never meant anything good for him. But if it weren't for McGonagall accepting his sentencing of attending Hogwarts, he would be in a cold cell in Azkaban right now. So without a word or snicker of disdain, Draco stood and followed her. Needless to say, he would do everything he could to be on her good side.

Draco wracked his brain for what could be the possible cause of him being taken to her office in the middle of breakfast and came up blank. He had been doing everything right, had been on his best behavior, and had barely left the Manor over the holiday break. He allowed his wand to be taken and inspected for any Dark magic, he let the Aurors stationed at Hogwarts search his room and belongings upon his arrival after the holiday break. He was compliant, complicit, going along with whatever they wanted.

He followed the Headmistress past the turning heads and whispering mouths of the Great Hall, through the corridors, and into her office only to see Granger already there, sitting nervously in one of the chairs before her desk.

He met her dark brown eyes for the quickest of seconds, confused as to why they were both there, and noted the worry on her face.

He wasn't sure what had come over him the other day in the Hog's Head when he pulled her out of the way of the Death Eaters — all he knew is that he overheard them talking about their need for her and how they had their best chance that evening and he had taken it upon himself to get her out of harm's way.

Headmistress McGonagall gestured for Draco to take the chair next to Granger as she rounded her great oak desk and sat down herself.

"I'm sure you both are wondering why I pulled you in here," McGonagall said, breaking the silence.

When the pair of them didn't answer, McGonagall proceeded to lay a wanted poster on her desk, laden with Granger's picture and the words: "MUDBLOOD DESIRABLE #1. PRIZE ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND GALLEONS."

Granger sucked in a breath at the sight of the paper and Draco's eyes jumped back and forth between her and the wanted poster. He could see the panic overtaking Granger's face as his own sense of dread overtook his body, the anxiety he knew all too well crept up his body. This wasn't good.

"As you can see, things have escalated since last night," McGonagall said.

Silence rolled over the room for a few more moments.

"Why me?" Granger choked out next to him.

McGonagall looked at her with pity on her face.

"Your absence was noticed at the Hog's Head by the Death Eaters. Apparently, they were after you specifically. They have taken their efforts public in an attempt to get to you more quickly since they could not find you there."

Draco did his best not to react to the revelation that his heroic act had just made things worse, though it didn't surprise him. As everything went in his life, when he thought he was helping, he was really just making things worse. It was obvious that McGonagall knew he was involved somehow and the only way she would have known that was because of Granger. The righteous Gryffindor just *had* to run her mouth to McGonagall and ruin what little peace he had for the term.

"I still don't understand wh—"

"What does this have to do with me?" Draco asked, interrupting Granger, perplexed as to why he was being involved in a price being set upon her head. Yes, he had pulled her out of the way in the Hog's Head, but it wasn't his fault that she was a hot commodity all of the sudden. He wanted to be as far away as possible from whatever was going on.

McGonagall gave him a pointed look. "Miss Granger tells me you helped her during the attack at the Hogshead. That you pulled her out of harm's way when Death Eaters showed up. Is this true?"

"I wasn't in the right state of mind," he scoffed in defense. "It'll never happen again, trust me."

Ever since he pulled her into that alcove in the Hogshead that night, he had been kicking himself for his stupidity. He should have known that pulling her out of the way would come back to bite him. His valiant deeds always did. It was as if he lost control of his body when he grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the way when he heard the Dark Wizards knocking down the door of the pub.

But he had heard what those Death Eaters had said just minutes before, what they planned to do to her if they got their hands on her. Which started the chain reaction of him slipping through the back door of the building and into the packed pub, his eyes searching for her.

And as much as he had disliked Granger during their earlier school years, he had known that she had already suffered enough just by being born a muggle, as well as everything that she had been put through during the war. They were the same in that way. That night when she was screaming on the floor of the Manor was forever ingrained in his mind and plagued him more than he was willing to admit.

If he had known he was only making things worse by pulling her out of the way, he would have gone a different route and stupefied the Dark Wizards when he heard them talking about her.

But of course he had done the wrong thing. Again.

"Regardless of your mental state at the time Mr. Malfoy, you have proved yourself a perfect fit for an assignment I have for you. Miss Granger also said that you knew they were looking for her - information that I'm not quite sure how you received, but that you nonetheless used to help her. Seeing as Miss Granger is personally and publicly being singled out by the Death Eaters now, we need her to be guarded at all times. That is where you-"

Granger cut McGonagall off. "Headmistress McGonagall, I appreciate the efforts but I am perfectly capable--"

"I know you are about to say you're perfectly capable of protecting yourself and you are indeed, Miss Granger," McGonagall answered, cutting Granger off in return. "But have you stopped to think about what could have happened at the Hogshead if Mr. Malfoy hadn't pulled you out of the view of those Death Eaters? And this was before this price was placed on your head and you were singled out amongst all of muggleborns publically."

"So what are you suggesting, Headmistress?"

McGonagall cleared her throat. "I'm suggesting that we assign Mr. Malfoy to look after you this term. He has insight on the Death Eaters and their operations that we do not from his time with them. We will rearrange your schedules to coincide with one another to make things easier."

*Fuck. Me.* Draco thought. Now he really wished he could go back in time and strangle his past self for trying to be the hero. For caring when he shouldn't have. The last thing he needed or wanted was to have to follow Granger around and babysit her because some Death Eaters couldn't accept that they had lost. This was supposed to be an easy term for him, skating by without any issues and just focusing on his schoolwork. So much for that. Now he was going to be thrust into issues that shouldn't involve him, issues that would turn his whole plan for the semester on its head.

“Do I get any say in this?” he asked with an annoyed tone.

“We will have a deeper discussion about this assignment privately, Mr. Malfoy. But for now, it would be in your best interest to go along with the conversation,” McGonagall replied with a pointed look at him that said: *I am the only thing keeping you out of Azkaban right now.*

As much as it bothered him, he backed down and stuffed himself back inside that box he had been operating in all school year. Being mandated to attend Hogwarts to keep him out of Azkaban had caused Draco to be on the best behavior he had ever been his entire life, which was incredibly annoying, if you asked him.

“How will this affect my classes? I am taking several classes that I know for a fact he isn’t qualified to be in,” Granger said in her matter-of-fact voice that drove him up a wall. It seemed as if the war had done nothing to suppress her holier than thou attitude she had growing up.

“And how did you manage to weasel your way into those, huh Granger? Pull the war hero card? You missed just as much schooling as I did last year,” he replied, taking any bait he could get to show that he was not the person for this job, that Granger would most likely hex him first rather than some Death Eater in the event of an attack. Pairing them up with one another was asking for even more trouble.

“I continued my studies while we were out, I’ll have you know,” she said while curling her lip at him.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Of course you did. Not even a war can keep Hermione Granger from her swottiness.”

“And what about my Head Girl duties!” she exclaimed, turning back to face the headmistress.

Draco laughed.

“Sad that you won’t be able to boss people around with me by your side, Granger? An ex-Death Eater will definitely take away all of your credit.”

“Hush you two!” McGonagall reprimanded them. “Hermione, your Head Girl duties will remain as they are with the accompaniment of Mr. Malfoy when appropriate. Mr. Malfoy is being moved to your academic schedule Miss Granger, for his OWLs and NEWTs were neck and neck with yours when tested. You are both equally qualified for the classes, Mr. Malfoy just didn’t opt into them. Everything is being arranged for you as we speak and I will hear of no more bickering from the two of you unless you want to spend extra time together in detention!”

They both shut up, but used the opportunity to glare at one another.

“So do I get a say in whether or not I accept this arrangement?” Granger asked, turning back to face McGonagall.

“This has gone beyond you, Miss Granger. This is Ministry mandated because of your status as a war hero so no, you don’t have a choice.” Draco rubbed his forehead, a headache at the front of his skull already forming at the thought of dealing with Granger per the Ministry. Just another way for them to show that they had control over him no doubt. “Having you in danger and hunted by the remaining Death Eaters does not look good on the Ministry. Keeping you safe is essential to showing the Ministry’s power. You two will report here tomorrow morning for some final

information and new schedules. McGonagall turned to face Hermione. “Miss Granger, you are free to leave. There are some things I need to speak to Mr. Malfoy about in private. Please report back here tomorrow at nine in the morning.”

“Thank you Headmistress,” she said, sighing as she left the room - Draco’s eyes lingering on her back as the door closed behind her. He felt bad for her, but that didn’t mean he wanted to be dragged into this mess.

“Now Mr. Malfoy, there is a second part to your assignment with protecting Miss Granger - also from the Ministry itself,” McGonagall said as soon as the door closed.

Draco’s head turned back to McGonagall at the headmistress’ words.

Draco growled in frustration. “Haven’t they asked enough of me by condemning me to this castle this year? And now you’re mandating me to babysit Granger and you want more on top of that?”

“I would watch your words, Mr. Malfoy. Complete this assignment and all charges of yours will be dropped permanently from your record.”

This silenced Draco. Because while his sentence was reduced to only attending Hogwarts instead of serving a sentence in Azkaban, it didn’t erase any of the crimes he was tried for. His and his family’s actions would follow him forever, appearing on background checks for jobs, searches of his name, and would be forever mentioned if he were to ever unfortunately end up in the Daily Prophet. The Malfoy name was nearly synonymous with “Death Eater” during the first Wizarding War- but after the Second, “Malfoy” might as well have been the definition.

“I’m listening,” he responded.

“Since your family is closely tied to the Dea—”

“*Was* closely tied. We no longer are,” he interrupted.

“And that is why you will be going back to them, saying you had a change of heart and want to work with them again. You will be a spy for the Ministry and tell us of their plans and operations. They will be none the wiser of our conversation today, and if you do well, they will confide in you and give you the information we need.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Draco asked after a beat of silence, confusion and anger rising up in him. “Has the Ministry lost its mind? Are they so desperate for information that this is what they have to resort to? This will undo everything the Ministry has been attempting to do by forcing me back to this school this year, forcing me to walk these halls and be berated with every breath.”

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy. The Ministry *is* desperate, as all of their insiders with the Dark Wizards were killed in the war,” McGonagall said matter-of-factly. “The Ministry is struggling to regain what it was before the war, and these attacks aren’t making it easier.”

“And what will the Death Eaters think of me joining their ranks again, while also guarding their number one target? Think of that at all?” he sneered, not caring how his tone came off.

“Your assignment with Miss Granger is to be kept secret. No one except you two, me, and certain staff members here at Hogwarts will know of it. For both your protection and hers. Your

assignment with the Ministry and the Death Eaters is confidential as well. No one, not even Miss Granger or your friends, can know about it. Understood?"

"So you're just sending me to the slaughter while also forcing me to protect Hogwarts' Golden Girl?"

"Do you want to go to Azkaban or not?" Headmistress McGonagall asked. "Because if you fail to comply, that is where you will be going."

"So it's either take this assignment or Azkaban? What about my pardon?"

"As much as it pains me to say this, the Ministry needs you. You are one of the last ex-Death Eaters, and you know their system better than anyone else," McGonagall said. "On top of that, you've proved that you have had some sort of change of heart when you pulled Miss Granger out of the Death Eaters' way at the Hog's Head."

"What about Blaise? Or Theo?" Draco asked.

"Blaise and Theo didn't have their homes act as a headquarters for the Death Eaters during the war. They weren't as heavily involved as your family was."

The statement made Draco flinch.

Draco huffed once more before speaking again. "I need proof somewhere that if I do this, my charges will be dropped. My mother's too. Those are my demands. I need to get something good out of this, because this risks my whole family once again. Especially after all of the work we've done to prove our loyalty to the Ministry."

If there was anyone who shouldn't suffer anymore, it was his mother. Everything she did, she did for him, and he knew that with every fiber of his being. While his mother got out of her Azkaban sentence as well, she was still ordered to house arrest, and found herself wandering the halls all alone day in and day out. While it ripped Draco's heart out to see his mother alone and trapped inside of the Manor, a place that no longer really felt like home for either of them, he had also never seen her happier. She seemed to now have the peace she so desperately fought and sacrificed for during the war, and if he could give her this one thing, it would all be worth it.

"I will see about getting your mother's charges dropped as well, Mr. Malfoy. Because contrary to what you might think, I do realize what this assignment would mean if it went bad."

He stared at the Headmistress intently. She knew that this assignment could kill him, could reverse all of the work he had done to prove himself, yet she still asked him. Because she knew she held a power over him that no one else did when it came to him and his Azkaban sentence.

"Okay," Draco said. "I'll do it."

McGonagall nodded, seemingly satisfied with having persuaded him to take this on.

"If you fail, and are found out to be feeding information to the Death Eaters once again about the movements of the Ministry, or you fail to protect Miss Granger, or Merlin save us, *both*, your trial will be renewed and you will receive a new judgment from the Ministry. Do you understand?"



Draco swallowed nervously and nodded but couldn't help the bout of anger he felt rising up within him. All of his life, he was destined to do what other people set out for him. All of his life, he was told what to do and how to act. Every day, he was backed up into a corner against his will and put into a stereotypical box that everyone thought he believed in. He wanted nothing more than to be as far away from the Death Eaters as possible, to start his life anew after the term ended. To leave this place and everything they saw him as, behind.

And now he was being forced to go back to that place with the Death Eaters he had tried so desperately to escape. He had sobbed with joy when he was announced free from the terrors of Azkaban and proven innocent, but now it felt as if he was starting over again.

But, this assignment could prove who he now was, could prove that he was not like his father. That he wasn't a coward, that he was changed, and he wouldn't back down from a fight.

As he walked out of McGonagall's office, he promised himself that he would channel all of his anger and hatred towards the Death Eaters into this assignment. Let his rage towards them for everything they put him through drive him towards seeing their extinction in his lifetime.

They stole any hope of a future from him, and he would destroy theirs right back.

## Chapter End Notes

The more I write this story, the more I realize this story is mainly about Draco haha. He is just a sad, emotionally confused boy :( He is just such a complex character and I really enjoy writing him. I hope you enjoyed reading him as well. Plenty of Draco POVs to come!

Shoutout to the betas :)

Tesla.Ember

WeavingWindflowers

books.andknits

kaylamcgrathbooks

duchessofdude (TikTok)

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

Comments and kudos are appreciated!! I appreciate all of the support you all have shown me so much!!

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

There were a few things that Draco had expected to change in his life after his sentence to Azkaban was pardoned. He expected sneers and choice words to be thrown at him. He expected to be barred from certain establishments. To be treated as an outsider. He had expected for his actions to follow him for the rest of his life. He was prepared for that. He was ready to deal with it.

What he didn't expect was being used as a pawn by the Ministry in order for them to get information they needed on the Death Eaters. To be used as a means to gain back the control that the Ministry had lost during the war.

What he absolutely did not see coming was for them to ask him to protect Hermione Bloody Granger from the Death Eaters who wanted her dead.

If it weren't for the promise of his charges being cleared from his record, he would have said flat out no. There was nothing he wanted to do less than play babysitter and get himself involved with the Death Eaters again. Yet, the opportunity to change his life was right there. He had to take it.

Although, it wasn't like he had much of a choice. At the end of the day, he was still cornered into this by the Ministry, the promise of his record being wiped clean dangled over him just to get him further into their clutches.

He was fighting for his mother's life now as well, for she also deserved some sort of reward for all she had sacrificed when he first took the Dark Mark. If it weren't for her and the decisions she made during the war, he knew where he would be today — in Azkaban right next to his father. Or dead.

And for that, he would willingly lend himself over to whatever the Ministry wanted or needed, no matter how much he hated it in the moment.

That morning, he received an owl holding a scroll with the Minister's Seal promising that both he and his mother would be pardoned upon the indictment of the Death Eaters involved in the new muggleborn attacks. It was hope on a piece of parchment, the promise that the future could work out for him and his mother, his father be damned.

The thought of going back to the Death Eaters terrified him, but it was worth the risk when freedom was the prize. He glared down at that tattoo, still embedded on the skin of his left forearm, thankful that at least he wouldn't have to endure that pain again, for it was a life event that was forever seared in his brain.

He would never forget the day he had taken the Mark against his will. How the pain felt as the tattoo was seared onto his body, the feeling of the last of his childhood innocence being ripped from him. When it was done, the look of pride on his father's and aunt's faces made him sick, because at that moment, they now knew that they could control him even more than they did before. And that they did.

The moment the Dark Mark was seared onto his skin began the years of manipulation and control that led Draco to where he was today.

It was a relief when Bellatrix was killed and his father was imprisoned. He may not have been free from the Ministry, but he was free from them, and that had been enough before the prospect of freedom had been dangled in front of him.

Even now, with his life more controlled than ever by a government who wanted nothing more than to use him, he felt hope like he never had before.

He entered the Headmistress' office, a feeling of déjà vu washing over him as his eyes landed on Granger once again sitting in the same chair she had been in yesterday, McGonagall perched in her chair behind the grand desk. Draco took the seat next to Granger, not going out of his way to be friendly or seem enthused about the situation at all. He would do the bare minimum for this assignment, just enough to keep McGonagall and the Ministry sated, but not enough to make it seem like he actually cared about Granger- just keeping her alive out of obligation.

"Here are your new timetables," McGonagall said, wasting no time at all and sliding papers across her desk to them. "Mr. Malfoy, you are expected to escort Miss Granger to and from all of her classes, meals, and Head Girl duties. Other than that Miss Granger, you are free to roam the castle as you wish. If you wish to go off of castle grounds, please inform me first and find Mr. Malfoy to escort you. Are we clear?"

"Yes," they said in unison as Draco looked down at the timetable in front of him. It confirmed his suspicions of Granger's insanity when it came to academics. Advanced Charms, Advanced Herbology, Advanced Defense of the Dark Arts, Advanced Potions, Advanced History of Magic... Draco's head already hurt.

All of this on top of being Head Girl? The witch was off her rocker. Or maybe she just had nothing better to do.

"Splendid!" McGonagall said with a smile. "One more request from the Ministry and you can both get on with it."

"Now what? Ensuring the safety of the Golden Girl isn't enough?" Draco hissed, pinching the bridge of his nose, the feeling of a headache from off his new responsibilities coming on. What else could the Ministry possibly ask of him?

"You two are being required to swear an Unbreakable Vow. To ensure that everything expected of you is completed and that Miss Granger is protected as promised."

Bloody hell. As if it wasn't enough that he was risking his life by being forced to spy on the Death Eaters, he now had to bind himself to protecting Granger and if he failed...he would die. Just cherry. This day couldn't get any worse.

"You can't be serious," he said through clenched teeth.

"I am indeed, Mr. Malfoy. Miss Granger has already agreed to it. Let's get to it. Stand up, and face one another."

At the headmistress' words, awkward tension filled the air. Draco cast a sidelong glance towards Granger, and found her anxiously playing with her fingers, her eyes looking anywhere in the room

but at him. She had already agreed to the Unbreakable Vow, meaning she didn't trust him to follow through with this assignment of his own volition. Fine, if that's how she wanted to be, then he would follow suit. He would bind himself to her and she would have to live with the consequences of it.

The two of them stood and faced one another, but refused to make eye contact, making the awkwardness in the room even more palpable.

"You have to *look* at one another during the vow," the Headmistress said, her voice exasperated.

Draco begrudgingly forced his eyes to meet the Gryffindor's eyes at the same time she looked up at him, their height difference making the eye contact more of an effort than it should be. He craned his head down to look at her, and his grey eyes met her brown. He expected to see a hesitant expression on her face, or something withdrawn and weary given how she had avoided looking at him so far. Instead, he found only the fire of Gryffindor courage, courage that he knew all too well. That look sucked him in and caught his attention, her eyes boring into his.

They stood there, staring one another down, Draco's mind swirling at the thought of what such a thing would mean for them. To bind their lives together through an Unbreakable Vow... it was something that could never be undone. He had already planned on succeeding, but now there was no room for error. He only hoped that Granger also knew what this meant for them. That she would also be bound to him for life, even when this arrangement was over.

"Take each other's hand," McGonagall prompted, seemingly agitated about having to walk them through the vow step by step.

He tried not to cringe at the thought of holding Granger's hand, for the act of hand holding always seemed so incredibly intimate to Draco. It was an innocent gesture, yes, but one that two people usually participated in when there was a history of trust and familiarity between both parties. It was a way to connect when every other option wasn't available.

And in this moment, he and Granger were neither familiar or intimate but regardless, they intertwined fingers, his hand almost fully encapsulating hers.

Wasting no time, McGonagall brought her wand to their hands, and he couldn't help but notice the shaky breath Granger let out as the magic started to whirl around and through them. *She was actually worried about this.* Maybe she did think through the implications of what this meant after all. That she was binding herself to someone who had grown up making her life a living hell — something Draco was no longer particularly proud of.

And then suddenly, Draco felt it too. Felt the foreign magic that belonged to her surge through him. It was like warm water rushing through him, balmy and comforting and drawing him closer and closer by the second. He had never taken an Unbreakable Vow before now and couldn't help but wonder if this is how it always was - one's magic combining with another, their lives forever entangled through the magic of the Vow.

"Now to begin. Will you, Draco Malfoy, swear yourself to be in service to the Ministry of Magic and follow through with any requests they give to you during the duration of this assignment?" McGonagall asked, officially beginning the Vow and breaking Draco out of his stupor over the feeling of his magic swirling with someone else's.

Draco broke eye contact with Granger and whipped his head to look at McGonagall.

He knew that she couldn't know about his work with the Death Eaters in addition to protecting her, and that was the reason for the Headmistress' vague language, but the fact that McGonagall was making him swear on his life in that regard angered him to no end. He was already sacrificing enough by putting himself back in league with the Death Eaters, along with swearing on his life to protect Granger — now she wanted him to swear on pain of death that he would be obedient to the Ministry in anything they asked him to do.

It wasn't fair. There were so many things that were out of his control when it came to getting inside information for the Ministry. If he was found out by the Death Eaters, they would most likely exploit and kill him if the Ministry didn't do it first. And what if he was unsuccessful in finding the information the Ministry wanted? There was no way he could win in either scenario, and he didn't see a way out. This Vow was another way for the Ministry to do what they wanted with him, and Draco wouldn't stand for it.

"Can you be more specific please?" he asked with a bite in his tone.

"Do you object to the Vow?" McGonagall asked, seemingly almost flabbergasted that he would oppose.

"I object to how vague the terms of the Vow are. We are swearing this in order to ensure I keep her safe, correct?"

"Indeed," McGonagall answered, her mouth set in a grim line.

"Then say that," he snapped back.

"Fine then. Do you swear to keep Miss Granger alive, to protect her from the Death Eaters and defend and guard her in times of need, on the pretense that if she dies, you forfeit your own life?"

Granger's eyes widened at the new terms of the Vow. She broke his gaze to look at McGonagall, only to see that the headmistress was being completely serious. McGonagall really wanted to bet Granger's safety with his life.

"Mr. Malfoy?" McGonagall prompted.

"I swear," he said through gritted teeth, working hard to keep his frustration at bay. The words hung in the air as the swirls of fire circled around their intertwined hands, burning the promise into one another. They returned their eyes to their hands and watched as the magic seeped into them, the feeling like a surge of adrenaline within him.

"That should do it then," McGonagall said, as the last bit of magic disappeared. "You are free to go."

Draco promptly dropped his hand from Granger's, shaking the feeling out of his hand and striding out of the room before another word could be said.



(Once again thank you to the incredible [ivmaruva](#) on Instagram for this amazing artwork!)

### **Hermione**

Never in a million years would Hermione have thought she'd be bound to Draco Malfoy in any way. She definitely never expected to be bound to him via an Unbreakable Vow, sworn to keep her safe from the Death Eaters who wanted her dead.

Malfoy had promptly left the room after the Vow was said and done, as if he couldn't bear her presence a moment longer, and she hadn't seen him since. This agreement between them was already off to a bad start.

It had been hours. What was the point of this arrangement if he was just going to ignore her? She supposed she wasn't surprised by his actions, but she thought he would at least pretend to care until they were both out of the room and away from McGonagall.

She understood why McGonagall chose him, she really did. He *had* saved her at the Hog's Head and he was the only one at the school who had intimate knowledge of the Death Eaters operated. But just because she understood, didn't mean she had to accept it or like it. In reality, she was still grappling with the thought that she even needed someone to look after her. She was strong and could fight and duel just as well as anyone else, and she always took care of herself. She didn't want to have to depend on someone else, much less Draco Malfoy of all people.

Regardless, it was set in stone now and the experience of the Unbreakable Vow was one she would never forget. Their lives were twined together, his life dependent on hers.

She had read a few reports on Unbreakable Vows and the wizards' and witch's accounts of them, but never had she read about what she had just experienced with Malfoy in McGonagall's office. Unbreakable Vows were usually uncomfortable, almost painful as one witch or wizard combined their magic with another. But during their Vow, she could feel Malfoy's magic flowing through her, the experience of it taking her breath away. She knew Malfoy was a powerful wizard. Hell, he was neck in neck with her in every subject. But to actually *feel* his power...she had not been expecting that. It felt endless, rich and warm, familiar and comforting. And she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Hermione shook her head at the thoughts. She had other things to think about right now and needed to focus on the more pressing issues at hand. Like how she would now have to spend most of her waking moments with Malfoy from now on. Because regardless of how she felt during their Vow, it didn't change the fact that they couldn't stand each other and that he would now be in all of her classes and following her around during her Head Girl duties. It was stupid, this arrangement, but she knew it was necessary. She had not gotten any sleep last night after seeing the wanted poster McGonagall had shared with them. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her own face smiling back at her with one of the largest ransoms she had ever seen.

One *hundred thousand* Galleons...the thought of that much money was unfathomable and why she was worth that much, she would honestly like to know. She knew the likely reason the Death Eaters were after her was because of her proximity to Harry and her role in the war — that much she had figured out after the initial shock of seeing the wanted poster wore off.

But who had that much money to give for delivering her to the Death Eaters? There were only a few wizards in Britain who possessed that much money, one of them being the Malfoys, but Lucius was in Azkaban, his assets surely in the Ministry's control until Malfoy served his sentence. There were the Notts as well, but they were also at the mercy of the Ministry for their work with the Death Eaters during the war.

Regardless, Hermione could feel the stress of it all weighing down on her, the grief and fear she had felt last term increasing tenfold.

She wouldn't let it get to her. She couldn't. If she could get through the war, get through hunting horcruxes and being hunted by Snatchers and Death Eaters and tortured at the hands of Bellatrix, she could get through this.

She hoped she could at least.

Hermione headed to the library, anxious to continue the reading for her classes and use studying as an excuse to forget about everything else going on. She had a rigorous schedule this year, all in order to make up for the time she had lost during the war. She had already planned on keeping to the castle as much as possible this term to stay ahead, but now that she was truly locked within its walls, unless she wanted Malfoy to escort her out of the castle walls, she was content with the excuse to not socialize.

Studying and reading gave her time to herself, a moment to forget about the world around her, to dive into the unknown and lose herself within it. She could pretend that her problems didn't exist, and that was what she needed most at the moment.

Hermione made her way out of the shelves of books to the table she usually frequented when she spotted Malfoy just on the other side of the main level of the library. Her anxiety spiked at the sight of him, for she now didn't know how to act around him. Before, it was easy. He was a pureblood prick and she was a muggleborn; easily sworn enemies that dutifully ignored each other. She could navigate that, she knew how to act in that situation and that dynamic.

But now, they were being forced to coexist together, to work with one another on a project that had much higher stakes than either of them were prepared for.

It wasn't going to be easy to work with him but she didn't want to feel like she had to avoid him whenever they crossed paths. They were going to have to get used to being around each other, and Hermione would be damned if she would make this awkward stage last any longer than necessary. She threw her resolve for quiet study time out of the window, steeled herself, and marched over to the table, not giving herself a chance to back down.

"You know, you're not doing a very great job of being a "protector" if you're just going to run away from me every moment you get," Hermione said, dropping her books on the table and sitting in the chair across from him.

"I really couldn't care less. Plus, you're fine as long as you're inside the castle," Malfoy responded without looking up from the Daily Prophet he was studying.

"How can you be so sure?" Hermione asked.

"I just am," he said, still dutifully ignoring her. His cockiness earned an eye roll from Hermione as she began to dig her books out of her bag and stack them neatly onto the table with the others. Malfoy still didn't look up from the paper he was reading, as if he had absolutely no interest in what she was doing at all. She probably could have put a cursed object on the table and he would have never been the wiser.

"What are you reading?" she asked, unable to keep her curiosity at bay.

Malfoy let a big sigh out through his nose, still not looking up at her. "I'm trying to find any information I can about these attacks so that this arrangement can be over sooner rather than later," he replied.

Hermione looked closer at the stacks of Daily Prophets around him and realized that it seemed as if he had collected every newspaper from the last six months.

"Any news we should be worried about?"



“Merlin Granger, do you always ask so many questions?” he said, dropping the paper in his hands onto the table and finally looking up at her. His grey eyes grew steely and full of annoyance, causing Hermione to pull back a fraction from where she was leaning over the table to get a closer look at the papers.

“How do you think I always know the answer to everything, Malfoy?” Hermione responded back, her lips twitching with a smile, knowing her answer would get under his skin.

“You don’t have to be here right now, you know that right, Granger? You know that I don’t want you here. There’s a whole castle you could find elsewhere to be in.”

“Yes I do know that. But as you might know, I spend a lot of time in the library, so if you’ve suddenly decided to spend your free time here, you might as well get used to my presence.

“I came here to get away from you,” he snarled, the annoyed look on his face becoming more prominent.

“You chose an awful spot, honestly.” Hermione pulled out her syllabi for the term, finding the correct page in her Charms book that they were expected to have read before today’s class and started reading, dutifully ignoring the glare she could feel Malfoy sending her way. “There are much better spots to study where no one will find you for hours.”

“You are insufferable,” he said, picking his paper up again.

“Sounds like the cauldron is calling the kettle black,” she replied

“I may be insufferable but at least I’m not a swotty Gryffindor,” he spat back at her.

“Are you determined for us to bicker this whole term?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

“Well I’m definitely not trying to become your friend.”

Hermione glared at him. He was not going to even *attempt* to make this any easier. It’s like he wanted to suffer through it.

“You didn’t have to agree to this, you know,” she said.

“I actually didn’t have a choice,” Malfoy snapped back. “In case you forgot, I am a puppet and the Ministry holds the strings.”

Hermione pitied him. She had felt the same kind of pressure upon her during the war and while being one of Harry’s closest friends. She didn’t always know the answers to everything everyone was asking of her, but because she was always with The Harry Potter and had already been dubbed “the brightest witch of her age”, she was expected to always deliver answers. She wouldn’t wish that pressure on anyone and now it had been passed to him.

“What did they promise you for agreeing to look after me?” she asked, curious and assuming that the Ministry had to be giving him something in return for looking after her. It wasn’t as if this was going to be an easy assignment and she knew the Ministry had to make it enticing to him *somehow*.

Malfoy shook his head, avoiding answering her. “It doesn’t matter. I just want to get to the bottom of these attacks-”

“You and I both,” Hermione grumbled under her breath.

”—The remaining Death Eaters aren’t that smart,” Malfoy continued, frowning at Hermione. “They’ll have slipped up somewhere. I’ll figure out where that is, and we can be done with this arrangement.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so eager to figure something out in all of the years we’ve known each other, Malfoy,” she said.

“If you really must know, Granger, it’s because the Ministry has promised to drop all of my charges if I succeed in this. If not, I will be retried in court. That is of course unless you die, then I die too, thanks to the Unbreakable Vow we just swore,” he answered with a heavy sigh.

For as long as Hermione had known him, she had never seen Malfoy quite so resigned and was quiet for a moment as she took in this information before she blurted out: “What? How can they do that? It’s illegal to put you back on the stand when you’ve already gotten your sentence.”

“Yes, well the last thing the Ministry cares about is treating ex-Death Eaters fairly,” he said matter-of-factly.

Hermione didn’t have a reply for that for she knew he was right. He was the puppet and the Ministry’s strings were the crimes he had committed that they were holding over his head; and now the threat of death if anything happened to her. Her heart sank. The Vow had no negative repercussions for her, but meant the loss of absolutely everything for him- not just his freedom, but now his *life*.

“I think it’d be faster if we worked together,” she said hopefully. Not that she necessarily wanted to work with him, knowing that they would butt heads more than anything, but she was willing if it meant ending this torture- for the both their sakes.

He gave her a steely look. “We’ll see. I don’t want to spend any more time with you than has already been arranged. Come on, we have Charms soon, we’re going to be late.”

At least they both were on the same page there, even if it felt like a million miles separated them in regards to everything else.

## Chapter End Notes

Badda-bing, badda-boom.

Once again, thank you to my betas! This fic would be nowhere without them!

You can find them all on Instagram/Tiktok:

Tesla.Ember

WeavingWindflowers

books.andknits

abookishbelle

fromtherestrictedsection

kaylamcgrathbooks

duchessofdude (TikTok)

And thank you all for all of the love on this fic!! It means the world to me.

AND thank you to [@ivmaruva](#) for the amazing art of the Unbreakable Vow!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

Comments and kudos are appreciated!! :)

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

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

### Hermione

Charms class with Malfoy went exactly as expected. He was endlessly annoyed by her frantically answering every question the professor posed and seemed even more displeased when they were assigned to work on the term project of creating a new charm together.

“Merlin kill me,” Malfoy grumbled as he looked at the requirements for the project.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She never thought she would ever find anyone more dramatic than Harry and Ron, but she should have known that Malfoy would act like the world was ending when things didn’t go his way. The project required quite a bit of research and even more trial and error to ensure that their charm worked before they turned it in. Unfortunately, that would mean that the pair of them would be spending even more time together now. Hermione’s schedule was suddenly full of study sessions with Malfoy — nearly every night.

While Hermione wanted both the assignment of him protecting her and their classwork to go seamlessly and be less awkward — for both of their sakes and sanity —she had to admit to herself that she was feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of near constant companionship.

She had gotten so used to being on her own last term, so used to navigating the terror of the muggleborn attacks and coping with everything that went on during the war by herself, that she was struggling how to navigate Malfoy almost constantly by her side. She had found solace in her solitude last term, and suddenly, one little moment at the Hog’s Head took all of that away.

Hermione’s one saving grace was that Malfoy continued to avoid her as much as possible when he wasn’t required to be near her. He stormed away as soon as they entered the Great Hall after Charms, his duties of safely escorting her through the halls in between classes over and done with.

She knew it couldn’t continue this way if they both wanted to get through this term without strangling one another, so she would keep pushing them both out of their comfort zone.

Her with her self reliance and him with his avoidant behavior.

If something didn’t change between the two of them, they were bound to fail, and if they failed, they would both ultimately be forfeiting their lives.

A reality neither of them wanted to see — which to Hermione’s amusement, was another thing they could agree upon.

Hermione took a seat at the Gryffindor table, sitting near a group of students who seemed engrossed enough in their own quiet conversation that she could go unnoticed. Hermione enjoyed her lonesome meals in peace, for it gave her more opportunities to read and get ahead on her studies or just get lost in her thoughts. She often kept herself so busy with her classes, studying, and other duties that she sometimes missed the moments to just sit and be. So when and if the opportunity arose that she found herself ahead of things, she let herself indulge the quiet moment.

And thank Godrics that right now, The Great Hall was quiet. The sound of cutlery clinking on plates and soft conversation was the perfect background noise for some casual reading that Hermione had fallen behind on. Other than her solitude, one thing that never changed about Hermione was her love for reading and getting lost in other worlds. She could pretend her problems weren't real and weren't hers, and disappear into the pages of a story where she had to make no decisions, make no sacrifices, and just *be*.

It wasn't long, however, before more students started trickling in, their murmurs slowly spreading through the Great Hall. The crescendoing sound of conversation pulled Hermione from her book during her solitary meal and she looked up from her parchment to see many of the students gathered, heads bent together, books and plates of food abandoned as their chatter became louder and louder.

Hermione had no idea what all of the fuss was about, but her curiosity got the better of her. She scooted closer to the group of fifth years sitting near her and listened in to their conversation.

"Another attack in Hogsmeade! Was it more muggleborns?"

"Yes! Can you believe it?"

Hermione froze at the words, the panic washing over her at the news of another attack so soon. Last term the attacks were frequent, but never just a few days within one another. They were usually spread out and subtle, only garnering attention from the Aurors who told her about them. But now, it seemed as if the Death Eaters wanted the attention, that they were now more interested in terrorizing the entire muggleborn population, that they wanted widespread panic and to send muggleborns into hiding. They wanted these attacks reported. They wanted people to whisper. But why?

Something must have changed from last term to this one, as the Death Eaters were getting more and more confident. What was their end game? What did they want?

"Yeah, and apparently the Death Eaters left a note this time. Didn't get word on what it says though."

That was all Hermione had to hear to decide that she would no longer sit in the castle and do nothing while innocent muggleborns were being senselessly attacked.

Hermione jumped up from her seat, quickly glancing around the room to see if Malfoy was still in the hall and if she could escape his notice, because there was no way she was letting him come with her. Once she was sure it was clear to sneak away without being questioned, Hermione raced out of the Great Hall, through the castle and down the steps to the path leading towards Hogsmead all the while pulling on her coat hastily over her robes.

She knew it was reckless to do what she was doing, but she didn't get anywhere in her time at Hogwarts by following the rules and doing what she was told and she wasn't about to start now.

She made her way down the path swiftly, carefully avoiding any other witches or wizards, her hot breath billowing in a cloud in front of her in the cold air. Winter was still raging, snow and ice still packed on the ground, the sun giving little reprieve to the biting air. She jogged most of the way into Hogsmeade, only slowing down to a brisk walk once she hit the cobblestone pavement of the town, not wanting to risk slipping and hurting herself.

Making her way through the winding cobblestone streets of Hogsmeade, Hermione slowly started to hear the chatter of a dense crowd. She rounded the corner and found the source of the sound — a small group of wizards and witches stood around a small area that was blocked from Hermione's view.

As soon as she got close enough, Hermione pushed her way through the crowd, only to get to the front and find nothing but a broken wand and a note on the pavement.

"No evidence that he was even here. Just his wand and that note," the wizard next to her said to no one in particular. A life gone with barely a trace, just like that.

Hermione bent down to read the piece of parchment on the cobblestone: *Magic is Might, Purity will Prevail.*

Hermione swallowed upon reading the words, for the Death Eater motto was one she would never forget. If she thought last term's attacks were bad, they had nothing on this. She was right: gone were the attacks of subtlety, the Death Eaters wanted people to know what they were doing and were now purposefully trying to cause a scene, resulting in an uproar of the entire wizarding population. This was proof enough.

"What happened to the person who was attacked?" Hermione asked the man next to her, her eyebrows bunching in concern.

"He just disappeared! There was a loud bang and bark, and one moment he was right here, the next, he was gone!"

Hermione nodded as she took in the wizard's words, scanning the area around them and trying to find if there was anything that would give the Aurors an idea of where the man went. Her eyes caught on a peculiar set of animal tracks that seemed to have appeared right where the wizard's wand and note lay, and then led seemingly out of Hogsmeade.

Hermione thanked the man she was speaking to before wiggling out of the crowd, her eyes only focused on the muddy trail that led through the winding streets and alleyways, away from the crowd and shops and the most popular spots in Hogsmeade.

The paw prints were huge, bigger than anything she had ever seen from the normal cats that roamed around Hogsmeade or even a domesticated dog. Whatever these tracks belonged to, it seemingly tried to go unnoticed with how it hugged the walls and shadowed areas of the village, but had a definite destination in mind.

She followed the tracks all the way to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, studying them carefully and racking her brain on what type of creature they could belong to, when she was suddenly yanked backwards off of the path, effectively losing her balance and careening into whatever — *whoever* — pulled her out of balance.

"*Do you have a death wish?*" an angry voice seethed into her ear.

She stumbled as she regained her footing- Malfoy apparently had no qualms about not announcing his arrival before he pulled someone off their feet, for the first time he did it could definitely be counted as an accident, but this time was decidedly on purpose.

“Do you?!” she screeched back while turning to look up at him. “Maybe next time let me know before you nearly knock me over from behind!”

“You’re not supposed to leave the castle without me or without letting McGonagall know,” he hissed while tugging her forward by her arm. “Did you forget that already?”

“Like you really care!” she shrieked back at him, craning her neck up to look him in the eye as much as she could.

“It’s entirely because of you that I got dragged into this mess, so keeping you safe is actually my top priority right now, Granger,” he said in her ear as he marched them through Hogsmeade. “I *do* care because my neck is one the line too. I told you this. Not everything is about you.”

“Of course, Merlin forbid Draco Malfoy care about anyone other than himself. It always comes back to you, doesn’t it?”

“You know me so well,” he sneered back.

They continued down the path, Malfoy dragging her behind him, his hand large enough to engulf her entire wrist as if he was holding a pencil. She glared down at the hand, wishing she could hex it off of her. She tried with all of her might to wiggle out of his grasp, but the movement only caused him to grip her tighter.

“How did you figure out where I was anyway?” she asked.

“I heard the rumors of the attack too, you know. And once I saw that you were no longer in the Great Hall, I knew there was only one place a idiotic Gryffindor like yourself would be when news of danger came about. You lot love to dive right into it.”

“Do you really expect me to sit by and do nothing?”

“No, but I’m hoping you’ll come to your senses about how much danger you’re really in. What were you doing when I found you anyway?” he asked her with a curious tone to his voice, but still seemingly irritated.

“There were tracks of some sort of animal leaving the scene of the attack. I followed them all the way to the edge of the Forbidden Forest before you so rudely interrupted me,” she answered.

“What kind of animal?”

“I couldn’t tell. I probably could have figured it out if you would have just let me be.”

“There are far too many stray animals in Hogsmeade, so I wouldn’t be surprised if some animal got curious about all of the commotion. It’s probably nothing,” he answered in a dismissive tone.

“Whatever you want to believe. But I think there’s something bigger going on. These attacks are vastly different than they were last term,” she argued.

She was met with stony silence, Malfoy still yanking her along angrily before he pulled her to a halt, forcing her to face him and said seriously: “From now on, you need to tell me every time before you go somewhere. I mean it Granger, even within the castle, because this little stunt has broken what little trust I did have in you,” he sighed and used his free hand to pinch the bridge of

his nose. “I knew I should have never agreed to work with a Gryffindor, you’re all so busy being noble that you don’t have an ounce of self preservation.”

Hermione closed her eyes at his words and tried to calm herself down as bouts of anxiety and stress threatened overtake her. Just when she had resolved that she could handle sacrificing a little bit of her solitude to work with him on this assignment, he went and took the last little bit of freedom she had left. She had been depending on having the castle to herself, of being able to move about its halls without being watched and monitored every moment, but now that was null. If she was to do things his way, Malfoy would now be breathing down her neck even when she wanted to use the loo.

On top of that, Malfoy made it clear that while he was being forced to protect her and that he didn’t actually care about muggleborns or the issues they were facing after the War. Why had she expected anything different? He was a Malfoy, after all. He probably just wanted to do his time and be left alone. She was sure he was counting the minutes before he could get this assignment over with and be rid of her.

Another thing they could agree upon — Hermione frowned at the second revelation of its kind today.

But maybe he did have a point about her running off without him deliberately. Even if she felt completely safe, there was the Vow hanging over his head that put a dark shadow over everything she did, made her every action feel threatening. This was bigger than a school assignment, bigger than an old school rivalry.

This was life and death and wizarding law.

Her stomach swooped — there it was.

Guilt.

She knew she could have handled her mad dash to Hogsmeade differently, but chose not to. She took the entire problem upon herself, like she always did. As much as she felt that Malfoy didn’t care about protecting muggleborns, including her, she realized that if she didn’t start collaborating with him instead of pushing him away, she wasn’t going to get anywhere in the fight to protect those being hunted by the Death Eaters and whatever it was they were up to.

She was a part of a bigger problem and that was what she needed to focus on.

She needed to keep her mindset from earlier in the day: befriend him and this all would be easy and everything would fall into place. Otherwise, he would undermine everything she tried to do if he was constantly trying to keep her from danger, both real and imagined, all because she was making a point to avoid any real communication between them.

She could do this. She just had to make him see that even though the War was over, the violence against muggleborns wasn’t, and that she *had* to do something about it. After all she had done in the war, she couldn’t just sit idly by now.

She could put on a brave face and stop trying to be so in control of everything all of the time. Didn’t she just tell herself she was going to stop being so self-reliant? It wasn’t a bad thing at the end of the day. If something were to happen, Malfoy would be there. And that was good. Right?



And by being around each other, she was helping him succeed in this assignment. They just needed to communicate. This could be a win for both of them if they wanted it to be.

“Fine. I will let you know my every move, okay? You can let me go now,” she huffed as she tried to pull her arm out of his grasp again. It only got tighter, the veins on his hand bulging out as he gripped her harder.

“You’ve proven that I can’t.”

“We need to be able to trust each other,” Hermione said.

“Yes, we do,” Malfoy answered. “And as I said, today you’ve proven that I can’t leave your side for a single second.”

“So what, you’re just going to escort me everywhere I go now?”

“That’s the plan,” he said with a grin, as if he knew nothing else would bother her more.

### **Draco**

*Stupid Gryffindor*, Draco thought as he dragged Granger back up the path and into the castle. He hadn’t removed his hand from around her arm the whole walk back, his grip tightening every time she tried to move away from him. Thankfully she was small enough that he had control over her and her movements, allowing him to keep an eye on her no matter what.

He was embarrassed by the slight frenzy he had gone into when he realized she was gone from the Great Hall. His eyes frantically swept over the room, trying with all his might to spot that bushy hair that had hit him in his face all throughout Charms, but she was nowhere to be seen. He had hoped she had just gone to the library or her dormitory, but then he heard the rumors of the attack in Hogsmeade and he immediately knew where she was.

He ran to Hogsmeade as fast as he could, his agitation pushing him forward through the cold as he made his way through the crowd before finally spotting her off the beaten path. Which brought them here, to him angrily escorting her back to the castle where she needed to stay. He had left in such a hurry, that he didn’t even think of putting on a coat, the cold bite of the winter air sinking into him as they made their way back to the castle.

*What was wrong with her?* It was like she didn’t even care that her recklessness put his life in danger.

And as much as he hated to admit it, she was his lifeline to freedom. Without her, he wouldn’t have a chance of a normal life. If something went wrong, he would find himself back in that courtroom, being retried as a criminal, the charges surely worse. Without her, he would be the one to pay for his family’s mistakes. Again.

He was convinced that the witch really didn’t get it. He would have thought her self righteousness would have been knocked down a peg or two when she had such a price on her head.

Goes to show that even in the face of certain danger, Granger couldn’t back down, regardless of the consequences. He shouldn’t be surprised really, especially after hearing about the number of stunts she pulled with Potter and Weasley during the war, but he thought she at least had a *little* self preservation.

Not to mention the fact that she's well aware of the consequences of breaking an Unbreakable Vow. Did she just not care about his life? Did he have that little value? Was he that much of an afterthought to her? Not that he should care. He had made his mistakes, he wouldn't be here otherwise, but he worked hard to atone for his crimes. He came back to school at the Ministry's behest, and kept his head down. He thought that was worth something, worth noticing, that he would get at least a *little* credit for crawling out of the pit his family pushed him into...but apparently not.

He had enough to think about tonight. He had gotten word from the Ministry on where the Death Eaters were meeting, and that tonight he was to be initiated back into their ranks. The Ministry didn't want to waste any time, but hadn't made any moves because of lack of insider intelligence and willing Aurors. The last thing the Ministry needed was to be defeated in an operation to take down the last remaining dark wizards so soon after the war. That's where he came in.

But first, he needed to gain their trust —show them that he was one of them yet again.

The thought filled him with dread.

Granger's irritated voice interrupted his thoughts. "So what am I supposed to do? Just sit around and do nothing until you're available now that you want to know my every move?"

"That's exactly what you're supposed to do, Granger," he said, glancing down at her.

"A group of dark wizards decide to go after me and now my life revolves around you, how grand."

"It could be worse. Those dark wizards could have actually captured or killed you by now."

Granger became quiet at his statement. He knew she couldn't find fault in what he said and this arrangement was the best possible thing for her at the moment. While he may only know her through their time at school, tumultuous as that was, he knew enough about the witch to be able to tell when he read her correctly, and in this instant he had.

"I know you think you're a big, bad Gryffindor who can take on anything, but just like McGonagall said, think about what would have happened in the Hog's Head if those Death Eaters would have seen you."

"Whatever you say," she responded dismissively, but went quiet.

Draco rolled his eyes. He knew trying to get through her thick skull would be near impossible.

After what seemed like an impossibly long walk, they had finally arrived at the entrance of Granger's Head Girl room, the tension slipping from both of their bodies now that she was safely back where she was supposed to be. Draco envied the perk of Head Girl's and Boy's having their own private rooms. The private suites were located just down the hall from the prefect bathroom on the fifth floor of the castle, which Draco deemed as safe as anywhere in the rest of the castle. The distance from here to the Slytherin common room was bound to be an issue, but one he would deal with later.

He would be totally unavailable to her tonight, and now that she had pulled the stunt she did, he was filled with worry and stress that she would try it again. He was barred by the Ministry from telling anyone about his agreement to work with them on spying on the Death Eaters, so it wasn't like he could tell her where he was going to be. He had to trust that his berating had gotten through

to her somewhat and that she was starting to realize just how big of a deal this was. From her silence after his statement about what could have happened at the Hog's Head had he not been there, he felt as if reality was starting to dawn on her.

"Just...stay in your dormitory tonight, okay? Just this once, do what you're told," he said before quickly turning on his heel and disappearing down the hall.

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Draco walked into the dilapidated building that was the Riddle House, the familiar chill washing over him as he took in his surroundings.

Other Death Eaters were standing around the room, masks adorning their faces so as to remain anonymous amongst the most vile of wizards of all of Britain. It took a certain sort of wizard to pledge to the Death Eaters, but it took another sort all together to wear it proudly and not hide your identity. There were many wizards who pledged to the Dark Lord during the war, but only a few who became bold enough to reveal their names and faces and boast their association with the Dark Wizards.

Draco's family being one of them.

Most Death Eaters wore their masks after they swore the Oath, not wanting the knowledge of their identity to go beyond the room they took the Oath. Self preservation was most important among the purebloods.

Goes to show that just because you think you're better than everyone, you can still be a coward.

New, unmasked recruits littered the room as well, surveying one another. That was part of taking the Mark and swearing the Oath: you had to be able to show your face and commit fully before hiding behind the mask. You had to be able to look the leader of the Oath in the eye while saying the words of the pledge, and mean it. If they felt like you didn't, your time with the Death Eaters was over before it even began.

Some new pledges looked proud and confident, while others did their best not to tremble, trying to look stony and ready to take the Mark. Draco knew that feeling all too well, memories of when he first took the Mark before sixth year racing through his mind. He had nervousness crawling up his skin, anxiety rolling in his stomach. Somehow he still found the strength somewhere deep within himself to say the words of the Oath in a convincing enough manner that his aunt, father and Voldemort all fell for it, allowing them to Mark him.

This time wouldn't be any different. He would have to find that deep well of courage within himself yet again, subject himself to saying the Oath with all of the vigor he could.

It would be harder this time, for now he wasn't as easily influenced. He had learned to question things more; to think for himself.

But he had also learned to survive. He had perfected how to mask what he was really feeling through occluding, able to send himself to a quiet and safe place inside of his mind while his body stayed present in the real world. That was the plan for tonight: occlude and get through it.

Draco looked around the room, taking a look at each face to see if there was anyone he recognized, anyone who somehow escaped the final Battle of Hogwarts and Azkaban. The moment he and his mother walked out of the courtyard after the Battle of Hogwarts, he officially stopped caring and

keeping up with the inner workings of the Death Eaters. He did everything he could to distance himself from the organization and what they believed with the hope of fully disengaging himself from them. What good that ended up doing him.

His blood went cold when he spotted Augustus Rookwood at the center of the room. Draco had no information prior to this who was at the head of the Death Eaters now, so any new information he discovered tonight was a shock. Though, Rookwood was a favorite of Voldemort's during the war and he was certainly one of the most terrifying. With Bellatrix dead and his father in Azkaban, it only made sense that Rookwood would take the helm.

The Ministry only had vague information of where the Death Eaters met, but no details on their movements or who was leading them. That's where Draco came in. The first part of his assignment was to report back with who was leading the Death Eaters since the Dark Lord's death, and he already had his answer. For one fleeting moment, he thought that maybe, just maybe, this assignment wouldn't be as awful as he thought.

As he walked deeper into the house, he was shocked that the Death Eaters were running such an operation from what was little more than a shack. Long gone were the days of the Death Eaters operation in the luxury of Malfoy Manor. Riddle House had long become inhabitable, but the history of the home made all too much sense as to why the Death Eaters chose this place to convene now that the Manor was no longer an option.

Rookwood spotted Draco from across the room and tilted his head in vague surprise. He was sure it was quite a shock for Augustus to see him here — all the Death Eaters knew that he had been sentenced to attend Hogwarts and be under constant Ministry watch.

Draco had to be careful with how he navigated this. If the Death Eaters found out he was spying on them and feeding information to the Ministry, he would be dead quicker than he could take his next breath.

Rookwood approached him slowly, the sound of his boots echoing on the floor around the room. The room lifeless and cold despite all of the bodies in it.

Draco gritted his teeth and clasped his hands behind his back, his occlumency slowly taking effect and calming the roaring of his mind and the affects the anxiety had on his body. Rookwood was not a Legilimens but he could read a man better than any of the other Death Eaters he knew.

As he approached Draco, Rookwood stood close, face to face with him, noses nearly touching. His rotten teeth were on full display in what could have been a smile or a grimace, depending on how much you liked the man. His oily hair was slicked back and he was wearing filthy robes full of holes, any sense of cleanliness obviously abandoned.

"Malfoy," Rookwood stated plainly, a slight strain in his tone. "Good to see you're back where you belong. Escaped the confinement of the castle, have we?"

"Indeed," Draco answered. "Word in Knockturn Alley is that you all need more recruits to help you with... whatever it is you're doing." He did his best to channel that arrogant air of detachment his father had perfected, sounding as if he could be anywhere he wanted, but he chose to be here.

"We need all of the willing bodies we can get, that's for sure. Big plans we have," Rookwood said, slapping Draco on the back like he was some long lost friend he hadn't talked to in forever.

Before Draco had a moment to react, Rookwood pulled him closer by his lapels, and said in gritted voice that only he could hear:

“Now how do I know that you don’t have some ulterior motive in being here, huh? I know you’re basically the Ministry’s little pet. Your whole family is on their leash, doing whatever it is they tell you. Last I heard, you were keeping your head down and playing school to get out of your sentence, and that you’d cut all ties with the people who really matter. Pathetic.” Rookwood practically spit the last word in his face with his rotten breath and in that moment, Draco was more thankful for his occlumency than ever, allowing him to be as still as a statue in the face of such disrespect, such humiliation.

“What if I said I was setting myself up to do more intel work for you?” Draco said, choosing his words carefully, for he knew he was walking a slippery slope. The Ministry had not provided him with an alibi and he couldn’t just go showing up here without a reason to want to be here. He had to be convincing, had to show that he was on their side. “Hogwarts is worse than ever now that the war is over. Everyone is acting as if everything can just go back to normal, but with the way the final battle ended last year, I know you all are far from done. And I want in.”

It was all a lie, of course. Draco wanted nothing to do with this and them, wanted nothing more than to be far, far away from all of this. This term would be a constant battle of morals for Draco, and the exhaustion of it all was already draining him.

A slow, cheshire grin spread across Rookwood’s face. “There’s the Malfoy spirit I know.”

Draco forced down the nausea that was slowly working its way up, his occlumency working harder than ever to calm both his mind in his body in an effort to not give him away. He forced a mirror image of the grin that donned Rookwood’s face upon his own, convincing Rookwood that pureblood arrogance still lived in him.

“Glad you could find us,” Rookwood continued. “We’re not what we used to be, but maybe with you back, we can become that again.”

Rookwood let go of his lapels and walked back to the center of the room, commanding the attention of all with a loud clap of his hands.

“Tonight we expand our efforts and our ranks with the initiation of new Death Eaters,” Rookwood announced to the room of dark wizards that had gathered around. “And the return of the most prolific Death Eater family.” Rookwood nodded in Draco’s direction, bringing an unwanted bout of attention on him as he stood near the back of the crowd.

“Our mission here is simple: bring purity back into the wizarding world and extinguish those who exist against our mission,” Rookwood continued. “As our motto says, purity will prevail, for our families worked long and hard to create the foundation of wizarding society. And while wizarding society has evolved to embrace those of different backgrounds and blood status’, the families of the Sacred twenty-eight have seen the benefits of pure blood lines. We are stronger when our blood is pure; the magic flows quicker through our veins and we must keep it this way. With each mudblood accepted into our world, we lose more and more of our power. Our Dark Lord — rest his soul — was the first one brave enough to pursue ridding the wizarding world of lesser borns, and it is now our duty to continue and see his mission through.”

“With that, let’s begin. New and returning recruits repeat after me,” Rookwood said as he began the Oath that Draco had already taken once.

Draco's mouth went dry at the thought of saying the words he didn't believe. It was difficult enough for him the first time, and now, when he truly wanted nothing more than to leave all of this behind, he found he was near gagging trying to say the words. Words of prejudice and hatred, of discontent and aversion.

"I, Draco Malfoy," he started after a deep breath. "Pledge myself to the Death Eaters in remembrance of Lord Voldemort and his quest to make Wizardkind pure once again. I will work to the best of my ability to eradicate the blood traitors, half bloods, and muggleborns who contaminate our kind and lessen our power. Magic is Might, Purity will Prevail."

He repeated the words while simultaneously telling himself that he was past this, that this wasn't him. That the sacrifice was all worth it, and that soon he and his mother would be free from all of this and the corrupt nature that wizarding society had taken on.

While the new recruits got their Mark, Draco felt the searing pain in his left arm that he hoped he would never feel again as the Mark reactivated. The white hot pain that shot up his arm sent his mind back to sixth year, to the war, to everything he hated about himself and everything he worked so hard to overcome.

He clenched his hands as he pushed those feelings down. He pulled his occluding walls up so no one could see the panic and self loathing running through his mind, and pushed away the feeling of the dark magic coursing through him, its slick, oily feeling already bogging him down. He had to compartmentalize, or he'd never get through this.

Draco finally got a hold on himself as Rookwood approached him and handed him a mask with a grotesque smile and a nod of almost-congratulations. "The Malfoys are back where they belong."

Draco nodded and took the mask, the cold metal stinging his fingers. He turned on his heel and left the room, striding out as fast as he could get away with. He was barely around the corner before his nonexistent lunch found itself on the alley ground.

## Chapter End Notes

Be sure to follow me on socials for any immediate update about delays in updates and what not. I don't foresee many more happening, but you never know! I'm pretty active on socials so you can always look there for information :)

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

Thanks to my betas :)

Tesla.Ember

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Comments and kudos are appreciated!

## Chapter 6

### Draco

The last place Draco wanted to be after the Death Eater initiation was Hogwarts, so he found himself stepping through the Floo and into the parlor of Malfoy Manor – his Dark Mark freshly searing with pain and his stomach churning with disgust over what he had just done. His mind was at war with himself, trying to see the good of this arrangement and the benefits that it would bring. But first, he needed to calm down. Not that the Manor was a place that brought him much peace, but anything was better than going back to Hogwarts and looking his reality in the face.

“Draco?” his mother asked tentatively as she walked into the room, signaled by the small amount of the Manor’s remaining magic that he had just arrived.

He was in such a hurry to get out of Riddle House that he didn’t take the time to realize that stumbling into the Manor late at night would mean explaining to his mother the recent developments in his life. His Death Eater robes were a dead giveaway that he wouldn’t be able to explain away. He rubbed his face in irritation — so much for a peaceful moment to catch his breath.

Narcissa Malfoy, matriarch of the Malfoy Manor, stood expectantly in front of the fireplace.

As much as he didn’t want to explain what he got himself into, he was happy to see his mother. It had been a lonely past few months for her, his father in Azkaban, him at Hogwarts, and her stuck inside the grandeur of the dying Manor all by herself. Since she was placed on house arrest, she hardly saw anyone, and was always at the mercy of whatever friends and acquaintances she had left to come visit her, granted they weren’t on house arrest either. But Narcissa Malfoy was strong, and always put a happy face on for Draco whenever he could visit.

He looked down at his mother with a grim smile as she approached him, setting a warm hand on his cheek.

“What is it, my love?” she asked as she gave him a once over. “What happened?”

He could only imagine the thoughts going through her mind as she took in the robes and the look on his face. He knew it was her personal nightmare to see him involved with the Death Eaters during the war, for she had done everything in her power to stop it from happening. But nothing could stop Lucius Malfoy once he was determined.

It was a relief to her when the war was over and Draco was given a lighter sentence at his trial. The sheer fact that he wouldn’t have to suffer a fate such as his father was all the reassurance she needed. While she said she mourned her husband’s imprisonment, Draco couldn’t help but notice the light in his mother’s face despite the loneliness she was combating.

“How are you, Mother?” he asked, hoping to sidestep her impending interrogation by distracting her with an inquiry about herself.

He should have known better.

“I’m fine. It is you I am now worried about,” she said, straightening his tie, forever the doting mother. “What is going on?”

“The Ministry has approached me with...an offer,” Draco answered carefully. “I guess I should explain,” he finished with a huff.

“Yes, dear, you should,” she agreed while eyeing his robes again. “Let's have a cup of tea.”

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“It’s too dangerous, there has to be a way to get you out of this,” his mother argued, setting down her cup with a light clink, a look of sheer determination on her face. If Draco knew anything about his mother, it was that she was a force to be reckoned with when she was committed to do something, and the last thing he needed right now was for her to be a force who was resolved to get him out of this arrangement with the Ministry.

“I don’t have a choice. The Ministry is mandating I do this,” Draco responded, his knuckles white as he gripped his teacup. “Plus, it’ll be a good thing for us when it’s all over. Our charges will be dropped and we will have our lives back.”

“I appreciate you thinking of me and my circumstances, dearest. But the Ministry cares so little about us,” she ground out, that fiery rage in her eyes that Draco had grown up fearing, but in his older age, admiring. “Even when we’ve proved that we are no longer who we used to be. And now this...they are throwing you into the most dangerous situation possible—”

“There’s another part to it all... I haven’t told you everything yet, mother,” Draco trailed off, suddenly terrified to reveal the other half of the bargain. He didn’t know why telling her about his involvement with the Death Eaters seemed easier than admitting to her he was being forced to protect the one person in all of Wizarding Britain who should hate them the most. The one person who was labeled and hunted as Undesirable Number Two during the war, one of the poster children for the Order of the Phoenix.

“What is it?” she asked, concerned. “How much more could they possibly ask of you on top of reinstating yourself to those awful people?”

Draco took a deep breath before launching into everything that had happened over the last few days, everything that had turned his world upside down yet again. He told her everything. From pulling Hermione out of the way of the Death Eaters at the Hog’s Head, to the assignment mandated by the Ministry, the rearrangement of his schedule, and his bargain for her record to be cleared. He left nothing out.

His mother was silent as he finished. He had seen her stunned into silence several times in his life, but never like this. Never this look of dead shock, all of the color in her face gone.

“The girl that was...” Narcissa trailed off.

“Tortured on the floor of the drawing room, yes mother,” Draco answered with a flat tone, his emotional capacity for the day drained.

“One hundred thousand Galleons? Where are the Death Eaters getting that kind of money?” she asked.

“Who’s to say? Maybe someone had an inheritance we don’t know about.”



His mother scoffed— one of the biggest parts of the Malfoy family's sentence was that all of their assets went under Ministry control. Anything they wanted access to, they had to ask permission. Any Knut, Sickle, or Galleon spent without being cleared through the Ministry was questioned. Just for this fact alone, Draco was grateful his father was in Azkaban and didn't have to deal with it. Draco knew that it would be ugly, that everyday would be a battle for his father while under such control from a government he hated so much.

"And how does the girl feel about this?"

"I almost think she would rather get captured by the Death Eaters than deal with me."

His mother gave a small smile. "She'll come around. And if not, she can ask the Ministry for someone else to protect her."

"That's the thing, she doesn't want to be protected. Her Gryffindor pride is getting in the way. She's making it rather difficult actually," Draco groaned, rubbing at his temples.

"Well it has only been a couple of days, sweetheart. Give her a chance and I'm sure she will give you one too. It could end up working out for the both of you."

"Thank you. But regardless, we have no choice. They made us swear an Unbreakable Vow, mother," he said.

Her face winced at this information. He knew his mother had taken an Unbreakable Vow with Snape, but she never spoke of it past telling him that it had happened, and that it was all to protect him.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through the pain of a Vow," she said in solemn response, reaching out to clasp his hand in hers.

Draco tilted his head, confused at his mother's words. While the Vow had been extremely uncomfortable — having to hold Granger's hand and swear himself to her — it hadn't been physically painful in the slightest.

"Painful? I don't know what you mean."

"When Severus and I swore our Unbreakable Vows, it was the most painful experience of my life — right after child birth of course."

Draco paused and took in his mother's words. Maybe the Vow varied depending on what was being promised? On who the Vow was made with? Either way, such a variance in experience didn't add up.

"Ours...wasn't painful," Draco responded.

His mother cocked her head to the side and looked at him intensely.

She picked her tea up again and asked: "Explain to me what the Vow was like. How did it feel?"

Draco swallowed as he thought back on the Vow, looking off into the distance as he recalled the experience, how it had felt to feel Granger's magic combining with his. How the heat of her skin seeped into his when her hand laid in his palm. How he had to look deep into those her eyes and

swear himself to her. How that heat from her hand seemed to swim through his entire body, taking over every part of it in that moment.

"It was...uncomfortable of course, being so close to someone that I have bullied and hated most of my life. But it was warm. Comforting almost. That's the only way I can describe it. I have, obviously, always known she was a smart and powerful witch, but that was the first time I had ever been able to really grasp just how talented she really is. To feel just how impressive her magic actually is in comparison to my own."

It had taken his breath away if he was being honest with himself. And as much as he had been fighting McGonagall to be more specific with the terms of the Vow, he had been vehemently distracted by the feeling of Granger's magic flowing through him. Even thinking about it now, part of him ached for it, that comfort, the glow of another's magic within him.

He had felt so empty and cold for so long that the feeling of her magic's warmth felt like coming up to the surface after a deep dive. Yes, he had been swearing his life away, but it was also the first time in years that he had truly felt alive.

He looked up at his mother, realizing that he had been staring off into space the whole time he explained the Vow to her, almost forgetting completely that she was in the room.

She had a slight smile on her face, her eyes soft in the way he only knew from when he saw fleeting moments of tenderness between her and his father before the war.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing dear," she stated while sitting down her tea cup and plate. "Just...please be safe. While I don't agree with what the Ministry is doing and the position they have put you in, I am grateful for the opportunity for some light to be shed on our name."

"I just hope I can do it all," Draco muttered, letting a moment of self doubt be verbalized.

"You can. They chose you for a reason. You were there that day at the Hog's Head for a reason. Fate works in strange ways."

"That it does," he agreed, wishing he had something stronger to spike his tea with after dealing with all of the emotional labour he was faced with tonight.

"Take down those despicable dark wizards, my dear, and show them what the Malfoy's now stand for," his mother said with a ferocity he hadn't heard from her in months. "And more than anything, you have Black family blood running through your veins. Never forget that."

"What do you think father would make of all of this?" he asked.

Draco wasn't sure what prompted him to ask such a question at that moment. He had had no contact with his father since his sentence to Azkaban, his father not even bothering to write to ask his mother how his only son and heir was doing. Not that it mattered. Draco was an adult after all, and should be removed from the desire to attain his father's haughty approval, no matter how out of reach it seemed. But at the end of the day, he had always wanted his father's approval, and couldn't help but seek it, even subconsciously.

“It does not matter. He will be there for a long, long time, and either way, it will be a different world when he comes out.”

Draco could only hope that was true.

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Draco looked around the Great Hall, his eyes landing on Granger at the Gryffindor table. He was relieved to discover that she had indeed listened to him last night and didn't do anything reckless while he was gone. He had half the mind to go by her room last night when he returned, but figured that as long as she was in the castle, all was well.

The prospect of surveilling the Death Eaters while also keeping a watchful eye on her was going to be a tricky one to balance. A part of him couldn't help but think that the Ministry had assigned him both of these tasks because they knew it would be impossible to do both; that he couldn't be by Granger's side and attend Death Eater obligations. But now that his mother knew of the arrangement and of the possibility of the both of them having their sentences dropped, he felt a new sort of determination. He could let himself down, but he could not let down Narcissa Malfoy.

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose, mentally preparing himself for a night of accompanying Granger on her rounds. The irony of him trailing her while she did her duty making sure the castle was secure wasn't lost on him. He wasn't even sure why McGonagall had let her keep her role of Head Girl with such a price on her head, but he figured that either way, he was sure Hermione would have fought tooth and nail to prevent that privilege from being taken away.

After dinner, Draco stood outside of Granger's door. The lucky witch got her own private room as Head Girl. Though, he assumed it made his job of making sure she made it safely home at the end of every night easier. Anything that would allow him to avoid the Gryffindor common room, he would take.

She didn't notice him right away as she opened the portrait and walked out of her room, for she was busy flipping through some sort of notebook she held in her hands. She had half of her hair tied up and pulled away from her face, which drew attention to her facial features in a way that Draco had never noticed before. Her angled jaw connected flawlessly with the curve of her neck, her ears dainty and decorated with gold studs pierced through them.

She was wearing comfortable pants and an oversized jumper underneath her robes, looking perfectly content as could be, like she was about to spend the night reading— not walking up flights upon flights of the castle stairs with him tonight.

“Let's get this over with,” she sighed when she saw him waiting against the wall, the feeling in the air between them immediately turning taut.

They took off down the hall in an awkward silence — the only sound between them was their footsteps echoing off the stone floor in the empty corridors. A slight draft made its way through the halls, chilling Draco to the bone. He hadn't thought to bring a jumper and silently cast a warming charm on himself.

Turn after turn they took, climbing a multitude of staircases and walking down halls in silence for what felt like an eternity. Draco suddenly became hyper aware of every sound, every breath he made before he couldn't stand it any longer.

“Any thoughts on the Charm assignment?” Draco asked. He was willing to talk about anything other than enduring this awkward silence. These rounds were supposed to last a few hours each, and as much as he didn’t want to do this in the first place, it would only make matters worse if they weren’t even going to say one word to each other and with such tension in the air.

“No, I haven’t. But, I have decided to give you a chance and stop being a brat about it. All of it.”

Draco was stunned at the words that came out of her mouth. He stopped her by her elbow, turning to look at her dead on with squinted eyes.

“Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?”

She rolled her eyes and appeared to be trying her best to suppress a smile.

“You aren’t making this any easier, Malfoy,” she said, trying to sound earnestly upset with him, but failing.

“Hermione Granger is giving me, Draco Malfoy, a chance to fulfill the Unbreakable Vow we took. I’m honored, really. But if you think about it, I’m probably the best partner you could have ended up with,” he gloated as he smirked down at her.

She rolled her eyes in response again as she continued down the hall, “Keep telling yourself that, Malfoy.”

They walked in silence for a few more minutes, through a myriad of courtyards, multiple winding staircases and classrooms, all the while the castle was quiet around them. There were only a few students out studying late, taking their chances and pushing curfew to its brink. Draco couldn’t blame them— the beauty of the castle came alive at night.

“What are you even looking for during these rounds?” Draco asked, his curiosity piquing as she did her checks at one of the many ward stops they had tonight. “The castle is so secure not even a bird could accidentally fly in.”

“That’s not necessarily true. And there is no such thing as being too safe. Plus, wards fail, spells break— you never know. Our rounds are an extra layer of precaution.”

“Always so noble,” he uttered under his breath while tucking his hands into his pants pockets.

Draco followed along as Granger dutifully led them around the halls, going to parts of the castle that he hadn’t been to since he was eleven. As first years, he and his friends explored the castle endlessly, always getting into nooks and crannies and places where they weren’t supposed to be. It was a miracle that none of them had lost a limb or hadn’t been more intensely maimed than they were. Memories flooded him with each corridor they turned down, each flight of stairs they took. He wished the castle hadn’t become a place of such despair. Before the war, these walls held endless happy memories for so many, a place of childlike wonder and discovery. It was a first and second home to so many and it would never be the same.

Draco couldn’t help but reflect on his role in the demise of the castle. How he had been the one to let the Death Eaters in sixth year, officially elevating the war and taking the last safe space away from students. It was something he constantly berated himself over, one of the many things in his life he wished he could undo. He once again told himself that it wasn’t his fault as he fought a new

wave of despair that threatened to overtake him — that he was just a child operating under the wants of older, power hungry wizards.

This specific part of the castle they had stumbled upon held a multitude of trophies and awards, given to different academic and athletic groups within the school over the years. It was impressive really, how many awards could be held by one school, but here was the evidence displayed for all to witness. Potion masteries, research breakthroughs, new articles, alumni accomplishments — it was all here.

A wave of nostalgia rolled over Draco as they passed a particular trophy case, the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup front and center. A relic from a life of his that seemed so distant now.

Quidditch was one of the few things he did for himself in his younger years. His parents despised him playing the sport, but alas they still showed up for his games regardless. While his parents — more particularly his father — loved competition of the sport and loved seeing him win even more, Draco loved the physical challenge of practice, the thrill of going into a match and not knowing the outcome but still playing your heart out either way. He loved the rambunctious cheering of the crowd as points were scored and he chanced the Golden Snitch. That was one of the only times he felt like he was a part of something bigger. When he wasn't just a Malfoy, but a part of a team that depended on him.

Draco cherished those moments of his childhood before the world turned into the dark and solemn place it was now. He ached to find something that made him feel that way again, something he could dedicate himself to just for the fun of it. That would have to wait until after this year though, after this assignment was said and done. He couldn't focus on himself and his wants right now. He had to succeed in protecting Granger and taking down the Death Eaters, get his charges dropped, and then he would do whatever he wanted.

“Can I ask you a question, Granger?” Draco asked before he could stop himself.

She looked at him curiously. “You just did.”

Draco sneered, ignoring the cocky tilt of her head and cheeky smile spreading across her face. “And here I thought we could actually have a civil conversation.”

“It was a joke,” she laughed. “Ask your question.”

“Why do you care so much?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you're the one with the outrageous price on your head. Why do you still care so much about the castle? And the other students? Why didn't you give up your role as Head Girl when you knew it required things like this?” he asked, gesturing around to the dark empty hall they were currently walking down to emphasize his point.

It was getting late, the light of the moon slowly finding its way in through the arched stained glass windows, casting both of them in a blue light that almost gave the impression they were under water.

“I guess it's because it is the first place where I truly felt like myself,” she began, her voice so low that Draco had to strain to hear her. Hermione inclined her head, her gaze cast down toward the

ground as she refused to look at him when she answered. “I’ve always been a bit of an outcast—” She chuckled mirthlessly— “Imagine that. But at least here I excelled beyond anything I could have done in the muggle world, all while being praised for it instead of being sent home or having my parents called into the Headmaster’s office to talk about my ‘behavioral problems’ or being accused of cheating. This was the place where I met friends who have become more like family to me. It’s where I first felt like myself. And even though here, in the wizarding world, I may be known as muggleborn, it didn’t hold me back.

“Back home, I was supposed to be my parents' daughter, destined to take over their dental practice. Just a normal girl with a very normal life. But here, I am a part of something bigger than myself. I mean, look at what’s happened,” she said with a laugh that Draco detected a hint of anxiety in.

“But regardless, I’ve still found more of a home here than I ever had before I came to Hogwarts, you know what I mean?”

He didn’t. He had never had that space where he could just truly be himself and not have to put on some sort of facade. Yes, Hogwarts was an escape from being under his father’s immediate scrutiny, but he still had to hold up to the Malfoy legacy. He still had to be a good Slytherin, still had to excel in his classes, when as a young boy, all he truly wanted to do was to play Quidditch and just...simply be.

But Granger, when she came here, she was able to completely reinvent herself. She was able to leave behind who she was in the muggle world, and become a totally new version of herself. He studied her as he realized that this muggleborn Gryffindor got the luxury to be able to start from a clean slate, while he was dragged down by a heavy family name and legacy, his reputation preceding him as it still did to this day.

His envy and hatred for her in their younger years suddenly made sense to Draco. He always blamed it on him being brainwashed to hate anyone that wasn’t of pureblood status — which was definitely part of it — but now Draco knew that he had also subconsciously hated Hermione Granger because she got everything he had always wanted.

A chance to be herself, to act in her own accordance with no one to answer to, except the rules at Hogwarts and the professors that enforced them.

Silence hung around him, Draco realizing that he never actually answered her question, caught up in the idea of Hermione Granger first arriving at Hogwarts, a shiny new world awaiting her.

He shook the thoughts away, mentally berating himself as he looked down at Granger to find she had raised her gaze, those deep brown eyes peering back at him curiously. He nodded in response, for he couldn't find a way of explaining his jumbled thoughts, and gestured for her to continue.

Draco trailed behind her as she continued to talk about her family and her first year at Hogwarts, realizing that Granger, of all people, had lived the life he had always dreamed of.

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With Draco now officially reinstated into the ranks of the Death Eaters, he knew it was only a matter of time before he would have to start attending meetings. He always hated them during the war. Hearing how they planned to terrorize and destroy the lives that people had worked so hard to build. And now, due to his history with the Death Eaters, his family name, and the promise to Rookwood about getting intel for them, Draco found himself already invited to a meeting of higher ranking dark wizards that new recruits would usually not be allowed to attend.

Draco apparated just outside of the Riddle House to find Rookwood standing and waiting for him, his revolting aura telling Draco to run, to get as far away from him and this place as he could. Dark magic coated the wizard and smoke drifted around him, basking Rookwood in an eerie light that made the man look like Death reincarnated.

Draco pushed against his instincts and approached Rookwood, noting that his ability to mask his revolution towards the wizard through occlumency was already improving. He just had to keep it up.

“Stay in the hall,” Rookwood said to Draco as he approached, turning to enter the front door of the dilapidated shack. “You’re here to listen, and not be heard or seen.”

“What am I supposed to do with the information I hear today?”

“This is just to get you up to speed,” Rookwood answered, blowing smoke out of his mouth before depositing the cigar he was smoking on the ground and stomping it out with his boot. “There have been a lot of changes to our operation since you were last involved, and with your proximity to those in Hogwarts and the Ministry, you need to know the full scope of our plans. Not everything will be talked about today, but this will give you a good idea of what’s to come. I assume you know about our hunt for Potter’s mudblood?”

Draco swallowed as he nodded his head with an air of cool indifference.

“And why her, may I ask? What makes her so special?” he asked, disguising his question with the most disgusted sneer he could muster.

“She has something we need, yet she keeps evading us. It’s only making things more tense among the upper ranks. Everyone is beginning to lose patience.”

That was not the answer Draco had been expecting and his mind reeled at the prospect of what could be so important about Granger that the Death Eater's needed to get ahold of her so quickly and so desperately. He racked his mind for what she could have done or possibly had that the Death Eaters hopelessly needed but came up blank.

Yes, she had fought against them in the war and had more intel on them than the average wizard did because of who she was and who she was associated with, but what could they possibly want from her? What did she know? Or have?

“Stay here,” Rookwood said as they approached a door at the end of the hall. “Don’t let anyone hear or see you. And once we adjourn, you get out of here, you hear me? I’ll never hear the end of it if they all discover that I’m involving you so soon.”

Draco nodded as Rookwood placed his hood over his head and entered the room, leaving the door ajar just enough for the light to come through and for Draco to hear what was being spoken of.

Through the door, Draco could hear Rookwood, Dolohov, and a small collection of other higher ranking Death Eaters all gathered around the fire, talking to someone who had used the hearth to Floo in, only a talking head amongst the flames.

“What of the girl?” the voice in the Floo asked.

“She was spotted in Hogsmeade right after the attack yesterday,” one of the voices said.

Draco's stomach clenched. *Of course* the Death Eaters had seen Granger when she decided to venture into Hogsmeade by herself. They had eyes everywhere and would leave no stone unturned. He had learned that much from his time with them.

"And what happened to the mudblood we got in Hogsmeade?" the voice from the Floo continued.

Draco leaned in closer, interested to hear more about the dark wizard's plans for all of the muggleborns they were attacking. What *was* happening to them? Were they being captured? Killed? Tortured? It was one part of the mystery that no one could figure out.

"Taken to be held with the others. And will be eventually disposed of."

Others? Draco knew that these attacks had been going on last term as well, but sharing what came of the victims post-attack was another one of the Ministry's pitfalls. He assumed that the Ministry had rescued and taken them to St. Mungo's and that they then went on with their lives but apparently not.

"Very good. And what about our other...asset that you all were supposed to bring with you?" the voice asked. Whoever was in the Floo, it was obvious that they were the head of everything going on, but were keeping themselves anonymous from the rest of the group.

"They ran off to where they were supposed to, causing enough of a ruckus in the village to draw a crowd," Rookwood answered, talking and riddles and giving no exact details or answers. It seemed as if they were being purposefully vague, as if they knew there was a chance they were being listened to.

"Excellent," the voice commended. "This is what we want. We want the people of the wizarding world to know that the Death Eaters are rising again and this time, we refuse to fall. We refuse to be defeated. It's a disgrace we fell at all the first time, an embarrassment to pure blood culture. We want to scare the mudbloods into submission, and frighten the rest of the wizarding population into giving them up and handing them over to us. In due time, we will have them all at our beck and call once more. Just like the Dark Lord was working towards."

Draco's head swam at the words he was hearing. And as much as he hated to admit it, Granger was right. There was something bigger going on. And while Draco didn't know the specifics yet, he would find out. He had never felt so motivated to work towards something, but his conversation with Granger earlier tonight left him inspired. If she could be so positive when the world had thrown so much at her trying to bring her down, he could find it within himself not let his past make him fear his future. He wasn't the same person he was in sixth year. He had different beliefs and could think for himself now, and he would be damned if he just stood idly by this time.

The Death Eaters had been conniving and ruthless during the War, but it seems that now that they weren't working under Voldemort, they had become even more malicious. They were powerful under Voldemort, but on their own, when they weren't working for one man's agenda but to fulfill their own vendetta in his name, there was a good possibility that they could be unstoppable.

And it was Draco's responsibility to stop them.

"They are our strongest asset in our resurgence. We must guard them as one of our own. Rookwood, do anything you can to make that a priority."

"Yes sir," Rookwood replied. "It is my top priority, other than the girl, of course."



“And what of our next attack? Those odds aren’t looking as good. Lots of Ministry and Auror activity there,” one of the other higher ranking Death Eaters that Draco couldn’t get a good look at asked.

“We will bring in the new recruits for that,” the voice in the fire said. “Put them to good use and test them for their loyalty and ability to do what we need. They will increase our numbers and manpower ten fold once they have proven themselves.”

Draco’s breath caught at the words. He didn’t know what he had expected as a reinstated recruit of the Death Eaters, but he hadn’t considered that he was going to be in the active field, wielding spells at innocent wizards just because they didn’t have any information. At least, he hadn’t expected it so soon. He had avoided much of the active combat during the war, his failure at murdering Dumbledore ensured that.

But it made sense to throw the dispensable new recruits into situations where they weren’t sure if they would come out on top. If they were lost in the heat of the battle, it wouldn’t be an issue. It was apparent that more and more pureblood wizards were willing to pledge to the Death Eaters, so they could afford to lose them.

They were building an army, and Draco found himself right in the middle of the front line.

It was obvious that Draco had no one to look out for him, save his mother who couldn’t do anything for him.

He would have to look out for himself, for the Malfoy name no longer offered peace and safety.

Draco apparated out of the house and back to the castle, feeling safe within its walls for the first time in a very long time.

## Chapter 7

### Hermione

The sunlight filtering through the windows was warm and comforting as Hermione lounged in one of the chairs in her favorite section of the library, a place with very little foot traffic, the quiet rustle of pages easing her into a state of solace that she had struggled to find lately.

She loved this part of the library. It was so far from the main areas that no one was likely to find her here if she really wanted to be left alone. She could sit in the comfiest chair, dive into the text in front of her, and read with no distractions. Get lost in the words and just be.

While she had accepted her arrangement with Draco for what it was, and was actively trying to make it work and not be so against it or him, that didn't shake the fact that she was still going through all of this alone. She was still being hunted by the Death Eaters for no reason other than what blood flowed through her veins.

She supposed she could talk to Harry about how he dealt with it during the war, but he was as absent as she was from their friendship lately. And while she would love to catch up with him, she knew the conversation would be much like many of their other recent exchanges: stilted and awkward.

Hermione thought she would have been used to the blood prejudice at this point in her life. Used to being called names, being thought of as less than, but she wasn't. She had used her early school years to prove she was just as good as everyone else, trying to better herself, prove herself, fix herself in order to fit in.

And while she now had Malfoy to protect her, as well as McGonagall and the Ministry looking out for her, none of that stopped the self-hatred that lay within her.

She had a late start to her morning, for castle rounds had gone longer than she had anticipated last night. Hermione had initially dreaded spending her evening with Malfoy – they hadn't exactly left things in a great place the last time they had talked.

But she was bound and determined to push through it, to fight for a friendship with him no matter what. And from their interaction last night, it seemed like he was too. Was it out of character for the both of them? Yes, but lives were at stake, and Hermione realized that the last thing she wanted to do was be selfish when Malfoy had been forced into this just as much as she had.

It was an odd alliance they were forging; the both of them were desperate to get through this term, to get out into the world, and to forget any of this was happening.

So here she was, spending her Saturday morning researching and getting ahead on their Charms assignment. During their walk for her rounds about the castle last night, she and Draco had come to the conclusion that they were going to develop a new type of tracking charm for their project surprisingly quickly. It was simple in theory, but complicated enough to impress the Charms professor and she knew it would earn them top marks.

That was another thing Hermione had been reminded of about Malfoy as of late — he was just as much, if not more so — dedicated to academics as she was. They had only been to a few classes

together, but he took notes as extensive as her own, did the reading ahead of time and talked about their Charms assignment with a fervor that matched hers.

If it weren't for their opposing blood status', they might have been friends in another life. She wondered what their relationship could look like now if they had chosen to spend time together of their own volition instead of being forced together by such extraneous circumstances.

And now that they knew what direction they wanted to go in, Hermione was eager to get a jump on research. The current tracking charm that most wizards used could only identify recent uses of magic and footprints; while that was handy, she and Malfoy had wondered what it would take to track someone just by their essence, by where they were at any given moment, using any means of transportation.

Surely it would take something like having access to hair or saliva to be able to locate where someone had been, and with such magic doable with polyjuice potion, she was confident it could be done with a charm. The question was just how it could be done.

The library was quieter than normal today. Most students took Sundays off to relax and unwind before another week of classes. And while Hermione tried to instill the discipline within herself to do the same, she was too eager to get a jump on preliminary research. It fascinated her that the ability to invent such things was possible, and as pathetic as it was, she had nothing better to do today.

Hermione focused on her reading, taking notes on how to incorporate DNA into charms, when the sound of soft steps padding towards her caught her attention. Her head snapped up at the sound, only to find nothing there.

Hermione lifted out of her chair slightly to see if she could see anyone around the corner who she just missed, but found the section empty like it usually was.

While there were obvious muted echoes of the other patrons of the library, there was absolutely no one on this level with her – that she was sure of.

It was no secret that the castle was haunted and that the ghosts liked to play tricks on students, but usually they were eager to take credit for successfully fooling someone, especially Peeves. Plus the castle was old and was bound to creak and shift, and while its structure was held up by magic, that didn't change how time affected it.

A few quiet moments passed before a sniffing sound filled the air, causing Hermione to look up from her book once more. The sound sent her heartbeat into a stutter and anxiety crept up her throat. Someone had to be near, and for whatever reason they felt the need to approach her disillusioned.

Determined to see who her unexpected guest was, Hermione got out of chair this time, rounding one of the bookshelves when she spotted a shadowy figure on the ground.

"Hello?" Hermione called out. "Who's there?"

She was met with silence, the shadow on the floor disappearing as the sun that was beaming through the windows was hidden by clouds. Stillness washed over her again and while her heart still pounded in her chest, she made her way back to her chair, never taking her eyes off the spot where the shadowy figure had just been.

Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she went back to her book, diving back into how to fuse the DNA of anyone and anything — not just a witch or wizard — into a spell when the sound of a hex flying towards her grabbed her attention yet again, this time prompting her to fly out of the chair she was lounging in and duck for cover under the table next to her.

All theories of the noises she heard being a ghost or just an old castle went out of the window. This was an attack.

Someone had been let inside of the castle, somehow had gotten past the wards, or Merlin forbid, someone inside the castle was working for the Death Eaters and had found the perfect opportunity to launch an attack while she was alone. Either way, she was fucked.

Panic took over her body as she silently scolded herself for seeking out the most isolated part of the library she could. No one would find her here, and whoever was attacking her had the best advantage they ever would. And to make matters worse, she hadn't told Malfoy where she was having woken up, skipped breakfast and made her way to the library first thing this morning.

She didn't not tell him on purpose; she had truly resolved to work with him and be a better partner. She had just been eager to get a jump on research this morning and hadn't thought of it.

Hermione scolded herself for her slip of judgment. She had made a big mistake, and there was no doubt that Draco would be fuming mad at her – if she managed to get out of this, anyway.

She peeked out from the table, only to be met with a jinx that sent her flying backwards into another table in between the rows of books she currently resided in. Searing pain scorched up her back as she slid down the bookcase, her side and head throbbing from meeting the corner of the table full on.

Hermione let out a small whimper of pain, pushing up off of the ground in a low squat, ducking under the table she just flew into, before she steeled herself, preparing to fight back despite the growing agony roaring through her body. She patted the sides of her jumper, looking for her wand, only to spot it deep in the crevices of the chair she was curled up in moments earlier.

The sound of more spells flying filled the air, this time coming from the opposite direction of whoever the original perpetrator was.

She whirled around from her spot on the ground towards the sound of the additional curses slicing through the air, her vision blurring from a combination of trying to stand up too fast and the pain in her side. She was at least bruised, and maybe had a few broken ribs. Her head pounded as she struggled to get to her hands and knees, only to collapse back to the ground when the piercing pain only got worse.

Hexes and curses filled the air, soaring at such a rate that Hermione couldn't keep up. It seemed someone was fighting her initial attacker, and whoever that was wasn't giving up easily, and was a skilled duelist. She had half the mind to crawl to her wand and attempt to fight both of them off, but knew she was in no shape to duel.

Just as quickly as it had started, the battle came to a halt and the silence of the library once again returned after the sudden thump of a body dropping to the floor and a wand rolling out of the perpetrators hand registered in her ears.

Hermione focused on the sound of her own panting breaths as the footsteps of the second wizard made their way across the floor towards her. She squeezed her eyes shut as the footsteps got closer, preparing herself for her demise.

She had been found, and no one was here to save her.

If she had her wand, it would be a different story. But there it sat, across the room, just far enough out of Hermione's reach that any attempt to get it would put her directly in her attacker's way. She didn't like being the damsel in distress, didn't like depending on anyone for help, but in this moment, she wished she had someone.

Everyone was right. McGonagall was right. Draco was right. She didn't realize how serious this situation was, and now she was going to be killed because of her carelessness.

Whoever was here had the perfect chance to claim the reward the Death Eaters were so willing to give for her. They were about to be a very rich witch or wizard.

The footsteps stopped right next to her.

"Hermione?"

She whipped her head up at the voice, only to find Malfoy standing above her, his chest moving in time with his gasping breaths, his eyes wild with what only Hermione could discern as panic. His use of her full name and the panic in his eyes jolted her back into reality — he came for her. He found her.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a deep tone as he took her in, his eyes scanning her relentlessly for any signs of injury.

A wave of calm washed over her as she let out a shaky sigh of relief, thankful for the first time in her life to see Draco Malfoy.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her body shaking along with her voice. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize," he said as he crouched down to her level. "It was a Death Eater. A lower ranking one that broke in somehow. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I didn't tell you where I was," she struggled to answer. "I promised to always tell you where I was and I didn't."

"You didn't," he stated. "Which does annoy me. But I think I can forgive you this time because of the circumstances."

He said the words with such gentleness that Hermione was taken aback for a moment. She was expecting him to be more angry or upset that she had found herself in harm's way, that she hadn't told him where she was — again. But he didn't. She almost felt slightly uncomfortable with the way he seemed genuinely concerned about her at the moment. Both at the Hog's Head and when he found her at Hogsmeade, he had seemed more frustrated than anything that she had been in the direct line of danger. Now, he seemed scared, frightened that she had been hurt.

She looked over to the wizard who was now lying on the floor unmoving, his wand now in Malfoy's hand.

“How did you know to come here?” she asked, looking back at Draco.

Draco smirked. “I hadn’t heard or seen you all day and there are only a few places to look for a missing Hermione Granger. This was my first stop.”

“Thank you for looking for me,” Hermione breathed in response, exhaustion slowly taking over her body as the adrenaline from the attack wore off.

“You’re welcome,” he whispered back before breaking her gaze. He turned to look at the wizard on the ground before bringing his eyes to meet hers once more. “Are you finally starting to realize how serious this is?”

He was silent for a moment as he looked around at the destruction of the room. Chairs toppled over, books strewn all over the floors, tables flipped so their legs were in the air. It had all happened so fast that Hermione didn’t even realize what a ruckus had been made. No wonder Draco knew where to find her. He probably heard the attack when he first entered the library, for Godrick’s sake.

There was not one hint of cockiness in his tone. She knew that if he wanted to, he could make fun of her and boast about how right he was. But he didn’t. He again spoke to her softly, like he was genuinely trying to get through to her as someone who...cared about her? Wanted her safe?

The only explanation had to be that Hermione hit her head harder than she thought she had, and was imaging all of it. Draco Malfoy did not care about her. He cared only about himself and not being thrown in Azkaban again. She was an assignment to him, and he was simply doing his job.

Hermione shook the thoughts from her head as she looked down at the stupified wizard laying at her feet. How did he get all the way to the depths of the library? He would have had to first get past the school wards, then the few Aurors they had stationed at the castle doors, through the main hallways and landings of the castle which connected to the Great Hall and most of the staircases that led to the house common rooms which were also guarded, before he even reached the library. Someone should have spotted him, and stopped him before he was able to make it this far. Why had no one raised the alarm?

As much as McGonagall wanted the students to believe it, it was slowly becoming apparent that Hogwarts probably never was the safest place for them all, not as infallible as they had always been led to believe.

“I am,” Hermione answered finally. “I’m sorry for how I’ve been acting. It’s not fair to you, or anyone else really. I told you yesterday that I was going to stop being a brat about all of this and I really meant it. I’ll do better.”

She had been selfish and felt an insurmountable amount of shame. This wasn’t who she was. She was the one who put herself on the line for everyone, the one who took the brunt of every hardship. She fought for others harder than she fought for herself. While she had been trying to look out for other muggleborns, and felt she still must, she officially needed to start thinking about herself first. If not for her own sake, but for Malfoy’s.

“Come on,” he said, standing up to his full height and reaching his hand out to her as he saw her struggling. “Let’s get you to the hospital wing. Can you walk?”

Hermione nodded as she slid her hand into his, his grasp on her gentle yet stabilizing as he pulled her up from the ground.

As odd as it was that he was here, helping her up and taking her to the hospital wing, Hermione couldn't help but think about how nice it was to have someone care for her, even if he was forced into it. During the war, Hermione constantly doctored herself, or had to find her own means of healing and care. And it wasn't because Ron and Harry didn't care to help her, it was just that they didn't realize she needed help. When they did finally realize, they didn't have the training or means to assist her.

So now that Draco had showed up in the library today and had fought off the Death Eater in order to keep her safe — Hermione realized that she had never been given the opportunity to be taken care of. Never been given the chance to lean on someone and not be self-reliant.

And if this is what it felt like to embrace that level of support, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing after all.

It was a baby step towards letting others in, but a step nonetheless.

### **Draco**

If there was one thing Draco was persistent about, it was his hair. Usually expertly coiffed and under the control of an almost embarrassing amount of charms, Draco felt put together when his hair wasn't in complete disarray. It gave him a sense of control and the outward illusion of not being a total wreck on the inside. His appearance helped him fake his demeanor, and he would be damned if anyone caught him slipping since his return to Hogwarts post war.

Right now was one of the few times Draco couldn't be bothered to keep up appearances. That expertly coiffed hair found itself in chaos from Draco constantly shoving his fingers through it as he worked through the stress of finding Granger in the path of a Death Eater attempting to attack her in the library.

Anger and anxiety coursed through him at the thought of any dark wizards inside of the castle again. It shouldn't be possible with all of the wards intact. Granted, there was a chance, albeit a small one, that another student aided their entry. Or even, Merlin forbid, a professor was working with the Death Eaters once again. But Draco knew how thoroughly vetted everyone inside of the castle was; The Ministry had made sure of it.

And yet, this intruder had somehow managed to get past the castle's defenses, had found Hermione, and almost had her at their mercy. Seeing her on the ground, defeated and overcome, was a sight Draco hoped he wouldn't have to get used to.

As much as he thought he would relish in Hermione's demise in his younger years, there was nothing more pitiful than seeing the brightest witch of his age in that state.

While he subconsciously knew that protecting her was protecting himself, in that moment, when he found her in the library at the Death Eater's will, all he had cared about was getting her out of there and to safety. He jumped straight into the line of fire, her protection and well being the first thing on his mind.

She didn't have any outward injuries as far as he could tell, but he had brought her to the hospital wing just in case. Their Vow was riding on him keeping her safe, and he would be damned if he wasn't thorough about it.

The sound of Hermione whimpering pulled Draco out of his thoughts, his head whipping towards her and finding her face scrunched up in discomfort.

He quickly glanced over her again, looking for any signs of injury, but found none. She had walked to the infirmary with him easily enough, but that didn't mean she was totally unscathed. He wouldn't put it past her to hide wounds from him, to force herself through the pain just so she didn't seem weak.

While part of him admired and understood her reasoning for that, she couldn't keep things like that from him anymore. Draco cursed himself for not assessing her more thoroughly before bringing her to the hospital wing. She had been here for hours now, Madame Pomfrey too busy to aid her because of a Quidditch practice gone wrong; a loose Bludger injured several first years, and that had the healer's full attention.

"Are you in pain?" he asked her.

Granger weakly nodded in answer.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked her, a hint of annoyance rising up within him.

"I-"

"Don't say it." He cut her off. She had already apologized to him enough for one day.

He had no intention of grabbing her hand to perform legilimency on her, but found himself reaching for her nonetheless.

Draco went into her mind, searching for any traces of pain he could find and was shocked at the amount he found burning within her. She hadn't shown any major signs of discomfort and pain when he demanded they come to the hospital wing. She had managed to hoist herself up in the library with his assistance and followed without a word. Granted she had seemed out of sorts by the time they had made it to the hospital wing, but Draco had just assumed it was because of the shock of the attack. As far as he knew, Hermione hadn't had that close of a brush with the Death Eaters since the war, so he was sure she was disturbed by the intrusion. He hadn't even considered that she could have been physically hurt.

As Draco worked his legilimency through her mind, that warm feeling that he had experienced with her during their Unbreakable Vow crept back up. The heat swirled around his veins, coating him in comfort and a welcomed sense of familiarity as he used their bond to take away Granger's pain.

Ever since that day in McGonagall's office, something had changed between them that Draco couldn't put his finger on. He wondered if it was the same for her, if she had felt that warm and comforting heat between them during their Unbreakable Vow. He wondered if this is how it would always be for them now if their magic was somehow linked in their minds.

Could it be because they had finally agreed to work together and not constantly be at each other throats?

But still, that didn't explain the new thrum of familiarity and connection between the both of them. It didn't explain how Draco just knew something was wrong when he hadn't seen her in the Great Hall this morning, and it didn't explain the panic that rose up in him when he ran to find her in Hogsmeade.



Was it simply a forced familiarity because their lives were now intertwined due to circumstances when they had previously avoided each other at all costs, or was it something deeper than that? Could the magic of the Vow manifest in ways beyond the initial promise to each other? He had never heard of that before, but the feeling of this thread between them, this tether from his mind to hers and the way their magic intertwined... it felt like more than just a binding spell. But how? Why? And then there was the fact that the way his mother described taking an Unbreakable Vow was the complete opposite of his experience...

With his mind lost in his thoughts, he didn't even see Granger reaching towards him, suddenly pressing the pad of her finger to his temple. He was taken aback by her touching him without being prompted that he physically pulled away, his heart suddenly racing within his chest.

"See something interesting, Granger?"

"You have a scar near your forehead. Just like Harry," she said with a slight laugh.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just make that comparison," he responded dryly, trying not to balk at being compared to the Chosen One, of all people.

This only made her laugh harder, the soft sound filling the air around them.

He had never seen this version of her before — incredibly relaxed, not at all the uptight version of her he had always interacted with. He was used to her being all wound up, everything in her seemingly pulled taut — not this sleepy eyed, giggling version of herself. It was disarming.

He simultaneously was intrigued and unnerved by her demeanor.

He liked knowing what he was walking into and dealing with, and he didn't know what to do with this version of Hermione Granger.

"I never thanked you," Granger blurted suddenly, already looking a thousand times better with her pain alleviated.

"For what exactly?" Draco asked.

"For taking my pain away in the drawing room that night."

Draco's throat suddenly got tight. That night was in the top three worst moments of his life, right behind when he first took the Mark and when he had failed at murdering Dumbledore. He would never tell anyone, but the sound of Hermione's screams often echoed in his mind, waking him from a peaceful night's sleep or pulling him out his thoughts if his mind ever wandered off.

He had become so disassociated from that night, from those events, that at some point, part of his mind had pushed out the fact that it was Hermione's face that shook him from his dreams more often than not.

He hated remembering it. Hated recalling that he had done nothing to stop his aunt's torture of her on the floor the drawing room.

It was that night that the reality of the war slammed into Draco: that his classmates were more than just classmates, but people with futures they aspired to, things they hoped for. That they were all just kids, and none of them deserved to go through this.

He had stopped wishing for his family's approval that night.

He vowed to himself to be different, to not go down the path that was laid out for him.

It struck him then – it was as if he had been given this assignment as a second chance to make up for what he failed to do for her that night in the drawing room. Draco didn't necessarily believe in fate like his mother did, but he couldn't deny that it was a chance to set things right. To lessen the weight of the guilt he felt so heavily everyday.

Then there was the unwelcome thought that Draco had already failed in keeping Hermione safe. For all he knew, the Ministry was on its way to the castle and was getting ready to put him back in front of the Wizengamot like they so desperately wanted to. Barely a week into the assignment and he felt like he had already failed.

“Um,” he stuttered, not sure how to address her gratitude about a night that had thoroughly traumatized them both. “You're welcome.”

The distressing thoughts caused him to rake his hand through his hair once again; it was now utterly wild and undone, causing the slight curls to render his once immaculate charm work completely useless. The only thing tethering him to the ground was the warmth that was still — somehow — flowing between him and Hermione through his legilimency.

He glanced at her once more and found her eyes trailing his hand as it went through his hair.

They held each other's gaze for a moment, Draco taking note of features on her face that he had never noticed before. Freckles peppered her cheeks, mostly over the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were big and round, not in a buggish way, but more so in a curious, inviting manner that made him want to swim in their depth.

Their eye contact broke at the sound of the infirmary doors bursting open, Draco dropping his legilimency from Granger's mind and removing his hand from hers as McGonagall entered the wing, and to Draco's despair, followed by Potter and Weasley.

Draco didn't miss Hermione's eyes gazing toward Potter and Weasley and the immediate way her body seemed to tense up at the sight of them.

Long gone was the relaxed Hermione he just had the pleasure of interacting with for the first time.

Back was the tense, swotty version that he had known his entire life.

Harry's look of concern immediately dropped once he noticed Draco, his eyes squinting in disbelief and shock at him being there.

Draco rubbed his face in exhaustion. He didn't have the willpower to talk himself out of what was bound to be a berating monologue from Potter and Weasley. It wasn't like he could tell them why he was here: that he was sworn to keep their friend safe, and that he had just used legilimency on her to take her pain away. Again.

Not that they had any reason to believe him, but Draco was exhausted and simply couldn't bring himself to care enough to even bother mounting a defense for his tarnished name.

Resolving himself to push forward, despite the protest from both his body and mind, Draco tensed and waited for the trio to approach – his stomach churning with dread at the thought of what he must do. There was one conversation he didn't want to have, but nonetheless, needed to occur, and he might as well get it over with.

He quickly stood up as the three approached the bed where Granger was recovering.

“Headmistress, can we speak alone for a moment?”

McGonagall looked at him with a bewildered expression, but followed him into the hall nonetheless, leaving Potter and Weasley with Hermione, well out of earshot for what he had to say.

“I understand if you need to take me off of this assignment and report me to the Ministry,” he said in a quick breath to the Headmistress, not wanting to delay the inevitable.

McGonagall looked taken aback by his declaration.

“And why would I do that, Mr. Malfoy?” She replied after a prolonged beat of silence between them.

Draco shook his head- McGonagall's response confused him. Didn't she want him gone? Locked up in a cell and paying for his crimes? Wasn't that the whole point of this arrangement?

“Because I let Her—Granger get attacked- I- I wasn't there to stop the situation before it started.”

“But you did stop it, correct?”

“Yes, but I—”

The headmistress held up a hand, halting any further explanations Draco might have prepared from slipping off his tongue. “Then we will leave it at that, Mr. Malfoy. No reason to martyr yourself for events you could not control.”

“But—”

“You didn't let anything happen. You did your duty and protected Miss Granger when she was in trouble. I'd say you're succeeding far beyond what was expected, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco was stunned, for he had never received any praise from McGonagall in his younger years at Hogwarts. No matter what he did, Draco could never seem to meet her ridiculously high standards, even with his determination, cunning, and penchant for academia. There always seemed to be someone better than him — usually Hermione.

“Now, we have to focus on getting the wizard who attacked Miss Granger secured and to the Ministry for questioning.”

“Where is he now?” Draco couldn't help but ask. He had been so focused on Hermione's care that he didn't even bother to think of what became of the Death Eater until the moment McGonagall brought it up.

“After Flitwick restrained him, he was taken to the dungeons and is currently due to wake up soon. Please work with the Aurors and find out what you can.”

“Yes, Headmistress,” Draco nearly stuttered out, inclining his head. “Of course”

“Good. I expect a report on my desk by tomorrow afternoon.”

McGonagall turned to leave, but not before patting him on the shoulder as she passed him, with what could almost pass for a smile on her thin lips. She made her way back into the hospital wing to check on Hermione and the first years, leaving him in the hall stunned.

Maybe there was hope for him after all. Maybe, just maybe, this would all work out.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

TW: descriptions of torture and thoughts of death. Please look out for your mental health!

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

### Hermione

“Mione, why was Malfoy here with you? Of all people?” Ron asked, a confused and disgusted look on his face as he watched him walk out into the hall with McGonagall.

Hermione pulled her eyes away from Malfoy’s retreating form and turned to look at Harry and Ron. Seeing them walk through the Hospital Wing doors wasn’t something she was expecting, but she supposed she shouldn’t be too surprised that word of the attack had made its rounds.

She knew that the moment she saw them walk into the Hospital Wing and noticed Draco next to her bed, they would be questioning why he was there and why she let him be there. She knew they wouldn’t hear her out about how much he had changed, and she couldn’t tell them about their arrangement with the Ministry.

“He’s the one who found me,” she answered with a nonchalant tone. It was the truth, plain and simple. She just hoped they would believe it, because she did not have the energy to explain further. She was still in a bit of pain, still riding the high of Draco’s legitimacy, and she wanted nothing more than to crawl into her bed and cuddle Crookshanks for the rest of the day.

“And you’re sure Malfoy had nothing to do with the attack?” Ron pressed.

“I’m sure, Ronald,” Hermione seethed. “Why would he bring me to the Hospital Wing if he attacked me?”

Ron and Harry glanced at one another, looks of surprise on their faces that she was doubling down and defending Malfoy. That she wasn’t totally distraught over the whole situation. The Hermione that they were used to would be cursing Malfoy’s name, not to mention all of the Death Eaters as well, for attacking their sacred school. But that Hermione was long gone, and it was time they started to get to know the person she was now.

Harry broke Ron’s gaze and sat at the edge of her bed, an attempt at friendliness that Hermione hadn’t seen from him since the war.

“I can’t believe the Death Eaters made it into the castle,” Harry said, a worried expression taking over his face. “Again.”

“I blame those good-for-nothing bloody Slytherins,” Ron declared angrily. “I can’t believe the Ministry even let them in here after the war, considering their backgrounds.”

“Them being here is their punishment,” Hermione retorted. It might as well have been a punishment for them all if she was being honest, Death Eaters or not. It was so hard enough to deal with everything they had gone through in the war but pushing them back into these halls and expecting them to perform well in classes like they hadn’t all been trying to kill each other at one point made it all the more traumatic.

“Still, their punishment should have been something else,” Ron grumbled. “I’m so sick of looking at them all day, pretending like we don’t remember what they did.”

“They went through the war as well,” she snapped, her patience wearing thin.

Shocked expressions painted the boys’s faces. She hadn’t blown up at them like that since they were hunting for Horcruxes, since that time when things were so strained between them all the time you could cut the tension with a knife. The surprise of her response and her defense of the group of people they have always hated was like pouring a cold bucket of water over them all, changing the very air between them.

She didn’t know if it was because of her exhaustion from the attack or because of Draco coming to her rescue that she responded the way she did, or just the culmination of everything that had happened between them in the last year. Maybe it was simply because she had had enough of Harry and Ron’s nonsense.

Trying to ease the growing hostility before it became any more out of control, Hermione gave a big sigh. “Sorry. So much has happened today. I’m a bit exhausted,” she said while rubbing her eyes and moving to get out of the cot. “Best head back to my room.”

“We can walk you back,” Harry offered with hopeful eyes that made Hermione’s heart ache – it was obvious he was trying to do whatever he could to undo the awkwardness that settled like dust in the air. She could tell that he cared right now, that he wanted her to know he was there for her.

She didn’t want them to worry about her; simply just for the reason that she didn’t want more people to answer to, more people expecting her to explain her feelings and her reasoning. She was dealing with enough – even outside of trying to just figure out life after the war, she was currently juggling her own emotions about the attack in the library, dealing with Malfoy in general, and coming to grips with whatever was going on between them. It was just too much.

She knew that Harry would understand her position with the Death Eaters, but she didn’t want to put him through that emotional labor so soon after the war. He was finally happy, living a life where the state of the world wasn’t on his shoulders and he deserved that.

They were all in different stages of their post-war journey, and as much as it may hurt her, she knew she had to let them go.

That’s how life went. People ebb and flow in and out of your life. And right now, Harry and Ron were on the ebb, being swept away with past versions of herself.

She had accepted that.

And not only had she accepted that, but she was ready to let in whatever new rendition of herself waited on the other side of this nightmare. She had been through enough trials and tribulations to know that if she could just get through this term and get past this new threat to her and all muggleborns, it would all be worth it later.

There had to be brighter things waiting for her.

“Really, thank you both for coming and checking on me,” Hermione said as she began to gather her things. “I appreciate it.”

“We’re always here for you Hermione,” Harry said with a sad smile and look in his eyes.

Hermione wanted to believe him, she really did. But the fact of the matter was that things just weren’t the same between them anymore. And there had been a lot of times that they weren’t there. The fact that Harry didn’t even seem to realize that said enough.

They had all come out of the war so different, and they had different goals for the lives they wanted to live now. Harry and Ron had found happiness with being eternal heroes, they enjoyed being in the limelight, going down in history as war heroes, and now as everyday saviors.

They didn’t understand why Hermione didn’t have the same aspirations as them. Why she wanted to fade into the background.

If this situation with the Death Eaters hunting her wasn’t enough for them to understand why, she wasn’t sure what would make them see the world from her point of view; and honestly, she was tired of trying to make them.

Leaving Harry and Ron at the door of the hospital wing, Hermione sleepily made her way into her room, the exhaustion of the attack and the day wearing down on her with each step. She was grateful Malfoy had helped her alleviate some of the pain, for if he hadn’t, she could still be in the Hospital Wing vying for some of Madam Pomfrey’s attention. And dealing with Harry and Ron. Saved in more ways than one, it would seem.

She entered her room to her cat’s incessant meowing, no doubt wondering where she had been all day.

“I’m so sorry Crookshanks, I’m sure you have been worried to death,” she cooed as she squatted down to pet him. “Shhh I’m here now.”

Hermione quickly changed her clothes, picked Crookshanks off the floor and cuddled him to her chest before falling into bed and into the deepest sleep she had ever had.

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*The ceiling of the drawing room in Malfoy Manor was one of the most beautiful ceilings Hermione had ever seen. Its surface was decorated with gilded swirls and patterns that she had been tracing for hours as she lay on the floor under Bellatrix’s wand.*

*She had no idea where Harry and Ron had been taken. She had no idea how long she had been subjected to this seemingly unending pain, to the questions that she refused to answer.*

*She knew she was at a risk of possible torture during this war, that she held important and vital information that the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters wanted, and that they’d do anything to curry favor with Voldemort*

*Yes, she knew that there was a possibility of this happening... she just never truly believed it would.*

*The pain of the Cruciatus curse coursed through Hermione's veins as Bellatrix cast it repeatedly, her eyes concentrating on the patterned ceiling above her, giving herself something else to focus on as she cried and screamed through the pain.*

*It was the same thing over and over again. Bellatrix would ask a question, Hermione would cry that she didn't know the answer, Bellatrix would cast a hex on her. Again and again, all with the Malfoy family and several other Death Eaters standing around the room as an audience to her suffering.*

*The agony continued as Bellatrix began a new form of torture, carving the word 'mudblood' on her arm with a silver knife, branding Hermione with the slur she had been running away from her entire life. Guttural wails left Hermione's mouth as the blade dug deep into her flesh, nearing vital veins and arteries. Hermione was terrified Bellatrix would nick one, leaving her here to bleed out on the floor, killing her with the nickname she had run from her entire life.*

*She screamed and screamed and screamed, hoping for someone, anyone to help her. But the pain didn't stop. It took over every inch of her body, from the top of her head to the bottom of her toes; she could feel it everywhere, feeling it coursing through her veins, making her heart pound so hard she thought it would burst from her chest.*

*She pried her eyes open as the torture continued, frantically looking around the room for a bit of solace, for something, anything else she could focus on as she fought the agony coursing through her.*

*Her eyes skittered around until she met Draco Malfoy's stare across the room, his face alight with a horror she wasn't expecting to see from him. His face was tense, his lips pressed in a tight line, the skin around his eyes crinkled as he worked to not cringe away at the sound of her screams. Other Death Eaters around him were laughing and pointing at what they saw Bellatrix carving on her arm, but not him. Somehow, the boy who had thrown that disgusting word at her for the very first time in her life, who always hated her for her "dirty blood" and made it known at every opportunity, looked like he'd rather be anywhere else as he watched what his aunt did to her.*

*She kept her eyes on Draco, silently begging for help as the sting of pain continued traveling through her, threatening to take away the last little bit of sanity that she was clinging onto.*

*Bellatrix dug her knife deeper into Hermione's arm, muttering words she couldn't make out when a new, more vile feeling started to make its way through her body.*

*It was a different pain than the Cruciatus curse. While the Cruciatus felt like a million little needles in every part of your body, Hermione currently felt like she was being stung over and over again. Like her body was filling with venom. The foreign substance flowed through her veins, alighting every part of her with the feeling of poison.*

*Her body started to shake as it all became too much, as she started to lose grip on reality and on her will to live. She had never wanted to die, but if it would stop this pain, stop this torture, she would welcome Death like an old friend.*

*Just as she was about to give up, just as she was about to let herself succumb to the agony, the feeling started to dissipate. The unmistakable sensation of legilimency made its way through her mind, erasing any and all awareness that Hermione was currently experiencing. She felt like she could breathe again, felt like she might be able to get through this if she could only just—*



Hermione woke with a gasp, sitting straight up in her bed as she attempted to catch her breath.

It had been a few days since she had dreamt about that night at Malfoy Manor. Right after it had happened, Hermione had been plagued with nightmares of that room every night, waking up in whatever tent or safe house she, Ron and Harry had found— screaming, scaring and waking everyone out of their precious sleep.

The night terrors had become slightly better since returning to Hogwarts, but they still haunted Hermione more often than not.

Hermione looked down at the words carved on her arm. The witch's scratchy writing had made the word almost indiscernible, but everyone knew what it said. What it meant, what it represented.

Every letter was bent at an odd angle, none of them quite matching up with each other, looking just as vile and grotesque as Bellatrix was when she was alive.

Hermione rubbed the scar on her arm, still able to feel the sharp cut of the tip of the blade when the word was first inscribed on her, as well as the echoes of pain she felt in the scar yesterday during the attack.

She had never felt her scar flare up like that before. The pain seemingly came out of nowhere when the dark wizard began to attack. She knew it was possible that her scar was laden with dark magic given the way it was inflicted upon her, and with the fact that it had been carved in her skin while also receiving the Cruciatus curse, but surely the dark magic would have made its way out of her system by now.

Rubbing her hands across her face, fingers pulling through her tangled curls, Hermione hauled herself out of bed and readied herself for the day. Her movements were slow, mind blank and exhausted but not enough that she wanted to crawl back under the covers and try for sleep. It would be a futile attempt anyway.

Her mind drifted over her schedule for the day, reviewing her timetable and seeing what classes she had, what homework she needed to turn in. As she packed her bag and double checked she had all the necessary materials, she couldn't help but notice the uneasy feeling in her stomach. She was never one to put stock in feelings, even during the war, but there was a nagging source inside of her pestering her that something deeper was going on when it came to the Death Eaters and what they wanted from her and other muggleborns.

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The day consisted of an intense research session with Malfoy for their Charms assignment. They began with the basics: taking a small bit of an object — for their purposes today, a page of a book. They then hid the book, and then incorporated the piece of the page of the book into the charm. The only problem with that was, the charm did not recognize the paper from that book specifically, so instead of leading them to the tome they were hoping for, the tracking charm spurted out in all directions, sending paths of golden light to every book, on every shelf, in every section of the library.

It caused an embarrassing ruckus and earned them the infamous ire of Madam Pince.

They opted to try something more specific the next time. Taking a thread from Hermione's jumper, Malfoy went to the opposite end of the library and infused it with the charm in hopes that it would lead him back to her and her jumper.

The charm went in the general direction of Hermione but fizzled out only a few feet away from where Malfoy had cast the charm.

Hermione scratched out their hypothesis that any part of an object being used in the charm would lead it back to its original source. She bit her lip, theorizing about what could work. There had to be a way to track an object based only on an element of it. It just had to be something more specific, but how?

She and Malfoy were on the brink of being buried alive by textbooks when they were interrupted by Blaise, Theo, and Pansy making their way into the library, finding them among the shelves on the second floor.

"Well well well, if it's not our little bookworms," Theo teased. "What are you two up to on this fine day?"

"Studying, working on assignments. Something you aren't familiar with," Malfoy jested as the Slytherins placed themselves and their things on the chairs and desks that she and Draco were currently occupying.

"Ah, contraire. That is why we are here!" Theo said flamboyantly, dropping his book with a loud thump on the table in front of him. "Since you two are so studious, we thought why not start a little study group?"

"We're not in any of the same classes," Malfoy retorted, rolling his eyes. He tried to act annoyed, but Hermione could see a small grin playing at the corner of his mouth, trying his hardest to hold his amusement back.

"Even better! You two are in more advanced classes so that means you can help those of us with smaller brains."

"Speak for yourself," Pansy said, sitting next to Hermione. "I tested into the same classes as you two, but didn't feel the need to put that pressure on myself."

"And that is why you are smarter than any of us at this table," Theo quipped.

"I'll take all of the help I can get. I have no shame," Blaise said, sitting on the other side of Hermione.

"And yet...the help never makes a difference does it, Blaise?" Draco teased.

Hermione looked at the four of them with a quizzical look on her face. She obviously never spent much time with Slytherins outside of when she was forced to in classes, but she never expected them to be so...normal? So much like what she had experienced in the Gryffindor common room her first six years at Hogwarts.

She had every reason to believe that Slytherins were always scheming and plotting their next move, and she couldn't help the slight uneasy feeling she felt around them; it was an instinct for so long in her younger years, one that only got worse during the war. She couldn't shake the guilt for feeling her own developed internalized prejudice, silently chiding herself that she should know better after spending extra time with Malfoy. She knew they weren't all evil and conniving, but rather as their house traits outlined, clever and determined. Much like she was.

“How are you dealing with working with him, Hermione?” Blaise inquired. “I never met someone as proud as Draco in my life.”

“Um,” Hermione trailed off awkwardly. “We’re getting through it.”

“If you need tips on how to get under his skin, just let me know,” Pansy winked, flipping her book open.

“We are experts at annoying him. So much so that now we just have to be around him and his blood immediately gets pumping,” Blaise said, bumping his shoulder into Draco’s which in turn, knocked the book he was holding out his hand.

Hermione looked over at Malfoy to find him softly chuckling at the jests of his friends.

She was struck by how relaxed he seemed in their company. He had transformed into a totally different person just with the presence of his friends. She had always seen him tense and rigid, but right now he was laid back and calm— his tie pulled loose, shirt sleeves rolled up just a tad, but enough to cover the Mark she knew he had on his left arm.

She thought about her own marking on the same arm, ironically even in the same exact spot as the four Slytherins around her, bearing their own Dark Marks. Had Bellatrix chosen that spot on purpose? Some sick, twisted play on their symbol for blood purity?

The thought had never struck Hermione until just now. That maybe Bellatrix had wanted to inflict the same pain on her that they had all gone through when they took the Mark.

In a way, Hermione had a Dark Mark of her own, condemning her to her blood status just like their Dark Marks condemned them to theirs.

“How are you doing with everything?” Pansy asked quietly, breaking Hermione out of her thoughts.

Hermione didn’t mean to, but she looked at the witch next to her with a bewildered expression. It was the first time someone even bothered to wonder how she was in the last couple of weeks. The remaining Order members had checked in on her when the flier with her face and the largest reward ever seen in wizarding Britain was first making its rounds, but she hadn’t heard from anyone since that first day. It was a hot topic in the halls of course, the peak of all gossip, but like everything else, it was fleeting. Once everyone found something else to focus on, they had all gone back to their own lives. Everyone had. Nothing major had happened since those fliers went public, so naturally, everyone lost interest and assumed Hermione was fine.

So the fact that Pansy Parkinson of all people had asked her how she was doing told her everything she needed to know about this group of friends.

Ron and Harry hadn’t even asked how she was when they visited her in the Hospital Wing. They were so concerned with Malfoy and how Death Eaters had broken into the castle that they didn’t even think to ask her about her emotional or physical well-being.

“Um, fine,” Hermione answered hesitantly. “I’m as fine as I can be these days.”

“Good,” Pansy responded with a smile. “I can’t imagine the pressures you had coming out of the war. Being a hero and all.”

“Yeah...it was quite a lot,” Hermione answered lamely. “But I’ve tried to distance myself from it all, honestly.”

“If there’s anyone who understands that, it’s us,” Pansy chuckled. “But it seems history has marked us, and the stories will follow us for the rest of our lives I think.”

Hermione smiled awkwardly at Pansy. She had never thought about how those on the other side of the war were dealing with the repercussions of what they had done, and how that would affect them. She had been too caught up in her own grief, her own trauma, to really pay attention. She felt a wave of guilt come over her for her own self absorption.

“I can’t even imagine what it’s been like for you all,” Hermione responded softly.

“Yeah,” Pansy sighed, her eyes suddenly finding the words on the page in front of her very interesting. “It’s been rough. Especially because none of us wanted this in the first place.” She looked back up at Hermione, eyes glassy with unshed tears that the Slytherin girl was trying to fight. “But we have each other, and that’s all that really matters.”

As much as they may not show it to outsiders, Hermione could see that this group of friends truly cared about one another, and they protected one another fiercely. They had been through unthinkable things together, and instead of letting that get between them, it seemed to have forged an unbreakable bond.

She felt a gaze on her as she talked to Pansy, glancing over to find Draco watching them interact. She froze under his stare for a moment before he nodded his head at her slightly, before turning back to his conversation with Blaise and Theo.

The group of them studied in comfortable silence after that, the only sounds filling the air were pages turning and questions from Malfoy’s friends if they got to a topic they didn’t understand or needed clarification on.

It was odd to witness, but wholesome. Normal. Hermione was glad to see that the four of them were able to find each other, especially when the world and the Ministry seemed content to condemn them for making impossible choices. She was glad they didn’t have to cope with that alone.

Hermione sat back and thought that there really wasn’t too much difference between them and the rest of the student body. They all had been forced here against their will, forced to walk the halls of the castle that had crumbled not even a year ago. If only they all could see that.

“Well,” Theo announced, slamming his book shut with a loud thump. “Us Slytherins have to get going. Nefarious things to do and all.”

“Way to paint our house name in such a bright light, Theo,” Blaise deadpanned.

“We’ll see you there, Dracomeister?” Theo asked Draco.

“Yes,” Malfoy said as he ran his hands down his face, a chuckle escaping him. “I will be there Theo.”

“Drive him crazy for me, Granger!” Theo yelled over his shoulder as they all left the library.

“Sorry about them,” Draco said with a sigh, turning towards her.

“No, they’re...” Hermione trailed off, trying to find the words to describe the group. She had wrongly made assumptions about them her entire life, only to find out that she couldn’t have been more mistaken.

“Nothing compared to Potter and Weasley, I’m sure.”

“Couldn’t be more of the opposite really,” Hermione responded with an awkward laugh.

“How were things with them after I left?” Malfoy asked as he rummaged through his bag.

“Awkward. Uncomfortable,” Hermione admitted after a beat of silence.

His busy movements stopped, head tilting up to look at her with a raised eyebrow. “Whatever happened between the three of you?”

“Nothing that I want to get into,” Hermione said with a tired sigh.

“That’s fine. There is something I need to give you,” Draco said suddenly, turning to face her more directly.

Hermione looked at him quizzically as he stood tall, towering over her.

He held his fist out towards her before flipping it over and uncurling his fingers, revealing two silver metal bands in his hand. Ingrained in the metal of both rings was an etching of laurel leaves, the smaller one accented by tiny green gems.

Draco took the simpler of the two bands and slid it on the fourth finger on his left hand. His was slightly wider than the one remaining, featuring a large circular portion with a large M stamped into the metal.

“I need you to wear this from now on,” Draco said, holding the twin ring out to her, its glittering gems sparkling in the sunlight coming through the window.

“What is that?” Hermione asked hesitantly, observing the jewelry in his hand.

“It’s one of the Malfoy Family signet rings. They’re a linked pair, and, as you can see, I have the other one,” he explained, pointing to the band he had just put on his left hand.

“And why do I need to wear this?”

“I need to be able to know where you are at all times, and for us to have a way to contact one another when we aren’t near each other. The rings allow us to do that.” His head inclined slightly, his voice lowering so much so that Hermione had to lean in to hear him. “I can’t let what happened in the library happen again.”

Hermione’s heartbeat picked up as she looked at the rings. She had heard about similar jewelry in some of her readings. They were very common amongst pure blood families, where arranged marriages were the norm.

“And you’re sure there isn’t some hex on it that will activate once I put it on?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes at her superstition.

“My ancestors didn’t have that much foresight, Granger. Even if they did, everything in the Manor has been decommissioned of hexes and anything else of the like by the Ministry. It’s completely safe.”

Hermione hesitantly reached out and grabbed the ring from his hand, examining it. It glittered in the sun every which way she turned it, capturing the light and reflecting it right back to her. It was beautiful, and undoubtedly extremely expensive.

An heirloom of one of the most pure blooded families in all of wizarding kind, being given to her — a muggleborn witch.

Hermione slid the ring on her finger, sucking in a quick breath as magic zipped through her.

It felt like the Unbreakable Vow again, only this time it wouldn’t end when they dropped hands, because the magical connection was coming from the ring. The unmistakable feel of Draco’s magic surged through her, a power in its own league.

Hermione never thought a thing possible, feeling someone’s magic like this outside of an Unbreakable Vow or legilimency. Now, the thrum of Malfoy’s magic was a constant sensation with the ring on her finger. His power ran from her scalp to her fingertips, through every vein, every nerve ending. She didn’t know how she was going to function with this electric feeling coursing through her body every minute of the day. It was insanely distracting.

“That’s part of it too,” Malfoy answered her unspoken question, clearing his throat. “We will be able to feel each other most of the time, but we can learn to tune it out.”

Hermione stared at the band around her finger, focused on the weight and feel of the silver, of the new magic coursing through her. The ring fit perfectly, definitely charmed to adjust its sizing to the wearer if it was passed down for so many generations.

“How do I contact you with this?” Hermione asked, not able to take her eye off the emeralds glittering back at her.

“Turn it on your finger. It’ll signal me and I will come right to you.”

“Does this mean—”

“You still need to tell me where you’re going,” Malfoy said, cutting her off and reading where her mind was headed. “And you still can’t leave the castle without me. This is just an extra precautionary step.”

“Okay,” she conceded, looking down at her finger once more. “Does it work the same way for you? Can you turn the ring and it will call me?”

“Yes, it works the same way for me. Though I doubt I will ever need to call upon you like you might for me. I would cast an invisibility charm on it too,” he suggested. “Lots of pure blood women know what these are.”

Before Hermione could pick up her wand and cast the charm herself, Malfoy clasped her hand and held it up, pointing his wand at the ring, softly muttering a spell she could not hear. The glittering

silver circling her finger shimmered out of view and completely disappeared

“Thank you?” she said as a question. She wasn’t sure how to interact with this version of Malfoy. Up until now — until the attack in the library — they had both just been tolerating one another. This felt... different.

Malfoy grinned over his shoulder at her as he picked up his books and put them in his bag. “No problem, Granger.”

“You’re being awfully nice to me,” Hermione joked. “It’s freaking me out.”

“If you can put your best foot forward for this assignment,” Draco started, “Then so can I.”

He rounded the table to stand in front of her once more.

“Now, stay out of trouble please.”

The moment he was out of sight, Hermione sat back down at their table, continuing their Charm research, and fiddling with the invisible ring on her finger all the while.

### **Draco**

The rings were his mother's idea. After he had questioned the wizard who attacked Hermione with the Ministry, Draco had gone back to the Manor to vent to Narcissa about the attack. He had to get off his chest that he almost already totally screwed up and ruined his mother’s chance of having a clean record— not to mention almost putting himself back in Azkaban.

He told her about how he knew something was wrong when he didn’t see Granger in the Great Hall that morning, assumed that she had gone to the library and luckily found her there just in time. He voiced how he was afraid he wouldn’t always have that foresight, and that one day he was going to mess up, and all of them would wind up dead.

He explained to her that he wasn’t able to sense if Hermione was in pain unless he questioned her, and that the guilt of missing her internal injuries was consuming him. He told her that he needed a solution, but just didn’t know what it was.

He was sure his mother thought he was insane with the way he paced as he recounted the story, the way he frantically ran his hands through his hair and talked faster than he had ever talked his entire life.

So when she suggested the rings, he stopped in his tracks to face the matriarch of the Malfoy family. He was stunned – he never even thought of it as a possibility if he was being honest, and he couldn’t believe his mother had even brought it up. The rings were such a traditional and significant heirloom in the Malfoy family, one of the few things that the Ministry let them keep possession of. He was shocked to his core when his mother offered them to him, knowing full well their importance not just in general, but specifically to her.

He had always been told that they would be his whenever he was ready to wed and no sooner. It was understood that they would be something he was given when he proved that he would be carrying on the family legacy by marrying a good pureblooded witch and fulfilling his duty to carry on the family line.

“Purity will prevail,” his father always said.

But with his father locked up for an unknown amount of time and his mother just wanting her only son safe and happy, it seemed some of the strings attached to the rings had been broken. Broken so easily, in fact, that Narcissa pulled the set out of the drawer next to her in the sitting room as if she had them ready just in case something like this were to happen.

“They will protect you both in more ways than one my dear,” she said as she handed the jewelry over to him.

Draco held the rings in his hand and studied them for a long time. He knew how they worked — what it would mean when they both put them on.

They were a foolproof way for Draco to always keep tabs on Hermione – the magic allowed him to feel if she was okay or not, and to be able to be alerted when something was amiss with her. It was genius, and he couldn’t believe he didn’t think of it before his mother brought it up.

The only issue was that he could feel her now. At every moment, of every day. It was like living through the creation of their Unbreakable Vow over and over again. Her power was seeping through him, alerting him of every feeling and emotion she was having, and vice versa.

It would take continuous occlumency to tune her out, to get her constant presence out of his mind and body. He would have to train Granger in occlumency as well so she could tune him out too. Otherwise, they’d drive each other insane with the constant thrum of each other’s energy and emotions.

If anyone had told Draco last term that he would be wearing a pureblood heirloom on his finger meant for newly wedded witches and wizards, and its match was on a muggleborn witch’s finger that he had grown up hating up until two weeks prior and that he was assigned to protect that witch in exchange for getting his record wiped clean, he would have laughed in their face and told them that they had lost their minds.

But it was real, and it was happening, and if Draco was honest with himself, he was given a piece of hope, and he wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

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Draco sat up in his bed with a gasp, his Dark Mark burning so intensely that it woke him from his sleep. It had been so long since he felt the sting of the brand burning that the unpleasant sensation was heightened, spreading down his arm, all the way to his fingers, the pain taking his breath away.

He was being summoned in the middle of the night. And if there was one thing he knew, it was that it was never a good thing.

He immediately had flashbacks to war when this was a common occurrence for him and his friends and family, the panic that would ensue as they raced around, trying to look presentable in time for the Dark Lord’s appearance at the Manor.

Draco didn’t miss those times one bit.

Whatever he was being summoned for right now couldn’t wait and he felt the worry wash over his body. It was too soon into his re-pledging to be called upon in such a manner. There was nothing



that could have happened or that he could have done to have caused this.

Draco began occluding as he quickly jumped out of bed and got dressed before apparating to Riddle House, hoping he had given himself enough time to appear stoney, devoid of any distress that he currently felt.

He glanced around the front of Riddle House, noting that it seemed as if there hadn't been any activity at the house all day. The air was quiet and still and damp, the only sound was the wind slowly circulating the dank air.

Draco was the only one there except for Rookwood, who currently stood outside the house smoking a cigarette. He had to have been the one who called him at this late hour. Also not a good sign.

"Malfoy. Appreciate the prompt response," Rookwood greeted, as Malfoy stood in front of him.

"What is it—" Draco began to ask when a sudden impact of pain bloomed across his jaw as Rookwood's fist met his face.

"What are you up to?" Rookwood demanded, grabbing Draco by his collar and bringing them nose to nose before he could recover from the assault.

"What do you mean?" Draco hissed back through the pain, turning his head slightly to spit out the blood that was filling his mouth.

"We had some interference in our recent attempt to capture the mudblood," Rookwood said, his grip on Draco only getting tighter. "Care to explain what that was about? Are you trying to make us look stupid?"

So that's what this was about. Draco's breath quickened as his mind raced on how to cover up his intrusion on Hermione's attack. He hadn't even considered word getting back to the Death Eaters about what he had done, how he had jumped in to protect Hermione as she was being attacked.

He steeled himself as his mind raced for an excuse. What could he say to make sense of what he had done to the intruder? How could he continue to play both sides while not damning him in the other?

If there was anything the Death Eaters didn't like, it was being regarded as anything less than the best of everything – talent, blood purity, status, money, it didn't matter. They always had to be on top. They didn't take blows to their ego lightly, and Draco knew that was going to be his best bet as weaseled his way into their good graces. Make them depend on him, make them need him in a way that elevated themselves. Offer them something they couldn't do without him.

"Your stunt on the mudblood in the library of Hogwarts was sloppy. You will never succeed with these outlandish, attention-grabbing attacks you keep pulling," Draco responded as he wrenched free from Rookwood's grasp. "You're lucky I was there to intervene before whoever you sent made a fool of themselves. And you."

He needed to outsmart Rookwood and the other higher-ranking Death Eaters. He needed to cultivate their trust and show he had a better plan, all while criticizing their tactics and sowing doubt without making them dislike him. A masterful manipulation, a slow planting of a seed that would allow Draco to worm his way into their trust and higher ranking circle. He needed to make it

seem like he was the one who was the most capable of getting Hermione where they needed her – even if it was all lies.

“Let me deal with her,” Draco continued as he fiddled with the ring on his left hand, careful not to turn and activate it, feeling the thrum of Hermione’s magic alive and well and spearing through him, letting him know that she was okay. “She will be more willing to trust a reformed fellow student, and it’ll be that much easier to get her where we want her. I told you I would do intel work for you, so let me do it.”

Rookwood was silent as the words hung in the air and he considered what Draco was saying.

“And why do you care so much for this mudblood all of the sudden, Malfoy? Have another motive in mind, eh?” Rookwood questioned in a suggestive tone.

Draco moved to lean against the stonewall of the house, doing his best to look like the epitome of indifference. He decided to play into Rookwood’s suggestion and give them what they wanted to hear. Let them think he was depraved and heinous. Let them think that there was more in it for Draco.

“Yes, actually. I want her for myself,” he stated, a strange feeling shooting through him as the words left his mouth. “Use me to get to her. After this is all said and done with whatever you lot need her for, give her to me. That’s all I ask.”

Even with the words being lies, Draco felt sick saying them. But, he needed the higher-ranking Death Eaters to think of him as despicable and as full of prejudice as his father was. To think that Voldemort was wrong for viewing him and his family as weak. This was redemption.

Rookwood chuckled, impressed with Draco’s plan. If there was anything dark wizards liked within their ranks, it was when their operations had something in it for them, and by making this move, Draco was showing he was one of them once again. That he was selfish, and had other reasons for wanting to get Hermione to them.

If only they knew that they were the ones being played, soon to have the bag pulled over their eyes. He hoped he got every last one of them thrown in Azkaban.

Draco stood still as he watched Rookwood pace and considered his proposition.

“Alright, Malfoy, she’s yours. If she’s alive by the end of all of this. Bring her to us, and there might be more in it for you than just filthy blood. Give her to us, and you could find yourself among me and the other upper ranks. We have big plans for her. And together, we could make all of wizardkind bow before us, and rid the world of those who threaten to bring the strength of it down.”

Draco nodded in thanks, turning to leave and apparate once more.

“But Malfoy,” Rookwood called once more. “If you fail, you’ll be dead.”

Draco smiled. “I would be either way, now wouldn’t I?”

First and foremost, I want to give credit to all of the other amazing fics out there that use the Malfoy Signet Rings in a similar way that I am :) The first ones I can think of off the top of my head are Draco Malfoy and the Mortifying Ordeal of Being in Love and Bring Him to His Knees. I'm sure there are tons of others, but I just wanted to give credit for the idea because I love it SO much and it was one of the first things I knew I wanted to include in this fic :)

Big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), [Halliwell19](#) and [raynick11](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

Kudos and comments are always appreciated! Until next time :))

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

Draco pressed his back against the cold stone of the room he and the other Death Eaters were huddled in, doing his best to blend in amongst all of the other masked figures around him.

He fiddled with the ring on his left hand as the higher-ranking dark wizards spoke in hushed voices in the center of the room, Draco's mask covering any emotions that came across his face.

He looked down at the ring as he felt Hermione's emotions come through the jewelry, using her sense of calm to channel his own, to still his beating heart as the room filled around him. It had become his go to fidget over the past couple of weeks — a way to reassure himself that Granger was fine, and that there was no reason to panic.

It had been two weeks since he first gave Hermione the ring. Two weeks since he had been able to feel her at every moment, monitor every little change of emotion when he wasn't near. He was initially worried that being able to feel her emotions at all times would drive him mad, but he found that being able to tap into her essence eased him a bit. He knew she was okay when he wasn't around, which gave him the peace of mind he sought.

And while the ring gave him repose when it came to Hermione, his stress only increased with each passing day when it came to the Death Eaters and his arrangement with the Ministry to figure out what it was they were doing. He had gotten nowhere, had uncovered no answers, and he was starting to feel like he was at a loss.

The Death Eaters hadn't called a meeting or attacked since their failed attempt in the library. Their radio silence may have seemed like a good thing to the average witch or wizard, but it was a blazing siren to Draco. He knew that the lack of activity meant that the group was working harder than they ever had before, preparing to strike when no one else thought to look at them.

Something was coming. And soon.

The days passed slowly, inching along at a glacial pace and all Draco could do was prepare for the worst. He constantly looked over his shoulder, patrolled the hallways at night, and was all around distracted as his mind reeled about what was coming next.

When his Dark Mark burned this morning and this meeting had been called, Draco knew it was time. The Death Eaters were ready to execute whatever the next part of their plan was and he was going to be a part of it whether he was ready or not.

To make matters worse, Draco had reluctantly let Granger go to Hogsmeade by herself while he was away. Draco was ready to drop all plans and accompany her today, when suddenly the summons seared his pale skin before he could respond to her request. He was tempted to say no and make her stay in the castle while he was at the meeting, but she had done her part and asked before she went frolicking off, and he had to trust her. They had made a deal, and he was going to try with all his might to stick with it.

So here he stood, draped in his Death Eater robes while Hermione enjoyed Hogsmeade, his worry slightly eased through the connection by the rings on their fingers. Serene happiness floated through Hermione's ring to his, and he kept his finger on the jewelry as he stood, waiting to hear just what Rookwood and the others had in store.

"Your patience while we have been silent is much appreciated," Rookwood started as he commended the attention of the room. "It takes time to build a plan that will establish an empire, and that is what we've been doing. Thanks to Malfoy and his feedback about our 'outlandish and attention-grabbing attacks', we have had to think outside of the box." Every head in the room turned to look at him. It wasn't often that a lower ranking wizard had such an impact on the upper ranks of the Death Eaters, and Draco was sure that this announcement had just put a new target on his back.

"We've had to think about what would catch the mudbloods of the world off guard, and force them to show themselves and not be able to run or hide as they have before. Come up with some other ways to accomplish our goal," Rookwood continued as he circled the room.

A new wave of quiet washed over the room as Rookwood built the suspense.

Draco's stomach turned at the thought of him being the reason for whatever new demented system of actions they had come up with. He had taken a risk in saying what he said to Rookwood about their library attack, but it didn't escape him that it would have been a bigger risk not to say anything at all, to not have been there when Hermione needed him.

"We have been working hard to formulate a plan to speed up our ultimate goal of finishing what the Dark Lord started. Thanks to Dolohov, we have now devised that plan," Rookwood continued to pace around the room, taking the time to study every Death Eater he crossed as if he was assessing their strength, their loyalty.

Dolohov stepped forward from the line of leaders, making his vile presence known. Draco had only seen him through the crack in the door that night he eavesdropped on one of the high ranking meetings, but even then, he didn't get a good look at him.

Dolohov was just as depraved and decrypted looking as Draco remembered, and just like most other higher ranking Death Eaters, had a heavy aura of dark magic seeping off of him.

"There are multiple establishments within Hogsmeade that openly support squibs and muggleborns. Some even run by the lowlifes themselves!" Dolohov began, rallying the others to express hate-filled grumbles that echoed around the room.

"Today, we are going to get rid of them. But not in our usual ways. Today, we move stealthily. Subtly amongst the shadows."

Dolohov paused to draw a sequence of symbols on the ground with his boot, drawing the attention of the Death Eaters who were muttering questions about the strange image under their breath.

"We need to mark all establishments with these symbols," Dolohov explained, standing at full height again, a sinister smirk on his face as he gazed around the room. A leader at the helm of the ship, his crew ready to follow him into a deluge. "You will be broken into groups, and your group will cover specific shops in a specific area. One person in the group will be designated to draw these symbols on the establishments, while the other stand on watch for defense." His eyes tightened, voice deepening into a menacing tone. "It is important we hit all establishments in

Hogsmeade during this mission, and weed out the infestation that has plagued our world for too long. We will not be doing this twice. There is no room for mistakes.”

Draco didn't understand the meaning behind the symbols that Dolohov drew, for it was nowhere close to anything related to the Death Eaters nor the Dark Mark they all bore on their arm. He himself had never seen such symbols before that he could recall, and had no idea if it was imbued with magic, or if it was just inherently magical in its abilities. There was no telling what was about to be invoked with these symbols, what sort of havoc that would be caused.

And Hermione was going to be right in the middle of it.

“Once you mark the shops, I will give the signal for each person who wrote the symbol on the door will then use the incantation *magia potens est, munditia vincet* to activate the symbols. This will cause pandemonium to begin, so be prepared to stand firm and defend as we finish marking all of the shops. Once we are done, it is important for us to evacuate the premises as soon as possible. Understood?”

Heads nodded around the room.

“Let's go,” Rookwood commanded and with a snap of their fingers, they all disappeared.

---

Draco apparated into Hogsmeade with the rest of the Death Eaters, thankful for the first time for the mask that covered his face. Crowds immediately gasped and shrieked at the sight of them, causing a commotion that Draco didn't want to be anywhere near. Their presence would only cause chaos and he didn't have time to get caught up in it other than to use it as a means to slip away so he could find Hermione.

Once he was out of sight of his group, Draco moved away from the center of the village and quickly transfigured his Death Eater robes for something more inconspicuous, pulling the hood of his robes over his head and ducking around the corner, blending in with the crowds that were now flurrying in and out of shops.

He had to get to Hermione before the other's discovered that she was here. Before they held him at wand point and make him act on his promise to deliver her to them.

He focused on the ring as he walked down the alleyways of Hogsmeade, feeling the pulse of Hermione's magic become stronger now that he was in closer proximity to her. It didn't tell him her exact location, but as they both became used to the rings over the past couple of weeks, they had discovered that the further away they were from one another, the weaker the connection they had, and the closer they were, the more intensely they could feel one another.

Draco wound down through the alleys and cobblestone streets, his thumb fiddling with his ring. The feeling of her magic became stronger as he walked further into the village, her magic and emotions seeping through him. He felt relieved as he detected that she wasn't stressed or scared, that she hadn't been alerted to the Death Eaters' presence yet – and they hadn't been alerted to her. A slight mercy. He supposed that he could call her to him, but he did not need her roaming around more than she already was.

He had initially thought that being able to feel another person's emotions and magic on top of his own would have been an annoyance, something he would have to learn how to deal with through gritted teeth. But, he was surprised to discover that he and Hermione were more alike than he could

have ever imagined. She was as annoyed as he was when someone asked a blatantly obvious question in class, or when someone tried to talk over the teacher when they were trying to answer a question or teach a lecture. She felt the same fatigue when one of their classmates hadn't done the reading or couldn't follow simple instructions.

It was nice, knowing her stress mirrored his, or that her annoyance coincided with his. It was an unspoken solidarity that Draco never knew he needed. Slytherins weren't the most forthcoming when it came to sharing their feelings, and growing up in the stiff and cold household he did, Draco wasn't used to having such access to someone else's emotional state.

It was a lot to get used to in the last couple of weeks, but as more time went on, the more Draco got used to it and had come to appreciate it. Even just during the few moments he would take off his ring to bathe, he found himself feeling empty and bare without the constant reminder of her. It was odd to feel that way about Granger, but something he was getting used to.

Draco honed in on that feeling as he wound through a few more streets, finally stumbling upon Hermione coming out of the apothecary placing a bag of vials in the bag over her shoulder.

He waited until she rounded the corner, slightly more out of sight before grabbing her and pulling her against his chest, reminiscent of when he pulled her out of the way in the Hog's Head, starting this whole arrangement.

Only now, things were different.

Now, it was as if Hermione instantly recognized him – she gasped at the shock of being pulled out of her stride while her hands flew to his forearms as he held her against his chest, out of the way and out of sight of the Death Eaters who were now prowling through Hogsmeade.

Now, he was in tune with her magic and could feel it through the ring. He could feel her fear, but her reassurance that he pulled her out of the way. That he was there for her. That he protected her.

Now, she wasn't squirming to get away from him but was rather leaning into him, trying harder than he had ever seen her to stay out of harm's way. She knew that if he was here, pulling her out of the way, that something was wrong and that she needed to trust him.

She turned around and asked, "What's going on?" curiosity and concern filling her eyes while she scanned him from head to toe, as if she could find an answer just by looking at him.

"Shhh," Draco hushed her as a pair of Death Eaters walked nearer to them. He cast a silent disillusionment spell over the both of them, blending the two of them into the wall as Hermione turned back around, her back to his front.

"What are they doing?" Hermione whispered, her eyes locked on the doorway of the shop across the street.

Draco followed her line of sight to the door of the potions shop and watched as the Death Eaters went door to door, marking each entrance with the same symbols that Dolohov had drawn on the ground. Seemingly nothing happened when the symbol was complete and the Death Eaters made their way to the next target. One shop after another, they diligently made their way through the streets as if they were shadows, marking these shops with unknown effects.

It still didn't add up as Draco watched them go from door to door, all of them drawing the symbols, some small, some large.

Draco felt his pounding heart ease as Hermione's warmth sunk into him, the two of them huddled together as they continued to watch the Death Eaters mark each shop. When he was younger, he would have run as far from this situation as possible, fleeing any sort of dangerous circumstance he wasn't forced into. Now, while he still felt a sense of uneasiness, he felt determined to push through, to get to the other side of this situation unscathed and victorious. It was a new development for him, and he wasn't sure if it stemmed from the Unbreakable Vow to protect Hermione, or if it came from a new need to prove to himself that he wasn't who he used to be.

They continued to watch as Dark Wizards marked shops with the same symbols that had no apparent effect until they got to the Tomes & Scrolls – a widely used and essential service to the village, and the only shop known for carrying otherwise restricted or banned texts. The owner Thomas Brown was muggleborn, and widely revered for his knowledge of a multitude of subjects.

As soon as the symbol was drawn on the storefront of Tomes & Scrolls and the Death Eaters backed away from the walls, Draco heard the cracks of apparition in the center of Hogsmeade as Dolohov appeared and gave the signal for each Death Eaters to mutter the incantation to activate the symbols they had drawn.

As soon as the words left each Death Eater's mouth, screams were heard from inside all of the marked shops throughout the village. Patrons across Hogsmeade exited the stores, some seemingly fine while looking worriedly at the other shoppers who were yelling, clawing at their arms, legs, and torsos in pain.

Thomas Brown then stumbled out of his storefront, clutching at his arms and torso as if he had been burned, following some of his customers who were also screaming and tearing at their clothes. It was a disturbing sight, seeing fellow wizards and witches fight an unseen foe with such fervor. Whatever the Death Eaters had just done, it was something Draco had never seen before. Something very powerful and very, very effective.

The witches and wizards didn't seem as if they had an injury, or like any hexes had been cast on them. But the sounds coming out of their mouths were blood curling – loud and gruesome enough to raise the hair on one's arm. The last time Draco had heard a similar sound was when Hermione was under his aunt's wand in the Manor, the pain of the Cruciatus Curse weaving through her.

Draco sent a worried look at her, making sure that she was okay as they both watched the disorder unfold before them. She seemed fine, her hands still clutching his arm that wrapped around her chest, still firmly holding him to her. Her eyes tightened slightly, but otherwise she stood and watched just as Draco did, curious and confused as to what was unfolding before them.

Draco pulled his eyes away from her and studied the crowd as they gathered outside of the shops, trying to discern what could have possibly happened to them, what could be affecting them in this way. No spells had been cast, and no hexes shot. Just these strange symbols on all of the shops.

Pops of apparition sounded as the Death Eaters left after Dolohov's signal; their job done, their havoc wreaked.

Draco felt a strange pull within himself to apparate as the others did, but fought it, placing his feet firmly on the ground and holding onto Hermione, both in an effort to keep himself in place, and to keep Hermione close as the commotion spread throughout Hogsmeade.



The moment the coast was clear, Granger worked her way out of his grasp and ran up to the steps that led into the bookshop where all of the patrons of Hogsmeade seemed to be gathering.

Draco walked up behind her, the two of them studying the strange symbols that the Death Eaters had diligently drawn on each shop. They were as odd-shaped in the light as they were in the dark room where Rookwood had drawn them on the floor, bending at odd angles and not seeming to connect in any particular way. The markings didn't spell out a word in any language that Draco knew.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, a worried look overtaking her face as she moved her eyes from the symbols on the shop wall to the witches and wizards gathering around, trying to make sense of what just happened.

"I don't know," Draco responded, shaking his head.

A zap filled the air as Hermione went to open the door of Tomes & Scrolls. She let out a soft shriek as she pulled her hand back – as if the door had shocked her. Draco reached her side and took her hand in his to find it unmarked and unmarred, not a single scratch on her.

Draco reached around her and opened the door with no such reaction and walked inside, motioning for her to follow.

Again, Hermione went to cross the threshold of the shop, but jumped back as the air zapped and crackled around her once more. She tried to enter again, determined to get into the shop, but found that she couldn't, jumping back and gasping, clutching her arms much like the other patrons and Thomas Brown had.

Draco looked around the inside of the shop, perplexed as to why he could enter and she couldn't.

"Just stay there. I'll be out in a second."

Draco walked further into the shop to find nothing amiss. Whatever it was that the Death Eaters were marking the shops with, it didn't affect the contents inside. It seemed to only be affecting certain patrons of Hogsmeade, but not everyone.

Draco exited Tomes & Scrolls to see Hermione standing with shoppers just outside, the lot of them examining their bodies, looking for injuries but coming up blank. Thomas Brown was standing away from the crowd, studying the symbols drawn on the wall of his shop, a grave look on his face.

Draco walked up to stand next to him. "Any ideas?" he asked the shopkeeper.

Thomas was wise and well-read with his multitude of rare and banned texts at his fingertips every day. Surely he would know what was going on.

What Draco didn't prepare himself for was how much his answer would alter everything. How much it would flip his world on its head.

Thomas Brown said one word that snapped everything into place:

"Runes."

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“I need to speak to McGonagall and you need to go back to your room,” Draco stated as they made their way through the halls.

He was thankful that most of the students were out today so that no one could see the absolute rage that was overtaking him. His mind was reeling at the fact that he hadn’t figured it out the moment Dolohov drew the symbols on the ground during the meeting. He should have known, should have been able to figure it out on his own.

Runes.

Of course it was runes.

There wasn’t much knowledge readily available about runes, but it was widely known as an easy and foolproof way to perform magic from a distance.

And the Death Eaters had found a way to use them to bar certain people from certain places. That was why they had drawn it on every shop in Hogsmeade. They wanted to make sure no muggleborn could go into any shop, wanted to make sure that they had nowhere to hide or run to safety. The Death Eaters were now placing these symbols wherever they could in order to make it impossible for anyone with muggle blood to function in society – exiling them and making it impossible for them to go out in public safely. They might as well have pinned Howlers screaming out their blood status to their chests.

They were corralling muggleborns like cattle, preparing them for slaughter or worse.

Draco wasn’t sure which runes the Death Eaters had been drawing on the shops in Hogsmeade, as Hogwarts’ education on runes wasn’t incredibly thorough, but it wasn’t nothing. Using runes fell out of fashion years ago — there was a reason the class at Hogwarts was called “Ancient” Runes. Hogwarts didn’t even teach students how to use them— it was more like learning to decipher a dead language and all about the lore of how they came to be. They learned how to read some of them, definitely not all of them, and it wasn’t at all practical. It was such an underused and outdated form of magic that it didn’t even occur to him that the Death Eaters knew how to actually use them. He had never even seen one outside of a book. He would have to scour the library for any information he could find on runes and what he could do to stop this new threat, how to get ahead of the Death Eaters before they covered all of the wizarding world with them. Because if they did, it would be havoc trying to undo them.

His panic about needing to protect Hermione only increased the closer they walked to McGonagall’s office. Keeping an eye on her whereabouts was something he could do. Spying on the Death Eaters was something he possibly could accomplish. Stopping them from marking every inch of the wizarding world with runes that physically repelled anyone that wasn’t a pureblood? He wasn’t so sure.

“I’m coming with you,” Granger said as she began to follow him down the halls, trying her best to match her pace with his, their difference in height making it difficult for her.

“No,” Draco responded sharply. “Go to your room.”

He hadn’t wanted to tell her about what Thomas had said, didn’t want her to know about the runes because he knew that the moment she had an inkling of an answer to whatever the Death Eaters were doing, she would make it her mission to learn everything about it and try to come up with a

solution. Her swottiness had her benefits, but it would also be her downfall in this case. The threat to her safety was too big.

But of course, she had gotten it out of him anyways. She could tell he knew something that she didn't by the way he immediately started scouring the rest of the shops, confirming that yes, they had all been marked with runes inlaid with magic to bar muggleborns from entering.

Draco needed her as far away as possible from the Death Eaters and their runes, for if they were able to mark her with one, there was no telling what would happen. What the runes would do to her. What they would do to her

"I was there! I can fill her in on what I saw too. I can tell her what happened when I tried to enter that shop with the runes!"

While she was right, there was no way to have this discussion with McGonagall without talking about his work with the Death Eaters. He had to update McGonagall on so many things: what he had told Rookwood about him being the one to capture Hermione, about the runes, about how they had affected muggleborns, and what that could possibly mean for the rest of the wizarding population and his arrangement with the Ministry to protect Hermione now that this new information had been revealed. So much had changed in so little time.

He didn't want to exclude her from these conversations, but he had no choice. There was already too much going on that Hermione didn't know about, and bringing her into the fold now would just complicate matters more. He needed to keep her out of it and somehow convince her to not go off the deep end and take this issue on herself, thereby putting her in even more danger and making his job even harder.

"Hello Malfoy?" Hermione demanded impatiently, waving her hand in front of his face, attempting to grab his attention when he didn't respond.

"Granger, for the love of Merlin, just do what you're told for once," Draco clipped as he continued to stride down the hall.

"Why don't you want me there? This is a big deal! We finally have an answer! This is what we have been working towards! McGonagall will be thrilled!"

"Do we have an answer?" he seethed. The only thing Draco had now was more questions, more worry, more stress. "Do we really have more answers or do we just have more to worry about now? All I see is more for me to think about, more to keep you away from. More for me to worry about."

"I can take care of—"

"Don't finish that sentence," he cut her off while sending her a glare.

"Is this because I was there in Hogsmeade when the Death Eaters were? If so, we can tell her about the rings! And I asked you if I could go. There is no reason for her to be mad at you for that."

"It's not that," Draco responded as he turned the corner.

"Then what? You can't do this by yourself! Let me help. McGonagall would want to hear it from me firsthand and how it felt and—"

“And how do you know that?” Draco asked, cutting her off again.

“Because it’s my life on the line!”

“Granger,” Draco sighed, stopping in his tracks and grabbing Hermione by her shoulders. “I don’t need you there. McGonagall doesn’t need you there. You’ll only complicate it more. Let me do my job. What happened to us working together?”

“That requires both parties to agree on what’s being decided.”

“So you’re deciding to be childish? To be a hindrance?”

A look of hurt flashed across her face and an immediate sense of regret passed through Draco. He shouldn’t have said that, but he knew he would have to potentially hurt Hermione’s feelings in order to get her to listen and not insist on coming to McGonagall’s office with him. If there was anything Hermione prided herself on, it was being mature and level-headed, and not being an annoyance and impediment to others.

He knew that if she had the faintest idea that he felt that way about her, she would distance herself from him. And while that may be an issue later, it was a problem that future Draco could deal with.

Right now, his main focus was getting the news of the runes to McGonagall and the Ministry. After all, this was all for Hermione’s benefit, whether she knew it or not.

“Fine,” she said, before turning around and walking in the opposite direction they had just come from.

He watched her stomp down the hall towards her room, before turning himself and heading the rest of the way down the halls towards McGonagall’s office.

### **Hermione**

Hermione angrily grumbled to herself as she walked through the halls.

How dare Malfoy tell her she couldn’t update McGonagall on what they saw and discovered in Hogsmeade? How dare he keep her from explaining what she saw and how it felt when that rune kept her from walking into Tomes & Scrolls?

She knew he wanted to keep her as far as possible from what the Death Eaters were doing but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be involved in his updates with McGonagall.

Weren’t they supposed to be a team? Wasn’t that what they resolved to do?

And she was not being childish. Nor was she trying to be a hindrance to anyone. She was trying to help and trying to prove that she wasn’t a liability, that she could take care of herself and find answers to what was going on.

She breathed deeply as she walked through the halls of the castle, her feet moving of their own accord for her mind was far, far away. The only thing she knew right now was that she didn’t want to go to her room. That was the last place she wanted to be.

She needed answers.

Now that she knew the Death Eaters were using runes to ostracize muggleborns from Hogsmeade, she finally had a starting point to attempt to figure out what it was they wanted from her specifically, as well as their motives and plans for the renewed attacks.

Getting to the bottom of it would make her feel better, and make her feel like she was making a difference in all of this. She would no longer be kept in the dark or told what to do when it came to the Death Eaters hunting her down. Not by Draco, not by anyone.

Hermione arrived at the library with a vigor for information that she hadn't felt since before the war. She had to find answers. Needed to find answers. She felt that if she didn't put some work into figuring out what was going on, she was going to lose it. Give up all hope. Maybe if she found something to help, Draco would give her a break.

Hermione angrily pulled books down from the shelves, scouring the titles for anything and everything rune related.

Being able to find some inkling of information would put her back in control, and would show everyone that she could take matters into her own hands and take care of herself.

She would get to the bottom of this once and for all.

## Chapter End Notes

First things first, this chapter and I have beef. This is a big turning point for the story so I felt like I had to get everything just right! So thank you all for your patience while I fought with this chapter haha.

But yeah...runes. I always knew they were going to be a big part of this story but I am planster (meaning I have a plan but let myself figure out details as I write) so sometimes I surprise myself with where things go when I write and this was one of those times hahaha. And the more I write this story, the deeper it all gets so buckle up friends.

I don't want to put an exact chapter count yet (just because sometimes things need to be moved around and chapters are chopped/added) so we are all along for the ride here :) Thank you all who are trusting me and following along with a work in progress! I know it's not everyone's favorite but having those of you who are along for the ride make it so worth it!

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), [Halliwell19](#) and [raynick11](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

Kudos and comments are always appreciated! Until next time :))

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

TW: graphic depictions of torture.

And no, you're eyes do not deceive you -- a rare update from me! More notes on this at the bottom :)

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

### Draco

Draco ran a hand over his face as he walked down the hall, the events of the day wearing on him now that he finally had a moment to breathe.

The debrief with McGonagall went just as well as he could have expected it to with the amount of information he gave to her. The revelation of the Death Eaters using runes to control muggleborns was not a great one and if the expression on McGonagall's face told him anything, it was that she was equally, if not more, concerned about this development than he was.

The realm of possibilities of things that could go wrong with the runes was endless. They could be drawn on any surface quietly and without a commotion, their effects taking place with no notice. It was ingenious, Draco would give them that. But looking at it from the other side was terrifying, for the runes took away what little they had in their control, giving them yet another obstacle to overcome.

McGonagall had called in Shacklebolt from the Ministry to debrief about the runes, and to try and come up with a solution, but they discerned that there was nothing they could do if the runes had already been drawn and invoked, their power tied to each individual Death Eater who had drawn them. It would be impossible to track down that many wizards to break the runes.

Even if they were able to track down each Death Eater in order to break the runes, it wasn't like anyone knew how to do such a thing. The use of runes was such an archaic, dead form of magic – one that hadn't been put into practice, or so they thought, for nearly a thousand years. What few rune experts did exist were now long gone, or at least not readily available to the general wizarding population. Runes were a way of magic that all but died out once wands were invented, and then became commonplace. Any little tomes or documentation of the rune magic that had been preserved were now lost, other than the most basic texts taught at Hogwarts.

It was a new territory for this generation of wizards, one they would have to start from scratch to learn about. According to McGonagall, the newly rebuilt Ministry didn't have the resources to explore archaic branches of magic, and “since it had only happened in Hogsmeade”, it was deemed unimportant for now– they refused to task one of their few employees to investigate such a thing. Thus, it fell into Draco's lap.

This angered Draco. It seemed as if the Ministry didn't even try to come up with solutions anymore now that the war was over. Everything seemed fine on paper for the most part, and that was good enough for them. As long as the general public was sated, everything was under control. The Ministry was concerned about the runes and the wizards and witches that it had already affected, but past that, they didn't really seem to care, and they would "deal with it later". They would rather just fix the mess the runes caused than try to prevent it from happening again.

Draco had to hold in his seething rage during the meeting, biting his tongue at the idiocy happening right before his eyes. The Ministry had no idea that inaction from them would only encourage the Death Eaters. If the Ministry really wanted to show that they had their power once more, they would go after the Death Eaters, go after Dolohov, and stop this before it got worse. But, they would rather him, an eighteen-year-old, do their dirty work.

It baffled Draco. He knew the Ministry was spread thin after the war, but preventing the effects of the runes would be a lot less work than dealing with their aftermath. But what did he know? Nothing, apparently.

He stepped into the Slytherin common room, rubbing his temples in an attempt to dissipate the headache that he could feel forming. What the Ministry ultimately decided to do shouldn't be his problem, but it was because before he left McGonagall's office, Shacklebolt had tasked him with finding a way to break the runes.

Another impossible task to add to his never-ending to-do list.

He was their disposable worker, someone they felt they could shift all of the less than savory responsibilities they didn't want onto.

Draco tried not to think about it and tried to remind himself that it was all going to be worth it once his record was wiped clean, and once he and his mother were finally free.

He would never say it out loud, but he would do whatever they wanted if it meant leaving his past behind him.

Yet, if he was being honest with himself, he was already feeling bogged down by the hefty weight of what was expected of him.

Draco hadn't given himself a break since all of this started— hadn't had a moment for one. He spent every free second either lost in stressful thoughts about what the Death Eaters could be doing, thinking about where Hermione could be and if she was okay, or if he had done something wrong and the Ministry was on their way to take him to Azkaban. It was wearing on him, all of the pressures that had stacked up over the years, and he hadn't given himself the space to realize it until now.

He hadn't had a break since sixth year. Not one moment's peace.

His whole life he had been facing the pressure of what it meant to be a pureblood wizard, to live up to a legacy he wanted nothing to do with. Those unrealistic expectations pressed on him all of his life, grinding him down until he was a shell of himself when he turned sixteen. That's when his father and the Death Eaters made their move on him, perfectly molded him into the soldier they wanted him to be.

Draco entered the washroom, ready to drown his thoughts out with scalding water; burning away the stress that was slowly overtaking him, slowly turning him into a person he didn't recognize. Every day he felt a little more angry, a little more ready to burn the world to the ground for how it had treated him. Let everyone — including himself — just die and be done with it. It was a dark thought he often shook from his head.

He carefully removed his ring, placing it on the mantle before moving to take off his robes. He looked at himself in the mirror, noticing just how much he had changed since sixth year. He had always favored his mother in his stature, tall and lithe but the muscle he gained from his father's side negated any willowy traits he could have inherited. Though, during the war, he had become sallow-eyed and skinny, the physical personification of stress.

Now that he had made time to separate himself from the stress of the war and, most importantly, his father, Draco had filled out and had grown taller. But even then, all he saw when he looked in the mirror was the ghostly image of his sixteen-year-old self.

Draco turned from the reflection and had just begun pulling the bottom of his shirt out when he felt the pull of a summoning apparition in his stomach. He lost his balance as he was pulled in a circular motion and up out of the washroom before he could stop it.

Forced apparition wasn't uncommon among the Death Eaters, for Voldemort had wanted the ability to call upon his followers whenever he wished, summoning them to him at his beck and call, but Draco had assumed the ability was tied to the Dark Lord himself and that it was a thing no more once he had died. He had experienced it a few times during the war, as well as the confusion that went along with the action. It was one of the many things he was happy he would never have to experience again when Voldemort died. So whoever invoked it now had to have some sort of control over the Dark Marks — but who?

Any thoughts on how the apparition had worked disappeared from Draco's mind as he threw up his occlumency walls when he saw that he had landed at the Riddle House. Dolohov and Rookwood stood just outside of the front gate, this time accompanied by Yaxley. The three of them were talking together quietly, Draco the only other person there with them.

"Malfoy," Rookwood greeted, beckoning him over to where they were standing. "Our new right-hand man. We have an important task for you. With a possibility of growth, and an official station for you within our plan and our ranks."

Draco tilted his head, interested and intrigued by Rookwood's words as he approached the wizards, taking note that Dolohov and Rookwood were still in the same robes that they were wearing earlier today in Hogsmeade; only now, the robes were splattered with blood and dirt, dark magic filling the air around them and expanding towards Draco.

"Today while we were causing a ruckus in Hogsmeade, Yaxley was able to capture some Aurors for us," Rookwood announced.

Draco looked over at the wizard, his first time seeing the man in almost a year since the Battle of Hogwarts. He was still as grimy and wrinkly as ever, wearing posh robes to try and make up for the disgusting aura that dripped off of him.

"And I'm here because?" Draco asked no one in particular.

"You're a Legilimens, right Malfoy?"



“Yes,” Draco answered wearily, looking from Yaxley to Rookwood and Dolohov and back, worried about what they might do with such information. Legilimens were few and far between and there was no telling what they would want him to do with such an invasive type of magic.

“Good. That’s going to be very useful for us going forward. Be prepared to use it a lot more from now on, given that you do well tonight,” Rookwood said, slapping Draco on the back. “Tonight you will be assisting Yaxley in getting information out of the Aurors he captured today while we were in Hogsmeade. And if you perform well tonight, you will take on the charge of questioning prisoners as we get them, while Yaxley moves on to bigger and better things. Capturing other important people for you to question, securing new bases, all that.”

Draco looked over at Yaxley and found the wizard tossing a small knife in his hand. Yaxley was one of his least favorite members of the Death Eaters to interact with during the war- his ruthlessness and apathy toward others was unlike anything that Draco had ever experienced before. Even worse than Bellatrix, he was right up there in rank with Voldemort. Lucius had always envied Yaxley’s ability to torture, kill, and maim without remorse because of the commendation he got from Voldemort for it, but Draco always wanted to be as far from the man as possible.

“Malfoy,” Yaxley nodded in greeting. “Ready to work together once again?”

“No,” Draco deadpanned. “But I don’t have much of a choice do I?”

Yaxley let out a laugh at Draco’s honesty before gesturing to follow him down to the basement of the house, the temperature around them dropping the deeper they went. This room was separate from the one the Death Eaters used for their gatherings, built out of the same stone material that kept no heat and enhanced any and all echoes around the room. It was eerie and dark, the only light coming from the sconces on the wall.

The room was mostly empty, save for a table with various weapons laid out. Along the far wall sat four male Aurors, all gagged and bound and Stupified, currently unconscious and unaware of their presence in the room.

“What information do you need from them?” Draco questioned as he observed the Aurors.

“We need to find out how they’ve warded the castle so that we can get the mudblood,” Yaxley said as he examined the table, his expression calculating as he filtered through his artillery.

“Why?” Draco asked, turning to give Yaxley a sharp look. “I told Rookwood I would take care of her.”

“Yes, but we still need to drop the wards and seize control of the castle. We’re hoping you will have hold of her at that point and then the castle will be our new base before we overthrow the Ministry.” Draco raised his eyebrows at this new information. They were going all out with their siege it seemed, and as much as he hated to admit it, Draco was astounded with their confidence in their abilities. It seemed delusion did have its benefits after all.

Yet, the more he discovered about the Death Eater’s plans, the less he was able to piece things together. The fact that they had singled Hermione out, the runes, and now the castle...nothing was adding up.

“And how does Potter’s Golden Girl play into this? What about Potter himself?” Draco asked, leaning against the table with his arms crossed, attempting to appear casual. If there was any

information Draco wanted above everything else, it was how Hermione played into this grand scheme they had.

“I believe that’s above your rank, Malfoy,” Yaxley smiled nastily. “But Potter is obsolete now that the Dark Lord is dead and all of his Horcruxes destroyed. Maybe if you agreed to share the girl with me once this is all said and done, I’d be more willing to tell you our plans for her.”

“I never expected you to be one for lesser blood,” Draco said as he observed Yaxley, feigning a distasteful sneer on his face.

“I’m not. But I’m not blind,” Yaxley stated with a wink while running his tongue over his bottom lip.

Disgust filled Draco, even if it wasn’t the first time he had heard such things from a Death Eater. When he first pulled Hermione out of the way in the Hog’s Head, he had overheard the Death Eaters talking about her in a similar way, detailing all of the horrifying things they wanted to do to her. The thought of what these wizards were capable of put a pit in Draco’s stomach, but it made him wonder if that’s what they really wanted from Hermione all along, to use her body for their sick pleasures, because of how integral she was in the downfall of Voldemort. Was that all it was? Was she just in this big plan because they wanted revenge that badly, and she was the most famous mudblood they knew? If so, regardless of blood status and even if they weren’t locked into the Unbreakable Vow, Draco would cut down any and all wizards who deigned to put their hands on a witch without her consent.

Draco could feel his anger bubbling up, the urge to strike down anyone who entertained such despicable thoughts growing within him.

Focus — he had to stay focused. He couldn’t lash out just yet. Not here, and not now.

Draco shook the thoughts from his head, pushing his focus back onto the Aurors before him.

“So, how do you want to go about this?” Draco asked, gesturing to the Aurors and moving Yaxley’s attention away from his thoughts of Hermione.

“Ah, watch and learn, Malfoy, and maybe you’ll find yourself getting a promotion soon. We will be doing a lot of this in the coming days, you and I.”

Yaxley picked up a knife from one of the tables in the room, flipping the handle in his hand as he slowly approached the Aurors lined against the wall. He could see that Yaxley loved this, that he got a power trip from being the one in charge and having unarmed wizards to bend to his will. Only the weakest men got off on exploiting those who couldn’t defend themselves, and fortunately or unfortunately, most of the Death Eaters fell within that category.

“Renervate,” Yaxley cast on each of the Aurors in turn, waking them from their unconsciousness.

The Aurors anxiously took in their surroundings, their eyes widening when they saw Draco standing near the back of the room, fear shining in their eyes. Draco knew his reputation preceded him, but he had never seen such a reaction to his presence when entering a room unmasked. Most people cringe just at the sight of the Dark Mark and the Death Eater mask, or at the grotesque faces of the Dark Wizards themselves, but at the moment, Draco had none of those things on display. It was obvious that they didn’t know about his deal with the Ministry, and they most likely assumed

that he was following in the footsteps of his father and his aunt. As far as they knew, he was just as brutal.

But if Yaxley, Rookwood, and Dolohov truly wanted him to be a part of interrogating captured Aurors, Draco was being presented with the best possible situation he could ask for when it came to gaining the trust of the Death Eaters. Allowing him to interrogate Aurors would also allow him to communicate with the Ministry right under the Death Eater's noses. He just couldn't fuck it up, and tonight would be the first test.

There was only so much Draco could do to get the Aurors out of their predicament, and he would try his damndest, but it was going to be tricky to do with Yaxley watching so closely.

Yaxley took his time levitating each of the Aurors into the center of the room, but levitating was a generous word for it. He made sure that he only lifted them enough to move them, essentially dragging each person with his wand across the ground, roughly, to land in a heap. Finished with that indignity, Yaxley began circling the Aurors as they tried to straighten themselves into sitting positions, back to back. The click of Yaxley's shoes was timed perfectly with the drip of water that continually fell from the ceiling. The monotony of the sounds alone would be enough to drive one mad — it was a small mercy that Yaxley had kept the Aurors Stupified and hadn't let their thoughts drive them insane. The Aurors hadn't been here for long, but there was no telling what Yaxley did to get them here, or what their minds had already gone through.

"I would say we could do this the easy way or the hard way, gentlemen, but the fact of the matter is that no matter what we do, this will be effortless for me regardless. It is up to you to decide how you want this to go for yourself. And don't try to lie, because Malfoy here will be able to confirm if you are, and the consequences won't be good for you. Understand?"

The look on the Aurors' faces became even more terrified at the prospect of their memories being searched against their will, their eyes bouncing back and forth between Draco and Yaxley. Draco knew that Aurors were trained for situations like this, but there was no telling how one would react until they found themselves in it.

"You," Yaxley said, pointing the tip of the knife towards the Auror facing him. "How long have you worked for the Ministry, Mr...?"

"Sallow," the Auror answered. "Mr. Sallow. Thirty...thirty-five years," the Auror stuttered out.

"So, you should have details on the castle, yes? Maybe you were even one of the Aurors who warded the castle, so that the precious students could return in peace?"

"I...I," Mr. Sallow continued to stutter. Panic overtook the Auror's face, his eyes bouncing around the room, looking to the Auror next to him for support, darting back to Yaxley, before finally landing on Draco.

Their gazes met and as quick as he could, standing behind Yaxley out of view, Draco entered the mind of the Auror to try and calm him down.

"How is Hogwarts warded?" Yaxley asked the Auror abruptly, forcing Mr. Sallow's eyes back to him, compelling Draco to retreat from his mind. He had to be careful, for if Yaxley thought Draco was doing anything else other than searching for the information he asked for, he would surely find another Legilimens. And that Legilimens would search Draco's own mind, exposing everything.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I had nothing to do with the restoration of the castle!” Sallow exclaimed.

“Liar!” Yaxley yelled, grabbing Sallow roughly, bringing the Goblin silver down deep into the Ministry official's leg. Screams filled the air, echoing around the room and piercing Draco’s ears. The other Aurors sitting with their backs to their companion jumped at the sound echoing off the walls, the color draining from their faces as the reality of the future set in. Yaxley was coming for them whether they were ready or not.

“Please!” Sallow begged. “I have a wife. Children. I didn’t have anything to do with the castle! I work on robberies mostly, sometimes magical statute cases. But I never touched the castle. Please! I’m a half-blood.”

“Ohhh should have stopped at never touched the castle, lad,” Yaxley taunted as he continued to hack away at the man’s leg as his blood started to coat the floor. The other Aurors watched in horror as Yaxley dragged the knife out of Sallow’s thigh and into his calf, creating a long gash down the vein that ran the back of his leg, blood sputtering up and out of the vein and onto all of them, coating them in the sticky substance. Bone showed through the laceration that ran from knee to ankle, muscle laid open, tendons severed. It was a gruesome sight that sent a bout of nausea running through Draco’s stomach, causing him to turn away.

Yaxley dragged the man away from the others, and started to slowly circle around the Auror, watching as the man sob and bleed on the dirty basement floor; a puddle was forming under his leg that was sliced open, the blood slowly sliding and seeping towards the other Aurors along the gentle slope of the stones, making its way toward the center of the room.

Yaxley stopped behind Sallow, the man in front of him shaking and squeezing his eyes shut in fear.

“Please,” Sallow whispered. “I’ll do anything. I’ll serve your cause. I’ll take the Mark. Anything to continue to be with my family. Just please don’t kill me.”

“Oh, you’ll be with your family alright,” Yaxley said with a dark laugh. “Avada Kedavra!”

Green light filled the room as Sallow slumped to the floor, his eyes open and unseeing. The other Aurors stared at their colleague in shock, the reality of their own fates washing over them. Draco looked at them with pity, for he could only imagine how they felt. Their life was flashing before their eyes, and while he would try to do whatever he could to save them, it was obvious that their fates had already been decided. There was no getting out of here alive.

“Filthy half-blood,” Yaxley spat, his spit landing clearly on the dead Auror’s body. “I was willing to let him join us before he said that.”

Knife back in hand, Yaxley pointed to the Auror who was now in the center, a bigger man, sweat profusely dripping down his face.

“You’re up next. And you better hope you have some good information for me, or you’ll end up like your friend here.”

“Sir, none of us here worked on the castle. I promise you that. But I can give you the names of some people who did. Some people who will talk!”

Yaxley tsked. “Ministry officials are so ready and willing to betray their government and promise to protect the wizarding world. Interesting how that works out when you’re faced with death isn’t it?”

The Auror shakily nodded. “I’ll do anything. Just please, don’t kill me,” the man sobbed out.

“Search his mind,” Yaxley commanded Draco. “I don’t believe he doesn’t have the information we are looking for. We found him on the perimeter of the castle.”

Draco approached the wizard slowly, squatting before him and looking him in the eyes, trying his best to convey that he was on their side, that this didn’t have to be painful, and that the Auror didn’t have to die tonight. There had to be something that Draco could give to Yaxley to spare the man’s life, some sort of information that would seem useful yet not damn the Ministry.

“Now, Malfoy,” Yaxley demanded.

Draco entered the mind of the nameless official before him, doing his best to calm the man while he searched through his mind.

Draco saw the memories of the Auror leading up to when he was attacked on the castle grounds earlier today. He had been distracted, in a deep discussion with another Auror about the runes in Hogsmeade and how it was too hard to undo them. There were too few Aurors to spare any to go and try to remove the runes, so the Ministry had ultimately decided to not do anything about it. It was exactly what McGonagall had told him, but through the Auror’s memories, Draco saw the relief from the Auror that he didn’t have to get involved in rune magic. It was too risky.

“What do you see?” Yaxley prompted.

Draco moved on and continued to search through the mind of the Auror, trying to come up with a plan on how to not expose the Ministry and its lack of resources. It would be great information in Yaxley’s eyes, definitely enough to encourage the Death Eaters to push forward.

“There’s not much here,” Draco lied. “Some Auror movement, but no specific plans on what they are going to do. I see other Aurors being deployed to Hogwarts, but nothing about their-”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Green light flashed and lit up the room, the Auror’s body went limp as Draco pulled out of his mind just in time to feel the beginnings of the wizard’s death.

“Impatient much?” Draco questioned, looking at Yaxley with disgust on his face. “Being in the mind of someone who is hit with an Avada is likely to affect both parties,” he growled.

“He was useless. No one’s going to miss him,” Yaxley shrugged. “Plus you’re quick enough on your feet to get out in time.”

Draco looked at him with a stony face, no assistance from occlumency needed for the first time in a long time.

He was no stranger to the ruthlessness of the Death Eaters, but he had never had the chance to work with someone such as Yaxley one-on-one. Yaxley’s reputation was one to be reckoned with, and his actions quickly sent Draco back into the headspace he had adopted during the war just to survive.

He channeled the same ruthlessness he had put on like a mask. “How do you expect us to get the information you want if you don’t give me a fucking chance?” Draco spat.

“You’ve got two more tries,” Yaxley grinned, gesturing towards the other Aurors before him as he continued to walk about the room. Draco got up from his squat and cracked his neck, trying to shake the experience of feeling that Auror die out of his mind and body.

“I know nothing about the castle!” the third Auror exclaimed, not waiting for Yaxley to approach him. “But I do know about Little Hangleton Cemetery.”

This stopped both Yaxley and Draco in their tracks.

Little Hangleton Cemetery was a small, unassuming graveyard, but became infamous for housing Voldemort’s corpse following the war.

After the Battle of Hogwarts, a second wave of chaos ensued as everyone tried to figure out what to do with Voldemort’s body. No one - especially the Order - wanted the body just lying around anywhere.

After the Battle had ended, The Order pulled the Dark Lord’s remains out of the courtyard and stored it within the castle walls to dispose of later, after they tended to their wounded and mourned their losses.

Unbeknownst to them, the Death Eaters snuck into the castle and stole the body back, claiming their leader's corpse for themselves as a relic they wished to praise and mourn.

The Order discovered that the body was missing hours later, causing a new wave of panic to wash over the group until they got the Ministry involved. Weeks passed and raids were made under the newly reformed government. All known Death Eater bases were searched to find the body, to no avail, before they landed on it at Little Hangleton. There they found a small group of dark wizards honoring the Dark Lord’s grave as if it were a shrine for a great leader who was tragically lost.

And in a way, Voldemort was a great leader that was truly lost to the Death Eaters, a symbol of fear and power that the Death Eaters tried to emanate. He was their reason for even existing in the first place, although ultimately brought down by the force that no wizard or witch would ever be able to defeat – death.

It was odd - to think of the Death Eaters as a group of people who needed to go through the mourning process just as everyone else did. That was the only explanation Draco could think of for why the Ministry had left the mausoleum, for why they hadn’t dug his body up and immediately disposed of it. The Ministry must have had a moment of odd, misplaced sympathy for the Dark Wizards and allowed the sacrarium-like structure to stay as long as it was government-monitored. Thus began an odd partnership with the Ministry and the Death Eaters - the dark wizards were allowed to keep their leader’s body as long as the Ministry had unstrained and unlimited access to guard and monitor the wizards who went to visit it.

“What do you know exactly?” Yaxley demanded, squatting before the Auror.

“I know the incantations behind the wards. I could break them for you when the shift changes. That’s where the Ministry is putting most of its efforts. Everywhere else is second to the cemetery.”

Yaxley rose while staring the Auror down. A moment of tense silence hung in the air before Yaxley clapped once out of excitement, a wicked smile spreading across his face.

“That is what I’m talking about. This is what we needed.”

Rookwood and Dolohov came down the stairs at the sound of Yaxley’s elation.

“Keep this one,” Yaxley said, pointing towards the Auror in the center. “He’s actually useful.”

“And the last one?” Rookwood asked as he began levitating the body of the already deceased Aurors.

“Malfoy and I are still working on him. I’ll let you know what comes of it.”

As Rookwood and Dolohov worked on moving the traitorous Auror upstairs, the cycle repeated. Draco performed occlumency on the remaining trembling Auror who looked at him with hatred and spite on his face, cursing Draco under his breath as Draco entered his mind. He did his best to make up pertinent information to make this Auror seem important and worth keeping alive, but nothing would compare to the information on Little Hangleton cemetery that the second Auror had given them. Yaxley’s expectations were sky high now, and Draco feared there was no way to meet them.

Once Yaxley had the slightest inkling that the Auror was useless, he sent a killing curse the man’s way, the light in his eyes fading in a flash of green. Draco kept eye contact with the Auror as his soul left his body. He supposed that death was better than being kept prisoner of any dark wizard. That still didn’t change the ache of unnecessary loss of life.

“Good job today, Malfoy,” Yaxley said as he wiped the blood off his knife. “I look forward to our next session together.”

Draco nodded and followed Yaxley up the stairs, leaving the body of the last Auror below for Rookwood and Dolohov to collect.

“If I may ask, why do we need access to Little Hangleton?”

“There are many things currently at play, boy,” Yaxley responded. “Many things that have been planned for a long time now.”

“The war hasn’t even been over for a year,” Draco said. “What could you all have possibly planned?”

“The Dark Lord had many failsafes in addition to the Horcruxes. Getting access to the Dark Lord’s grave in Little Hangleton is just step one in our overall plan.”

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Draco felt the exhaustion of the day sink into his bones as he once again sat in McGonagall’s office, this time recounting the loss of the Ministry members who had been questioned and who Draco had performed occlumency on. Once she had heard what happened, she immediately called Shacklebolt in.

“You do know that using legilimency is an arrestable offense right, Malfoy?” Shacklebolt immediately questioned him, as if he had done something wrong of his own will.

“Yes,” Draco ground out.

“And did you try to tell them that? Did you try to say no at all?”

“What would you do if three Death Eaters twenty years your senior asked you to interrogate Aurors? To search their minds? When you know you’ll die either way? Do it, and I die. Don’t do it, and I still die. Don’t blame me for attempting to take my fate into my own hands.”

“What did they want to know?” Shacklebolt asked as he stood up from his chair and began pacing the room.

“How the castle is warded, who set the wards up, and how to take them down,” Draco answered. “All to get to Granger, and to make Hogwarts their base.”

“Merlin save us. And did they get the answers?” McGonagall asked from behind her desk.

“No. Yaxley killed them before I was able to get deep enough in the Auror’s mind to find anything. He was too impatient. They were mostly useless anyways.”

“And if you would have found anything? Would you have told them what you found?” Shacklebolt asked in an accusing tone.

“No,” Draco said, sending him a glare. “Of course not. I told them to leave Hermione to me so that I could have a reason to not tell them anything. Even if one of those Aurors did know something, I wouldn’t have said anything.”

McGonagall looked at him contemplatively. “I believe him,” she said eventually. “Malfoy has been nothing but cooperative during this whole assignment, Kingsley. Go easy on him.”

“Any word on the runes?” Shacklebolt asked, still in a gruff tone, but less accusatory.

“No, it hasn’t even been one day. But they did tell me if I performed well today I would have a permanent spot in their ranks. They want to keep investigating the minds of Aurors. I’m sure I will find out more information soon. They seemed pleased with my performance.”

“Keep climbing rank,” Shacklebolt ordered. “Do whatever it takes to get as high as you can with them. Gain their trust.”

Draco nodded, his face hardening as he suppressed the irritation that bloomed in his chest at the fact that no matter what he did, he was always going to be backed into a corner. Which was it? Make advances in finding the precious intel the Ministry needed by performing illegal legilimency and climb rank within the Death Eaters, or stay in line with the Ministry and hope the Death Eaters didn’t kill him for refusing to do what they wanted when they asked? He was so sick of Shacklebolt talking out of both sides of his mouth.

“You did good today, Malfoy. I’m proud of you. You’re really proving yourself,” McGonagall said with a kind smile.

Usually, the praise would give him hope, make him feel like he was making progress and making a difference. But the revelation that the Death Eaters were working towards accessing the Dark Lord’s grave stunned Draco. Along with the use of the runes, if it got to the point where the Death Eaters actually did get access to the grave, the Ministry would be done for.

“There’s something else,” Draco said, sighing out his stress.



Both McGonagall and Shacklebolt looked at him expectantly.

“The Death Eaters are trying to gain control of Little Hangleton cemetery,” he started. “One of the Aurors today told them that they could break the wards and tell Yaxley anything he wanted to know about how it is being guarded.”

McGonagall and Shacklebolt both stilled at his words.

No words needed to be said about why Yaxley wanted to know more about the security surrounding Little Hangleton cemetery. They all knew what was there and what it would mean if the Ministry lost hold of its security.

“Which Auror?” Shacklebolt asked.

Draco swallowed as he shook his head. “I didn’t get a name. But regardless, he knows the wards, and he was the only one Yaxley didn’t kill. He’s still with them being held as a prisoner.”

McGonagall sighed, looking to Shacklebolt for guidance.

“There really isn’t much we can do until they actually make a move,” Shacklebolt admitted. “The entire Auror department is caught up in either guarding this castle or they’re already at Little Hangleton. We’ve already had to move some Aurors around to look into the runes in Hogsmeade. We’re spread too thin.” Shacklebolt rubbed his forehead.

Draco knew what the Minister was really thinking. This would make the Ministry look weak — like they didn’t have enough resources to guard the wizarding world’s most volatile asset. If the general population knew that Voldemort’s body was just sitting in Little Hangleton almost completely unguarded, chaos would erupt even more than it already had. The news of the resurgence of the Death Eaters brought back all of the fresh worries from the war, and with the news of what happened in Hogsmeade with the runes slowly spreading across Britain, it was surely only going to get worse.

Adding that Voldemort’s grave was vulnerable and left nearly unguarded was not a good look, or a chance the Ministry wanted to take.

“Can you keep an eye on it, Malfoy?” Shacklebolt asked. “Do whatever you need to keep them away from that cemetery. I don’t care what it takes.”

“I’ll do my best. It’s going to take me getting more involved, so I need other Ministry officials to know what is going on. The other Aurors today had no idea about me working with the Ministry, and they would have killed me if they weren’t tied up with their wands broken.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Shacklebolt said. “Do what you need to Malfoy, and I’ll ensure that the Ministry knows that you are working in their best interest.”

Draco nodded and exited the office, making his way back to his room to resume what he had been doing before he had been so forcibly pulled back to the Riddle House.

He re-entered the washroom to find it just as he had left it, spotting his ring on the mantle. He reached up to grab it and slid it back on his hand, and when he did so, the feel of Hermione’s magic washing over him once more. She was content, none the wiser to the horrors that Draco had just watched and endured.

Draco looked at himself in the mirror for the second time that night and hated what he saw reflected back at him.

Something had hardened within him. The cold, tired look on his face was still there, but beneath it was stone. His eyes looked flinty, impenetrable.

He'd had to occlude harder than usual tonight, and he wasn't sure if he was ever going to be able to drop that wall in his mind all of the way.

A voice inside of him was nagging to keep his defenses up, to keep the wave of horror of his reality behind the wall, keep it from overtaking him.

But. Gut churning or not, he had to think through this unexpected boon that just dropped into his lap tonight.

The Death Eaters needed him now. He had proved his usefulness. To both them and the Ministry, regardless of the way Shacklebolt treated him. Finally.

Tonight, the Death Eaters had inadvertently presented him with the perfect opportunity to fulfill his mission from the Ministry. Draco had been so desperately looking for a door, any door that would allow him to work his way in, and now he had actually found it. They needed him and his legitimacy. He would make them depend on him, and force the Death Eaters to become inoperable without him.

As stressful and sickening as it was to work with the Death Eaters again, he'd be lying to himself if he didn't recognize that this was a great opportunity to strike from the inside and actually use it. To lead the Death Eaters so far astray that everything that they had been working towards crumbled into dust.

But, he wouldn't be able to succeed by just providing the Death Eaters with incorrect information.

Yaxley's brutality showed him that he needed to do more— fight fire with fire.

This was just beginning.

The Death Eaters may have won the battle today, but Draco was determined to win the war.

## Chapter End Notes

HI!

A random update because I:

1. miss updating this story and talking about it with everyone
2. want everyone to know that I am indeed constantly working on this story. I think about it every day, almost all day.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and can see the changes slowly happening in Draco. He is going to go on quite the journey.

Anyways, thank you for your patience with me if you are still here -- think of this as an early Christma/holiday gift from me! haha. I'm working on getting to a place where I can more regularly update this fic while also creating something to the best of my ability!

A quick note that chapters 1 through 9 have been slightly edited - nothing plot wise has changed, just some grammar and me being picky about how I've worded things :)

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), [Halliwell19](#) and [raynick11](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

Comments and kudos are always appreciated!

Until next time :)

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

Draco rubbed the exhaustion from his eyes as he walked beside a silent Hermione while she did her rounds the next night. It was nearing midnight and the castle still alive with a few students coming and going from various activities outside the school's sanctioned curfew causing for a busier than usual night.

He had spent most of the day attempting to catch up on the homework and assignments that had piled up now that he had been forced into the same advanced classes as Granger but found that the effort was futile after what he had experienced last night. He couldn't concentrate even if he wanted to. His lack of sleep and inability to focus long enough to even read the material was not a good combination. After he had returned from his interrogations with the Death Eaters, then immediately was pulled into the meeting with Kingsley and McGonagall, he promptly passed out into a restless sleep as soon as he stumbled into bed – only to wake up the next morning with the weight of everything he had to do today crushing him.

That seemed to be the theme of this term: things he didn't want, falling right into his lap. But he would try, like he always did.

Regardless, no matter how much he tried, Draco found it impossible to focus on his studies when all he could think about was the possibility of what could happen if the Death Eaters did get access to the Dark Lord's grave. What could they do with a dead body? Were there more Horcruxes that needed to be found? There was obviously more that he didn't know about — Yaxley had eluded to that last night — and Draco was going to have to continue working his way up the Death Eater ranks to find out, as Shacklebolt had suggested.

Draco stressfully ran his hands through his hair, letting out a silent sigh as he tried to slow down the thoughts that raced through his head.

Even with everything he had learned, seen, and did last night, he had been more nervous about Granger's upcoming rounds than anything, for Draco had obviously insulted her when they returned to the castle after they discovered that the Death Eaters were now using runes to ostracize muggleborns. He had said things he knew would make her mad, things he knew would set her off, deliberately trying to make it so she didn't want to talk to or be around him— but now he wasn't prepared for the aftermath of dealing with the consequences of what he said head on. He expected Granger to punish him with a berating, vicious diatribe, or even a nasty hex, maybe – he was sure there would be at least some form of fury directed at him.

Instead, he got nothing but pure silence. Hermione refused to say one word to him since he met her outside her room, and that bothered him even more.

They made their normal rounds, walking down mostly empty corridors and checking well-known hiding spots, busting students who were caught in intimate embraces that Draco wished he could wash from his eyes. There were only so many fifth years they could find snogging behind suits of armor before it got old.

They did all of this, assigning multiple students detention or taking house points away, and all the while, Hermione didn't even glance in his direction.

Once upon a time, Draco would have loved for Hermione to be as quiet as she was right now. Would have found solstice in absence of her grating, know-it-all tone. But now he was unnerved, and more than a little guilty, knowing he was the cause of her deafening silence.

They started to slowly end their loop around the castle, making their way back to Hermione's room, when Draco decided to try one more time to break this icy barrier she had erected around them.

"So, are you just going to be silent forever now? If I knew all it took was a slight dig at your character to get you to be quiet, I would have said something a long time ago," Draco said, falling back into old toxic patterns – he knew that being cruel to her was one of the only ways he would get a reaction out of her.

She remained unphased, not even acknowledging that he had spoken. Hermione continued walking down the hall at a pace Draco had to work to keep up with — which meant she was really trying to not talk to him, for it was usually her attempting to keep up with his long strides when they had to walk together somewhere. She could ignore him, but could feel the undercurrent of her annoyance through the ring, which meant he was sure she could feel his own echoing right back. It wasn't hard to guess the content of her thoughts.

"You know, I was joking when I said you were being childish, but maybe that statement holds some truth," he quipped, letting arrogant aggravation seep through his tone. "I haven't experienced a silent treatment like this in ages."

She sent him a glare, which wasn't the response he was hoping for, but at least she was acknowledging him.

"Well?" he asked, arching an eyebrow at her.

Hermione let out an exasperated huff as she broke her eye contact with him, her gaze boring down the hallway with determination to look anywhere but at him.

"You're annoying, Malfoy."

Draco let out a soft laugh at the accusation.

"Right back at you, Granger."

She glared at him again.

"I don't deal well with people shutting me out. You need to let me be more involved with your meetings with McGonagall," she said, as if that would solve all of their problems.

Draco sighed deeply before answering. "I can't do that," Draco answered.

"Why?" Hermione whirled back to face him. "What's the big deal? What's the big secret?"

*The big deal is that I'm secretly spying on the Death Eaters who are now torturing Aurors in order to get to you, and now they want to raid Little Hangleton Cemetery to get Voldemort's body, Draco thought.*

Silence hung between them once more as Draco thought about how to answer.

"It's safer if you don't know," Draco said finally.

Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. "Everyone always likes to leave me out of things. Always wants to protect me when I don't ask them to." She paused, taking a long, drawn out breath, "I didn't ask for any of this."

"I'm sorry, Granger," Draco answered quietly.

"Yeah, right," Hermione huffed.

"I'm being serious. I wish I could tell you everything," Draco said sincerely to the side of her head. She still wasn't holding eye contact with him, but at least she was talking to him. He would take it for now.

"You know, you and this whole arrangement are making my life harder than it already is," she snipped.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Trust me, Granger, you don't know what hard is."

Evidently, that was the absolute wrong thing to say – for she spun on her heels to face him, curls crackling with the ire she was suppressing inside. Her eyes, usually a warm and melting caramel, were now dark with rage as she fixed her glare onto him.

"Oh, but I do." She took another step closer. "You have no idea everything I went through in the last year and a half. Who do you think did most of the legwork and research for Harry during the war?"

Another step, this time, Draco almost involuntarily swayed away from her aggressive pursuit.

"Who do you think was constantly saving Harry and Ron from getting themselves killed in our early school years?"

His back collided with the corner of the corridor, leaving him no room to retreat.

"Do you know how hard I've had to work to prove myself in the magical world?" Her voice dropped low to a menacing decibel, full of warning. "To do everything everyone has always expected of me and it still not be enough? Now, I'm being hunted down for Merlin knows why and I'm not even being told what's being done about it for *'my safety'*. Everyone else is off celebrating the end of the war that never ended for me."

"Have you ever thought that maybe I'm being held to unrealistic expectations too?" he shot back.

"Please," Hermione brushed off in a condescending tone. "You've been given everything you could possibly want in life. Your family was well established in the wizarding world until they went and fucked it up! Boo hoo. But you still have your money and still have your blood status to save you – how hard could your life really be?"

Hermione might as well have slapped him in the face.

He knew his family fucked up. Hell, the whole reason he was even standing here right now was because of their wrongdoings. The fact that Hermione thought it didn't matter to him just showed

how little she really knew about his life and about the consequences he was forced to pay, all because of mistakes that weren't his own.

She had it all and she didn't even realize it. Friends, success in school, the possibility of a future. He had none of that. Even when this arrangement was over and his record was technically wiped clean, everyone would still remember what he and his family did. It would follow him around for the rest of his life. He was forever tainted — his past could never be undone.

"Just because you grew up in an unknown, low-class muggle family and struggled when you first came to Hogwarts, doesn't mean your life was hard," he growled at her, getting in her face. "You've had challenges, yes, but there are things I've seen and experienced that you wouldn't even be able to wrap your head around, Granger."

"And you think I haven't? You know nothing, Malfoy, about what it is like trying to survive in a world that wants you dead. You've been given everything since the moment you were born. All the way down to your blood privilege," she seethed back at him.

"Oh yeah? Is that what you think?" he spat as he pushed off the wall, moving closer to her.

"Yeah, it is. And now you're all mad and upset because you're having to work for something for the first time in your life and you have to deal with someone — me — who isn't grateful and falling at your feet."

"Oh really? Maybe I regret that day in the Hog's Head. Have you ever thought of that? That I wish I hadn't been there, hadn't heard what those Death Eaters said they were going to do to you? This is all. Your. Fault."

"Maybe you should have let them, because then we wouldn't be in this mess!" Hermione was almost yelling now, though her feet were moving in the reverse while Draco took his chance to advance onto her. "I can't help how I was born, and you didn't have to go and get involved just because you were bored. It must be so nice to have it so easy as a pureblood — you're drowning in money and privilege, never had any real setbacks in life. Clearly you feel the need to go and find something interesting to do to keep you occupied, and I don't appreciate being your fucking project."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he said as he got in her face, their noses nearly touching. Hermione's back was to the wall now, her chest rising and falling as the rage grew on her face. "The only reason the Ministry assigned me to protect you is because they're terrified of seeming like they don't have things under control. If you were anyone else, they would have left you to the wolves, but seeing as you're Potter's Golden Girl, here we are."

"You can't know that," Hermione shot back, breathing heavily.

"Oh but I do. It was one of the first things McGonagall told me when I was forced into being your babysitter."

Hermione was silent for a moment, as if it was finally clicking into place that there was a great possibility that they were both just pawns in a bigger game. That this of neither of their faults, that they both just happened in be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Even if that is true, you can't pretend you know who I am and know everything about me just because we've been forced into this!" she exclaimed, gesturing between the two of them.

“Road runs both ways, Granger. You think you know all about me?”

“I know all I need to know.”

Draco had her caged in against the wall as she attempted to stand tall, her brown eyes cutting into his like daggers, somehow still managing to look down her nose at him even though he stood head and shoulders above her.

“I never took you as one to judge a book by its cover,” Draco hissed. “You’re always fighting for the rights of lesser creatures, but you can’t give the same treatment to me when I’m telling you not everything is as it seems?”

“Those creatures had no one else to advocate for them other than me!” Hermione exclaimed. “You’re not enslaved under a magical spell like they are.”

Oh, how little the brightest witch of their age actually knew.

“There’s so much more you could know if you would just stop being a self-righteous swot. We’re more alike than you think, Granger.”

“You will never understand me,” she fumed, slamming her hands against his chest and pushing him away from her. “We will never understand each other. We are totally different, and will clearly never see eye to eye. I tried being your friend, I tried working with you on this situation, but you keep pushing me out and I’m done with it.” She stepped even further away from him, stalking down the corridor towards her room. She whirled around suddenly when she reached her door, her eyes filled with angry, unshed tears. “It would be easier if you just went back to Azkaban, the Death Eaters got what they wanted from me, and we both just ceased to exist.”

Hermione opened the door to her room and slammed it so hard the wall shook, the portraits in the frames around her door jumping in surprise at the commotion, looking at Draco with accusatory glances.

He stood dumbfounded in the middle of the hall, her words slicing through him. He had never wanted to admit it, but she was right. Things would be easier if he had just stayed in Azkaban, if she had never testified for him, if the Ministry had never given him a chance. Neither of them would be in this mess, forced to face even more darkness in the world while everyone moved on.

Draco stood in front of the door, standing defeated once again by Hermione Granger.

### **Hermione**

Hermione seethed as she paced in her room, her hands shaking with the anger that coursed through her. She had been taken aback by Draco’s words and even more taken aback by how much they stung. She was equally shocked with herself and the words she threw back at him, but everything that she had pent up inside of her just came spilling out like an overflowing cauldron before she could stop it. He egged her on when she had fought against her anger all night – she had tried so hard to be silent, to just go through the motions and get the night over with – until he finally cracked her. Why did he have to get under her skin so much? And so easily?

She had tried to be open with him – tried to ask calmly and nicely to let her be involved, especially when it was her life on the line, tried to go about it in a mature way and he just had to go and once



again tell her that it was all for her own safety, and that she had no idea how hard any of this was on him.

Please. Malfoy had no clue about the position she was in.

Just when she thought they were becoming friends, just when she thought they were trusting each other, he threw it back in her face.

He thought he had her all figured out but he couldn't be further from the truth. There was no way they would ever understand one another. She did realize their lives were vastly similar, the both of them bound by the stereotypes of their blood status, yet somehow the people they had become were simply too different, raised to always find an enemy in each other. No amount of forcing them together would change the history of the wizarding world.

It was ingrained into their blood.

Hermione continued the trek along the carpet in her room, Crookshanks watching her with curious eyes as she paced back and forth. She hadn't been this irate in ages, hadn't felt unable to stop this rage coursing through her since she was younger.

Hermione shook her head. She had enough to think about, she couldn't let a little fight with Malfoy take over her mind. There were other things to worry about.

She had spent most of the night before pouring over every book she could find about runes in the library, absorbing all the information available to her. The Hogwarts library only had the basics, but it was enough to get her some answers.

According to *A Brief History on Magical Runes*, The Death Eaters were using the Samblása runes, forged thousands of years ago by Merlin himself. They had been one of the first ways magic was used in the world before the discovery of wands as a magical conduit.

Thus, runes had been popular upon their initial invention, but as magical schooling became the norm for all of wizarding kind and magic as a whole was more readily practiced, regulated, and integrated into everyday life, the use of runes fell to the wayside.

There were hundreds of them that could be used for almost anything, but most of the documentation of such runes had been lost to time.

From what Hermione had read, the Death Eaters had only scratched the surface in Hogsmeade.

Megin was for strength and power. Vafi for chaos. Skaer for purity. And Odal for inheritance.

All of these were runes used that day in Hogsmeade. It was obvious what the Death Eaters were doing and what their goals were. If they couldn't exile muggleborns by war, they would do it by subtle force.

The runes were a supplement to their magical power. If they couldn't attack directly, they would use the runes to do the work for them.

It was genius really, using an archaic form of magic most weren't privy to, one that would do the work that the Death Eaters couldn't accomplish under Voldemort's reign of terror, and one that didn't even require their immediate presence to maintain after the initial casting.

For once it seemed the Death Eaters learned how to work smarter, not harder.

Hermione still had to dissect how the runes were specifically keyed to the muggleborns, but that was research for another day. Just knowing what exactly the Death Eaters were using was enough for now, and it was something she could bring to McGonagall to show the Headmistress that she hadn't lost her ability to take care of herself and could still get to the bottom of things.

It was something she was sure Draco hadn't had time to research himself. Knowledge about the runes made her feel important, and needed. She would be able to go to McGonagall with answers before Draco could, and she would show the Headmistress that Draco's involvement as her "babysitter" was unnecessary. She could give this information directly to the Ministry, they would be able to stop the Death Eaters, and she could go about the rest of the school year as normal – free from the confines of the castle and most importantly, free from Malfoy.

Hermione looked down at the ring on her hand with disdain, the annoyance and anger of both of them flowing through her with such force that it was hard to discern which emotions were hers and what was his. Yet, the one emotion she could pick from Malfoy was one she hadn't expected – guilt. Was he regretting all of the nasty things he said to her? Doubtful.

Not wanting to be bothered by feeling any of his emotions, Hermione slid the ring from her finger and slammed it on her bedside table, the force of it shaking the lamp that sat atop it.

She went over to the fireplace in her room, flicking her wand in order to ignite the flames and chase out the slight chill in her room.

She bent down to poke at the wood when she saw the embers moving on their own accord, shifting to form an image.

As she watched in a mixture of awe and horror, her left arm began to hurt, right where her scar was, her eyes falling on the sight of embers where the shape of the Dark Mark was taking form and the sound of a familiar growling filled the air.

The door to her room burst open and she whirled around, grasping her wand in her hand, ready to defend herself. She scrambled back towards her desk, knocking over the chair as she moved to get as far away from the door as possible.

The outline of a dog shaped creature leapt towards her from the doorway, and the blinding light of a spell shot out of Hermione's wand at the same time the red light of a curse came at her through the Floo.

That was the last she saw before everything went dark.

## Chapter End Notes

Not me making up a new magic system for a world with an already established magic system!!

More on that later :) I will be making an infographic and posting it to social and in the notes here so you can visualize the runes. I've been working on drawing them myself because I

wanted to make it clear that I'm not using Nordic runes for this fic. I know they are widely used in HP fics but I just wanted to try something new and I love building magic systems. You will be learning much more about them throughout this fic, so never fear, the world building is just beginning!

Also, who doesn't love a good banter sesh. They were due for a screaming match.

Hope everyone is doing well and thank you so so much for reading.

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

Draco flew over the Scottish mountains on his broom, the cold air stinging his skin while also refreshing his mind. He soared through trees and over the lake that sat before Hogwarts, letting his fingers skim the surface of the water as he dipped down low. After his fight with Granger, he needed to get out of the castle and get out of his head. It had been months since he had flown and it was the closest thing to freedom he would ever have until this ordeal with the Ministry was over.

His thoughts were consumed with where he could have gone wrong before his conversation with Granger had devolved into a screaming match. Was he actually a bad person, just so impossibly blinded by his own privilege that he hadn't seen anything wrong with how he acted towards her after Hogsmeade? He was miles better than he was when they were eleven, but he obviously still had a ways to go.

He thought back to what Hermione said about being thrust into a world where everything was foreign to you and starting from scratch. She was right — he had never wanted for anything in his life, at least not anything tangible. He got almost everything he asked for and then some. He would never truly know what it was like for her to be plopped into a totally new culture, to have people wanting you dead for how you were born, or what it was like to want something but not be able to get it due to limitations with money, privilege, blood status or some other arbitrary reason.

But that didn't mean his life was easy by any means. They had grown up with two sets of totally different problems that neither of them would really understand unless they personally lived them. It was an impossible problem to fix.

With the heavy weight of their fight hanging over him, Draco continued to fly around the area surrounding the castle, focusing his mind on the moonlit scenery around him. If he tried hard enough, he could almost forget everything going on in his life, becoming one with the wind and imagining how different his life would be if he had just made different choices in his life or been born into a different family.

There was nothing that could bog him down up here, not even—

His ring.

Draco looked down at the ring on his finger. There was nothing coming from it. No magic, no anger, no happiness, no feelings of calm. Absolutely nothing was coming through the ring.

Draco had become so used to feeling Hermione through it that it had become second nature to him, the feeling of her magic blending right in with his so much so that he stopped really noticing it during the day unless Granger was feeling particularly annoyed or upset.

And now, he felt nothing at all. Which only meant one thing.

Draco swirled around on his broom and headed back towards the castle at such a speed that the ground below him was a blur. He landed on the front lawn, discarding his broom before bursting into the main hall and making his way to the library.

He doubted that the Death Eaters would make the same move twice, but he couldn't rule it out just yet. Which begged the question, how were they getting into the castle? Was this another fault of his?

It was a small mercy that the castle was pretty much deserted at this time of night. The last thing he needed was for students to see him running like a madman through the corridors, ultimately causing a ruckus and getting him in hot water with McGonagall. He most certainly was not keeping a low profile, but that was not his concern right now. There was no telling what he would see or run into when and if he found Hermione, and he didn't want an audience for whatever trouble had found them once again.

It had only been a few hours since Hermione had slammed the door to her room in his face, and seeing as it was the middle of the night, he doubted that she had left her room to go to the library, but he wouldn't put it past her. Books were her escape after all, and her Head Girl status would get her into the library even after hours if she really wanted to.

As he approached the library, Draco cast a quick Disillusionment spell over himself before casting Alohomora over the library door, effectively breaking in without anyone noticing him.

He ran through stacks upon stacks of books and down winding staircases until he got to the little hidden alcove he found her in last time. She was right when she said there were parts of the library where you could hide and no one would find you, because this was one of them. He was happy to see that she wasn't here, but even more concerned about where she could be. Because wherever she was, it meant that danger had somehow found her even in the safest of places.

Draco had been lucky last time when he had found her so quickly. Not so much this time.

He tried McGonagall's office next, thinking that maybe something had happened with a student and Granger was meeting with the Headmistress about a late night incident or accident.

He found the office locked and empty.

That only left one place. And if she wasn't there, he was shit out of luck.

Draco raced up the stairs, cursing the castle for its hundreds of staircases and their need to position everything so far apart with no indoor apparation possible. It was a great security measure, but made getting more from one place to another in an emergency impossible.

When he finally arrived at Granger's room for the second time that night, he found her door wide open, causing his stomach to flip as fear jumped up his throat. He ran through the door and into her room to find Crookshanks standing over Hermione's body, meowing incessantly, his panic over his owners state apparent. Draco's breath caught in his chest at the sight of Hermione's still body and pale face laying before the fireplace, unmoving except for the slight rise and fall her breaths. Draco never thought he would be so grateful for such a small movement in his life.

The room was in a state of disarray, the desk chair pushed out and knocked away from the desk as if kicked out and over in a rush to get away from who — or what — had come after her.

The thing that caught his eye the most though was the canine lying a few feet in front of Hermione, sliced up and mutilated by what Draco knew all too well as Sectumsempra, blood slowly starting to pool out of the animal and inch towards Hermione.

He made his way over to where she laid on the floor, his hands shaking as he hovered them over her before gently setting them on her shoulders, rolling her towards him so he could look at her more clearly.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he cursed as he examined her closer. She was breathing, but pale as a ghost with small scars littering her face. Whatever she was hit with was going to have her knocked out for hours seeing as she was totally unresponsive to him bursting through her door and to Crookshank’s meowing. Whatever malicious magic she had been hit with, she had been hit hard.

She was still in the clothes she had worn earlier — meaning whatever had happened in here happened not long after their fight, and had been waiting for the perfect moment when she was alone and vulnerable.

But why couldn’t he feel her through the ring?

Draco picked up her left hand and examined it, finding that the ring wasn’t on her hand like it should be.

He glanced around the room to see if who or what had attacked her had flung the ring into a random corner when he suddenly spotted it sitting perfectly on Granger’s bedside table. Draco sighed at the revelation that Hermione must have been so mad at him after their fight that she took the ring off in a fit of Gryffindor pride, causing her to be the most exposed she had been in weeks. That also brought forward the thought that whoever had attacked her must’ve known about the ring, in addition to knowing where her room was, and her schedule.

Draco shoved those thoughts away, for those were details to focus on and figure out another time. There was enough to deal with at the moment.

He pocketed the band and gingerly picked Hermione up, her small form folding into him as he exited her room and made his way to the infirmary with her once again. Madame Pomfrey was sure to be suspicious of him for bringing her to the hospital wing in various forms of injury twice now in one term. It wasn’t good for his track record the first time he brought her in, but this time Hermione was actually unconscious, which was bound to make him look guilty.

His saving grace from a bout of panic was that she was still warm, her skin pressed up against his as he rushed through the quiet halls. Her head perfectly rolled into the crook of his neck, her hair tickling him just so as her lavender and vanilla scent filled his nose.

He kicked the doors to the hospital wing open, the ruckus immediately catching the attention of Madame Pomfrey.

“My heavens!” she exclaimed when she saw Hermione in Draco’s arms. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” Draco answered breathlessly, his heartbeat racing within his chest from both the physical exertion of carrying Hermione through the castle and from the anxiety of not knowing what happened to her, or who exactly did it and how, and if she was going to be okay.

“Where was she? How did you find her?” Pomfrey questioned him.

“I couldn’t feel her through the ring, and when I found her in her bedroom, she was unconscious.”

Pomfrey looked down at Draco’s hand, spying the signet ring on his finger, her eyebrow shooting up at the sight of it. There was no time to explain his reasoning for them wearing the matching set, but it was obvious that the healer knew the history of the linked rings and what they were typically used for.

“Hers is in my pocket,” he explained. “She took it off.”

“Set her over here,” she said, guiding him over to a free bed along the wall of the infirmary, her demeanor suddenly less defensive of the witch in his arms, and more caring towards the both of them.

He deposited Hermione down on the bed, collapsing into the chair next to it. Draco wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take. He already felt incredibly out of control of almost every part of his life, but this was the second time someone had gotten into the castle and attacked Hermione, and they still didn’t know how they were doing it. It surely wouldn’t be the last.

“I’ll alert the headmistress,” Madame Pomfrey said while quickly glancing over Hermione’s body.

“Please,” Draco croaked out.

Never in his life did Draco think he would feel bad for failing Hermione Granger. Yet here he was, guilt consuming him because he once again hadn’t been there when she was in trouble. Once again, he had failed her, and this time it practically cost the Gryffindor her life.

### **Hermione**

Hermione awoke in the hospital ward confused, not knowing how she had gotten there, and surrounded by too many people. She looked around and saw McGonagall, Harry, Ginny, and Draco all standing around her bed, looking at her as if she was going to break just by laying there. Relief lit up each of their faces once they noticed her return to consciousness.

“Oh, thank Merlin.”

“Hermione!”

“I’ll get Madame Pomfrey and let her know that you’re awake.”

Hermione made to sit up in the bed as Ginny dashed into Madame Pomfrey’s office, only to find a pair of pale hands pushing her back down. She looked up and met Malfoy’s stern silver eyes silently berating her for moving from where she was.

“You need to rest,” was all he said to her.

“But—“

“Granger,” he asserted with a cold look on his face that could freeze anyone in place.

Hermione conceded and laid back down on the bed, pulling her eyes away from Malfoy towards Ginny as she walked back over to stand with Harry and McGonagall around her bed. If he was going to continue to be cold towards her, then she would return the favor. Plus, her head was

pounding and she didn't have it in her to fight him right now. Her body ached like she had fallen off a broom, her muscles sore and joints stiff from lying still and in one position for too long.

"What happened?" she asked, looking at Harry and Ginny and ignoring Malfoy.

"There was...an animal that came into your room," Malfoy answered in a clipped tone, grabbing her attention once more.

She looked over at him, meeting his eyes for a split second before pulling them away. She could feel the stress rolling off of him even without her ring, taking note of the dark circles under his eyes and the state of disarray his hair was in from undoubtedly running his hands through it while she had been here.

Harry and Ginny looked over at him as well, a stark expression of confusion on their faces. She was happy to see her friends here, to know that they cared for her, but she couldn't help the immediate anxiety their presence brought – and by the silent looks they were shooting her, she knew she would have to explain her way out of why Malfoy was here and seemingly so concerned about her well being.

"How long have I been here?" Hermione asked no one in particular. She didn't want to look at Malfoy longer than she had to after the things he had said to her last time they spoke.

"Almost twenty-four hours," Harry answered carefully. "Gave us all quiet the scare, 'Mione."

Twenty-four hours? Hermione's mind reeled at the possibility of everything. It had all happened so fast. One moment she was reeling mad at Malfoy over all of the things they had said to one another, and the next her door was bursting open, that familiar sound of growling filling the room before she saw the outline of a dog and a hex was sent her way. All in the matter of seconds.

"Do we know what happened exactly?" Hermione followed up, hoping someone would have some answers for her.

"No. We were hoping you would have more information," McGonagall said. "Malfoy here said a dog got into your room somehow, but when we found it, it was hit with a slicing curse."

"Thank Merlin you had the foresight to cast that curse, Hermione," Ginny sighed in relief. "There's no telling what would have happened to you if you didn't."

Hermione smiled at Ginny before turning back to McGonagall. "What was I hit with?"

"Bludger imitation curse. Used in combat to knock a person unconscious for hours on end. And you were hit with a strong one," the headmistress answered. "The spell was cast straight at your head, so you're concussed. You're lucky Mr. Malfoy here found you when he did. If you had sat there all night by yourself, there's no telling what state you'd be in right now. "

Hermione cast a sidelong glance at Malfoy. The two of them held each other's gaze longer than normal as Hermione contemplated how this man always knew when and where to find her. She had taken the ring off not long after she had slammed her door in his face, but he seemed to have a keen pulse on where she was when things went wrong – he was making a habit out of finding her when she was in trouble, ring or no ring.



Hermione broke her gaze from Malfoy and looked at Ginny to find her eyes darting back and forth between the two of them, questions clearly spinning in her head. She was sure her and Malfoy's interactions seemed odd to Ginny. Merlin, she was sure just Malfoy's presence here alone was odd. Her friends still had no idea about everything going on between the two of them and the Ministry, but now was not the time for them to find out. She wanted to get out of here, to stop being the center of attention.

"Shoo, shoo!" Madame Pomfrey said, hurrying over, forcing her way in between the crowd that had gathered around Hermione's bed, leaving her with a profound sense of relief that she wouldn't have to try and answer questions from her friends that she didn't want to deal with right now.

Ginny and Harry promptly stepped away, but Malfoy held strong, keeping his feet firmly planted in the spot next to her.

"How are you dear?" Madame Pomfrey asked as she cast a diagnostic charm over her.

"I've been better," Hermione grumbled. Needless to say this was one of the more mortifying moments of her life. She hated being the center of attention in general, and now that she was the center of attention for something as humiliating as not being able to defend herself, Hermione felt a new wave of shame wash over her.

She hated that it had come to this. That she had fallen so out of control of her life that she now found herself in the one place she never wanted to be — defenseless and coddled.

She knew it was her own fault, her own self-riotous need to take matters into her own hands had landed her here.

But how had she gotten to this point? It was a far cry from who she was during the war and her earlier years at Hogwarts. She was the Golden Girl but recently she had fallen from her pedestal.

Something was going to have to change... *she* was going to have to change. She was going to have to find that strength within her once again if she was going to survive any of this.

"That I am sure of," Madame Pomfrey replied. "Nothing like some rest to get you back to normal, though. You're lucky Mr. Malfoy found you when he did."

"Hmm," was all Hermione replied before asking, "How did the animal get into the castle anyway?"

"That's something we are trying to figure out, Miss Granger," McGonagall replied. "But you do not need to worry about that just now. You need to rest and recover."

"Hermione, we have to do something about this," Harry said once Madame Pomfrey left to go prepare a potion for her head injury after she finished fussing over her. "We know what happened last time the Death Eaters found their way into the castle," Harry shot a seething look in Draco's direction. "Only this time they're after you. This is twice now."

"I know," Hermione sighed. She was so tired. She didn't have any answers as to why this was happening or any solutions as to how to stop it. She was tired of being the one who came up with the solutions, tired of being the one who always knew what to do next. "But we're not even sure if that's what's happening."

“Now is not the time for this, Potter,” McGonagall interrupted sternly. “Thank you two for being such great friends. I can assure you that we are working our hardest on keeping the castle and Miss Granger safe. But you two need to see yourself out. I need a word with Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger.”

There was an awkward shift in the air as Ginny and Harry said their goodbyes, blatantly ignoring Malfoy as they turned to leave. Hermione studied the blanket that laid over her lap after they exited the infirmary, refusing to meet Malfoy’s eyes as silence fell over them.

“Well, here we are yet again,” McGonagall started. “It is unfortunate that this keeps happening, Miss Granger. I am so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Headmistress,” Hermione replied softly.

“The next order of business is securing your room, Miss Granger, because it is obvious that you are not safe there,” the headmistress continued. “I have entertained the idea of moving you back into the dorms but we cannot risk other students’ safety. While this obviously isn’t your fault, the Death Eaters targeting you so publicly has made it rather difficult for the other students to continue on as normal.”

Hermione felt a wave of guilt wash over her for everything that she was inadvertently causing. She didn’t ask to end up in this mess. All she had wanted was to fade into the background this year, focus on her studies, and yet she had gotten the opposite.

“I’ll do whatever I can to make this easier on everyone, Headmistress,” Hermione answered. “I’m just not sure what to do anymore. I haven’t gone out of the castle without anyone in weeks, or wandered anywhere within the castle without telling Malfoy. The last two times something has happened, I was just minding my own business and following all your rules when the Death Eaters still somehow found me. The library I can somewhat understand, its fairly public space within the castle, but my room? I’m so sorry, Headmistress but I don’t know what to do about that.”

Hermione huffed at the end of her rambling, her mind soaring with all of the possibilities of how she could fix this problem, but she was coming up blank. Frustration continued to rise within her, tears forming in her eyes as the hopelessness set in.

“Me being in the Slytherin dungeons isn’t helping if something were to go wrong like it did last night,” Malfoy stated. “It’s too far away from everything. Especially the prefect rooms which are all the way up in the towers.”

“What are you suggesting then, Mr. Malfoy? That we move you up into the towers?” McGonagall scoffed as if such a suggestion was ludicrous.

“It wouldn’t be the worst idea that’s been presented to me this term,” Malfoy grumbled with a shrug.

A silence hung in the air as McGonagall considered his proposition. It was obvious that the Headmistress hadn’t been serious when she suggested moving Draco, but now that he had said it wasn’t a bad idea, Hermione could tell that McGonagall was seriously contemplating it.

Hermione, for one, was shocked that he even suggested such an idea. After all of the things he had said to her the other night, all of the nasty insults he threw her way, the last thing she thought he

could ever want was to be closer to her, especially during his “off time”. She would have thought that being as far away from her as possible would have been a perk.

“While moving you to the tower isn’t a bad idea, the fact of the matter is that there are no more rooms in the tower. They are already taken by prefects. If we were to move you, Mr. Malfoy, it would have to be into Miss Granger’s room, if anything.”

Hermione immediately started to interject, but McGonagall turned to look at Hermione, cutting off any objection. “And obviously Miss Granger would have to consent.”

“When I suggested being nearer to her, I didn’t mean—”

“No, no Mr. Malfoy, you are correct. You do need to be nearer to her rooms. This can’t keep happening. The Ministry does not need word to get out that Hogwarts isn’t as safe as they thought. The castle was rebuilt so quickly after the war that we were bound to miss something, and if these attacks are any indication, there are a lot more holes in the protection spells guarding the castle than we were aware of. If the Death Eaters were able to get access to her room once, they’ll be able to do it again. I think placing you in her room with her is going to be our best option, if Miss Granger is agreeable.”

“Headmistress, you can’t be serious,” Hermione said, the horror of the proposal not lost on her. If she and Malfoy were having so many issues right now, there was no telling what would happen if they lived together.

“Do you have any better ideas, Miss Granger?” McGonagall asked.

Hermione fell silent, her mind scrambling to come up with something, anything. She was always the one with answers and solutions, but for the first time in her life, she didn’t have any ideas.

When it was obvious she didn’t have a rebuttal, McGonagall turned to Malfoy.

“Mr. Malfoy? How do you feel about this arrangement?”

“Like I don’t have a choice,” he deadpanned.

Hermione sent a glare his way. “You’re the one who suggested it.”

“I apologize for my slip in judgment,” Malfoy spat back at her.

“That wouldn’t be the first time in your life you made a ‘slip in judgment’,” Hermione responded, her defenses on the rise once more.

“Quiet you two!” McGonagall interrupted. “I can’t believe both of you are still speaking to one another this way. Last time I saw you two together, things seemed to be going fine.”

“That was before Granger made it obvious that she would rather be dead than be anywhere near me,” Malfoy accused.

McGonagall whipped her head in Hermione’s direction. “Is this true Miss Granger? Do we need to talk to the Ministry about this arrangement? This is for your benefit, need I remind you. I would think someone as bright as you would realize that, considering you were almost killed yesterday, not to mention the fact you agreed to an Unbreakable Vow. Or have you forgotten already?”

“No,” Hermione responded quietly. “I haven’t forgotten.” Even if she felt like she could take care of herself, deep down she knew that Malfoy was depending on this arrangement to wipe his record clean. No matter how much she hated him, she refused to carry the blame for screwing that up. Too much had gone awry already.

“Well then that settles that. We will keep moving forward with this arrangement but Miss Granger, you should be much more thankful than you are acting towards Mr. Malfoy right now. If it weren’t for him, you would still be on the floor of your room right now. Possibly dead.”

Hermione flinched and kept silent at the Headmistress’ berating words. It wasn’t often — or ever — that Hermione found herself on this end of a conversation with McGonagall. She was so used to bringing troublesome students to the Headmistress that she often forgot how it felt to be scolded by her.

“And you, Mr. Malfoy, need to stop making Miss Granger feel like such an annoyance. This arrangement is for both of your benefit, I will remind you.”

“How could I forget,” Draco mumbled.

McGonagall let out a frustrated huff, eyeing the both of them, her mouth a thin white line.

“You two need to work together,” the Headmistress eventually said. “Miss Granger, you need to trust Mr. Malfoy. And Mr. Malfoy, you need to be kinder to Miss Granger.” She paused, leveling them both with her sternest glare. “And the both of you need to be more open with one another about what is working and what is not. I can’t believe I have to give you two this talk after all you’ve been through. Of all my students, you two should be the least of my worries. I shouldn’t have to tell you that I have a school full of traumatized students who are under my care — you especially are well aware of that, Miss Granger. So. Tell me, now – what caused this new animosity between you two?”

Both she and Malfoy were silent as they looked at one another.

Hermione finally broke the silence. “After Hogsmeade, I wanted to come with Malfoy to your office to explain what I saw and how I felt when I tried to walk into that shop that was marked with the runes. But he kept saying no, that he would explain it to you himself. But none of that makes sense when it’s me that the Death Eaters are after, and he couldn’t even feel the effect of the runes on the buildings. If the Ministry really cares about the Death Eater attacks and its effects on muggleborns, don’t you think they would want to hear it from me firsthand?” Hermione asked the Headmistress.

“I can’t even begin to assume why the Ministry does what it does,” McGonagall answered. “But if that is what started all of this—” she sighed, gesturing between the two of them. “Then that is an easy fix. From now on, the both of you will debrief me weekly on anything new happening—together. Does that suffice, Miss Granger?”

“Yes,” Hermione answered. “I’ve also already been looking into the runes and I’ve found—”

“That’s a conversation for another day, Miss Granger. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but one thing at a time. Let’s get you and Mr. Malfoy sorted into your new rooming arrangements. Miss Granger, I want to ask you one more time – are you amenable to temporarily sharing the Head Girl room with Mr. Malfoy, until such a time as we figure out how the Death Eaters are getting inside the castle?”

Hermione nodded - if this was one thing she could do to stop this madness, she would, even if it did mean having to deal with Malfoy more.

“Mr. Malfoy, you best go down to the dungeons now and collect your things, that way you can escort Miss Granger to her room once Madame Pomfrey deems it’s safe for her to return to her dormitory.”

Malfoy begrudgingly got up and exited the infirmary.

“Now, Miss Granger, I know what Mr. Malfoy told me about the incident, but can you recount it for me as well?” McGonagall asked as she turned her attention solely onto Hermione.

Hermione took a deep breath before she answered. “There wasn’t much to it. I was just in my room and went to light the fire and...it all happened so fast. I noticed the fire looking strange, and then I heard growling... Suddenly my door burst open behind me, and I saw the shape of the dog, and then, nothing,” Hermione answered.

“And Mr. Malfoy just...knew to find you?”

“He always finds me when something bad happens, or is about to happen. I don’t know how to explain it,” she admitted. And while it did baffle her about how Malfoy kept finding her just in time when she was attacked, she couldn’t deny the comfort that grew each time he *did* find her. Even now, when she was raging mad at him she was still grateful.

“You were very lucky that he showed up when he did.”

“Yeah, I guess I am,” Hermione answered quietly.

“Well, despite the attacks, it appears Mr. Malfoy is a great help to you, regardless of your feelings towards each other. Unless I am mistaken in my evaluation of the facts, it seems everything is going according to plan with this arrangement, Miss Granger, and we need to keep it up. However, you’re still the brightest witch I know – I trust that if anything starts to go wrong and if you ever feel like Mr. Malfoy is no longer capable of this assignment, you will let me know. I value your opinion in this situation just as much as I value Mr. Malfoy’s”

Hermione nodded her head in agreement as Malfoy walked through the infirmary doors once more, levitating bags behind him.

“Am I free to go now?” Hermione asked.

Before McGonagall could answer, Madame Pomfrey bustled back into the room with Hermione’s potion, a worried look on her face. “Yes, dear, you can go, but remember you need to rest. You are still injured. Make sure you drink all of this before you go to sleep tonight,” Madame Pomfrey said.

McGonagall stood in front of the door, her face stern. “Next time we talk, I expect you two to be on good terms, yes? Maybe some extra time together will allow you two to get to know each other a little more,” McGonagall said before sweeping out of the room.

Malfoy stood patiently while Hermione gathered her things. She didn’t deign to say anything to him, fearing that they might descend into another argument if she tried to make small talk.

Nothing had been said through the entire journey to her room from the hospital wing, and now here they stood before her door. Hermione took a deep breath before pushing her door open, letting Malfoy in as well.

The two of them entered, awkwardly standing in the center of Hermione's room, the space suddenly much smaller with Draco inside.

Hermione frowned at the small cot on the right side of her bed that McGonagall must have delivered soon after they had agreed to this idea. Hermione resigned herself to the fact that in reality, she was going to have to give up her large bed in order to make room for something bigger for Malfoy to sleep on. Even with how much she didn't like him at the moment, there was no way he was going to fit on what had been provided. His looming presence in the room was already enough proof that a measly cot wouldn't do.

Crookshanks stood at the end of Granger's bed and looked at Malfoy with malice in his eyes, ready to attack at any moment. *Good boy*, she thought.

"I guess this is home now," he said dryly, sitting his stuff on the cot next to her bed before moving to take in the various aspects of the room.

"Welcome," Hermione grumbled as she surveyed the state of her room.

It was messier than she would have liked it to be the first time she let someone other than herself in. Her usual clutter was littered throughout the room, but the remnants of the attack were still apparent. The fence that covered the fireplace was still set aside from when Hermione was lighting the fire, her desk chair still askew from when she bumped into it.

The books that lay atop the table were about to fall off, the names turned out and clearly readable. Suddenly Hermione felt like she had too much of herself on display. From the pictures of her parents and friends back home that were lined up on the mantle, to old drawings and awards from primary school pinned into the walls, to the stacks of fiction books on her bedside table, little glimpses into her life outside of Hogwarts were littered through the room. It felt so... exposing.

Everything that she hid about herself from everyone else was on full display here, and having been in the hospital wing, Hermione hadn't had the time or even the thought to clean it all up. Not like she knew she would suddenly be living with Malfoy anyway, but she felt entirely laid bare, and she didn't like the vulnerable feelings it was bringing up within her. She wasn't ready to show herself in this way to Malfoy.

"Sorry about all of this," she said as she began gathering up books in her arms. "I'll be sure to get it all cleaned out tomorrow so you won't be forced to look at my stuff all the time."

"Granger, please," he pleaded, catching her arms and stopping her from grabbing the photos off of the mantle. "This is your space. I don't expect you to fix it up just for me. Like McGonagall said, we have to work together."

"I just—"

"Stop," he insisted, grabbing the books out of her hands. "I don't care about looking at old photos of you where your hair is so bushy it covers your whole face. Or about knowing you read books like... 'A Wizard's Embrace'." Malfoy arched a brow as he took in the cover of one of the cheesy

romance novels she had hoped no one would ever find out she read, a slow grin taking over his face.

Hermione snatched the books out of his hands, a blush rising up her chest, her face burning in embarrassment.

“Well if I’m going to keep my things up, the least I could allow you to do is put some things of yours up in here too,” she offered, trying her best to follow McGonagall’s orders and make amends.

“I don’t really have much to ‘put up’,” he admitted softly.

She gave him a look. “Nothing? No decorations from your dorm or from back home?”

“No,” he answered.

The awkward silence returned once their jests were over, the two of them shifting on their feet as they tried to figure out where to go from there.

Malfoy turned and dug through his bag, searching for something as Hermione moved to pick up the things that had fallen when she was attacked.

When she stood up and turned around, she found Draco holding her signet ring out to her, the metal and jewels glinting in the light.

“Please,” he said, his voice lowering to a tenor that captured her attention, his eyes meeting hers that glued her to the spot she was standing. “Wear this. And don’t take it off again. No matter how mad you may get at me.”

Hermione took the ring from his hand and slipped it back onto her finger, observing the way the stones glided off the light and the way the metal perfectly complemented her skin tone. She could never deny how gorgeous the jewelry was.

“Scream at me. Threaten to curse me. But do not take that ring off,” Malfoy said in a serious tone that caused Hermione to look up, only to find him observing the ring alongside her.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said.

Malfoy nodded in acceptance of her apology, turning to take in the space once more.

“Well, at least now you won’t be lonely by yourself in this room,” he said as he moved back over to his cot and attempted to stretch over it, the small bed almost completely disappearing under his body.

“I’ve never been lonely,” she lied, moving to pick up and cuddle Crookshanks to her chest.

“I watched you all last term, Granger. I know the smiles are fake.”

“So are yours,” she responded in a know-it-all voice.

Draco gave her a small grin. “Seems like we are both good at pretending.”

Hermione looked at him with disbelief – she couldn’t believe how easily he saw through her. It was disconcerting. And annoying. She turned and huffed, refusing to let her walls down around him

after what he said to her yesterday – the things they had said to one another. And as much as either of them may not want to admit it, those things held some semblance of the truth. At least, usually when such hurtful things were said, there was truth in them, even if it was a little blown out of proportion.

But McGonagall was right.

Even after the nasty jabs she threw at him, he had still come for her and had known the instant something was wrong. She needed to be more grateful for him and all that he was doing to keep her safe, even if it was against his will. No matter how evil a picture of him she tried to draw in her mind, he kept proving to her time and time again that he wasn't the bad guy in the situation. He was the one trying to save her from it.

Tomorrow. She would try tomorrow. Hermione was too tired to attempt to make nice tonight. It was going to take a long time to get to sleep with him here with her. She was so used to sleeping by herself that she wasn't sure she could bring herself to fully relax with his presence. She knocked back the potion Pomphrey had given her, hoping that it would help her fall into a deep sleep and forget Malfoy was even here.

As she settled under her blankets, she looked over to where Malfoy lay on the cot next to her, his arm thrown over his eyes in an obvious attempt to sleep. Hermione muttered a quiet *Nox*, plunging them into darkness before she settled under the blanket on her bed. It felt so strange to get into bed with him there right next to her. Even if they were in different beds, there was something so intimate about sleeping next to someone. It was when you were your most vulnerable, all of your guards down, your body finally at rest. And they both had caused each other so much strife and stress that she wasn't sure if a restful night would ever be in the cards again.

Hermione tossed and turned, every movement of her sheets suddenly as loud as boulders colliding in the dark and quiet room. She finally forced herself to settle down in one position, willing herself to fall asleep. But minutes passed, her body still on high alert and all too aware of Malfoy laying next to her, the tension in the air growing by the minute.

“Granger, we can't keep going on like this,” Malfoy said into the darkness.

Hermione sat up and turned on the lamp beside her bed, washing light over where he lay.

He was looking in her direction already, sitting up once the light illuminated the room.

“McGonagall is right. I need you to trust me. Fully, now. You've had enough run-ins. *We've* had enough run-ins. Things are getting too dangerous now to keep acting like this.”

“It's only been one day,” Hermione responded. “You can't expect me to forget everything that was said and everything that has happened between us that quickly, Malfoy. But for your sake, I'm trying. I don't want you getting thrown into Azkaban because of me.”

“This has gone way beyond my own need for self-preservation,” he admitted. “I know we're not the best of friends — we established that yesterday — but believe it or not, I don't want to see you captured or killed.”

His words struck her and as she looked at him - really looked at him - she could see the genuine feelings that were lying within him. Even more so, she could feel his sincerity and concern coming



through the ring in waves – she knew he meant it. He really wanted her safe and out of this situation, just as she did with him and his deal with the Ministry.

“If I'm being honest, I think about that night at the Manor constantly,” he continued. “And I know you do too. So, in a way, this arrangement between us, it's an opportunity for me to do what I should have done that night.”

Hermione was shocked into silence. She had no way to respond to that and instead pulled her eyes away from his and studied the pattern of her bedspread as her mind reeled over his words. If he was so willing to move past their argument, to work with her and express how he *wanted* to make things right with her, then she could do the same.

“I'm sorry for what I said,” she said eventually.

“I am too,” he responded.

“Is it true?” she asked, looking back up at him. “That the Ministry only assigned you to me because they want to seem like they have it all under control?”

Draco sighed as he looked away from her. “Not completely. I'm sure they do want you safe, but that isn't their first priority. No, their top priority is keeping up appearances, and ensuring the public feels like the Ministry is no longer corrupt. They're main focus is that they have re-established their integrity so close to the end of the war. But this ordeal with the Death Eaters is making them look weak, McGonagall told me that much when this was all set up. The Ministry is desperate, and they want to look like they have a hold on things. You being targeted isn't helping that, so here I am, making sure you don't get hurt for the Ministry's benefit.”

“If they wanted to appear like they have a hold on things, you would think they would assign me an Auror, not — no offense — you.”

Draco scoffed. “None taken. I said the same thing to McGonagall.”

Hermione looked back up at him and found truth in his eyes. She regarded him for a moment, taking in the fact that they were on the same page about the folly of their situation. Was this what it was like to not constantly fight against what everyone else in your life thought? To be aligned and on the same page as someone? As the voice of reason between her, Harry and Ron, she was always trying to get them to see her side of things. But with Malfoy, he was already on her side more often than not. It was an odd perk to be paired up with him that she had not been expecting. It was *her* who had trouble seeing things from his point of view. But she was working on it.

“Truce?” she asked, holding her pinky out.

“What am I supposed to do with that?” Draco asked, looking at her hand like it was a new, never-seen-before magical creature.

“Wrap your pinky around mine. It's called a pinky promise.”

“And what are we pinky promising for?”

“To no longer judge one another. To no longer assume things about one another. To be friends and to try to survive this term together.”

Draco nodded as he wrapped his pinky around hers. Hermione pulled their hands to her mouth and kissed her hand, Draco jerking back at the seemingly loving gesture.

“What was that?”

“You have to kiss it to lock in the promise,” Hermione laughed.

“Muggles are so strange,” he said, but pulled their hands to his mouth, pressing his lips to his hand. A jolt zinged down Hermione’s body at the action, thrilled at the fact that he was indulging her in a silly muggle tradition. The fact that he did made her think that maybe – just maybe – this arrangement with him could work out after all.

They dropped their hands and Hermione laid back on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

“A pinky promise is more binding than an Unbreakable Vow, I’ll have you know,” Hermione teased with a slight smile on her face. “You’re really stuck with me now.”

A soft laugh that Draco tried and failed to disguise as a scoff filled the space between him before he replied: “Consider me bound, Granger.”

## Chapter End Notes

An alliance forms :)

It's been really interesting to explore a less than perfect and struggling Hermione. But she's getting there and will be back to her normal bad ass self before we know.

Thank you so much to everyone for continuously coming along on this ride with me!

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), and [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

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

### Hermione

The next week took on a sense of cohabitation that Hermione had never experienced before. Living with Malfoy obviously wasn't her first experience with a roommate, but it was her first experience living in such close proximity to a *man* outside of Ron and Harry. And a pureblood such as Malfoy at that.

She had been expecting them to be at each other's throats a bit in the beginning, constantly in one another's way. After all, it was a small room made for one, and Hermione already had to downsize enough just to fit herself and Crookshanks comfortably.

Yet, she and Malfoy operated together within her small space with a sense of fluidity she hadn't been expecting. He was clean and organized, and their routines fit together like perfect puzzle pieces that had been waiting to find one another.

It deeply unsettled Hermione.

It didn't make sense. They were supposed to be total opposites: pureblood and muggleborn, forced together to get through this term. Surely there were things in his life that Hermione would have trouble accustoming to, and the same for him. And while they had obviously had their moments of fighting and bickering, and some less than great moments of almost ripping each other's throats out, their relationship blossomed from one of forced cooperation to one of fluid companionship.

The intimacy of the most recent attack on Hermione, as well as the heart to heart they had the first night together in her room, had mended most of the strain that had been making things difficult. Them sharing a living space opened up a plethora of opportunities for them to get to know one another — just like McGonagall had predicted. And it was exactly what they had needed. They knew what they needed to do to get out of this situation, and nothing was going to get between them and that goal.

Instead of sneering and making fun of her belongings, Draco looked at all of her muggle objects with fascination, asking her what they were, what they did, and their purpose. Hermione would then dive into an explanation, excited to share something new and be an expert on something he was not. It became an anchor for them rebuilding what little trust they did have back up.

The only thing Malfoy made fun of in her room was her wizarding romance novels, which she was set on burning now.

Malfoy had also eventually moved some personal things into the room, mainly Quidditch memorabilia much to Hermione's disdain. But he did bring a few books from the Malfoy library — books that Hermione definitely didn't look at while he was in the restroom — and other little knick knacks. It was fascinating seeing such an intimate side of someone she was so distant from all of her life up until this point. You never really knew a person until you saw the things they held dear, what they surrounded themselves with, and what they filled their free time with.

On top of that, it was nice to see a calmer side of Malfoy for once. She was always presented with the rude, terse version of him before now. But all of this had forced them to view one another in a different light. Malfoy was quite docile when he wasn't on guard from fellow students, professors, or any of the other pressures that came with having such an infamous name. It was refreshing... nice to be around.

They, of course, still bickered. Hermione knew they would never get to a point where they didn't. But now the bickering was less out of annoyance at one another and more out of poking fun. Malfoy often laughed at her morning bed head and she at his, the pair of them looking like they had each lost a fight with niffler in their sleep.

Another thing she took note of was how deeply Malfoy slept — deeper than she had witnessed anyone ever sleeping in her entire life. She supposed it was the only time he got true peace during the day, and was envious that nightmares didn't plague him the way they did her. She was grateful that she had yet to wake him up from the terrors that plagued her in her sleep.

She couldn't even begin to imagine the stress he was under being assigned to protect her. The pressure he must feel to perform well or be sent back to Azkaban was immense. While she was jealous of his ability to fall asleep in almost the same instant his head hit the pillow, she did not envy the weight that lay on his shoulders. She was noticing that weight more and more these days.

Naturally, it took a few days for them to sort out their individual schedules and find a flow that worked. Seeing as they were now sharing the bathrooms along with all of the other prefects, Hermione now knew intimate things such as when Malfoy preferred to shower, the scent of his soap, and how his skin looked freshly washed — still slightly pink from the hot water when he walked into her room shirtless that first week, drying his still wet hair. Things like that.

She never once denied Malfoy's attractiveness — she really did understand where everyone was coming from — it was just that she never had a reason or want to recognize it before. But now that she was around him all day, everyday— she noticed.

Hermione took note of the way he rolled the sleeves of his shirts up, far enough to show his forearms but not too far as to not expose the Dark Mark on his left arm. She noticed that he became annoyed when his hair fell in his eyes when he was concentrating on his reading or studying, but found that that's when she had the most trouble looking away.

Malfoy was a highly intense person, and when he became engrossed with something, he became almost obsessive, and utterly determined to find a solution.

Pair that with Hermione's need for academic success and they were quite the duo.

Hermione shook the thoughts from her head. They meant nothing. She could recognize someone was attractive and move on. There were more important things at stake.

Now that some time had passed and they had gotten used to one another, they got up each morning, both got ready respectively, and made their way to their classes. Where Malfoy went, she went. And where she went, Malfoy went. The pair of them were finally following the rules of their agreement with the Ministry that they had so many issues with in the beginning, and so far it was working.

The only moments they were apart were when Malfoy went down to the Slytherin common room to make regular appearances so no one would get suspicious as to why he was no longer there. And

even then, they kept tabs on one another with the rings, always able to tell just how far apart they were, and if there was imminent danger or not.

And in an effort to not ostracize each other from their friends, they took turns sitting at the end of each other's house tables during meals. The Slytherins were fast to welcome Hermione much to her surprise. She had of course interacted with Blaise, Theo and Pansy before, and when the rest of the Slytherins saw her acceptance into their little group, they were quick to join in. It was the Gryffindors that had slightly more reservations about Draco sitting at their table, which Hermione fully understood, but she could tell it made him uncomfortable.

So, now she found herself taking more meals at the Slytherin table than she ever would have imagined – not only eating with them on a regular basis, but finding herself actually enjoying the company of the House she once hated with every fiber of her being. Her conversation with Pansy Parkinson from a few weeks ago was always at the forefront of her mind every time she saw her friends glance over at her while she sat at the table usually reserved for the House of Snakes. If only her own housemates knew just how much their Slytherin counterparts had suffered too, maybe they wouldn't judge her so much.

The days continued to drift by with of new normalcy that Hermione surprisingly adapted to easily. She wasn't one for change, for surrendering control to the routines she so dutifully contrived was more than difficult for her, but she found herself leaning into her new routine alongside Malfoy easily, and from the way they now orbited around one another, she could tell he was easing into it too. She stopped caring about the whispers and the looks she got in the hallways as they walked side by side. Those people didn't know the situation at hand - didn't know just how dire the situation was.

It was the end of a busy school day when the pair of them made their way down to the Headmistress's office for their newly scheduled weekly meeting after another awkward attempt at eating at the Gryffindor table. Ever since the attack in her room, it had been quiet and the Ministry still had no lead on how the runes were being utilized or controlled. Hermione read *A Brief History on Magical Runes* from cover to cover three times now, the book highlighted within an inch of its life, but still, there was nothing groundbreaking or overly useful that would answer the plethora of questions they all had about the runes the Death Eaters had placed in Hogsmeade.

Even so, Hermione sat in McGonagall's office with Malfoy, ready to spew everything she had discovered the moment the Headmistress asked her. She was ready to finally feel useful and be a part of helping the Ministry get to the bottom of what the Death Eaters were doing.

"What exactly have you found out about runes, Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked, transitioning the conversation to her.

"Well there isn't much. They're using the Samblása runes forged by Merlin, a truly ancient magic that hasn't been used in ages. There are hundreds of runes, really for anything you could possibly want, and the ability to make new runes is endless. While, I don't know the exact runes the Death Eaters used in Hogsmeade, it's obvious that they all line up to create a magical effect that is able to detect and deter muggleborns from entering establishments that they were drawn on – all while having no effect on pureblood wizards entering that same establishment. It's very possible that they are creating even more on top of what they already have."

McGonagall sat back in her chair blinking as she took in all of the information Hermione just spouted at her.

“And you’re saying there isn’t enough information on the runes in the school library?” McGonagall asked with a quirked brow, as if that was the most important part of everything she just said.

“Well, yes. We, for one, don’t know how to track all of the runes down. And then we would need to break them once we found them. And *A Brief History on Magical Runes* is just that — brief. It only talks about the origins of the runes and describes some of the first runes made, but there’s nothing past that. We only know how the Death Eaters are making the runes, but nothing about finding them and breaking them. That’s what we really need to know.”

McGonagall sat in silence for a moment while she contemplated Hermione’s words.

“Very well. I will reach out to some contacts and see what they have on the runes. But you are right, it is such an ancient magic that not many have experience with it any longer. I will let you know what I can find.”

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Hermione replied.

“What about who attacked her?” Draco asked, promptly changing the subject. He hadn’t stopped theorizing since he moved in, and was determined to figure out how the Death Eaters were getting into the castle, what happened to the dog that had been on her floor when he found her, or how they had managed to send a curse through her fireplace.

McGonagall nodded at Draco’s words.

“We’ve been working on that and I have something you might be interested in,” McGonagall said as she stood up and led the way into a small alcove off to the side of her office. “Follow me.”

Inside the room was Kingsley Shacklebolt and Head Auror John Dawlish standing before what was undeniably the dog that had attacked Hermione. The marred animal was sprawled across the table, barely held together by magic and dried blood due to the slashes Hermione inflicted upon it had gone bone deep.

The three of them approached the table, taking in the gruesome display. Hermione’s eyes scanned the mutilated body of the dog, her stomach turning at the sight of the gore in front of her. She had done what she needed to do in the moment, and cast the spell purely out of self defense. But she didn’t think she would ever get used to the violence that war created and what she was forced to do to keep herself safe. She became a different person in those moments, and she still hadn’t come to terms with the duality of who she was versus who she was capable of becoming.

She felt Draco come to stand next to her as she continued staring at the dog, his proximity so close that his arm brushed against hers.

“Miss Granger,” Shacklebolt said, nodding in her direction as she entered the room. “Mr. Malfoy.”

“Hello, Minister,” Hermione replied and granted herself a moment to look away from what had attacked her to look at Kingsley. He was in his usual purple robes and stood confidently, giving the aura of a man who was sure in his every move. Kingsley was the reason they had succeeded in so many aspects of the war, and for that she was grateful. But Draco’s words continued to echo in her mind that she had somehow found herself as a pawn in their games. That the Ministry needed to keep appearances, and that she was their direct path to doing just that. Standing next to him, Dawlish was deep in thought, concentrating hard on the sight in front of him.

“We recovered this from your room and have been casting multiple diagnostics on it, attempting to find any magical signature or any evidence of how it got into the castle,” Kingsley started, gesturing to the creature on the table.

“And have you found anything?” Draco asked from beside her, ready to get to the point.

“Unfortunately no,” Dawlish replied. Draco rolled his eyes at the Auror’s answer and grumbled under his breath. Malfoy may not like the answer Dawlish gave, but Hermione owed a lot to him. He was the one who kept her in the loop about the rise of muggleborn attacks last term, the one who had warned her to be on the lookout and to take care of the younger students.

Though, it troubled her that Dawlish was here with Shackbolt. Was he in on the power struggle that the Ministry was going through? Did he know that this ordeal was all in an effort to make the Ministry look like they were in control?

“And what is it exactly?” Hermione asked, gesturing to the corpse. Canines were some of the hardest species to tell apart – with Crups, Grytrash’s, werewolves being just a few of them – and with features that varied but only slightly so, and it took a trained eye to be able to see those differences right away. From what little knowledge Hermione did have on the subject of magical canines, she could tell that none of those examples off the top of her head were what this creature was.

Dawlish cast a spell over the animal causing the creature’s magical signatures, diagnostics and DNA codes to float above them in a shining blue light.

Hermione studied it for a moment before the revelation of what exactly they were dealing with dawned on her.

“This is a hunting hound,” Hermione whispered in an awe-struck voice.

“Impossible,” McGonagall determined immediately. “Hunting hounds were eradicated after the first war.”

“Well, not completely,” Dawlish answered with a frown.

“What do you mean?” McGonagall asked, looking horror-struck at his answer.

“The Ministry always keeps a copy of the magical signature and DNA of creatures even if they were eradicated from the general public,” Dawlish answered. “Just to have on file.”

“So if someone were to get into the Ministry and find those signatures and DNA…” Draco trailed off.

“They could technically repopulate an extinct species,” Hermione finished.

“In theory, yes. But it’s not as easy as you think,” the Auror said, scratching the back of his neck. “It’s also possible that some of the hounds were missed after the first war with Voldemort. They’re mostly native to the Highlands, and well, that isn’t the easiest terrain to navigate. There was a lot of loss and other things the Ministry was trying to juggle after all of the fighting was over.”

“So they might not have even been eradicated in the first place?” Draco asked, a slight sound of rage in his tone.

“It’s possible,” Kingsley replied, butting into the conversation. “There’s no way to really know. The first war was gruesome, and many things weren’t recorded. The world as a whole was in a lot of mourning, and it was more important to focus on the positives at the time. The general population didn’t need to know about the possibility of hunting hounds running around freely. Such things weren’t recorded for the sake of peace.”

“Seems to be a theory that the Ministry is still following,” Hermione grumbled under her breath. Malfoy let out a small laugh, hearing her sly remark.

“So you all decided that collecting DNA samples of every magical living thing was the better decision? Didn’t even think of the possibility of someone using that information to wreck havoc down the road?” Draco deadpanned with the hint of a steeliness overtaking his eyes. “Why didn’t you all try to make sure you got rid of everything that was causing the problem instead of trying to cover it up? It’s just come back now and caused an even bigger problem.”

“They haven’t been a problem until now,” Kingsley answered matter of factly. “And even then, we’ve only heard of this one. It’s a singular, isolated incident.”

It was no wonder the Ministry was fighting so hard to make it seem like they had everything under control. If Kingsley truly believed that this was the only hunting hound in existence, that this was the first instance of their appearance since the first wizarding war against Voldemort, things were worse than Hermione could have imagined. The more Hermione seemed to learn about the inner workings of the wizarding government, the more it seemed like they had no control over anything. That it was all a ruse.

Hermione studied the hound, taking in its fur pattern, recalling the hounds and other tracking types they had learned about in Magical Creatures during third year. Hunting hounds were brutal and terrifying, because unlike most other dogs, hunting hounds could sniff out a wizard or witch's magical signature, DNA based off of hair, skin or piece of clothing, or — the purity of one's blood.

“Is it possible that the Death Eaters are using more of these hounds?” McGonagall asked Dawlish.

“They are,” Hermione answered, not taking her eyes off the creature. “Almost every time I’ve been near an attack, I hear them, and I saw paw prints in Hogsmeade not too long ago. It all makes sense now. They’re using the dogs to find me, to sniff me out. Any muggleborn actually. All of them.” She turned to look at Draco and found him already studying her, the dots connecting in his head at the same time as hers.

“That’s the conclusion we’ve come to as well,” Kingsley added with a nod.

“Now the question is, how are they getting inside of the castle?” Hermione asked, her eyes slowly peeling away from the animal to look at McGonagall, Dawlish and then at Kingsley.

She didn’t miss the subtle exchange between McGonagall and Kingsley, both imposing adults trying to mask embarrassment that was akin to a child being caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

“The wards are renewed, nothing should be getting in,” Dawlish answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Well obviously things are,” Draco snapped, the annoyance in his tone palpable.



Hermione resumed studying the hound as she walked around the table when her eyes caught on an odd mark just under the animal's neck. It dipped and swirled in a familiar pattern, and as Hermione tilted to look at it closer, an even deeper realization flooded her mind.

"This one has a rune on it," Hermione stated, observing the marking. "I don't recognize it from any of the symbols from the books in the library but, that's definitely what it is."

Draco rounded the table to come stand next to her, taking in the sight of the rune alongside her.

"A rune?" Dawlish asked in disbelief. "We thought those were only used on Hogsmeade."

"Obviously not," Hermione responded with a frown.

A beat of silence filled the room.

"Minerva, can we have a word in private?" Kingsley said to the Headmistress. She nodded and they both left the room, closing the door to her quarters behind them and leaving Hermione and Draco in the office with Dawlish.

"We knew the runes were used in Hogsmeade, but had no idea that they could be used like this."

"Does the Ministry have *any* idea what's going on at all?" Draco asked, not even attempting to hold back his irritation now. Hermione looked up at him, slightly shocked by the anger in his expression, not to mention the internal force of it also rolling off of him in waves through the ring and into her mind. He was furious, the rage pounding through him so strongly that it was affecting her own emotional state, boiling her blood and making her heart beat harder and faster. Hermione took a deep breath, calming herself and willing the same for Malfoy. They couldn't afford to lose their cool right now, just as they were finally getting answers. She watched as the tension slowly melted off of Malfoy, his shoulder relaxing and his fists uncurling. He looked over at her with a grateful expression before taking a deep breath and focusing his attention on the hound once more.

Dawlish shrugged, rubbing the same space between his eyebrows while letting out a deep breath. "Our numbers are down and we are spread too thin. I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for Minevra personally calling me and my colleagues in to keep an eye on the school's wards." Dawlish sighed again, a look of defeat briefly flashing across his features as he took a moment to allow the tired weight of a post war world to rest on his shoulders. "We're doing all we can."

"So you're saying that the Ministry is truly in shambles? That everything that they're telling the public is a lie?" Hermione questioned, feeling truly angry now herself. She was grateful that Shackbolt was out of the room so that she could speak freely on the thoughts that had been searing in her mind ever since Draco told her what was happening behind the curtain. She could trust Dawlish. He had been so honest with her last term, that surely he had to be there for her now.

He shrugged. "I suppose so. But as long as the public believes everything is alright, that's half the battle. Once people start to believe that things are going bad again, well, that's when we really need to worry." So, Dawlish did know the true state of things but refused to divulge that information to her last term. In hindsight she was glad he didn't, for it would have made her feel more desperate about the situation, but she couldn't help but feel like she had been kept in the dark on purpose. That wasn't calming her down, and she knew it was only ramping up Draco's frustration once more. She could feel him seething down the ring, and could tell he was minutes away from exploding. She knew Draco was becoming more and more impatient with the Ministry with everything they had piled on him. And the fact that the Ministry was continuing to keep the public

in the dark just so they appeared in control while the brunt of it all was falling on Draco only made the matter worse.

“But things are already going bad,” Hermione said bluntly. “In fact, they haven’t really improved since the end of the war.”

“It could be worse,” was all Dawlish replied, his voice hollow but clear. He was done with the conversation.

Draco and Hermione looked at each other at the same moment, as if the pair of them were having the same reaction to the words that had just come out of the Auror’s mouth. How much worse could it really be? The magical world was essentially back in the same place it began, terror raining down on those considered ‘less than.’ Could the Ministry really not see the same pattern happening over and over again? Or were they blatantly ignoring the cycle and falling victim to what the wizarding world already knew? For it was easier to go along with the status quo, than to do the work it took to break it.

For the first time, Hermione truly understood what people meant when they said war was easy, but it was the reconstruction after that was hard. But were they even reconstructing at all? No one was screaming “Magic is Might” from the offices of the Ministry anymore, but what did it matter how loud they were if the same people who were behind that in the first place still got what they wanted in the end? What had *happened* to Kingsley? To his promises of making the wizarding world a better place for all? Was the Order and the war and defeating Voldemort all for nothing?

McGonagall and Kingsley reentered the room and Hermione couldn’t help but notice the look of despair that sat on the Headmistress’s face before she schooled it into her normal, no nonsense demeanor. Maybe the Headmistress had finally realized that the Ministry was playing a ruse all along too.

“Well you’re almost there,” Draco said, responding to Dawlish’s asinine statement, dragging Hermione out of her spiraling thoughts. “Everyone already knows that the Death Eaters are hunting down not only Granger here, but muggleborns as a whole. Let word get out that hunting hounds and runes are being used as well and you’ll be close to full blown pandemonium.”

“Our ultimate goal is keeping Miss Granger safe and taking down the Death Eaters,” Kingsley snapped at Draco. “You know this. We just need to keep these things under control and out of the public eye, and everything will work out just fine. I will not let what happened last time word got out about the Death Eaters running amuck happen again.”

Dawlish wiped sweat off his brow at Draco’s words and Kingsley’s less than kind response to them.

“I think that’s enough for now,” McGonagall butted in, turning towards Draco and Hermione. “You two can see yourselves out.”

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Hermione replied as the pair of them made their way out of the office and firmly closed the door behind them.

“Idiots. Everyone in the Ministry is a bloody idiot,” Malfoy grumbled beside her as they made their way down the hall, waves of rage still billowing off of him through the ring. “They really thought the runes were only going to be used in Hogsmeade? Anyone with half a brain would know that the Death Eaters wouldn’t stop there.”

Hermione inclined her head in agreement. She had no words, nothing to say of what she just witnessed.

If the Ministry was really that daft, was there any hope? Any reason to trust their word and lean on their suggestions? Why was it so impossible to depend on anyone put into positions of authority there?

At this rate, she was surprised that they even cared to assign her protection after the Death Eaters publicly declared that they were going after her.

And then she remembered.

The only reason she had been assigned protection is so that the Ministry seemed like they had everything under control. Like they were strong, mighty and powerful following the defeat of Voldemort.

Draco's words from their fight rang through her mind. At the time, she resented his insistence that if she had been any other muggleborn that the Death Eaters were after, the Ministry wouldn't even bother protecting her. It was at that moment that she knew he was right.

The only reason they acted on her behalf was because Hermione was so closely tied with the Ministry, Harry, and the success of winning the war. Seeing a beloved war hero fall so closely to the end said war would not speak to much success.

There had to be more she could do — especially now that she knew that the Ministry wasn't actually doing *anything*. They knew nothing about the hounds, nothing about the runes.

She could start there. Take matter into her own hands and research until she found a way to stop the runes and whatever it was that the Death Eaters were planning on doing with them. She was sure that she and Draco could find a way to stop this themselves.

"I'm going to the library to see if I can find anything more on runes," Hermione announced. "It's odd that there's one on the hound. It must be for some reason. You and I both know that the Death Eaters don't do anything without cause."

"There shouldn't even be hounds in the first place, much less those monsters somehow getting into the castle. I don't understand how the Ministry couldn't make sure that all of the hunting hounds were wiped out 30 years ago," Malfoy said.

"Just because they're in charge, doesn't mean they do everything right," Hermione retorted sardonically, though the bite of her tone was not directed at him, but more at the situation.

"Yet another thing we agree on, Granger."

Hermione glanced at Malfoy only to find him already looking at her.

She sighed as she turned back to look in front of her before asking, "How do you think they are getting in the castle?"

"I don't know. I don't want to think someone is letting them in, but nothing else makes sense."

"The Ministry screened all of the new professors, didn't they?" Hermione knew they did. McGonagall had shared as much with her and all of the prefects at the beginning of the school

year.

“That’s what they said,” Draco replied bitterly. “But politicians say a lot of things. Doesn’t mean they actually do it.”

Hermione had always had an unwavering belief in the Ministry to do the right thing, but the more Hermione learned about everything going on with their government and the situation with the Death Eaters, the less and less Hermione continued to trust them. And seeing the way Shacklebolt had talked to Malfoy today had been unsettling. She knew why the Minister wouldn’t trust him, but if he disliked Draco so much, why put so much faith in assigning him such a task as protecting her in the first place?

They entered the library together and began making their way down to the section where Hermione had previously been researching anything and everything there was to find about runes. The two of them scoured the stacks together, Draco handing books to Hermione that were just out of her reach. Anything that had the slightest mention of a rune or hunting hounds was pulled from the shelves, but it was to no avail. Hogwarts had a robust curriculum, covering almost any and all wizarding subjects, but the history of the wizarding world was deep, and most classes and books only scratched the surface. Hermione hated to admit it, but for the first time in her life at Hogwarts, the library was letting her down.

Draco let out a frustrated huff next to her. “There’s nothing useful in here. Even as a first year, I had to write home to find actual information from the Malfoy private collection.”

“I always knew you cheated,” Hermione teased with a smirk.

“It’s not cheating if I’m just using the resources at my disposal,” Draco responded, an idea suddenly coming alight on his face. “That’s where we need to look.”

“You think the Malfoy library will have something on runes?” Hermione questioned.

“Yes,” Draco answered with a fervor she had never seen before. “There are books there that are nearly a thousand years old. Old logs, journals, tons of stuff. Someone was bound to write about runes at some point. I should have thought of this earlier.”

“And you think your family will be okay with this?”

“It’s just my mother at the Manor — she’ll enjoy the company.”

“What do you mean company?”

“You’re the bookworm Granger, and you already know more about the runes than me, so you’re coming with me to scour the Malfoy Library.”

Hermione sat in silence at Draco’s words. Of course she would die to have endless access to all the information in the Manor library, but the prospect of going back *there* ...she wasn’t sure if she could do it. She had gotten over her and Draco’s strenuous relationship over the past week because of the forced proximity, but she didn’t know how she would react to being in the place that had fundamentally changed her forever, the place she still had nightmares about almost every night.

“Don’t overthink it just yet, Granger,” Malfoy said, no doubt noticing the subconscious change her thoughts made to her expression. “I still need to ask my mother, but I’m certain there is something

in that library about runes, and I'm also certain she will let us visit her." His face dropped and a sudden softness coated his tone as he said, "She would be thrilled honestly."

Hermione nodded at Draco's words, trying to be grateful for having him around and his willingness to use his family's personal library for her own issues. She knew that they were past their personal squabbles and petty schoolyard rivalry now, but she still had to wrap her mind around the fact that she and Draco Malfoy were...friends. You didn't just flip a switch and immediately reverse seven years of enmity with someone. But as weird as it felt, they *were* friends, so much so that he was inviting her into his home of his own free will.

"Well, well, well, if it's not Hogwarts' most loyal study partners," a teasing voice said from behind them, breaking through Hermione's internal panic about going back to the Manor and disrupting their thoughts.

Hermione turned around to find Theo, Pansy and Blaise approaching them. How they always seemed to find them in the library, Hermione did not know, but now that she had spent more time with them at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, the anxiety she once felt from their presence was long gone. She had spent several mornings now watching them talk with Draco, experiencing how they now welcomed her with open arms, taking her attachment to Malfoy in stride without a fuss. The war had made them grow up and see outside of the pureblooded bubble they grew up in and had made all of them go from schoolchildren to soldiers practically overnight. The days of hexes and hateful words thrown across corridors due to House rivalries seemed so far in the past now, like moments from a different life. War had changed all of them, and she now knew deep their friendship with Draco went, and truly felt comfortable around them. She never thought her life would look like this, that these people would be *her* people – yet here she was.

"So what are we studying this time?" Theo asked, plopping down next to Hermione.

"A lot of things," Hermione answered, closing the book in front of her and sliding her notes out of view. She wasn't sure what Draco had told his friends about the runes, the hounds or the Death Eaters — if anything at all — but it wasn't her place to give them that information. Nothing of the sort had come up during meals over this first week that she and Draco had been living together. If Malfoy wanted to tell them what they were working on, that was up to him.

"Don't make Draco work too hard, Granger, or his brain will explode," Theo jested. "That pretty head can only hold so much."

"Oh I know," Hermione answered with a laugh.

"You two deserve a drink for all of this studying you've been doing," Blaise added, flopping down in the chair next to Draco.

"I could take you up on that," Draco said, closing the book he had barely begun reading.

Theo clapped his hands together in excitement. "It's a date then. Riddle me this: four Slytherins and a Gryffindor walk into a bar..."

"I don't know where you're going to go with that Theo, and frankly I'm afraid to ask," Pansy muttered, sitting next to Hermione.

Pansy had continued to befriend Hermione, and needless to say, it was something she was still getting used to, but she appreciated the female companionship that she had lost after the war. She

had attempted to reignite those friendships that became strained after the war, but being constantly accompanied by Malfoy definitely didn't make matters easier so she found herself leaning into the newfound friendship with Pansy.

"How are you today?" Pansy asked. "After the thing in your room and everything."

They weren't planning on telling anyone about the attack, but once again, word had gotten out when the Aurors were spotted removing the dog as well as the Death Eater who had been at her door. Rumors had run rampant and more eyes than ever turned to Hermione. It all made her severely uncomfortable, but there was nothing she could do about it. Pair that with her being tied to Malfoy's hip and now hanging out with Slytherins in the library and at their House table during meals, and Hermione was severely disrupting the social status quo that once stood strong at Hogwarts.

"I'm...better," Hermione answered, pulling herself out of her reprieve to address Pansy's question. "Malfoy's been a great help."

"You've given him purpose again, that's for sure," Pansy replied while looking over to her friend. "You might not see it, but I do."

"What do you mean?"

Books abandoned, Hermione glanced over to where Draco was talking with Theo, a joyful glint in his eyes as he listened to whatever it was that Theo was enthusiastically explaining.

Even with everything going on, his friends brought out a lightness in him. For a few moments, the heaviness of the world melted from his body and she saw who he truly was under it all. She knew Malfoy had to keep his walls up in order to protect himself, but seeing him in these moments, he was a far cry from what he showed everyone else.

"He looks like he's actually living again. Right before and during the war, he was a ghost. He walked around like he had no reason, no purpose in life. You've given that back to him."

"Oh," was all Hermione was able to respond. What did one say to being told you've given someone purpose again? In a way, she supposed it was true. He had a goal to work towards now with this assignment, something, although dangerous, to look forward to. There was hope that he and his mother would have a new future after all of this was over and who was he to not want that? She didn't think she was the reason for his new found purpose, but merely a means to get on the good side of history. That's not how Pansy made it sound though. She made it sound like it was more than that somehow.

"I don't know how or why you've given him purpose, maybe it's because he's being forced to work with you in your classes and he feels like he needs to keep up with you, but whatever it is, it's working."

So Pansy didn't know the truth.

None of them did.

They had no idea that Draco was her human shield and had come to her rescue four times now, fighting off Death Eaters in order to save her life. They didn't know that Draco had comforted her

through the pain of Bellatrix's torture during the war or had been there for her – saved her – from the attacks she had experienced this year.

They truly thought that Draco and Hermione were study buddies who had turned into friends.

Hermione knew Draco was still making regular appearances in the Slytherin common room so as to not draw suspicion about where he was now living. But other than that, Hermione had no idea how he was keeping the charade up with his friends. He was constantly with her now, so there was no telling what the rest were thinking. She was sure Pansy was reading too much into the situation, or at least classifying their closeness in completely the wrong way.

“Well,” Theo started, slamming a hand down on the table to get her and Pansy's attention once more. “I know Granger and Draco aren't doing any more studying. Let's get this night started early, eh?”

“Not tonight, Theo,” Draco objected with a shake of his head.

“C'mon! Who even are you? We haven't had a night out in so long, and I know for a fact that Granger here has never experienced a *Slytherin* good time.”

“Granger, you can say no,” Draco said next to her.

“It's a school night. I'm not really sure what you could have planned,” Hermione responded.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Don't put it past him.”

“It's Theo's mission to get everyone absolutely obliterated by his hand at least once,” Blaise informed them, a mischievous glint in his gaze as he looked between the members of the group.

“Oh, I'm good,” Hermione responded quickly. The last thing she wanted to do was get drunk with this particular group of people, especially with everything going on.

“Merlin, Gryffindors are hard to befriend,” Theo grumbled.

“I'll be your friend, Theo. Over *coffee* or *tea* though maybe,” Hermione emphasized.

Theo put his hands up in surrender. “If you say so. Next time, Granger Danger.”

The Slytherins stood up and hovered at the edge of the aisle, waiting for Draco as he packed his things.

“I don't have to go, Granger,” Malfoy said to her quietly, turning so his back faced his friends. “If you'll be uncomfortable alone in your room tonight—”

“Go,” Hermione answered. “I'll be fine for a few hours. And I'll keep the ring on. You deserve to have some fun.”

Malfoy looked at her for an intense moment before he nodded, pivoting on his heels, and following his friends.

Hermione sat in her room, enjoying a rare moment of solitude when a knock sounded on her door. Her body instantly went tense, fearful that another Death Eater was already at her door yet again. But with the Aurors' and Draco's wards that were keyed specifically to them, she knew logically that no one would get past.

She stood on her tiptoes, looking through the peephole in her door, and saw the person she least expected on the other side.

Ginny.

Hermione whipped the door open swiftly but couldn't help the confused look that overcame her face.

"Hi," Ginny said nervously.

"Hi," Hermione responded, equally as nervous. "Come in."

"How are you doing? How are you feeling?" Ginny asked as she entered her room, moving to sit on Hermione's bed, obviously tense and on edge.

"Better. Better for sure," she answered, sitting down next to Ginny.

It had been so long since she and her friend had been alone and had a moment to themselves. She and Ginny weren't always close, but as time went by and Ginny got older and more involved with Harry, their friendship blossomed. Ginny had become the confidant that Hermione had needed for a time, especially through the war.

But like the rest of them, after everything was said and done, Ginny had moved on from the war quickly, the threat to her gone. And once the attacks on the muggleborns had started up and Hermione saw that Ginny was also blind to the problem at hand, she had pulled herself back from their friendship as well. While she didn't want to bring anymore stress onto her friends about the situation, she still couldn't help but feel hurt by her friend's avoidance of the situation.

Ginny was silent as she glanced around the room and noticed everything that was notably not Hermione's before turning to her with an eyebrow raised.

There was a beat of silence before Ginny asked, "Do you want to explain what is going on with you and Malfoy?"

There it was. The million dollar question. She was sure Ginny was concerned for Hermione after the attack, but with the way her friend had been looking at her and Draco in the hospital wing, Hermione knew Ginny was endlessly curious about the details behind the change in their relationship. Did she tell Ginny the truth? Or just play it off like this was nothing?

"I'm not really supposed to say anything," Hermione settled on, though her answer was forced and awkward. There was no easy way to go about this.

"Well, it's obvious *something* is going on. Look, you know I care about you, and as much as it makes me want to puke that you're dating Malfo—"

"We are *not* dating," Hermione interjected, her mouth gaping open in shock.

Ginny was quiet for a moment as she processed what Hermione said.



“Okay, so you’re just living together casually? What kind of sense does that make? Who just lives with a guy they’re not dating? And he just *happened* to be at the ward with you, sending death glares to everyone who tried to get close to your bedside? He watches you like a hawk everywhere you go. Even when you’re sitting next to him in the Great Hall, his eyes are always on you. We all see it. Luna, Harry, Padma, Neville – ”

Hermione was quiet for a moment as she took in her friends' observations, and considered how odd all of this must seem to everyone on the outside looking in – everyone who was not aware or were choosing to ignore the true horrors that were happening right under their noses.

“It’s...complicated,” Hermione answered.

“So complicated that he’s...living with you?” Ginny parroted back in disbelief, gesturing around Hermione’s room that was clearly full of both of their stuff.

Hermione sighed but didn’t answer — the situation was too nuanced to begin to explain, especially now that they were getting to the point where they were starting to uncover what the Death Eaters were doing. On top of that, Hermione had begun to realize that she didn’t mind Draco’s presence — that he was a welcome companion and met her at the same level where so many others failed. How would she even begin to explain that to Ginny, and all without hurting her feelings?

“Why is it so complicated Hermione?” Ginny pressed on, not taking Hermione’s silence as a satisfactory answer.

“He found me after the attack. He saved my life,” Hermione muttered simply with a shrug.

“So what? Does that just automatically make him your bodyguard? Do you trust him that easily? Even then, I don’t think sticking you in this room with Malfoy is the best course of action. Remember how he was before the war? How much he hated you? All of the things he did to you? Him being a Death Eater for Merlin’s sake! Are we just going to pretend all of that never happened? You’re with him all of the time now, and it’s weird. I know you’re partners in a couple of classes but taking meals with him and the rest of the Slytherins? Bringing him to the Gryffindor table like we don’t have *years* of rotten history? It makes no sense! If you’re not dating, or having some kind of enemies with benefits situation, then what *is* going on? I’m worried about you.” Ginny said the last part softly, a huff of air leaving her now that she had aired all of her grievances.

There was so much Ginny didn’t know, so much that Hermione was keeping from her and all of her friends.

“Again, Ginny...it’s complicated. There’s so much to explain...”

Ginny gave her a despondent look.

“How did it come to this? I mean, Malfoy situation aside, do you know why the Death Eaters are after you?” she asked.

“No. That’s the mystery of it all,” Hermione said.

“I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me. Not telling all of us,” Ginny admitted.

Would Hermione ever stop feeling guilty for the cards the world had dealt her? Would it be like this forever? Keeping this secret from her friends, always looking over her shoulder, never knowing

who to trust?

She had put all of this on Draco, not telling a soul just like the Ministry asked. And even though he would never admit it, she could see how holding both of their trauma on his shoulders was affecting him. Affecting herself as well, if she wanted to be honest.. They both would crack at some point — especially as the pressure of the situation continued to build.

She should tell someone. They both should.

She needed someone who knew her from the beginning, before all of this, to know what she was going through now.

Someone else to depend on.

What was the worst that could happen if her friends knew what was going on?

“I’m going to tell you something that I’m really not supposed to tell anyone Ginny, but I have enough going on and don’t want to keep secrets from you,” Hermione sighed. “I honestly need to tell someone before I lose it.”

Taking a deep breath, Hermione dove in and told her everything, closely watching the expression on her friend’s face as all of the details came together. The Death Eater attacks, the hounds, the runes...she held nothing back.

“You’re saying that the Ministry has no idea about what’s going on with the Death Eaters? With the attacks in Hogsmeade?” Ginny questioned with a shocked tone that matched the look on her face.

Hermione nodded in confirmation. “They know they’re attacking muggleborns. They know they are after me, but they have no idea why.”

“And they’re having Malfoy look after you because of his experience with the Death Eaters? That’s why he found you after the attack in your room and why you’re always with him now?”

“Yes.”

“That makes no sense.”

“That’s what we said too,” Hermione replied with a sigh, already feeling lighter that someone besides her and Malfoy knew what was going on. “We met with McGonagall and Shacklebolt today and they further confirmed that they don’t know what is going on or what to do. There are hunting hounds out there again, Ginny. And they had no idea.”

Hermione could see all of the puzzle pieces start to connect in her friend's mind. The corruption of the Ministry for using Malfoy as their scapegoat to seem like they had everything under control, the confusion and the rage about what the Death Eaters were doing, the complete and utter ignorance the Aurors had in regards to the entire situation.

“So are you and Malfoy friends now?” Ginny questioned after she was done processing everything else.

Hermione was silent as she thought over Ginny’s question.

How could she even begin to explain their dynamic to someone outside of it? The last time Ginny saw the pair, they were at one another's throats, ready to rip each other to shreds. And now, after their heart to heart and living with each other, they had established a groundwork of trust and companionship. So, Hermione wouldn't say they were friends, but more so partners. Two people with impossible odds set on them, forced to work their way through challenges together.

Hermione's thoughts were pulled away to her ring as a soft hum of happiness warmed it.

It was a rare emotion for either of them these days, and she was glad to know that Draco was finding a moment of joy among everything else that surrounded them. Too often lately they had both felt desperate and unsure of what to do. They deserved moments of peace with their friends, most of all him.

"Hermione?" Ginny asked, pulling Hermione out of her own mind.

She hesitated before she responded: "I would say we're two people who've both been dealt an unfortunate set of circumstances. And that we're starting to find that those circumstances intertwine more than we ever thought possible. We're more similar than we ever imagined."

Ginny shook her head, exasperated but smiling. "Never in a million years would I have thought to hear you say that you and Malfoy are similar, 'Mione."

"I never thought I would be saying it either," she laughed back.

They continued to sit and talk for a while, Ginny catching Hermione up on her progress on the Quidditch team, her relationship with Harry, and everything Weasley related. Hermione felt a pang of sadness that the people she once admired so much weren't really a part of her life anymore. Her home away from home hadn't been a place she ran to for a long time.

But she couldn't help but think that she was in the process of making her own new home again. Forging her own path in life.

And if her friends wanted to meet her on that path, they would.

"Ginny?" Hermione asked as her friend made her way to her door.

"Yeah?"

"It was nice talking to you," she said with a smile. "I miss you. I miss everyone."

Ginny smiled weakly at her. "We miss you too, 'Mione. We're always here for you, I hope you know that."

Hermione nodded, even though she wasn't sure how much she believed it.

"Don't be a stranger," Hermione responded as Ginny walked out into the hallway, leaving Hermione to her thoughts.

As always, thank you for reading :)

Kudos and comments are appreciated!

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

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

### Hermione

As the days went on and Hermione and Draco settled into their routine, it seemed as if they were given a small moment of reprieve, for their biggest current issue was once again their schoolwork and continuous scouring of the Hogwarts library for any and all information on the hunting hounds or runes. They had found a few tomes in addition to the ones from their initial search, even rereading the books they had deemed unworthy, and they still came up dry. It was odd that the Hogwarts' library seemed to be missing such a huge part of wizarding history from its curriculum, and Hermione couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't by accident.

She would have suggested looking in the various bookshops in Hogsmeade if it had not been for the runes on the walls barring her from entering, so they worked with what resources they did have, even going as far as asking professors about any knowledge they might have possessed, stored deep in the crevices of their seasoned minds after decades of teaching. And still, they came up empty handed and Hermione continued to grow more and more perplexed.

Why did Hogwarts seem to be missing such a huge chunk of information on subjects that played such a significant role in wizarding history?

Their last hope had become the Malfoy Manor library, but as they couldn't just rush off to Draco's ancestral home any time they pleased, there were other assignments and readings to be done. Hermione was getting a head start for the day, catching up on assigned chapters for class and still pulling her hair out over their charms homework.

Nothing they tried seemed to garner any real results.

Hermione jotted down any and all ideas that came to mind, determined to find a way to make a tracking charm work. She knew that the assignment was supposed to be challenging, supposed to push her knowledge of magic and the way it worked to the brink, but never had she struggled so much with a school project.

Maybe it was the trauma of the war affecting her, or the distraction of being wanted by the Death Eaters – or maybe it was just *everything* that had happened in the last two years was finally catching up with her, piling up and up and up until she couldn't distract herself with research anymore.

Maybe the strain was finally too much.

It was all finally too much and the stress of it all was forcing her to stop and take a break, and be less than perfect. To not be the one constantly trying to have all of the answers and solutions to every problem around her.

It wasn't like she had to try and let go of her urges of perfectionism — the universe was doing it enough for her this term.

Was there a greater reason for her to go through even more trials and tribulations following the war? Or was it all just some sort of sick joke?

And as much as she was reluctant to admit it, she hated that Malfoy got the brunt of it all. That he had to walk behind her and pick up the pieces. She had distanced herself enough from Harry and Ron that they didn't have to deal with it, and now all Malfoy was experiencing the opposite- all he knew of her was the faltering front she had put on since the beginning of the term and the mountain of issues she was trying to handle. She weirdly wanted him to see that she could hold her own, see more of what Harry and Ron got to experience with her before all this happened. When she could remember being actually happy.

Hermione shook her head. She was better than this, *stronger* than this. She was tired of being cast as the damsel in distress and knew that she could get to the bottom of all of this if she just stopped feeling sorry for herself.

She had just spent the last year actively fighting in a war for Merlin's sake. And *won* .

"Are you still stressing about that?" Hermione heard from behind her, breaking her from her musings. She looked over her shoulder to find Malfoy sauntering her way, a playful grin on his face. A wave of lightness washed through her as he approached — it was one of the nice things about the rings — if Draco was happy, generally she was too. They opened up a two way street of shared emotions between them, and thankfully, the pair of them had an unspoken rule of not manipulating one another's emotions in a negative way. And in this moment, she was grateful for that.

Malfoy sat on top of the desk beside her, taking her notes out from under her quill and studying them.

"Seeing as we haven't found a way to get the tracking charm to work and the assignment is due in a month...yes, I am *stressing* about it," she responded, exasperatedly running her hand through her hair.

Malfoy read over her notes with a thoughtful look on his face. "Hmm...these are good thoughts here, Granger. But we have other things to focus on. Do you have any plans for today?"

Hermione looked at him quizzically. "Other than studying and going to class, no."

"Merlin, even after living with you for a couple of weeks, your swottiness never fails to shock me. But good, we have plans."

"What do you mean?" Hermione wearily asked.

Draco produced a letter from his robes and dropped on the desk in front of her.

"We're officially invited to use the Malfoy library."

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The pair of them wasted no time flooing into Malfoy Manor after classes, the fireplace spitting them into a room dedicated to receiving guests.

Hermione was so ready to finally get some real answers that she accepted Malfoy's invitation without thought, stepping through the fireplace in the parlour room of the Manor before she had

even considered how coming back might affect her. Her mind was too focused on research, the books, and the answers they might find here, but her body – it instantly recognized this place and the trauma she had endured here, immediately tensing up, her chest getting tight and her stomach churning, the feelings of unease taking over.

Hermione braced herself as she followed Malfoy out of the parlour, waiting for the same cold chill she had felt that night during the war to seep into her skin. It was one of the fragments of that night that had stuck in her mind, reminding her why she hated the Manor so much – how cold and uninviting it was, the Dark magic hanging in the air like a badly scented candle. She never thought she would walk these halls again, never thought she would set foot anywhere near this place. Yet here she was.

She looked over to see if Malfoy felt the same way, and she immediately noticed the tension that radiated from his jaw and down through his shoulders. He was trying to dampen his emotions so she wouldn't feel them through the ring, but she could tell he was stressed – tense. Over the last couple of weeks they had been living together, Hermione had studied him and his expressions like she did textbooks, correlating his expressions and body language to his emotions, committing them all to memory. It had turned into a weird game of sorts, her trying to guess what he was feeling or thinking before the thought or emotion came down the ring. He was a hard one to figure out at first, but as Hermione practiced and studied him more, she was quickly able to tell what he was feeling or how he would react to something before it came down the ring.

Hermione felt a wave of guilt come over her — she had unknowingly encouraged him to come back to a place that he probably wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Do you come here often?” Hermione asked, hoping to ease the tension and foster a sense of solidarity between them about their feelings of this place.

“Not as much as I should. I only come here to visit my mother every once in a while. If it weren't for her being on house arrest, I don't think either of us would be here,” he paused, voice lowering to an almost incoherent whisper. “Too many bad memories.”

Hermione nodded her head in response and attempted to get a grip on the anxiety rising up in her as they made their way down the seemingly endless hall, passing doors upon doors and a plethora of portraits of deceased Malfoy family members. Their painted figures leaned and whispered to one another, sneering at her, looking down on her with those judgemental grey eyes — no doubt commenting on Hermione's presence.

But Hermione couldn't be bothered by their gossip. She was too focused on what door the drawing room was potentially behind and if that's where they were headed. She doubted that Draco would arrange a meeting with his mother in the same room she was tortured in, but she had no idea how large Manors like this one operated. For all she knew, the Malfoy Matriarch had moved on from that night and continued using the room as it was intended. Her breath came quicker at the thought, her mind reeling and spinning as she mentally prepared to face it when a hand at her elbow stopped her in her tracks. She stopped, looking up at Draco – who was studying her intently.

“I can feel your anxiety screaming through the ring.”

“Sorry,” she breathed, looking down again as she twitched with her hands nervously. “It's just all so much. I never in my life expected to be back here again.”

Draco softly grasped her chin and tilted her face up to meet his. She sucked in a breath not only at his touch, but at the deep color his stormy grey eyes took on in the low light of the hallway. Somehow, his were different from those in the portraits. “It’s going to be okay. Deep breaths, Granger. Nothing bad is going to happen to you, and if it does, I’m here.”

She felt herself relax at his words, his touch and the slight feel of calming legilimency flowing through her, grounding her, just as he did last time she was here under Bellatrix’s knife. As she calmed down, she reminded herself of her earlier thoughts – she was stronger than this, she could get through this.

They stood there for a moment, basking in a rare moment of peace with one another, the promise and possibility of what they may find out about runes in the vast Malfoy Library hanging over them. Whatever they found, it could change everything.

It could end this.

“Draco?” a soft voice called from one of the rooms, breaking them from their shared reverie.

Hermione felt herself tense once more at the sound of that voice, for it could only belong to the one resident of such a large estate. She’d never really given Draco’s mother passing thought until the war, their interactions few and far between. But she had no reason to dislike Narcissa Malfoy, for without her, Harry wouldn’t have had the chance to kill Voldemort. To end the war that was tearing the wizarding world apart.

The Malfoys were an odd saving grace for the wizarding world as a whole — except for Lucius of course. No one expected Draco and his mother to help Harry and the Order when they needed it the most, but without them, the likelihood of the war ending was practically nonexistent. It was a shame that Narcissa Malfoy got as much of a sentence as she did, but Hermione supposed that being compliant in all of her husband’s doings made her as much of an active Death Eater as anyone else, even if she did right in the end.

Still though, as Narcissa Malfoy exited the room she was calling from, meeting them in the hall and smiling when her eyes found her son. Narcissa looked just as Hermione remembered, maybe just a little happier. It was clear the stresses of the war had lifted from the woman’s shoulders slightly, prisoner though she was. She held a regal air, surely commanding the attention of any room she walked in, but she didn’t seem inherently hateful.

“Hello, Mother,” Draco said, breaking away from Hermione and approaching his mother, wrapping her in a warm hug. The love they had for one another showed in the embrace, and it was obvious that the woman only acted as she did during the war because she thought it was what was best for her family, not because she had altruistic motives for saving the wizarding world. Hermione felt a pang of jealousy that she had lost such a connection with her parents. But she knew what she was witnessing in this moment wasn’t always how it was for Malfoy.

In all of the years that Hermione had gone to school with him, she had only ever seen him interact with his father, never his mother. She didn’t know what to expect of Narcissa Malfoy, but she couldn’t be more opposite of Lucius if she tried. That much was already obvious.

Where Lucius had been demanding and harsh, it seemed Narcissa loved her son for who he was.

“Mother, I’d like you to meet Hermione,” Draco said, turning to gesture toward her.



Hermione was struck by the way the syllables of her first name rolled off his lips. How it made her feel, how it affected her. She had only heard him say her given name a few times, but even in the last few days, she felt herself start to think of him as *Draco* and not so much as *Malfoy*. She never really realized just how much it meant to her to hear her name from someone she cared about. Someone she considered a friend.

“Hello, dear,” Narcissa said, meeting Hermione’s gaze. “I’m glad to be able to officially meet you under...calmer circumstances.”

Hermione let out a nervous laugh as she moved to approach the pair. “It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Malfoy.”

“Please, call me Narcissa,” she corrected with a kind smile. Hermione came to stand next to Draco and felt the slight warmth of his hand on her lower back, steadying her. Her eyes flickered up to his face before going back to Narcissa’s, only to find her looking between them both, a slight twinkle in her eyes. Hermione nervously fiddled with her hands, Narcissa tracking the movement and focusing her attention on Hermione’s left ring finger, right where the signet ring she wore was disillusionsed. Hermione suddenly became very aware that she was wearing a revered Malfoy heirloom that had once belonged to the woman standing in front of her and moved her hands behind her back, bumping into Draco’s arm that rested there.

“I’m so glad you two could come. It’s not often I get visitors,” Narcissa continued, thankfully not addressing the uneasiness Hermione felt about wearing a family heirloom in front of the matriarch.

“You know I try to come by as often as possible,” Draco said. “I’ve been rather busy lately.”

“Yes, yes.” Her eyes once again flickered between the pair of them. “But nothing brings me more joy than to see my only son happy and thriving. I was more than happy to open the library to you two if it meant I got to see Draco more.”

“Of course, Mrs—Narcissa,” Hermione said. “Depending on what we find today, we might be in your hair more than once.”

“I’d be happy to host you both as many times as you wish.”

“We will be in the library,” Draco stated, ending the conversation, tightening his hand on her back to guide her towards the double doors at the end of the hallway.

“Of course. I’ll have Topsy bring you both some tea,” Narcissa called, looking at the pair of them warmly before her eyes fell on where Draco touched her – that small smile continuing to paint her face.

Hermione felt a wave of heat come over her face. What did she think of her and Draco’s relationship? Did she know about Malfoy working with the Ministry? Did she know that Hermione was being hunted down by the Death Eaters? Did she know that Draco was being forced to look after her, bound to her by an Unbreakable Vow? Or did she simply think that they were just close study partners?

Draco guided her down the rest of the hallway, doing her best to ignore the continued whispers of the portraits they passed, and before she knew it, they were standing in front of a large set of dark wooden double doors that creaked loudly as Draco pushed them open.

Hermione sucked in a breath as she took in one of the grandest sights she had ever seen.

Books went on for as far as she could see, shelves towering all the way up to the vaulted ceiling. Hogwarts' library was large and she was sure there was no way the Manor library was larger, but at this moment, she felt as if she could get lost in here for hours.

Hermione took a few steps into the room, immediately noticing the shift in atmosphere compared to the hall they just came down.

While the hallways of the Manor were cold and drafty, the light in them pale and grey, the library was warm and full of soft, inviting natural light. The smell of leather and old books filled the air, the warmth from the fire seeping into her very bones. Floor to ceiling windows took up the far wall from the door, and a large fireplace to her left warmed the space, several large brown leather chairs in front of it.

It was homey and lived in, unlike what she had seen of the rest of the Manor. It was a place that she wouldn't mind spending all of her time in, getting lost in the thousands upon thousands of pages that surrounded her.

She was quiet as she took in the large chandelier that hung above them, the intricate and colorful glass work an anomaly from the rest of the decorations she had seen in the hallway.

"Everything okay?" Draco asked, coming to stand behind her as Hermione's silence continued on.

"It's just... it feels so different in here," Hermione said with a shake of her head as she walked further into the room, looking up at the ornate painting covering the expansive ceiling of the library. It depicted a brutal story of a mighty government at war with itself, the leaders of the society backstabbing one another in a bloody scene as the land they were supposed to be guiding fell to ash behind them.

Draco entered the room and looked up at the ceiling with her. "This was the one place that Voldemort and the Death Eaters never came into or used, so very little dark magic has ever touched it."

"Thank Merlin for that."

"Yes, I have lots of happy memories here," Draco responded.

Hermione turned to look at him, an expression of surprise on her face.

"I know it may seem like it, but my childhood wasn't all that cold and harsh," he revealed with a sad smirk on his face.

"I never thought it was," she responded, even if it was a little bit of a lie. With how Draco spoke of his father and acted during his years in Hogwarts, it was hard to imagine anything else but that. Constant pressure to perform and become everything his father wanted, blood purity preached to him every minute of every day.

Yes, it was hard to imagine that Draco Malfoy lived a life of anything other than one full of harsh standards.

“My friends and I have many happy memories in these halls,” Draco said, looking around the space as if he was reflecting on happier times.

Hermione looked at him. “I’m sure your mother and the elves loved the lot of you running amok in the halls.”

“She did, honestly. It was my father who...” Draco trailed off, clearing his throat as the air between them became slightly awkward.

“Thankfully you don’t have to worry about him anymore,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, that’s one good thing the war gave me. What do your parents make of all of this?” Draco asked, obviously looking for a connection over the sore subject of parental trauma that neither of them really wanted to broach.

He knew nothing about her family life other than the few pictures she kept up in her room and the even fewer stories she had told him about her childhood. She could only imagine how odd it must seem to him that her parents were totally disengaged from the wizarding world when it was his whole family’s life.

Hermione didn’t make it a habit to talk about her parents much. Never brought them up unless she was asked, and a question like this from Malfoy was one she had been dreading the most.

“They don’t know about any of it,” she answered finally. “I obliviated them before the war. They don’t...remember me,” she said, choking the last two words out. “They don’t know or remember anything about the wizarding world.”

Draco stood in a stunned silence. It obviously was not the answer he was expecting.

“Have you tried bringing their memories back?” he asked, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“No. They moved to Australia,” Hermione answered softly. “And after the war, I was so swept up in the rehabilitation of the castle and everything that the Ministry was pulling us in to do to help rebuild the wizarding world that I...I haven’t had a chance to go try and restore their memories. I fear it may be too late to save them.”

“Granger...” he trailed off. He obviously hadn’t known that such a simple question would lead to such a despairing conversation. The regret was written all over his face.

“It’s fine, really,” she dismissed quickly, clearing her throat uncomfortably. “Them not knowing anything about the wizarding world when everything started was the best possible solution to keeping them safe. I had intended to restore their memories after the war, but things really haven’t gotten any better. It’s for the best if they continue to not remember me or any of this. Especially now.”

The silence in the air was palpable as she let Malfoy take in her response. Her reality.

“Do you ever give yourself a break?” he eventually asked her, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean?” she questioned, meeting his gaze once more. His eyes were curious and inquisitive, and oddly warm for the shade of grey they were. She had only ever seen his eyes as sharp, cunning and full of malice throughout their younger years, but the more and more time they

spent with each other, the softer Malfoy looked at her. And right now, his expression was one of such tenderness that Hermione couldn't help the feeling of safety she felt wrap around her.

"Do you ever stop trying to hold it all together? Stop trying to be what everyone thinks you are or wants you to be?"

Hermione huffed out a harsh laugh. "It's funny you ask that, because this term I can't seem to keep everything from falling apart. Just this morning I was thinking about how much I've been failing."

"None of this has been in your control. You can't help anything that has happened to you," he countered, coming to stand closer to her.

"I know. It's just—I'm not used to this. This isn't *me*. I'm not the girl who needs to be saved. Who needs help. I'm usually the one with all of the answers, the one who *does* the saving. And yet..." Hermione's words faltered, unable to find a way to express her thoughts out loud.

"I've been doing just that? Saving you?" The vulnerability of admitting that neither of them wanted to be in this situation finally reared its head. Draco continued, "And to make matters worse, I'm me. And you're you. The history between us really doesn't make this easier."

Hermione shook her head. "It's...been a lot. And I'm sorry you've been forced into all of this." She paused, taking a breath to steady her nerves. "I'll admit, I've been off my guard, but now that things have escalated so much, I'm ready to defend myself again. To take some of the pressure off of you. You deserve better than this. Now that I really understand just how dire the situation is, I'm ready. And I want to apologize again for how I acted." Hermione looked at him. *Really* looked at him. She hoped he saw the sincerity in her eyes, a tiny bit of the flame of the girl she was during the war.

"We've already been through this, so you don't need to apologize. Plus, you make me feel like I'm not completely useless Granger, so I'd say we're even." Warmth spread from the ring on her finger through her body, the sincerity of his words hitting home. Hermione took another deep breath as her nerves settled, accepting Draco's calming aura spreading from the ring and settling through her. "And, you don't need to always have it all together. No one does. You're allowed to not be the Golden Girl now and then."

Hermione felt a pang in her chest at his words, the truth of his words settling deep within her. She didn't need it, but it was nice to hear someone give her permission to not have to keep herself to such high standards. To hold that space for her and tell her it was going to be okay if she faltered a bit.

"Thanks, Malfoy," she sighed. "But I'm ready to be myself again. I know I don't need to hold it together all of the time, but it will be better for us both if I do. We will get out of this situation faster if I do. I guess I just needed a bit of a break after the war, and I wasn't ready for all this mess to happen so soon. It almost feels like we didn't even win."

"Tell me about it. I just wanted to fade into the background after everything, but here I am." His arms came out on either side of him in emphasis.

Hermione was silent for a moment. "Does your mother know about everything going on? Why we're really paired up?"

"Granger, my mother is the only reason why I'm even doing any of this," he said, his silver eyes flashing to meet hers. "So yes, she knows."

Of course it was. Of course his mother was his reason, of course Malfoy found another way to undo everything she ever thought about him. Underneath that cold exterior and all of the awful things he let the wizarding world think about him, at the end of the day, Malfoy was just a boy who loved his mother fiercely and would do anything to protect her.

“Seems like we’d both do anything it takes to keep our families safe,” she responded.

“Anything,” Malfoy agreed. “I’d do anything for the people I care about.”

Hermione smiled. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?”

Draco shot her a quick smile in return. “I guess we are, Granger.”

## Chapter End Notes

Kicking my feet over my own chapter hahaha. We love a good bonding moment over messed up families and realizing that they both would burn the world down for the people they care about 🥰

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), and [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on all socials as elleerheawrites :)

Thank you so much for reading! Kudos and comments are always appreciated <3

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

It was late as Draco worked in the Hogwarts library, the silvery moon lighting up the parchment he was scribbling on when the pain of his Dark Mark jerked his attention away from the assignment, causing him to rush out of the library and out of the castle, making his way outside to where he stored his Death Eater robes far past where any preening eyes would see him, past the Herbology greenhouses, near the Forbidden Forest.

After he and Hermione had returned from the Manor, coming up dry on their search for runes but had plans to return to the estate to continue their research, Draco headed to the Hogwarts library, hoping to find some answers of his own, while Hermione promptly fell asleep in their room.

But now, those plans were null and Draco appeared back at the Riddle House, the searing in his arm stopping the moment he landed on the property. Spring coated the house in a heavy layer of humidity and mist that left the air feeling damp and just cold enough that he could still see his breath as he breathed.

He looked around and saw all the newly pledged Death Eaters, looks of confusion on their faces as more and more of them were forcibly apparated in, just as he was the other night.

Why he wasn't his time — he wasn't sure.

Draco fiddled with his signet ring as he continued to look around, observing that there were a number of obviously older Death Eaters in the crowd, all primed and dressed in their robes worn during the war, bringing back bouts of memories that Draco would rather soon forget. This wasn't a normal gathering that Draco had become used to attending. Rookwood, Dolohov, and Yaxley all stood together at the front, heads bent together in serious conversation.

No, they were all gathered here for something other than a meeting, something bigger.

"Malfoy! Up here with us," Dolohov called to him, pulling the scattered attention of the room in his direction.

Draco felt the eyes of the other recruits on him as he weaved out of the crowd and up to the front of the group where Rookwood, Dolohov, and Yaxley now stood, the weight of all the Death Eaters' eyes heavy upon him. It was never good to be the center of attention in a room of Death Eaters, no matter if you were on their side or not. And Draco found himself dead center.

"You stand up here with us from now on, got it, Malfoy?" Dolohov said, setting a firm hand on his shoulder and directing him to stand between him and Rookwood. "We need you out of the crowd."

"And why is that?" Draco asked, suspicion rising up within him. He didn't want any unnecessary attention on him, and being singled out and brought to the front of the crowd so quickly after his re-initiation was liable to make some of the recruits jealous. After all, they all were in competition

with one another, all vying to climb rank and be in the Rookwood's favor. By dragging him up here, Dolohov was essentially tying him to the stake, giving the new recruits a reason to work harder to knock him down.

"Because you're the only one of the newer recruits who is actually useful," Dolohov ground out. "We need them to be as dedicated as you are — be their example."

"Seems like you're failing to remember that none of this is new to me," Draco responded snarkily.

"Then your place up here is even more earned," Dolohov nodded before turning to speak to Yaxley out of Draco's earshot.

"You were missed in Hogsmeade," Rookwood said as Draco took his place next to him.

Draco glanced at the wizard, giving nothing away, even as he felt a jolt of anxiety tighten his chest at the wizard's observation. Everything had happened so fast in Hogsmeade that he didn't even think of the repercussions of leaving — the thought of his absence being noticed hadn't even crossed his mind. He had been solely focused on finding Hermione and making sure she was out of harm's way that he didn't think about his own safety once.

"I was there," Draco answered eventually, spinning his words in a way that he knew would satisfy Rookwood. "Doing what I told you I would do weeks ago — I'm getting the mudblood right where we need her. I sought her out, followed her and kept tabs on where she went in the village. I figured I would be more useful that way than covering buildings with those silly symbols of yours." Draco's stomach twisted as the slur left his lips, but Rookwood gave Draco a sideways grin of triumph at his update.

"Good thinking, Malfoy. How did she react to being barred from every shop in the village?" Smugness oozed out of Rookwood's voice, the sickening thrill of triumph clear on his face. It was as if Rookwood got off on wrecking chaos and havoc, on making people's life a living hell. All three of them — Rookwood, Dolohov and Yaxley — were sadists.

Draco decided to play into it.

"Just as you'd expect. Angry and determined to do something about it just like all Gryffindors." Which, when he thought about it, was actually true. The combination of the runes and Draco's inability to let her come to the meeting with McGonagall that day had caused Hermione to become so irate that she spiraled, throwing herself into research; and she *had* found answers, albeit surface-level ones. While it wasn't everything they needed, it was nice to see some life come back to her after witnessing so many of her lows this term. That day in Hogsmeade and their following fight had reignited the fire within her, and if that's what it took to bring Hermione Granger back to life, then Draco would happily burn. They would need all of the Gryffindor courage they could get to survive this term.

Rookwood snickered. "I wish her luck. Those silly little symbols as you called them are impossible for anyone to control but us. She can try all she wants to research them, remove them, but she'll continue to find dead end after dead end."

Draco held onto Rookwood's words, committing them to memory. Any information he could get about the runes straight from the source was invaluable at this point. They were losing time with all of the roadblocks they kept hitting and if he kept Rookwood talking, maybe he could get what they needed to know about how the runes were being made, and how to break them. It would certainly

take that stress off of him and Hermione. Merlin knew they needed one less thing to worry about. He knew Hermione was pushing herself to find all of the answers, to fulfill her swotty call to know everything, and he was so afraid that she would go too far in her search, putting herself in danger once more. He could see it in her as they researched, that willingness to do whatever it took to end this, to bring the Death Eaters to justice.

“You have that much faith in such a lost form of magic?” Draco questioned.

“You know much about runes?” Rookwood asked.

“No, but I’m not completely certain that you do either.”

A sneer formed over Rookwood’s face, the insult clearly hitting home.

“Stay in your lane, Malfoy. Focus on the girl and let the rest of us do the heavy lifting. You taking this on is giving me a lot of free time to focus on other efforts that will make all of the difference in the end.”

“Good, then that means you have time to answer this,” Draco said, turning to face Rookwood. “Do you want to explain the attack in Granger’s room?”

A quick look of surprise overcame Rookwood’s face. By the way the attack happened so quickly and in the dead of night, it was obvious that Rookwood was counting on it happening undetected. But the wizard wasn’t as smart as he liked to think he was.

“Heard about that one, did you?” Rookwood said, the look of shock on his face morphing into another disgusting smile.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Yes. Didn’t I tell you all to stop being sloppy? To stop the attacks that bring unwanted attention? The only thing you’re doing is getting the Ministry more on your tail.”

“And you know this how, Malfoy?” Rookwood questioned with a tilt of his head. It was obvious that they didn’t think Draco was as involved as he was, that he wasn’t paying attention. Good. He wanted to keep it that way.

“People talk,” he shrugged. “There are plenty of Slytherins who would like to see the swot taken down. I hear things. Plus, anything you do without telling me first puts the blame directly on me. Remember, I’m the Ministry’s number one scapegoat. I can’t do work for you if they’re looking at me too closely. There are Aurors all over the castle.”

Draco’s throat felt dry at the words he was saying, the lies coming out of his mouth. Ever since he began rooming with Granger and seeing the side of her that she so often hid, he really started to see her as a person — not an assignment, not a classmate, but someone with an intricate life that he found himself wanting to know everything about. A life that he was quickly becoming entangled in, and was ready to defend no matter what.

“Some things got lost in communication with some recruits we have in other locations,” Rookwood responded. “It won’t happen again. We know you’re on the girl. And the Aurors won’t be there for long. Don’t worry.”

Draco nodded his head, keeping his expression neutral while satisfaction flared within him. He was happy that the Death Eaters seemed to *finally* understand that Granger was his — even if it wasn’t



in the way they thought. They were all so blinded by their own sadism and the legacy that his father left behind that they thought the same of him, thought that he was going unto Granger as they would. And while that couldn't be further from the truth, it was a confirmation that the ruse he was carefully maintaining was working, and in the end, that was what mattered the most.

"Good job with those Aurors the other day, Malfoy," Dolohov butted in, taking Rookwood's attention away from him. "What we are doing today is the outcome of your good work. And if this goes well, there will be more for you."

Confusion danced across Draco's face. What could he have done to be the reason for gathering all of the Death Eaters here today?

"What exactly are we doing here?" Draco asked.

"You'll see," Rookwood responded, sending a silent look to Dolohov that indicated to begin.

Rookwood and Dolohov stood at the front of the crowd of confused Death Eaters, dressed in all black and nearly blending into the background. There had been no hint to why they were here, or why Rookwood had been handing out uniforms like they were in school— or worse — an army.

"You all did great work in the village last week," Dolohov announced, his voice echoing around the small room where they all gathered, "The Dark Lord would have been proud of your efforts."

Low muttering of approval flowed through the crowd and then quieted to allow Dolohov to continue his speech.

"Hogsmeade is just the first of many towns and villages that we will purify!"

"Not that any respected wizards would step foot in there anyway," a younger recruit standing at the front of the crowd heckled. "That place is too inlaid with dirty blood to even be *worth* saving."

The Death Eaters around them chuckled and agreed at his jest.

"You may be wondering why we have called you back so soon," Dolohov said, breaking up the laughter, their eyes all darting back to his twisted face. "Tonight you will truly prove your loyalty. You will show us just how hard you are willing to fight for our cause, for everything we stand for. Everything up until this moment has just been child's play. Our stint in Hogsmeade was a diversion. While the runes will be useful in herding the muggleborns where and when we need them in Hogsmeade, the bigger part of our plan begins now. We had to pull Ministry focus elsewhere to ensure our success tonight, and with how inept our government is, they are still distracted by the runes. This has given us the perfect opportunity to strike."

Dolohov stepped into the light.

"As you all know our current target is Hermione Granger. But before we capture her, we need to do something first. Today, we are raiding the Little Hangleton cemetery."

The new recruits all looked to one another. Of course, this wasn't the first time they had heard of Little Hangleton cemetery — anyone with pureblood ties knew what lay there and what it meant. But, this was the first time that they were realizing just exactly what the Death Eaters possibly had planned.

“As you all know, the Ministry was so gracious as to give our Lord a place to rest, a place for us to visit and mourn him. Now, that stroke of sympathy is going to come back to bite them.”

Dolohov paused and let a dramatic silence fill the air.

“Your objective tonight is simple,” Dolohov continued. “Kill anyone associated with the Ministry that you see who is still lingering around the grave site. Rookwood here has figured out a way to get into the Dark Lord’s tomb.”

Draco’s eyes suddenly snapped to attention, struggling to contain his horror at the announcement. Yaxley had told him that getting access to the Dark Lord’s grave was just one part of their plan, but Rookwood figuring out a way into the actual site itself was new information.

There were only a few reasons why anyone would want access to anyone’s grave, let alone the tomb of the most deadly wizard who ever lived – none of them were good, all of them involving very Dark magic.

Draco’s mind reeled as he schooled his face into one of a collected calm.

What was Rookwood’s plan? Surely the cemetery was inlaid with ample curses and hexes to ward off anyone who tried to break into it. And what about when he did get to the body? Even if they did somehow take down the Aurors who were guarding the graveyard, how would they go about moving the body without being seen? Where were they planning on taking the remains and keeping Voldemort’s body? What would they do with a dead body?

“And how do we know the Aurors won’t be ready when we show up?” one of the newer Death Eaters yelled from the crowd.

“Yaxley and Malfoy here already got all of the intel needed for this attack. We know their schedule and rotations, how to break their wards...and we have timed our arrival for when they are right in the middle of a shift change. We also got intel that all other Aurors are preoccupied either in Hogsmeade or at Hogwarts, so no backup will be coming tonight. We’ve created the perfect window for us to infiltrate Little Hangleton, as we vastly outnumber them and their resources are stretched thin. Their defenses are low, and they will be caught off guard. We are completely assured that we will be able to take them down, save for the one or two we keep to unlock the Dark Lord’s grave, get the body, and then focus on getting Potter’s girl.”

Draco was silent as he took in Dolohov’s explanation. He knew that Little Hangleton was important because of Voldemort’s grave, and he knew that Yaxley had been excited about the intel from the Auror because it upped their chances of getting access to the cemetery. Draco just didn’t think they would act on the information so fast, and without any prep. Which left him in a precarious position: he had helped the Death Eaters organize this attack without meaning to, and he hadn’t been able to warn the Ministry of it. What would they think once word got back to them? He had told Kingsley and McGonagall about the interrogation and the intel that he had uncovered, but he didn’t mention anything about an upcoming attack. Would they give him a chance to explain the situation, or just send him straight to Azkaban because he seemed very clearly involved? There was no way this didn’t look like he had deliberately hid key information from the Ministry. He pushed those thoughts down, there were other things to focus on in the moment.

“You’ve all thought this through I assume?” Draco asked when Dolohov was done explaining the plan of attack, the other Death Eaters in the room scurrying about to prepare for action. “About

how to deal with the grave and body itself being covered in curses to prevent anyone from doing exactly what you are attempting to do?”

“That’s another reason why you are here,” Dolohov said. “We have identified the Aurors who will have that information and once we gain control of the cemetery and all of the Aurors are either killed or captured, we will start questioning them to see who has the intel on how the grave is cursed and how to break it. And then we will start to question them on how they are protecting the castle. We will need you to be ready to drop the castle wards at any given moment so that we can get in.”

Draco nodded at his commands, but internally he felt like he was screaming. This felt too similar, too familiar. He hated that it had come back to this, but at least this time he would do the right thing and tell the Ministry, warn them of what was to come. He felt his panic subside a little – he would set himself up for success, protect Hermione, as well as the other students. He wouldn’t be the reason anyone died this time. He was better than these sadists – never again would he sink to this, never be forced to make these decisions, go along with this evil. They didn’t know they were giving all their key information to someone bent on destroying them. Maybe this would all be over before he knew it.

“Why do you want to get into the castle anyway?” Draco asked. He never understood their obsession with it, their constant need to infiltrate it and make it their own.

“That school means too much to the wizarding world. What better way to bring everyone to their knees than to destroy it? We attempted it once and failed, but this time our plan is thought out more, so the chances of failing are much smaller. Plus, the Dark Lord always wanted to rule from there. Hogwarts is a sign of hope for many, and there is nothing more dangerous than that.”

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It was a good thing that Little Hangleton was abandoned. The village was no place for any form of life to reside before the war, let alone after it. Looking at the state of it now, there was no way even a mouse could survive, much less people. It was a desolate place – most of the buildings were dilapidated, or had been blasted into ruin, and every patch of grass was scorched and burnt by fires from the war. The stench of Dark magic was a permanent fixture.

It was night, yet no stars showed themselves in the sky here. The light of the moon was the only thing rendering the headstones readable, barely illuminating them. The once lush trees were reduced to naked branches, and it was eerily quiet. No insects, no running water, just silence – any life that remained now found its place in guarding the cemetery, where the band of Death Eaters now stood just outside.

Off in the distance Draco could just see the outline of the mausoleum erected for Voldemort by the Death Eaters – its gray stone was surprisingly detailed with intricate swirls and stonework.

*Magic is Might, Purity will Prevail* was ingrained along the top of the stone of the grave – the Death Eater motto that Draco had grown up reciting before he realized the weight of those words, the animosity they held.

On top of that, the grave was surprisingly cared for. Draco felt a wave of disgust rise within him. It was too nice of a resting place for the gruesome things Voldemort did in life, and the hatred he helped spread across the wizarding world. It had barely even been a year since Voldemort’s death, yet it was apparent that someone had been tending to the grave, sweeping any dirt or leaves away, making sure that it was pristine for whoever would be visiting it.

There were four Aurors standing around the mausoleum, and about ten more spread throughout the rest of the graveyard from what Draco could see. While that may have made the Aurors feel like they had all of their bases covered, they were easily outnumbered two to one by Death Eaters tonight.

The Aurors had no chance here.

Draco was at a loss of what he could do to help them, to stay loyal to the Ministry. He would have to do his best to remain neutral while not blowing his cover, but also somehow make sure they didn't get to the body inside of that grave. His mind was whirring with possibilities and half formed plans – this attack was unplanned on his end, while obviously meticulously thought out by Dolohov, Rookwood and Yaxley. If Draco had gotten word of the attack even twelve hours earlier, he would have been able to warn the Ministry and help in some way, come up with *something* to divert the Death Eaters from succeeding.

But instead here he was, moving forward in unison under a heavy disillusionment and muffling spells with the Dark Lord's followers as an unsettling hush fell over the group.

There was no plan of attack past the breaking of the wards — just catch the Aurors off guard at Rookwood's signal. Overwhelm them. Overtake them. Kill them.

Yaxley and Rookwood led the crowd, wands at the ready.

“Wands up!” Dolohov yelled. “Prepare yourselves and remember, focus on drawing them away from the mausoleum. Leave the Aurors who have a stripe down their robes. Yaxley and I will capture those to question about the grave's wards.”

There was a beat of silence and stillness, the moment moving in slow motion as Draco took in the crowd around him. He wasn't sure if he had ever been around this many Death Eaters at once — he had stayed fairly out of the way during the Battle of Hogwarts, and the full company of Death Eaters had never been at the Manor all at once. The amount of Dark magic rolling off everyone in waves combined with the magic that still hung in the air post war threatened to suffocate him, bogging down his mind and spirit the longer he stood there. He felt it creeping up on him, tugging at him from within, coaxing him down, inviting him to the place within himself he always ran from. It was only the warmth of the ring on his finger that kept him from succumbing to the darkness around him, keeping his head above the water.

“Now!” Rookwood yelled, pulling Draco out of his brooding, signaling for all of the Death Eaters to cast the wards with the penetration spell the Ministry Auror had given them, effectively taking down the wards that surrounded the graveyard in a smattering of white blue light. The Ministry was smart to key the wards of high security locations with specific spells, if only their Aurors weren't so easily swayed in passing off that information to the Death Eaters when faced with life or death.

The Aurors inside the wards looked above them in horrified awe as the wards crumbled, moving closer to one another in a panic, leaving parts of the graveyard exposed and unattended as the Death Eaters moved in unbeknownst to them.

It didn't take long for the wards to come completely down, and when they did, Dolohov sprung ahead of the new recruits, firing off an *Imperius* hex that landed on the Auror standing front and center of the field of tombs, causing him to drop to the ground as the curse landed.

The Aurors around him ducked as the bright red of the spell lit up the otherwise dark cemetery, their heads on a swivel as they attempted to take in where the spell had come from.

But they were a moment too late. A second too slow.

Because by the time they noticed Dolohov coming at them, the disillusionment spell dropped from around the rest of the Death Eaters, releasing them in a wave of black and silver terror.

Spells began to fly through the air at breakneck speed as the Aurors retaliated and began to defend the cemetery once they figured out what was going on. The Auror that Dolohov hit began to howl and thrash, fighting the Imperius as Dolohov drug his body through the dirt, flipping him through the air and swinging him above the group of Aurors, doing his best to distract them with the torture of their coworker.

Standing in the center of the formation of the surge of Death Eaters, the chaos of a new battle all around him, Draco realized he could easily slink away to the sides, out of the main path of the spells, and away from anything too dangerous if he really wanted to. With so much going on, spells flying everywhere around him, no one would notice if he slipped away.

It was tempting. Draco hadn't seen battle in so long that the sight of multiple wizards sending spells across the field was dizzying. Incantations filled the air as an array of colors that would have been quite beautiful had they not been so deadly painted the sky.

He wasn't sure where to look, where to cover himself, what to do. He was suddenly catapulted back to the Battle of Hogwarts, the urge to run and hide gnawing at him, panic rising in his throat, threatening to suffocate him. That night had been one of the first and only times he saw a true battle, and he knew he never wanted to experience such a thing ever again. And in this moment, the temptation to return to that boy he was back then rose within him. He wanted to freeze, to just keep himself alive, to do whatever he was told so he could survive.

But he couldn't. He had come so far, and yet still had so much to prove. He would *not* be a coward.

There were Death Eaters here, but more importantly, there were Aurors here. And regardless of who knew about his deal with the Ministry, word would get back to Kingsley and other Ministry officials about his actions and he couldn't afford anything less than being painted in a noble light, of once again proving his worth to the Ministry. Swallowing his fear and pride would be worth it if it freed him and his mother.

More Aurors apparated in, increasing their odds slightly, but not enough to make a difference. There were easily a hundred Death Eaters here, all ready to kill, all braced with the most damaging and lethal curses in their arsenal. They were to hold nothing back.

Draco watched as the Aurors cast body binding hexes, stunners, and other non lethal spells, but it was to no avail. The Death Eaters retaliated with anything and everything they could think of that was destructive — *confringo*, *bombarda*, *levicorpus* — the spells increasing tenfold as they flew around the cemetery, with shouts of Unforgivables ringing over everything else. Draco didn't know much about Auror training, but from what he witnessed during the war, the killing curse was an Auror's last resort, as was any Dark magic, while the Death Eaters wielded them as easily as any other spell.

He saw one Auror go down. And then another. Then another.

It was no mind that Yaxley and Dolohov had been wrong about no Auror backup being possible tonight – the Aurors who continued to apparate in just ended up being extra bodies to add to a kill count for the Death Eaters. More blood on their hands. It was obvious that the Aurors hadn't come prepared for the barrage that the Death Eaters were raining down on them, and the ones who were on guard most certainly didn't expect anything like this. The Aurors were going to be done before they even started.

Still standing at the edge of the field, Draco went to move his position, to finally take a step into the fighting and hold his keep when he stepped into a sloshy patch of grass. He looked down to see a black puddle beneath his feet, the tacky substance sticking to his leather shoes.

*Blood*, Draco thought, from slicing hexes – Diffindo was a favorite of Dolohov, and Yaxley took Snape's Sectumsepra curse and ran with it. A few minutes into the battle and already so much destruction had already been done. They wanted to hurt and kill at the same time – The Killing Curse was too fast for their sick tastes. The blood was everywhere, spreading and coating the ground and making walking difficult. Draco carefully stepped around the puddle, the blue light from the moon painting the blood that seeped into the ground a dark black color. Draco was sick, but he had to do something.

The Death Eaters' gruesome curses continued to fly through the air, and the screams of the Aurors echoed throughout the trees. Draco went to step around one of the tree trunks when Turner Draguar, the new Death Eater recruit who had gotten mouthy earlier today while receiving instructions, got hit with a hex so powerful that it stopped his heart just as he landed at Draco's feet, wide, empty eyes now staring into his own. He should have been shocked at seeing someone die at his feet, but this recruit had nothing but hate in his heart.

It was better for the world that he was gone.

Draco couldn't find it within himself to mourn.

Draco stood frozen, unsure of how to act in the heat of such a battle but he knew he couldn't just stand here paralyzed forever. Inaction would find him out just as much as the wrong action would. He had a duty to the Ministry to perform, but a guise he had to keep up with the Death Eaters. Both were equally important. His failure to perform for either side could end in his death, and considering he almost got hit with the curse Draguar took, he was just as likely to get killed accidentally as he was intentionally at this point. He had already wasted enough time standing on the sidelines, and it was only a matter of time before someone noticed his absence yet again.

As Draco looked around, he saw that there were very few Aurors left already, the remainder of them spreading through the cemetery, leaving them wide open in so many spots that it wouldn't take much for the Death Eaters to overpower them.

Another Auror down, the sound of their yell echoing around the cemetery. Another Death Eater down, Rookwood's angry curse that echoed through the cemetery announcing it.

Even with some Death Eater deaths, the Ministry was going to lose today, and Voldemort's followers were going to come out on top. It would all be over, that easily. How long had he even been standing here? Five minutes? Ten? They would get Voldemort's body, and there was no telling of the horrors that could come next.

What would he do to stop them then? Beg for forgiveness from the Ministry and become an Auror? Succumb even more to the whims of his family name and stay on the side of the Death Eaters

because it was the safest bet?

It was in that moment that Draco truly realized that he belonged to neither side.

He wasn't one or the other. He wasn't totally good or totally bad, but lay somewhere in the middle and was able to see the corruption on both sides of the coin when it came to the politics of the wizarding world.

The Death Eaters weren't that different from the Ministry if you looked close enough.

Maybe that is why he struggled so much all of his life. He always knew he wasn't the same as his pureblood relatives, but he also knew that he didn't have it in him to mindlessly follow anything and everything the Ministry said or did.

He had his own path, but didn't know how to forge ahead, having only ever experienced one side of the coin his entire life, and was now unsure what to do with the other.

So as he stood there on the side of the cemetery field, he asked himself — did he always want to just be a bystander? Did he want to pick one side or the other because it was the easy thing to do? Did this indecision just make him a coward?

No.

He was smarter than this. Smarter than most people on this field right now.

He had to do something. Choose a side and stop letting life happen to him.

With that realization, Draco snapped out of his daze.

He took in the surroundings of the graveyard, looking for anything he could use. Anything to give him the edge he needed.

He spotted a cluster of large boulders to his left and recalled what he remembered from all of his training with Bellatrix. If shot strong and quick enough, his magic should rebound off of any hard surface. It would seem insane to anyone watching, and it was a technique so under utilized that little of the wizarding population even knew about it. It had been a while since he tried it out, and there were no guarantees that it would actually work, but he had nothing to lose.

Draco sent a special hex toward one of the boulders that surrounded the cemetery, watching to see how it would react when it collided with such a solid surface. And just as Draco hoped, the hex bounced off the surface of the rock, catapulting into the chaos of the battle, hitting one of the Death Eater recruits, and causing him to cry out in pain from the acid curse.

Draco nodded in triumph as he looked down at his wand. Training with Bellatrix had always been intense, but it was no question that she was a skilled duelist. Brutal, efficient, and merciless. Draco had had no reason until now to employ the things he learned from her, but now that he found himself in the middle of a battle he had no escape from, maybe his aunt wasn't so insane after all.

Draco turned towards the cacophony of sounds, taking in the action and planning his pursuit. He had to be meticulous about where he placed himself – the right angle and positioning would be the key to his success.

Rookwood stood near the center of the field, perfectly placed to have a vantage point on everyone, casting hexes and curses in every direction, not sparing a single soul. If you were in his way, Auror or not, you would get hit. Not even the new recruits they brought in to gain control of the cemetery were safe from him. If a curse hit them because of Rookwood's sloppiness, down they went. They all were disposable. Death was the only objective here tonight.

They were all blind with it.

Dolohov stayed near the front, nearest to the mausoleum that held Voldemort's body, right in the face of the Aurors who were fighting back with all of their might. On top of his quick spell wielding, Dolohov was known for putting on a show for his opponents. He loved getting in their face, mocking them and pushing them so far with his actions and words that they made a fool of themselves. It was all mind games. And it was working. Dolohov went on and on about the Aurors stationed at the front, spewing facts about their family, their jobs while continuing his puppet show with the Auror he hit with the *Imperius* curse. Draco could see the control slipping from the Auror that Dolohov taunted, the poker face they were so well trained to have slipping as the rage overtook them from the mockery, the fact that Dolohov knew intimate details about their families, and where to find them. Aurors were typically proud people, and Dolohov was exploiting that. He was wearing them down, preparing to capture them so the Death Eaters could have their wicked way.

Yaxley stayed near the back of the fight, his eyes expertly trained on the Ministry officials they were fighting, no doubt trying to make the determination about who would have the most valuable information. So far only one Auror had been taken and was being held captive – a slight mercy, yet Draco still felt a wave of exhaustion flow through him at the thought of another session with Yaxley in the basement. Who knew how Yaxley would be after a fight such as this, fresh bloodlust flowing through his veins. Draco noted that his robes were already soaked with blood, no doubt a result from the slicing curses he favored and clearly used during the initial rush into the cemetery.

The rest of the Death Eaters were evenly dispersed through the graveyard, most hanging near the middle of the grassy area, close enough to the front to look like they were brave, but far enough to run away if danger became too imminent. Draco was sure that the moment the wards came down and the curses and hexes began flying, the Death Eaters who hadn't seen battle yet would suddenly realized that no matter what side you were on, at the end of the day, they all faced death the same way.

A new bout of Aurors apparated in, causing a wave of renewed fervor to take over the field. With the cover of the new activity, Draco positioned himself on the left side of the field, far enough in to look like he was actively engaged in battle, perfectly shielded by the cover of the trees, but still close enough to the rocky terrain to bounce spells, hexes and curses off of. As a new wave of spells cascaded into the air from the Aurors who had just apparated in, Draco sent hexes and curses every which way, perfectly aiming them at surfaces they could bounce off of and rebound to hit fellow Death Eaters. Not enough to kill them, but just enough to slow them down and give the Aurors a chance to gain the upper hand. To anyone not paying too close of attention, it looked like Draco was in the depths of the heat of battle, focused on the common goal of the other dark wizards.

He made sure to send hexes towards the Aurors as well, nothing strong enough to seriously hurt anyone but enough of a careful cover up just in case someone was watching him that closely. He didn't want to risk anything if Rookwood looked his way. They would leave with slight injuries at worst, a bruise at best.



Draco glanced out of his side eyes and saw a familiar face – Dawlish was watching him as he cast his own spells at the Death Eaters, noticing the patterns in which Draco cast his spells. If anyone, this was the only person Draco wanted to know what he was doing, especially after their meeting yesterday. He had no one in the Ministry to rally for him, and while Dawlish seemed disengaged and defeated by the state of things, maybe seeing how much Draco was sacrificing for the cause would give the Head Auror some renewed hope – help him see the light in such a dark time in the wizarding world. Dawlish nodded in Draco's direction before turning his attention back to the stakes at hand. The new bout of quiet approval gave Draco a surge of hope and energy.

He had a duty to fulfill to the Ministry that would give him his freedom. Now was the time to show them that he was serious and that he would do anything to wipe his record clean.

Draco quickly continued his ministrations, finding himself in a flowstate, casting a combination of spells at a breakneck speed, faster than he had ever cast before. Slicing hexes, exploding curses, stunning spells — all cast in quick succession in hopes of confusing those around him of what was flying where. Not a single spell he sent landed on an Auror, all rebounding and ricocheting off of the surfaces around him like fireworks. This field was an orchestra, and Draco was becoming its conductor.

Draco made his way further up the field, slowly becoming more and more coated with sprays of blood from Aurors who found themselves on the other end of Dolohov's or Yaxley's wand. He wiped his face, only spreading the blood more. He moved closer and closer to where Rookwood and Dolohov fought, hoping he could send a curse strong enough towards the mausoleum to distract them and pull their attention away from the Aurors. No matter what he did, the closer he got to them, the more careful he would have to be. One wrong move and they would figure out it was him, and then it would all be over.

Just as Draco turned to look at the chaos of the field once more, a searing hot pain bloomed across his side. A hex had hit him before he could even see it coming, knocking the breath from him and throwing his aim off balance. The curse he was about to throw went sideways, hitting an Auror and causing red stings to explode all over his face as he collapsed from the pain. Draco continued to stumble his way forward as the agonizing heat of the hex made its way up his body, the warm feeling of blood slowly dripping down his side and through his robes. His breath hitched from the throbbing pain that seared up his left side, but he pushed on. He had to keep going.

Draco mustered up with little strength he had left, moving to throw another curse towards the wall of the mausoleum when his magic just seemed to...stop. His wand sputtered out, as if his magic couldn't get through it. He could feel his magic thrumming in his veins, fighting for a way to get out, but something was blocking it. He kept pushing, kept willing his spell to move through the wood of his wand, but the more he tried, the more he felt the cold pull of Dark Magic within him. He felt a pull within to strike the Aurors true. To kill. To make Dolohov and Rookwood proud.

Draco faltered as he fought this barrage of thoughts, shaking his head to rid his mind of them. The Ministry. *I need to help the Ministry*, he told himself.

Draco continued to fight the Dark urge with him, and became more and more perplexed by the uncooperativeness of his wand and the nature of his thoughts as even more Aurors continued to apparate in. He wanted to help the Ministry, *needed* to help the Ministry. The Aurors quickly turned to attack the Death Eaters and pressed them backwards and out of the graveyard, gaining the upper hand in battle right when the Death Eaters were at the precipice of victory. Some younger recruits were captured by the Aurors, their wands snapped and hands bound behind their backs.

“Retreat!” Dolohov yelled when he spotted the younger Death Eaters tied up on the ground. “Get out of here. All of you!”

Pops of apparition filled the air as Death Eaters evacuated the graveyard, Aurors diving, trying to grab a hand or a foot or a piece of clothing in an attempt to capture them before they got away, but it didn’t matter. The Aurors began to rebuild wards around the cemetery, quickly closing the window of escape. Anyone who became trapped inside of the wards would be subject to the Ministry’s questioning, their freedom effectively over.

Draco thought that it might be smart to stay, to debrief the Aurors on the timeline of the attack and his lack of knowledge of it, maybe let them know what to expect next. Show them that he had no hand in this before they had the chance to think of it themselves.

A hand landed on his shoulder, jostling Draco and reminding him of the pain that was still burning in his side.

“Malfoy, back to the house with us so we can debrief.” Dolohov said to him before disappearing, pulling him in a sidealong. Before he knew it, they had apparated back into utter chaos at the Riddle House. The injured Death Eaters who managed to make it out of the cemetery lay on ground to one side of the wall, and Dolohov ran over to Rookwood, yelling at the other higher ranking Death Eaters to sort out where everyone was and who hadn’t returned from the cemetery. Most notably of all, Yaxley was levitating several unconscious Aurors downstairs. Even in the chaos of extra Aurors appearing, Yaxley had still managed what he had set out for in this attack, though it was obvious Dolohov and Rookwood were less than impressed with how tonight went.

“What happened out there Yaxley?” Dolohov yelled as the wizard returned from the basement. “You told us that tonight was the night that there was no possibility of Auror back up coming in. That they were all busy trying to break the runes in Hogsmeade!”

“It was!” Yaxley exclaimed back. “That’s what the Auror we captured told me. He assured me it was true!”

“Well it obviously wasn’t! I’ve never seen so many Aurors in one place since the war!”

Dolohov turned to look at Draco, the fury alight on his face.

“Is this true Malfoy?” Dolohov asked. “Did you find the same information in the Aurors’ mind when you interrogated him with Yaxley? That there was to be no back up tonight?”

The realization of where everything went wrong hit Draco like a ton of bricks. Draco had searched the mind of three Aurors that night when they got the information about Little Hangleton, but Yaxley had been so thrilled at the prospect of finally having intel on the cemetery that he hadn’t even thought to ask Draco to search his mind and confirm that what he was being told was true. A grave mistake that had cost them tonight. But one that worked in Draco’s favor.

“I never heard about this until just now,” he answered truthfully. “This is new information to me.”

“What do you mean? Did you see none of this when you searched the Aurors’ mind?”

“I didn’t search that Aurors mind,” he responded truthfully. “He told Yaxley he had information on the cemetery and that was the end of that. Yaxley put him to the side and continued on with the

others and I never searched his mind. I only used legilimency on two Aurors during our questioning that night.”

Icy rage took over Dolohov’s face before he turned to look at Yaxley once more.

“You didn’t have him search his memories to confirm the information was true?” Dolohov screamed in Yaxley’s face. “That was the whole point of involving him!” he said while pointing in Draco’s direction.

“I—I,” Yaxley stuttered.

“We brought Malfoy in to make sure we were getting high quality information. To make sure our plans were solid and reliable. We cannot afford to make any mistakes. And you got us this!” Dolohov exclaimed while gesturing around to them. Between the injured Death Eaters, leaving the cemetery empty handed, and the Ministry onto their plans, it was obvious that the loss was a hit on his ego, a wrench in carefully laid plans. “What good is it having you at the helm of intelligence when you can’t even think to confirm that the information you discovered was accurate and correct? The Aurors *will* lie to us when we interrogate them. It is what they are trained to do.”

“It was an oversight,” Yaxley excused. “It was the first information we’ve had to the graveyard so I lost sight of—“

“Enough. I don’t want to hear it. We cannot afford to lose sight of our goals as you have,” Dolohov said to Yaxley before turning to face Draco. “Malfoy, you are now in charge of all interrogations, intelligence and all legilimency that our prisoners need. You got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Draco answered quickly with a nod of his head, schooling his expression into one of disinterested calm.

“This means you will be on call more,” Dolohov continued. “Legilimency is imperative to our cause. Prepare yourself for more nights like tonight, and a lot more Aurors to interrogate. We might as well alert you of all raids beforehand now just so that you have time to prepare.”

“That would be ideal,” he answered in a flat tone as he stood stone faced, all the while elation ran through him.

He knew his legilimency would be his in with the Death Eaters, he knew it would make him valuable and useful. But, he never thought it would come to fruition this quickly.

Getting word about the attacks before they happened would be essential for the Ministry. It would give them the edge they needed, the puzzle piece that they had been missing for so long. It would put him in a position where he would finally be of use to the Ministry, be someone they actually *needed*, someone who could give them information they couldn’t get anywhere else.

He was officially in the perfect position to do exactly what the Ministry wanted him to do.

And the Death Eaters had no idea.

Random Wednesday update because I'm having a weird week and wanted to update now and couldn't wait until Sunday :) I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Battle scenes are an art and this was a challenging and fun one to write!!

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), and [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites. And find me on tumblr as snortinglavender! I've been loving being active on tumblr and reddit more recently.

Kudos and comments are alwaysss appreciated! <3

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

TW: graphic depictions of torture.

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

### Draco

Even in the chaos of the Aurors showing up to the graveyard when they didn't expect it, Yaxley was still able to stun and capture two Aurors and bring them back to Riddle House for questioning. And despite the exhaustion from the adrenaline of the battle wearing off, and the lot of them sporting numerous injuries, Draco was to begin interrogating the Aurors they captured immediately.

Draco made his way down the stairs with Dolohov, Rookwood, and Yaxley following him to find the two Aurors in the center of the room, just like last time.

They were back-to-back with a long, thick rope wound around their centers, binding them together. Their hands and feet were tied as well, their wands on a table at the far end of the room. They were battered up—lacerations on their legs leaking blood, arms sitting at odd angles, and their robes covered in dark blood. One wore fractured glasses, while the other had a nasty cut down his face, blood dripping into his eyes.

Draco was sure he looked similar, as the pain in his side had yet to let up, and he could feel the wounds crusting through the fabric of his robes in several places.

“Just like last time, Malfoy,” Dolohov ordered. “Find us anything useful that we can use against the Ministry. No stone left unturned.”

Draco slowly approached the Aurors in the center of the room, preparing to pull his occlumency walls up. The whirlwind of the surprise battle on Little Hangleton cemetery had come so fast that he had fought the whole thing without his occlumency in place—while he was sure everyone was too busy during the battle to notice him faltering, he couldn't risk it now. Not when he was the center of the Death Eaters' attention, not when they were watching his every breath.

Though he could never be as brutal as Yaxley had been the first time he had been called into question Aurors, he also couldn't afford to flounder. He *had* to perform, not just for Yaxley this time, but also for Dolohov and Rookwood.

This was his chance to prove himself, and he knew that he had to occlude to do it—to drown out any hesitation or fears simmering just below the surface, the hate he felt towards them, his own misgivings, all the thoughts that made him a Death Eater fraud instead of just a Death Eater. *That* voice was screaming, drowning out all reasoning, and he had to shut that down.

He painfully let go of any part of himself that feared the task before him, and reluctantly slammed his walls up, snuffing out the voice inside of him that was afraid of what the constant exposure to such Dark forces would do to him.

All while still maintaining his cover.

“Your mother would be disappointed in you,” the Auror with the cut on his face spat as Draco approached them, sneering with disgust.

How the Ministry saw him, and the rest of the wizarding world for that matter, wasn't something Draco often thought about. Didn't need to. He knew that it was still too soon after the war for anyone to see the name Malfoy and think of anything other than 'loyal servant of the Dark Lord.'

Now that he was the ringleader of this particular show, he hoped to have better control over how he communicated with the Aurors he was questioning; prove to them that he *wasn't* a part of the evil committed by the men who stood behind him, and that Draco was on their side.

But, he still had a show to put on.

“Contrary to what you may believe, gentlemen, she's quite proud of me,” he said gruffly, squatting down and leaning so close that his nose was less than an inch from their ears, his breath ghosting their dirty, torn skin. “But what you don't know is that I'm not like *him*,” Draco whispered under his breath, just loud enough for them to hear while nodding in Yaxley's direction. He had to get on their side, had to get them to see that he could get them out of this situation safely if they knew his role with the Ministry. He pushed sincerity into his voice as much as he could, but it wasn't enough.

“But you could be,” the cut up Auror spat, and entirely missing what Draco was trying to convey entirely. “You might be young and fresh right now, but you have no idea how much constant violence and exposure to the gruesome truths of the world will change a person. That's the difference between the Death Eaters and the Aurors. You lot let the evil grind you down until you become it, and the Aurors rise up and fight against it,” the Auror continued, his eyes jumping from Draco's and landing on Yaxley, Dolohov and Rookwood behind him. “All you Death Eaters do is lie and poison our world. You refuse to accept that you lost the war and only want to spread more evil with your constant violence and blood purity.”

“Is that what they tell you in training?” Draco said, seeing how this was going to go. He chuckled as he stood once more to his full height, feeling like he was having an out of body experience as he circled around the other side to examine the other Auror who wore glasses. Would he be less self righteous and see that Draco was on their side? Would he pick up his hints? Or would he be as difficult as his cohort?

Draco didn't get three steps before the mouthy Auror hacked back his throat and spit in his direction, warm saliva landing on the edge of Draco's blood crusted shoes.

Draco looked at it in shock before looking at the Auror with steel in his eyes, his occlumency walls stronger than ever before raising a brow, mocking him. The other wiser Auror cowered at his partner's foolish actions, while it took everything in Draco not to scream in frustration. He was desperately trying to show these Aurors that he was on their side, yet they were acting like a bunch of willfully ignorant idiots.

It was obvious that the Aurors weren't willing to try and see that he wasn't what the world thought him to be. He would have to try another angle. It was going to be a balancing act, the perfect blend of showing Yaxley, Dolohov and Rookwood that he was capable of this new role, but still holding onto that humanity within him.

Tightening his occlumency even further, while simultaneously reaching for that bit of dark magic he felt on the field of Little Hangleton Cemetery, Draco honed it to his advantage in order to become what the Aurors before him so desperately believed.

“If that’s what you want to believe about me, I’m not going to spend all night trying to convince you otherwise,” he said softly, crouching once more so he was right in between both Auror’s heads, just out of earshot of the Death Eaters. “But between you and me, I happen to know for a fact that a few of your coworkers are responsible for what happened tonight.”

Both of the Auror’s eyes widened at Draco’s confession.

“Oh yes, your men *sang* to me when they became scared for their lives,” Draco said, “So, if you want to spend your last breath talking about the differences between us, here’s one thing the Death Eaters have always been that the Aurors will never be — loyal.”

The same Auror who spat at him lunged at Draco at his words, and before Draco could stop himself, a quick *Stupefy* left his mouth, the red light of the charm lighting the basement momentarily as the Aurors body stiffened and slumped, his weight threatening to pull down his partner. The Auror with glasses, the one who was obviously more demure and afraid of Draco, began to tremble, his breath coming out in panicked spurts of what could happen next.

His occlumency walls were solid steel within his mind at that point, allowing him to easily slip into the role of the Death Eater that everyone so badly wanted him to be. His body was moving on its own accord now. He had successfully drowned out any and all feelings of remorse over his actions. It was as if the stronger his walls became, the deeper his humanity was buried.

Still, Draco found himself simultaneously reaching for the warmth coming from the ring on his left hand, almost subconsciously desperate for something to tether him to his true self. It was the middle of the night, so he knew Hermione was in a deep sleep, yet he could still feel her peace, her warmth. While *he* may be losing precious sleep, he was happy that she would be none the wiser to these late night escapades. She had dealt with the horrors of this world enough already.

“I always thought the Ministry was wrong in letting you go free,” the Auror with glasses said, his voice trembling as Draco rounded to face him. “I was on the council at your trial. I voted for you to get the same fate as your father but everyone else was too blindsided by the Granger girl’s testimony about your character. Saying that you were just a child. Bullshit!”

“You’re some sort of bigwig Auror then?” Draco asked the man before him, observing him more closely now that his partner wasn’t chirping in his ear.

“You could say that,” the Auror responded in as cocky of a tone as his shaky voice could muster. This Auror was nervous and didn’t have the confidence of his partner, but was trying to stand his ground now that Draco’s focus was solely on him. Out of the two before him, this is the one he could sway.

“But couldn’t you use your status to keep me in Azkaban? Doesn’t seem like you would know anything particularly useful then.”

“Even if you did find something useful, we would stop you. The Ministry is becoming stronger each day,” he replied, his voice cracking on the last word.

Draco felt his occlumency walls break for just a moment at the obvious nervousness of the man before him. He felt a thread of sympathy slip through, for Draco knew exactly how the Auror was feeling. He had felt it all too much himself. Still felt it now.

But, he still had a job to do. A show to put on.

“We’ll see about that,” Draco responded before diving in the Aurors mind.

With the audience of Rookwood, Dolohov and Yaxley, Draco had to be extra vigilant in finding *some* sort of information to give to the Death Eaters without actually furthering their plans. Something that was just enough to satiate them, to get their egos going and keep them occupied.

He knew what he had to do, and it was going to be a risk, but one he had to take. He had to trust that one of these Aurors would see the truth of the situation at hand. Would trust *him*. And if it was going to be either of these Aurors, it would be this nervous, trembling one. This one who so obviously wanted out of this situation.

*I am on your side. I’ve been sent here to spy by Shacklebolt*, he said into the Aurors’ mind, showing him scenes of meeting with the Minister to back up his claim, the wizard’s eyes widening at the sound and feel of Draco speaking to him mind to mind. *I just need something to satiate them. Let me in just a little bit. Let me see something that will excite them.*

Draco was well aware that this Auror could turn on him and yell out to the Death Eaters that he was spying on them for the Ministry, but he had to trust that he wouldn’t. They would all be dead if this Auror was stupid enough to do such a thing.

Thankfully, the Auror relaxed, seeing the truth of what Draco said and showed him and let him in just slightly.

Draco found the opposite of what he had tried to pass off as truth. The Aurors were indeed spread thin, with Ministry workers resigning every day as the stakes became higher and higher and as the Ministry slipped more and more out of control. It was emptier than ever except for those at the top – just a few high ranking Aurors and department Heads were left. They had used every last person available tonight to bring them to a standstill at the cemetery. It had been a game of chance for the Ministry, and fortunately they had won.

This time.

“Why are Aurors resigning?” Draco asked as he pulled out of the man’s mind, speaking the words loud enough for the Dark wizards behind him to hear. *Work with me here*, he pleaded into the wizard’s mind.

The man in front of him cursed, his body shaking. “They’re weak. Tired from the war. But the rest of us are ready to fight your lot,” he added on, trying to sound brave.

Draco’s heart clenched as scuffles echoed from the back of the room; Yaxley, Dolohov and Rookwood no doubt moving closer at the news that the Ministry was worn down from their efforts. He could only hope that they would let this Auror go, that they would wipe his memory and let him think this never happened.

“So you’re admitting that the Aurors are on their last leg?” Draco asked, goading as much information out of the man before him as he could.



The Auror didn't respond right away, just studied Draco with a hard look. "No. We will come back stronger than ever with Dawlish and Kingsley leading us."

"Your confidence in the Ministry's abilities is truly heartwarming," Draco said sarcastically, this time not having to put on an act for the words he said. This Auror was obviously so devout, believed so strongly that the Ministry was good and just that he felt pity for him. If only he knew.

"I've given you the information you want," the Auror gritted out through clenched teeth. "Now let me go."

This man did what Draco asked, and yet he couldn't promise him that he would get out of here alive. Draco felt pity seep through his occlumency walls, the deep need to show that he wasn't who they all thought him to be fighting to the surface once more.

*Thank you. I'm sorry for this. I have to,* he apologized into the Auror's mind before casting *stupefy* on him, his body slumping next to his coworker's.

Draco was sure that once he was done with the next Auror the Death Eaters would require him to... dispose of them, but that was something he couldn't think about now. The thought of actually killing innocent people nauseated him, and would no doubt distract him.

"Let's see what you have," Draco said, shaking the thoughts of killing the Aurors before him and reinforcing that cold, steel demeanor once more.

He calmly walked around the second Auror, casting a quick *Rennervate* to bring him back to consciousness.

The Auror physically recoiled as he opened his eyes, making a feeble attempt to scramble away even though it was impossible given that he was tied to another person. The man obviously knew that nothing good awaited him, especially once he observed that his partner was now unconscious next to him.

Draco didn't dare reveal himself to this Auror as he did the other, as this one already showed enough contempt towards him. He would have to use a different angle this time, something a little more aggressive.

Draco crouched in front of him, and the Auror recoiled even further back, doing his best to drive his legs out in an attempt to kick Draco, to maim him in any way possible while being tied up.

"Now, now, none of that," Draco said, casting *Petrificus Totalus* before ripping into his mind.

It was somewhat of a struggle – this Auror was clearly trained by someone who had been on the other end of Legilimency before.

As much as the Auror tried to fight against him, Draco was able to shatter his walls without much of an effort. There was a reason he was the one doing these interviews despite his age and relative inexperience. He was trained by the best, put through summers of agony to hone his Legilimency. He had yet to meet a witch or wizard who could keep him out, and this would be no different.

He pushed harder and saw flashes of the halls of Azkaban, guard rotations, as well as the layout of the inner halls of the prison where the offices were, before the images began to go blurry as the Auror attempted to push back.

Draco retreated from the wizard's mind, giving him a break, and contemplating what he saw.

From his slight stint in the prison, Draco knew that the guards were just the first line of defense in the prison's security system. Just because you got past them didn't mean you had full access to the entire building. Giving this information to the Death Eaters wouldn't give them a foolproof way into Azkaban, but it *could* be the perfect way to form a plan that led right to an ambush with the Ministry, ending this ordeal sooner rather than later.

"Azkaban hmm?" Draco said, broadcasting the little glimpse of information he found to his audience.

The three senior Death Eaters perked up at the name of the prison, looking between Draco and the second Auror with fire in their eyes.

"If it's Azkaban this one has information on, get it from him and then dispose of him," Dolohov said harshly. Draco dragged his gaze away from the Auror's terrified eyes. Dolohov had a triumphant smile on his face. "Do whatever you need to do. We have valuable people there. This is your time to prove yourself."

Draco turned to observe the Auror before him once more, cataloging their injuries. With the Death Eaters' intense attention on him at the sound of Azkaban and Dolohov's words, Draco felt the weight of what was expected of him all at once.

He needed to do something drastic, something out of his comfort zone.

He twirled his wand in his hand, thinking. He never classified himself as a violent person, having always stood on the sidelines until tonight. But already he was reaping the benefits of being forced to cross that boundary tonight by being forced to act on his feet and fight along with the rest of them. He knew he could do what was required of him, even if he didn't want to. As he sat there in the cold silence of the room, Draco knew what his next step was.

He occluded harder than he ever had before, going past the point of no return. He knew it was dangerous, but it was the only way he was going to succeed. There was no way he was going to get through this without it. If he didn't, the roaring panic in his mind would take over and he would fumble and falter, and he couldn't afford that. He felt his body tense as he worked his mind into the cold, steely Death Eater within himself that he hated once more; he felt his eyes go hard, his brow tensing in brutal concentration.

Draco met the eyes of the Auror before him and saw the change in their demeanor once they saw his morphed expression. He went from cocky and determined to fearful and unbelieving. It seemed that even if he suspected that Draco wasn't necessarily capable of violence a moment ago, his assessment had now changed.

Just occluding wouldn't get him what he needed though, wouldn't put on the show he knew the Death Eaters were looking for.

Draco looked at the Auror before him, assessing him for any injuries he already had from the battle. He was covered in blood, but a heavy stream continued flowing from the Auror's right leg.

*That'll do.*

Draco turned his attention to the injury, placing his hand just above the bloody laceration and squeezed, just enough for the Auror to wince and cry out in pain, but not enough to injure him any further. From Dolohov's point of view, it would have looked like Draco exacerbated the existing injuries on the Auror, using pain as a tactic to get more information.

As the Auror screamed, Draco pushed into his mind once more, harder than he ever had before, working against the obvious training this Auror had. He knew how to keep the secrets he had safe, and this attempt was even more trying than the first, now that the man knew it was coming.

But Draco's legilimency was stronger, and in combination with the pain in the Auror's leg, Draco ripped through the Auror's defenses, easily pushing past the memories he threw up in an attempt to distract Draco before landing on something he could work with. He saw the private offices of the guards of Azkaban, of those who controlled the dementors, as well as files denoting prisoners' information. Most importantly, he saw the schedules of the rotations of the guards. It had times, dates, names, and the locations of each rotation.

Draco pulled out of the Aurors' mind and looked over to where he was squeezing the Aurors leg, noting the blood that was pooling around him on the floor. The Auror was breathing heavily, his eyes glassy.

Draco looked back at the three Death Eaters behind him, squeezed the Aurors leg once more so he wailed in pain, trying to act like this wasn't horrifying him. He checked and then refortified his occlumency walls, and took a deep breath, doing everything he could to appear hardened, unbothered. Even if the second Auror did know that this was all for show, Draco doubted it would help dull the ache of guilt he felt growing in his chest.

"Pummell and Lennox are both Aurors who work at Azkaban guarding the main doors," Draco said as stood up, wiping the blood from his hand as he began to walk back towards the stairs where Dolohov, Yaxley and Rookwood watched. "Their schedule rotates every six hours on the half hour, with about five minutes where there is no one standing guard at each entrance of the prison. If you want to get in, that would be the time."

"And the dementors?" Rookwood asked.

"Hamish Tate is the one who controls the Azkaban dementors. A simple *Imperius* should solve that problem."

"Good job, Malfoy," Rookwood said, clapping him on the back. "We will take care of the Aurors from here."

Draco felt relief flood him. He wasn't going to have to kill the Aurors after all, but he would be leaving them in Rookwood's hands. He wasn't sure which fate was worse.

"You're free to go", Rookwood continued. "But like I said, stay alert. We'll be calling on you more now."

Draco began to drop his occlumency as he turned to leave, his mind reeling about the information he had found tonight, about the things he had to do to get it.

Such pivotal information could go one of two ways: it could damn the Death Eaters all of the way to their demise, or they could somehow succeed, and against all odds, go in and out Azkaban

without being caught. He had to get to Kingsley, and fast. This would never work unless he could set up that ambush.

If the Death Eaters continued to capture and question Aurors over and over, there truly was no way that the Ministry could come out on top. Especially not if he had to keep giving them vital information and then trying to sabotage it after the fact. Someone was going to slip up somewhere. He would mess up, or the Ministry would.

It was all so messy.

And now he had handed over information about the most secure building in the wizarding world. Who the Death Eaters wanted to rescue from Azkaban, Draco had no idea. His only hope was that Azkaban's security was as impenetrable as it had been when he was held there before his trial. Every door one went through, every hallway, was monitored. Magical signatures were traced and dutifully logged. The only way to get past that is if the Death Eaters went in and decimated Azkaban completely after they retrieved whoever it was they were after. Even with little support from the Ministry, after how the plan for the graveyard tonight went bottom up, Draco had little confidence any plan the Death Eaters came up with for breaking into the prison would succeed. No one could penetrate Azkaban undetected — especially Death Eaters who were currently wanted.

Maybe he had just led the Death Eaters right to their demise with the information about Azkaban.

He could only hope.

It was going to be a balance, giving the Death Eaters what they wanted from these interrogations without putting the Ministry at risk. But as stressed out as he was, the more he thought about it, the more he felt that this was a good place to start.

Let the Death Eaters think they had a chance to infiltrate the most protected prison of the wizarding world, let them give Draco information and a heads up on their next attack, and he would be able to tell the Ministry of those plans.

Kingsley. He had to talk to Kingsley.

If he would only listen to him.

Draco had done everything he could tonight to stay on the correct side of history, to do the right thing. And as he hoped it wasn't all for nothing, the green light of the killing curse lit up the walls as he ascended the stairs.

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Draco apparated back to the castle quietly after casting a quick *Scourgify* to clear himself of any blood, storing his Death Eater robes before heading inside.

It was odd at first, not going down to the dungeons, but Draco found that he liked being above ground. The Slytherin common rooms would always be his home, yes, but there was something freeing about being able to get up and look out of the window and see the sprawling landscape around Hogwarts and not the dark, watery light that came through the windows from being underground and looking into the Black Lake. Up here in the towers he was able to catch his breath, and not feel the suffocating weight that he often felt so far below ground.

It was nearing mid morning, and Draco's limbs felt heavy as he climbed the steps of the tower, the exhaustion of the long night and the effects heavy occluding wearing on him with each step.

After what felt like a million staircases, he opened the door to the room he shared with Granger.

She looked up from the book she was reading at the small desk in her room as he entered and Draco suddenly found himself thrust back into a sense of normalcy, a sigh of relief silently escaping him, the weight of the night slowly starting to melt from his body. Her warm aura and magic seeped into him through the ring from the close proximity, melting the chill that had started to settle into him.

He knew he would most definitely be losing his mind if he didn't have some sort of anchor in this world to keep him grounded with what he was doing behind closed doors with the Death Eaters these past weeks. And Granger just happened to be right there, tethering him to this Earth without even knowing it, nose in a book, hair everywhere, a scene he'd witnessed a thousand times now. A scene he was surprised to find comforting these days, rather than annoying.

"Early start this morning?" she asked casually.

Draco assessed her tone as he shut the door behind him and found no amount of suspicion in her voice at all. He felt overwhelmingly guilty that she trusted him so much while he was keeping the truth from her. Their friendship may be new, but he felt utterly undeserving of it.

"You could say that," he grumbled, dropping onto her bed, leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes.

Crookshanks hopped up onto the bed, rubbing his head against Draco's arm, begging for attention.

Draco didn't have any pets growing up, so he and the little beast had bonded over the last couple of weeks, both out of forced proximity and the comfort the creature brought him. He enjoyed the warm company of the feline, and now understood why so many classmates kept companions of their own.

Crookshanks settled onto his lap, purring as Draco stroked his head.

"So, I was thinking, if it's not too much trouble, we should go back to the Manor today and search for some more books. I've been looking into it all morning, and I think I know what we've been doing wrong. We need to look for books on the origins of magic, not the runes themselves, since that's how they started. Runes were used before wands, so they won't be talked about as their own topic, but as the origin of magical practice itself. That's why we aren't finding books on runes, especially in a place like the Manor who has books as old as you say."

Draco wanted nothing more but to sleep for a long, long time, but as he looked over at Hermione, he couldn't deny the expectation and excitement he saw in her eyes. She was clearly on one of her information trains that couldn't be stopped, and it was obvious this was all she could think about. He couldn't deny the need to indulge her.

"The Malfoy library does indeed have tomes older than Hogwarts itself," he replied. "If you think you can find something, then let's go."

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Draco followed Hermione around the Manor library, letting her lead, for it was obvious she had spent all morning compiling a list of what exactly to look for, if the pile of books in his arms were any indication. She was on mission, and Draco knew better at this point than to get in her way.

Their search brought them deeper into the bowels of the library than usual, into a section of the Malfoy archives that Draco's father kept under lock and key, but now, as the man of the house, Draco got unrequited access to.

He hadn't explored this section much since he gained access to the hidden tomes — he had no need to until now. But back in this dusty section of the library after a few hours of searching, Granger hit gold. It never ceased to amaze and frustrate him that she always seemed to find the answer to absolutely everything. She found exactly what she was looking for — ancient texts covering the origins of magic, some dating so near the time when Merlin was alive that Draco was sincerely shocked to see such a thing in his home. He had known his family's library was vast and full of rare texts that not even the Ministry had, but never would he have thought they would date back to almost the beginning of wizard-kind. The books were old and brittle, their pages yellowed, ink faded. They were only being kept together and made legible by strong preservation spells and careful handling.

He continued to follow Hermione as she examined the books in the back of the library, making sure no shelf went without being thoroughly investigated. It was beyond quiet here. There were no windows back here, but small sconces lit the space, casting both of them in a warm, yellow light.

He watched her, their elbows almost brushing in the narrow space between the shelves, noticing how comfortable she already was here. She moved about the room like she had already visited hundreds of times. It seemed she had overcome the fear and anxiety she had felt as they first walked into his family home, yet Draco couldn't help the ever growing urge to protect her, to always be near her. He had seen enough of her being tortured and attacked for a lifetime, and was at the point where he would do anything to stop it.

But even more than that, he wanted her to be happy.

It was a less surprising revelation than he thought it would be.

While he was thankful for a lull in the attention on Granger from the Death Eaters, the exhaustion of the night was wearing on him. However, Hermione's excitement as they traversed deeper into the Malfoy library kept his feet under him. He could push through for her, for finally getting a break in this mystery that they so desperately wanted answers to.

Sleep would come later.

Along with trying not to dwell on his exhaustion, he did his best to mask the pain lancing up his side, still unsure of what kind of curse or hex had hit him. He'd have to figure out a way to get it healed without going to the school's infirmary. There was no way he would be able to go to Madame Pomfrey again without being questioned. And if things were going to continue in the same way, he needed to have healing potions and spells on hand, or else there was no way he was going to survive this ordeal with the Death Eaters.

*Just another thing to add to the research list.*

His mother was more than thrilled that they were back so soon, and he could tell just by looking at her when they stepped out of the Floo that she hoped these visits would be recurring even after they

found what they were looking for. Maybe they'd make a point to stay for tea next time.

"How are you, dear?" Narcissa asked as she studied him, pulling him aside once they returned to the main portion of the library to take a break from their research.

Draco couldn't bring himself to mask the exhaustion he knew was painted all over his face as he looked at his mother. It seeped into his bones.

"I've been better," he answered.

His mother's expression turned concerned, her eyes running over him, studying and scanning him for any injuries. "What's going on? What else has happened? You know you can tell me anything. I'm not made of glass, you know."

Did he dare tell her the things he was forced to do that night? The things he had done and would continue to do? Would she still love him if she knew the truth of it all? That he was doing all of this for her freedom?

"You don't want to know. Trust me. But things are going well in the sense that this arrangement with the Ministry might be over quicker than we thought," he answered finally.

The expression on his mother's face didn't let up. "What are they making you do?" she asked in a hushed whisper. "Draco, you can not get too involved. Do the bare minimum that you need to, and then I need you to be done with this. It isn't worth it."

"Your freedom isn't worth it?" he asked his mother, giving her a sharp look.

"You are potentially ruining the rest of your life trying to save everyone but yourself. That most certainly isn't worth it dearest, not to me. I know you want to take care of me, and her," his mother said, moving her gaze to where Hermione sat in front of the fire, reading one of the many books they had collected. "But don't forget about yourself. You are my son. I can't lose you too."

Draco followed his mother's line of sight to where she was watching Hermione.

"She's a strong girl, I can tell. I could tell that night...during the war. But don't let yourself become something you're not while trying to fulfill what the Ministry wants. It's not worth it to lose yourself for their gain."

Draco continued to study Granger as he turned his mother's words over in mind, thinking of everything he had already sacrificed, everything he had already done in the name of the Ministry. Retaking the Dark Mark, conspiring with the Death Eaters, torturing innocent Aurors, and the blood that already stained his hands.

"I fear it's too late for that mother."

## Chapter End Notes

I fought with this chapter a lot 😊. Finding the perfect balance of showing what Draco \*had\* to do for both the Ministry and the Death Eaters and what he \*actually wanted\* to do was a

challenge. I didn't want it to seem like he wanted to do this in any way but show that he had to so he didn't blow his cover. He is officially walking the line of morally grey lol.

Also, I know we are all wondering what Hermione is thinking when she feels all of Draco's emotions through her ring during the battle and now during torture sessions, and that will be addressed, but just know the last two chapters have taken place in the middle of the night (around 2-5am) so she has been in deep sleep during all of this. I tried to make that a little more clear in this chapter :)

And lastly, I know I keep updating on different days of the week hahaha, but I'm still trying to keep the cadence at about every two weeks :) I just didn't want to wait until Sunday for the last two updates :)

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter! Special shoutout to mitusfanfiction on Instagram for hopping into my google doc at the last hour to help convince me that this chapter came across correctly!!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites. And find me on tumblr as snortinglavender!

Thank you all so much for all of the wonderful comments and support on this fic thus far! Y'all keep me writing :)



# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

“You’re saying you knew nothing about the attack happening, Malfoy?”

Shacklebolt’s tone was accusatory, but Draco was too tired to be offended.

He was back in the Headmistress’ office that evening after returning from the Manor, still having had no sleep, but after such a big attack on Little Hangleton, the Ministry wanted details. Immediately. They apparently had tried to summon him while they were at the Manor and were none too happy to be debriefed almost 24 hours after the fact, or that Draco and Hermione had left Hogwarts all together for the day. They were demanding to know why Draco didn’t inform them of the attack, and his loyalty to the Ministry was being questioned once more.

Dawlish was present for the meeting again, watching and listening intently from the sidelines, not contributing to the conversation, but taking it all in. Draco was thankful for his presence, as he knew Dawlish had seen him on the battlefield and knew where Draco’s loyalties lie. At least he could count on one person in this room being on his side.

“Nothing,” Draco replied. “I told you what I knew about the Death Eaters wanting to gain control of the cemetery weeks ago, but I knew nothing of how they wanted to do it, much less when. In the beginning, right after I re-pledged, they did say they were planning something where there was lots of Auror activity, but never said where or what it would be.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us?”

“Again, there was nothing to tell you,” Draco replied back. “What would you have done with such little information? Do you not understand that they don’t tell me everything? I just got back in their good graces. Nothing gave away that it was the cemetery they were talking about. And I only knew of the attack once they summoned me.”

“We could have recruited more Aurors,” Kingsley snapped back at him.

“You should be doing that anyway,” Draco replied, equally as irritated.

He was growing more and more tired of defending his motives and loyalty to the Ministry during every meeting he was called into. He didn’t know how many more times he could prove to the Minister that he was on their side, that he was doing all he could. Yet, the downfalls of the Ministry continued to be put on him time and time again.

“Last time I mentioned Little Hangleton cemetery, you said the Aurors were spread too thin. That there was nothing you could do,” Draco continued.

He didn’t dare tell Shacklebolt that he knew that Aurors were resigning left and right, that the Ministry was emptier than ever because of how things were being handled. Would Kingsley ever admit to the fact that his leadership style was causing the downfall of the Ministry?

“You think people are so willing to sign up for a death sentence after the war?” Shacklebolt stared at him down from where he sat behind McGonagall’s desk. The Headmistress stood behind the Minister, looking more and more uncomfortable as the conversation grew progressively more hostile.

Draco sat in silence instead of responding. They wouldn’t be happy with anything he had to say, any angle he came from. Shacklebolt was determined to pin all of the Ministry’s downfalls on him no matter what.

“He has a point, Kingsley,” Dawlish said, finally stepping in, looking at the Minister. “We should be trying to find all the resources we can.”

Draco was shocked that someone in a position of power was agreeing with him, but he was thankful nonetheless. Maybe Dawlish was the person who should be leading the charge of this espionage. It at least seemed like he didn’t outright hate Draco, like Shacklebolt did. Draco hadn’t even had a chance to tell them what he *did* know, to try and convince them of his plan to ambush the Death Eaters at Azkaban, because the Minister was too busy berating him for things that weren’t his fault.

“But Kingsley has a point too. No one trusts the Ministry anymore. This situation with the Death Eaters is nearly out of hand, and unfortunately, we *are* doing everything we can to handle it. You’re our first line of defense.” Dawlish turned to look at Draco.

“I never asked to be a Ministry employee,” Draco grounded out.

“Sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do,” Dawlish replied. “But you’re doing a great job, Malfoy, that much I can attest to.” Kingsley looked between the two of them with a cynical look on his face, showing more and more just how much he did not trust Draco, and how much he obviously thought Dawlish’s praise was misplaced.

“Is there anything you can tell us from the events at Little Hangleton that would be useful?” McGonagall finally asked, speaking to him with kindness for the first time this entire year. She had eased up on him as time passed, as if she could see the pressure growing heavier and heavier on him. Draco was grateful that out of everyone in this room, at least she was focused on talking about something productive.

“The Aurors need to use Dark spells,” Draco said, turning to look at Dawlish. “Then they won’t be dying as much. You’ll have more of a chance of winning then.”

Dawlish seemed to be contemplating this when Kingsley butted in:

“Absolutely not. Our methods have worked for us thus far and we will not be changing them.”

Draco huffed out a disbelieving laugh. “If you saw what I saw last night, you would not have the same sentiment. If you think your methods are working, why are we even having this conversation then? If your methods were working, I wouldn’t even be in here right now. Continue doing what you’re doing, and your Aurors will continue to be murdered with ease by the Death Eaters. Why not let your Head Auror make the call? Little Hangleton was a bloodbath and you know it. Dawlish was *actually there*. Your methods may have worked once, but they aren’t working now. The Death Eaters may have retreated this time, but they won’t always do that. How many Aurors did you lose last night? I know for a fact you’re down at least two more, and according to you, they can’t be replaced. You caught them off guard this time, and it’s the only reason why the Death Eaters didn’t

get what they wanted. Next time, they will be more prepared – with more people, more Dark Magic, more intel...It's the Ministry's turn to step up. I told you everything I could and gave you all the advice I was capable of before the attack happened. It's not my problem if you refuse to listen to me," Draco finished, realizing once he was done talking that he was nearly shouting in the small room.

A beat of silence hung in the air before Dawlish spoke.

"Everyone take a breath. At the end of the day the Ministry came out on top at Little Hangleton."

The Minister did indeed take a deep breath, but sent a scathing look Dawlish's way. There was an obvious power play at hand between the two Ministry officials, the tension between them hanging in the air. The weight of the wizarding world was on both of their shoulders, and it seemed their foundation was cracking.

Was Kingsley worried he'd be outed as Minister because so many things were falling apart? Maybe this was why so many Aurors were resigning — they could see that not even the leaders wanted to work together to rebuild the wizarding world and that there was no way they could combat the Death Eaters and political infighting at the same time.

"Yet the Death Eaters still managed to capture two more Aurors for interrogation before torturing and executing them." Draco felt his anger bubbling up as he thought about what he was forced to do by the hands of the Death Eaters. Dawlish knew this, yet it seemed to be the least of his worries.

"Despicable people," McGonagall cursed. "Putting innocent people through torture just for their own gain when their leader is long dead. What are we going to do if we can't stop them, Kingsley?"

"We will stop them, Minerva," the Minister replied with conviction.

"It may not seem like it, but we are getting somewhere," Dawlish added. "Mr. Malfoy is doing everything in his power to do what the Ministry needs. I've seen it myself and that's why I came along today. I'm here to help offer extra support where needed in this mission."

"No extra help is needed, Dawlish," Kingsley stated, standing up from behind the desk.

"Obviously it is, or what happened at Little Hangleton wouldn't have happened," Dawlish replied, looking at Kingsley with a furious glint in his eye before turning back to Draco. "Now, Malfoy, do you know what information they got from the Aurors this time? If any?"

Finally, they were gonna get somewhere. Maybe with Dawlish in the room, they'd actually listen to him for once.

Draco took a deep breath before replying:

"They now know the names of the guards, and the cadence of the shift changes at Azkaban, but I'm hoping that Azkaban's reputation of being unbreachable will ring true and the Death Eaters will be taken care of in one sweep if they actually attempt a break-in, which seems likely." He didn't dare tell them it was he who got this information from the Aurors. That it was him who pointed his wand at the innocent men to satiate the Death Eaters. The less the Ministry knew on this front, the

better. Draco would continue feeding them the information he got now that he had higher clearance, hopefully bringing this whole ordeal to an end quickly.

“Smart plan Malfoy, I see what you did there,” Dawlish complimented him. “I will let my men at Azkaban know to be more on guard going forward.”

“And they still know nothing about the castle’s wards, correct?” McGonagall asked, the fear of the castle she so deftly guarded showing starkly on her face.

“Nothing, but they are going to keep trying. That they’ve already told me. Their next step is to gain control of the castle.” Meaning he was going to be tasked with more questions sooner rather than later. “The Auror who gave us the counter spell to break the wards at Little Hangleton broke easily, and the same can happen to whoever has the counterspell for the wards at Hogwarts.”

“Can we trust you to not let that happen again? Since you performed legilimency on the last Auror who gave away pertinent information,” Shacklebolt asked, the insinuation on the question not lost on Draco. He had failed once to keep the castle safe, and they didn’t trust him to do it again.

“I’ll do my best,” Draco deadpanned, not even bothering to harness the energy to tell him that the Auror who gave the information on Little Hangleton did so voluntarily out of fear of what Yaxley was going to do to him, and that he wasn’t even involved. “Which brings up another issue — your Aurors have no idea how to occlude, and that is a major problem.”

Kingsley sneered but didn’t take the bait.

“We’ll see what we can do,” Dawlish replied, stoking the flames of the conversation, seeing that the more Draco spoke, the more it angered Shacklebolt. “Thank you Malfoy. You’re free to go.”

Upon Draco’s dismissal, Kingsley gave Dawlish and McGonagall a nod, and then with two great strides, entered the fireplace and disappeared in a flash of green flames.

Draco left the meeting with a heavy feeling that they hadn’t gotten anywhere, that even though he had told them everything he had seen and knew, and even with Dawlish as a witness, they still treated him as if he wasn’t giving them anything that was of importance.

Maybe they did know everything Draco had told them already, and this whole thing was set up to burn him at the stake when it was all over. Maybe they would hold all of the things he had done over his head and imprison him along with father. Maybe that was the point of all of this.

He could only hope that something – or someone – would be his salvation.

## **Hermione**

The struggle to focus on her studies continued for Hermione as time went on. She tried her best not to let it get to her, but quickly found herself entering a similar mindset of when she, Harry, and Ron all dropped out of seventh year to go on a search for the Horcruxes — one of struggling against what she wanted versus what she had to do. Whether she wanted to admit to it or not, her academics were falling to the wayside as other more important subjects took over the forefront of her mind.

Not to mention the restless sleep that had started to take over. She would toss and turn all night, never quite entering a deep sleep, feelings of anxiety and stress taking over. There were too many

things at stake, and she couldn't seem to turn her mind off.

She was still nose deep in books, but none of them on the subjects of her classes. Instead, now that she had been able to scour the shelves of Malfoy Manor knowing what she was looking for, the information that lay within those tomes consumed her every waking thought. She was right when it came to looking for books on the origins of magic instead of runes themselves. This history was hidden deep, as if the creator of the Samblása rune system didn't want anyone to know about it. And just as she was reaching for her notebook to write down some new information about the runes, she heard her door open, Draco entering, looking even more beat than he was earlier. He looked exhausted, as if he hadn't slept in days.

He had told her he was going to meet with his friends, and she wanted to protest that he should probably rest, but he insisted that they were up his ass and he needed to satiate them. She knew he was pushing himself too hard though. He was constantly out late and then up early to study or do his duty by meeting with the Ministry. And yet, Draco was trying so hard to please everyone to the point he was obviously neglecting himself and his needs. She could feel the waves of exhaustion pulsing off of him through the ring, and had been all day, although now that he was back in her room she could feel some relief and a silver of contentment too.

She watched as Draco winced as he laid down on his cot, letting out a deep sigh as he leaned back. He moved to throw his other arm over his face, working to hide the grimace from the motion, but nothing could mask the uncomfortable feeling coming from him down the ring. Something had happened. This wasn't just exhaustion — he was hurt and wasn't telling her.

"Are you okay?" she asked, genuine concern lacing her voice.

"It's nothing," he clipped back, the bite in his voice shocking her. It had been so long since he had talked to her in that tone that she knew something definitely had to be wrong.

"Draco..."

"It's nothing, Granger," he said, using her surname to drive home his irritation.

"I just want to help. Let me see," Hermione insisted in her swotty tone she hadn't used on him in weeks, moving to sit up on her knees so that she could get a better look at him. If she had to guess, it was part of his shoulder or side that he had hurt by the way he was avoiding putting any weight on it.

"No," he responded too quickly, moving away from her hastily. She froze at his sudden movement, not wanting to cross any boundaries with him. Their newfound friendship was still so fragile, yet she couldn't fight the urge to take care of those who were in need of help. And as much as he may want to deny it, Draco could use her help. She had no idea of what could have happened to cause him to be so abrupt with her once again, but she wasn't going to leave the matter alone.

"So, if something were to happen right now, you would be able to fight? If a Death Eater busted through the door, you could duel them?" she asked, selfishly using her own safety as a tactic to get him to comply.

Draco let out a deep, defeated sigh.

"Where is it?" Hermione asked, moving down to the floor so that she would have more room to work, motioning for him to join her so she could look at him more closely.

“My side,” he said begrudgingly as he moved to unbutton the top few buttons of his shirt. He started pulling the sleeve down and over his left shoulder, and then off his body entirely.

Hermione was thankful she already had experience with him shirtless, even though never in this close of proximity. The first time he sauntered into their room after his nightly shower had taken her by surprise. She knew he was fit, but never once deigned to fantasize about *how* fit he was much like her classmates. She never allowed herself to look too long, as she didn’t want to cross some unspoken boundary with him and also didn’t want to embarrass herself.

Now, Hermione moved around him so that she could see his injury more clearly, noticing the thin lines of his scars from when Harry hit him with *Sectumsempra* in sixth year. They were almost imperceptible as she glossed her fingers over his ribs, the skin surrounding the gash in his side painted black and blue. She heard Draco suck in a quick breath at the feel of her hands on him, assessing the wound. Whatever had happened, it was recent, the gash still fresh and the skin very tender with small amounts of blood oozing from his side.

“What happened?”

“Just a friendly tussle with Blaise,” he answered, looking away as she continued to prod him.

“A friendly tussle that ended in blood?”

“We were in the Common Room. I ran into a...table,” he stuttered out.

“Okay,” she conceded, not quite believing him, but not pushing him any further either. “I can fix it with a charm, but it's going to hurt.”

“You don’t have to do that, Granger.”

“Would you rather go to the hospital wing?” she retorted, looking up to meet his eyes.

“No,” he answered quickly.

“Then let me heal it.”

“How do I know you won’t make it worse?”

She rolled her eyes at his ridiculous remark. “Who do you think healed all of Harry and Ron’s injuries during the war when we were on the run?”

“That’s not a good case for your healing abilities, seeing how those two buffoons act. Too many concussions I’m sure.”

“I can assure you that if there were any injuries to our brains, we went to those with more experience.”

Silence fell between them as Hermione patiently watched the internal war play out behind Draco’s eyes. She could tell he was very conflicted, that asking for help wasn’t something he did often, but knew there was nothing else she could offer to persuade him to agree with her offer to heal him.

“I really don’t want to go to the hospital wing,” Draco finally admitted.

“Then here,” she said, reaching for the bottle of firewhiskey she kept under her bed. “For the pain.”

He looked at the bottle like it was the last thing he ever expected her to have. “You don’t have any dittany?”

“Yes, I do, but I figured you might like this better.”

Draco clucked his tongue. “Head Girl hiding liquor in her room? Oh dear, *whatever* would McGonagall say.”

Hermione shot him a look.

“Well, you know how to keep me guessing,” he grinned as he raised the bottle to his lips, and wincing slightly as he chugged a few gulps.

Without warning, she cast the healing charm on his side, Draco groaning in pain as his muscles and tendons started to knit together and heal. She watched as the muscles of his abdomen tightened, stretching the skin and emphasizing the toned planes of his body. His alabaster skin near glowing in the lamp light of their room was familiar, but she had never observed him quite like this.

He was lean, yet muscled, surely powerful physically in the same way he was magically.

She wondered if he had always been built this way — from years of quidditch or if during the war when he suddenly needed to be able to defend himself if his wand was taken from him. There were plenty of instances where that could have been a viable circumstance.

Her throat became tight at the thought of him fighting like that, no magical barrier to fall back on. Magic was easy that way, ranged fighting based on wit and quickness — and skill obviously — but it was so easy to retreat if need be. Would Draco be able to defend her if the Death Eaters somehow found a way to take their magic from them? What would she do in witnessing such violence? She had seen so much of it during the war, but she was different now.

She blinked out of her thoughts, focusing once more on the task at hand and the injuries in front of her. The charm was working and the wound was healing. Draco took another swig from the bottle as the skin continued to tighten, his moans of pain already becoming less frequent due to the liquor working through his system quickly. The ring was giving off feelings of distress, but it was quickly starting to feel heady, almost like *she* was the one consuming the alcohol. Hermione tried to block it out, and cast the healing charm from a few more angles, making sure to leave no spot unchecked, working hard to keep her mind focused on the task at hand and not on the smooth skin beneath her fingertips.

She cleared her throat before saying, “I think you should be good to go now.”

Draco sat up and angled his body to look at his side, nodding with an impressed expression at her spellwork.

“You deserve a drink after that,” he offered, holding the bottle out to her.

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t drink.”

“So, you’re just going to let me get pissed by myself? That’s no fun.”

His words were starting to slur, causing Hermione to tiredly sigh before answering. “Trust me, you would have less fun if I did. I wish I was one of those people who get happy and silly and could

forget about the issues of the world when I drink, but the opposite happens. I get depressed, and quiet and sad.” She paused. “Sometimes angry. You don’t want to drink with me.” Hermione was embarrassed to admit such things, but she would rather be honest.

“That’s just because you haven’t drank with *me* yet,” Draco said, bumping her shoulder in a friendly way.

“You’re so full of yourself,” Hermione laughed.

“If you get drunk and sad and angry, then I’ll get drunk and sad and angry with you. We can go on a rampage around the castle together,” he said as he held the bottle out to her once more, his silver eyes almost swaying her.

“I told you already, you don’t always have to be the Golden Girl around me,” he said, his voice soft.

She looked at the bottle and then back up to him, thinking about all of the things that could go wrong. Was he prepared for that when that happened? Was she? It dawned on her for the first time that *she* might be the one who was afraid of what would happen when she didn’t keep herself to strict guidelines, that *she* was the one who was afraid of who she would become if she let go of the Golden Girl facade everyone saw. Malfoy was right, and he was once again offering her space to just *be*. The act of letting herself go wouldn’t be instant, but she was willing to try. She couldn’t remember the last time she had let herself loose and had anything that resembled the word fun.

“Fine,” she sighed, taking the bottle and tipping her head back to take a gulp. The warm liquid made its way down her throat, and Hermione did her best to push back against the anxiety that rose up, trying to let go of the persona, the expectations, that she held onto so tightly.

Her emotional outbursts had happened enough when she drank that now every time liquor touched her lips, her body instantaneously knew what was to come. But Draco’s words of solidarity about being by her side if adverse effects arose made her feel safe, like a little bit less of a burden. Feeling like shackles that dragged down those she loved was one of many reasons why she isolated herself from her friends. Pair that with her new found social anxiety, and it made trying to socialize at pubs or at parties or in the Gryffindor Common Room near impossible. But having someone who was willing to catch her when she fell, and be there for her if those less than great feelings came up once more, made it all a little more bearable while also making the sting of her friends’ abandonment that much worse.

So, sip after sip of the bitter liquid went down her throat as the two of them sat on the carpet of her bedroom, Hermione anxiously waiting for the despair of the world to come crashing down on her as they talked about anything and everything.

Only the sadness that usually crawled up her chest never came.

Shot after shot of firewhiskey, she only found herself becoming looser, more willing to talk and have more fun. Draco’s own relaxed drunkenness was a buoy, keeping that despair at bay while waves of sleepy happiness flowed from his ring into hers, turning her thoughts towards the light rather than the dark.

She saw the tension in Malfoy slowly start to dissolve as the night went on, and the more alcohol they consumed, the more it seemed as if Draco was trying his hardest to truly get her as drunk as possible.



And it was working.

Hermione couldn't remember the last time she had felt this happy and free and light. The Yule Ball maybe? It was hard to say. Every year had been overcome with some sort of darkness, until it fully consumed every part of Hermione's life. Ever since then, the weight of the war and the burden Harry carried weighed so heavily on them. *Consumed* all of them. Of course, ever since the war had ended, many people were finding their way back to their pre-war life, or finding new purpose in the post-war wizarding world. Hermione was struggling with both of those things. Sometimes it seemed like she was the only one who couldn't adjust.

Most of her identity before the war centered around helping Harry with everything that was thrown his way. Between that and her studies, the more Hermione thought about it, the more she realized she didn't have much she was interested in. She knew once school was over, she couldn't continue to rely on learning as her main source of entertainment, so who would she be? What would she do? Would this stint with the Death Eaters chasing after her go on forever?

The dark thoughts she fought so hard to avoid, the ones that were always perpetuated by alcohol, started to creep their way up into Hermione's mind and she felt her breathing start to become more and more shallow as they threatened to overtake her.

Hermione was pulled suddenly out of her thoughts as Draco drunkenly reached a hand towards Crookshanks, only for the animal to lunge at his hand and nip at it, yowling loudly and then hissing in indignation.

"Ah, bastard animal!" Draco exclaimed, pulling his hand away.

Hermione felt a bubble of laughter leave her lips, any heavy thoughts of the nightmare world around them dissipating almost instantly.

"Oh you think it's funny, do you? That I might be killed in my sleep by this thing you let live in here with you," Draco slurred, clutching his hand to his chest.

"Stop being so overdramatic. He's been coming around," Hermione defended as she reached to pet Crookshanks.

"He is. But he better keep it up, or he'll find himself roaming the dungeons one day."

"You wouldn't dare!" Hermione exclaimed, scooping Crookshanks up and cuddling him to her chest. "Maybe *he* should go sleep in the halls, shouldn't he, Crooks?"

"Yeah, yeah and then who is going to talk to you until you fall asleep? Or did you just always talk to yourself until you drift off?" Draco asked, causing another laugh to come from Hermione.

"I hate you," she giggled, clamping her hand over her mouth to keep more laughter from coming to the surface at his statement.

"Sure you do, Granger," he smirked as he swayed. Hermione laughed harder, the mixture of the liquor and gaiety making her head swim.

Draco stood and collapsed on the bed, one arm thrown over his face, the other dangling to the floor. "I don't know if you've noticed, Granger," he said, suddenly serious, flipping over and grabbing

her hand, and drunkenly playing with her fingers as she sat on the floor with Crookshanks. “But ever since we took the Vow, things have been different between us.”

Hermione became quiet and swallowed. She had been ignoring it all night, but ever since she had finished her first sip of alcohol with Malfoy, that warm hum between their rings only intensified as the night went on. The feeling was almost numbing, dizzying – surely the combination of the rings and the alcohol wasn’t the best. But she couldn’t deny how good the thrum of calming energy felt going through her.

It was like nothing she had ever experienced before. Hermione thought she knew how to identify when she had chemistry with someone, as her experience with men wasn’t zero, but her relationships with Krum and Ron — if she could even call them that — didn’t come close to what she felt with Malfoy. Which was a crazy thing to think about, but she could no longer deny how much he had been creeping around in her head.

“I have noticed,” she whispered, suddenly afraid of admitting any feelings towards him other than the playful annoyance they had settled on.

He looked at her with an intense stare on his face, almost as if he was studying her. Hermione looked back at him unabashed.

He really was handsome – all sharp edges and pale skin, coming together to form a face that she used to see as cold and unforgiving, but now saw as someone who just wished to be understood, seen for more than what he presented on the surface. They were barely just into adulthood, yet he carried a maturity with him that most struggled to achieve in their entire lifetime.

From a distance, his skin looked perfect, not a scar or freckle marring the alabaster surface of him, quite the juxtaposition from her freckle covered skin. But the closer she looked, the more his flaws revealed themselves, making him seem that much more human. Much more like her.

From the scar on his chin, to the one on his temple, to the scars she had just discovered on his torso, Draco’s body painted a picture of someone who—

“What are you looking at?” he asked in a whisper.

Hermione felt stripped naked. Seen by another person like she never had been before. It was never like this with Ron or Krum. Everything was so surface level with them, but not with Draco.

“Just you,” she replied just as softly.

“Do you like what you see?”

She had tried for so long to deny it, to pretend that feeling wasn’t there. But he was right, ever since the Unbreakable Vow, it was like something awoke within her. It wasn’t the rings, because these feelings had been stirring since before then. The rings only intensified it.

“What do you think it is? This feeling?” she asked, avoiding answering his question. “The Vow?”

Malfoy shrugged, his fingers still playing with hers. He flipped her hand over, tracing the lines that lay in her palm. It was distracting, and dizzying, even more so with the amount of alcohol she had consumed. Hermione had to focus on sitting up right, for the longer Draco touched her, the more she felt like she might catapult off this planet.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I talked to my mother about the Vow and she said it was painful for her, that she would never want to experience anything like it ever again. But ours...”

“Wasn’t anything like that,” Hermione finished, thinking back on the night and the moment they swore their magic to one another. While it hadn’t been comfortable, it was far from painful. If anything, it was a shocking experience, because she finally got a front row seat to just how powerful of a wizard Malfoy really was. They truly were equals in every way during their school years — the rivalry of their bloodlines just kept getting in the way.

Hermione shook her head, not wanting to let her drunken thoughts go too far down that road.

“Thank you, Draco,” Hermione said, moving to stand up.

Draco jolted as his name left her mouth. She moved to stable him, leaning over the bed, suddenly worried that combining healing charms with alcohol maybe wasn’t the best course of action. His injuries, while not life threatening, hadn’t been minor.

“Everything okay?” Hermione asked.

Draco cleared his throat. “I’m still getting used to you saying my name.”

“You hear it all of the time. What’s the difference when I say it?”

He turned to look at her. Once again, his normally steely eyes had melted into liquid, yet still piercing enough to make her feel laid bare. The warm sensation they had felt during their Vow flowed through them once more.

“You’re you,” was all he responded.

Hermione was quiet for a moment as she took a silent deep breath, attempting to slow her racing heart. And once again, she wasn’t sure where these feelings were coming from or what to make of them. She was drunk...that had to be the answer.

She looked away from him and Draco broke the silence in the room once again.

“What are you thanking me for anyway?” he asked.

“For being...not as awful as I thought you would be.”

Draco huffed a laugh. “Right back at you, Granger.”

They stared at each other for another silent moment before Hermione moved for the door.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

“Where are you going? Do you need me to come with you?” he asked, his drunken expression suddenly concerned as he attempted to get up from the bed without falling over.

“I’m just going to get ready for bed. I’ll be fine,” she laughed. Draco gave her a disbelieving look. “I promise.”

Hermione stumbled her way to the bathroom, suddenly aware of just how drunk she really was. Thankfully the prefect’s bathroom was empty as she entered. Rushing to the sinks, she splashed

cold water on her face in an attempt to sober herself up and shake the brain fog that had taken over her, both from the alcohol and being so close to Malfoy. The more she was around Draco, the closer and closer they became, the more she found herself feeling lighter and lighter, further away from her own body. It wasn't a bad thing. Just...different.

She came back from the bathroom to find Draco curled up and fast asleep on her bed, Crookshanks asleep next to him, his hand on the animal as if he fell asleep mid pet.

She studied him as he slept and took note of how different he had looked tonight and at this moment.

When he came in the room that morning, it was obvious he was stressed, the remnants of tension all over his face and body. But throughout their day at Malfoy Manor and after finishing off a bottle of firewhiskey together, gone was the hardness of his eyes and the strain in his face. She saw a glimmer of the man he was underneath all of the pressures he was facing, and realized she liked what she found there.

She was correct in her assumption that he only showed certain parts of himself to everyone else, whether it was a form of self defense or just because he couldn't be bothered with making everyone like him. She wasn't sure.

But Hermione felt warm at the fact that she *was* sure that she got to be one of the ones he was willing to be vulnerable with now, even if it had taken them a lot of work to get to this point.

Drunkenly, Hermione crawled into the open space on her bed next to Draco and her cat, and fell into a swift, deep sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

:))) Things are HEATING UP! Nothing like a good drunken conversation to break down some of those awkward walls. They are becoming so cute and close one with one another 🥰 I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it!

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), and [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites and on tumblr as snortinglavender.

Also, we are almost at the one year anniversary of this fic! I have a surprise for the next chapter and I am so excited to show everyone!

Thank you again for reading. Kudos and comments are always appreciated!

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

The next weeks were full of being called back to Little Hangleton to interrogate Aurors again and again and *again* . And each time, Draco found himself a little more worn down.

Yaxley, Dolohov and Rookwood were requiring more of him every session, pushing him to be more brutal, pushing him further past his limits. He had no option but to do what they said, to satisfy their gruesome wants and needs.

Kingsley must have taken his advice about training the Aurors in occlumency, for each new captive they questioned was stronger in occlumency than the last, causing the Death Eaters to push him harder, and for each interrogation to become progressively worse. More callous, more taxing.

Each night, he occluded his own mind even more than the night before as he brutalized Aurors, pulling himself further and further from his humanity and away from who he really was. The only thing keeping his feet on the ground was feeling Hermione through the ring.

She was the only thing keeping him sane as he slowly became a shell of himself. He found himself itching to return to the castle each night, his mind and body yearning for the warmth that emanated from her. He was the moth to her flame. She was the only thing that kept those walls in his mind up, the only thing that made him feel like a person instead of a monster.

While Hermione was his tether, Draco couldn't deny that he was starting to feel the effects of how draining it was to keep his rendezvous with the Death Eaters a secret while living with her. Whenever he was called upon, Draco would have to slip out of the room, barely even daring to breathe and praying to Merlin that Hermione didn't wake up and see him missing in the middle of the night. If she ever did ask where he had been the next morning, he kept her curiosity at bay with more excuses of spending time in the Slytherin Common Room, hoping that she would never run into his circle of friends and ask if they had seen him.

The truth was that he hadn't seen any of them in weeks.

He knew he had to tell her eventually.

Their lives had become so entangled that hiding the truth from her was becoming almost impossible. Not just because she was smart and observant, but because he found himself *wanting* to tell her. He needed someone to lean on, to help him carry this weight, and while his mother was always there for him, he needed something more. He and Hermione's relationship had developed past just tolerating one another into one of actual friendship. But it was a friendship he didn't want to ruin with the truth of his late night escapades.

*Friendship*. He swallowed as he thought the word. Was that all that was really going on between them?

Ever since that night in their room when Hermione insisted on healing him after the battle at Little Hangleton, he never stopped thinking about the feeling that flowed between them all of the time, and how amplified it had felt that night on her bedroom floor. It was more than the liquor, and surely it was more than the Unbreakable Vow. As far as he knew from what his mother told him, Unbreakable Vows didn't feel like he felt with Hermione.

Maybe it was the rings influencing their emotions, but they only amplified what already existed.

What *did* exist between them?

It had changed drastically since their arrangement had started.

Most notably though, when Hermione jumped to heal him when she realized he was injured after Little Hangleton, he felt a connection between that that went deeper than the Vow and their rings. No one other than his mother had ever doted on him like she had that night, and it was at that moment he knew he would mold himself into whatever it took to keep her safe. That thought pushed him through the late nights with the Death Eaters while simultaneously keeping him distracted from the atrocities he was being forced to commit, trying to figure out what it was that was flowing between them while he blocked out everything else.

Even despite his exhaustion, on the rare evenings when he wasn't pulled away by the Death Eaters, they stayed up discussing anything and everything, eventually falling asleep on Hermione's bed together.

It was friendly. Platonic. They were comfortable with one another now.

The first night they both fell asleep on her bed, Draco brushed it off as a drunken mistake.

But then it happened again, and again, until he eventually didn't even bother to sit on his cot and opted to go straight to her bed after classes each day, the pair of them studying and reading late into the night.

This new found trust was so fragile, and he still hadn't found a way to tell her the other half of his deal with the Ministry. When they were together, the last thing he wanted to do was sully the air with such an announcement. He had no idea how she would take it, or if she would still trust him after she knew everything that he was doing.

Every day he felt more like a monster and all he wanted was to sit in this little pocket of peace they had found for just a little longer. So, he kept it to himself, enjoying the calm before the storm.

It was nice, not having to tiptoe around one another like they had for the first two months of their arrangement. He couldn't even remember the last time they had an argument, and their row in the hallway right before they started living together was all but forgotten.

On top of all of that, Draco constantly found himself touching her. Her back, her side, her hair. He couldn't stop.

It was nothing nefarious, but ever since that night after the attack at Little Hangleton where they sat on the floor and he let himself grab her hand, the world blurry from the amount of firewhiskey in his veins, he couldn't stop thinking about the softness of her hands – and if that softness continued to the rest of her body.

He shook himself out of such thoughts, still shocked that the object of his fantasies was now Hermione Granger.

If anyone told his first year self that he was thinking about what Hermione would feel like under his hands, he would have laughed in their face and told them they were insane.

Yet now he found himself making his way through the busy halls next to her, hand on her lower back, heading towards their classes for that morning. He was lost to his reverie when a voice calling from behind them ripped his attention back to the present.

“Hermione!” They heard shouted from behind them, the pair turning around to find none other than Weasel and Pott-Head running to catch up, a deep frown immediately etching itself onto Draco’s face.

The sentiment was echoed when they saw him standing next to Hermione. They scrunched their brows and wrinkled their noses in almost identical looks of confusion and obvious disgust.

When was the last time Hermione saw the pair of them? When she was near death in the hospital wing? Was that the only time they cared for her at all this year? Had they any idea of what was going on in her life at all?

“Harry, Ron...How are you?” she asked them like they were distant acquaintances, not friends she fought a war with.

“We haven’t seen much of you recently,” Ron said, fully ignoring Draco standing right next to her.

“I’ve been around,” Hermione answered with a shrug.

“Come to Hogsmeade with us tonight for butterbeers,” Harry said, a slight gleam of hope lighting his eyes.

“Um...” she hesitated, looking up at Draco as he rolled his eyes. He knew what she was thinking just by looking at her face. The idiots. How was it that they had no idea that she couldn’t step foot in Hogsmeade? If they were to become Aurors, they were all in big trouble.

“I... can’t go to Hogsmeade,” she answered finally, looking back at Harry and Ron.

“What do you mean, you can’t go to Hogsmeade?” Harry asked in an accusatory tone, glancing at Draco quickly as if *he* was the reason she couldn’t go to the village.

“The Death Eaters...they made it so no muggleborns couldn’t go into the village. There are runes everywhere that make it impossible for me to go inside any of the buildings. How do you not know about this?” she asked.

“There was nothing about this in the Prophet,” Weasley said, almost as if he thought Hermione was lying. He was still resolutely pretending like Draco wasn’t standing there, giving him all the attention he would to a suit of armor in the corridor.

“I know, they’re keeping it out of public discourse so they don’t cause any more panic than there already is. At least...that’s what the Ministry is telling me. Aren’t you both training to be Aurors? Why have they not told you about this?”

Harry shook his head in confusion. “We haven’t heard a word, Hermione. I’m so sorry. But we can help now that we know about it, what can we do?”

“Yeah, ‘Mione, you just need to tell us,” Ron added, almost as if it was her fault they didn’t know what was going on. “We will be working at the Ministry in just a few months. Kingsley and Dawlish have already talked to us about starting our on site training soon, so I’m sure we can be involved. We’re just here this year as a formality.”

“I’m not sure how great of an idea that is,” Draco snapped, coming up behind Hermione to place his hand between her shoulder blades. He watched with amusement as both wizards clocked the movement - Weasley looking ill and Potter confused. “We don’t need more inept Aurors who don’t know what’s going on.”

“Why do you care?” Ron hissed, finally forced to acknowledge his existence.

“Because what the Death Eaters do affects us all, *Weasel* . Or did you just happen to forget everything that occurred during the war? Some of us actually want to know what the Death Eaters are up to. And sadly, the Ministry continues to fail on that front.”

“You would know what the Death Eaters are up to right now wouldn’t you?” Ron said, a hateful sneer on his face.

“I pay attention to my surroundings, and local events. I see what the Death Eaters are doing and how the Ministry reacts to it because I don’t have my head up my own arse unlike some people, so yeah, it’s not that hard to figure out,” Draco responded with a glare.

Hermione turned to look up at him once more, concern lacing in her eyes at his harsh words towards Ron. He knew her relationship with them was strained, but as they held each other’s gaze for a moment, it was obvious that he and Hermione both were equally uncomfortable having this conversation with her past cohorts.

“It’s fine,” Hermione said. “If you all want to catch up, there are plenty of other places we can go. But, right now we’ve got to be going.” She brought her hand up to Draco’s wrist to pull him away from her long time friends.

“I’ll see you around,” she called over her shoulder to Harry and Ron. “We’ll plan something. I’ll come by the Gryffindor Common Room soon.”

---

Draco tapped his finger incessantly on his knee as they sat in the library, his mind buzzing after their interaction with Potter and Weasley.

Draco never thought of himself as possessive, but when he saw how Hermione’s ‘friends’ looked at her, how their eyes narrowed when she stepped closer to him, he felt a hot wave of overprotection deep in his gut. His left hand absentmindedly found its way to Hermione, his right hand curled in a fist next to his body.

She wasn’t his. He didn’t own her, but he also didn’t like how Potter and Weasley looked like they were ready to jump in and save her from him at any moment. If only they knew how much he had already done to keep Hermione safe, maybe they would think of him differently.



Not to mention the thought of the history she and Weasel once shared angered him to no end. While he didn't know how they ended things, he couldn't help the anxiety and outright rage he felt when he thought about her running back to Weasley for anything.

*What was happening to him?*

He expected to feel somewhat possessive over her when it came to the Death Eaters, for he was assigned to keep her safe, and was at the point in their relationship where she wasn't just a project. He would do anything to keep her safe, just because he wanted to.

They were so far past “*have*” to.

But her friends? These were unexpected dilemmas that he didn't know what to do with. They had been in their own little bubble for so long, he hadn't even thought about what Potter and Weasley would think.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

Would she have gone with them if he wasn't there with her at that moment? If the runes in Hogsmeade weren't a deterrent?

If she did, Draco was fine with it. But he wouldn't let her go gallivanting around with Potter and Weasley like she used to before the war. He knew the precarious situations they would often end up in, and it would be all too easy for things to go south. He would just have to go along with her if the situation arose and explain to them that it was for all of their benefit that he was there.

They now sat in Hermione's favorite section of the school library, books from the depths of the Malfoy Manor surrounding them. It seemed as if they were finally finding some answers; the ancient tomes from the Manor were actually turning up useful, but Hermione had proclaimed that they had spent too much time cooped up in their room and that she needed a change of scenery – so it was to the library they went.

They settled in quickly, Hermione already dozens of pages into one of the books, when she gasped, sat up quickly and exclaimed, “I found it!” Here, it says...

*‘One creates a new rune by embedding the symbol he or she draws with their magical essence along with the intention of the rune.*

*For example, if a wizard wishes to use a rune to unlock a door, they would draw the rune while chanting:*

*in hoc symbolo magicae invoco*

*while imposing the will of what the witch or wizard wishes to accomplish with the rune at the end of the incantation in either Latin or English.*’

“In this symbol, I invoke my magic to?” Draco translated.

Hermione nodded and continued reading.

*‘This incantation binds the wizard's magical essence to the rune, along with the intended purpose of the rune.*

*It is important to note that the incantation will only work and create the rune if the intention is true and exactly what the witch or wizard wishes for the rune to do. If the incantation detects the slightest bit of apprehension, the rune will not work. Once the rune is initially created, it can be redrawn without the incantation by the original maker and by other wizards who are willing to use their magical essence for the rune.'*

"So, it's like any Dark spell, you have to *really* mean it to make it a reality. Which was obviously easy for the Death Eaters since they all have a vehement hatred of muggles."

"Being able to make a rune to do anything you want sounds incredibly dangerous," Draco replied. "It doesn't sound like there are really any limits to this form of magic past just really *wanting* it to work."

"Well if you'd let me finish," Hermione said, giving him a playful look, "you'd see that's the first thought the wizards back then had too."

She continued reading: *"There is truly no bounds to what sort of runes can be created. A wizard can easily become all powerful if one knows how to properly forge runes to his will, and that will is strong enough. Only the wizard who first created and activated the rune can control or destroy it. Other wizards may draw the same rune using their own magical essence to activate the replica(s), but the control over the rune remains in the hands of the inventor. This is one of the many reasons why runes were eradicated as a magical practice."*

"So, all of the Death Eaters that day in Hogsmeade put their magical essences into the runes and just didn't know it? And whoever created that rune has control over them all?" Hermione asked.

"I guess so," Draco said, his brows scrunching together.

"Seems like it. So whoever came up with the rune that bars muggleborns from all of the shops in Hogsmeade then controls any iteration of the rune that is drawn, wherever it's drawn, no matter how many times. The magical essence of the wizards who drew the rune is only needed to activate it, but they don't actually control it."

"That sounds like a problem that's only getting bigger the more information we find," Draco grumbled, raking his hand through his hair stressfully. The Death Eaters had placed the rune Rookwood drew all over the village, and there was nothing stopping them from placing the rune all over the wizarding world.

"Do you think things will ever be normal again?" she asked, looking up from the book at him.

"I don't think anything about the wizarding world has been normal for a long time," he responded, looking down at the floor.

"You're right," she frowned. "I just wish there was more I could do."

Draco looked up immediately, leveling a stern gaze at her face. "Because researching an ancient magic form that is affecting all muggleborns isn't enough?"

Hermione huffed, but a ghost of a smile painted her face. "I don't know if I'll ever feel like I'm doing enough. I mean, this doesn't solve anything. It just reveals a bigger problem, like you said. I don't know what to do with this."

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” he said sincerely.

“I know,” she said, looking up from the book to meet his eyes. “You’re the only person who tells me that. But this does make me feel like I have a purpose at least, even if I can’t fix it.”

Hermione leaned back in her chair, picking up the book on Samblása runes again.

Draco studied her as she scanned the pages, sinking deeper against the chair. This part of the library was chilled, but the light coming through the windows Hermione sat in front of kept the room at a comfortable level. Hermione was curled up in her chair, one of the straps of her tank top slipping off her shoulder as she got comfortable, oblivious to his gaze as she dove back into the text. Winter was on its way out, so much so that once they settled in the library, Hermione had removed her sweater, sitting in the chair across from him in just that tank top that hugged her body in all of the right places and was not doing any favors for his current mental state.

His eyes tracked her slim fingers as she turned the page of the book she was studying. He wondered what it would feel like to run his hands down her arms, to trail his fingers along hers again like he did when they finished that bottle of firewhiskey together. They had bumped hands and brushed fingers so many times since then that Draco could almost recall the feel of her soft skin from memory now, but he knew nothing would compare to touching her without holding himself back.

He watched as she scrunched her face in concentration, eyes still on her delicate hand as she attempted to thread her wand through her hair to keep it up in a messy knot. She huffed, frustrated, and gave up when the wild tendrils wouldn’t cooperate, simply tucking it behind her ears, reading all the while. He had come to love those curls, despite how much they hit him in the face on a daily basis.

She shifted in her armchair, putting her feet up. It was one of many that littered this section of the library – a small study nook sectioned off from the rest of the tables and chairs that most students occupied.

Hermione suddenly looked up at him, pulling him out of his embarrassing reverie. He quickly turned his gaze to the book that lay abandoned in his lap, hoping his staring wasn’t too obvious, his heart threatening to pound out of his chest.

A few quiet moments passed before Draco chanced another look at Hermione, only to find her smirking at him when his eyes met hers. He couldn’t help the grin that came over his face, the warm feeling that came over his body at her attention.



(HUGE thank you to the incredible [incendiosketches](#) on Instagram for this amazing commission of this scene!)

“Why do you always sit in this part of the library?” Draco asked her, breaking the silence.

Hermione thought for a moment.

“It’s warm,” she responded. “The sun hits me perfectly right now in this spot. I love how it feels on my skin. It’s so rare to get sun in Britain so I take advantage of it when I can. Plus, like I’ve told you before, it’s quiet and secluded, so I can study uninterrupted for hours.”

“Maybe a little too secluded,” Draco responded.

“Well I’m never here without you anymore,” she smiled. “So, I think I’m fine.”

He hummed in answer, not taking his eyes off of her as she went back to reading the book on her lap.

The sun shone down on Hermione perfectly as she sat across from him. She looked tranquil as she basked in the sun, the light hit her hair just right, bringing out the faintest tinges of red.

Draco couldn’t stop himself from wondering what her freshly sunned skin felt like. Not just her hands now, but all of her. No doubt warm and soft. What he would do to run his lips over her, feel the warmth there, taste the sun on her skin.

His mind couldn’t be any further from runes.

He only ever had a few rendezvous during sixth year and the war – something to escape the horror that he was going through – but he already knew nothing would compare to her. Those moments didn’t mean anything, not really.

Draco absentmindedly ran his fingers over his mouth, thinking about how it would feel to run his hands through her hair, to tangle his fingers in her curls, get lost in them and in the pure essence of her. He wondered how it would feel to wind those twisted locks around his fists, tightening his grip and tilting her head up towards hi—

Draco shook his head as cleared his throat. He had to stop. He couldn’t think about her like this, couldn’t go any further down this road. At least not until this ordeal with the Death Eaters was over, she was safe from them, and he was free from his deal with the Ministry with a clean record. Then he could think about what was next. Then maybe he’d be worthy of her.

Draco sat up in his chair and began to quickly gather his things. The longer he sat here, the more he would be tempted to do something he would eventually regret. He couldn’t sit next to her any longer in her current state, that tiny tank top with that damn strap halfway down her arm, and keep his mind on anything but getting that other strap down too.

“I just remembered, I need to meet Blaise and Theo,” he announced.

“Oh, okay,” she replied, looking up at him with those liquid brown eyes that threatened to drown him. *She had no idea what she did to him, did she?*

“Turn the ring if you need me,” he said, racing out of the library.

They were finally friends, maybe more than that if the feelings that ran through their bond were any indication.

It was hard to tell. It wasn't like the rings shouted what the other person was thinking. The general pulses of warmth and happiness that emanated between their rings could've indicated anything from general happiness and contentment, to friendship, to lust, to love.

He knew what *his* feelings were...

But he couldn't risk testing out if she felt the same way.

He finally had her trust. She finally looked at him like he was a person and not just someone she was forced to be around.

He had been denying it ever since the Unbreakable Vow, but it was so obvious at this point that he could no longer ignore it:

He was in deep shit when it came to Hermione Granger.

## Chapter End Notes

The way I've been hoarding this comission for this scene since LAST AUGUST! I've been dying to share this with you all. I love it so much and Jane perfectly portrayed the vibe of the scene and the ooey goeeyness of Draco oogling Hermione hehe.

As you can see, our boy is officially down bad ;)

Also this marks one year of Bound by Blood!! So crazy to think we/I have been on this journey with this fic for a year now! Thank you so much to everyone who has been here whether it's been since the beginning or more recently. You all mean to much to me!!

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), and [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites and on tumblr as snortinglavender.

Your comments and kudos give me life and mean more to me than you know!! <3

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

It was another late night in the Riddle House and Draco was more than ready to return to the castle and fall into a deep sleep. He found himself standing before more innocent Aurors, covered in blood that wasn't his, listening to the sounds of the sobs and groans coming from their mouths. Draco set his pity aside for them for just a moment, wishing he could express his emotions like they were, yet his occlusion walls were so high and thick at this point that he just stared at them with a blank expression on his face, feeling nothing at all.

He knew this wasn't normal – to not feel anything in the face of such horrors – but it had taken much violence to get here, that at the end of the day, he was grateful for anything that lessened the guilt he felt for what he had to do to survive.

He had been on his own this time, Rookwood and Dolohov leaving the Aurors for him as they went out on another mission.

Draco wished that being on his own during interrogations meant that he didn't need to be ruthless, didn't need to harm innocent people who were just doing their best to survive, but the Death Eaters liked to see proof, liked to know that Draco had broken them, even if he had come up dry on information.

He did what he could to make it bearable for the people he tortured. Obliviating them after each injury, pouring firewhiskey down their throats before he began. It was the little things that made him feel somewhat better about himself, but nothing would fully rid him of the sins of what he did here.

It was mid-morning when he finally was able to take his leave. He had been at the Riddle House since before the sun rose and exhaustion was beginning to settle heavily over him as he apparated back to his outpost near the castle, stowing his Death Eater robes and casting a quick Scourgify on himself before making his way down the path towards Hogwarts.

Draco wanted nothing more than to return to his and Hermione's room and fall asleep to the sound of Hermione turning pages in her books as she studied. He wanted nothing more than to smell her sweet scent of vanilla and lavender as he drifted into unconsciousness and then wake up next to her, blissfully rested, the things he did in the basement of the Riddle House a far off memory. It was Saturday, so they had no classes to be at or social obligations. Of course, the work was never done and they continued researching runes and hunting hounds when they could, but Draco hoped he could convince her to relax for once, maybe even persuade her to go down to the dungeons with him to see Pansy, Theo, and Blaise.

It had only been a couple of days since that afternoon in the library where his thoughts had started to wander down dangerous paths. He would be remiss if he didn't admit that it was harder than ever for him to be away from her. Not because he felt overprotective of her – he did – but because he craved being near her. Something about Hermione calmed him, chased all of his inner demons away and quieted his loud mind.

And right now, he needed that more than anything.

But apparently, his needs did not matter. His daydreams of a relaxing Saturday didn't last long.

It was the sound of barking that made him break out in a sprint. It was the sound of the screams that made him run faster.

As he turned down the path that led to the castle, he found Hogwarts surrounded by hunting hounds – the most he had ever seen in one place.

He had only seen one at a time, at isolated events where the Death Eaters employed the dogs, but never this many at once. And to make matters worse, it was a nice day out, so there was a plethora of students littering the courtyard, giving the hunting hounds easy pickings for targets.

Students and hounds alike ran up the staircases, the hounds chomping and snarling at those they could corner, saliva dripping from their maws. It was obvious that the dogs were searching for something, hunting for one thing in particular.

*Hermione.*

Draco bolted.

He ran as fast as his legs would carry him, his mind on one thing and one thing only — *Hermione, Hermione, Hermione.*

Anger rose in Draco as he continued to push through the crowd. Neither Rookwood, Dolohov, or Yaxley had mentioned an attack on the school. Yet as Draco frantically made his way through the chaos, flashes of apparition sparked around the courtyard, experienced Death Eaters and new recruits alike arriving to elevate the horror that was already descending upon the castle.

Why didn't they think it was necessary to mention this attack to him? Maybe they assumed that because he would already be here that he would join in on the action unprompted. Still though, this would make two attacks now that Draco had failed to warn the Ministry of. Anxiety began creeping up in his body, fear that soon Kingsley would think him purposefully keeping information from them even more so than the Ministry already did. He would have to find a solution to this missed communication between him and the Death Eaters, and fast.

Draco continued his ascent up the stairs when he finally spotted Hermione barreling out of the castle alongside other prefects, yelling directions to students to get inside and to clear the area, perfectly playing the role of the courageous, protective Gryffindor he knew lived inside of her.

Draco caught her by her arms, taking her by surprise. "Draco!" she exclaimed, looking almost shocked to find him. "I didn't know where you were and the hounds—"

He immediately grabbed her and drew her to his chest, his heart pounding in relief that she was okay. She was here. She was with him and she was safe.

"Thank Merlin. Are you okay?" he asked, his breathing heavy, grabbing her face in between his shaking hands and his eyes scanning over her face quickly, making sure she wasn't injured. She seemed fine, if not a little tired if the circles under her eyes were any indication.

"I'm fine. I'm fine but I'm not sure if everyone else is. I need to—"



“You need to get back to our room,” he ordered.

“There are younger students who need help!” she exclaimed. “The hunting hounds, they’re inside and I—“

“Hunting hounds who are after *you*, ” he reminded her. “Let me take care of it. You need to get back to our room. There are Death Eaters apparating in and we can’t risk them seeing you.”

“I’m *fine*. What are *you* doing out here? Why are you outside already? Where have you been?” she questioned, shooting an accusing look his way.

“Hermione, get back inside,” he demanded, ignoring her question, panic rising up in him as more and more Death Eaters continued to apparate into the courtyard. If they saw him with her like this, there was no coming back from it. How would he defend himself? How would he spin talking to Hermione so casually in his favor? He couldn’t. He had to get her out of here, had to get her out of sight and harm’s way.

“I’m helping,” she replied stubbornly.

“Hermione...” he sighed.

Before he could continue his reply to her, a figure apparated beside them, causing Draco to go on the defense, pushing Hermione behind him, his wand raised, ready to attack. Just as a stunning spell was about to leave his mouth, they turned around, and Draco slumped in relief. It was Dawlish, alert and scanning the courtyard below before turning to them.

“Miss Granger,” Dawlish greeted tersely, nodding at her before turning towards Draco. “Malfoy. I’m glad to see you two are alright. I was coming to warn Hermione of the attack, but I’m glad to see you move so fast, Malfoy.”

“Hermione moves faster than me. I just have good timing. She was already out here in the courtyard when I got to her.”

“We need to get you somewhere safer. You out here with these mutts would make it too easy. We’re dangling their target right in front of them.”

“Why are they doing this now? And here of all places?” Hermione asked, her eyes wide and unbelieving. “They should know that the castle is one of the safest places in the wizarding world!”

Draco couldn’t believe it either – that the Death Eaters would be so stupid to try and infiltrate Hogwarts without a plan, without consulting him first. Not that he would tell them anything true. He would have led them down dead ends, just as he had with the information he gave them about Azkaban.

“I’m not going to pretend I know the Death Eaters’ plans or motivations,” Dawlish said. “All I know is that they are here now and we need to stop them.”

As the words left Dawlish’s mouth, the sound of an explosion boomed behind them. Draco jumped and capitulated himself on top of Hermione at the sound, wrapping his arms around her and clutching her head as they hit the ground, rolling them away from the shards of the castle that rained down on top of them. Smoke quickly filled the space around them, making it difficult to see the immediate surroundings, but still, the sounds of growls and screams continued.

Draco laid still for a moment, panting as the debris settled around them before looking down to Hermione who lay underneath him, her eyes wide and body trembling as the realization of what they were facing dawned on her. They weren't just dealing with a small attack here. The Death Eaters had a mission and they were going to do whatever it took to complete it.

"Are you okay?" he panted, his eyes roaming over her, looking for injury for the second time that day.

Hermione nodded her head quickly, fear making her eyes go wide.

Draco quickly looked away to assess what had happened and found that a group of Death Eaters had cast *bombarda* at the front doors, forcing their way through the castle's last defense in order to get inside. *Shit.*

Draco turned his attention back to Hermione once more, running his hands down her arms and sides, confirming that she was indeed okay and not just trying to be strong for the sake of being strong. He felt irrationally angry at the thought of her pushing through any amount of pain or suffering, his possessiveness and need to keep her safe only growing by the day. If he could just stay like this, keep her wrapped up in the safety of his arms, he would be okay. It would all be okay.

Unfortunately, they weren't that lucky.

Draco stood, holding a hand out to help Hermione up as the fighting continued to rage around them, a horde of hounds bounding towards them once they caught Hermione's scent on the wind.

"Hermione, behind you!" Draco yelled as he dug for his wand, the hounds getting so close that he could see the bloodlust in their eyes for their target.

Hermione followed his line of sight, turning around and swiftly casting a *Protego* around them as another hunting hound came for them from the opposite direction.

Little difference did it make.

The dogs were everywhere. Draco's mind spun as he tried to think of just how the Death Eaters got their hands on so many of what was supposed to be an extinct species. He knew that they had likely given the dogs Hermione's scent, but it seemed that they were feral for any muggleborn they laid eyes on, which, as awful as he felt thinking it, Draco was grateful for. He couldn't imagine Hermione being the sole focus of the pack. If she was, he would not hesitate to apparate her out of here and to somewhere far away, where she was safe and no one could hurt her. Where it could be just them, and no one else. No pain, no Death Eaters, no blood purist politics to navigate. He would do it now if he could if it didn't seem so rash.

Quick bursts of color left Hermione's wand as she fought back the approaching hounds bringing him out of his fantasy, and Draco watched her for a moment, in awe of her strength and speed of casting – in awe of her ability to stare down the threat before her, meeting it face to face without wavering. Even if he never wanted to admit it in his younger years, he always knew she was a great witch, but never during their school years or during the war had he *really* come across her as she was now.

It gave him a moment of comfort, knowing that if it really came down to it, and something happened to him, that she could defend herself in the end.

Confident that she was holding her own, Draco turned his attention to the battle around him once more, clocking the movements of everyone in his sight.

To his left was another small group of Death Eater recruits, and to his right was Hermione, sending spells at breakneck speed toward the hordes of hunting hounds running at them.

Together, they fell into a dance, fighting by one another's side. Together they cast spell after spell, leaving their opponents no breathing room, not a moment to falter or hesitate or they would be hit with a spell that would take them down without even a moment's notice.

It was nice, fighting alongside her like this. Their skills matched, their opponents not standing a chance against them.

This time last year, they were fighting on opposites of the war, both of them just wanting to come out alive, and now here they were – more than allies, but partners, friends – working together.

How quickly things could change in a year.

He continued to fight, but as time went on, Draco felt that same cold feeling of Dark magic as he did at Little Hangleton rise up within him, stronger than it was the last time, the chill working its way up his veins, slowly taking over. It was as if he was operating through a haze, like he couldn't see clearly in front of him. He felt almost drunk on the Dark magic coursing through him, the chill of it fighting to overtake him as he worked his occlumency walls into place.

His magic made its way down his arm and to his wand before it stopped as he aimed towards the hounds. As much as he willed it, his magic wouldn't continue through the wand, his conduit failing him. He suddenly didn't want to attack the hounds, didn't want to hurt them because hurting them would impair the Death Eaters' mission.

Draco shook his head, trying with all his might to gain control, equally disturbed and confused by how this was happening to him *again*. Were the other Death Eaters experiencing such a sensation? Were any of them overcome with an even stronger urge to serve the Death Eater agenda? Or was it just him? Was it just because he was working for the Ministry and the Dark magic tied to the Dark Mark wanted him to do otherwise?

“Draco!” he heard from behind him, slightly snapping him out of the seductive pull of Dark magic that threatened to overtake him, her voice grounding him and bringing him back to earth.

He pushed past the block, using occlumency to gain control of himself once more.

He turned to see a hunting hound bounding towards them, Hermione casting every defensive spell she could think of with no luck. She was a strong fighter, yet these hounds were ruthless when near their target, their numbers only growing larger as they all seemed to figure out that she was here, that their target, Hermione, was right in front of them.

Draco hit the dog with a hard *bombarda*, its body catapulting back, hitting the stone of the castle with a sickly thump and crack. He whipped around at the sound of another hound sprinting their way, throwing a repellent spell at him, the hound rebounding back as if hit with a wave of force.

The chill of Dark magic lessened by the minute, Draco actively fighting it with every panting breath escaping his body, but still, it fought back. Draco fought harder than he normally did, each cast of his wand focusing his attention between the fight and that cold feeling of Dark magic

seeping into him. He had forgotten his surroundings, too focused on trying to come out of this unscathed that he missed the feeling of a pair of dark mahogany eyes watching him with unmistakable intensity.

He snapped out of his reverie, turning towards Hermione as he panted, trying to catch his breath, the buzz of battle still ringing in his ears.

Their gazes met, and they stood there for a moment, taking one another in, realization shooting between them. Neither of them had seen much of this side of each other, had seen the depths of each other's abilities. Because when they were fighting in the war, they were so focused on just trying to *survive* that looking for one another in a crowd wasn't even a thought.

What did she think of him now that she had seen him fight? Impressed? Scared?

As Draco and Hermione continued to stand there and take one another in, two Death Eater recruits Draco recognized apparated in right behind Hermione, she so focused on him that she didn't even notice their presence behind her.

Draco didn't hesitate. Before they could recognize him and Hermione, Draco sent blinding hexes their way, the recruits clawing at their eyes as the stinging took over.

"Hermione!" Draco belted as he grabbed her hand, apparating them away from the heat of the battle, away from any more recruits who might recognize them.

They landed just outside of the Forbidden Forest, the quiet of the forest perfectly juxtaposing the chaos that was the battle currently going on at the castle. Hermione took in their surroundings before turning to look at him, a look of frustration painting her face.

"Why did you apparate us away like that?" she asked. "I was fine. I was fighting."

"Two Death Eaters apparated right behind you," he stated sharply.

"I was fine! I could have fought them off!" she exclaimed.

Draco ran his hand through his hair stressfully, doing his best to not bark back at her. He didn't want this to turn into an unnecessary fight. "They were too close. And they are new recruits, so there's no telling what they would do." He avoided meeting her gaze, hoping she wouldn't question him on *how* he knew they were new recruits.

If he was being honest, he would have attacked them outright if it wasn't for the sheer number of other Death Eaters in the castle courtyard, and there was no telling who had eyes on him at that moment. He had already risked enough by protecting Hermione out in the open like he did.

"I still could have defended myself. I'm not a total lost cause. I did fight in the war if you remem—"

"I panicked! Okay," Draco exclaimed, raising his voice to get her to stop talking. "I panicked. I'm sorry."

Hermione stopped her berating at his raised voice, at the obvious sound of pain and stress in it. Draco hated feeling so exposed. He had done so well in the last few weeks to hide his feelings, but in that moment a shard of them slipped through.

Draco let out a deep sigh. He suddenly felt like his world was balancing on the tip of a knife, and the slightest breeze would knock everything over.

He felt as if he was at war with his duty to the Ministry and his desire to protect Hermione. The two objectives had intertwined at one point, but now, he realized that he would do anything – break any promise, go against the Ministry’s orders – if it meant protecting her.

“It was too close of a call and I couldn’t risk it,” he continued on, rambling his anxiety out.

Hermione didn’t respond to his confession and the growing silence between them was deafening. In this space, Draco was suddenly reminded why he kept his emotions to himself, why he rarely allowed himself to be vulnerable.

What would Hermione think of him now that she knew that he couldn’t keep his cool? That sometimes he became his emotions after he fought so long to suppress them?

Even with their newfound friendship and trust, he still tried so hard to be the strong front to all of the horrors they faced. But still, as his feelings grew for Hermione, he was finding it harder and harder to keep himself in check.

“What happened back there?” Hermione asked quietly, breaking the silence between them.

“What do you mean?” he questioned, looking up to meet her concerned eyes.

“You...you...” she trailed off, seemingly struggling to find her words. “It looked like you were struggling to fight. Like you couldn’t control your magic.”

Draco ran his hands through his hair once more, beginning to pace the length of the dirt patch he had apparated them to.

Usually, he would admire her observation skills, but right now they were condemning him.

Draco never expected for such an attack to happen on the castle before he could tell her the truth. But there was no way he could lie about what she had seen. He knew he couldn’t – the expression on her face when she saw the state he was in was enough to confirm that she knew something was wrong, that something abnormal had happened to him.

“I’m not sure,” he finally sighed. “It’s happened before. I think it has something to do with the Dark Mark.” The fear of honesty shot through him, but it was accompanied by a wave of relief that he no longer had to bear the burden of this all on his own.

“Happened during the war? Or recently?”

“Recently,” he admitted, sneaking a glance at her to gauge her reaction.

“What does it feel like? What exactly happens?”

“My magic... it just stops,” Draco started to explain. “It’s like it stops at my wrist and won’t go through to my wand.”

“Just when you’re fighting?”

“Just when I’m fighting the Death Eaters,” he clarified softly. He was terrified he was giving himself away, that she would learn the truth before he was ready to share it with her. He was too exhausted, too frazzled at the moment to explain his deal with the Ministry clearly.

But Merlin was on his side for Hermione looked at him with a slight tinge of fear in her eyes before sighing and answering. “Okay. Okay, we will figure out what is going on and stop it.”

He felt guilty at the wave of relief that came over him that she hadn’t pieced it together.

Draco shook his head. “You don’t need to do that. We have enough to figure out right now.”

“You’ve spent endless hours researching runes and hunting hounds with me.”

“But that’s because—”

“I can take care of you too,” Hermione interjected, the tone in her voice insistent.

“But—”

“You think it was easy for me to see that? To see you lose control, to be in the middle of those hounds and Death Eaters and think there was nothing I could do?” she said, her voice becoming shrill.

If she only knew that it was her voice that pulled him back down to earth, that snapped him out of it and back into reality. That if she hadn’t been there, he had no idea of what could have happened if he continued to let that loss of control fester within.

“You think I didn’t worry about you when I heard those horrendous howls in the castle, knowing what was making those noises, and had no idea where you were? You had been gone all day and I had no idea—”

He approached her, grabbing her hand and pulling her closer to him, his eyes scanning over her once more for injury.

She kept her gaze on the ground, refusing to look up at him as her emotions overtook her. He placed a knuckle under her chin, tilting her face up to look at him.

“Hermione,” he said in a soft yet demanding voice.

“I’m okay,” she whispered, her eyes finally flickering up to meet his. “I promise. I just need you to know that I worry about you too.”

His heart tightened at her words, his hand twitching, resisting the urge to pull her that small distance closer to him and reveal how he really felt. But he couldn’t ruin the moment. Couldn’t break the trust between them.

“Okay,” he replied softly. “Come on. Let’s get back to the room. I’m sure things have died down by now.”

### **Hermione**

There was a crowd of people in the Headmistress' small office following the attack – Draco, Hermione, Dawlish, McGonagall and a few other Aurors that Dawlish had brought along with

him.

As soon as they had made it back to the courtyard and saw that the fighting was over, Dawlish called them to the Headmistress' office for a debrief. Apparently, the Death Eaters had just apparated away out of nowhere, the fighting in full rage one moment, and over the next. Hearing this puzzled Hermione. So many parts of the day didn't make sense, and she was starting to feel like the only one who couldn't see everything adding up, for everyone in the Headmistress' office wasn't even questioning the exit of the Death Eaters – they were just relieved it was over.

Hermione felt a headache coming on from the whirlwind events of the day, her mind constantly spinning trying to make sense of everything.

“Minerva, I apologize for what happened today. I'm sure this brought up lots of trauma, especially so close to the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts,” Dawlish started once everyone was settled in the room. “The Aurors who were placed here at the castle will be debriefed and we will reallocate whatever resources we have to the castle.”

“I appreciate that. Merlin knows we've had enough horrors take place at this school. Thank you for coming today, Dawlish. Kingsley has been notified and sends his apologies and regrets but he is caught up with some foreign meetings today and could not get a Portkey quickly.”

“It's the least I could do, Minerva,” Dawlish said. “The attack at Little Hangleton made me realize how much the Aurors have failed the wizarding population post-war. I am doing everything in my power to fix that.”

Hermione tilted her head in confusion at the mention of Little Hangleton. When had there been an attack on the cemetery? And how bad had it been for the Head of Aurors to finally step in and get himself involved?

She looked over to Draco, and found him nervously racking his hand through his hair. She felt a wave of disappointment wash through her – she knew what that meant.

“What attack?” Hermione asked him, not waiting to beat around the bush.

McGonagall and Dawlish looked between one another with an expression of stress, like they had let something spill that they weren't supposed to.

“There was...an attack at Little Hangleton cemetery,” McGonagall elaborated poorly. Yet, she didn't need much more info than that. She could put it together herself. She knew there was only one reason why the Death Eaters would attack that place.

“Where...”

“Voldemort's body is, yes,” Dawlish confirmed. “We have viable intel verifying that is what they were after.”

Hermione's body went cold at the confirmation.

“Did you know about this?” Hermione turned to ask Draco.

She watched as his body tensed at her direct question. He knew how much it meant to her that he be honest in their friendship, that he shared what he knew. And yet, he had kept information from

her once again.

Her trust in him had been growing so deep, but this threatened to shatter it.

He cleared his throat before answering. “Yes. The Ministry let me know about it since it was so much Death Eater activity. They wanted me on high alert in case another attack was to take place.”

Hermione gnawed on her lip, doing all she could to keep the hurt inside her. She didn’t want to lash out at him in front of all of these people, so she buried it deep within her, turning her anger towards the Ministry. She looked at Dawlish and McGonagall once more.

“And the Ministry just thought the best course of action was to keep all of this out of the public eye?”

“We have kept it all out of the public eye, Miss Granger,” Dawlish said. “They know none of it. And it will stay that way. We don’t want the public to panic when we have it all under control.”

“But you *don’t* have it under control!”

“Miss Granger!” she heard McGonagall exclaim, but Hermione continued on, feeling the white-hot lick of anger rise up in her.

She was tired of holding back, tired of not saying what was on her mind.

“So let me get this straight. The Ministry has been blindsided by the Death Eaters *multiple* times following the war, doing nothing about the attacks on innocent muggleborn wizards and witches, many of them students. The Ministry has let those attacks escalate so far that they decided to go after *me*, and you all only took action because you were afraid it would make the government look weak. Next, Little Hangleton Cemetery is attacked and the Ministry didn’t tell anyone about it to save face. And *now*, the Ministry was blindsided once again by the Death Eaters, this time at Hogwarts which already has a history of being a bloody battleground and you think you can just continue to keep this from everyone?!”

The room was silent as her words sunk in, as the people in the room realized that she wasn’t going to just sit back and let them get away with this.

“So, are you sure you’re just not telling people about these attacks because you care about how they react or because the Ministry is dropping the ball at every turn?!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Miss Granger, we are doing everything we can—”

“When will we stop reacting to the things that are happening and try to get in front of them? We can’t keep playing catch up! Eventually the Death Eaters are going to overtake it all! We will all be dead before we know it! We still haven’t figured out their motivation for singling me out of everyone, and I’m starting to think that no one actually cares.”

She could feel Draco’s eyes burning into her at her words, at the anger that had just poured out of her.

“This isn’t a conversation we should have without Kingsley,” McGonagall stated. “But trust me when I say the Ministry and the school are diligently working on the problem. Is there anything else we can do to make you feel at ease?”



“We need a way for Hermione and I to travel in and out of her room without having to go through the castle in case this happens again,” Draco spoke up. “We can’t be caught with our hands tied like this if the Death Eaters try to infiltrate again. Today was too close of a call.”

Hermione turned to look at Draco at his suggestion, a bit of her anger towards him leaving her as she saw the stress and worry on his face. She immediately felt bad for saying that no one cared about her or the Death Eaters going after her when it was so obvious that Draco did. For all she knew, he might be the only one who did care.

“I can make an exception to the castle wards and install a Floo seeing as there is already a fireplace in Miss Granger’s room. That is no problem,” McGonagall replied. “At the end of the day, your safety is still our priority, Miss Granger. Even if you may not believe it yourself.”

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Hermione acknowledged, inclining her head in thanks.

“We all went through a lot today,” McGonagall finalized, the exhaustion in her voice evident. “But we once again succeeded against the Death Eaters and no one got seriously hurt. That’s all that matters.”

*Succeeded on sheer dumb luck*, Hermione thought.

“I agree,” Dawlish said. “And on behalf of the Ministry, I want to apologize for all of the pressure the two of you are bearing because of my mistakes. I can only hope that it will not cause you any more grief. Today’s attack has opened my eyes to just how grievous of a state everything truly is in.”

“It shouldn’t have taken a second attack on the castle for the Ministry to *open its eyes*, but okay,” Hermione said.

“I have to agree,” Draco spoke up next to her. “It shouldn’t have taken all of that for the Ministry to finally personally step in, but I’m glad you’re finally realizing what is actually going on.”

Dawlish cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Yes, well, I am dedicating myself going forward to doing everything I can to put a stop to this. You can count on that.”

Hermione nodded her head in acceptance of Dawlish’s words, even if she knew that she couldn’t totally believe him.

How had it come to this?

During the war and the months following, Hermione trusted the Ministry just as much as Ron and Harry. She had relied on the Aurors during those first few months back at Hogwarts, and had put much of her faith and trust in them to help her feel like she had some semblance of control over the chaos she was surrounded by.

But now, as time went on and more and more was revealed about the Ministry and how they operated in the face of adversity, she didn’t know who to trust.

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Hermione restlessly tapped her finger on her book, her mind spinning about everything that had just happened that day – everything she had witnessed and experienced in the last two hours in

particular. She thought she was finally in a place where she knew everything that was going on with the Ministry, the Death Eaters, the hounds, and the runes, but apparently not.

She had wanted to discuss with Draco what had just happened, but her spiraling thoughts were also intertwined with his whereabouts, why he had already been in the courtyard when she arrived, why Pansy didn't seem to know where he was, and more. Yet she couldn't bring herself to bring it up with him and pretended to be asleep, only to feel him leave the bed and exit the room once he thought she was unconscious.

That only troubled her more and confirmed her suspicion that there was something going on she wasn't aware of.

She thought back to how the day had started. She had been in a prefect meeting when the screams filled the air, the group of prefects scrambling out of their chairs and out of the room as fast as possible. The memory of all of the other times student screams filled the castle sprung to the forefront of Hermione's mind, her heart lurching up into her throat about what they could mean. It had barely been a year since the Battle of Hogwarts, and where they were again, facing the same horrors that seemed to never end.

She and the other prefects exited the room to find the castle in chaos, the growls that had begun to haunt her nightmares were now realities, echoing menacingly off of the stone walls. Her heart leapt into her throat at the sound, but stronger than that, she felt the need to protect the innocent students from the terror that were the hunting hounds. She had already handled them once, so she knew could survive. She had less fear than the first time she faced the creatures as she ran down the stairs, her wand at the ready, going through a catalog of spells she knew would take them down in her head. She mentally prepared to find a barrage of them outside, only to get on the landing of the steps that lead to the main hall to find that the hunting hounds had made it inside the castle.

It was like a scene out of a nightmare. Hounds herded students into corners, scaring first years and infiltrating what was supposed to be a safe space, a place for them all to heal and forget about the war. They had worked so hard to ensure the castle's safety, yet it still wasn't enough.

As she ran down the stairs, her panicked mind couldn't help but wander to where Draco was, and if he was okay. Was he aware of what was happening?

He had been gone all morning, the note he left on his pillow claiming he was joining his mother for morning tea. It was past lunch now, so she assumed he was back and possibly visiting his friends since he had yet to make an appearance in their room before her meeting. He often spent Saturday afternoons with them, but normally she would have seen or heard something from him by now.

She knew Draco was capable of taking care of himself, but over the last couple of weeks, ever since their night on their bedroom floor, Draco had gained a spot in a tender part of Hermione's heart.

She tried to not let it show – she didn't want to seem overbearing, or like she had a claim to him. But she did worry. There was so much riding on his shoulders, so much pressure put on him by the Ministry that it wasn't fair, and she was at the point where she was willing to do anything to make sure he didn't crack under the pressure.

As Hermione ran down the stairs, following the sounds of the growling hounds, she ran into Pansy coming up from the dungeons, relief washing over that someone knew where Draco was.

“Is Draco with you?” she asked breathlessly.

Pansy furrowed her brows in confusion. “He said he had plans with you today.”

She looked back at the Slytherin witch with equal shock, her features mirroring Pansy’s bewilderment. She didn’t bother telling Pansy that she hadn’t seen Draco either, that she didn’t know where he was. There was enough going on and they didn’t have time to converse on his whereabouts. But still, that was her first moment of questioning how much she really knew. Of what was really going on. Where was Draco and what was he doing? Why didn’t he tell her the truth?

Things only became more puzzling as the day went on.

Hermione ran outside alongside all of the other prefects, mentally preparing herself to fight off what she could only imagine was a barrage of hunting hounds. She felt anxiety clawing its way up within her as she exited the walls of the castle, her mind protecting her like it had during the war once more. She knew it was a risk being out here in the middle of all of the hounds, but it was one of the first moments in a long time since the war where she felt like she could do something other than idly stand by.

She had glanced around as she ran down the stairs, taking in the chaos before a pair of strong hands caught her, grey eyes frantically washing over her, before pulling her close, clutching her, and making sure she was okay. She felt her own relief seeing that he was okay, her own arms wrapping around him, subtly assessing him for any injuries. It was odd, seeing Draco so panicked, but it made sense. Something had shifted between them in the last couple of weeks, and it only grew stronger between the two of them as time went on.

She couldn’t put her finger on exactly what it was but what she did know was that she felt differently towards him now than she did at the beginning of this arrangement. Now, she saw him as a dear friend she couldn’t bear to lose. Now, he was as much a part of her as Harry and Ron were before they drifted apart.

His panic replaced any confusion she had about his whereabouts, her only focus on calming him down that she was okay, and that she wanted to handle this beside him and not be cast to the side like had so many times before. It was obvious he wanted her far away from the situation, away and safe from the hounds who were ultimately after her. Her heart clenched at how much he obviously cared about her and her safety. Just his expression alone made it seem like his whole world would crumble if something were to happen to her.

She was happy that he didn’t make her beg to hold her own, that he seemed to know that she was strong and able enough to fight alongside him – to make a difference. It would be almost easier in a way, because once the hounds caught her scent, they would flock toward her and away from the innocent students. If she had to be the lure that ended the attack, she would happily do it.

It didn’t take long for the fighting to escalate, for the Death Eaters to begin their onslaught.

Hermione steadied herself as she prepared to fight, this time alongside Draco.

The hunting hounds were ruthless, terrifying creatures, but it wasn’t anything Hermione couldn’t handle. Before, in her room, she had been caught by surprise, anger blinding her and making her forget herself. Now, she was prepared, ready to fight and tap into the ruthless version of herself that she had become during the war.

It felt nice to defend herself, to show herself that she wasn't the damsel in distress she was so terrified of becoming.

She felt alive in those moments fighting by Draco's side, a part of her feeling relief for finding one of the parts of herself that she had lost in her grief after the war.

And the way he fought those Death Eaters, anticipating the way they were going to move before they even did it...It was terrifying. It was mesmerizing.

She stood there, taking him in, bearing witness to this dark part of him that she knew he hid so expertly.

She knew of his experience with the Death Eaters, knew that he was most likely trained in their ways of ruthless killing, but seeing it in action was another thing.

She hadn't seen him much during the war or the Battle of Hogwarts, but seeing him today, it was obvious where he got his training from.

He had the discipline of Snape, the ruthlessness of Bellatrix, and the grace from what she could only assume came from his mother.

Draco was honed in on his targets, though she swore she saw him stutter, saw him hesitate to fight against the Death Eaters for a moment, and for just a second, she feared that it had all been a ruse and that he was going to turn on her.

She trusted Draco, she really did, but now, after witnessing his absence this morning, catching him in a lie with Pansy, and finding him already outside during the attack, it was obvious he was keeping things from her. At least she knew he trusted her, and had let her defend herself and fight alongside him. For the most part, she was sure he saw her as an equal.

Yet she couldn't shake the cold feeling that came over her as she watched him fight, watched him struggle and stutter to keep firing against the foes in front of him.

It was when he became distracted was the moment the hunting hounds turned their attention on her, growling and sniffing, biting their jaws in her direction at catching a whiff of their intended target. She screamed Draco's name, wanting nothing more than to break him out of whatever it was he was internally battling.

And the moment he broke out of his reverie, yelling to warn her of the hound at her back, she immediately felt awful for thinking such a thing. He immediately came to her defense, catapulting the hounds back and into the castle walls, a sickly crunch announcing their death.

Then there was the way he looked at her after he had brought them down, their crumpled forms bowing by his feet. The steel in his eyes, any trace of the softness that she had become so fond of gone.

He turned to look at her, to check if she was okay, and she had froze in place, mesmerized by his ruthlessness in his eyes, the determination she found there.

The hard look in his eye sent shivers down her spine, yet she had never felt safer in her life.

She was confused, and pushed those feelings she felt for him that night they got drunk in her room down. She couldn't feel anything for him except friendship. Anything else would be stupid, illogical...embarrassing.

At the end of the day, this was an assignment to him, and while they both had gained a friendship out of it, Hermione couldn't stand jeopardizing it for some fleeting feelings.

A pair of Death Eaters apparating in beside her jolted Hermione from her thoughts, their eyes landing on her like a band of pirates who finally found their treasure.

Draco had immediately jumped in front of her when he noticed them, sending one of the nastiest hexes she had ever seen their way, most likely damaging their eyesight for life before apparating them away and to the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest.

She could admit that she reacted badly. She was finally feeling like she was back to her pre-war self, like she could hold her own in a fight that being swept away from any danger like a damsel in distress insulted her.

But then she saw how flustered Draco was, more so than when he had found her on the steps at the beginning of the attack. He was pacing back and forth, rambling all of his thoughts out of his head, obviously shaken by how close the Death Eaters had gotten to her.

The Draco she saw now was the exact opposite of the Draco she met at the beginning of this arrangement.

In the beginning, he was his normal selfish self, all about his own self-preservation and just getting by.

Now he was tender, caring, vulnerable, softer than she ever expected him to be. And it was the culmination of these little moments over time that had caused her to start feeling more than just friendship for him.

But he could never know that.

And in this moment of vulnerability, Draco confessed to her what had happened when she saw him stutter and lose control of his magic. That it had happened before and only when fighting Death Eaters. And the more information Draco gave her about the attacks, the more fearful she was. She had never heard of such a thing happening, but like all things, she was determined to find an answer.

She understood why he had never told anyone about them, but that didn't stop her from wondering what else he had kept from her.

Not to mention, he knew about the attack at Little Hangleton and didn't tell her. The Ministry and McGonagall felt the need to tell Draco but not her. Why?

It frustrated her to no end that those in charge continued to think that she shouldn't know everything that was going on. The urge to scream at them burned high in her chest, for how else was she going to get them to understand that it was *her* the Death Eaters were after? Wouldn't it make the most sense if she was aware of everything going on? She and Draco had already had a screaming match about it once. They had come so far in their relationship, and Hermione was

under the impression that they weren't keeping anything from one another, but apparently that wasn't the case.

Everything about the day was odd, and as much as she wanted to force herself to pretend it was all coincident, the logic inside of her kept creeping back up.

Maybe she was overreacting. Maybe she was just tired. She hadn't been sleeping well, after all. Her restless dreams had been occurring almost every night now and every morning she would wake up alone, Draco already gone. She assumed he was with his friends in the Slytherin common room, but maybe that wasn't actually the case.

He was always there when she fell asleep, on her bed with her, but rarely did she wake up with him still there.

But he was busy, and there was so much riding on his shoulders, she was sure he needed time to himself.

Hermione shook her head, her restless need to find the logic in situations causing more harm than good.

She wasn't overreacting. Things weren't adding up and she was being kept behind a wall, shielded from the horrors of what was happening to her and it had made her soft. She had forgotten herself, and she supposed that in a way, she had needed some time away from being the Golden Girl, needed these months following the war to process the trauma, to come to terms with everything and everyone that they had lost, and in the comfort of Draco's protection, but had found peace with everything that had happened.

But now it was time to stare down at the reality in front of her.

She was ready to peek from the wall she was being kept behind, ready to relieve Draco from taking the brunt of it all.

But, that didn't change the fact that Hermione was now sure that he was hiding something from her.

She was coming back into focus and now starting to see things how they really were.

Resolved, Hermione decided she would bring this up to him. She would bring it up to him, she resolved. When the time was right.

She still trusted him, and was still his friend, but she was still Hermione Granger.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience on the delay of this chapter!! I fought with it a lot so I hope everyone enjoyed! I might come back and edit this a little more but nothing major will change!

Thank you so much to everyone for reading, leaving kudos, and your amazing comments!



# Chapter 20

## Chapter Notes

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

### Draco

Draco apparated back to Little Hangleton that night after Hermione was fast asleep. He felt awful, constantly leaving her like this, wishing for nothing more than to stay in the warm bed with her, but this was one of the few times he *wanted* to go to this Merlin forsaken place. He wanted answers and was prepared to confront the Death Eaters for their reckless ideas and for not telling him about the attack on Hogwarts. They had made him look stupid once more in the eyes of the Ministry for not sharing their plans with him, and he was ready to get to the bottom of *why*.

He couldn't wrap his head around what their motive was. Why they told him about some things and not others.

Draco was ready to get to the bottom of whatever it was that the Death Eaters were up to.

He had only seen Rookwood and Dolohov at the beginning of the night before they left him to conduct the interrogations on his own, and they hadn't mentioned anything to him about such an attack.

If Draco had known they were going to attack the castle, he would have warned everyone — would have told McGonagall and the Ministry, and would have done everything in his power to get back to Hermione early enough to prevent her being alone when the hounds began showing up to the castle.

Yet at the same time, he didn't see Rookwood, Dolohov, or Yaxley at the school. Just far off, faceless Death Eaters until the two recruits he did know directly apparated behind Hermione.

Why weren't they there? How did the attack even happen without any leaders there?

As he approached the house, Draco could hear voices inside, talking just loud enough that their words carried through the walls.

Draco felt a heavy sense of dread creeping up as he reached for the door, the weight of the air heavy all around him, his feet dragging the closer he got to the House. There was something different about the Riddle House tonight. He could feel the energy from outside, could hear the change in the cadence of the voices through the door before he even opened it.

The attack on the castle hadn't gone well enough to entice such a reaction from the Death Eaters unless they thought causing any sort of strife was a job well done.

Maybe they had finally made some advances on the false information Draco had given them and thought they were making some leeway on their goals.

The last bout of information he had given them was how to get into Azkaban. Information he readily provided, hoping it would bring them to their demise. But could it be that the attack on Hogwarts was a distraction from their prison break-in?



Draco cursed himself even further.

It would be smart if that was indeed what they did. Knowing that the Aurors were spread thin, it would be wise to pull them between two of Britain's most important places, both being infiltrated by Death Eaters at the same time.

Draco pulled open the door to the House and found it empty save for Rookwood and Dolohov. Yet as he entered the main room, the air was different. It was almost... excited, elated, electric.

A chill went through Draco's body.

Something was terribly wrong.

"Ah, back already?" Dolohov asked upon seeing him. "Missed us?"

Draco didn't have time for their games and got straight to the point.

"You want to explain why Hogwarts was surrounded by hunting hounds today? Why *you* didn't inform me of such an attack?" Draco accused, his voice slicing through the air.

"Good to see you too, Malfoy," Dolohov replied snidely.

"Cut the shit. Why was there an unsanctioned attack on Hogwarts today?"

"As much as you may want to think that was our doing, it wasn't," Rookwood said, spinning his wand in his hand like he hadn't a care in the world.

Draco's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean it wasn't you? Who else would it be? Yaxley? Who else knows about the hunting hounds and runes?" Was there another blood purist group also after Hermione? Could that even be possible? That two groups of purebloods didn't want to work with one another but both wanted her?

"We've been hard at work since we last saw you," Rookwood answered, a sinister grin coming over his face.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Shall I call for tea to celebrate?"

Dolohov laughed. Which was odd for him. He was usually so serious, or cruel, but this laugh... it unsettled Draco.

"Maybe you should. We have something for you that I think you will be very excited about," Dolohov said.

The shift in the atmosphere was palpable at Dolohov's words. Dark magic was always present inside Riddle House, seeping just slightly into Draco's skin each time he was in the Merlin forbidden place, but in that moment it increased tenfold, the magic becoming so thick you could cut it with a knife. It even seemed as if the room became darker, colder.

Draco felt a shiver work its way up his spine as he felt the chill of the dark magic work its way into his bloodstream.

"What do you mean?" Draco asked, his voice wary.

It didn't take long for a soft and yet familiar clicking to fill the air, the sound of polished shoes followed by the unmistakable thump of a cane.

"Hello, son," he heard an all too familiar voice say from behind him.

Draco's back straightened on instinct, his body tense.

No.

No, this couldn't be happening. It wasn't possible.

Draco turned around and almost fell back at what he saw, the shock of it all stunning him beyond belief.

Standing in the doorway at the back of the room was his father, Lucius Malfoy, looking as if he had been resurrected from the dead.

He might as well have been, with how Azkaban treated their prisoners. Draco's brief time in the prison showed him just how much he wouldn't be able to handle a full sentencing — it was no wonder that most of the inhabitants went mad.

It looked as if his father was no exception with his crazed and haggard appearance.

Lucius had already been a shell of himself at the end of the war, his body whittling away from the stress of serving the Dark Lord and the constant exposure to Dark magic. Already looking as if he had one foot in the grave, he looked even worse than he did the day he was dragged down into Azkaban — cheekbones protruding from his face like knives, deep dark circles against his pale skin emphasizing not only showing fatigue but now looking sunken, his eyes now buggish. His hair was still long, but now wiry and unkempt. The robes he wore fell off his body as if they were three times too big.

Draco was looking at a ghost of what his father once was.

"No kind words for your father who you haven't seen in so long? No embrace?" Lucius asked mockingly, as he limped forward with the support of his cane.

It was like a nightmare — everything was happening in slow motion, but also all too fast at the same time.

Draco's body was slowly catching up with his mind, stumbling back as his father approached. He didn't have the mind to occlude but didn't need to, for his mind was in such crisis mode that it was dissociating Draco from the reality that stood right in front of him of its own accord. He had been through enough trauma at the hands of his father his whole life and during the war that his mind knew when to protect itself.

"I must say, I am happy to see that you have realized what the right side in all of this is. It just *warms* my heart to see you here. We can finally be the father and son duo we were always meant to be."

Draco looked at Lucius with wild eyes as his mind went numb with static, the panic now quickly shooting down his body in cold spurts.

“If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be here right now. Thank you, Draco,” Lucius expressed his gratitude as he approached Draco with open arms, now actually seeking an embrace.

“What?” Draco asked as he stepped back from his approach, dumbfounded by his father’s words.

Lucius tilted his head and smiled.

“Those Aurors who worked at Azkaban were very forthcoming with letting us through when we told them all we knew, thanks to your legilmeny on the ones we captured after the attack on Little Hangleton.”

Draco blinked at his father’s words. This is who they wanted out of Azkaban, why they had pushed him so hard to get that information out of the Auror.

Draco had led the Death Eaters right to his father.

His father had been helping orchestrate these plans this entire time – that was the only explanation. The only part of this twisted reality that made sense.

But how had they gotten past the guards? Why did they not get captured? Even with the attack going on at Hogwarts, surely there were guards at the prison who would have questioned how they knew where to go and how to get inside.

Right?

Draco worked to hide the panting breaths that were making their way out of him, worked hard to look like the face of composure. For he knew that if his father saw him falter for even a moment, he would call him on it. Question him and his loyalty.

It all made sense now.

That’s why they looked so triumphant when Draco walked into this house.

His father was the missing piece in all of this. And now that he was free...

Rookwood...Dolohov...they had just been filling in for his father while he was in Azkaban. Everyone always knew that Lucius was Voldemort’s right-hand man — he was always supposed to be the one who took over if anything were to happen to the Dark Lord. But when he had been captured, sentenced, and imprisoned, everyone had assumed he would never make it out. But now here he stood, the new rightful leader of the Death Eaters.

“Yes, I am so very impressed, Draco. Handing over information so easily now for the benefit of our cause. I told you it just took a little bit of practice.”

Draco’s mind stuttered. It shouldn’t—couldn’t have been possible for them to break in, nevertheless, break someone *out* . But those bastards had been successful, all because of *him* . He was going to be sick.

It was as if the world was constantly telling the same cruel joke, with Draco being the punchline.

His father circled him once more, observing every tick, every movement closely—looking for a moment to strike if the opportunity presented. Assessing him for weakness.

“It seems as if you’ve grown quite a bit in the last few months. I’m sure your mother is proud.”

Draco’s stomach rolled at the mention of her.

Did she know his father was out of Azkaban? Walking freely? Did she know that he was no longer shackled, no longer far, far away from the little slice of peace she had built for herself after the war?

He never directly asked his mother about how she felt about his father being imprisoned, but he could read the truth all over her face every time he visited her.

She was happy. Even confined to the Manor, his mother was thriving, coming into a version of herself that she wasn’t allowed to be during the war. During their marriage.

His mother was strong, yes, but he could also see that there was a softer side of her waiting for the space to relax into. A space she had been able to hone following the war.

Draco had to warn her before his father decided to show up at the Manor and knock his mother back into the headspace she had worked so hard to get out of. She finally had peace, and Draco would do anything to protect that—would do anything and everything he could to give himself and his mother the future they both deserved.

But the one thing he never accounted for was his father showing up.

Did the Ministry know that the Death Eaters had made it in and out of Azkaban so easily? That his father was missing? Surely not or his father wouldn’t be standing here right now. Right?

He had to get back to Hogwarts. He would have to warn Kingsley, and at the same time assure them that he had nothing to do with this, that he once again didn’t know it was happening. That he was left out of the loop.

It was now obvious that the Death Eaters had no intention of actually telling Draco about their plans outside of his role. He was foolish to ever think they would. They had played him to their own advantage and he had fallen for it.

“I’ll be sure to tell Mother that you’re out of Azkaban,” Draco spoke finally. If he took dealing with his mother into his own hands, maybe his father would be so caught up in the Death Eaters power play that he wouldn’t feel the need to visit her and stay far away from her.

“Hmm, yes, I’m sure my dear wife will be most excited to hear about my escape from Azkaban,” Lucius said while continuing to stroll around the room, his cane sending reverberations through the floor. He was too calm, setting Draco even more on edge. “What does she think of all of this, Draco?”

“She supports me in everything. You know that,” Draco answered with a sneer.

“That she may, but you must admit that she was less than enthusiastic when you first joined the Dark Lord’s ranks in your sixth year. So, I’m surprised to see she supports you now.”

“I was a child then. That’s why she didn’t support it,” Draco ground out. “I am responsible for my own actions now.”

His father never seemed to understand that he was still considered a child in sixth year and that is why his mother was so vehemently against him joining the Death Eaters. But his father had been caught up in the politics of it all — Draco joining the Death Eaters would make him one of the youngest wizards in history to join the rank of the Dark Wizards, permanently ensconcing the Malfoy name in infamy. His father wasn't concerned if that meant they were on the wrong side of the history books, only that they were in it.

And once he had finally pledged, Lucius always tried to push Draco too far — that's how he ended up being the one who was supposed to be responsible for Dumbledore's death. It was always for the Malfoy legacy, to make his father look good in the eyes of Voldemort and the other Death Eaters.

It was just one of many ways Draco was forced to uphold the Malfoy legacy against his will.

Draco had been relieved when his father was sent to Azkaban—he could finally forge his own path in life. Make his own legacy and separate himself from the disgrace the Malfoy family name invoked. Maybe even let it die out with him.

But of course, Lucius Malfoy was never done. He always had a way of slithering back into the limelight, just like he did all of Draco's life.

Did his father know about his deal with the Ministry? Surely not. Draco hoped not. He couldn't stand more abuse from his father, couldn't take another lecture about how disappointed he was in him.

Draco released a silent breath through his nose. He would have to work hard to make sure Lucius never found out. He wouldn't let his father ruin his one chance at salvation. Draco would have to notify the Ministry of this immediately so they knew what they were now dealing with.

"And you think you are not a child now? You are still just a boy, but one with access to years of experience from your betters, experience that will now help you become one of the most prolific dark wizards of our time," his father said.

*Most prolific dark wizard of our time.*

Was that really the end goal?

"Is that what you want for me? To be a dark wizard feared by everyone?" Draco asked, working hard to keep the shaking anger out of his voice.

"It would be quite the legacy," Lucius answered as he circled around Draco. "Someone is going to have to step up and be the symbol of the new uprising of pureblood families. The Death Eaters have been operating too long without a leader. I have just been a stand-in. The Dark Lord was only as successful as he was because he made himself an icon, someone for the masses to look up to, to praise, to want to serve—" he paused, eyes narrowing as he stared at Draco— "To fear."

"I don't want that," Draco spat.

"The best kings never wanted to rule," Lucius retorted.

Draco ground his jaw at the practiced words. His father was not going to take no for an answer. No matter what Lucius wanted, he always got it.

“Why don’t you become the next Dark Lord?” he inquired.

“And ruin everything I’ve primed you for?” Lucius chuckled darkly. “I think not, son. Plus, that was not the plan.”

Draco’s breath began to come in short spurts, the dizzying truth coming more into focus with each second that passed.

Plan. His father had a plan for him this whole time. Draco was nothing but a pawn, a piece in his father's game. Everything his father had made him do, everything Draco thought he was doing of his own volition, was leading up to this point.

He watched as his father came to a halt before him, digging in his pockets for something. He smiled once he found what he was looking for and pulled it out — a small, yellowed piece of paper.

“This has always been your path,” Lucius said, shaking the parchment in his face.

“What is that?” Draco asked.

“It’s the Dark Lord’s dying wish. His wish of whom to leave his legacy to. Signed and inked in magic and blood so it is binding.”

Draco snatched the paper out of his father’s hand, unbelieving of his father's words. He scanned the paper, and indeed, there in what was unmistakably his father’s tilted handwriting was the most chilling paragraph Draco ever read in his life:

*In order to maintain the brevity of the Death Eaters and the superiority of the pureblooded families of the wizarding world, I, Lucius Malfoy, promise my son, Draco Malfoy, to the great Dark Lord Voldemort as the heir to the regime he has built.*

Beneath it, in the Dark Lord’s handwriting was:

*I, Lord Voldemort, accept my most gracious servant’s sacrifice of his son, Draco Malfoy, to be my heir and promise to train him in my ways when the time comes.*

Below it was his father’s signature, right alongside the Dark Lord’s.

Draco began pacing as he read the words over and over again. He couldn’t believe his eyes, couldn’t believe that this was his reality. It was his greatest nightmare come to life, everything he had feared in sixth year when he first took the Mark staring him down.

“My magic is tied to it, to ensure it comes true.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Draco asked, tearing his eyes away from the paper to look at his father.

“Our bloodline will be cursed.”

Draco swallowed at his father's words, spoken as if there was no doubt Draco would proceed without a second thought.

“Why do you think we are trying to revive him?” His father said. “This is all so he could continue his legacy with you under his wing. Rule by his side in his final days! So our bloodline wouldn’t be

cursed for the rest of time!”

Draco stopped his pacing at his father’s words. Revive Voldemort?

“What?”

“The Dark Lord was weak when the Battle of Hogwarts finally happened. We came up with this plan before then but never thought the Potter boy would actually take him down. The plan was to begin your training with the Dark Lord after that, but things did not go as anticipated. We were set back, but this war is not over no matter how much everyone else wants to believe it is. Failsafe plans were made in case something like this happened, and the Death Eaters have been diligently working towards it this whole time. Getting me out of Azkaban was step one. Now, we must get the Dark Lord’s body, revive him, and continue where we left off.”

“You can’t revive a dead body,” Draco stated. It was one of the few things magic didn’t allow its casters to do.

“You can. There are ways. I’m sure you’ve come in contact with runes by now, yes?”

Even as Draco’s breath started coming faster and faster, he worked hard to keep his nonchalant expression on his face. Yes, it was all adding up now. The attack on the graveyard, the runes, using him to get into Azkaban...this was all orchestrated.

Yet, reviving someone from the dead? He was insane. They all were insane.

“You’re lying.”

“Why would I lie to you, Draco? This is the highest honor anyone could get.” The look on his father’s face was the most sincere he had ever seen in his entire life, and something within Draco shattered at the sight of it. All his life he had worked towards getting any other emotion than anger or disgust out of his father, and no matter what he did, he never seemed able to get it. But here — now, his father explaining the path he had set for him — here his father was being *sincere*. Was showing some sort of...care and tenderness to him for the first time. It was maniacal sure, but it was real. The little boy inside of Draco wanted nothing more than to please his father, but the man in him knew better.

“Why me?” Draco asked.

“Why not you? The Dark Lord saw potential in you. You were one of the youngest ever to pledge to the Death Eaters! That alone showed your courage, a glimpse into what you could be. Being willing to follow that young showed the Dark Lord that you could be shaped into someone even stronger than him.”

“No other reason?” he asked his father, not believing for one second that Voldemort had chosen him for this because of his potential, because Voldemort thought Draco would be more evil than he.

“Our family needed a failsafe to survive. Or he would have killed us all. Offering you to him as his protégé and heir was the only acceptable way for us to continue on living.”

Deep disgust rose up in Draco. His father had no couth, no morals when it came to his own perseverance. He knew his father stooped low in order to survive, but never thought it was come to sacrificing his own blood.

“Does mother know about this?”

“Of course not,” his father answered with an amused scoff. “It would kill her to know about such a fate for you.”

“But you still did it anyway?”

“I know what’s best for the family. We are all still alive aren’t we?”

“This has always been your plan for me?” Draco gritted out through clenched teeth, ignoring his father’s grab for validation. Because yes, they were all alive, but at what cost?

“Oh yes, Draco. It’s why I did everything I did when you were a boy.”

“I was a child!”

“A child born for greatness! Born to one of the most prolific pureblood families in the world.”

“I was a child,” Draco repeated, becoming angrier as his father continued on. He was begging his father to hear him, begging his father to notice that he was still just a child on the inside, but had been forced to grow into a man all too young.

“Your mother and I just want the best for you.”

“I doubt Mother would want this for me,” he sneered back at his father. “She knows I’ve never had a choice, and her unwavering support has always been in hopes that I will survive.”

“Your mother was always willing to do whatever it took to make sure you were taken care of,” Lucius corrected. “Even if it wasn’t becoming of the role she so desperately wanted to play in society.”

Draco continued to seethe at his father’s words. He had worked so hard and sacrificed so much just so that he and his mother might finally have a normal life once all of this was over and he wasn’t going to stand for his father to come in at the eleventh hour and ruin it all.

“Promise me something, father.”

“What?”

“Stay far away from Mother. She’s finally happy and at peace. Don’t ruin that for her.”

“Hmph,” Lucius scoffed. “You’re lucky I cannot return to the Manor with it being so heavily imbued with Ministry wards, son. If it weren’t for that, you best believe that I would have gone to visit my *dear wife* well before I showed my face to my ungrateful son.”

“Where will you be staying now that you’re not in Azkaban?” *Rotting like you should be*, he thought to himself.

Lucius held his arms out. “Here. Where the Dark Lord began his journey and where I shall continue mine. Where you have now started yours. You should leave that forsaken school and stay here as well.”

“I think I’m fine,” Draco responded.



“Plus, he’s working on getting the mudblood for us, sir,” Rookwood chimed in from behind them.

“Ah, yes, you told me about that on our way here,” Lucius said with a thin smile, turning to look at Draco once more. “Very good, Draco, very good.”

“Stay away from her,” Draco growled out, hoping he sounded possessive rather than defensive. His head was all over the place with his father standing here, but he could not, under any circumstances, let Lucius in on the fact that he truly cared about Hermione.

Lucius waved a dismissive hand at Draco. “I wouldn’t dare touch your little pet project. Dolohov here has already filled me in with how successful you’ve been with her. You’re finally putting that Malfoy charm to use.”

Draco felt nauseous at his father’s implications, but he didn’t dare correct him.

“I’m glad I could finally impress you, father,” he spat.

“Well, she *is* imperative to our plan.” There it was again, that insistence that Hermione was somehow important to the Death Eaters, yet no one would tell him how, or why.

“And how do you come into this plan, father?” he asked, diverting the attention from Hermione. He didn’t want his father to focus on her too much. Anything to distract his father from her, he would do.

“Well, for one, I was able to get more hounds into the castle today than anyone else has while I’ve been in Azkaban.”

“So it was you who made that happen?” Draco didn’t even want to know how such a thing was possible from Azkaban. That was another problem, for another day. He had enough to handle right now.

His father smiled thinly.

“There are a lot of things I’ve made happen for the greater good of the wizarding world.”

Draco remained silent, but he was done with this conversation. He looked away from his father, unable to stomach the cold yet smug look that was permanently on his face.

“I will be seeing quite a lot of you from now on, son. But we’re done here for now. Go back to the castle and continue doing whatever it is you’re doing with the mudblood. But we will continue this discussion.”

It was a clear dismissal, one Draco was happy to take as he exited the Riddle House, the warm late spring evening air pressing in on him with each hurried step he took.

He felt suffocated from every angle, his reality coming in and out of focus with every passing second.

Everything was different now that his father was free.

He had to tell his mother, but he also needed to get back to the castle, needed to tell McGonagall about his father, about Azkaban being compromised, and needed her to relay that information to Kingsley and Dawlish before things escalated past the point of no return. He had to get to

Hermione and make sure no Death Eaters had made a move on her while he had been utterly indisposed by the sight of his father for the first time in almost a year. He wouldn't put it past them to try such a thing, even if they knew his claim on her.

His mind was reeling, his stomach churning, not knowing what direction he needed to go in, what the right choice was.

Nothing seemed like the right choice—like everything he had ever done was wrong, every choice and every path, past and present, leading only to destruction.

He had tried to set the Death Eaters off course but only ended up directing them to exactly where they wanted to go.

Draco had finally started to feel like he had a hold of things, like maybe there was light at the end of all this.

But as always, it was too good to be true.

## Chapter End Notes

I am nervously chuckling as I post this chapter because it is the official start of the second half of this fic. Shit is going to get continuously crazy as we go on. The first 19 chapters before this have all been leading up to the next 20 chapters so...prepare yourself. Friendly reminder that this fic is HEA if you squint so things might seem bad, but it'll be mostly okay haha.

And thank you so much to everyone for reading, commenting, and leaving kudos! Your love and support keeps me going :)

As always, big thanks to [WeavingWindflowers](#), and [Halliwell19](#) for beta'ing this chapter!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites and on tumblr as snortinglavender if you want to scream over this fic or anything fangirl related :)

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

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

The feeling of the Dark magic continued to seep into Draco as he walked down the path away from the Riddle House. It was as if the Dark magic of the Riddle House had increased tenfold in the presence of his father, and sunk into everything around him and corrupted it to its core.

After Draco had calmed down just barely enough to be able to apparate, he ultimately decided to go back to Hogwarts – he could see his mother in the morning. She was already so worried about him and what he was being put through with the Death Eaters that she didn't need to see him like this. Not until he got himself under control and fully wrapped his mind around everything he had just learned. He didn't need her worrying even more, and he didn't want to upset her with the news of his father being free from Azkaban just when she was beginning to find her peace. Let her have one more night of peace.

As he landed in front of the castle and stashed his robes, Draco reached for his occlumency once more, desperate for any aid to help compartmentalize the emotions that were threatening to overtake him. His brain had gone into overdrive during the interaction with his father, and now it felt as if it was failing and halting to a stop, threatening to shut down completely to keep him safe. His occlumency that he had become so dependent on was failing and he could feel the panic continue to rise up within him as he made his way close to the castle.

It always came back to the same thing — his father, and the control he had over Draco. After the war, he thought he had a chance to live a better life now that his father was locked up for good and that the Ministry was willing to wipe his record clean. He should have known it was too good to be true – that his father was somehow tied to everything going on. That Lucius was the ultimate ring leader and the reason the Death Eaters were going after Hermione.

This is how Draco had always been living his life. Never fully aware, never fully in charge, letting his father mold him into whatever he thought Draco should be.

Draco racked a hand through his hair. Hermione. He had to find Hermione.

Had to protect her and make sure she was safe now more than ever that his father was roaming free.

Who knew what he wanted with her? He had told Draco that she was essential, and knowing his father, he would only let him falter for a little while longer before he started demanding answers. Before he started demanding that Draco bring her to him.

How would he keep her safe now that his father was out and roaming free?

He had to get to Hermione. She would know what to do. She had helped Potter deal with the same situation when Voldemort was hunting him down after all.

Draco opened the door to their room and found her in her usual spot — curled up on the bed, deep in sleep. Blissfully ignorant of the world and all of the horror that was unfolding in it every day. Just as she should be.

She was truly the most innocent one in all of this. Even as much as he didn't want it, Draco had blood on his hands at the end of the day. But still, he was selfish and wanted nothing more than to curl next to her on that bed and fall into a deep sleep, and forget that the rest of the world even existed.

He immediately felt the tension in his body begin to uncoil at the sight of her, the feel of her near enough to loosen some of the tension coiled tight in his body. But only some. The cold, dark magic still wove its way through him yet her warmth shot through the ring stronger than ever now that he was close to her.

She awoke at the sound of the door closing and looked up at him with sleepy eyes, a smile gracing her face before it quickly fell when she noticed the state he was in. He was sure his despair was all over his face, the distress screaming rolling off of him in waves.

"Draco? Draco, what's wrong?" she asked, sitting up and climbing off the bed, moving closer to him, looking him over for any injuries. She wore her sleep clothes, the ones that had slowly been torturing him for weeks now — a slinky thin strapped top, and cotton shorts that clung to her like a second skin. They constantly fell asleep on her bed together, those straps and shorts following him to his dreams where he could touch her when and how he wanted.

But as he stood in front of her right now, all he wanted was her friendship. Her comfort. As she approached, her warmth enveloped him completely, steadying him for just a moment, driving away the icy feeling of the Dark magic that had been taking him over until this exact moment. He could feel the thrum of her magic now and sighed as he finally found a moment of peace.

"What's wrong?" she asked him once more, studying his face with growing concern.

How did he even begin to tell her what he had discovered tonight? How would he even come to terms with it himself? He wanted to deny it with all of his being, to run and hide and pretend the things he learned tonight weren't real, but he knew he couldn't.

"My father," Draco whispered, turning to look away from her. He couldn't meet her eyes for what he was able to tell her. "He's out of Azkaban."

He heard her suck in a quick breath, silence filling the room as she took in his words and their meaning. The air became taut between them, full of stress and tension and something else Draco couldn't put his finger on.

"Okay," Hermione said as she let out the breath she had been holding. "Okay."

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Draco said, his breaths starting to come faster as the reality of the impossibility of his task now dawned on him. How would he play the Death Eaters, working to feed the Ministry information on their movements with his father at the helm? His father was the only person who could see right through him and if Draco faltered for too long, his father would expose him to the Death Eaters, making everything he had worked so hard for moot. The possibility of him and his mother ever being free again was suddenly gone, everything he had worked towards out of the question. "I'm doing everything I can to keep you safe. Everything, I swear. But I—"

"I know, I know," Hermione said, stepping closer to him in an attempt to calm him down, placing her hands over his beating heart, the warmth of her hands sinking through his shirt, steadying him.

“I’m trying, I really am,” he repeated, bringing his hands up to meet hers, clutching them to his chest, clutching onto anything that felt real, for the reality around him felt like a nightmare for too long now. “I’m doing the best I can.”

She had to know he was trying, that her safety was all he wanted. He couldn’t live with himself if something happened to her. He leaned his forehead against hers, unable to hold himself up any longer. The weight of the world was finally taking him down and he couldn’t find the strength to hold himself up anymore.

He began to shiver, the last little chill of the Dark magic he couldn’t seem to escape seeping into his very being. It was flowing into him in earnest now — those same Dark thoughts that he had experienced at the Little Hangleton cemetery and in the courtyard of Hogwarts — and he could barely find it within himself to fight back.

Hermione grabbed him into a hug, the dark voices scurrying away like demons to a cross as her body pressed against his. Draco wrapped his arms around her in response, breathing her in, feeling every point of contact of her against him bring his spiraling thoughts back into focus.

His soul exhaled at the feel of her against him, at the relief of finally getting a glimpse into the comfort he had sought his entire life.

“I know,” she said in an attempt to keep him calm. “I know you are.”

They stood in silence for a moment, holding one another, taking in the feel of being pressed against each other. If Draco could just stop the world right here, in this moment, and never have to leave it, he would be happy and content for the rest of his days.

“Come on,” she said in a soft and caring voice as she pulled away which made his chest crumble. “Come with me.”

She grabbed his hand and led him out of their room and down the hall toward the prefect bathroom. He followed in his haze of emotions, barely even noticing her hand twining through his as she led him. Once they were inside, Hermione locked and silenced the door of the bathroom, giving them privacy.

She dropped his hand and he vaguely heard water running, coming back into focus when he felt her hands on his tie as she started unknotting it.

“What are you—”

“You need to calm down,” she said quietly as she slowly worked the knot of his tie out. “I’m running you a bath,” she said, dropping his tie to the floor and turning away to turn on more of the faucets, the steam of the hot water quickly filling the room.

The temperature of the room rose quickly, the warmth seeping into the iciness of his skin as the bath quickly filled, bubbles slowly filling the air.

Draco took a shaky breath as he stared numbly at the rising water, unbelieving that someone was willing to take care of him in such a way. That someone was willing to consider how he felt. It was as though he was watching himself from outside of his body, not really feeling like he was there in the moment at all. He didn’t know how to react to this kindness.

“Come on,” Hermione said, pulling him out of his thoughts once more by taking his hand and leading him to the steps that led into the tub.

Before he could think any differently, he stepped into the bath fully clothed, not hesitating to duck his head underwater and let himself succumb to the heat. The water muffled all of the thoughts from the outside world, the heat of it diminishing the thoughts inside his head. He was floating, blissful, and untethered. Just for a moment, he wasn’t a pureblooded wizard with the weight of the world on his shoulders, but just a boy existing in a small pocket of bliss.

He rose up out of the water with a gasp, the heat of the water sinking into him and driving away the chill of the Dark magic, making his mind feel light. He let out a deep sigh, almost feeling like himself once more.

This is exactly what he needed.

He shook his now wet hair from his eyes, turning to find Hermione sitting on her knees, watching him from the edge of the bath, nothing but kindness and worry in her eyes. In their earlier years at Hogwarts, he had always watched her look at Potter and Weasley in that same way, and always wondered what it felt like to be about by someone who was a friend. He was always jealous and always expressed that jealousy through taunts and jests. But now he knew.

Here she was, caring for him unprompted. Tending him because she actually cared.

Other than his mother, she had become the only one who cared about him – truly cared about him. He had his friends, but he knew his bond with Hermione had surpassed anything he had ever felt with them. Between the bond the rings gave them, living together and the constant research and tribulations they had faced together, they had become one entity over the last few weeks. It had begun to feel odd to not have her at his side.

He saw her caring expressions towards him grow more and more every day. Saw it on her face when she healed him, saw it on her face when the hunting hounds attacked the castle, saw it now.

Old him would have been convinced that she was trying to sabotage him somehow, use him for her own gain. But now he knew the truth – that Hermione Granger was a person who cared too much and would sacrifice herself for the ones she cared about no matter what the cost, much like himself. They were so much more alike than he ever thought they could be.

“Come here,” he said softly, holding his hand out to her.

She shook her head. “No, this is for you. I can leave so you can have some time alone,” she answered, standing to move out of the room.

“I don’t want time. I don’t want to be alone,” he relented, his eyes begging hers, the fear of being left alone creeping up within him. “Please. Come here.” He reached his hand out once more, wordlessly begging for her touch.

Hermione looked at him for a second longer, before she proceeded and climbed into the bath, also fully clothed.

She submerged herself under the water like he did, coming up soaking wet, water dripping from her curls. Her clothes clung to her like a second skin as she submerged herself and Draco didn’t know

what would have been worse — Hermione naked or her being fully clothed and wet, the cloths sticking to her and emphasizing everything little curve and dip of her body.

If he was a gentleman, he would do his best to stay away from her.

But he had restrained himself his entire life, held himself back from the things he really wanted in order to make everyone else around him happy and proud.

But not anymore.

He pulled her closer to him, melting as Hermione leaned her head onto his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him without hesitation, sinking into him like she never had before. Draco sighed at the sensation. Every curve perfectly met every hard plain of him, her head perfectly tucked under his chest and he laid his head on top of her.

It was a relief, not holding himself back in the moment, letting himself touch her after all of these weeks of dreaming of it.

Standing there, Draco came to the realization that she was his sense of comfort. She was everything he had ever wanted and more. He had come to realize that she was the balance he needed in his life, his equal in all of the ways that mattered. He was tired of denying it, of denying himself. He had gone his whole life living for others, doing what everyone else expected of him.

And in this moment, here with her, he decided that he was ready to live for himself. To put himself and his needs and wants first for a change. He could handle his father. He could handle anything for her.

With these simple thoughts finally at the forefront of Draco's mind, it was as if the dam had broken.

He rested his forehead against hers and focused on the feel of her breaths as her chest rose and fell against his.

She didn't know it, but in this moment, she was the only thing holding him together, keeping the demons that made up his life at bay.

He could feel them crawling up, threatening to take over.

For the first time, Draco didn't hold himself back, placing his hands on either side of Hermione's face and tilting her head up so their eyes met, silver beating into chocolate brown.

They stood there like that for a moment, taking each other in, breathing in one another.

He moved his hand to her neck, tracing all the way down until he was touching the soft skin where her throat met her chest at her collarbone. He watched as her chest began to move up and down rapidly, her breaths coming quicker and quicker, her pulse thumping beneath his fingertips, strong feelings of anticipation coming down the ring, elevating his own.

She was so much shorter than him that she had to tilt her head back to make eye contact, showing off her neck that Draco often found himself fantasizing about leaning over and inhaling.

He often shook the thoughts from his head, but not this time.

He moved his hands back up her throat, relishing in the softness of her skin before finding the hair at the nape of her neck and tangling his fingers in it. Almost as if it were instinctual, Hermione angled her head to the side, leaning into his touch while closing her eyes. His other hand rose to her mouth, his thumb tracing the shape of her lower lip, her lips parting under his touch.

Hermione opened her eyes once more, her pupils blown wide as she looked at him.

“Draco, I—” she started.

He cut her off by bringing his lips to hers, a gasp escaping her as he kissed her like a man starved.



(Big thanks to the talented [DaraArt](#) on Instagram for this amazing commission of this scene!)



The moment their lips touched, all of those feelings of Dark magic scurried away, overtaken by the sensation of pleasure – her bright, golden magic now beating through the ring down into his.

She tasted divine, like everything he thought she would be and more.

More.

His soul needed more.

Needed her.

Needed all of her.

He was desperate to lose himself in anything that wasn't his own mind. So instead, he lost himself in her curves, her hair, and the gasps she made as she responded to the way he touched her.

It gave him a thrill to hear the way she was responding to him, for he truly had no idea she felt even a fraction of the way he did for her, but if the way she was arching into him was any indication, she felt the same and had for a while now.

They passed the threshold of being just friends the moment they had taken that Unbreakable Vow, when their magic became one, intertwining them with one another, that connection further solidified by the magic of the Malfoy signet rings.

For weeks now he had been suppressing the pulsating feeling between them, chalking it up to the power of the Unbreakable Vow and the fact that they had been spending so much more time together. But as time went on, the feeling between them only got stronger, the connection between them undeniable. Now that he unleashed it, there was no going back.

He threaded his hands further into her hair, deepening the kiss and taking control of the angle of her face, and fisting his fingers through her curls that he had woken up to for so many mornings now.

He walked Hermione backward until she hit the edge of the tub, chasing her mouth with his, unable to get enough of her to satiate the need within him. He lifted her up by her hips and set her on the edge of the tub, water sloshing onto the ground, making their clothes cling to their bodies even more than they were before. Draco lost all rational thought as she wrapped her legs around his waist, tugging him closer.

He ran his hands over her curves that were so spectacularly emphasized by the wet clothes, his mind dizzy at the fact that he finally got to touch her in all of the ways he wanted to.

But it wasn't enough.

He wanted more. He wanted her. And he'd be damned if tried to hold himself back any longer. He knew it was wrong, for she had no idea who he really was, the things he had done, and the things he would do. But, it was all for her anyway. He hoped she would forgive him one day.

She was light, and his darkness, his despair, and would soon overtake her if he didn't stop, if he didn't break away and save her from himself. But he couldn't find the strength to pull himself away as they desperately clung to one another, hoping she would be his salvation, forgive him of his sins, and wash him clean.

He felt her hand wandering beneath his shirt and gasped – the feeling of her hands on his skin enough to drive away all of the evil in the world.

He responded in kind, sliding his hands up her thighs, all the way until his fingers crested under the hem, all the way over her hips until he reached the waistband of her underwear. He squeezed the soft skin there, drawing a gasp from Hermione's lips. She was unbelievably soft everywhere, and he wanted to leave no part of her unexplored.

"Room. The room," Hermione gasped. "We need to—"

Draco captured her mouth with hers once more as he picked her up, securing his hands under her as they stumbled out of the door and through the hall, their hands grabbing onto whatever they could, desperate for contact, grabbing onto each other like they were water in a desert. Draco was suddenly incredibly grateful for the late hour of the Death Eater meetings, for if it were any earlier in the night, they would be putting on quite the show for any students wandering the halls.

Draco continued kissing down her neck as he walked them down the hall, leaving a trail of water behind them while Hermione returned the fevered kiss on his neck. It was as if the world was on pause to let them enjoy this moment in peace and he could focus on nothing but her.

He felt drunk on the feeling that was flowing between them. It was deeper than lust. It was a yearning of their magic reaching for another yet, just out of each other's grasp. It was all-consuming, overwhelming, mind-numbing.

Draco lost his balance as he felt Hermione's teeth scrape his neck, slamming her back up against the wall, and attaching his lips back to her.

"Sorry," he gasped out, clutching onto her so he didn't drop her.

"Shut up," she gasped, bringing his mouth back to hers.

He felt a thrill go through him at her words, at the enthusiasm at which her lips met his. Even as much as he wanted it, he never thought their relationship would come to this, would get to this point.

He had daydreamed about this moment so much, and reality was surpassing his imagination tenfold.

They stayed there for a moment, consuming one another in the hall as if their lives depended on it. They weren't far from their room, but neither of them seemed able to let the other go for long enough to make the rest of the journey.

Hands grabbed whatever they landed on, mouths faltered as they pulled away to inhale gasping breaths.

When they finally made it back to their room, Draco kicked the door closed behind him and cast a drying charm before depositing Hermione on her bed. She didn't remove her legs from around his hips, keeping them connected at every point possible.

He moved his lips to her neck, kissing a path down the column of her throat, across her chest, eventually working his way down her arm, all the way to that scar that marred her arm. He hated looking at it, the permanent reminder of his failure, his cowardliness.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t stop her that night,” he said, he said between caresses on her skin, kissing her scar over and over again. “That I didn’t stop her from hurting you.”

“You did though,” she said.

“You still have this,” he said, tracing the scar on her arm. “That night was my worst nightmare. I’ll never forgive myself—”

“Shush,” Hermione said, bringing her hands up to his hair, quieting him as she pulled his head so that their eyes met. “What you did for me that night, was more than I could have ever asked for. You brought me peace in the most chaotic of moments.”

Draco studied her body as he ran his hands down her arms once more, starting at her shoulders, his fingers trailing down her freckled skin before they met the straps of her shirt and pulled them down, his lips leaving a trail of hot kisses in his wake.

Hermione lifted Draco’s shirt from his body, and it didn’t take long for her eyes to flick to the Mark on his arm.

Draco froze as his eyes went down to the Mark on his arm, shame washing over him as he watched her study it.

“I—let me just—” Draco stuttered as he went to grab his shirt off the floor.

Hermione’s hand caught his left wrist. “No. No, I want to see it.”

His heart thudded in his chest as she examined the scar, delicately running her fingers over the intricacies of the tattoo.

Draco had never felt so exposed in his life. Everything he hated about himself boiled down to that tattoo and he had done everything he could to hide it from her day in and day out. And yet here she was, observing it as if it wasn’t the symbol of total hatred towards people like her.

“Do you think it’ll ever fade?” Hermione asked. “It still looks so new.”

Draco closed his eyes at her words, a tsunami of guilt washing over him. More than anything in the world he wished the Mark would fade, but with the Death Eaters rampant and active, Draco didn’t see the Dark magic that kept the Mark bright on his skin fading anytime soon.

“Hopefully one day,” he answered in a whisper.

“I don’t judge you, I hope you know,” Hermione said, her eyes flickering away from the tattoo to meet his. “You didn’t have a choice.”

Draco cleared his throat as he broke her eye contact, his emotions threatening to overtake him more than they already were.

He was often ashamed of his Dark Mark and everything it represented. Especially now that it had brought his father back from Azkaban. Especially since there was no doubt in his mind that it would land both him and Hermione in a reality they had never wanted anything to do with.

Draco leaned forward, capturing her lips with his once more, drowning out the sorrow he felt within him. If only she knew what her acceptance of his mistakes meant to him, what it meant for

someone to see him as he was and accept him wholeheartedly.

They couldn't get enough. It was frantic and passionate and most importantly, made him forget the horror of his reality for a moment. Not one part of the other went untouched, the two of them basking in one other and the electricity that was flowing through them. Hermione was allowing him to indulge in the pleasure that was her, allowing him to be who he wanted to be. Even if just for a moment.

He kissed his way down her body, glancing up at her through the hair falling in his eyes, their souls speaking to one another through just a glance.

She was laid bare now more than she had ever been, yet she didn't feel self-conscious. She instead felt safe. Praised. Wanted. Needed.

He touched in her places where no one else had gone before, for her experiences were limited but not none. Yet, no one had made her feel the way Draco was making her feel at that moment.

Her body was on fire from the touch of his fingers and his mouth. His hair tickled her lower stomach and inner thighs before suddenly he kissed her once more, the whole of his body pressing on hers as he captured her lips with his.

Draco pulled away and Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist, not wanting him to be any further from her.

He knew what this meant, but he was afraid. They had already gone too far, yet he wanted more. He was insatiable for every part of her.

"Are you sure?" He panted into her neck.

Draco felt the warmth of her hands on his cheeks, pulling his face back to look at hers. He found a sincerity there that he had never seen from anyone else in his life.

"I would have told you no a long time ago if I wasn't," she responded earnestly.

The world stretched and paused as he pushed into her, everything quieting and coming to focus all at once.

Maybe they were imagining it, maybe it was real, but a golden light fluttered around them as they became one, much like it had when they took the Unbreakable Vow. Them and their magic become one, and there was nothing the universe could do to separate them in that moment.

Draco dropped his head onto her shoulder once more, shuddering at the divine feel of her around him. In this moment, it felt as if they were one and it was almost too much. He felt every suppressed emotion, every suppressed confession he ever wished to say bubble to his lips.

"I'm so sorry for everything. For all of it. For every mean thing I've ever said to you, for doubting you were anything but incredible. I'm so sorry it took me so long to see it," Draco professed in her ear as he began to move within her. He couldn't stop himself as the words left his lips – he wanted to make up for every wrongdoing, every jest, every insult he threw at her. He didn't care how long it took – he would make it up to her.

"I'm so sorry. I hope you can forgive me one day," he continued.

“Shh, Draco,” Hermione said, pushing the hair out of his face and locking eyes with him.

The feeling down the rings was surreal, their pleasure mixing into one another, no distinctive beginning and end to it, no way to define whose was whose. Just them, becoming one. The same strange feeling that they had experienced during the Unbreakable Vow reared its head once more, their magic swirling and combining into one, the power of each other’s magic taking their breath away, only this time it was increased tenfold.

Draco buried his face in Hermione’s hair as he lost himself in her, his soul laid bare to her. She now had every part of him, and he had never felt safer in his life.

He brought his hands up to hers, clasping them near her head for leverage as he increased his pace.

He pulled back to kiss her swollen lips once more, never wanting to leave this moment. It was perfect, as if it was always meant to be like this. As if the world had conspired to bring them both here, to this very moment. Would it always feel like this between them, if this were to ever happen again? Would his soul beat into hers like this forever?

Hermione clutched his hands tighter and tighter as he picked up the pace, her mind, body, and soul overwhelmed by every sensation she was feeling. She never knew it could be like this, much less with someone whom the world had told her was her enemy.

She had never felt more seen, more heard and more cared for than she had in these past months with Draco. She knew her friends wouldn’t understand, but some things were meant to be kept private, sacred. And this was one of them.

As they crested the precipice of their pleasure together, Hermione made a conscious decision that nothing was going to stop either of them from getting their happy ending. No matter the cost. They had both worked too hard and suffered too many losses. Their lives had been a mirror of one another, and she would be damned if he didn’t get the happy ending he deserved alongside her.

Once they caught their breath, still in awe of one another, Draco rolled over and fell asleep, wrapping Hermione in his arms, the cold darkness he had been chasing away now long gone. There was only her and her warmth, all of his worries and horrors gone from the world for one blissful night.

## Chapter End Notes

Little disclaimer that this chapter was not beta read, so if you saw any issues in the chapter (grammar, double words, missing words, misspellings, etc...), please feel free to kindly comment them or message me on Instagram and I will fix :)

But WHEWWWW 21 chapters later, and these two fools have finally given in to one another 🥰 haha, thank you to everyone for your patience during this slow burn. I hope it was worth it! Draco finally got a little piece of happiness ;)

You'll notice there wasn't one particular POV for this chapter, as I wanted Draco and Hermione's magic/minds to converge as they finally gave into one another. Hopefully that came across :)

Another huge shoutout to [DaraArt](#) for the art for this chapter! It was a dream to see this scene come to life and she did it so beautifully!

Find me on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) as elleerheawrites and on tumblr as snortinglavender.

Your comments and kudos give me life and mean more to me than you know!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!