

Courage and Conviction

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Courage and Conviction

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Summary

Draco Malfoy has spent more than a decade keeping his head down and out of trouble. But when he gets wind of movement among the remaining Death Eaters, he finds that the Malfoy name closes more doors to him than it opens, making it difficult to know who to turn to. Eventually, he reaches out to the woman he tormented during their childhood and finds, to his surprise, that she seems willing to overlook the past and help him.

Notes

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A Foray into Bravery

Draco

Draco Malfoy knew he was not considered a brave man. Self-serving and spoiled were the descriptors that had most often been associated with him throughout his life, but the time he spent reflecting alone in a cell in Azkaban had allowed him to consider the type of man he wanted to be, and a spineless Death Eater was not it. In fairness, he had come to that conclusion a number of years prior to his stint in prison, but circumstance had forced him to continue in the role of Death Eater to avoid the brutal murder of his family. He had therefore spent the years since his release trying, and mostly failing, to convince the wizarding world that he was much more than that scared boy who made some terrible choices. But, try as he might, he didn't seem to be able to shake off the shadow of his past. This, however irritating, was mostly fine. Draco had his mother, his inheritance (on account of his father's life sentence in Azkaban) and his new business venture running a small potions shop, none of which required the good opinion of most of the wizarding world. However, when he had news of critical importance regarding a serious threat to said wizarding world, the fact that the Malfoy name now closed most doors to him became something of a problem.

When his requests to speak with everyone from the lowliest Auror right up to the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were all declined, Draco became desperate. Remembering how Potter testified at his mother's trial, he thought he might find a slightly more receptive audience there. He was disappointed, though, as the Boy Who Lived had evidently grown into the Man Who Wouldn't Listen.

Hence Draco's current foray into bravery. Attempting to speak with Potter didn't require courage, exactly, more a shelving of his pride. The idea of speaking to Granger, however, elicited a very real fear in Draco and, if he had a better option, he would never have considered it. Although, he thought to himself as he took a deep, calming breath and steeled himself to knock on her dark green front door, he did have another option, didn't he? He could forget what he had discovered, go about his life and not attempt to be a better man. But he found that he just couldn't do it - he couldn't look away this time.

Draco gave the door three sharp knocks before taking a step backwards. A few seconds passed and, heart hammering, he wondered if perhaps she wasn't home. He was about to leave, thinking he would try again another day, when the door swung open and a great quantity of curly brown hair obscured most of Draco's vision. Blinking, he realised that the reason for this disorientating sight was that Granger had her face turned away from the front door. In fact, she had her wand pointed back into her cottage, and was muttering a string of incantations under her breath. Unsure how to proceed – who opens the door with their back turned?! – Draco simply stood there waiting for the witch in front of him to return to her senses.

After several seconds, that to Draco felt like years, Granger finally turned to the front door. “Hell – oh!”, she stuttered as she spotted him. Her expression went blank, and Draco didn't think he had ever seen the witch so surprised. He certainly couldn't remember ever seeing her rendered speechless, and yet he seemed to have managed it with his mere presence. The silence stretched, becoming an almost tangible thing, as Draco remembered the last sort-of interaction he had with Granger. It was years ago now, when she testified on his behalf in front of the Wizengamot trying, unsuccessfully, to convince them not to scapegoat a child.

Unable to stand the silence any longer, Draco, in what could not be considered one of his more inspired greetings, simply nodded at her and said “Granger.” Still, she simply stood there gaping at him for a few more seconds before physically shaking her head and saying, with more curiosity than animosity, “Malfoy?”

Feeling more awkward than he could remember feeling in his entire life, he said “Look, I know this is strange but can I come in? I need to speak with you about something quite sensitive and I’d rather not do it standing on your door step.” A few more seconds passed before she shrugged and nodded.

Feeling both pleased that he had managed to pique her curiosity and slightly surprised that he hadn’t been hexed, Draco followed Granger into her home. Stepping into the hallway, he looked around and was unsurprised to see books almost literally everywhere – books stacked up the stairs, books on top of and under the hallway table, and even books in what appeared to be a shoe rack. The cottage, he noted, was quite small, not at all what he expected one third of the Golden Trio to live in. He’d heard that the Weasel had capitalised on his fame and bought a rather ostentatious estate for his family, the newly vacated and largely dark magic-free Lestrangle Estate, and of course Potter was living in one of Draco’s ancestral homes. Not that he had any desire to lay claim to Grimmauld Place, but it still stung that his childhood rival was living in the Black family house. Granger, on the other hand, seemed to have opted for comfortable simplicity. She turned to take his coat and gestured for him to follow her into an open plan kitchen and dining room. The room was still rather small, but light, airy and tidy (if you discounted the books).

“Would you like some tea, I was just making some?” she asked, a slight frown on her face – not angry, Draco thought, simply confused.

“Er, yes please then, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Draco hovered with uncharacteristic awkwardness. His upbringing had equipped him to deal with a great number of social situations, but how to behave when he found himself an unexpected guest in the home of someone he tormented throughout most of their childhood was not among his etiquette lessons.

“Feel free to sit down” said Granger, gesturing to one of the comfortable looking chairs clustered around a coffee table by the large French doors. Draco did, and then found himself unsure of what to do with his hands. He opted for drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair – because why not risk irritating Granger before he had even started speaking – until she floated a tea set over and set it on the table. He then occupied the offending hands by preparing his tea, while she sat opposite him and did the same.

Once they had both made their tea to their liking, Granger sat back in her chair and fixed him with a stare. It was not unfriendly, but she clearly wanted an explanation for his sudden appearance in her life. Draco, in the spirit of trying to be a better man, decided to start by voicing some things which should have been said a long time ago.

“Look, Granger. I am here to talk about something specific, something important, but first I have a few things I’d like to say.” He cleared his throat and carried on. “Firstly, I want to thank you for testifying at my mother’s trial. I know you and Potter were the reason she avoided Azkaban, and for that I will always be grateful. Secondly, I want to thank you for testifying at my trial. It was unexpected and, although I still ended up in Azkaban, I appreciated your efforts in trying to avoid a sentence.” There was a third thing, but Draco suddenly found himself unable to speak. He wanted

to apologise, he wanted to explain that he wasn't that snotty, spoiled teenager anymore. He wanted to explain that he had grown up and was sorry for the way he had treated her when they were children. He wanted to make sure she understood that he no longer believed any of that blood purity nonsense, and hadn't for a long time. But, most of all, he wanted to tell her that he was sorry for that night in the Manor. That he wished he had done something, anything, to help her. But he found that he couldn't do it. So much for bravery, he thought scornfully.

Granger tilted her head at him and said "You're welcome, Malfoy. It was the right thing to do. And, for what it's worth, I'm sorry they sent you to Azkaban. It was the wrong decision, both legally and morally, and I'm sorry they blamed you for things that weren't your fault."

Although he was the one who brought it up, Draco found that he really didn't want to talk about the year he spent in the wizarding prison. He couldn't, however, let her apology stand. "Don't apologise to me. You have nothing to apologise for."

She snorted at that, clearly disagreeing, but didn't say anything. Draco, having said his piece – or as much of it as he was going to manage today – looked at her properly for the first time. He hadn't seen her up close since his trial, more than ten years ago. Despite being well into adulthood now, her long mane of curly hair still appeared to defy the laws of gravity, although she did seem to have worked out how to style the bushiness into neat curls. She wore simple muggle clothes – jeans and a long sleeved burgundy top – and they suited her. In spite of himself, Draco couldn't help but notice that she was extremely pretty.

His ogling now complete, Draco turned to the real reason for his visit. "Look, Granger, the reason I'm here is quite complicated. I'm not sure where to begin, but I have reason to believe the Death Eaters are active again and I need your help."

An Unexpected Visitor

Hermione

Considering her career as an Unspeakable at the Ministry of Magic, alongside the fact that she fought in a war for a large part of her childhood, Hermione was rather used to finding herself in strange situations. Nevertheless, having Draco Malfoy appear on her doorstep and ask for help was enough to shock even her.

Hermione stared at him, trying to process what he said, while a small part of her brain noted that the pointy, sneering boy she remembered from school had grown into an indisputably handsome man. His eyes were the same piercing, gunmetal shade of grey she remembered, but his white blonde hair was shorter now and he had finally grown into his features. He was well dressed, wearing a tailored three-piece suit over his tall, lean frame. Disregarding that part of her brain, Hermione broke the silence.

“I think you’re going to need to elaborate, Malfoy.”

He leaned forward to put his tea cup and saucer down on her coffee table, before sitting back up and drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair. He seemed to be thinking how best to phrase what he had to say so she didn’t interrupt him, although she did find the finger drumming annoying.

Finally, he said "You know, you’re about the tenth person I’ve tried to speak to about this, and the first one to give me the time of day. Thank you.”

She always thought the way he was treated after the war was appalling, and felt a pang of sadness for him. He had certainly made some poor choices, but he was a child forced into situations most adults wouldn’t have known how to cope with. The Ministry, however, wanted a poster boy for the public to blame and, with most prominent death eaters either dead or missing, the Malfoys were an easy target. It was just lucky for Draco that he was underage when he committed his most notorious crimes, and quite obviously working under duress for all of them, which resulted in a much shorter sentence than he would have otherwise received. Lucius Malfoy, quite rightly in Hermione’s opinion, received a life sentence.

After a brief pause, Draco continued. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but I own and run a small potions shop.” Hermione nodded to indicate that she knew.

“Well, I had to set up the shop somewhere inconspicuous to avoid some of the more outspoken people who thought I should have been given a life sentence. I initially tried to set up in Diagon but there were a number of people who were against that idea, so I set up in one of the back streets instead. It worked fairly well, but unfortunately being somewhat out of sight and the, ah, reputation attached to my family name has meant fending off some unsavory characters from time to time.” He looked awkwardly at her, clearly thinking she would have something to say to that, but she just nodded so he carried on.

“A couple of weeks ago, Rodolphus LeStrange came by.”

Hermione couldn’t help but grimace as he said those words. Rodolphus LeStrange. One of the few death eaters from Voldemort’s inner circle who survived the Battle of Hogwarts and avoided

capture in the aftermath.

Malfoy gave her a sympathetic look, clearly understanding more than most why the LeStrange name would unsettle her. He gave her a moment, and then carried on.

“You have to understand, I’ve been trying ever since then to report this but no one in the Department for Magical Law Enforcement would hear me out. My owl was returned multiple times with all of my letters unopened; I’ve had more doors slammed in my face than I can count, and I even tried to get someone else to report this for me but no one would listen once they knew the report came from me.”

“I believe you.” Hermione said, because she did. She could well believe the Ministry to be that short sighted. It was one of the many things she was trying to change, but she hadn’t made as much progress as she would’ve liked. Or any, if she was being honest with herself.

Malfoy looked, if possible, even more uncomfortable when he said “I do mean every member of the DMLE... Potter was one of those who quite literally slammed a door in my face. Granger, I want you to know that I wouldn’t be asking you for anything if I thought I had any other choice.”

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes. She knew Harry was having a difficult time balancing his new responsibilities as Head of the Auror office with being a father to two children under the age of five, but she would have expected him to be mature enough not to do that.

“Not that it excuses anything, but Harry’s been under a lot of strain recently. I’m sorry he treated you like that.”

She noticed a muscle in Malfoy’s jaw twitch as she apologised to him again, but he carried on regardless “Well, anyway, I needed someone who might listen and thought of you. I know you don’t work for the DMLE but I thought if the message came from you then people might actually take this seriously.”

He looked at her with a kind of guarded hopefulness, and she felt another pang in her chest. She would, of course, help him. For some reason she already believed him, so she had no hesitation in saying “Of course, I’ll do what I can.”

The gratitude on his face was unnerving. Although logically she knew that the man sitting in front of her was not the same person he had been at school, she kept expecting him to throw insults at her.

“Well, Rodolphus came in just before I locked up for the night. I usually stay behind and brew for a few hours after the shop closes, and had stayed later than usual that night. He caught me off guard and without my wand.” He grimaced as he admitted his mistake, and it struck Hermione for the first time how difficult this visit must be for him. How desperate he must be to show her this level of vulnerability.

“What did he want?” Hermione asked, a cold feeling of dread spreading through her gut.

“He wanted me to access the mausoleum of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. I don’t know how much you know about pureblood customs, but until recently most of the old families were laid to rest in one central place known as the Vault. Only members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight can access it and, even then, it’s by appointment only. Meticulous records are also kept of who is granted access, so a man on the run wouldn’t easily be able to get in.”

“So why did he want you to go in there?”

Malfoy gave her a look that said she wouldn't like his answer “He wanted me to retrieve a sample of bone for him. Specifically, bone from Cygnus Black.”

Hermione felt as though someone had hit her with a full body bind curse. Unable to speak, she simply stared at Malfoy while her brain worked over the horrifying possibilities. Only one seemed to make any sense, and it was enough to make Hermione's head spin.

Clearly thinking she hadn't made the connection, Malfoy cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable, and said “Cygnus Black was... well, he was my maternal grandfather and father to...”

“Bellatrix.” Hermione interrupted him in a small, strained voice. She automatically clutched at her left arm while muttering under her breath the words she remembered Harry telling her at the end of their fourth year at Hogwarts.

“Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you shall renew your son.”

Malfoy nodded, meeting her eyes as he said “Or daughter.”

Hermione felt numb, and almost pleadingly said to Malfoy “But... she didn't... how could she... no one knew about Voldemort's Horcruxes.”

He gave her a look that was almost pitying before replying “That was the assumption, but if anyone had known it would have been my father or Bellatrix. But, even if she didn't know the Dark Lord had made horcruxes, he didn't invent them. They've been around for centuries; it was only the use of multiple horcruxes that was unique to the Dark Lord.”

Not willing to accept that one of the starring characters of her nightmares might have a way of returning from the dead, Hermione reasoned “Well, Rodolphus could have been asking for the bone for some other reason, couldn't he?”

“Of course, Granger” he said, not unkindly “but since I remembered how Potter described that ritual in that interview he did with the Quibbler back in fifth year, Rodolphus' request made me extremely nervous. I thought it best to report the incident, since at the very least I had a wanted Death Eater in my shop.”

“Yes, of course, you did the right thing. And you've been trying to report this for...”

He grimaced before replying “Almost two weeks now.”

Under her breath, Hermione muttered “I'm going to kill Harry.”

What Date Is It?

Hermione

Appearing in a blaze of green in the fireplace of Grimmauld Place, Hermione was almost vibrating with rage. She was equally as angry with herself as with Harry, but unfortunately for Harry it would be much more satisfying for her to vent her wrath at him. She had of course noticed the way the world treated everyone who had been associated with the Death Eaters in the years after the war, even those who simply had the misfortune of having a Death Eater parent. She'd hoped that things would get better over time, and that once the hurt wasn't so fresh people would start to move on. She was ashamed to admit to herself that she hadn't done anything to change things, beyond those initial months after the war when she tried to help the Malfoys. Well, the deserving Malfoys at least (Lucius could rot as far as she was concerned). She'd initially had a vague intention to reach out to her former classmates, in the hope of building bridges and leading by example, but they all seemed to retreat from wizarding society in the immediate aftermath of the war. Not that she blamed them, given the way they were shunned at best and outright abused at worst. But that social reclusion coupled with her own mounting workload as she made a career for herself at the Department of Mysteries meant that Hermione had never acted on her intentions. Well, she was certainly going to act on them now.

"Harry James Potter" she shouted, stepping out of the fireplace and casting a quick *scourgify* on herself before turning to the door of the travelling parlour at Grimmauld Place and storming into the hallway.

Grimmauld Place was almost unrecognisable from the dingy, depressing headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix she had known as a child. Harry and Ginny had done extensive renovations, replacing the perpetual gloom with a light and welcoming home. She herself had spent a considerable amount of time breaking down and removing the centuries worth of dark magic that had seeped into the very walls of the house. One of her favourite memories from that time was the bonfire that she, Harry, Ron and Ginny had after finally managing to remove an apoplectic Walburga Black from the wall. Harry had teared up at the thought of how happy it would have made Sirius to know they had removed the last reminder of his mother from the house. They then proceeded to get well and truly pissed on Sirius' favourite firewhiskey and spent the night dancing around Walburga's smouldering portrait singing loudly to muggle music.

Harry immediately appeared at the top of the stairs, asking "Hermione, is everything ok?" just as Ginny came striding out of the kitchen, chuckling to herself and asking "Uh oh, Harry, what have you done now?"

"To answer your question, Gin, he's been a complete and utter prat." Ginny sniggered at that while Harry looked slightly offended. Before either of them could say anything, Hermione turned fully to Harry and asked "What date is it?"

"Um, what?" asked Harry, looking nonplussed.

"What. Date. Is. It?" asked Hermione, slowly and clearly enunciating each word.

"17th April 2010?" he replied hesitantly, turning his answer into a question.

“Oh, my mistake! It’s not 1994 then?”

“1994? What... Hermione, are you ok?”

“You see, I thought we must be back in 1994 since you seem determined to act like a *child*.”

Harry just stared at her, clearly wondering whether she had lost her mind. Ginny was smirking as though she was rather enjoying the show. Apparently just to see what would happen, Ginny piped up “I don’t know, Hermione, we were taking advantage of the kids being with Mum this morning to do some pretty grown-up things just before you arrived, weren’t we Harry?”

Harry grimaced at his wife, clearly knowing perfectly well that she was trying to rile Hermione up further. Without acknowledging Ginny’s comment, he said to Hermione, in a tone one might use to try to calm an angry hippogriff, “Hermione, if you tell me what I did I might have more to contribute to this conversation.”

“A couple of weeks ago, did anyone by any chance try to report a sighting of a renowned Death Eater to you, the *Head Auror*?” Hermione asked him with narrowed eyes.

“What, no, of course not! We haven’t had any sightings in years now and if we’d had a report like that I would’ve told you.”

“Hmmm. Funny, because I’ve just had a report made directly to me about an interaction a member of the public had with Rodolphus Lestrange. That same member of the public had apparently attempted to make the report to multiple Aurors, including his highness the Head Auror himself, along with wider members of the DMLE and goodness knows who else. Every last one of them, including you, refused to hear him out. Is that sounding familiar to you now, Harry?”

Harry had gone pale.

“I would’ve hoped, given that you are almost 30 years old, you wouldn’t let schoolboy grudges interfere with doing your job, but clearly that hope was misplaced.” She glared at him and he had the good sense to look ashamed of himself.

He didn’t, however, have enough sense not to provoke her further, as he said “Look, Hermione, Malfoy caught me on a bad day and I...”

“I don’t give a flying rat’s arse how bad your day was, Harry. You are in a position of responsibility and people are relying on you. Not only that, people will follow your example of how to act in these situations so you can bet your life that if something like this happens again you’ve just ensured that more people won’t be listened to. If you set aside the fact that you acted like a twat to someone who *does not deserve it*, might I point out that those who were associated with the Death Eaters during the war are the ones most likely to be contacted by the Death Eaters still at large? What kind of example have you set to them, and to your department, as to how they can expect to be treated if they try to report it?”

Clearly not finding the interaction amusing anymore, Ginny muttered under her breath “Wow, dick move Potter.” Harry narrowed his eyes at his wife but kept his attention mostly focused on the bigger threat; during her speech Hermione had felt her hair spark with magic, and she had a reputation for being quite hex-happy when provoked.

Hermione lowered her voice back to speaking volume, but deliberately didn't sound any less menacing as she said "Be honest with me, Harry. Regardless of how bad your day was, would you've turned, oh I don't know, Dennis Creevey away if he was trying to make a report to you?"

Harry stared at her for a long moment, guilt shining from his brilliant green eyes, before his face crumpled and he sat down on the top stair with his face in his hands uttering a muffled "No, I wouldn't."

Hermione stared at her best friend, debating whether she was done shouting at him. She still felt antsy, like she had more she wanted to say, but she didn't think it would do any good. He obviously realised the severity of his mistake, and she didn't want to be cruel by hammering the point home any further. She turned to Ginny and said "I'm sorry for interrupting your morning."

Ginny patted her on the shoulder and said with a grin "Honestly, having you storm in here and scream at Harry was more interesting than anything else I'd planned to do this morning. Want some tea?"

"Tea would be lovely, thanks Gin!" Hermione started to follow Ginny into the kitchen before calling back to Harry "Once you're done wallowing, come and join us so I can get you up to speed."

"Well, shit." Was Harry's eloquent summary once Hermione had caught him up on what Malfoy had told her. Hermione didn't answer. She merely raised one eyebrow at her friend, who flushed a deep red and held up his hands "Yes, Hermione, I messed up. I freely admit that I was wholly in the wrong. Are you happy?"

"I'm so glad you asked, Harry" said Hermione with a deceptively sweet smile on her face. "I am not, in fact, happy but I know what you can do to change that."

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, knowing full well what was coming. "You want me to take this to Forder?"

Garrick Forder, the Head of the DMLE, was Harry's boss. He was also a raging misogynist with a superiority complex and one of both Harry and Hermione's least favourite people at the Ministry of Magic.

"To start with, yes" Hermione replied, "and I want you to make sure he takes this seriously. Harry, I really do believe Malfoy and think we need to be very careful how we go about this. I don't want our actions to put him in danger."

Harry just nodded, so Hermione continued "The other thing I want you to do, oh wise and powerful Chosen One, is apologise to Malfoy."

Harry opened his mouth, presumably to object, but Hermione held up her hand to silence him. "No, Harry, this ends now. It's bad enough that we all just stood aside and let a new type of prejudice grow over the years. Members of our society, who were either exonerated or served their time, are treated as outcasts after more than a decade of so-called peace. Well, we are going to put an end to it right now. It's not only wrong, but also puts us at risk if it's reached the point that a dangerous threat almost wasn't reported because of it."

Harry just stared hopelessly at Hermione as Ginny patted her husband on the hand consolingly and said “I think she’s got you there, love. Better start thinking about what kind of flowers you want to buy Malfoy.”

That Went Surprisingly Well

Chapter Notes

CW - minor implied reference to attempted assault.

Draco

It took Draco a while to believe that she had actually agreed to help him. He usually prided himself on his mental acuity, but something about having to ask Granger for help had wrong-footed him. It wasn't the same objection that he would've had as a boy; he certainly no longer believed her to be inferior to him due to her blood status. No, the thing that had unsettled Draco was the fact that this witch had every reason in the world to disbelieve him – to hate him, even – and yet she hadn't hesitated to let him into her home and hear what he had to say.

He'd declined her offer to use her floo, opting instead to walk to a small wooded area near her cottage from which he could apparate back to his home. Malfoy Manor had been seized by the Ministry after the war and, once it had been decontaminated from the vast amounts of dark magic that had corrupted the place, it had been sold as part of the contribution to be paid by the Malfoy family to the war reparations fund. Good riddance, as far as Draco was concerned. He never wanted to step foot in the place again, and it had long ago stopped feeling like home.

After his release from Azkaban, Draco had briefly lived with his mother in the upmarket town house she had purchased in London. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for him to realise that he was too conspicuous to be able to navigate wizarding London without drawing unwanted attention. Everywhere he went he was subjected to hostile stares and muttered comments, and was often spat at or hexed. Thankfully, his mother wasn't subjected to the same sort of treatment (likely due to her pivotal and well-publicised role in the downfall of the Dark Lord), but Draco found that he couldn't stand the constant reminders of his past mistakes. He, Theo and Pansy, both of whom were also finding themselves shunned due to their families' roles in the war, decided to stick together and purchased a vast estate in Wiltshire. The original idea was that they would each live in their own private home (the estate housed several large farm houses in addition to the principal manor house), but in the end all three decided to live together in the manor. Draco, for his part, had endured enough isolation in Azkaban to last him a lifetime so he was exceedingly glad for the company of his two childhood friends.

As Draco materialised in the travelling parlour, he felt the distinctive tingle of wards around the estate which prevented anyone other than himself, Pansy or Theo directly apparating in. Anyone wanting to gain access either had to side-along with one of them, have a link established to the floo (they kept these to an absolute minimum, in fact only Narcissa's townhouse and the Malfoy estate in France were currently connected) or walk in. Given that the grounds surrounding the estate went on for several hundred acres, and the driveway up to the main house was well over a mile long, they felt as confident as they could that they wouldn't have any unexpected visitors.

Seconds after he arrived, Draco heard footsteps thundering down the hall before the tall, distinctive form of Theo Nott appeared in the doorway. Letting out a whoop, Theo ran forwards and Draco had

the brief impression of messy brown curls and dark blue eyes before he was tackled to the floor.

“He’s back! The prodigal son returns to us!” cried Theo dramatically, lying on top of Draco and planting wet, sloppy kisses all over his face.

“Merlin’s tits, get off me you lunatic!” said Draco, half-heartedly pushing at Theo in an attempt to get him to move, but far too used to his antics to be more than vaguely surprised at this greeting. “I’ve only been gone for a couple of hours!”

“Yes, but you went to see the Golden Girl herself! We thought at the very least you would have your bollocks hexed off!” said Theo, finally getting to his feet and holding out a hand to help Draco up.

“I’m pleased to report that both bollocks are present and accounted for.” Draco deadpanned as he dusted off his clothes.

“Why are we talking about Draco’s bollocks?” came Pansy’s amused voice as she stood in the doorway and surveyed her two housemates.

“Just expressing my surprise that dear old Draco still possesses the family jewels after his meeting with Granger this morning.”

“Ah” said Pansy, turning concerned eyes to Draco “yes, did you have any more luck with her than with the rest of those morons?”

Draco, still in a state of shock, shook his head in a kind of daze. Pansy, understandably, seemed to take that to mean the interaction hadn’t gone well and scowled. “Bloody self-righteous idiots, where do they get off treating you like shit? It’s been over a decade! Draco, you’ve tried repeatedly to get them to see reason, you’ve done all you can.”

“No, Pans, that’s not what I meant. It went... surprisingly well.”

“And you thought the best way to convey that would be to shake your head?” asked Pansy, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I’m still slightly shocked to be honest with you. She let me in, made me tea, and seemed to actually believe me. She said she would head over to Potter’s immediately to... well, I think her exact words were that she was going to kill him, but I highly doubt that’s true. I do think he might be in for a rough ride though; her hair was sparking by the time I finished explaining.”

Without warning, Theo punched him hard on the shoulder “Yes mate! You always did like it when her hair sparked at school! And this time you weren’t even the one to get hexed!”

Not wanting to dignify that with an answer, Draco rubbed his shoulder as he turned to his less unhinged friend and said “I don’t think it could’ve gone much better to be honest with you, Pans. I know she’s not part of the DMLE but surely people will have to listen to her seeing that she’s, well, Granger.”

“Let’s see before you get your hopes up. I wouldn’t put anything past those idiots at the Ministry. Last I heard, Granger was an Unspeakable so I’m not sure what she’ll be able to do while she tinkers around with time or space, or whatever it is that she does there.”

“Well, she said she’d try so that counts for something. Regardless, it was a pleasant surprise to have a friendly conversation with someone other than the two of you or my mother.”

“No offense taken, mate.” said Theo, grinning at him “I should be more upset, though. I bet Pansy fifty galleons that you’d use the ring to have us come rescue you.”

In the years following the war, many people seemed to decide that the punishments handed out to the Death Eaters hadn’t been enough to make up for what happened; their families had been hurt, and so they wanted the Death Eaters to understand their pain. Some decided to take matters into their own hands by targeting the children of Death Eaters. In reality, it was just an excuse for giving into their darker urges in the name of ‘justice’. After a particularly nasty near miss involving Pansy and a group of drunk middle-aged wizards who thought they could vent their frustrations on a “Death Eater whore”, Draco extracted a set of rings from his family vaults. The rings contained old protective enchantments which meant that, in the event of an emergency, the wearer could press it and it would send an alert to anyone wearing the connected rings. A clever bit of magic then allowed the wearers of the connected rings to apparate directly to the person calling for help. Luckily, that night with Pansy, Draco and Theo had been passing in time to disarm the wizards and get her home relatively unscathed, but the next morning Draco went straight to Gringotts and, from that day on, the three of them had never removed their rings. This habit had saved each of them on more than one occasion, although thankfully neither Pansy nor Theo had needed to use theirs for a few years. Draco had used his ring on the night Rodolphus cornered him in his shop, and it was the sound of Theo and Pansy arriving that had caused the Death Eater to flee and allowed Draco to leave unharmed.

Draco rolled his eyes at that but ruffled Theo’s hair affectionately before saying “Well, it’s a good job you’re filthy rich then. And let that be a lesson to you, you should have more faith in me!”

“I have every faith in you when it comes to literally anyone other than Granger. You’ve always had a soft spot for her.”

Draco scoffed at that – he did not have a soft spot for Granger – but said “Even if I did have trouble with Granger, do you really think I would have used the ring? If I can’t take Granger in a duel, you’d stand no chance!”

“My natural charisma is enough to charm even Granger. I wouldn’t have needed to resort to wands.”

Draco scowled at that. While Theo had a terrible habit of flirting with anyone with a pulse, he tended to favour wizards over witches. Still, the thought of him attempting to charm Granger made something in Draco’s chest tighten. Not wanting to linger on the feeling, he clapped Theo on the back, nodded at Pansy and led them both out of the travelling parlour towards the grounds saying “Come on, let’s celebrate the small wins with a fly around the estate.”

That evening, Draco was sitting in his favourite wingback chair by the open fireplace nursing a glass of firewhiskey. Theo, for reasons best known to himself, was knitting on the floor (as far as Draco was aware Theo didn’t actually know how to knit) and Pansy was in the chair opposite Draco flipping through several of the muggle fashion magazines that she subscribed to. The three of them had been sitting in comfortable silence for almost an hour before Draco spoke.

“I think I need to write to my aunt.” Pansy and Theo exchanged a look, clearly concerned for Draco’s sanity.

“Draco...” said Pansy sharply, “your aunt died more than ten years ago.”

Almost as though he was coming out of a daydream, Draco blinked at Pansy before smirking at her “Not that aunt, you git, my mother’s other sister. Andromeda Tonks.”

“Okay...” said Pansy, still clearly not seeing where Draco was going with this “but why do you want to write to her?”

“Yeah” piped up Theo, setting aside his knitting and fixing Draco with a concerned look, “have you ever even spoken to her?”

“No” replied Draco, “but I think I need to warn her. With mother out of the country and me on alert, I’m concerned that Rodolphus might target Cygnus’ other living descendants... Andromeda and her grandson.”

After his run in with Rodolphus and the worrying demands he made, Draco quickly realised that, since he had not agreed to assist in retrieving Cygnus’ bone from the Vault, his mother might be targeted - both due to her being Cygnus’ daughter and to spite Draco. She quickly agreed to his suggestion that she might be better off out of harm’s way until this was sorted, and temporarily relocated to the Malfoy estate in France. Draco had assumed that meant that Rodolphus would need to target him again if he wanted access to the Vault, but had forgotten about his estranged Aunt. He didn't think it likely she would be targeted – as far as Draco knew she was an upstanding member of wizarding society and would therefore be too conspicuous for a man on the run to contact – but as he sat there and thought about it, it seemed a gross oversight not to warn her.

Sighing to himself, Draco drained the last of the firewhiskey before pushing himself to his feet. “Right, you two, I’m going to write to Andromeda. I might as well get all of my awkward interactions with witches I barely know out of the way in one day. I’m going to turn in after that, see you tomorrow.” At that, Theo winked at him and Pansy blew him a kiss, and he walked up to his suite, grateful as always for the friendship of the witch and wizard behind him.

Once he was alone in his bedroom Draco leaned against the door and let out a long sigh; it had been a strange day. He made his way over to the large desk in the corner of his room and sat down to write.

He'd just finished reading over his finished letter, in which he tried to explain the situation to his aunt without coming across as a paranoid lunatic, when he heard a tapping at his window. Looking up, he saw a large, long-eared owl sitting on his window sill. Draco racked his brain as he walked over to let the bird in, but couldn't for the life of him think who the owl might belong to. He slid his window open and the bird took a graceful leap into the room before fluttering over to his desk.

“Well, you’re a handsome bird, aren’t you” said Draco, walking back over to his desk and sitting down, “who do you belong to, then?”

Seemingly in answer to his question, the owl stuck his leg out and allowed Draco to remove the letter attached there. Draco wasted no time in unfurling the scroll, and could hardly believe what he saw.

Draco,

Thank you for stopping by this morning. While the circumstances were, of course, not ideal, it was nice to see you. I have since spoken to Harry and, between the two of us, we will ensure that the appropriate people are made aware of this latest threat.

I wonder whether you might be free to discuss this further tomorrow? I know it's awfully late for me to be asking this, but if you are available then I thought we might have lunch. Please let me know by return.

All the very best,

Hermione (that's my first name but, in case that causes you any confusion, this is Granger)

P.s. my Owl's name is Mr Darcy and he is partial to owl nuts.

He smirked at that; cheeky witch. He was almost certain that she'd never once called him by his given name before this letter. Did he want to meet her for lunch tomorrow? If he was honest with himself, which had been happening more and more frequently in recent years, the idea of spending more time with her sent a thrill of excitement through him. His life had become so small over the years, and the idea of doing something different was both thrilling and terrifying.

He wrote a quick note back agreeing to her suggestion, and inviting her to meet him at a muggle restaurant he knew to be roughly halfway between their respective houses. He then gave Mr Darcy – what a ridiculous name for an owl – several owl nuts before sending him off home.

Getting into bed, Draco reflected on his interactions with Granger and tried, but mostly failed, not to think about amber eyes and brown curls as he fell asleep. Really, he thought just as he was drifting off, maybe there was something to this whole courage thing.

A Foray into Friendship

Hermione

Hermione had never been one to hesitate once she'd made up her mind about something, and she stayed entirely true to character in deciding to befriend Draco Malfoy. Her meeting with him yesterday, while unexpected, had been pleasant (if she ignored the subject matter they discussed). He had obviously grown up from the horrid boy she'd known at school, and she was curious to know more about the man he'd become. She therefore sent Mr Darcy off with an invitation to lunch the next day with the goal of building bridges. She didn't really have much about the Lestrangle matter to discuss with him, but it seemed as good an excuse as any to reach out.

She'd been pleasantly surprised when he responded not only agreeing to lunch but also suggesting that they meet in a muggle restaurant. While Hermione was fairly sure he no longer held the bigoted beliefs he'd spouted as a child, his choice of restaurant all but confirmed it. She arrived five minutes before their reservation time with a definite spring in her step.

Despite being early, she was surprised to see Draco already seated at a table in the corner of the restaurant. His back was to the corner of the room, giving him a clear view of everyone in the space and leaving no room for anyone to sneak up on him. She recognised the strategic position, as it was one that she herself chose whenever possible. Despite being positioned to observe the room, Draco appeared to be engrossed in a crossword if the open newspaper and pen in his hand were any indication. Taking advantage of his distraction, Hermione took the opportunity to really look at him. She had appreciated yesterday that he'd grown into a handsome man, but that was largely, and quite rightly, overshadowed by their discussion about the Lestrangle matter. Now, however, she had to admit to herself that handsome might not cover it; he was stunning. His thin pointiness of youth had filled out into a lean, athletic build, and from yesterday she knew that he stood almost a head taller than her, making him a little over six feet tall. He was impeccably dressed in another suit, with the jacket hung on the back of his chair. He wore a dark green waistcoat and had the sleeves of the dress shirt he wore underneath rolled up to his elbows, displaying a tattoo that trailed up his right forearm. She briefly wondered about the mark on his left forearm, but she couldn't see it from here and decided to disregard it completely. Hermione shook herself and refocused; she was here to make a friend, not drool over an unsuspecting wizard.

Hermione strode confidently over to Draco's table, before realising that she didn't know how they should greet each other. She had always been a hugger, but she had a feeling that Draco wouldn't appreciate that. Instead, she walked up to the table and simply said "Draco" before sitting herself down in the seat opposite him. It made her back feel itchy, having it exposed to the room, but she supposed she was fairly safe in a muggle restaurant.

He looked up at her and smirked, showing a glimpse of the person she remembered from Hogwarts, before slowly and deliberately saying "Hermione."

She grimaced, making herself laugh "Ugh, that does sound strange! I've changed my mind, let's stick to surnames."

His smirk grew wider, as he said "I quite like Hermione, I think I'll stick with that thank you."

Chuckling, she asked the question she had been wondering about ever since Mr Darcy returned with Draco's letter the night before "Why a muggle restaurant?"

The smirk quickly fell from his face, and she could have kicked herself for asking something that made him uncomfortable. But his choice of restaurant was a puzzle, and she hated when she didn't understand something.

"This particular restaurant is a favourite of mine. I tend to prefer muggle establishments these days. Places where I'm not at risk of being recognised."

Of course. She felt like an idiot for not piecing it together. Trying to cover up her blunder she said brightly "Well, it was a pleasant surprise. I've only eaten here a couple of times but the food is excellent. Do you frequent many muggle places? I noticed you were using a pen instead of a quill for your crossword."

Merlin what was wrong with her? She felt like she'd been hit with a babbling hex; she just couldn't seem to stop talking.

He gave her a small but genuine smile and said "That, Granger, was something I learned the hard way. One of the first times I came here a waitress asked me why I was writing with a feather and not a pen. I asked her what a pen was, and she thought I was hilarious. When she brought the cheque at the end of the meal, she also gifted me a biro. I must say, muggles are definitely onto something with these pens – much more convenient than quills!"

"I agree! Magic is wonderful and makes life so much easier in many ways, but I think over reliance on it does hold wizards back in some respects. I'd love to see a future where we blend more muggle inventions into the magical world. I think we would all benefit immensely."

He was smirking at her again, so she quickly added "And I see we are back to Granger now? That didn't take long!"

"Yes, well as much fun as it would have been to see you grimace every time I said your name, it felt strange for me too. I'm a creature of habit, I'm afraid."

She smiled at him, and he cleared his throat before looking down at his menu. She got the distinct impression that he had just remembered who he was speaking to and why it might be awkward. But they had been having a nice conversation, and Hermione was nothing if not determined. So, unwilling to let the topic drop, she asked "So have you tried many muggle pass times?"

He looked up at her, clearly thinking how best to word his answer. He was tracing his lips with the tip of his index finger and it took all of Hermione's concentration not to fixate on the movement.

"The simple answer to that is no, not many. We tried a muggle pub once, but there were these flashing boxes shouting about some muggle game that we found quite overwhelming so we left quickly."

She wondered who he meant when he said 'we' but decided that could be a question for later. "You said *"The simple answer is no"*, what would be the complicated answer?"

He gave her a look that said she might be pushing her luck, but after a moment he said "It's not for lack of interest, or because we have any aversion to muggles, if that's what you're thinking. Theo, Pansy and I were all raised in pureblood households, ones that held nothing but disdain for

anything muggle, so we really had no idea where to start. Restaurants are easy, there's not much difference between muggle and magical restaurants, so as long as we keep our Quidditch chat quiet, bring muggle money and remember not to whip out our wands we're usually ok."

Hermione had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning at his inadvertent muggle euphemism. But she wanted to address his comment about what she was thinking.

"That wasn't what I meant. It just took me by surprise that you would choose a muggle place and I was interested, that's all. I'm sorry if it sounded like I was making assumptions."

She hesitated, not wanting to seem over eager and scare him off, but she had never been one to give anything less than one hundred percent effort so, in the spirit of friendship, she said "If there's ever anything muggle that you'd like explained, or something you're interested in trying, I'm happy to help."

He gave her a tight smile but said "Thank you, Granger."

At that moment the waiter came over to take their orders. Once he'd left, Draco rested his chin on his hand and said "So, you wanted to discuss this business with Lestranger?"

"Yes, nothing in particular but I just wanted to know if you have any further insights. I'm conscious I was rather... aggravated yesterday and wrapped the conversation up in a bit of a hurry. I wanted to make sure we didn't miss anything out. For instance, do you have any thoughts as to why Rodolphus might be going to such lengths to revive her? I know she was his wife, but I was under the impression that there wasn't much love lost there."

Draco looked thoughtful for a moment before sitting up slightly and putting his hand back down onto the table. He fixed Hermione with an intense look before saying "You're right in that I don't think they were in love in the traditional sense. They were both fanatics, so they had that in common, but theirs was a political marriage between two old bloodlines. I do think there's more to it than a wizard simply wanting to resurrect his wife. I don't know how much you know about Bellatrix's role in the Dark Lord's ranks or what she was doing during the war?"

Hermione did, in fact, know rather a lot about it – she was one of the few people who did. But, since that wasn't common knowledge, she made a non-committal noise and gestured for him to continue as the waiter poured their wine.

"Well, I don't know any details, but I do know that in addition to being the Dark Lord's second in command, Bellatrix also ran the Dark Lord's research projects. While I don't know exactly what she was working on, there was one project in particular that had the Death Eaters very excited. I don't think she completed the work but, if I had to guess, I'd say that she made her horcrux as a contingency before the Battle of Hogwarts so that she would have the chance to continue her work if she died."

"How dangerous would you say she would be if she returned, considering Voldemort is gone?"

Draco gave a barely noticeable flinch at the name, but answered as if nothing had happened "She followed the Dark Lord willingly because she was a blood supremacist through and through. While she hated muggles, she particularly detested muggle borns and "blood traitors". I think the Dark Lord gave her direction and a way to channel her cruelty. She was an extremely powerful witch and utterly without mercy. People thought she was insane, and I'm not denying that she was, but she was also highly intelligent with a deep understanding of magic – the dark arts in particular. I think

she would be a compelling witch for any remaining Death Eaters to rally around if they were so inclined. So, I would say it would be in all of our best interests if the Aurors manage to stop Rodolphus before he resurrects her.”

Hermione nodded. Their food had arrived during Draco’s speech so she took a bite and enjoyed the delicious meal while she thought what to say next. Finally, she said “I’m sorry again that they didn’t listen to you. For what it’s worth, Harry feels terrible about it.”

He smirked at her “Well, making Potter uncomfortable has got to count for something.”

There was no venom behind his statement, he was obviously making a joke of their schoolboy rivalry. Hermione simply rolled her eyes at him before giving him a slightly guilty smile.

“Speaking of Harry, he would like to apologise to you.”

“Granger, that’s really not...”

“I’m not going to try to force you, but I do think it would be good to clear the air. If it doesn’t make you too uncomfortable, he’d like to meet us after lunch to speak to you in person.”

Draco looked incredulous and opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione cut him off “Of course, you don’t have to if you really don’t want to – I can send him a quick text and tell him not to come – but I do think it would be a shame. I think it’s high time we all moved on and this would be a step in the right direction.”

Draco looked like he wanted to argue but, after a few moments of opening and closing his mouth, he simply asked “What’s a text?”

Draco

Draco was pleased that he hadn’t argued too hard against this idea. Any amount of discomfort he felt at the idea of seeing Potter again was quickly outweighed by the absurd sight before him. The man in question looked utterly miserable, presumably owing to the fact that he was holding out a bouquet of white tulips which he clearly expected Draco to take.

Taking a deep breath, Potter looked him in the eye and said “Look, Malfoy, I’m sorry I acted like such an arse the other week. I genuinely feel terrible, and not just because I was “*negligent in my duties as Head Auror*” to quote Hermione, but you’d done nothing to deserve that sort of treatment and I really am sorry.”

Draco smirked at him “Did you have to rehearse that, Potter?”

Potter muttered something under his breath and Draco distinctly heard the words “my wife.” Then, Potter cleared his throat and said “Look, just take these will you? Ginny’s charmed them so she’ll know whether or not I give them to you and I really don’t want to find out what she’s got planned if I don’t do this.”

“Um... Thanks, I suppose?” said Draco, at a complete loss for what to say as Potter thrust the flowers into his hand.

Granger was visibly shaking with suppressed laughter as she watched the two uncomfortable wizards attempt to talk. Presumably in an attempt to break the tension, she piped up “Remember when Gin was pregnant with James and you brought home that curry?” Turning to Draco, she explained “Ginny was extremely sensitive to smells in her first trimester and this genius thought it would be a good idea to bring home curry after a night out. He took it into their bedroom, and it was the smell that woke her up.” She smirked at that, and Draco couldn’t help but admire the expression on her as she carried on “She told me she was up all night being sick as a result, so she spent that time thinking up a revenge plan. What was it she did again, Harry?”

Grumbling to himself, Potter said “She cast delayed transfiguration and multiplication spells on my morning coffee. When I poured the drink it was just normal coffee but as soon as I took a sip it turned into stinksap and multiplied by ten. When I turned around, she had cast a bubblehead charm on herself and was laughing so hard she cried.”

Draco couldn’t help but snigger at that, and when he caught Granger’s eye she beamed at him. Draco was still a little sore at how Potter had ignored him, but he found himself largely agreeing with Granger that it was time they learned to set their differences aside. So, in the spirit of trying to build bridges, Draco decided to offer his own anecdote “It sounds as though your wife is as terrifying as Pansy when crossed. One time I used the last of her oat milk and forgot to replace it, so she charmed all of my firewhiskey to taste like oat milk for a week. It didn’t matter how many times I *finite’d* the charms, she always had backups.”

So quickly he almost missed it, Draco saw an unhappy expression cross Granger’s face. He remembered that she despised Pansy at school, and Draco really couldn’t blame her. He and Pansy had terrorised her for years, but she seemed willing to look past it with him so he hoped she would eventually do the same for Pansy.

Potter chuckled and said “Well I’m glad someone understands. I’m not ashamed to admit that I’m slightly scared of my wife. And for some reason, Malfoy, it was important to her that I give you flowers. Feel free to bin them if you’d like, though, my part’s done.”

“Oh no, Potter, I’m going to cherish these. Flowers from the Chosen One himself, I’m honoured.” Draco smirked at his old school rival, thinking that he wasn’t really all that bad.

“Wonderful. Well then, Malfoy, the other thing I wanted to ask was whether you’d be willing to make a statement for me to take to Forder, the head of the DMLE. He can be a pain in the arse, so I’d appreciate as much detail as you’re able to give me.”

“You did buy me flowers, Potter, so it’s the least I can do.”

“He bought you flowers?! Those flowers in your hand right now are from Potter himself?” Theo almost shouted at Draco when he arrived home and explained the very bizarre conversation he had just had.

“Yes, Theo, these flowers in my hand are apology flowers from Potter.”

Theo grinned, the expression lighting up his entire face and he said “This is the best day of my life!” before taking the flowers from Draco and practically bouncing out of the room.

Muttering to himself about low bars and insane friends, Draco followed Theo to the kitchen where he set about digging out a vase for the flowers.

Later, when they were sitting in the lounge after dinner with Draco and Pansy in their usual positions by the fire and Theo once again sitting on the floor, Draco relayed the day's events to Pansy. She was less easily won over than Theo, who seemed to have taken Potter's peace offering as a personal declaration of friendship. While Theo carried on with his knitting, Pansy ranted about pity projects and how nosy Gryffindors should mind their own business. Draco knew better than to take her too seriously. Pansy was naturally distrustful and years of social exclusion had done nothing to improve that. Draco knew her well enough to see her anger for what it was – a defence mechanism. It was one he himself employed all too frequently, but for some reason he thought Granger was sincere in her not-too-subtle attempt to befriend him. In any event, he found himself willing to take a chance.

"I don't know Pans, Granger seems alright. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think we might actually stand a chance of being friends."

Pansy rolled her eyes at that and Theo, who had been silent for most of the conversation, piped up "There's no way this doesn't end with wedding bells. Narcissa will be thrilled."

Draco snorted "I have no interest in anything romantic with Granger, thank you very much. It will just be nice to have a friend who isn't a chaotic little shit... or Pans." Pansy flipped her middle finger at him for that, but was apparently done with their conversation and had started working on her sketch book.

Theo rolled his eyes dramatically before turning back to his knitting saying "Right, let me know how that goes for you."

Partly because he wanted to change the topic, but mostly because he was curious, Draco asked "Theo, mate, what's with the knitting?"

Theo turned his head and winked at him but simply said "All in good time, my love."

At that moment, there was a scratch at the window and Draco looked up to see the distinctive form of Granger's owl against the darkening night sky. More to himself than to either of his companions, Draco muttered "What on earth is Mr Darcy doing here?"

Pansy looked up at that "Who is Mr Darcy?"

"Granger's owl" said Draco, pulling the small parcel off of the owl's leg and summoning a packet of owl nuts. Mr Darcy allowed Draco to stroke his head before his talons squeezed Draco's arm as he launched himself back out of the window and into the night sky. Strange, owls usually waited in case they were needed to carry a return message. Ignoring the parcel for the time being, Draco opened the scroll and read:

Malfoy/Draco,

Thank you for lunch, it was lovely to see you again. And thank you for allowing Harry to apologise. As funny as it would have been to see what Ginny had up her sleeve had he not managed it, I think it's great that you were willing to hear him out.

At lunch, you asked me about texts so, in the parcel, you will see an example of a mobile phone – the muggle device I was telling you about. In a few moments it will beep, and that will mean you have a text message from me. You press the button on the side of the phone and swipe across the screen to unlock it. A banner will appear on the screen showing my name. Press your finger to the banner, and the message from me will appear. If you wish to respond, you press your finger to the rectangular box at the bottom of the screen. When you do that, something called a 'keyboard' will appear. You press each letter in turn to spell out a word, and the rectangular box under the bottom row of letters is a space key which you use to create a space between words. You then press the 'send' button, which looks like a small arrow facing right. It's quite simple once you know how, but might take some time to get the hang of. If you have too much trouble let me know and I can show you how to use it.

All the best,

Granger/Hermione

P.s. I have attached a little device to the back of the phone which nullifies magic. Don't worry, it's isolated so it will only affect the phone, but otherwise it might not work due to the amount of magic in your home. I think it's unlikely that there would be a problem, as it's usually only ancient magical places like Hogwarts that sends electricity haywire, but I thought best not to risk it.

Draco, Theo and Pansy spent the rest of the evening trying and utterly failing to get the muggle device to work. As promised, the little box did make a noise a few minutes after Draco had opened the parcel, but they were unable to discover what the message said. Draco fell asleep that night thinking about Granger and what kind of message she had sent him. Whatever Theo said, he was definitely not imagining it being anything other than strictly friendly.

That Went Less Well

Chapter Notes

Please take note of the updated tags. CWs at the end of the chapter to avoid minor spoilers.

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

Hermione

Hermione's week passed pleasantly enough. Work was going well, and she'd exchanged a number of owls with Malfoy attempting to help him understand the mobile phone she'd impulsively sent him. From what she could make out from his letters, he lived with both Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott, and not one of them could work out how to use the phone. It was really quite endearing. She didn't know what to make of his living arrangements, and didn't ask. It was none of her business.

It was late on Friday morning and Hermione was just wrapping up a memo to Shackbolt before heading up to the Ministry cafeteria for lunch with Luna when she was interrupted by her assistant, Adrian, telling her that Harry wanted to speak with her. Harry was one of the few non-Unspeakables allowed inside the Department of Mysteries, but he still had to make an appointment to be allowed in unaccompanied. Hermione therefore went to collect her best friend, giving him a quick hug before leading him back into her office. She could tell by the unhappy set of his mouth that something was bothering him.

Before she'd even sat down, Harry burst out "Merlin, Forder is *such* a twat!"

Sighing, Hermione said "Let me guess, he wouldn't listen?"

Clearly fuming, Harry said "He didn't even deign to look up from his paperwork. He said he has it on good authority that Rodolphus LeStrange left the country and went into hiding in France, and that I shouldn't fall for the tricks of someone who used to be in Voldemort's pocket. He also said that, even if it is true, him wanting a sample of bone from "some long dead fellow" wasn't worth the DMLE's time as it proves nothing."

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose and Harry continued "I'll obviously still work on this, but I'll have to be careful how I do it. I don't think it's worth you getting directly involved yet, but if he starts making things difficult then I might need you to."

"Of course, Harry, just let me know. I was just heading up for lunch with Luna, if you'd like to join us?"

"No thanks, I've got to oversee a training session of some of the new recruits. See you at the pub later, though?"

"Yep, I'll be there!"

Ever since they'd started work, Hermione, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Neville, and Luna had made a point to meet up every Friday night for some sort of group activity. This mostly consisted of drinking in the Leaky Cauldron, but they were occasionally more ambitious. Over the years, their group expanded to include partners and other old friends, and their weekly ritual was often the highlight of Hermione's week. About a year ago, she had instigated a monthly 'muggle night' where she, Harry, Dean or anyone else with an understanding of the muggle world would plan a muggle activity for them all to try. The others, particularly the pure bloods who'd never been exposed to the muggle world, were skeptical at first but it turned out to be a massive hit. Last month they moved from their usual Friday evening to a Saturday day time to go to a theme park. In a few weeks' time they planned to go bowling and Hermione couldn't wait to see her friends try it.

Hermione walked Harry out of her office at the same time that Luna emerged from hers where she worked in the Hall of Prophecy. The three of them chatted on their way up to the atrium, where Harry left them to oversee training. Hermione and Luna bought their food and took their seats at their usual table and had just started discussing Luna's latest project when Ron sat down at the table.

Ron and Hermione were, technically, friends. They had dated for a few years after the war but Hermione quickly realised that they weren't going to last. Ron was too insecure, too intimidated by Hermione's intelligence and ambition and, crucially, they wanted fundamentally different things out of life. Ron wanted to immediately settle down and start popping out the next generation of Weasleys, whereas Hermione wanted to focus on her career and had no interest in being a young mother. Things had been strained between them ever since the breakup, although they remained semi-friends mostly due to their hugely overlapping social circles. Even after all this time, Ron still seemed to resent Hermione for ending things, meaning most conversations between them were awkward at best. Hermione was therefore surprised when, after exchanging pleasantries with herself and Luna, Ron turned to her and said "Hermione, do you fancy coming over for lunch tomorrow?"

Not once since he and Padma, and subsequently Arthur and Molly, had moved into the old Lestrange Estate (now dubbed Weasley House) had she been invited round in the absence of a group invitation. Hermione was therefore sure he must have some kind of ulterior motive and, never one to beat about the bush, she simply asked "Um, thanks for the invite but why do you want me to come over?"

Ron's ears went red, a sure sign he felt uncomfortable, but he just said "I just thought it might be nice to hang out. I know Padma and the kids would love to see you, and we'll have James and Albus there, too."

Hermione just raised an eyebrow at him and waited for his real reason.

He huffed "Fine, all of that was true but I've also noticed something up with Topsey. I've got no idea what's going on, and I thought given all your Spew stuff you might be interested. I know you spent a lot of time with her while you were decontaminating the house so, I dunno, I just thought you might help."

Hermione sighed internally at the fact that Ron still seemed to expect her to solve his problems for him. She didn't, however, trust that he'd bother to get to the bottom of whatever was wrong with Topsey if she didn't help, so she agreed. Ron thanked her, then quickly made his excuses and said he'd see them both that evening at the Leaky.

The Leaky was packed, and Hermione was grateful for the small area at the back of the pub that Seamus (the new owner since Tom's retirement) kept roped off for them on Friday evenings. When Hermione arrived, Ginny was chatting animatedly with Luna, Harry was at the bar deep in conversation with Seamus, Ron was rolling his eyes at something Neville had said to him and Dean had his arm around his partner, Oliver Wood, who appeared to be having a good-natured debate with Angelina Johnson – no doubt about something Quidditch related.

Hermione quickly joined in with Ginny and Luna's conversation and passed an enjoyable hour catching up with everyone. Harry joined them after about half an hour, looking tired but pleased. He mentioned to Hermione that there was one recruit in particular, a muggle born called Erin Jonah, who seemed very promising and who he would be recommending join Hermione's team. Hermione's focus in the Department of Mysteries was on studying the dark arts, hence her involvement in decontaminating Grimmauld Place, Weasley House and Malfoy Manor. In addition to the research element, it was a rather practical role that often required an element of danger which meant that Harry, alongside several hand-chosen Aurors, formed a highly-secret team that Hermione could call upon when needed.

Hermione had just refreshed her drink when she felt the distinctive vibrating of her wand that meant someone had activated her wards. Thinking it was likely just a neighbour popping over to say hello, Hermione ignored it at first. However, the vibration kept stopping and starting, almost as though someone was trying to knock on the wards themselves. Intrigued, Hermione whispered to Harry that she had to go and check on something, before she slipped away to floo home. She didn't think she needed to take anyone with her, since she would be going straight into her house; she didn't want to interrupt anyone else's night, and planned to be back soon. Anyway, if it was anything sinister she would likely be able to handle it herself.

Draco

Draco couldn't remember being stunned but, as he cracked open his eyes and saw that he was lying on a dusty stone floor, he realised that something had definitely not gone according to plan. The last thing he remembered was turning around to lock up his shop and set the wards. Then nothing.

He tried to think fast. He didn't like the idea of calling Theo and Pansy until he had more of an idea of what was going on; he hated putting them in danger, so if this was a situation he could handle himself he would do so. Doing his best to still appear stunned, he tried to work out where he was. He couldn't smell much, the room seemed to just be dry and dusty. He could hear the rumble of male voices, with a slightly echoey quality, far enough away that he couldn't make out individual words but close enough to worry him. He was lying face down on the floor and couldn't feel his wand underneath him so assumed he had been disarmed.

Suddenly, he heard the distinctive clomp of heavy footsteps and received a sharp kick to the stomach. Taken by surprise, he let out a grunt of pain. Unable to pretend to be stunned any longer, Draco pushed himself into a sitting position and looked up. He was unsurprised to see Rodolphus Lestrange looking down at him. Behind him was two people wearing Death Eater masks and holding their wands at the ready.

"I told you the little shit was awake" sneered Rodolphus, presumably to the two wizards standing behind him.

“Lestrangle”, drawled Draco, deciding to channel his father's brand of haughty derision, “to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Your little friends might have turned up at an inconvenient time last time, Draco, but we’ve got some unfinished business.”

“Ah, yes, all that nonsense about wanting some bone from my dearly departed grandfather, wasn’t it?” asked Draco, stalling for time while thinking through his options. He had to admit to himself that, outnumbered and without his wand, they weren’t great.

“You will get it for us, boy. The Blacks were paranoid fuckers, and I know for a fact there’s a curse on that tomb to incapacitate anyone other than direct descendants if they try to open it.”

“Why would you be interested in bone from your dead wife’s father? Seems a bit sick, even for a Lestrangle.”

“That’s none of your concern, you disrespectful little shit. All you need to worry about is getting the bone. We’ll take it from there.”

“No.”

“What did you say, boy?”

“I said, no.”

“I think you’ll find you’ll regret that decision. One last chance to do this the easy way.”

Draco stared Rodolphus in the eye and sneered as he said “I think you’ll find my answer is still no.”

Rodolphus smiled, but it was an expression of pure cruelty as he raised his wand at Draco and said “I didn’t want to believe it, but you’ve turned into a filthy blood traitor too like your whore of a mother.”

Fury jolted through Draco but, before he could do more than jerk towards the wizard, he heard the word that had haunted his nightmares for the past twelve years as Rodolphus shouted “*CRUCIO*.”

Pain, the like of which Draco hadn’t felt in more than a decade, ripped through his body. Almost reflexively, his jerking left hand reached over and pressed the ring sat on the middle finger of his right hand, as he felt his bones turn to fire, felt his blood boiling in his veins. He couldn’t see, couldn’t think past the all-consuming agony scorching through him.

Draco had no concept of how long had passed, all he knew was that something caused the pain to stop. He slumped to the ground, trying to get his shaking body under control, sweat pouring off of him as he regained control of his breathing. He heard shouting and the noise of a fight. Lifting his head, he saw Pansy hit Rodolphus with a curse that sent him flying into the wall with blood pouring out of his mouth and nose. She took the opportunity to disarm the Death Eater before summoning Draco’s wand and, without so much as looking at him shouted “Draco, catch” before turning around with cold fury on her face to assist Theo. Draco could see that Theo had managed to stun one of the Death Eaters but was locked in a fierce duel with the second.

Wand now in hand, Draco got to his feet and made to run forward to help Theo and Pansy but, before he could take more than a step, he felt the cold blade of a knife bite into the skin of his throat. At that moment, Pansy successfully stunned the remaining Death Eater but, before she and Theo could do anything more than turn around, Rodolphus spoke.

“One more move, brats, and I’ll open his throat. I wouldn’t be surprised to see mud come out of him. What do you two think, huh? Want to see just how dirty a blood traitor bleeds?”

All of the blood had drained from Pansy’s face, and Theo was bouncing on the balls of his feet as though itching to run to his friend’s rescue but scared to make a move in case he made the situation worse.

“What do you want?” spat Pansy, never taking her eyes from Draco’s.

“What I want is for your boyfriend to retrieve a bit of bone for me. I wouldn’t have thought it was that hard, but he’s a stubborn little blood traitor. I’ll make you a deal, girl, retrieve that bone for me and I’ll let him live.”

Draco had to warn them so, ignoring the searing pain as the knife broke his skin, he said “Don’t, Pans.. Curse.”

“Shut up, filth. It’s very simple you two. One of you will get that bone for me, or blondie here dies. Up to you, but choose soon.”

So quickly Draco couldn’t have done anything to stop it even if he’d realised what was happening, Theo apparated across the room and pulled open the sarcophagus of Cygnus Black. Draco watched in horror as a burst of purple fire swelled on top of the tomb before seeming to dive directly into Theo. Theo let out a long scream and crumpled to the floor. A second passed which, to Draco, felt like years, during which Pansy used the distraction to hit Rodolphus with a powerful full body bind curse. She ran straight to Theo as Draco slowly and carefully extracted himself from the knife at his throat. A quick glance confirmed that the knife was, as he suspected, Bellatrix’s cursed blade. Disregarding his bleeding throat completely, he ran over and fell to his knees beside Theo who seemed to have been rendered unconscious but was, thankfully, still breathing.

“We need to get him to St Mungo’s” said Pansy frantically, attempting unsuccessfully to revive Theo with her wand “I’ve got no idea what he was hit with.”

Shaking his head, Draco let out a choked sob as he said “We can’t take him there, Pans, you know what happened last time. They don’t treat “*Death Eater scum*” and we can’t risk them taking that attitude with Theo.”

“Well then, what do you suggest we do?” screamed Pansy.

“Granger.... I think we take him to Granger.” Said Draco, his heart thundering as he realised that his best friend’s life may well depend on him making the right call here. “I think her role at the Ministry involves work with Dark Magic – she was one of the people who worked on removing dark magic from the Manor. I think she’s our best shot.”

Pansy looked highly skeptical, but one look at Theo’s pale form had her nodding. “Ok, you side-along Theo and I’ll apparate myself. Press the ring when you get there, as I don’t know her address.”

With a nod, Draco pulled Theo to his feet and wasted no time apparating directly to Granger's cottage, hoping to Merlin, Salazar and anyone else who might be listening that he was making the right call and that it wouldn't be too late.

Chapter End Notes

CW for torture, violence and blood.

Let Go of Your Guilt

Hermione

Hermione all but jumped through the floo and into her living room, as the near constant vibration of her wand told her something was wrong; whoever wanted to get into her house wanted to get in very badly. In reality, it had likely been less than two minutes since her wards were set off but to her it felt a lot longer. She sprinted to the window and looked out to see Draco kneeling on the floor holding an unconscious Theo Nott, while Pansy Parkinson pounded on her wards. Leaping straight into action, Hermione practically flew to the front door, muttering the incantations to let them through her wards as she went.

“Quick, get him inside” she shouted as she turned and conjured a medical table for them to lay Theo on. It was only once Pansy had levitated him over the threshold that Hermione began to wonder why on Earth she and Draco had brought Theo to her instead of taking him to St Mungo’s. After casting a quick diagnostic spell on Theo, however, all thoughts of why and how they were there fled from her mind. He should be dead. It was an absolute miracle that he was alive, and she didn’t waste any more time before she started work. Somehow he had been cursed, and it was one she was familiar with – she could almost feel the old ache over her ribs as she remembered Dolohov’s curse in the battle at the Department of Mysteries in her fifth year. The only reason the curse hadn’t killed her then was because Dolohov hadn’t been able to speak the incantation aloud.

Hermione worked mostly in silence for well over two hours, only speaking to snap at Draco or Pansy to grab some ingredient or other from her potions store. She was sweaty and exhausted when she finally lowered her wand. Looking down at the pale form of the still unconscious Theo, she spoke her first full sentence since telling Draco where to find her potions cabinet.

“I’ve isolated and removed the curse. He’ll have a rather spectacular scar across most of his torso, but he’ll live.”

At that, Draco crumpled onto her sofa and sat forward with his head in his hands. Pansy leaned over Theo to place a kiss to his forehead. Hermione took a long breath in and said “I don’t know about either of you, but I need some wine.”

Pansy snorted at that but nodded, apparently unable to speak, and Draco completely ignored them both. Hermione took her time in the kitchen, thinking over the events of the past couple of hours and trying to make some sense of them. She just couldn’t work out why they would bring Theo to her. They were lucky, she was probably the only person outside specialist healers in St Mungo’s equipped to deal with a curse like that, but they wouldn’t have known that so why take the risk?

Walking back into the living room, she noticed that Pansy had sat down in the armchair closest to Theo and that Draco still hadn’t moved. She levitated a glass of wine over to Pansy and put one on the coffee table in front of Draco before sitting down next to him and taking a large sip of her own.

After a few minutes it became apparent to Hermione that neither of the other conscious people in the room planned on speaking any time soon. Wanting to break the silence, but not wanting to pry just yet, Hermione said “We should be able to move him now. The curse is gone, and it’s just a matter of his body healing, so he’ll be more comfortable in bed. I also think he should stay here

tonight in case there are any unexpected side effects of the curse. I don't anticipate there will be any, but just to be sure. He can sleep in my spare room."

"We aren't leaving him." Pansy cut in, sharply.

"I wouldn't expect you to, Pansy. You're welcome to sleep in the spare room with him, or on the sofa down here, wherever you would be most comfortable."

Pansy just stared at her for a long moment before nodding. Well, then, Hermione thought, time for some answers.

"Why did you bring him here and not St Mungo's?"

Pansy looked at her like she was a moron and didn't deign to respond. Draco continued his impersonation of a statue on her sofa. Okay then.

"Well," she said awkwardly into the silence "Pansy, I assume you'll want to levitate Theo yourself?" Pansy simply nodded.

"Ok, let's do that now. He should sleep until morning, but just in case he wakes up early I want him to be comfortable. There's also a not insignificant chance that he'll fall off of this table if he wakes up here, so let's try to avoid that."

Without another word, Pansy drew her wand and levitated Theo. Taking a moment to vanish the table, Hermione led Pansy up the stairs and showed her into the guest room. It was small but comfortable, with a double bed, a wardrobe, dressing table and, of course, several book shelves. She hurried over and drew back the duvet to allow Pansy to lower Theo down into the bed. He was shirtless from Hermione's work earlier and Pansy quickly transfigured his jeans into pyjama trousers. Hermione checked Theo's vitals one more time, all stable, before turning to Pansy.

"The bathroom's directly across from this room. My room's at the end of the hallway on the right if you need me. Please don't go into the room directly across from mine. There's a new toothbrush in the cupboard under the sink in the bathroom, and a spare towel in the wardrobe behind you. Do you need anything else?"

Pansy shook her head but, as Hermione was turning to leave, she distinctly heard a small voice mumble "Thanks, Granger."

"I hope you don't need to take me up on this, but anytime Pansy."

Hermione walked back down the stairs, thinking how bizarre it was to have the three Slytherins in her home. Draco on his own hadn't seemed that strange once she got past the initial shock, but faced with an unconscious Theo and a just-shy-of-hostile Pansy, she didn't quite know what to do with herself.

The first thing she noticed upon re-entering her living room was that Draco had finally moved. He was now standing in front of the fire, staring into the flames while slowly drinking his wine. She paused in the doorway, and watched him. He seemed to be radiating misery and, while she could understand why he would be upset that his friend had been cursed, she couldn't understand why he seemed to have shut down completely.

He must have sensed her standing there because, without turning around, he said “Because we weren’t certain he would be treated if we took him to St Mungo’s.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He turned around, devastation written all over his face “In answer to your question as to why we brought Theo here rather than to St Mungo’s – it was because we were concerned that he wouldn’t be treated if we took him to St Mungo’s, or that if a Healer did see him that it wouldn’t be in time. I took a chance, and thank fuck it paid off because I don’t know what I would have done if he...” Draco turned back towards the fire, his shoulders shaking as he slumped forwards.

Without thinking, Hermione strode forward and put her arm around him. She didn’t know if it was the emotion that seemed to have overwhelmed him, the stress of the day, or a combination of the two, but he turned into her and let her hug him while he attempted to control his emotions. She couldn’t help but rub his back, and whisper “He’s going to be okay, Draco. I was hit by that same curse back in fifth year. It’s a nasty one, but there will be no lasting damage.”

He pulled away and stared at her with watery eyes as he said “You were hit with a curse like that? In fifth year?”

“Yes, that exact curse, during the battle at the Department of Mysteries.”

Draco’s face crumpled again and he looked away from her before asking in a strangled voice “Was it my father...”

“No” she interrupted before he could spiral, “no, it was Dolohov. It should have killed me, but he was silenced when he cast it so he couldn’t say the incantation aloud. It’s the only thing that saved me.” She frowned at Draco before continuing “I understand if you don’t want to talk about it tonight, but I will need you to explain what happened at some point. I can’t work out how Theo survived that curse, unless the person who cast it on him was silenced as well?”

Draco took a deep breath before turning around and sitting back down on the sofa. He took a long sip of his wine, and Hermione summoned the bottle from the kitchen to refill both of their glasses. Draco seemed to take that time to collect his thoughts, because as soon as Hermione sat down in the armchair next to the fire he spoke.

“It was my fault. I summoned them using my ring.”

“Your ring?” Hermione asked, puzzled.

In answer, Draco held up his right hand and showed her. “Theo and Pansy each wear one, too. We, uh, have had some trouble with people targeting us from time to time so I got these out of my family vaults years ago. Anyone wearing a ring can press down on it if they need help, which will alert anyone else wearing the connected rings. It also allows the wearers of the connected rings to apparate directly to the person who requires help.”

“I see.” Said Hermione and, although she was itching to know more about the rings, to examine them if he would let her, she said “So you needed help tonight? Where were you?”

Draco briefly explained what had happened, starting with being stunned outside his shop and finishing with Theo being cursed. Hermione finally understood “Oh, so it was a dormant curse that was triggered rather than one cast on Theo directly. That makes sense.”

Draco gave her an incredulous look before bursting out “Don’t you see, Granger, it was my fault! I called them there, I turned my back on Rodolphus without checking he was actually incapacitated, I did this to him!”

“I’d argue that Rodolphus did this, and that you did the right thing by calling for help.” Said Hermione, firmly. She couldn’t claim to know Draco well, but she was pretty sure that he would spiral into self-loathing if she let him. Well, whether he liked it or not she now considered him a friend and there was no way she was going to let a friend do that.

“Granger, I called them into danger knowing what they would face.”

“And what, may I ask, was happening immediately before you pressed that ring?” She had noticed the telltale tremors in his muscles while she was hugging him. Funny how he had glossed over the way in which Rodolphus had tried to “persuade” him when he was retelling the story.

He grimaced at her but said nothing. She pressed on regardless “Draco, if your friends had been kidnapped and were being tortured, would you want them to deal with it themselves and not risk putting you in danger? Or would you want them to use the ring?”

“Of course I would want them to use the ring.” He snapped.

“Then why do you deserve any less?”

“Because it was my fault! It’s because of me, my family and my blood that my friends were in danger again and I can’t stand it!”

“Draco, stop it. None of this is your fault, you can’t help who you’re related to and you certainly can’t control what they do. I don’t know them well but I’d bet you anything that Theo and Pansy would have never forgiven themselves if you got yourself killed because you didn’t want to involve them.”

Draco slumped back and flung his arm over his face in what Hermione thought was an unnecessarily dramatic move, but he’d had a rough day so she let it slide.

Since she had him talking, Hermione had to ask “Did Rodolphus get the bone?”

Draco sighed and ran his hand down his face before saying “Well, Theo opened Cygnus’ tomb so I think we have to assume that he did. When we left the three of them were incapacitated, but I think it’s too much to hope that they stayed that way long enough to get caught.”

Nodding, Hermione said “Yes, I think we have to assume he got it. If our theory behind his motivation is correct then he’ll need flesh from a servant and blood from an enemy. We still have time, Draco.”

He gave her a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes. He lifted his hand once more to run it through his hair, and Hermione could see that his muscles were still spasming. She’d also noticed the nasty cut on his neck, so she couldn’t stop herself from saying “I’ve got a potion that will help with the after effects of the Cruciatus, if you want it? And you should let me look at that cut on your neck, too.”

Draco scoffed at her and said “Believe me, Granger, I’ve got plenty of experience with the Cruciatus curse. I’ll be fine. And as for the cut, we’ll have matching scars. It was Bellatrix’s blade

that Rodolphus used.”

“Just because you’ve dealt with it before doesn’t mean you need to suffer now, you stubborn prat. I’m getting you that potion, and you are going to drink it, and then you will let me clean that cut. Just because it’s going to scar anyway doesn’t mean we shouldn’t take care of it.” Hermione stomped out of the room before he could argue further.

Draco’s muscle spasms seemed to subside almost instantly once he had taken the potion, and his curiosity seemed piqued. She explained that it was one she had invented herself, as she thought it was a ridiculous oversight to not have something to counter the effects of the curse just because it was illegal and so, technically, counter measures shouldn’t be needed.

“But how did you test it, Granger, it’s an Unforgivable.”

“Department privileges. You seem to have figured out that my specialism is dark magic, so I am given a certain level of leniency that most aren’t afforded.”

“So, what, you were allowed to just *crucio* an intern or something?”

Hermione gave him a withering look at that, and sniffed before saying “Of course not, I had someone use it on me. For very short periods of time, obviously.”

Draco gaped at her, apparently at a loss for what to say. After a long moment, he said “Granger, I... I want to apologise. I know it’s long overdue, but I’m sorry that I didn’t stop her that night at the Manor. For what it’s worth, I desperately wanted to. But I was just so scared and so used to violence at that point that I felt rooted to the spot. I should have done something, but I just stood there like a fucking coward.”

“Thank you for saying that, Draco, I appreciate it. But, for what it’s worth, I never blamed you for that. We were both children, and she would have killed you if you had tried to stop her.”

He just grimaced at that, but didn’t say anything further.

“You should let go of your guilt you know. The only thing that was your fault back then was that you were a horrible little shit at school and, even for that, I think a hefty chunk of the blame can be given to your father. But I forgave you for that a long time ago, and I know Harry did, too.”

“Granger, I did some terrible things in the war...”

“And so did I! Most of us did. We all did what we needed to survive. And I don’t think you or anyone else should be judged by the worst things they ever did. What’s important is what we choose to do now.”

“You are in a significant minority in thinking that, Granger.”

“Most people are idiots. They wanted someone to blame and you were an easy target. But I think most of them would be lying if they said they wouldn’t have made the same choices as you in the same situation. It’s disgusting, Draco, you should never have been treated that way.”

He didn’t seem to have anything to say to that, as he just stared into the fire. Hermione took a sip of her wine before deciding to push her luck, since he seemed to be willing to open up to her. “Is that why you’ve hidden away all these years? Because you think you deserve to be treated like that?”

He let out a long breath before saying “I don’t exactly think that. Pansy and Theo definitely don’t deserve it. We all received so much abuse in the wake of the war that we just made our lives small. From the outside it might look boring, but that feels safe to us. When non-boring days meant Theo had been hit with a stunner and beaten, or Pansy had almost been assaulted by a group of wizards calling her a “Death Eater whore”, we learned to value the quiet days. I’ve got my potions shop, and Pansy has a fashion line that she sells mostly on the continent. Theo does whatever he feels like doing on any given day. We’ve made it work.”

For a long moment Hermione was silent as she thought over what he said. She had questions, but didn’t know in which order to ask them. Finally, she settled on “If you don’t mind me asking, surely working in the shop is a public facing role? Given everything you’ve described, how does that work?”

He gave a humourless laugh before he said “It doesn’t, not really. I mostly brew difficult medicinal potions and sell them to St Mungo’s and other medical establishments at cost. It’s actually a huge loss-maker, but it keeps me occupied. I suppose I could do it from home, but I keep the shop open for the occasional walk-ins.”

She thought about that for a while. She knew that, even after the Ministry-ordered reparations, Draco was probably richer than she could imagine. But, still, the fact that he did all of that for a loss was incredible. She decided to bite the bullet and ask her next question.

“I couldn’t help but notice Theo’s scars when I was working on him. There are... so many. What happened?”

Draco looked as though he was weighing his response. Finally, he said “It’s not really my story to tell. But let’s just say that Nott Senior was one of the worst people to have ever lived. And, trust me, I’m well acquainted with the short list.”

The thought that his father had inflicted the hundreds of scars covering Theo’s torso was enough to make her feel ill. Purely to change the subject, and not at all because she was interested in the answer, she asked “And, you and Pansy are together? With Theo, too?”

He let out a burst of genuine laughter at that. “Merlin, no, is that what you’ve been thinking?” He chuckled and some of the weight seemed to lift off him.

“No, Granger, none of us are romantically involved. Pansy and I dated for appearances at school, but she and Theo are my oldest friends. From what I’ve seen of your dynamic, it would be like you dating Potter.”

Hermione grimaced at that, “Ok, point taken. So, none of you are seeing anyone?”

He gave her a strange look at that, she supposed she was being rather nosy, but said “I’m not sure about Theo, but to my knowledge Pansy isn’t seeing anyone and I know for a fact that I’m not.”

She nodded at that and ignored the slight fluttery feeling in her stomach that must have been from missing dinner and definitely had nothing to do with the fact that Draco wasn’t romantically involved with Pansy, Theo or anyone else.

Before she could say anything, he asked “What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

She snorted “Nope. Work doesn’t really leave me much space to devote the kind of time that most people seem to need from a romantic partner.”

“So, you and Weasley didn’t work out, then?”

She sighed, “No, with hindsight I don’t know why we ever thought it would. I mean, we were very young and had just fought in a war together so I do understand how it happened. But we were never right for each other. He wanted to settle down straight away but I was focused on my career. Anyway, it was for the best. He and Padma are very happy together.”

“Well, all I can say Granger is that it was his loss.”

She blushed at that, and the room suddenly felt far too hot. Clearing her throat, she said “Right, well it’s late and I’d better head off to bed. Will you be ok on the sofa?” For a moment she had an insane urge to ask if he’d like to come upstairs with her but she quashed it instantly. He’d been kidnapped, tortured and watched his friend cursed this evening, the last thing he needed was to have her try to blur the lines of their new friendship. And, anyway, just because he was single didn’t mean he was interested in her.

A Ridiculous Double Standard

Draco

Draco woke with a start, panicking slightly at the unfamiliar surroundings before remembering he was in Granger's living room. He slumped back down on the pillow that she had summoned for him and covered his eyes with the crook of his elbow.

He was just thinking he could really do with a coffee when a silvery otter shot down the stairs and he was instantly on his feet. In Granger's voice it said "Theo's stirring. If you want to be here when he wakes up then come upstairs now. First door on the left once you get up the stairs."

Without needing to be told twice, Draco ran out of the living room and sprinted up the stairs. He all but skidded to a halt in the doorway of the spare room and surveyed the scene before him. He noticed Granger casting diagnostic spells on Theo, and Pansy hovering on the other side of the room, but most of his attention was on the stirring form lying in the bed. He looked at Granger, who smiled encouragingly up at him and said "It all looks good, vitals are normal. I think he'll be awake any second now."

Draco heard Pansy whisper "Oh, thank Merlin." At that moment, Theo's eyes fluttered and he groaned weakly before saying "Ugh, I'm the dumbest boy in all the land."

Granger looked worried but Draco just grinned at Theo and said "Mate, you're a thirty-year-old man." Theo groaned slightly louder at that and said "Why must you kick me when I'm down?" His eyes then widened and he asked in a panicked voice "Wait, shit, Draco are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm here mate, I'm fine."

"Ah thank fuck for that" breathed Theo, visibly relaxing. "I'd do it all again but, seriously, zero stars... would not recommend."

Draco looked up at Pansy, his own concern reflected in her face at the fact that Theo seemed to be talking nonsense.

"Theo, why are you talking about stars?" asked Pansy gently.

To Draco's surprise, it was Granger who answered "It's a muggle rating system; they use a system of stars out of five to demonstrate how much they enjoyed an experience."

"Ten points to Gryffindor." Mumbled Theo, who sounded exhausted.

Before Draco could suggest that it might be best if Theo went back to sleep, he piped up "So, what happened then? What was I hit with?"

Evidently answering questions was a deeply engrained habit for Granger, as she answered that one as well "You were hit with a nasty curse which, if the incantation had been said aloud rather than activated by a delayed trigger, would likely have killed you. I was able to isolate and remove it. I was actually hit by the same curse about fourteen years ago so can attest that there will be no lasting damage beyond a fairly large scar."

At that, Theo wiggled his eyebrows at Granger and said “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours, Granger” and promptly tugged the duvet down to expose his chest. As Granger had warned, there was indeed a large purple scar across most of Theo’s torso.

While Granger spluttered her indignation, Draco tried not to stare at her. Now that the immediate excitement had passed, he noticed that she was wearing nothing more than sleeping shorts and an oversized t-shirt. Draco could only assume that Pansy had woken her at the first sign of Theo stirring and she hadn’t had time to get dressed. He struggled to keep his eyes away from the curve of her legs and the way her hair stuck up in the mornings. Draco mentally shook himself and refocused on Theo, who had been examining his own torso.

“Wicked” said Theo, grinning down at his new scar, “at least this one’s a testament to my heroic deeds. And it looks much cooler than the others.”

Against Granger’s advice, and much to Draco’s annoyance, Theo refused to stay in bed. They compromised and set him up in an armchair in Granger’s living room, where she proceeded to blow Theo’s mind by introducing him to the television. That, apparently, was what those little shouting boxes had been at the muggle pub. Theo was like a child at Christmas, and gave Draco a headache due to the speed at which he used the thing Granger called a ‘remote’ to flip through the various different pages that she called ‘channels’.

Slightly overwhelmed by the noise and flashing images, Draco joined Granger and Pansy in the kitchen where she was making breakfast. Draco couldn’t put his finger on exactly what the issue was, since neither of them were speaking, but there was a definite air of hostility between the two witches. Draco thought that most of it was coming from Pansy, who was watching Granger with an intensity that making breakfast didn’t seem to warrant.

Wanting to break the silence, Draco ventured “Thanks again, Granger, for saving Theo and for having us here.”

She smiled up at him “I’ll repeat what I said to Pansy last night: I hope you don’t have to take me up on it, but any time.”

Draco saw Pansy roll her eyes behind Granger’s back, so Draco narrowed his at her. Apparently undeterred from her commitment to hostility, she flipped her middle finger at him before sipping her coffee.

Just then, Draco heard the distinctive ‘woosh’ of the floo and saw Granger look up in alarm. Before he had a chance to say anything, Theo shouted “Merlin’s saggy ball sack, it’s the Chosen One himself!”

Granger’s face visibly relaxed, but Draco tensed as he heard Theo continue “I’d get up to give you a kiss, Potter, but I’m on strict armchair rest today. Feel free to lean down, though.” Horrified, Draco could hear Theo making kissing noises as he made his way quickly to the living room. Once there, he was greeted with the sight of a delighted Theo, a confused Potter, and a highly amused Ginny Potter. While Draco hadn’t seen the redhead in years, as the captain of the Holyhead Harpies she was regularly featured in the Prophet so he recognised her immediately.

Draco felt Granger brush by him and heard her say “Harry, Gin! What are you doing here?” as she greeted them both with a hug.

Potter gave her an incredulous look before saying “What are we doing here? I think the question, Hermione, is what are they doing here?” as he looked from Draco to Pansy to Theo. Draco couldn’t detect any hostility in his voice, he simply sounded baffled, but he could feel Pansy tense behind him. Ginny simply grinned around the room, clearly enjoying the unusual situation she had stumbled into, and said “Alright, snakes?”

“Never better, Red, and yourself?” replied Theo. If possible, Ginny’s grin grew wider and she said “Oh, I’m grand, Nott, thanks for asking.”

Theo grimaced “It’s not Nott, it’s Theo if you please.”

“Ok then, Theo not Nott, it’s nice to properly meet you.”

Not wanting to think too long about what would happen if Potter’s menace of a wife became too friendly with his unhinged friend, Draco nodded to each of them “Potter, nice to see you again. Ginevra, pleasure.”

Ginny nodded at him and said “Ferrett.” Pansy maintained a stony silence throughout the interaction and neither Potter seemed inclined to try speaking directly to her.

Apparently unable to take it any longer, Potter burst out “Will someone please explain what in Merlin’s name is going on here?”

Granger, who had been surprisingly quiet throughout the introductions, said “Well, it’s kind of a long story but…”

Before she could say anything more, Theo interrupted “I managed to get myself into a spot of bother, sort of a prank gone wrong, and Draco here thought Granger would be able to help. Of course, she’s brilliant, so she saved my sorry arse and then it was very late so she invited us to stay the night.” He finished with a wink at Granger, who narrowed her eyes at him.

Potter looked like he didn’t buy that for one second, so he turned back to Granger and asked “Is that really what happened?”

Theo gasped “You question my integrity? You wound me, Potter, I thought we were closer than that.”

Potter, having no experience with how to deal with Theo, simply looked helplessly at Granger while Ginny sniggered behind his back.

To the apparent surprise of everyone except Draco, Pansy piped up at that point “What’s so funny, Weasley?”

Ginny smirked at the irritated witch and said “It’s not often I see Harry lost for words, Parkinson, so I’m enjoying this.”

Pansy glowered at her but let it drop. To the Gryffindors in the room it might have seemed like a strange reaction, but Draco knew that Pansy was fiercely protective of her friends and would not stand for any perceived insult (that didn’t come from her, of course). Both Draco and Pansy were extra protective of Theo, but Draco was willing to give the benefit of the doubt whereas Pansy would need to be persuaded.

Draco caught Granger's eye and gave the smallest of nods, attempting to convey that she should agree with Theo. She must have understood him, because she turned to Potter and said "Yes, Harry, that's pretty much what happened. I was so distracted by them being here that I didn't think to send you a patronus – sorry if I had you worried!"

Potter narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her, but seemed to decide it wasn't worth pushing any further. Ginny piped up "So you're fine, we're fine, everyone's fine. It's almost like we didn't need to come storming over here at the crack of dawn, Harry."

Potter mumbled something indistinct to that, as Granger asked if they'd like to stay for breakfast. Much to Draco's relief, they declined. He didn't mind Potter, and thought he could quite like Ginny if he got to know her, but he knew it would push Pansy's patience to the limit to have so many strangers around Theo while he was recovering.

They all said their goodbyes, and as Ginny and Potter walked into the floo, he saw her clap her husband on the back and say "Come on, you paranoid git, let's get you home."

Theo turned to the rest of the room with a bright smile "I like her!" Draco wasn't surprised, and shuddered at the thought of what the two of them would get up to if they became friends.

Pansy scoffed at that, causing Granger to narrow her eyes at the witch. Pansy sneered, turned on her heel and walked back into the kitchen. Draco was about to follow when Granger rounded on Theo and asked "Why did you stop me from telling Harry what happened?"

In an uncharacteristically serious tone of voice, Theo replied "Granger, have you thought about how the events of last night would look if reported to the DMLE?"

Granger huffed and said "Of course I have! Draco was kidnapped and..."

Theo spoke over her "No, Granger, you're thinking about what would happen if *you* reported being kidnapped. What would happen if *your* friends engaged in a duel to save your life which resulted in one of you being cursed. Really think about how the DMLE will react if they hear Draco was the one kidnapped."

Granger frowned at him but didn't say anything for a long moment. Quietly, she said "Shit, you're right."

"I'm sorry, Granger, what was that? I didn't quite hear you." Said Theo, grinning at her.

To her credit, Granger did seem to be able to admit when she was wrong. She cleared her throat and said "You're right, Theo. It's a ridiculous double standard, but we need to be realistic."

Theo nodded "Exactly, Granger. If we reported this, I wouldn't be surprised if Draco ended up being hauled in for questioning and treated as a suspect rather than a victim. They might see the family connection and try to make it look like Draco was complicit in his uncle's crimes. They'd love an excuse to send him back off to Azkaban."

Having had quite enough of listening to their conversation, Draco pushed off of the wall and turned to join Pansy in the kitchen.

He walked in and found her sitting at one of the chairs clustered around the coffee table, flicking through one of Granger's books. She was clearly unhappy, but Draco decided he needed food and

coffee before dealing with a Parkinson tantrum; it had been an eventful morning and it wasn't even 9am yet.

Once he'd fixed his breakfast he sat down opposite Pansy. He ate in silence and let her brood. Finally, when he'd finished, he put his plate aside and fixed her with a stare.

"What's up, Pans?"

In an icy tone she responded "Oh, nothing much, beyond our friend getting cursed and the fact that we are social pariahs almost getting him killed as a result. You know, the usual."

"Yeah, it's awful, but you seem particularly angry at Granger. Why?"

"She just... irritates me. I don't want her pity, and she seems to think we need fixing."

"To be fair, Pans, Theo did need fixing last night. We were so lucky that she was able to help us. You know Theo would likely be dead otherwise."

"I know!" she snapped, glaring daggers at him. Deflating slightly, she said "I just hate it. I hate that he took that fucking curse, I hate that we wouldn't have been able to get him help because of the stupid fucking choices our parents made, and I hate that we had to beg for help from someone who has every reason to hate us. I just hate it all, Draco."

And that was the crux of the matter, thought Draco. Pansy felt helpless, and being helpless to save Theo was a very sore spot for both of them.

"Right" said Granger as she walked into the room a few minutes later and poured herself a cup of tea, "I've discussed this with Theo and I understand why we can't report what actually happened to the DMLE. I hate it, but I understand it."

"Join the club." Muttered Pansy under her breath.

"Since Theo retrieved the bone, thereby activating the curse, it'll be clear that it wasn't a Black family member who messed with the tomb, so we shouldn't run any risk of them suspecting Draco if the break in is reported. I do, however, plan to tell Harry what happened."

Pansy opened her mouth to argue, but Granger held up a hand to stop her "I can't explain exactly why, but trust me when I say that Harry will not report this to Garrick Forder. This investigation won't be run by the DMLE after Monday."

Draco struggled to hide his surprise as he asked "How come?"

Granger took some time to respond, busying herself with fixing her breakfast. When she'd finished, she walked over and sat in the chair beside Draco. He couldn't help but notice that she was still wearing nothing but her tiny sleep shorts and t-shirt. She seemed utterly unfazed by her state of undress, but Draco supposed it was her home after all.

It took more effort than he was proud of to tear his eyes away from her legs as she spoke, saying "I'm sorry Draco but I really can't tell you right now." He wasn't sure why, but Draco felt slightly hurt by that. It was unreasonable, she was an Unspeakable for Merlin's sake so there would be plenty of things she had to keep secret, but it still bothered him.

As though she could tell what he was thinking, she said “It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just that there are certain things relating to my job that I’m not allowed to disclose. I do, however, have a favour to ask you. Not to unduly influence you or anything but, if you agree, I will be allowed to tell you much more.”

Intrigued, Draco asked “What do you need?”

“As of Monday, this matter will be under the jurisdiction of the Department of Mysteries. I’d like you to come on board as an official consultant on this case. We’re fairly sure that Rodolphus is brewing a potion to bring Bellatrix back, so your insights there would be helpful. I won’t lie, your personal connection to Bellatrix and knowledge of how dark wizards and witches operate will also be extremely useful, but the official line will be your potions experience.”

Draco was stunned. She wanted to work with him? Openly? Did she realise what even suggesting that might do to her career? He had to make sure she knew what she was doing, so he said “Granger, as much as I’d like to help, what will that do to your career? Even just mentioning my name will make people instantly unhappy, I can guarantee you. What will your Head of Department say?”

Granger smirked at that and said “Oh, I promise you, the Head of Department is completely on board with this plan.”

Draco was surprised that she'd already discussed the matter with her boss, but then again it was Granger and she'd always been known for being over prepared. The identity of the Head of the Department of Mysteries had long been kept secret. Due to their position, they held unique and powerful knowledge that could make them a target to the wrong people. Draco couldn’t, therefore, make any kind of guess as to the type of person he would be facing if he worked with Granger.

Interrupting Draco’s train of thought, Granger said “And as for what anyone else thinks, they can hang for all I care. I’ve said it to Harry but I’ll say it to you, too: I’m sick of the way you have all been treated since the war and I’m going to use whatever clout I carry to fix it. This can be the start. Draco, would you be willing to meet me at the Ministry at 11am on Monday? I know you don’t need a babysitter, but I’ll meet you at the entrance to the Ministry. I don’t want you dealing with any nonsense, and it’s about time we sent a message.”

Two Angry Men

Hermione

The rest of the weekend passed in a blur. Hermione had insisted that Theo stay with her again on Saturday night so she could monitor his progress, which meant that both Draco and, to her dismay, Pansy decided to stay as well. Both had briefly returned home to pick up a few essentials, but they otherwise passed the day amicably, with Theo watching TV, Pansy working on her sketches, and Draco playing muggle board games with Hermione. He was particularly excited by Mouse Trap, and was alarmingly good at Monopoly once he got the hang of it.

Pansy remained largely silent, and didn't seem to have any interest in joining anything the others were doing, despite Theo trying to get her excited about the programmes he was watching. He quickly became obsessed with Dr Who and refused to engage in conversation if an episode was on. Hermione thought Theo was strange but endearing, with a disarming quality that made it difficult to be annoyed with him, and she found herself enjoying his company. For two people who appeared to be easily irritated, Draco and Pansy seemed to have an infinite amount of patience for Theo's various antics. There was a story there, Hermione was sure, but she didn't think it the right time to ask.

On Monday morning Hermione was part way through writing out her tasks for the day when Adrian came running into her office with a slightly panicked look on his face. Raising an eyebrow at him Hermione asked "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but Ron Weasley is outside the department and is demanding to speak with you. He seems a bit, ah, agitated."

Great, just what Hermione needed on a Monday morning. "Thanks, Adrian, don't worry about it. I'll go out to see him in a second."

As Adrian left her office, Hermione seriously considered just ignoring Ron. He didn't have clearance to access the Department of Mysteries, so she could avoid him all day if she had to. She had the meeting with Draco and Kingsley at 11am, though, so hiding in her office all day wasn't really an option. Besides, she wasn't usually one to hide from confrontations; she just didn't really have the energy to deal with Ron this morning.

She made her way out of the Department and shut the door behind her, turning to see an agitated Ron pacing up and down the corridor with a thunderous expression on his face.

"Where were you, Hermione?"

Confused, Hermione replied "Excuse me?"

"Where were you on Saturday? I thought you were coming round for lunch?"

Shit, she'd completely forgotten about lunch at Ron's. Something about having a half dead wizard appear on her doorstep on Friday evening pushed it far down her list of priorities.

"I'm sorry Ron. Something came up and it completely slipped my mind."

“Oh, something came up, did it?” Ron shouted sarcastically. “Tell me, Hermione, what was so important that you stood up one of your oldest friends.”

Long gone were the days when Hermione let Ron belittle her, but he seemed to have forgotten that in his anger. Taking in a deep breath, Hermione let it out again before saying “That’s none of your business, Ron, and I won’t have you speak to me like that. It was wrong of me not to send you a message, and I’m sorry. But that does not excuse you taking that tone of voice with me. Now, if you’d like to have a sensible conversation like adults then fine, but if not then I’m going to have to ask you to leave because I’m very busy.”

Ron’s face had grown redder and redder as she spoke, but she stared him down. As it became clear she wouldn’t back down, Ron seemed to remember that he was dealing with 30-year-old Unspeakable Hermione Granger and not a 13-year-old with self-esteem issues. She could almost see the effort it took for him to remove his head from his arse as he lowered the volume of his voice back to normal speaking levels and said “Let’s talk.”

It wasn’t an apology, but it was the best she was likely to get. “Great. You wanted to talk about Topsey, yes? How about I pop over after work and we can discuss it?”

And because Ron didn’t seem capable of going more than a few seconds without being a dick, he said “I want you to look at her now. Topsey!”

With a crack, the little elf appeared next to Ron. She was certainly in a much better state than she had been when Hermione first met her, after years at the non-existent mercy of the Lestranges, but something clearly wasn’t right. With a growing sense of dread, Hermione realised the connection.

“Hello Topsey, how are you?” asked Hermione kindly.

Topsey looked like she might cry as she said to Hermione “Topsey is doing well, Miss. How is Miss doing?”

“I’m very well thank you Topsey.” To Ron, she added “So what did you first notice and when?”

“Well,” said Ron with a frown, “she went out on Thursday after lunch to get stuff for dinner from the market, but she didn’t come back until late Thursday evening. She missed making dinner, which she’d never done before.”

As Ron spoke, Topsey’s eyes filled with tears. Hermione held out her hand to the little elf and said “It’s ok, Topsey, you aren’t in any trouble. Can you tell me where you went on Thursday, please?”

A few tears leaked out of Topsey’s eyes as she said “Topsey is sorry, Sir and Miss, but Topsey is not knowing what to say.” As Topsey put her hand into Hermione’s outstretched one, Hermione gasped and glared up at Ron “You punished her?!”

“What? No, I didn’t!”

“Then explain that!” Hermione almost shrieked as she leapt to her feet and pointed at Topsey’s left hand, which was missing a finger.

“Fuck, I didn’t notice that. I swear, Hermione, I didn’t punish her or let her punish herself. We’ve been very clear about that! And anyway, she’s a free elf, she gets wages and everything. She shouldn’t need to punish herself.”

But Hermione was furious. Whether Ron had punished her or not, he hadn't noticed that she was missing a *finger* because he was more concerned about his dinner. Hermione had to force herself to calm down enough to deal with the problem at hand.

"Ron, I can't explain why, so you are going to have to trust me, but I need Topsey to come with me. I'll cover her wages for as long as she's with me so you aren't out of pocket, but it's extremely important that she stays with me for a while."

Looking like he was about to argue, Ron opened his mouth to speak but Hermione cut him off "Harry knows what this is about, but we can't discuss it yet. I've got a meeting later this morning and we will hopefully be in a position to explain things better after that, but for now I really need you to trust me, Ron."

Looking dumbfounded, Ron simply nodded and turned to Topsey to ask her if she was happy to stay with Hermione. Topsey agreed, and Hermione quickly said goodbye to Ron with further assurances that she would explain when she could. She then led the little elf into her office wondering how she could have been so stupid.

Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master.

Topsey had belonged to the Lestranges. Wizarding law around the purchasing of estates, along with any resident House Elves, was complicated, but Ron had freed Topsey meaning she technically had no master. If Rodolphus had cornered her, Hermione wondered, would her conditioning kick back in? With no master's commands to override Rodolphus, would she have done what he told her to out of habit? The magical compulsion wouldn't have been there, since Topsey was a free elf, so would that have been enough to make it "willingly given?" Hermione wasn't sure, but she thought it might be.

She apologised again to Topsey, but the little elf didn't seem to mind, so Hermione asked Luna to stay with her until she returned from her meeting. Luna happily complied, taking Topsey by the hand and talking to her about her father's latest article on the feeding habits of nargles.

Hermione could feel her anger building at the hostile stares she and Draco received as they walked through the atrium of the Ministry. No wonder he, Pansy and Theo had hidden themselves away. A few seconds of this and she was ready to start throwing hexes; she couldn't imagine how they must feel after more than a decade. As they entered the lift to take them up to Kingsley's office, she threw withering glares at the idiots who pointedly got out of the lift to wait for the next one. She thought she might combust with rage, but as she looked sideways and saw Draco's body language, she noticed that he seemed to have withdrawn into himself. That wouldn't do at all. Partly to distract him, and partly because she thought it best to give him some prior warning, she nudged his ribs and said "Just a head's up, our meeting's with Kingsley."

Draco stared at her for a moment, his face blank with shock, before asking "Shacklebolt?" Hermione rolled her eyes at him, and said "Yes, of course."

He didn't seem to know what to do with that information, as he said "But, I thought we were meeting with the Head of the Department of Mysteries?" Hermione smiled at him, slightly surprised he hadn't caught on yet, and said "Well, yes, but I thought I should give you a heads up about Kingsley."

He didn't have a chance to say more because the lift shuddered to a stop at Kingsley's floor. Hermione led Draco along the corridor and, simply because she thought it might annoy the people staring at them, she decided to take Draco's arm. He looked slightly surprised at that, but was too much of a gentleman to do anything that might embarrass her like pull away.

Hermione knocked on the door once they reached Kingsley's office, and she heard the deep rumble of his voice say "Come in." She gave Draco an encouraging nod, as he was looking a bit shaken, and pushed open the door.

"Minister!" she exclaimed once the door was shut. The man in question smiled widely at her as he stood to greet them. "Ah, Hermione, it's good to see you." He walked around his desk to give her a quick hug, before turning to Draco with a smile "And young Mister Malfoy, it's a pleasure." Hermione knew Kingsley was being sincere; he was one of the only senior members of the Ministry who agreed with her regarding Draco's treatment after the war, and he had helped with her unsuccessful attempt to keep Draco out of Azkaban.

Draco looked blindsided, but for the second time in less than five minutes she saw him fall back on his upbringing, offering a hand to Kingsley and saying "Minister Shacklebolt, the pleasure is all mine."

Kingsley chuckled, and Hermione could see a look of mischief on the face she knew so well. He clasped Draco's hand in both of his and said "I take it from your expression that Miss Granger here didn't warn you that you would be meeting with me this morning."

"Not until about a minute ago, Sir, but it's a pleasant surprise."

Kingsley chuckled again and gestured to the chairs in front of his desk "Please sit down, both of you. We might as well get started." Draco sat in the offered chair, but looked around with a slightly confused expression on his face.

"Is there a problem, Mister Malfoy?" asked Kingsley, still smiling at the younger wizard.

"No, Sir, I just thought we were expecting someone else."

Hermione cut in "He was expecting to meet with the Head of the Department of Mysteries this morning, Minister."

Kingsley gave her a conspiratorial look as he said "Very well. As you know, Mister Malfoy, the identity of the Head of the Department of Mysteries is a closely guarded secret, and for good reason. Only Unspeakables, the other heads of departments and a very few select others know their identity. And the Minister for Magic, of course. Those who know have all taken a vow of secrecy."

Malfoy paled at that, and Kingsley quickly went on "Not an unbreakable vow – we are aware that there may be extenuating circumstances which necessitate revealing their identity. However, once someone has taken the vow, if they do choose to reveal their identity, the Head will know."

"How will they know, sir?"

"Nothing sinister, there's a charmed list and the disclosing party's name would appear on there. The Head will then follow up with them to understand the circumstances and who their identity was disclosed to."

Hermione was getting impatient now; she wanted this part of the meeting to be over. “So, Draco, if you want to work on this, you will need to take the vow. Are you comfortable with that?”

He appeared to be thinking it over for a moment before nodding. Hermione jumped straight into action and performed the necessary spell. Once it was done, Draco looked expectantly at Kingsley.

Kingsley looked greatly amused as he said to Draco “Mister Malfoy, I’m pleased to introduce you to the Head of the Department of Mysteries – Miss Hermione Granger.”

Hermione couldn’t help the smirk that crept across her face as Draco turned to look at her with equal parts surprise and annoyance.

“What?” she asked him, innocently, “It’s not like I could’ve told you. Even Ginny doesn’t know for sure, although I think she probably suspects.”

Draco just shook his head at her, although he was starting to look amused now that the shock was wearing off.

“Well, while I don’t begrudge you having a little fun with that reveal, Miss Granger, we should discuss the matter at hand.”

Hermione then proceeded to give Kingsley a detailed overview of the Lestrangle matter, and updated Draco about her suspicions that Rodolphus had managed to get the second part of the ritual from Topsey.

“So, if I’m right, that means that all he needs now is blood from an enemy. I’ve started a list of the people I think are at risk, but I’d value your help in creating a shortlist of those we think are most likely to be targeted, Draco.”

He nodded his willingness to help, and Kingsley said “Ok I think that will be all for now. I approve the transfer of this matter to you, Miss Granger; please feel free to utilise your team in the DMLE as you see fit. I will send a note to Garrick now informing him. Please keep me updated, Hermione, and it’s good to have you on board Mister Malfoy.”

Hermione walked with Draco down to the Department of Mysteries where she instructed Adrian to draw up the necessary paperwork to bring him onboard as a consultant. Once she had dismissed Adrian, she turned to Draco and said “I imagine you have some questions?”

He looked incredulously at her, before saying “Just a few, Granger. How long have you been Head of the Department of Mysteries?”

“Almost two years now.”

“And how is it that you have your own team in the DMLE?”

That one was a bit harder to explain, but she tried “It’s a relatively new development. I’ve studied dark magic ever since I started work as an Unspeakable, and I was frustrated by the huge gap between research and application. As I think you’re aware, I assisted on a few decontamination projects after the war, because the Aurors and Curse Breakers just weren’t equipped to deal with the sheer magnitude of dark magic and the various ways it interplayed and overlapped in the old pure blood estates. Not that I’m implying all pure blood estates are imbued with dark magic of course, but a lot of the old customs, for example blood wards, would nowadays be considered dark

magic. Anyway, it seemed ridiculous to me that, outside of very specific circumstances, the work in the Department of Mysteries was all theoretical research and was rarely applied. I wanted to change that so, when I became Head of the Department, I petitioned Kingsley, and he agreed. Garrick Forder, Head of the DMLE, hates it and hates me as a result.” She smirked at that “But that’s ok because I loathe him and it’s fun to see him throw his little hissy fits when there’s nothing he can do about it.”

“But what is it exactly that you do?”

“Well, I run the department so that takes up a fair chunk of my time now, but I’m still heavily involved in researching dark magic. That covers everything from disassembling dark objects to see how they work to studying curses to figure out how to cure them. Then there’s the practical element. When I need to, I can call upon a small squad of highly trained Aurors to assist on projects that are too niche for the DMLE to handle on its own, so we have a practical training session once a month. Muggles would probably explain it by saying that the DMLE is the regular army and I run the SAS, but I don’t suppose that really means anything to you.”

He just shook his head, but said “I don’t understand the reference but I think I understand what you’re trying to say. Taking a hypothetical example, if it was a standard dark witch or wizard with nothing remarkable about them then the DMLE would handle it on its own. If, for example, they had been using unknown dark magic, or they layered their dark magic with, for instance runes or blood magic, your team would take over?”

“In a nutshell, yes.” Hermione smiled at him, pleased that he had understood so quickly. She had started to worry that he wasn’t as clever as she remembered from school, since he didn’t pick up on her being the Head of the Department of Mysteries despite the hints she dropped, but she was willing to put that down to him not expecting his former classmate to be a Department Head. It was usually a position reserved for much older people.

“As I mentioned the other night,” Hermione continued “we get a certain amount of leniency in this department due to the nature of our work. I still don’t condone the use of Unforgivables in most situations but, taking the example of my research for a treatment for the Cruciatus Curse, sometimes we need to do unpleasant things to make needed progress.”

“And do you have appropriate checks in place? I know you’re Hermione Granger, Golden Girl, etc., but it sounds like you’ve been given pretty much free reign. Forgive me, but I’m distrustful of unchecked power.”

She smiled at him “I’m glad you asked! I have to present detailed monthly reports to Kingsley setting out everything we’ve done in the department and highlighting anything out of the ordinary. It’s not a perfect system, since Kingsley’s my friend as well as my boss, but it’s worked so far. There’s also a process whereby the three most senior individuals in government, i.e. Kingsley, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and myself have to subject each other to random spot checks at least once a quarter. I also have to submit to legilimency if any questions or suspicions are raised against me. Well, any which seem to have merit, anyway. Again, not a perfect system because if the three of us were corrupt we could easily work together, but it’s the best system they could come up with without too much risk of compromising sensitive information. If you have any thoughts about how we could improve the systems, though, I’d be very pleased to hear them.”

Draco looked surprised at that, and it hurt her heart that he found it unusual for someone to value his opinion. Before she could say anything else, there was a frantic knocking on her office door

before it was slammed open, and Hermione saw Adrian being knocked aside by the irate wizard striding into her office. Garrick Forder cut an imposing figure; he stood at almost 6 ft 4 and had the broad build usually associated with Beaters. He technically didn't have clearance to enter the Department of Mysteries without an appointment or an escort, but most people at the Ministry were terrified of him so he usually got his own way. He was a bully and a textbook misogynist who couldn't stand that Hermione, a much younger witch, was more senior than him.

"Granger, what the fuck are you doing taking over the LeStrange matter?"

Hermione gave him a saccharine smile before replying "Garrick, a pleasure to see you as always."

"Cut the shit, Granger, this is a classic DMLE matter. Where do you get off thinking you can take over my investigation?"

"Oh, that's interesting Garrick, were you investigating then? I was under the impression that you didn't think this was worth the DMLE's time?"

His face turned an impressive shade of red as he stared down at her "Potter has no business discussing Auror matters with you."

"On the contrary, Harry has every reason to discuss these matters with me, particularly when I brought it to his attention in the first place and when his Head of Department decided it wasn't worth his time." She said, calmly meeting his eyes and refusing to back down.

Garrick took a moment to look around the room, and seemed to spot Draco for the first time. He narrowed his eyes at him and then turned back to Hermione with a thunderous expression on his face.

"So, you're consorting with Death Eaters now?"

"A former Death Eater, who served his time and is now a free man whose opinion I value greatly? Yes, Garrick, I am."

Garrick sneered at her, then turned to Draco and said "Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater. You watch it or you'll find yourself back in Azkaban before you can say 'scum'."

Hermione had had enough. She stood up and could feel her hair crackling with magic as she said "Get out. Draco is here at my invitation and I won't stand for you threatening him. Go and throw your little tantrum somewhere else. The decision has been made, Kingsley has signed off, that's the end of it."

He leaned forward, seemingly unwilling to let her have the last word, and said "Kingsley might think the sun shines out your arse, but I know better *girl*. You just wait."

At that, Draco stood up. Hermione didn't much fancy seeing what would happen if Draco decided to weigh in on her behalf, so, before either wizard could do or say anything, she walked out from behind her desk and strode over to the door. Holding it open for Garrick, she said "Great, get back to me when you've thought of a good threat. I'll wait."

Glowering at her and Draco in turn, Garrick swept out of the room in a move reminiscent of Professor Snape, his Auror robes sweeping behind him.

“He seems nice.” Draco deadpanned, and she laughed as the full absurdity of the situation hit her. Draco chuckled, and she was pleased to see him smile. She had been worried that Garrick’s threats would have put him off.

As if on cue, once she had regained control of herself, he said “Look, Granger, I know you said it doesn’t matter but I need to say it again: if working with me is going to damage your credibility, I will understand if you want to back out.”

She shut the door of her office before turning to walk towards him. She stopped about a foot away, but still needed to crane her neck slightly to meet his eye. “Draco, I am very pleased that you’ve agreed to work with me on this. It makes complete sense to have you consult and I’ll not let any small-minded idiots change my mind. I hope you ignore them too. As far as I’m concerned, if us working together pisses off people like Forder then I’ll consider that an added bonus.”

She smiled at him, and he nodded. His eyes flickered down to her mouth, and she was suddenly very aware of her closed office door and how close they were standing. She licked her lips and she saw his eyes trace the movement, pupils dilating. She didn’t have a chance to do anything more than register his movements before he cleared his throat and stepped away from her. Scratching the back of his neck, he said “Thanks, Granger. I appreciate your faith in me and I look forward to working together.”

A List, a Firepit and a Murdered Pie

Draco

It still felt strange to Draco that he was working with Granger and consulting for the Ministry. It had been three weeks and, despite being frustrated that they hadn't made much progress, he found that he was enjoying himself. After the first couple of days, even the hostile mutterings and glances seemed to die down. He thought it probably had something to do with Granger insisting on him wearing Unspeakable robes to send a clear message about where he was working and who he was working with; even though most people didn't know she was the Head of the Department of Mysteries, Granger was still, well... Granger.

His first official consulting role was to help Granger with her list of Rodolphus' potential targets to obtain blood from an enemy. Someone like Bellatrix had a lot of enemies, so the potential list was long, but they managed to whittle it down to their top five most likely candidates.

1. Harry Potter
2. Molly Weasley
3. Narcissa Malfoy
4. Hermione Granger
5. Ron Weasley

They ranked them in order of who they thought most likely to be targeted. After much debate, they decided that Harry was the one Rodolphus was most likely to want for two main reasons: (1) it was his blood that had been used to revive the Dark Lord; and (2) he was the one who ultimately killed the Dark Lord. Molly Weasley was a close second, as she was the one who killed Bellatrix.

Narcissa's role in the downfall of the Dark Lord would, Draco was sure, be seen by Bellatrix as an unforgivable betrayal so she was next on the list. Granger and Weasley made the list for their well-publicised roles in the war.

After settling on the shortlist, their next task was to ensure the safety of everyone on the list. Narcissa was already out of the country, and Potter and Granger were both on high alert and working the case. That left the Weasleys who, in addition to potentially being significant enough enemies to be targeted, now lived in the old Lestrange Estate, adding insult to injury.

Draco had never had a high opinion of the Weasley family, although he thought he might be willing to adjust his opinion for the youngest Weasley (who wasn't really a Weasley anymore, anyway). But hearing about the fuss they kicked up when Granger and Potter suggested they relocate until the threat had passed did nothing to improve his opinion of them. The long and short of it was that they didn't want to move, with the Weasel insisting that he was an Auror and could protect his family. It took a lot of persuading (mostly from Potter) and arguing (mostly from Granger) to get them to agree to temporarily move to Grimmauld Place. Draco had questioned the wisdom of having three of their shortlisted people living under the same roof, but Potter had made the valid point that, as long as they were careful, Rodolphus would have no way of knowing they were all there.

Theo, who had recovered well from the curse, was nothing short of thrilled that Draco was working so closely with Granger and Potter. He seemed to have made it his life's mission to ensure they all became friends, much to Pansy's annoyance and Draco's amusement. Draco found that he was not

opposed to the idea. He could admit to himself that he already considered Granger a friend, and was surprised to find that he could tolerate the idea of being friendly with Potter, too.

Draco was slightly surprised, however, when on the Wednesday of his fourth week of consulting for the Department of Mysteries Granger turned to him before they left for the evening and said “So, I’ll see you tonight? You want us there at seven, right?”

Draco blinked at her and tried to work out what she was talking about. She stared at him with an expectant look which quickly turned to one of horror as she realised he had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

“You have no idea that Theo invited us over for dinner tonight, do you?” she asked, as a slight blush crept up her neck.

Draco tried to recover quickly, as he did in fact quite like the idea of Granger coming over for dinner, but he felt the need to clarify “When you say “Theo invited us”, who do you mean exactly?”

“Theo sent me an owl last night, and said he’d also invited Harry and Ginny. We don’t have to come though, I’m so sorry, I should’ve checked you were ok with it, I just assumed you knew!”

“Granger, it’s fine, you’re more than welcome to join us for dinner. It just took me slightly by surprise as Theo didn’t mention anything to me. Seven sounds great, though. I’ll see you then.”

“THEO” Draco shouted as he arrived in the travelling parlour. He heard a crash from the kitchen and the sound of Theo swearing, so Draco stormed out of the parlour and down the hall to find his ridiculous friend. He wasn’t upset that Theo had invited them round, Theo could do what he liked and Draco was quite pleased with the prospect of spending more time with Granger, but he was upset that he hadn’t been given any warning.

He had fully intended to make his displeasure known, but the sight that greeted him as he entered the room rendered him temporarily speechless. Their kitchen was a long room with a vaulted ceiling, finished with light, neutral tones. A long island ran down the one side, with an equally long wooden dining table running parallel. Three things surprised Draco upon entering the room. The first was the sight of the table straining under the weight of food from, at his conservative estimate, every restaurant in a twenty-mile radius. The second was the fact that every inch of the kitchen surfaces appeared to be covered in flour. The third was the sight of Theo standing next to the oven, holding an extremely burned looking pie and wearing an apron that said “*I am the secret ingredient*” across his chest, along with a look of utter devastation.

Before Draco had a chance to comment on any of those things, Theo said “I told Red that I’d make dessert and look at what’s happened!” He looked so genuinely upset that Draco couldn’t bring himself to suggest that perhaps he should have been warned about their dinner guests. Instead, he said “Theo, mate, I think we’ve got enough food. It won’t matter if there isn’t dessert.”

“But I said I’d make it!” wailed Theo, clearly beyond reason at this point “She said it would be nice, because it’s Granger’s favourite, and she bought me this apron for it, too!”

“Wait, when did you see Ginny?”

Theo gave him a cutting look and said “I do have a life outside of you and Parkinson, you know.”

Draco smirked and said “I didn’t, but go on.”

Theo huffed, but turned to take the burnt pie to the sink. “Well, obviously I owed her and Potter after we met at Granger’s” Draco didn’t think there was anything obvious about that, but decided it was best not to comment “and so last week Red and I went out for lunch. She was going shopping for something for her father in muggle London, and I tagged along. I got a bunch of stuff – muggles are amazing – and we decided we’d all have dinner.”

“And decided not to tell me?”

“Yep!” beamed Theo, clearly pleased that Draco had caught on. “We talked it through and thought that Pans would find an excuse not to be here if she knew about it, and of course you’d get your wand in a twist thinking about Granger coming round, so we decided it would be best all around for it to be a surprise. Of course, Granger and Potter both think you and Pans know, so that might be a bit awkward, but other than that I think it’s all working out rather well. Or it was, until I murdered the pie.” His face fell again as he looked forlornly at the ruined mess in the sink.

He’d known Theo for too long to be particularly surprised by his friend’s logic, so Draco didn’t bother to question him any further. Sighing, he asked “The pie really means a lot to you?”

Theo looked at him with pleading eyes and nodded, which was how Draco found himself attempting to bake an apple pie for the first time in his life.

Hermione

Hermione was flustered. She’d been thrilled when Theo had invited her round for dinner, but at the time she’d assumed that Draco had been in on the plan. Finding out that he, in fact, had no idea about it had unsettled her and, where she had previously been looking forward to the evening, she now felt quite nervous. She even had to ask Ginny to floo over to help her decide what to wear. Ginny and Harry came over together, so once Hermione had dressed in a simple but flattering dark green jumper dress they all apparated to the spot Theo had indicated together.

Hermione looked around as they arrived in the small clearing. She couldn’t see the house, but that was expected. Theo had explained in his letter about their wards, and said that he would apparate out to meet them. She didn’t have time to take in more than the small copse of trees and rolling fields around her before Theo appeared next to them with a wide grin on his face.

“Friends!” he shouted, with his arms spread wide. “Welcome, welcome, welcome! So sorry about the convoluted arrival protocol. I’ll apparate you all in separately, won’t take a moment.” And without another word he offered his arm to Ginny, who took it with a grin as they disappeared with a crack.

Hermione turned to Harry and said “Are you ready for this?”

Harry looked slightly concerned as he said “As I’ll ever be. Don’t take this the wrong way, but this is weird.”

Hermione gave him a smile and said “I know it is, but I genuinely like Draco and Theo and I think it'll be good to spend some more time together outside of work.”

Harry nodded his agreement just as Theo arrived. He apparated Hermione next, and landed them in the travelling parlour. Ginny was standing to the side exchanging very strained pleasantries with Pansy. Theo grinned at Hermione and said “Don't worry, Pans has promised to be on her best behaviour tonight so she won't bite.” Without another word, Theo vanished, presumably to get Harry.

Stepping over to Ginny and Pansy, Hermione greeted the dark haired witch with a smile “Hi Pansy, lovely to see you.” Pansy nodded back without smiling and said “Granger.” Merlin, Hermione didn't know how much patience she had left for the surly witch.

She was saved having to think of anything else to say by the arrival of Theo and Harry. Theo grinned around at all of them and said “Shall we go eat?”

He led them out of the parlour and down the hall, pausing at the kitchen and peering around the door. “Draco, darling, are you nearly done in there?”

Hermione heard Draco say in a disgruntled voice “Theo, for Merlin's sake, when I said I'd help you I didn't realise you'd leave me to do the whole bloody thing. You know I don't know anymore about this than you do. This had bloody well better be Granger's favourite or I swear to Salazar...”

“Funny you should mention Granger” interrupted Theo with a shit eating grin on his face, “look who just turned up!” and he dramatically stepped aside, clearly intending for Hermione to pass him into the room. At a loss for what to do, she stepped inside and paused at the scene in front of her.

Draco was standing at the kitchen island with his shirt sleeves rolled up, wearing oven gloves and holding what was clearly a freshly baked pie. He looked extremely embarrassed as he put the pie on the counter and removed the oven gloves before dusting off his hands and nodding at them each in turn.

“Potter, Potter, Granger. Sorry about Theo, we don't have company often and he's a little over excited.”

Waving Draco off, Theo ushered them back out of the kitchen, his apparent goal of embarrassing Draco accomplished. While Hermione tried not to fixate on the scene of domestic bliss she had just walked in on, Theo led them down the long hallway and into a surprisingly modern dining room. One wall was comprised entirely of floor to ceiling windows which looked out over extensive grounds, and the room had a similar colour scheme to the kitchen – light and neutral colours. The room felt airy and bright, and not at all something Hermione would have expected to find in an old manor house.

Hermione turned to Pansy and asked “Did you decorate after you moved in, or was it already like it?”

Pansy looked at her for a moment, and Hermione started to think she wasn't going to answer, before she took a breath and said “I renovated the place top to bottom, Granger. We wanted the space and acreage of a large estate but none of us wanted to live in a replica of the places we grew up. We gutted it and started from scratch.”

Hermione was stunned that Pansy had volunteered more than a one-word answer. It was more than she had hoped for, so she ran with it “Well, it’s beautiful, you’ve clearly got excellent taste.” Pansy grimaced at that, but there didn’t seem to be too much heat behind it so Hermione decided to take it as a win.

Dinner passed pleasantly enough. Hermione and Theo mostly discussed Doctor Who and the practicalities involved in getting muggle technology installed in a wizarding estate. Theo was hinting heavily that he would be coming round to Hermione’s cottage to carry on watching it unless something was arranged soon. Harry, Ginny and Draco spent most of the meal discussing Quidditch, and seemed to be getting along well. Pansy stayed mostly silent, joining in occasionally with the conversations where she had something to add, but it wasn’t the surly silence of last time they met. Hermione got the impression she was simply a reserved person and that it would take time to get to know her.

After dinner, Theo suggested that they all go outside to have a drink around the fire pit. Hermione was keen for the evening to continue so she readily agreed. They took up their places around the fire, and Hermione couldn’t quite admit to herself that she was disappointed not to be seated next to Draco. Over the past few weeks of working together she had developed an undeniable attraction to the wizard. He was indisputably handsome, but it was more than that for Hermione. He was thoughtful, considerate, funny and highly intelligent. It was an almost irresistible combination for her, and she had been finding more and more excuses to be around him. She knew she needed to be careful though; their friendship was still very new and she didn’t want to do anything to make him uncomfortable. She was also kind of his boss, so she tried to maintain appropriate boundaries.

She could admit to herself as she stared at him across the fire pit, watching the light dance over his face and breathing in the calm of the warm spring evening, that she would like to know him better. The past few weeks had been a solid start, but she wanted more.

As they all sipped their firewhiskey, they told stories from their days at Hogwarts. At first, Hermione had been concerned that the topic might have caused old tensions to rise, but on the contrary, it seemed to soothe over any last hesitations they had. Ginny and Theo had particular fun trying to one-up each other with outlandish stories of pranks pulled on Filch, half of which Hermione was sure couldn’t possibly be true (for example, she was almost certain she would have heard about it had Marcus Flint actually enchanted the suits of armour in the dungeons to smack Filch on the bum whenever he walked past).

They eventually moved onto stories from adulthood, and by that point they had all consumed quite a lot of firewhiskey. Adding the firewhiskey to the wine she’d enjoyed at dinner, Hermione was feeling very warm and tipsy. She commented that the fire and firewhiskey reminded her of the time they burned Walburga Black’s portrait, and she, Harry and Ginny proceeded to tell the story. Draco was particularly thrilled by the retelling, as he had heard awful things about Walburga growing up and could appreciate the particular kind of torment they inflicted on her. Theo asked how they managed to play muggle music outside, and none of the Slytherins could believe that a mobile phone could do it until Hermione took hers out to show them.

Theo, who was apparently even more exuberant when slightly intoxicated, instigated an impromptu dance party around the firepit, which Ginny and, much to Hermione’s surprise, Harry, happily joined in with. Hermione was content to watch her friends have fun; she felt a little too wobbly to risk dancing. She very much hoped someone would have a sober up potion that she could take before she had to apparate home.

She felt rather than heard Draco come up beside her.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” he asked.

She shook her head and said “No, please do!”

He sat down next to her, and she was pleased that he sat close enough to her on the outdoor sofa that their legs were pressed against each other. There was enough space that he didn’t strictly need to do that, which sent a small thrill of excitement through her.

“Ok Granger, I give up.”

She looked at him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been trying to work out this blasted thing but I’m going to have to admit defeat – please can you teach me how to use the mobile?”

Hermione burst out laughing. He had evidently summoned his phone from the house and was holding it out to her with a solemn look on his face. She nudged his shoulder with hers and asked in a teasing voice “What’s this top-secret knowledge worth to you, Malfoy?”

“What is it that you want, Granger?”

She turned her face to look at him, and saw that he had done the same thing. Their faces were only a few inches apart, and she could see the firelight dancing in his eyes. She thought in that moment that he might be the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She couldn’t stop her eyes from flicking down to his mouth, and she let herself wonder what it would feel like to kiss him. Meeting his eyes again, she saw that he was still staring at her with the same intense expression. Suddenly overwhelmed, she nudged his shoulder again and said “I’d settle for some sober up potion before I have to apparate home.”

He smiled at her, and there was a strange expression in his eyes as he said “I think I can manage that, Granger. Now, come on, tell me all your secrets.”

He held out the phone to her and she took it from him, shivering as their hands touched. He clearly mistook the cause of her shiver, because he summoned a blanket from the house and tucked it around her shoulders. In a surge of firewhiskey induced boldness, Hermione insisted that the blanket was large enough for two and arranged things so that it was surrounding both of them. She then proceeded to demonstrate the proper use of a mobile phone for him.

Once he was confident with how to use the phone’s basic functions, they lapsed into a comfortable silence and watched their friends. Theo and Ginny were still dancing, but Harry had sat down to chat with Pansy. Hermione couldn’t hear what they were saying, but their body language looked friendly enough. Hermione sighed contentedly and snuggled herself into Draco’s side. He seemed to hesitate for just a moment, before putting his arm around her shoulders. He smelled clean and citrusy mixed with the smell of firewhiskey and wood smoke. Hermione breathed him in and in that moment couldn’t think of anywhere she would rather be.

Hermione supposed she must have drifted off to sleep at some point, because she woke with a start. She looked up at Draco, who was smiling at her and gave him a bright smile in return. She was abruptly blinded by a flash, as Ginny used the phone Hermione had bought her to take a picture of the two of them.

“Ow, what the hell, Gin! You’ve blinded us!”

“What did she do?” asked Draco, sounding slightly alarmed and rubbing his eyes.

“She took a picture of us but she had the flash on.”

“Sorry,” sang Ginny, not sounding sorry at all “but I was coming over here to ask you something and you just looked so cute all snuggled up together so I had to take a picture!”

Hermione grumbled at their quiet moment being interrupted, but said “What were you going to ask?”

“Well, ask was perhaps the wrong word, but I wanted to inform you that I have invited Theo and the rest of the snakes to our weekly drinks. We’re starting this week, so they can join us for muggle night!”

Draco stirred uncomfortably next to her, and Hermione noticed Harry walking up behind Ginny looking concerned.

“I sense some hesitation” said Ginny, frowning, “spill it, boys. What’s up?”

Draco spoke first “I’m just not sure it’s a good idea. I can’t imagine your friends will be thrilled to see us.”

Harry opened his mouth, presumably to voice his concerns, but Theo beat him to it “House huddles! Let’s discuss.”

Theo grabbed Draco by the hand and pulled him over to where Pansy was sitting. Ginny sat down next to Hermione, and Harry stood in front of them.

“What’s up Harry?” Asked Hermione with a slight frown.

“I think it’s a lovely idea, Gin, I really do. But have you thought about how Ron’s going to take this?”

Ginny scoffed “I thought about it for exactly as long as it took me to realise that I don’t think we should allow our social lives to be dictated by my immature prat of a brother. So about two seconds in total.”

Harry looked uneasy and said “I know it would be immature of him, but you know he’s going to kick off.”

“I know, and he can either decide to grow up and get over it or he can choose not to come. It’s completely up to him. I don’t want to let him make this decision for us.”

Hermione nodded her agreement “Harry, it’s been over a decade. If he had a legitimate reason for having a problem with this then I’d be more inclined to consider his feelings, but he really doesn’t beyond old school grudges. Besides, we don’t even know he’ll have a problem with it. We’re just speculating at this point.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at her and she snorted. “Ok, yes, he’ll definitely have a problem with it. But I agree with Ginny, his problem is not our problem.”

“Ok, I hope you’re ready for an epic fit.”

Ginny called over to Theo “Oi, Theo, the Gryffindor huddle has been resolved in our favour, how are you getting on with the snakes?”

Theo grinned over at her “All sorted, Gin. We’ll be there. So, what will we be doing?”

Hermione smiled over at the Slytherins and asked “Have any of you heard of bowling?”

Snakes in the Lion's Den

Chapter Notes

Artwork by the incredibly talented Talita Asami

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

Draco

Draco was stressed. He couldn't see any way in which this 'bowling' thing wouldn't be a disaster. Not because of the bowling itself, although he struggled to see how throwing a ball at some sticks counted as fun, but because he was certain his, Theo and Pansy's presence would be contentious at best. Longbottom would be there, for Merlin's sake; he had personally tortured the man for years. And that wasn't even getting started on the Weasel. Unlike the others, Draco couldn't stand Weasley and saw no conceivable way in which that was likely to change. He was also sure the feeling was mutual. While Draco couldn't give a shrivelfig about how Weasley felt about him, he imagined his opinion would likely hold some sway over the larger group. No, all in all, Draco was sure this was a bad idea.

In spite of his reservations, he had agreed. He could tell that it meant a lot to both Theo and Granger, so how could he refuse? He'd realised, though, that he needed to be careful. Unless he was seriously misreading the situation (which, given his track record of questionable judgement, he wasn't ruling out) there'd been a charged atmosphere between himself and Granger on Wednesday night. It was all well and good when his attraction (which he would now admit to, if only to himself) was one sided, but he was starting to think that Granger might be attracted to him, too. However much he might want her, he couldn't allow anything to happen between them. It was for her own good, he told himself, as the stubborn witch couldn't be trusted to think of her own best interests once she set her mind on something. Whatever she said about not caring what others thought of her, he simply couldn't allow her to tarnish her reputation by being with him. Friendship was one thing and, since the Potters seemed on board with that plan, she wouldn't take any reputational fallout from that alone, but anything more was out of the question.

Theo, it turned out, had not only bought items for himself in his foray into the muggle world with Ginny, but had taken it upon himself to buy muggle clothing for Draco and Pansy, too. Both tried to insist that they owned clothes that would pass in the muggle world, but Theo informed them that, according to Ginny, anything they owned was likely to be too formal. Draco apparated home from work on Friday evening and was immediately accosted by Theo, who led him into his bedroom and instructed him to change into the clothes that, to Draco's amusement, Theo had laid out on his bed as though he were a child. Draco found the jeans that Theo had bought him to be extremely uncomfortable, but he did enjoy the soft fabric of the jumper. Thankfully, he was allowed to wear his own shirt and shoes, although Theo did pick those out for him, too.

They apparated to the closest approved point to their destination and, ignoring Theo's insistence that he knew the way, Draco used discreet point me spells to locate the bowling alley. The three of them paused outside the building, which sported a bright, tacky neon sign proclaiming the name of the establishment to be '*Striking Out*'. Draco looked at his two friends. Theo looked excited, and

Pansy uneasy. While Draco wanted the evening to be a success, he was particularly concerned for them. He knew Theo would be crushed if it didn't go well, and he suspected they would have trouble ever persuading Pansy to try something new again. It was too late to back out now though and, anyway, he was tired of letting fear dictate his actions.

Hermione

Hermione knew that blood supremacy was bad. She had fought in a war over it and everything. But, seeing Draco, Theo and Pansy walk into the bowling alley, there was a small part of her that thought she could understand the point the supremacists had been trying to make. All three of them had hit the genetic jackpot. Hermione had of course already realised that they were extremely good-looking, but seeing the three of them standing there in such an ordinary place highlighted their beauty even further.

Pansy was dressed in black on black, with high waisted jeans, a rollneck jumper and black heeled boots. Her short, dark-as-night hair gleamed as she turned her head from side to side taking in the room, and her lips were painted a deep red. To Hermione's surprise, she looked more assessing than unhappy, so perhaps she would be open minded about the experience.

Theo was dressed in a light brown zip up jacket under which she could see the collar of a white t-shirt, with dark blue jeans and spotless white trainers. His dark brown curls were as unruly as ever, and his blue eyes were lit up in a wide grin which emphasised his high cheekbones. He looked around excitedly, and Hermione saw that he was almost vibrating with energy.

And then there was Draco. Hermione could have sworn she stopped breathing and, as she looked at him, she felt her heartbeat kick into overdrive. He was dressed simply, in black slim-fitting jeans and a grey cable knit jumper over a white shirt, covered by a short, black trench coat. His blonde hair was slightly longer than it had been when he first visited Hermione's home a few weeks ago, and a few strands now fell forwards onto his face. As his grey eyes landed on Hermione, she felt as though a current of electricity ran through her, rooting her to the spot as she stood there staring at him like an idiot. As his gaze met hers he smiled a small but genuine smile which caused his eyes to twinkle in the gaudy lights of the room. It vanished quickly, however, as his eyes travelled past her and to the crowd of witches and wizards gathered there.

Hermione tensed slightly, but put her personal worries aside as she beamed at the three of them and gestured for them to come over. Ginny had been all for surprising everyone with the presence of the Slytherins, but Hermione and Harry quickly put an end to that idea. While Ginny might have found it amusing to see everyone's reactions, neither Hermione nor Harry thought it would be fair on anyone involved. Once Hermione had pointed out how it might be upsetting for Theo, Draco and Pansy to see everyone's initial reactions she agreed to give advanced warning. That turned out to be for the best; Ron had reacted exactly as everyone predicted he would, throwing a fit to rival his sixth-year realisation that Hermione had kissed Victor Krum, and refused to attend.

Ron aside, most of their usual group were enthusiastic about the idea. It had been long enough since school and the war for any lingering animosity to have faded, and the prevailing feeling seemed to be one of curiosity. As the three Slytherins made their way over, Hermione was relieved to see Charlie Weasley and Neville grin and wave, Luna smile serenely and Angelina shout out good naturedly "Look who it is!"

Predictably, Theo was the first to speak as he shouted “Make way, make way, snakes entering the lion’s den!”

Ginny stepped forward, and she and Theo grinned at each other before removing their jackets. Underneath, they were each wearing a muggle t shirt with ‘*I’m with stupid*’ written across the chest. As though they had rehearsed the move, they turned at the same time towards Harry, who let out a put-upon sigh and took off his jacket. His t shirt read ‘*I’m stupid*’. Ginny and Theo cackled at their joke and high fived each other.

Most of the gathered group of witches and wizards looked confused, but none more so than Dean Thomas who quickly asked “Wait, what? You guys are together?” turning to Harry, he said “Mate, that’s a weird way of telling us.”

“What?” asked Harry, frowning at Dean.

Hermione laughed as she explained to Harry “It’s usually muggle couples who wear t shirts like that, I would have thought you’d have known that, Harry! Dean’s wondering if you three have something to share with the group!”

She laughed again at the look of dawning horror on Harry’s face, and the look of mischief that crossed Theo’s. With a cry of “Darling!” he crossed the space between himself and Harry and gave the mortified wizard a smacking kiss on the cheek. Harry laughed and gave a half-hearted attempt to push Theo away from him as Ginny laughed behind them.

“For Merlin’s sake, get off Theo!” he said, between laughs as Theo stood back and beamed at him.

Harry turned to Draco and asked “Is he always like this?”

Draco nodded solemnly and said “I’m afraid so, Potter, you’ll have to get used to it; if you’re friends with Theo, you will get kissed, hugged and punched a lot.”

Everyone laughed at that, and then broke off into smaller groups. Hermione made her way over to Draco and decided to go for her usual way of greeting her friends and pulled him into a hug.

“Hi!” she said, smiling up at him “I’m so glad you came!”

He gave her a small smile as he said “Hi, yourself, Granger.”

They stared at each other for a moment, before Draco cleared his throat and looked sideways at Pansy, who was still standing next to him.

“Oh, hi Pansy!” said Hermione, her voice slightly higher than usual. Without looking at her, Pansy lifted a careless hand in greeting and said “Granger” in a distracted sort of way. She was gazing intently at something to Hermione’s right, but all Hermione could see when she looked was Oliver Wood and Charlie speculating with Neville about the rules of bowling.

Deciding she didn’t want to know what had so interested the usually aloof witch, Hermione turned back to Draco. Before she had a chance to say anything, however, George Weasley came over and clapped Draco on the back saying “Alright, mate. Ready to lose to Gryffindors at another sport?”

Draco scoffed at that but smiled as he said “We’ll see, Weasley.”

Hermione decided then that everyone had had enough time to catch up. Standing on a chair, she quickly explained the rules of the game. The particular alley she had booked had seven lanes, so she suggested they should sort themselves into teams of two. As established couples broke off into pairs, Hermione caught Draco's eye and raised an eyebrow at him. He nodded, and they grinned at each other.

Just then, Theo bounded over and said with mock indignation "Can you believe it, Red chose to play with her husband over me! I'll just have to play with Red the elder. He's better looking, anyway." And at that, he loped off and struck up a conversation with Charlie, clearly intending to team up with him.

Hermione called to the room "Right, everyone, five minutes to grab drinks and sort your shoes before the tournament begins!" Hermione had decided it would be easier to simply instruct everyone to transfigure their own shoes into ones suitable for bowling since she didn't want to deal with the inevitable calamity that would have ensued if they had attempted to get 14 witches and wizards fitted into muggle shoes. And that's not to mention the tantrums she was sure would have been thrown by at least a few of them if they realised they were expected to wear shoes that many, many others had worn before them. When she suggested tonight's activity, Hermione had debated long and hard whether to book the place out or not. Part of the fun of muggle night was for the witches and wizards who knew little about muggles to interact with them; Hermione hoped that in doing so they would realise that muggles and wizards really weren't all that different. She had, however, decided that for this particular activity it would be better if there were fewer muggles around. Aside from Quidditch, Wizards were not known for their physical abilities, and Hermione thought it would be better to have the option of casting protective spells in case of emergencies without unduly risking the Statute of Secrecy.

Hermione made her way over to the bar and found herself standing next to a frowning Pansy. To her astonishment, Pansy turned to her and voluntarily started a conversation. "Granger, you need to be honest with me. Have I lost my mind, or is Longbottom hot?"

Hermione couldn't help the laugh that burst from her. Pansy looked genuinely perplexed, as though questioning everything she knew. Hermione decided to put her out of her misery quickly and said, "You haven't lost your mind Pansy, Neville is definitely hot. The general consensus is that it happened some time in seventh year." Nodding, Pansy asked "And is he seeing anyone?"

Unable to believe that she was having this conversation, Hermione confirmed that, as far as she was aware, Neville was single. Pansy nodded at that, patted Hermione on the shoulder and said "Thanks, Granger." She then made a beeline for Neville, who looked surprised but pleased when Pansy suggested they should team up.

Shaking her head, Hermione turned back to the bar to order but found that Draco had already got her a drink. He had a faintly appalled look on his face when he said "The wine selection here is abysmal, and my understanding is that muggles don't have firewhiskey or butterbeer so I got you this... beer."

She smiled and thanked him, taking a sip of her drink as they walked over to claim a lane. They ended up between Pansy and Neville on one side and Theo and Charlie on the other. Hermione couldn't help smirking slightly to herself as she watched Neville attempt to show Pansy how to bowl; to her certain knowledge, Neville had no idea how to bowl. She was distracted for a moment watching him perform a sort of half squat with both hands around the bowling ball before he

launched it diagonally into the gutter. Hermione chuckled to herself – Neville may have grown into an extremely handsome man, but his physical coordination was still next to non-existent.

Hermione heard a shout to her other side and turned to see that Theo, for no discernible reason, had jammed his thumb in one of the bowling ball holes. It had evidently gotten stuck, because he was standing next to the ball rack holding his hand out in a ‘thumbs down’ sort of position with a bowling ball hanging off of his thumb. He just about had time to shoot a slightly panicked look at Draco before the ball fell off of his thumb, only to be caught by Charlie before it hit the ground. Theo recovered quickly from the shock, and made a comment to Charlie about his dragon trainer’s reflexes which made Charlie laugh. Hermione quickly scanned the room to ensure no one else was making a fool of themselves, before turning to Draco.

“Ready to crush these idiots?”

He grinned at her and said “Lead the way, Granger.”

Hermione smiled happily to herself as she surveyed the room. They couldn’t have been bowling for more than ten minutes but, in that time, Luna and Seamus had already sent numerous balls flying behind them, and Hermione had just witnessed George forget to let go of the ball and essentially bowl himself down the alley. She spun around to take her next turn, exchanging smirks with Draco since they were, successfully, crushing these idiots. The only team that was even close to them was Ginny and Harry; it turned out that Harry, ever competitive, had insisted on practice sessions meaning they were both pretty good. Charlie was doing quite well, but he was hindered by Theo who was an extremely enthusiastic, but abysmally bad, bowler. Draco, it transpired, was a natural. It took him a few turns to get the hang of it, but after that Hermione couldn’t help the little flutter in her stomach when he hit strike after strike. She tried to ignore it; she was a successful, powerful witch and the sight of a little physical skill in a wizard shouldn’t thrill her the way it did. But she couldn’t deny that her attraction to Draco ramped up a few notches as she watched him play. She was pretty good herself; her parents were keen bowlers and had taken her regularly when she was a young child and during the holidays when she was home from Hogwarts. It made her heart swell to look around the room and see so many people she cared about sharing something that meant so much to her.

The moment was shattered somewhat by Neville attempting to chase a mis-thrown bowling ball down the lane, tripping over and sprawling on the highly oiled surface. He sat up, shaking his hair out of his face and grinning around at everyone before asking “Why is it always me?” causing everyone to laugh. Hermione was slightly concerned that his less than elegant display would put Pansy off, but she had clearly underestimated the witch as she saw Pansy laughing good naturedly with everyone else, and giving him a playful nudge to the ribs when he got back to her.

Hermione took her turn, doing a little victory dance when she got a strike. She spun around, hair flying, before she ran at Draco with a huge grin on her face and launched herself into his arms. He spun her around, laughing with her, before setting her gently back on the ground. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Ginny lower her phone, and thought she might have taken another picture of them. She made a mental note to ask her to send the photos.



All in all, Hermione was very pleased with how the evening had gone as she hugged her friends goodbye. It had definitely been a good decision to book the place out for the evening. There was more than one occasion where a quick *impedimenta* had saved someone from getting hit with a bowling ball. She tried hard to suppress a grin as she noticed Pansy leaving with Neville. She hadn't intended the evening to be a match making session, and certainly never would have predicted the pairing, but she thought it was sweet.

She noticed Draco standing over by the claw machines and, after she had said her goodbyes to everyone, she made her way over to him. Feeling strangely nervous, she opened with a joke.

"They misnamed this place."

He looked at her in confusion. "What do you mean, Granger?"

She gave him a little smirk "Well, the place is called "Striking out" but as far as I can tell Pansy certainly didn't strike out tonight!"

"Of course she didn't hit anyone..."

Hermione laughed and swatted his arm playfully "No, you prat. It's a muggle expression; basically if someone strikes out it means they tried for something but failed. The expression is often used in

the early stages of dating, when one person has made a move on another. If their advances aren't received well, then muggles might say that the person 'struck out'."

"Whose advances were received well, then?" he asked with a growing smile. Merlin, how could he have not noticed his friend's completely unsubtle flirting with her team mate?

"I can't believe you didn't notice!" she laughed "Pansy and Neville were all over each other, and, unless I'm mistaken, they left together, too!"

Draco smirked at her and said "Well, I must have other things on my mind."

She leaned against the claw machine, crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow at him "Oh? What kind of things?"

He leaned forwards and she felt her heart stutter, but he pressed his hand to the claw machine behind her and said "It's been bothering me all evening. What in Merlin's name is this contraption?"

Laughing to hide her brief flicker of disappointment, Hermione turned to face the machine. They were the last two people there, if she didn't count the staff who were clearly in the process of locking up. "It's a rip off, really. You put money in these machines and in exchange you use the lever to move the claw. The idea is that you position it directly over one of the toys and then release the claw to try to grab your chosen toy. It's rigged though, people rarely win."

"I bet you could win, Granger."

She scoffed "Not without magic, and I refuse to cheat. I used to play these all the time when I was a child and I never won."

"Go on, Golden Girl. If you managed to get three Slytherins to a muggle bowling alley, you can do anything. Now, win me a toy." The smile he gave her was pure challenge. Never one to back down, Hermione huffed and fished around in her purse for some change.

"Fine, but I'm warning you this is a waste of money."

She aimed for a small, silver cuddly toy dragon in the corner of the machine. To her utter astonishment, the claw grabbed it on the first try. She turned to look at Draco as the toy thumped into the chute with a look of disbelief on her face. He was leaning against the machine wearing a look of smug triumph.

"I can't believe that worked!"

"I told you, Granger, you can do anything."

She blushed as she bent down to pick up the toy and handed it to him.

"You'll need to think about what to name him."

"I'll be sure to think of something as imposing and awe inspiring as Mr Darcy." smirked Draco as they walked together towards the exit.

She nudged him with her shoulder, and noticed that he didn't correct his course; he just stayed pressed against her as they walked side by side. Everywhere her body touched his felt electrified,

and Hermione felt her breath hitch. When they reached the street, she asked him “Did you have a good time this evening?”

He looked down at her and smiled. “Yes, Granger, I did. Did you?”

She beamed “I had a wonderful time. I’m so glad you came. I’m even more glad Theo didn’t injure anyone. I swear we had more of his balls in our lane than our own!”

Draco’s eyes crinkled in apparent amusement, but he said in a serious tone of voice “Granger, do me a favour, let’s not mention Theo’s balls again tonight?”

She laughed and they walked in comfortable silence the rest of the way to the apparition point. When they arrived, there was a definite charge in the air. She could almost feel the tension between them, but it wasn’t unpleasant. It felt like an unspoken question as they stood staring at each other. Neither of them moving closer; neither moving further away. Hermione got the sense that Draco was weighing his next move carefully. After a few more moments, he pulled her into a hug, gave her a soft kiss on the forehead and said “Goodnight, Granger. Thank you for this evening.” Without another word, he apparated away.

Draco

Granger was right - Pansy must have gone home with Longbottom, as she was nowhere to be seen when he got home. Theo, on the other hand, wouldn’t leave him alone. His friend wanted to go over the night’s events, but all Draco wanted to do was go to bed. He had enjoyed himself that evening, but he couldn’t stop thinking about how he had left things with Granger. There was a definite heat in the way she had been looking at him, and although he knew he had done the right thing by pulling away, it had killed him to let her go. All he had wanted to do was wrap his hands in her hair and, finally, kiss her.

“Draco, are you listening to me?”

“What?”

“I was saying, that I’ve finally found my type. Sexy, red headed dragon trainers! I don’t know why it took me so long to realise!”

“Good for you, mate.” Said Draco, still not really listening to Theo, too preoccupied thinking about how Granger had looked as she celebrated her win before throwing herself into his arms.

“You know, brooding isn’t actually all that sexy, Draco? At least not the way you do it. Your face just kind of goes all scrunchy. Maybe you should practice in the mirror then try again.”

Draco scowled at him “I’m not brooding.”

“Of course you are, and I don’t know why! Granger is clearly into you.”

“Granger isn’t into me.”

“Yes, she is, and you know it.”

“Well, she shouldn’t be!” Draco was getting angry. Not at Theo, but at the ridiculous situation he had managed to get himself into, wanting a woman he would never be good enough for.

Theo frowned at him “What makes you say that?”

“I’ll never be good enough for her.”

Theo stared at him for a long moment, before narrowing his eyes and saying “Never is just ‘reven’ spelled backwards.” He then stood up and made to leave the room.

“Wait, what?” Called Draco, not understanding what on Earth Theo was talking about.

“If you’re going to talk nonsense then so will I. I don’t have time for this, I’ve got a red headed dragon trainer to woo. Just stop being a self-sacrificing idiot and realise that, if by some miracle Granger wants you too, you should stop bitching about it and just thank your lucky stars.” Speech, apparently concluded, Theo went to bed.

As Draco walked up the stairs, he thought about what Theo had said. He didn’t think he was being a self-sacrificing idiot; he was just doing what was best for Granger. As Draco pushed open the door to his bedroom, he pulled the little toy dragon out of his pocket. He couldn’t help but smile at it as he put it down on his bed. At that moment he heard a beeping sound coming from the pocket of his jeans. Remembering that he had put the mobile in there in case he had needed to contact Granger in a muggle-friendly way that evening, he quickly pulled it out and looked at the message.

Granger had sent him a photo message. He pressed on the little square and saw that it was a picture that someone, Draco suspected Ginny, had taken of them that evening. Ginny had managed to capture the moment that Granger had launched herself into his arms and he was holding her whilst spinning them around. He had to admit, it was a nice picture. Another beep and this time she had sent him the picture that Ginny had taken earlier in the week of them by the firepit. He couldn’t stop the smile that spread over his face as he looked at the two of them together. The way she was looking at him... Well, he didn’t think anyone had ever looked at him like that.

Remembering Granger’s lessons from Wednesday, he arranged the toy dragon against his pillows and took a picture to send back to her.

He then wrote:

D: *Shhh, your incessant beeping is disturbing his sleep.*

H: *I’m so sorry, please convey my deepest apologies.*

H: *Does he have a name?*

D: *Of course he has a name, Granger. It is suitably imposing and awe-inspiring.*

D: *Meet: Lord Draconius Malfoy II, Destroyer of Men, Champion of Bowling Alleys.*

D: *Draco Jr if you insist on shortening it.*

H: *That is so unoriginal.*

D: *How dare you.*

H: *Draco Jr?*

D: *I'll remind you, witch, that it is a shortened form of a very original name.*

H: *Ok I'll give you that.*

D: *Goodnight Granger, sweet dreams. And thanks for the dragon.*

H: *Night, Malfoy. You're welcome :)*

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to jusforgiggs for her help with naming the toy dragon!

Taskforce Training

Chapter Notes

Please check end notes for CW.

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

Hermione

Hermione stared around the room as the various members of the Department of Mysteries Combined Auror Taskforce prepared for their monthly training session. Hermione encouraged them all to meet more regularly to practice, but their various commitments in the Department of Mysteries and the DMLE meant that scheduled training couldn't occur more frequently. In addition to herself, Draco and Harry, there were two Unspeakables and three Aurors present.

Clearing her throat, Hermione addressed the room. "Good morning, everyone. You'll see we have a new member with us today. This is Draco Malfoy, and he is consulting on the Lestrangle matter. I have no doubt that you will all treat him with respect. Now, a quick recap of the rules before we get started. It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway – non-lethal spells only. Please also refrain from using anything that will take more than an afternoon to recover from. Beyond that, anything legal goes. Anything that's legally or morally grey... well, you all know grey's my favourite colour." They laughed at that, and she winked at them all. "As always, I'll be holding barriers around each fighter. These will lessen the intensity of any spell that hits, but won't stop it completely and won't stop a physical attack. Otherwise, how will we learn?" She smirked at them. She then directed them to split off into pairs, and made her way over to Draco.

"Ready to duel?" she asked Draco, challenge in her voice.

"I think this is distinctly unfair, Granger, it's my first time here and I have to duel the boss?"

She winked at him and said "Don't worry, I'll be gentle."

"Thanks." Then he smirked down at her and said in a slightly lower voice than usual "Actually, is it too late to change my mind?"

She frowned at that "You don't want to train?"

His smirk grew wider "No, Granger, about you being gentle with me."

She rolled her eyes at that, but his words sent a little thrill through her as they moved into dueling position. Hermione called to the room at large "Right, shields are up. Remember not to fight fair, a real enemy wouldn't. Good luck, and don't kill or permanently maim your colleagues. Three, two..."

On two, she and Harry each struck out at their opponents. Draco clearly had excellent reflexes, as he easily blocked her full body-bind curse while shooting her a disgruntled look. She felt no remorse; she had literally just told them all not to fight fair. Harry's opponent was less alert, and

was hit by his slicing hex. As Harry had known it would, Hermione's barrier had prevented the hex from landing fully, and the Auror Harry was fighting had nothing more than torn robes and a long scratch across his chest. It would have been a nasty injury otherwise.

Draco then forced Hermione to pay attention to their duel by retaliating with a clever spell which caused the crashmat Hermione was standing on to jerk out from underneath her feet, causing her to lose her footing. Very smart, hitting something that didn't have the benefit of her shield. They traded various jinxes, hexes and minor curses back and forth, but Hermione could tell Draco wasn't giving it his all. She didn't know if it was an unwillingness to risk hurting her, but it wouldn't do. Hermione glanced around at the various bits of training equipment they had scattered about the room. She cast a non-verbal charm to levitate some of the boxing gloves, training pads and frisbees they used for target practice and sent them all flying at Draco simultaneously. She took advantage of his distraction and cast a *bombarda* at him. He wasn't fooled, and she was impressed to see that he focused on her spell rather than the objects flying at him. He blocked the *bombarda*, and was rewarded by being pelted by the various flying items, which was better than being hit by her curse. Her attack did what she'd hoped it would; it provoked his competitive instincts and he seemed to fight back in earnest. He caught Hermione with a well-placed cast that caused her hair to try to suffocate her. She countered it quickly, but he used her distraction to hit her with a disorientating hex. Unable to accurately locate him, she closed her eyes to minimise the effect of his hex and cast a summoning charm on his robes, which summoned him to her. She used his surprise, and the physical grounding he provided, to tackle him to the floor. She countered his hex as they fell and, simultaneously, used her free hand to pull out the training knife that she had concealed in a thigh holster and hold it under his chin.

He held up his hands in surrender and said "This feels an awful lot like cheating, Granger."

She grinned down at him "I specifically told you not to fight fair, Malfoy."

Hermione heard the sound of a throat being cleared from behind her, and turned to see that all of the other pairs of duelers had stopped to watch their fight. Harry was grinning at them and said, "Nice job, Malfoy, it's not often someone manages to get her to resort to physical violence!"

"I'm honoured, Potter. Do you think she'll let me up any time soon?"

It was then that Hermione realised that she was still straddling Malfoy with a practice knife held to his throat. She quickly stood up and offered him her hand. Dusting herself off, she turned to survey the other duelers. She was pleased to see that no one seemed to be seriously hurt. There were a couple of bloody noses, and one Unspeakable had an eye that appeared to be stuck shut, but nothing that would require hospitalisation so it was a good day.

Next, Hermione had them practice dueling with uneven numbers. This largely went well, except for an unfortunate incident where one of the Aurors, Penelope, wasn't quite fast enough to avoid a backfiring jinx from Harry which caused her own slicing hex to backfire and hit her. That meant that she hadn't had the benefit of Hermione's barrier so the slice to her stomach was quite deep. Hermione healed it but suggested she should sit out of the next part of training: hand-to-hand combat.

Hermione had noticed during the war that not many wizards were prepared to deal with a physical attack. It was Draco himself who had helped her realise this, as he had been vulnerable to Harry physically tackling him to disarm him at Malfoy Manor. Hermione had long suspected that Draco hadn't tried particularly hard to prevent himself from being disarmed that night but, regardless, it

struck her as a gaping hole in wizarding training. She herself had been taking Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and Taekwondo classes weekly since the end of the war. She couldn't claim to be an expert, but she could hold her own. She never wanted her lack of a wand to guarantee that she was helpless in a fight and, although she was competent with wandless magic, she thought it would be arrogant to assume she would always be able to rely on it.

Draco, to her surprise, requested to sit out the hand-to-hand combat portion of the training. Hermione didn't think it was a good idea, but allowed it as she didn't want to question him in front of people he didn't know. He sat at the side of the room with Penelope and watched the others train. Harry was, unsurprisingly, the best in the group at physical combat. He was no longer the scrawny boy she had first met, but he would never be a large man. He was, however, quick, confident and willing to do damage. Like Hermione, he had spent a large portion of his life not knowing he had magic, so it seemed to come more naturally to them than some of the others to rely on their bodies to attack and/or defend.

The training session lasted all morning and, by lunch time, everyone was sweaty, bloody and tired. It had been a good session, though, and everyone left in good spirits. Hermione waved her wand to send the crashmats to the side of the room, and cast a few cleaning spells. She knew the cleaners would be in later, but she thought it bad manners to leave blood on the floor. She was aware that Draco had lingered behind, but he hadn't said anything so she decided that, this time, the next move was his.

She sensed him walk towards her as she took a sip from her water bottle; she stood with her back to him and slowly screwed the lid back on before turning to face him. He was standing a respectable distance away from her, but his eyes were intense, almost burning as he stared at her. She stuck to her guns, deciding that he could be the first one to speak. They just stared at each other for a long moment, tension thrumming between them. Then he spoke.

"I've never seen anything like those shields before. How did you do it?"

Hermione couldn't help the disappointed sigh that left her before she answered. "It's a modified *protego* – I needed something to help my team train without pulling their punches too much and it was the best I could come up with."

"It's an incredible bit of magic, Granger. Will you teach me?"

"It's useful but has its limitations. It takes quite a bit of concentration to hold a shield around another person, so would leave you vulnerable in a fight. It's good for training, but I wouldn't recommend using it outside of a controlled setting unless you really have no other choice."

"Regardless, I'd like to learn if you're willing to teach me?"

She looked at him. He was still staring at her, almost boring holes into her with his gaze. "I'll teach you, but will you tell me why you didn't want to join in the last session?"

He looked down at the floor, and shifted uncomfortably. She felt bad for pushing, but he was a member of her team now and she should know if there was an issue.

After a long moment he took a deep breath before looking up at her and saying "I don't know most of the team. Dueling with magic is one thing, but I just..." He looked away again and swallowed

before continuing “I told you about the rings and why we used them. A favourite torment of many of the people who attacked us in the early days was to magically incapacitate us in some way and then beat us. They seemed to think a muggle attack was somehow fitting, although it didn’t stop them from using magical means to ensure we couldn’t fight back.” He was scowling at the floor and she couldn’t help but take a step closer to him.

He looked back up at her and said “I just didn’t think I would react well, being that vulnerable around people I don’t know. I’m sorry if I ruined your training session.”

“You didn’t ruin anything, Draco. I’m sorry, I didn’t even think that it might be difficult for you.”

“Don’t apologise, how were you to know. It’s not that I don’t want to learn. Would you... would you teach me?”

“Of course, but are you sure? I don’t want to do anything that might make you uncomfortable.”

He was staring at her again now, and despite the fact that they weren’t touching, she could feel him all around her. Her heartbeat picked up and she noticed the slight flecks of blue in his grey eyes. “I trust you.”

After a long moment she nodded and took a step away from him, turning to walk into the middle of the room. She beckoned him over, and ran him through the basics of fighting. She taught him how to throw a punch without breaking his thumb, some basic blocks and how to use elbows and knees to greatest effect. She then ran him through basic holds and how to break out of them. Finally, she decided to show him how to take an opponent to the floor and grapple.

That was how she found herself on her back with Draco hovering his body on top of hers. He had just tried some of the techniques she had taught him. He was a quick study; naturally athletic and confident in his movements, so he had had no trouble putting what she taught him into practice. They were both breathing hard, and she was suddenly all too aware that only a few thin pieces of material were separating their bodies.

Almost in a daze, as though she had no control over her body, she shifted her hips underneath him so their bodies were lined up against each other. He let out what she could have sworn was a moan, before lowering his head so that their foreheads were pressed together. On an exhale she heard him breathe “Granger.” He pulled back, staring into her eyes as he used one hand to brush her curls out of her face.

Her breath hitched and she couldn’t help it, she shifted her hips again, this time up. She pressed herself into the evidence that he was just as turned on by their closeness as she was, and she couldn’t help the groan that escaped her. That groan seemed to be his undoing, as he gasped and ground his hips into hers as their mouths met in a searing kiss.

Hermione had imagined this moment countless times over the past few weeks, and yet was still unprepared for the intensity of the kiss. He kissed her deeply, ravenously, as though she were air and he was drowning. She reached up and ran her hands through the silky strands of his hair, before moving down to cup his face. She ran her fingers gently along the line of his jaw, marveling at the feel of him finally letting go. He broke the kiss, and she cried out in protest before he started peppering kisses along her jaw and breathed in her ear “Fuck, Granger, you’ve got no idea how much I’ve been wanting to do this.”

He nipped at her lower lip before kissing her again. They were still grinding their hips into each other, and Hermione felt like her body would explode. She couldn't believe how close she was to unravelling, just from the feel of his body pressing into her through their thin layers of clothes. It was simultaneously too much and not enough. She reached down and wrapped her hand around him through the soft material of his trousers and moaned, the feeling of him hard in her hand almost enough to send her over the edge.

Without warning, Draco hooked an arm around her middle and rolled them so that he was lying beneath her, with her straddling his hips. He reached up and pulled the hairband out of her hair so that her curls cascaded down around them. He ran his fingers through her hair and hummed, saying "So soft." He gently took hold of a fistful of it the base of her skull and pulled her down into a kiss. His other hand wound its way between their bodies, and she felt her core clench as he ran a long finger along the band of her leggings.

Hermione had never been one to beg but, as he slipped his hand further beneath her waistband, she found herself muttering "Please, please, please Draco" as she took the opportunity to kiss along his neck. Despite their training, he still smelled clean: citrusy and smoky with just a hint of sweat. He gently pulled her head up and locked eyes with her as he teased at the waistband of her knickers. "Please" she almost moaned, and if she had been less aroused, she would have been embarrassed by the desperate tone her voice took. Without another word, his hand slipped underneath the band of her underwear and he began to gently circle her clit with a long finger. He stared up into her eyes and said in a low voice "Tell me what you need."

Almost beyond words at this point, Hermione panted "Harder" and he increased the pressure, causing her to moan with pleasure. Hermione bucked her hips against his hand, as he wound her tighter and tighter. She was close and, as she started to tremble, he slipped a finger inside her, groaning at the wetness he found there. Still keeping eye contact, he added another and curled them so that he was pressing on her inner walls. Her head fell back as he used the heel of his hand to put just the right amount of pressure on her clit as he continued to work his fingers in and out of her. She was so close and then she heard him whisper, so quietly she didn't think she was supposed to hear him, "Fuck, you're beautiful."

His words sent her over the edge and she cried out, feeling herself clench around his fingers as pleasure crested through her entire body. She fell forwards, with a hand on either side of his face, as he gently worked her down from her high. Finally, she collapsed against him with her head resting on his chest. She could hear his heart pounding, mirroring her own. He gently removed his hand from her leggings and gave her a soft kiss to the top of her head. Suddenly worried she might be crushing him, Hermione slipped off of his body so that they were lying side by side on the floor, neither speaking, just breathing heavily.

Once she had caught her breath, Hermione rolled onto her side and slid her fingers up his arm, leaning forwards to kiss him on the cheek. "Your turn now" she said, and made to move her hand down towards the tent in his trousers. Before she could complete the movement, however, his hand closed over hers and she felt him tense.

"Don't worry, Granger, there's no need." And, with that, he sat up. She was suddenly aware that he was deliberately not looking at her. The silence stretched, and she couldn't take it any longer.

"Is something wrong, Draco?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that... I just... I'm sorry."

“What are you sorry for? If you couldn’t tell, I quite enjoyed myself.” She tried to make light of the situation, but she had a horrible feeling of dread churning in her stomach.

He looked at her then, with anguished eyes and suddenly got to his feet.

“I can’t do this to you. I can’t give you what you need. You deserve better, and I’ve been selfish. I’m sorry.”

She didn’t know what to say, but was saved the trouble of thinking of anything when he suddenly got to his feet, gave her a pained look and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

This fic has now been changed from Mature to Explicit. If you want to avoid explicit content in this chapter, please stop reading after ***

CW explicit sexual content

CW less than ideal behaviour after sexual activity - not malicious, but extremely bad communication

What an Idiot

Chapter Notes

Check end notes for CW

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

Draco

Draco managed to keep himself under control as he walked out of the Ministry and apparated home. It wasn't until he landed in the travelling parlour that he let out the scream that had been building in him ever since he saw Granger looking at him with wide, trusting eyes after he had finger fucked her in the Ministry training room. He'd messed up. He'd let himself forget, just for a moment, that he couldn't have her. That he would never be good enough for her. That he couldn't give her what she needed. She needed someone worthy of her, someone who wouldn't damage her reputation and drag her down.

And now he had hurt her. Again. He'd let things go too far because he was, at his core, a selfish man. It didn't matter how hard he tried to be better, that would always be true. He'd led her on, and now she would remember all of the reasons why she hated him, all the ways he'd made her feel inferior in the past. Merlin, he should just be put out of his misery.

Theo came bursting into the room with his wand out, looking around for the non-existent threat.

“What the fuck, Draco, what's going on?”

Draco couldn't look at his friend, couldn't tell him what he'd done. Theo would, quite rightly, be disgusted by him.

Theo took a step forward and grasped his shoulder.

“Draco, look at me. What happened?”

But Draco couldn't. He'd fucked up. She was magnificent, powerful, kind and warm, and he had to go and fuck everything up. Just like he always did. Just like he always would.

He couldn't breathe, couldn't get enough air in as he stood there waiting for someone to tell him what an awful fuck-up he was, to tell him that he deserved to be alone. That he would never be more than a failed Death Eater. Too cowardly to do the right thing, too scared to do what he was told.

He hadn't realised that he'd fallen to the floor until he felt Theo's arms around him and heard him murmuring to him. “Draco, mate, you're spiraling. Come back now. Listen to my breathing and breathe at the same time as me. Come on.”

But Draco couldn't. He didn't deserve to breathe, didn't deserve the care that Theo was showing him. He heard a great, heaving sob leave his body and then he was crying into Theo's shoulder,

gasping for breath.

Draco didn't know how long he sat there with Theo holding him while he cried, but he thought it must have been a long time. By the time he had wrung out all of his emotion, Theo had shifted so that he was sitting cross legged on the floor with Draco's back against his chest, one hand stroking Draco's hair as he calmed down.

"Welcome back, mate." Said Theo, as he shifted to stand, holding out a hand to help Draco up.

Draco gave a small, pained smile but didn't say anything as he stood up. Theo clapped him on the back and said "Right, let's get you a drink and then you can tell me what happened." Draco nodded, and followed his friend into the sitting room.

"You're an idiot."

"I know, I should never have let things go that far."

"That's not what I meant. Finger fucking Granger is about the only sensible thing you've done today. Leaving like that, though, makes you a fucking idiot."

"I panicked. I got so caught up in her that I couldn't even think. I'd just seen her demonstrate the most impressive magic I've seen in years as though it was nothing, and then suddenly we were fighting and I was on top of her and she was so responsive; my control just snapped. When we finished it was like my brain caught up with my body, and I couldn't even look at her. I'll never be able to give her what she deserves, but I can't do casual with her, Theo. I just can't."

"I repeat, you're a fucking idiot."

"Stop calling me an idiot!"

"I take no pleasure in calling you an idiot, but until you stop acting like an idiot it is my unfortunate duty to point out that you're being an idiot."

Before Draco could say anything, Pansy walked into the room and Theo said "Pansy, perfect timing. Please tell Draco here that he's an idiot."

Draco groaned and slumped back in his chair as Pansy asked "Naturally, but what's he done this time?"

"Cutting out the self-loathing monologue and broody whining, basically he finger fucked Granger, panicked and left without a word. Like. A. Fucking. Idiot."

Pansy sighed to herself and, under her breath said "So close." Louder, she said "I agree with Theo; you're an idiot. Why won't you just let yourself have this?"

"Because!" shouted Draco, standing and starting to pace in front of the fire. "She deserves someone she can be proud of, whereas I would damage her reputation by my mere existence! And because things don't usually turn out well when I've got something to lose. I think we all learned that when I tried to commit *murder* to save my parents!"

He glared at his two friends, frustrated that they didn't seem to understand. Pansy just snorted at him and poured herself a drink. Theo, on the other hand, seemed incensed.

“Oh, get over yourself, Draco. I hate to break it to you, but you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time during the war. It could have been almost anyone in that situation and they would've done exactly the same things you did.”

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but Pansy cut him off “Theo’s right, you git. Even Granger did terrible things to save people she loved during the war. You heard what she did to her parents, right? And she admitted to killing Dolohov in the final battle. Do you blame her for those things? You don’t have a monopoly on doing shitty things to protect people.”

Suddenly, Theo stood up and said to Pansy “If I have to listen to him trying to justify being a self-sacrificing idiot for one more second, I’m going to punch him in his stupid face. I’m going upstairs.” And with that, Theo swept dramatically out of the room.

Pansy sighed and sat down in Theo’s vacated chair, taking a sip of her drink before fixing Draco with an assessing stare. “Look, I know this is difficult for you. But don’t give up on a good thing just because you don’t think you deserve it.”

“I just know she deserves better, Pans.”

“Don’t you think she should be the one to decide that? She’s known as the brightest witch of her age for a reason. Don’t you think you should at least show her some basic human decency and talk to her about it rather than, oh I don’t know, walking out without a word like an emotionally stunted teenager?”

Draco leaned forward with his head in his hands. He knew he'd made the wrong choice by leaving her there like that, but he'd felt the breakdown pressing down on him and his flight response had kicked in.

Pansy leaned forward and took one of his hands in hers “Draco, you don’t deserve to be alone forever. If you’ve found someone you think you could be happy with, you should at least give it a chance.”

“I don’t know how to do this.”

“Well, not that I’m an expert, but I think the worst thing you could do is nothing. Just try, I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.” Pansy smirked at him “That is, unless she hexes your balls off for acting like a moron.”

Draco gave her a small, pained smile. Before he could say anything, he heard Theo call from upstairs “Oi, Draco, come here.” Draco looked at Pansy and sighed. “What do you think he wants?”

“No idea, but I’d keep your wand out. He’s really latched onto the idea of you and Granger together so I don’t think he’d be above hexing you at the moment, either.”

Draco got up to see what Theo wanted, and was surprised to see that Pansy stood up too. “You’re coming?”

Pansy smirked at him “Of course, I wouldn’t want to miss an opportunity to see you get hexed.”

Draco rolled his eyes “Thanks, Pans.”

She patted his arm “Any time, you idiot.”

They made their way upstairs to Theo’s room. The door was ajar so Draco pushed it open and stepped in. Theo kept his room in a state of chaos that Draco could only assume mirrored what it must be like inside Theo’s mind. It wasn’t messy, exactly, but there was a lot going on so it was difficult to focus on any one thing. In one corner stood a large tank full of brightly coloured tropical fish. Theo had named each of them and was always upset when Draco couldn’t remember their individual names. They all looked the same to Draco. Shelves lined most of the walls, containing everything from books, to plants, to pictures to stores of sweets. There were various potted plants dotted across the space, and a large writing desk in the middle of the room.

Draco spotted Theo lying in his bed. He sat up as Draco and Pansy made their way over to him.

“Ah, Pansy, you’re here. Excellent. Please inform Draco here that I am no longer speaking to him.” With that, Theo thumped dramatically back onto his mattress and covered his face with an arm.

Pansy sighed, but said “Draco, Theo would like me to inform you that he...”

“Yes, thanks Pans, I got it. Theo, did you call me up here just to tell me that you aren’t speaking to me?”

Theo moved his arm and cracked open one eye “Pansy, please tell Draco that he is correct.”

Before Pansy could do as he asked, Draco walked over to Theo’s bed and scooted in next to Theo. Theo huffed at him but didn’t say anything.

“Theo, I know I fucked up.”

“You don’t say” mumbled Theo before he snapped open both eyes “Shit. Pans, tell Draco...”

“Stop it, please Theo” said Draco, as Pansy got into Theo’s bed next to him. She summoned a bottle of firewhiskey and three glasses. None of them spoke until Pansy handed around the glasses and they had all taken a sip.

“I’m going to apologise to Granger.” said Draco after a moment.

“No shit.” said Theo, clearly still disgruntled with him, but evidently willing to speak to him again.

The three of them sat in Theo’s bed drinking their firewhiskey and discussing ideas for how Draco could make amends. Eventually both Theo and Pansy drifted off to sleep, and Draco lay there between them thinking, not for the first time, how lucky he was to have them in his life.

Draco was lying between his two sleeping friends, thinking over the events of the day as well as the past few weeks. As he thought, he realised three things: (1) he was an idiot; (2) he needed to stop self-sabotaging; and (3) if he hadn’t ruined his chance by his earlier behaviour, he wanted to see where this thing with Granger might go. He still knew he didn’t deserve her, but Pansy was right: she deserved the chance to decide that for herself.

Gathering all of his courage, he summoned the mobile from his bedroom and typed a message to Granger.

D: *I'm sorry.*

He waited, but she didn't reply. He could, however, see that she had read the message as the little ticks had gone blue. He decided to try again.

D: *I shouldn't have left like that. I'm an idiot and I'm truly sorry.*

He felt his heart start racing as he saw that she was typing a message in response.

H: *You're giving me emotional whiplash, Draco.*

H: *I don't know where I stand with you.*

H: *One moment you're flirting, the next you back off.*

H: *I can't work out what you want.*

D: *You.*

D: *I want you.*

D: *I'm sorry about today. Not what we did (I rather enjoyed that, too).*

D: *But afterwards. I panicked.*

D: *You deserve so much better than me.*

H: *Don't you think I should be the one to decide what I deserve?*

D: *That's what Pansy said.*

H: *Smart witch.*

D: *Will you go on a date with me? A proper one.*

H: *That depends. Are you going to leave me high and dry again?*

D: *Believe me, Granger, you were not dry.*

H: *Prat.*

H: *You know what I mean.*

H: *I like you, Draco, but I don't want to do this unless you're sure.*

H: *I can't deal with you blowing hot and cold.*

D: *I am sure.*

D: *I'm sorry I made you doubt that.*

H: *As long as you don't do it again, we're ok.*

D: *So how about dinner on Friday?*

H: *It's a date.*

He put the phone down, relief flooding through him. By some miracle, she hadn't written him off yet. He snuggled himself down into Theo's bed between his two friends.

"Stop smiling so loudly, you're disturbing my sleep" said Pansy's sleepy voice from next to him.

“There's no way you can hear me smiling, Pans.”

“Has she forgiven you?”

“Sounds like it. We’re going out on Friday.”

“That’s good. You deserve this, Draco.”

“Thanks Pans.”

“Fuck yeah” said Theo, rolling over and flinging an arm around Draco “Knew you could do it, you idiot.”

Hermione

Hermione put her phone down and stared at the ceiling. She was lying in bed, having just agreed to go on a date with Draco. She sighed and rolled over, punching her pillow into a more comfortable position. He'd hurt her earlier. She hadn't known what had changed; one moment she'd been riding high from the orgasm he'd given her, and the next she'd been sitting alone on the floor of the Ministry's training rooms wondering what had happened.

She could see now that he'd panicked, and understood that he hadn't intended to hurt her. She'd known for weeks that something had been holding him back from acting on the attraction they clearly felt for each other, but she hadn't known exactly what it was. It was almost a relief to know that it was because he felt she deserved better (although it made her heart ache for him); as she had sat there alone on the floor earlier, she hadn't been able to stop the memories of his derogatory comments on her appearance and personality from school from flooding her mind. He had called her beautiful today, and was clearly attracted to her now, but it had hit on some of her old insecurities when he left her like that. She was still angry with him, but now that she understood why he'd left she was willing to give him another chance.

She fell asleep thinking about flecks of blue in grey eyes and imagining what could have happened if he hadn't left.

Chapter End Notes

CW for mental health spiral/panic attack

Date Night

Hermione

“And you just forgave him?” Ginny asked, incredulously, as she bit into her toast. Hermione had texted Ginny after the incident with Draco the day before and asked her to meet for breakfast. They were sitting at a corner table in a cute little café just off of Diagon Alley.

“Not exactly. I don’t know, Gin. I think part of me expected something like this; there were moments when I thought something might happen before, but always something seemed to be holding him back. Not that I’m excusing what he did or saying it was my fault or anything but, in hindsight, I perhaps should have asked him about it before anything happened.”

Ginny scoffed at that, tossing her long red hair over her shoulder as she fixed Hermione with a pointed stare. “You didn’t do anything wrong; he was the one with the problem so he should have spoken to you about it. What a dick.”

“Well, regardless Gin, it’s happened now. After I got that message from him last night, I thought about it and decided I still want to see what this might be. Up until now he’s given me no reason not to trust him, and so I’m choosing to put yesterday down as a blip.”

“Ok, it’s your choice, obviously. I will say, in the pointy prat’s defence, he does seem better than before. I mean, the bar was literally on the floor for him, but he does seem to be decent now. We can let this one slide but, if he pulls any more shit, I can’t promise I won’t bust out the old bat bogey hex.”

“Trust me, Gin, if he does anything like that again you’ll have to get in line.”

“I actually think Theo might beat us both to it if he does something like that again; I got an owl from him last night, so this at least explains the weird letter.”

“What did it say?”

“Literally just: Draco is an idiot (underlined five times) but his heart is in the right place. Give my love to Harry and your more attractive sibling.”

Hermione laughed. “Speaking of that, what’s...”

“Don’t even ask” laughed Ginny before Hermione had a chance to finish her question. “I’m not going anywhere near that; they can figure it out for themselves.”

They finished their breakfast chatting about the kids, Ginny’s training schedule and her plans for Harry’s upcoming 30th birthday. Their conversation about Harry’s birthday sparked a memory for Hermione, and she realised that Draco’s 30th must be coming up soon. She thought it was some time in June, but had never had much cause to know the exact date before. She made a mental note to look it up in his personnel file when she got to work; not strictly what she should be using it for but what people didn’t know couldn’t hurt them.

Hermione was in a good mood as she arrived at the Ministry; her conversation with Ginny had made her feel better about yesterday. She appreciated having her friend’s outrage on her behalf, but

that was a given. What she particularly valued was Ginny's willingness to give him another chance; she could be notoriously unforgiving when it came to the people she loved.

Hermione paused as she pushed the door to her office open, immediately spotting the large vase of white tulips on her desk. She quickly cast a few detection spells (she made a habit of never touching something unexpected without testing it first) which came back negative, so she picked up the small card that was propped neatly in the flowers.

Hermione,

I wanted to reiterate how truly sorry I am for acting like such an idiot yesterday. I will endeavour to make it up to you.

I'm looking forward to Friday.

Yours,

Draco

P.S. I bought these under my own steam, and not because a certain red-headed menace insisted. However, I did enjoy the symbolism of Potter's gesture last time so thought white tulips were appropriate.

Hermione smiled to herself as she sat down at her desk, noting his use of her first name. She would, of course, be seeing Draco before Friday - in fact, they had a meeting scheduled for that afternoon - but after their brief lapse in professionalism yesterday she had decided that it was inappropriate to discuss (or indeed, do) anything other than work while they were at work. She didn't want to mix personal with professional. That being said, she did take a peek at Draco's personnel file and saw that his birthday was on 5th June, which was this coming Saturday. She couldn't think of a professional reason for having looked, so resolved that the personal/professional divide would be implemented going forward.

That afternoon, she and Draco met with the rest of the taskforce to discuss next steps on the Lestranger matter. They, unfortunately, had little to go on. Rodolphus had evaded capture for more than a decade and the few leads they had followed so far turned out to be dead ends. They knew he had at least two people working with him, although Hermione's gut told her it had to be more and Draco agreed with her. He thought it likely that the reason Rodolphus was making moves to resurrect Bellatrix now was because he felt they had the numbers to come out in the open once she returned; Bellatrix was not known for subtlety so any rallied Death Eaters would be unlikely to stay in hiding under her leadership. It was not a comforting thought.

Harry suggested using himself as bait. While a large part of Hermione wanted to argue, the Head of Department in her recognised the strategic advantage. After much debate, they decided that their best chance of success would be if they had several of their targets in one place. It had the advantage that they could watch each other's backs, and they very much hoped it would prove too tempting for Rodolphus' group to pass up. They decided to take the idea away and each think of something public enough to attract Rodolphus' attention but controlled enough to contain the situation. In the meantime, Harry was keeping an eye on all files in and out of the Auror Office for anything suspicious and the two Unspeakables on the Taskforce were combing back through Bellatrix's research to see if anything in there gave clues as to Rodolphus' motivation.

All in all, it was a frustrating week. Hermione was especially glad when the weekend came around; not only did it mean a break from work but she had her date with Draco on Friday evening. Hermione left work and apparated home, meeting Ginny who was waiting to help her get ready. Hermione considered herself a fairly confident witch, but she was aware that fashion was not her forte. Luckily, Ginny enjoyed dressing Hermione and had happily agreed to help, and Topsey was thrilled by the idea of helping Hermione get ready for a date. The little elf had taken some time to get used to living in Hermione's cottage, as she seemed slightly lost without the Weasley children to look after, but seemed finally to be settled.

Draco was due to pick her up at 7pm, and by 6.50pm Hermione and Ginny were sitting in the kitchen drinking white wine and waiting for him to arrive. Draco was taking her to an upmarket muggle restaurant in Castle Combe, so Ginny had dressed her in an elegant silky dress in dark green which clung to her curves and was more daring than anything that Hermione would have picked out for herself. The dress was a respectable length, but had a slit on the right side cut up to just above her mid-thigh (Hermione particularly appreciated this as it gave her easy access to her wand which she had strapped to her thigh). She coupled the dress with a pair of black stilettos and a black shawl. She had to admit, Ginny had done a good job. For the finishing touches she had applied subtle make up and left her curls loose down her back. She felt nervous but excited, and couldn't remember the last time she had felt that way. Ginny broke some of the tension she was feeling by exclaiming "Merlin, between you dating the Ferret, Neville dating the Ice Queen and whatever's going on between Theo and my brother, I'm the only one not banging a Slytherin. I feel distinctly left out!"

"I've got to be honest, Gin, I'm starting to think Pansy really isn't all that bad. I think it takes her some time to warm up to new people, but from everything Draco has said she sounds like a really good friend. She was the one who told him to let me decide what I deserve."

Ginny grimaced, but it quickly turned into a smirk as she said "From what I hear, it didn't take her long to warm up to Neville!"

Hermione laughed "There is no way Neville would kiss and tell."

"No, but we were all there – we saw her all over him. Well, those of us who weren't distracted by handsome blonde prats anyway."

"Gin, be nice."

"That was me being nice."

"I'll make a note for us to work on that" said Hermione with a smile.

"Right, remember, in exchange for making you look even hotter than you usually do, I need *details*." Ginny demanded as Topsey poured her a second glass of wine. Hermione had tried to tell Topsey that she wasn't employing her to work in her home, that Topsey was there as a guest for her own protection, but Topsey was having none of it. The little elf had insisted on cooking and cleaning for Hermione while she stayed. It didn't sit well with Hermione, but Topsey had seemed so dejected when she tried to say no that she didn't feel like she could refuse.

Hermione only winked at Ginny and took another sip of wine. Just then there was a knock on her front door, and Hermione stood.

“That’s my cue to leave!” said Ginny, getting to her feet and draining her nearly full glass.
“Remember, he might be fit as fuck but he was a dick the other day – make him work for it, Hermione!”

Hermione laughed and pushed Ginny towards the fire saying “Go, you menace, I’ll text you later.”

“Have fun, don’t do anything I wouldn’t!” quipped Ginny as she threw floo powder into the fire and disappeared in a whirl of green flame.

“See you later Topsey!”

“Goodbye Miss! Topsey is hoping that Miss has a nice time on her date!”

Hermione opened the door and nearly had to pick her jaw up off of the floor at the sight before her. Draco looked *divine*. He had foregone his usual tie, and was wearing a light blue shirt, with the top few buttons undone. He had coupled that with a dark blue suit and black dress shoes. The colour of his clothes brought out the flecks of blue in his eyes, and for a moment Hermione just stared, forgetting to breathe.

“Hermione.” He grinned at her.

Hermione smiled “Draco.”

“You look stunning.” Hermione couldn’t help the blush that crept up her neck and wondered what had happened to her; she had never been one to blush easily. Something about Draco just completely disarmed her and had her feeling like a giggling teenager going on her first date.

“You don’t look too bad yourself, although I see you’ve dressed down for the occasion.” She gave him a teasing smile.

He scowled and replied “Pansy insisted on dressing me, she said I “*couldn’t go out looking like I was attending a funeral*”. If my friends keep trying to dress me, I’m going to develop a complex.”

He held out his arm for her, which she took after closing her door and setting her wards. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, Ginny came over to dress me this evening.”

“Well, you could wear anything and still be beautiful but, I must say, Red did an excellent job. I should send her flowers.”

Hermione laughed, and then asked “So, how are we getting to the restaurant?”

“There’s an apparition point a few minutes’ walk from the place. Are you ready?”

“Lead the way.” She said with a smile and, with that, Draco apparated them away.

The restaurant Draco had booked was in a beautiful manor house with stunning grounds. The restaurant itself was modern and minimalist and the food was divine. They chatted easily while they ate and drank, and Hermione enjoyed seeing this relaxed, unguarded version of Draco. She felt like she had seen glimpses of him before but something seemed to have shifted in him this evening.

After they finished their meal, Draco suggested they take a walk around the grounds which Hermione readily agreed to. A lot of other couples had the same idea, drawn by the warm late spring evening and the fairy lights strewn through the trees and hedges lining the many paths. Hermione's curiosity got the better of her so, once they were out of earshot of any of the other patrons, she asked "What's different tonight?"

"What do you mean?"

"You seem different. More relaxed. It's lovely to see, but I'm just wondering what changed."

He seemed to be thinking about his answer and, as they walked in silence, he slipped his hand into hers, causing butterflies to erupt in her belly. She was enjoying the feel of his slightly calloused hand – presumably from flying and potions – when he finally answered.

"Well, up until now, whenever I was around you, I was fighting a battle with myself. All I've wanted to do is get to know you more, be close with you, kiss you, but I always had to stop myself. Hermione, I don't know if I can properly explain what my life has been like since the war. I've been so scared that being around me will make your life worse, which is the last thing I want to do. So, I suppose what you've been seeing over the past few weeks has been a struggle between what I wanted to do and what I thought I should do."

He took a deep breath and she squeezed his hand. They could no longer hear any other voices, and the only noises around them were the comforting sounds of nature at dusk: the hooting of an owl in one of the thickets of trees, the barking of a muntjac in the distance and the tinkling of a water fountain nearby.

"I suppose what changed was me giving in. I still feel like it's an incredibly selfish thing for me to do, but you're right; you deserve to decide for yourself what you want, I shouldn't try to do that for you."

He grimaced and pulled her to a stop, turning her to face him as he said "I really am sorry for how I behaved on Monday. There's no excuse for it, the only explanation is that I was on the verge of a panic attack and not thinking clearly. I should have spoken to you about how I was feeling before anything happened. I can't tell you how much I regret spoiling our first time being intimate."

He was looking at her with such sincerity that it made her heart ache. She gently brushed her hands up and down his arms as she said, with a smile, "Well, we will have other firsts which I hope won't provoke panic attacks. For the record, though, you don't have to hide them from me. Merlin knows I've had my share of panic attacks."

He stared at her for a long moment before sighing and saying "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For the part I played in hurting you."

"Draco, you know I don't blame you."

"I'm still sorry."

"You did what you thought you needed to do to protect people you love. How is that any different from what I did? I really do understand what it's like to have done things that people who have

never been in the same situation judge you for. But a hill I'm willing to die on is that I don't think children who were put on the front line of a war that started before they were even born should be blamed for what they did to survive."

He was silent for a moment, before giving her a little smile and said "Well, I think the main difference between us back then is that I was a bigoted little shit and you were a glorious breath of fresh air in a world that felt stale."

She blinked at him; convinced she must be misunderstanding his meaning.

"What do you mean?"

He scoffed slightly, and reached up a hand to cup her face. "Come on, for the brightest witch of her age you must have worked out that I had a thing for you at school?"

"You *absolutely* did not!" she knew he must be joking; he had been awful to her at school.

"I absolutely did. Hermione, you have no idea how fascinating you were to me, given how I was raised. You were a study in contradictions; a puzzle I couldn't solve. I had been told my whole life that muggles were inferior in every way, that muggle borns weren't worthy of magic and could never compete with those of us who came from magical families. Before I started at Hogwarts, I had literally never met a muggle born before, so all of my views were based on lies. And then I met you, and you smashed through my preconceptions. I won't lie, for the first few years I hated you for it. I didn't understand you, and you threatened everything I had been led to believe, so I lashed out. But you fascinated me. And then I saw you at the Yule Ball and I couldn't keep my eyes off of you. I stood on Pansy's feet so many times that night because I kept getting distracted by you. You were transcendent, and it sparked something in me that I then had to put a lot of effort into ignoring, because I didn't want to feel anything for you but contempt."

Hermione's eyes had started to sting; she would never have known, but he was speaking with too much sincerity for her to doubt the truth of his words. He continued "That was a turning point, and I started to notice everything about you: the look you got in your eyes when you were standing up for something you believed in; the way your hair sparked when you were angry; the way you would smile to yourself in the library when you were caught up in a book. My behaviour towards you started to feel like an act. I behaved the way I did not because I believed it by then but because I didn't know how to do anything else. But I'm so deeply sorry for the way I treated you. There's no excuse for it, and I'll always regret it."

He was still cupping her cheek but, when he finished speaking, he trailed a finger down the side of her jaw before using it to tilt her chin up slightly further. She didn't have words yet, but he didn't seem to mind as he continued.

"You have no idea what you've done to me over the past few weeks. You've brightened up my life in a way I never dared to believe was possible. It's as though I was living in shadows and you came bursting in like the sun. I am constantly in awe of you; your kindness, your generosity, your power, combined with your innate goodness. I don't think you realise how entirely unprecedented you are."

During the last part of his speech, he leaned down so that his forehead was pressed against hers. Slowly, he dragged a hand up her bare arm before gently tangling his fingers in the curls at the back of her neck. Hermione shivered, and she felt her arms erupt in goosebumps. She had kissed him before, obviously, but something felt different now. There was no room for miscommunication or

misunderstandings; he had laid himself bare for her, made himself vulnerable. She ran the palms of her hands up his chest to clasp her hands behind his neck, ran her nose along the side of his face and breathed “Kiss me.”

Unlike last time, which had been the frenzied result of attraction mixed with adrenaline, he kissed her sweetly; softly and deliberately. He ran his fingers through her hair with one hand, and the other came up to cup her face, gently and almost reverently. Hermione felt a swooping sensation in her stomach which was quickly replaced by a growing heat as their lips found a rhythm and their bodies pressed together. Draco ran his tongue along the seam of her lips, softly requesting access. Hermione complied, and the kiss deepened into something more; sweetness still there but now edged with unmistakable desire.

Hermione broke the kiss, and was about to ask Draco whether he wanted a nightcap at her cottage, when she was startled by the unmistakable *crack* of apparition behind them. Hermione instinctively reached for her holstered wand as she spun on the spot, hearing a cackle of laughter that made her blood run cold.

“Awh, am I interrupting? Itty, bitty, baby... Draco.”

Bellatrix had joined them.

A Theory, a Plan and a Whiny Little Bitch

Chapter Notes

CW see end of chapter for notes

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

Hermione

Hermione's mind was the thing about her that everyone agreed was extraordinary; she was famously the Brightest Witch of Her Age, the brains of the Golden Trio, the youngest Head of Department in the Ministry's history. But hearing those eight words, in the voice that so often haunted her nightmares, caused her mind to momentarily short circuit. She knew, of course, what Rodolphus was working towards, but until she saw Bellatrix standing there it had all felt theoretical; she had been sure they had time to prevent it. Rodolphus must have found blood from another enemy that they hadn't considered. A thrill of dread ran through her as she considered the possibility that he had gotten to someone she loved while she had been out to dinner with Draco. What if he had managed to reach Harry, Molly, Ron or Narcissa.

Hermione realised they were lucky; Bellatrix evidently wanted something from them. She didn't think she would have been able to get control of herself in time to prevent it if Bellatrix had tried to kill them on sight. It was Draco pushing himself in front of her, standing between her and his aunt, that broke Hermione out of her frozen state and allowed her to fully focus on the situation before them.

"Bella" he said, in a remarkably calm voice.

"How dare you talk to me, you filthy blood traitor" spat Bellatrix, switching from a taunting tone to one of pure fury in the blink of an eye.

"It's good to see you too, aunt."

Hermione raised her wand and stepped up to stand beside Draco. She was aware that they were in a muggle area, and she didn't want to risk any muggles coming to investigate if they saw the flashing lights of a duel so she didn't make a move. Yet. Almost as an afterthought she noticed Rodolphus standing just behind and to the side of Bellatrix, glowering at them but clearly content for his wife to take the lead.

Bellatrix looked directly at Hermione, raising her own wand in one hand and a horribly familiar knife in the other as she shrieked "Where is it, Mudblood?"

Hermione feigned confusion and said in as even a voice as she could muster "Where is what?" while she considered her options. She had to do something; she could feel violence curling around Bellatrix like a gas ready to ignite at any moment.

"Don't try that with me girl. I'd love nothing more than to make you scream again. Shall we do the other arm this time?"

But Hermione was made of tougher stuff than that. Her momentary freeze when she first saw Bellatrix had passed, and she wasn't going to let her taunt her into making a mistake. She did, however, feel Draco tense beside her. To prevent him from doing anything impulsive, and still stalling for time, she glanced at Rodolphus and asked "Whose blood did you use?"

"What greater enemy is there than family that betrayed us?" growled Rodolphus as Bellatrix stared at Draco; there was no humanity in her hooded eyes, just a burning hatred for the nephew she now considered a traitor. "You kindly donated blood in the Vault." and he tapped his finger to his neck to indicate where he had used Bellatrix's knife to cut Draco. "Between you and Nott's brat, you gave us everything we needed that night. I had already acquired flesh from the elf."

Hermione's head buzzed; how could she have missed that? She had treated Draco's wound herself. She would have assumed that more blood was needed for the ritual, but given how little they knew about how it worked she shouldn't have been surprised. She glanced sideways at Draco, who looked aghast, and wondered why he hadn't pressed his ring. He didn't look like he was planning on doing so any time soon, so she realised her focus needed to be on getting them out. Just as she was considering her next move, she heard Draco ask "How did you find us here?"

Hermione watched as Bellatrix tapped the flat side of her blade against her cheek, her voice reverting back to her taunting tone. "Oh, come on Draco, we're bound by blood. I can always find you." The air around Bellatrix crackled with magic as she snarled "You could have been so much more, the heir of two noble houses, and yet you chose to defile yourself with mudblood filth!" She screamed the last two words at Hermione, who knew they had reached a tipping point. If they stayed any longer there would be a fight.

She didn't have a chance to warn Draco, but could only think of one thing that might not draw too much attention from any passing muggles; she just hoped that Bellatrix and Rodolphus would leave rather than go after anyone in the vicinity. Draco had given her the idea – he had told her how she had come back into his life like the sun.

Wordlessly, Hermione took a split second to gather her magic close and then let it burst out of her in all directions in a flash of blinding light. She had never tried this before, a modified *lumos solem*, but she thanked Merlin and anyone else who might be listening that it worked. Without hesitating she took advantage of Bellatrix's momentary shock, grabbed Draco and disappeared.

Draco

Draco felt a flash of panic as he was blinded, grabbed and whisked away by side-along apparition. The only thing that stopped him from lashing out was the possibility that it had been Hermione who grabbed him and not Bellatrix. He would rather be captured than risk hurting her.

They landed and Draco blinked rapidly, trying to clear his eyes. He relaxed infinitesimally when Hermione's voice was the first thing he heard.

"It's me, we got away. Come on."

"I can't see, where are we?"

"Sorry, hang on, let's get behind the wards and I'll explain."

He felt her hand grab his, as she pulled him forwards; presumably towards the unknown wards. He felt a strange tingle of magic – these wards clearly didn't recognise him - but Hermione's hand in his appeared to be enough for him to be allowed through. Despite his compromised vision, he was sure they weren't at her cottage.

She dropped his hand as soon as they were past the wards and started casting spells on him. In the blink of an eye he could see again, and he looked at his surroundings. They were standing outside a familiar townhouse in London, although he hadn't been there since he was a child: Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Potter's home.

"I'm sorry I couldn't warn you! I was trying to think of ways to get out that wouldn't alarm any muggles and it's the only thing I could think of."

"Don't apologise, you got us away."

He let out a long breath that he hadn't realised he was holding as he looked Hermione over and realised she was unharmed; visibly shaken, but physically fine.

He felt himself start to shake as he pulled Hermione towards him, wrapping his arms around her to convince himself that she was okay. He had to squeeze his eyes shut against the image of Hermione crying and writhing on his drawing room floor; he could almost hear her screams ringing through the intervening years. He inhaled, and the orange blossom scent of her hair grounded him in the present.

She leaned back and met his eyes with a concerned look and asked "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? Merlin, I should be asking you that." He ran a hand over his face, trying to ward off the impending panic.

"I'm... well, I won't say I'm fine, that would be a lie. I can't believe she's back; I thought we still had time."

"How did she find us?" he asked her, desperately.

"I can't be certain, but I have a theory. Did you see how she tapped her knife against her face when you asked that question and she said something about being bound by blood?"

He nodded.

"Well, the blade is cursed. I've studied a lot of artifacts from the Lestrangle Estate and they, unsurprisingly, dealt in a lot of seriously dark stuff. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she has some kind of curse in there to allow her to find people whose blood has touched her knife." She gave him a slightly apologetic look before continuing "Similar magic, in a way, to your rings."

Draco wanted to sit down, and perhaps scream, but didn't particularly fancy breaking down in front of any of the inhabitants of Grimmauld Place which, he remembered with a groan, now included his least favourite Weasley.

"Speaking of your rings" said Hermione, tentatively "I was slightly surprised you didn't use them."

He looked up at her and she carried on quickly "I'm not saying I think you should have done; I think it would likely have only ended with violence if Theo and Pansy had turned up, but I'm just

curious why you didn't."

His heart sped up, two instincts warring within him. He had once told Hermione that Theo's story was not his to tell, and he still believed that. However, now that Bellatrix was back, he thought it would be important for Hermione to know, and he didn't particularly want Theo to have to tell her. And there was also the fact that he didn't want to lie to Hermione, even by omission.

Decision made, he said "It's not a nice story, and probably best saved mostly for another time, as I assume there's a reason we're standing on Potter's doorstep, but you remember me saying about how Nott Senior was an awful person?"

She nodded and he continued "Well, part of Bellatrix's research required a pureblood. Originally, she planned to find a "blood traitor" to test on but they were concerned that they couldn't guarantee "purity" with blood traitors. That was when Nott Senior volunteered Theo. He spent weeks as Bellatrix's test subject in the summer after sixth year, which is how he came upon a lot of the scars you saw when you saved his life. Nott Senior's only stipulation was that Bellatrix was not allowed to kill Theo or do anything that would interfere with his ability to carry out his duties as a pure blood heir. Anything else, he was happy to allow her to do to him."

He saw the same sick expression on Hermione's face as he was sure had been on his when he discovered what had happened to his friend. Draco had been too caught up in his own problems that summer to even notice that Theo was missing at first. It was only when Pansy summoned him, under the guise of discussing a marriage contract, and expressed her concerns that he realised there might be something wrong.

"Nott Senior was a sadist, and tormented Theo throughout his childhood. When the Dark Lord rose again, he was sent abroad – I never knew why – and we hoped that would mean he couldn't terrorize Theo any further. Unfortunately, he found a way to ensure it continued even after he'd gone."

He took Hermione's hand and kissed her knuckles before rubbing his thumb over the back of them. She'd stayed silent with a look of horror on her face at the thought of what had been done to Theo. "I'm sorry if my decision felt as though I was putting you in more danger, but I couldn't do it to Theo – I couldn't call him there to face her, especially without any warning."

"Don't apologise, Draco, you made the right decision. I don't think it would've helped anyway, but - shit- now I know what happened to him there's no way I'd want him anywhere near her. I had no idea his childhood was that bad."

"Not many people knew. Pansy and I did as much as we could to help him when we were children, but his father was an influential man and our ability to help was limited. The world became a much better place the day that bastard finally died."

Hermione nodded vigorously in agreement, before giving his hand a squeeze and saying "I'm sorry I brought us here, but I thought we should warn Harry immediately."

"Of course, that makes sense. I'd like to get back soon though, to warn Theo and Pansy."

"You don't need to come in if you'd prefer to go straight back. If I've understood how she found us correctly then, as long as we stay behind powerful wards, Bellatrix shouldn't be able to track where we are, even with the knife."

“No, I’ll come with you. I don’t want to leave you just yet, and I’d like to give Theo a little longer without knowing this.”

“Is he at home tonight?”

“Yes, he said he’s working on a project, so goodness knows what that’s all about.”

Draco saw Hermione frown at her wand, which appeared to be vibrating. It stopped quickly, and she muttered something before stowing it away back in the thigh holster that was only just covered by the silky green of her dress. Merlin, what he would have given to be ending this date differently. “All okay?” He asked, forcefully pulling his mind away from visions of tracing his hands up her exposed skin.

“Yes, fine. Let’s go speak to Harry and the others. Ready for this?” she gave him a small smirk.

“Not even slightly. Lead the way.”

Draco could tell that Hermione was relieved when it was Potter who opened the door. She quickly greeted him and explained that they had something important to tell him. He didn’t question it, and if he was surprised by how dressed-up they were he didn’t mention it. Perhaps Hermione had told him they were going out tonight. The thought pleased Draco, and he had to suppress a small smile. Now was not the time to preen.

Potter led them down the hallway, and Draco could hear voices behind one of the doors they passed. He was thankful that Hermione had asked for the three of them to speak in private; he didn’t think he had the energy for Weasleys at the moment. Once the three of them had sat down inside a small snug off of the kitchen, Potter asked.

“Before you tell me what this is about, do you want drinks?”

“No thanks Harry” replied Hermione “we won’t be able to stay long.”

“Okay then. You both look as though you’ve seen a basilisk, so hit me.”

Hermione explained to Potter what had happened. Draco’s contribution to the conversation was to stare at Hermione and brood over the fact that, once again, he had been screwed over by his desperately bad luck in family connections.

Once Hermione had finished explaining what had happened with Bellatrix, Potter summed up his feelings quite succinctly by slumping back against the sofa covering his face with his hands and shouting “FUCK”.

“That just about covers it” said Draco, meeting his eyes grimacing at him. He had become quite comfortable with Potter in the past few weeks. Might even, if forced at wand point, concede that he was starting to consider Potter something of a friend. It did, however, still feel strange at times like this when he and Potter’s feelings were clearly in alignment.

Hermione, ever the pragmatist, clearly didn’t have time for self-pity or expressions of horror over the situation in which they found themselves. She said “Yes, well, is there anything in there that sticks out for you, Harry? Anything we might have missed?”

Potter frowned at her for a moment, clearly thinking and then replied “She didn’t attack on sight. So, presumably, she wants something. What was it she asked you, again, Hermione?”

“Well, leaving out the derogatory name, she asked me “*Where is it?*” – not a particularly clear question but I think I know what she meant.”

Draco saw Potter mirror his expression of surprise as Hermione continued. “You both know I worked on the decontamination of the Lestrange Estate, and that we found a research laboratory in the cellars under the Estate, the contents of which I took to study, essentially kicking off the Dark Arts Research branch of the Department of Mysteries.”

They both nodded, so she continued “Something that most people don’t know is that the laboratory was warded by some of the most complex magic that I’ve ever encountered.” Hermione started to look slightly uncomfortable, which appeared to be catching – clearly another trait that he and Potter shared was to automatically feel uncomfortable if something unsettled Hermione. She seemed, as a general rule, to be extremely collected and level-headed, so anything that bothered her couldn’t be good. “Now, before I say this, I know you’ll both want to tell me that this was a stupid error in judgement, but can we just skip that part because I am well aware of that. I was young, and inexperienced, and would not make the same decision now.”

Her words filled Draco with dread, and she explained “None of us on the team could work out how to break through. It was a complex system of wards, runes and blood magic but used in ways we had never seen before or since. I had a theory that no one wanted me to test, but I knew that whatever was behind the wards must be important so I decided to do it anyway. I used my own blood to break through.”

Potter looked confused, but Draco groaned and said “And I assume you realised after the event that something like that would leave a magical trace leading directly back to you?”

“Yes.” Said Hermione, slightly defensively. “As I said, I wouldn’t do it now. But it did mean we were able to access her research which has been invaluable in my study of dark magic.”

And essentially put a target on your back, Draco didn’t add as he knew she wouldn’t appreciate it. If there was something Bellatrix wanted, and she knew that Hermione had it, Draco shuddered to think of the lengths to which she would go to get it.

“Okay, leaving behind questionable decisions that we can’t change” said Potter, a tad impatiently “does that mean she was looking for her research?”

“I have to assume so” said Hermione “since it’s the only thing of hers that I’ve got.”

“Was there anything in there that seemed particularly important or significant?” Draco asked.

“Yes, but I don’t think now is the time to discuss it. The next step is to ensure the safety of those she’s most likely to target, and I need to inform Kingsley of what’s happened. I also think we might be able to use that knife to our advantage. If I’m right, and that’s how she traced us, then I might be able to reverse engineer the curse to help us locate her. Or at least locate the knife.”

“Okay” said Potter slowly, “how will you do that?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I think if I use blood from someone she’s cut with that knife I’ll be able to work something out.”

Draco thought she probably meant her own, so said “I think it’s safest to use mine. I was cut recently, and it was my blood she alluded to. I’ll do it.”

Hermione smiled and nodded at him “Thanks, Draco, I think that’s sensible. We also don’t know for sure that it’s the same knife she used on me – for all we know she had more than one.”

Potter cut in at that point saying “Of course it’s not the one she used on you. That’s the one she threw at... at Dobby.”

Draco could tell that, even all these years later, the death of the elf affected Potter. He felt a sharp pang of guilt for the way his father used to treat Dobby, and shame that he never did anything to prevent it. Before he could get lost in the feeling, Hermione spoke.

“That knife disappeared at Shell Cottage. I think it is a fairly safe assumption that it was spelled to return to Bellatrix, since it was a powerful and valuable magical object that I doubt she would have casually thrown around without the ability to get it back. If it works the way I think it does then it would be a significant vulnerability if it fell into the wrong hands.”

There was a pause in which Draco considered their current predicament, and he assumed Hermione and Potter did the same. After a moment Hermione said “Using your blood, Draco, will be the most accurate way to test the idea so, as long as you are comfortable, I think we should go with that approach”.

He nodded, and she continued “Right, do you mind staying for just a bit longer? I know you need to warn Theo but I want to quickly test a theory and we need to give the others the highlights and discuss safety measures.”

Draco was getting impatient to head home, it was true, as he worried that he was leaving Theo exposed. He was, however, intrigued to find out more about her theory and slowly learning that he was unable to deny Hermione anything she asked of him.

“Of course, whatever you need.”

It turned out that Hermione had correctly anticipated the general reluctance of the inhabitants of Grimmauld Place to move to a safer location, despite it previously being a Black family residence and potentially vulnerable to Bellatrix. In their defence, the Weasley matriarch and her husband appeared willing to do whatever was necessary to ensure the safety of their family, but the Weasel was, inexplicably, incensed by the suggestion that they move again.

Hermione’s suggestion was to see whether Draco, who had not been added to the wards and therefore shouldn’t be able to pass through unaccompanied, was able to break in. Her theory was that if he was unable to get through, it would indicate that the wards truly didn’t recognise the Black family any longer and they could move forward on the assumption that they would not admit Bellatrix. It was not a fool-proof plan; despite his mother being a Black, Draco had never claimed the name as his own. It would make more sense for his mother to test the theory, but he would not call her back to the country and potentially put her in harms way just because Weasley was being stubborn.

Despite his reasonable efforts, Draco was unable to break through the wards. The Weasel made a jibe about leaving him out on the street with the rest of the rubbish where he belonged, but no one

appeared to find him amusing and the Potters even joined Hermione in telling him to shut up.

Once back in the house, Draco concluded “I obviously wasn’t able to break through the wards easily. That’s not to say that someone like Bellatrix, who has a stronger connection to the Black family, wouldn’t be able to get through.” He looked directly at Potter and said “I would still suggest that it would be safest for your family if you relocate.”

Potter looked at him thoughtfully and said “Thanks, Malfoy. We’ll think about it.” To Ginny, Potter said “Where could we go that’s big enough for all of us? The Burrow doesn’t seem like a safe choice but I can’t think of anywhere else.”

Every instinct in him was screaming not to do it, but Draco once again reminded himself of his commitment to being a better man and overrode his instincts.

“We, ah, have a couple of vacant farm houses on the estate. You’d be welcome to stay there until the danger’s passed. I assure you it has the best wards money can buy. You’d be safe there.”

Draco noted the surprised look on Potter’s face, and thought he heard the Weasel scoff and say “not bloody likely”, but most of his attention was on Hermione who beamed at him. He thought he would do worse things than offer to host the Weasel to see that smile.

It was Potter who spoke first (he didn’t count the Weasel’s snide comment) “Thanks, Malfoy, that’s very generous of you.”

Weasley once again wasted perfectly good oxygen to share his opinion “Wait, you can’t seriously be considering this?”

“Yeah, Ron, I am” said Potter, frowning at his friend “I think we should consider all options when it comes to the safety of our families, don’t you?”

Draco couldn’t help but feel a bit smug as the Weasel’s face fell, presumably at Potter taking Draco’s side over his oldest friend’s. His smugness grew when Ginny chimed in with “Ron, do us all a favour and stop being a whiny little bitch.”

Draco saw Hermione try to stifle a laugh as Weasley turned on his sister in outrage. Before he had a chance to say anything, Hermione said “Just don’t, Ron. Now’s not the time.”

At that moment, and to Draco’s utter astonishment, he found himself being pulled into a hug by the Weasley matriarch. Unsure of what to do, and feeling intensely uncomfortable at the unexpected display of affection, Draco awkwardly patted her on the back and looked to Hermione to silently plead for help. He was mildly irritated to see that she simply looked amused.

“Thank you, dear boy. That’s very kind of you to offer.”

“Uh, you’re welcome, Mrs Weasley, it would be no trouble.”

“Please, dear, call me Molly.”

“Right. Molly. Well, you’d be most welcome.”

The older witch stepped back and beamed at him. He felt his cheeks redden and was grateful when Hermione said “We’d best be off. Let us know what you decide about relocating. Stay on alert everyone and keep each other safe. We’ll be in touch soon.”

And with that, she took Draco's arm and they left; Hermione to head back to her home and Draco to his, with the unpleasant prospect of telling Theo the bad news.

Chapter End Notes

CW for references to past abuse

Order of Moron, First Class

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for content warnings

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

Hermione

Hermione realised something was wrong as soon as she materialised outside her cottage. She could smell the smoke before she even turned around and, when she did, she saw what her other senses had already been screaming at her. Someone had set fire to her home. She leapt straight into action, dousing the flames with a powerful aguamenti charm, thanking Merlin that the fire was apparently mundane; cursed fire would have been much more difficult to deal with. Another small mercy was that the fire had evidently been set recently, as it hadn't had a chance to spread far.

Once the fire was under control, Hermione stopped to think and a horrible sense of dread came over her; it was almost certainly Bellatrix who had set fire to her home, what if she'd managed to get to Draco? Bellatrix would've needed to break through Hermione's wards to get in, so did that mean she could get through Draco's, too? Without another thought, Hermione disappeared, appearing moments later at the point just outside the wards of Draco's Estate; she was encouraged by the fact that they were evidently still intact, but she needed to see him to be sure. She hurriedly conjured her patronus, and sent her otter off with a message for him. Moments stretched agonisingly as she paced and her mind raced. How had Bellatrix got past her wards? She hadn't felt anything, other than the quick vibration of her wand outside of Grimmauld Place, but she thought that someone breaking down her wards would've caused more than a one-off vibration.

Before she had a chance to think about it any further, she heard the *crack* of apparition and Draco appeared next to her, looking worried but unhurt.

"Hermione, are you ok?"

She let out the sob that she hadn't realised had been building up in her chest. "My cottage... Bellatrix. Did she come here?" was all she managed to get out.

"No, she hasn't been here, there's no way she'd be able to get through these wards. They rival the ones at Hogwarts." He stepped forward and looked her over as the rest of her statement seemed to dawn on him "Did she hurt you?"

"No, no" Hermione cried, "she'd left by the time I got there, but I arrived and the cottage was on fire."

Hermione suddenly felt a chill go through her, as the part of her mind that had been silently screaming at her came into full focus. She swayed on the spot and Draco steadied her, clearly alarmed by whatever he saw on her face.

"Hermione, what's wrong?"

“Topsey.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Topsey was alone in the house!” she screamed. She saw his jaw set and, without another word, he spun them on the spot and disappeared.

They materialised outside of her still smouldering cottage and Hermione wasted no time; she sprinted up the stairs and wrenched open her singed front door. It was worse on the inside, and the fire had scorched a lot of her possessions leaving them recognisable but ruined.

“Topsey!” she screamed as she looked frantically around the room, Draco by her side as he helped search for the little elf.

Draco ran into the living room, so Hermione took the kitchen, quickly scanning the room as she entered. There, on the floor by the coffee table, was a small, burnt body. Hermione felt her knees go out from underneath her at the sight, and she sat on the floor and sobbed. It was too much; she'd brought Topsey here to keep her safe, and she'd failed her. She felt rather than saw Draco brush past her and heard him cast a diagnostic spell.

“Hermione, she’s alive.”

Hermione looked up at Draco through tear clouded eyes, hardly daring to believe it.

“She’s alive?” she asked, struggling to process what he was saying. Topsey’s little body looked so still, and Hermione couldn’t understand how she was alive if Bellatrix had been here. A sick feeling rose in her stomach at the thought of what Bellatrix might have done.

“Yes, but she’s hurt badly. I’ve got plenty of medicinal potions at the shop, I’ll take her there now.”

Almost numbly, Hermione nodded. She saw Draco gently cradle Topsey before turning on the spot and disappearing with her. Hermione took a deep breath to steady herself and followed after him.

Draco

By some miracle the little elf had survived. She was hanging on by a thread, but Draco knew if he could get her to his shop he had potions that would help her pull through; he knew from awful experience that house elves were much tougher than they looked. He'd never been more thankful that one of the benefits of stocking St. Mungo’s was that he always had a ready supply of a wide range of medicinal potions prepared. He was undoing his wards when he heard Hermione apparate behind him, although he glanced over his shoulder to be sure that it was definitely her. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw her, and he made sure to put the wards back up once they were all safely inside his shop. They weren’t as strong as the wards around the Estate, but they should hold anyone up for long enough to allow them to escape through the floo.

Draco and Hermione worked mostly in silence over the little elf, with Draco fetching the necessary potions and calculating dosages for Topsey’s much smaller body while Hermione administered them and cast the necessary healing spells. Draco felt a singular focus; he would not allow another house elf to be harmed by his wretched family. He vowed to himself as they worked in silence that, even if he had to nurse her night and day, he would ensure that Topsey made it.

Between them, Draco and Hermione eventually managed to get the little elf stable, although she was still unconscious. Brushing his hair off his sweaty forehead, Draco turned to Hermione and said “We should get her back to the Estate – the wards here are good but nowhere near as good as the ones there.”

He took a good look at her for the first time since she had appeared at his home and realised she was holding on by a thread.

“Hermione, I think you should come home with me.”

To his surprise, she didn’t argue; merely nodded. Realising that she wasn’t fully processing the situation, he explained very clearly what they were going to do. He then cradled Topsey in one arm, almost like a child over his shoulder, and took Hermione by the hand. He took them all out of the shop, and after sorting his wards, he apparated them straight into the travelling parlour of his home.

Hermione

Hermione couldn’t remember the last time she’d fallen apart like that. She was usually the one who was cool and calm in a crisis, but something about seeing her home in flames and then seeing Topsey’s body lying still on the floor caused her to crumble in a way she hadn’t done since the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts.

Draco apparated them straight into his home and got her settled in a small sitting room with a glass of firewhiskey and a promise that he would be right back. She heard murmured voices from the hallway, and assumed that he was talking to one of his housemates, but she couldn’t hear well enough to tell who it was. After a few minutes, Draco came striding into the room with both Theo and Pansy behind him. He walked straight over to Hermione and dropped into a crouch next to her, taking one of her hands in his and stroking his thumb over her knuckles. She couldn’t help but marvel at how warm his hand was against her cold one, or at the sheer size of his hand compared to hers. She let out a little laugh, realising that she was probably in a bit of shock.

“I’ve taken Topsey upstairs, and she’s sleeping in one of the guest suites in my wing. She’s stable and I’ve set charms around her to alert us if there’s any change in her condition.”

Hermione nodded and felt tears sting at her eyes. She felt weak and useless, and couldn’t believe she’d fallen apart like that. Thank goodness for Draco; she didn’t know if she would’ve been up to the task of saving Topsey alone tonight – she hadn’t even noticed Topsey was still alive, for Merlin’s sake.

She tried to speak, but all that happened was a couple of tears leaked down her cheek and her breath hitched. Draco reached up with his unoccupied hand and gently wiped them away. Finding her voice, she said “I’m so sorry, Draco, I don’t know what came over me. I just... I saw her and I thought she was dead and something in me just snapped.”

“It’s ok, Hermione. You weren’t alone. Between us we were able to get her the help she needed. I think we make a pretty good team, don’t you?”

She gave him a watery smile, and Draco stood up.

Clearly taking that as his cue, Theo burst out “Will someone please tell us what in the name of Salazar is going on here? Draco comes home, looking like he’s seen old snake face rise from the dead, says there’s something he needs to tell us and then a bloody otter comes in and summons him away. The next thing we know you’re back with a half-dead house elf and Granger looks like she’s about to faint. What the fuck happened on your date?”

Hermione watched Draco as he slumped backwards into a wingback chair by the fire, and ran a hand over his face. He looked as tired as she felt. He looked at her and said “I almost forgot that was today.”

She nodded her agreement, it felt like their date had been a lifetime ago.

Pansy piped up “Draco, please, you’re scaring us. What happened?”

Between the two of them, Hermione and Draco managed to summarise the events of the evening. They glossed over some of their conversation with Harry but otherwise told them everything. When they had finished explaining, Hermione looked up and saw Pansy’s face had drained of all colour and Theo was looking at them with an incredulous expression.

“And at no point in any of that did you think to use your ring?” asked Theo quietly.

Draco looked anguished, and Pansy put a placating hand on Theo’s arm, but Theo brushed her off.

“No, Pans, don’t think I don’t know why you didn’t call us there!” Theo was clearly incensed.

Draco said in a quiet voice “Theo, mate, it wasn’t just that. We were trying to get out of there without violence and the two of you arriving would have probably sparked a duel.”

“And that was the reason you didn’t use it, was it Draco? It wasn’t that you decided I wouldn’t be able to handle it and then realised afterwards that it probably wouldn’t have helped anyway?” Theo raised an eyebrow at Draco and snorted when he didn’t say anything. Hermione shouldn’t have been so surprised by how perceptive Theo was. He’d been just behind her in terms of grades at Hogwarts, but somehow his irreverent and slightly chaotic personality often masked his intelligence.

“It wasn’t that I thought you couldn’t handle it, I just didn’t want to do that to you if I didn’t have to.”

“And then when Granger’s home was set on fire, or when you were trying to save the elf, you didn’t think some back up would be helpful then?”

Hermione looked over at Draco and saw surprise on his face. It clearly hadn’t occurred to him, just as it hadn’t occurred to her. In hindsight, they had left themselves quite exposed, but at the time they were focused on saving Topsey.

“It honestly didn’t occur to me.”

“It didn’t occur to you that, given you are apparently being hunted by an insane dark witch, it might be useful to have some backup with you?” Theo snapped.

“No.” said Draco, getting visibly annoyed at Theo’s sarcastic tone.

Pansy stepped forward and said to Draco “I understand why you didn’t call us when she appeared. I think Granger’s right, more people would’ve made it difficult to get away without a fight, but you’ve got to admit it was stupid not calling us when Granger’s cottage was set on fire.”

Hermione felt like this was very much a conversation between the three old friends, but she felt the need to defend Draco. “Honestly, it just didn’t occur to either of us. We didn’t deliberately decide not to call you at that point.”

Pansy gave her an unimpressed look and Theo muttered something under his breath that sounded an awful lot like “Idiots.”

Theo looked at Draco and let out a long, exasperated sigh before exclaiming “I can’t believe I’m going to have to use this so soon. I was sure I’d need it once you and Granger started dating for when you inevitably acted like an idiot, but this is fast even for you, Draco.”

Clearly not having a clue what his friend was talking about, Draco just stared at Theo as the other wizard fished about in his robes for his wand.

Theo had evidently cast a wordless summoning charm, because after a few moments a small object zoomed into the room and into his hand. He strode over to Draco and handed it to him – it appeared to be a golden medal on a green ribbon.

“Congratulations, I hereby present you with your Order of Moron, First Class.”

Hermione didn’t know if it was Theo’s words, the dumbfounded expression on Draco’s face, the stress of the evening or a combination of all three things, but she lost it. She started laughing and found that she couldn’t stop. She laughed until tears rolled down her face and she was clutching at her side, trying desperately to get a breath in. She finally managed to compose herself enough to look around the room, but the sight of the three unnerved Slytherins set her off again.

She eventually calmed down and heard Draco say to Theo “Theo, did you make this yourself?” and saw Theo shrug in response.

Pansy gave an affectionate eye roll and answered for him “Yep, it was his top-secret project this evening. He said that you would inevitably do something extremely stupid in your pursuit of Granger and that he wanted to be able to properly mark the occasion when it happened.”

“Thanks, mate.” Said Draco, sarcastically. Theo responded by shooting a middle finger at him.

Hermione was starting to feel more like herself again now, and there were things she needed to do. She sent Harry a text letting him know what happened and asking him to send a team of Aurors to secure her home. Turning to Pansy, she said “Assuming you were never stabbed or cut by Bellatrix, the knife shouldn’t be able to track you, but it’s common knowledge that you and Draco are close so please still be careful.”

Pansy rolled her eyes and said “Yes, Mum.”

To Theo, Hermione said “Unfortunately for both you and me, Theo, we have to assume she has the same knife as she did during the war, which means we’ll need to stay behind strong wards as much as possible. Draco, too, obviously.”

Pansy asked “Do you have any idea how she got past your wards?”

Hermione shook her head, but Draco spoke up “Hermione’s wand vibrated when we were at Potter’s, so I think we have to assume that it was one blast of powerful magic that did it.” Looking at Hermione he asked “What kind of wards were they?”

Hermione felt slightly sheepish as she admitted “Just standard home security ones.”

All three Slytherins gave her a look, and Pansy said “Well that makes sense then. A witch as powerful as Bellatrix likely wouldn’t have much trouble taking those down if she really wanted to. You probably could as well, Granger.”

Hermione knew she was probably right, but didn’t say anything. She turned to Draco and said “It’s too dangerous tonight, but I think it would make sense if you gather anything you need from your shop and move it here. We should all be limiting the amount of time we spend in public, and your shop is a likely target for Bellatrix, if for no other reason than spite.”

Draco nodded his agreement as Theo stood up, looked at Hermione and said “Well, obviously you’ll be staying here until the danger passes.”

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but seeing Pansy nodding and Draco shooting her a look that clearly told her they would not accept no for an answer, she instead said “Thank you, if it’s not too much of an imposition that would be great.”

She was surprised when it was Pansy who said “Of course it’s not an imposition, Granger.”

“Excellent” said Theo “Draco, go check on the elf.”

“What?”

“Go, you nitwit, make sure she’s ok.”

Evidently confused, Draco left the room, presumably to do as he was told.

Theo appeared to be counting to himself, and Hermione just watched him, confused. After around 30 seconds he said “Follow me, Granger” and led her out of the room. Pansy followed, and they both pointed out different rooms and sections of the house as they trailed up the stairs to the second floor of the manor. “Now, I’ll assume most of your stuff was lost in the fire, so we can transfigure some clothes for you tonight and then tomorrow we’ll send out an owl order to get some necessities delivered here for you.”

Hermione was, again, about to argue before she realised that, unless she wanted to walk around in her now dishevelled date night dress, it was a good idea. She just nodded and followed Theo down yet another corridor. She knew, of course, that the manor was large but she had never fully appreciated it until now. Finally, they stopped outside a room that Theo announced would be hers. At that moment, Draco walked out of the room opposite and Hermione got a glimpse of a large bed with a tiny elf in it before he closed the door behind him.

“She’s fine” Draco said to Theo “I told you I set charms to tell us if anything changes in her condition.”

“That’s great, Draco. I was just showing Granger here to her new room. It’s such a shame that the only suite we can spare is the one that joins onto yours. Terrible, really. Well, it’s been an eventful evening and I need my beauty sleep. Night, kids.”

And with that, Theo strolled away down the corridor, presumably to his own room. Pansy gave a small chuckle at the look on Draco's face and said "Don't pretend you aren't pleased, Draco, we all know better. Granger, shout if you need anything. Night both."

Once they were alone, Draco said "I'm sorry about Theo, I don't want you to feel crowded or under any pressure. We have plenty of suites that don't join directly to mine, if you'd prefer?"

Hermione smiled and shook her head "It's fine, Draco. I see the adjoining rooms as a perk of the situation if I'm honest."

He smiled at her, and tucked a curl behind her ear. "This goes without saying, but tonight did not go the way I'd hoped." She smiled back at him and said "Oh, you weren't hoping for your deranged aunt to crash our date and set fire to my home? Weird."

He chuckled and leant down, brushing his nose against hers before bringing their lips together in a soft kiss. "Cheeky witch. You should have everything in there, but let me know if there's anything else you need. I'll see you in the morning."

As the door that evidently led to his suite closed behind him, Hermione let out a sigh and walked into her own room, thinking that it definitely wasn't the way she had wanted the night to end, either.

Chapter End Notes

CW burns

CW burning down of a home

CW near death of a character

Does She Have a Nose?

Hermione

Hermione didn't immediately open her eyes when she woke the next morning. She took a moment to think through the events of the previous night and try to make some sense of them in her mind. The one thing that she kept circling back to was the inescapable truth that Bellatrix was back. She'd failed to prevent it, and the guilt of that sat like a lead weight in her stomach. She was furious with herself for allowing Bellatrix's return to upset her enough that she made some terrible calls, from not recognising that Topsey was still alive to failing to call for help when they were saving her. She quietly resolved to do better; now that she knew Bellatrix was back, she could steel herself against the traitorous part of her brain that seemed to be stalled by the stress of seeing her.

Hermione heard a throat clear and felt her mattress shift without her having moved. In a panic, she sat bolt upright and grabbed her wand from the nightstand, pointing it towards the foot of her bed.

"Theo!"

Theo was sitting cross legged at the end of her bed, leaning against a bed post and giving her a wide, open smile.

"Morning, Sunshine!"

"Theo, what on Earth do you think you're doing in my bed!"

"I'm not in your bed, Sunshine, I'm *on* your bed. And if you keep up that tone, I'm going to have to reevaluate my nickname for you. It is decidedly un-Sunshine like." He frowned at her, as though she was the one behaving rudely.

Breathing heavily, Hermione tried to slow her racing heart while she debated the merits of hexing Theo on principle. Deciding, for the moment, that violence wasn't the answer, she drew in a long breath and let it out slowly before asking again.

"Ok, Theo, what on Earth do you think you're doing *on* my bed? And how long have you been there?"

"To answer your second question first, I have been here for approximately five minutes. I was going to wake you but you seemed peaceful so I didn't want to disturb your sleep." Hermione scowled; the better way to not disturb her would have been to refrain from sneaking into her room. She was beginning to reconsider the hexing situation.

"And to answer your first question, Sunshine, I realised that in all the excitement of last night I forgot to ask a very important question. Does she have a nose?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Bellatrix. Does she have a nose?" Theo asked, slowly, as though he thought Hermione was being a bit slow.

"I... of course she has a nose, Theo, what are you talking about?"

Theo's face fell, and on anyone else it would've looked almost comical, but Hermione could tell he was genuinely disappointed.

"I thought, since old snake face didn't have one when he came back, that maybe it was a common feature of resurrection by horcrux. She was always vain so I'd have loved to see her face if she realised she didn't have a nose."

"Right" said Hermione, thinking it was too early to be having such a strange conversation "well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, Theo. I think... old snake face's lack of a nose was a feature of his use of multiple horcruxes. I've not heard accounts of it having happened to anyone who used a single horcrux, although information is, of course, extremely limited."

"Ha, you sound like such a swot even when you're half asleep!" Laughed Theo, having apparently recovered from his brief spell of melancholy over the continued existence of Bellatrix's nose.

Hermione sighed, irritated by how difficult it was to stay annoyed with Theo for any length of time.

"Right, well, was that it then?"

"Yep, thanks Sunshine!"

"Hang on, why didn't you ask Draco?"

"I tried, but he wasn't in his room. See you at breakfast!"

And with that, Theo sprang off of Hermione's bed and jogged over to the door, giving her a little wave as he walked out of the room.

Shaking her head and thinking that had to be one of the weirder ways she had been woken up, Hermione decided that she might as well get up and face the day. She was exhausted from the events of the previous evening, but there were things that needed to be done now that she was awake.

She yawned, stretched and scooted out of the massive four poster bed. She'd been in too much of a daze to take in her surroundings the night before, so she waved her wand to open the heavy curtains and took a good look around the room. It was large and airy; modern but with traditional features embedded, and decorated in various shades of cream, with a green plush rug at the end of the bed, green bedding, and green accents on the walls. The overall effect was very calming. Along one wall was a row of bookshelves that she was itching to explore, and another wall was made up almost entirely of floor to ceiling windows looking out over the grounds of the estate. There was a dressing table next to a door which she knew led to a spacious ensuite bathroom, complete with an enormous sunken bath which reminded her of the one in the prefects' bathroom at Hogwarts. Hermione remembered that Pansy had also been a prefect, and wondered if that was in fact her inspiration for the room.

Hermione walked around the space, inspecting features and generally familiarising herself with her surroundings. She stopped in front of the carved wooden door that stood in the wall directly opposite her bed; the one that led to Draco's suite. She considered knocking, but remembered that Theo said he wasn't in there. Suppressing a pang of disappointment, she headed into the bathroom to wash. Since she only had the hastily transfigured clothes that Pansy had sent down for her to sleep in or her disheveled dress from the night before to choose from, Hermione opted to perform a

few cleaning and transfiguration spells on her dress. She was relatively pleased with the result; a cute green sundress now replaced the much more formal one she had worn on her date with Draco.

Feeling as clean as she was likely to feel without having a long soak in the bath, Hermione left her room and wandered in the direction of the kitchen. She thought it would likely take her quite some time before she felt confident navigating the huge manor, but she eventually heard the muffled sound of voices and followed them into the kitchen.

As she walked in, she saw Pansy sitting at the kitchen island with a coffee, flicking through what looked like a muggle fashion magazine and looking frustratingly perky for so early in the morning. Theo was standing at the hob, flipping a pancake with much more confidence than was warranted for someone who, to her knowledge, possessed no cooking skills. Draco, to her disappointment, was nowhere in sight.

Hermione poured herself a cup of coffee from the French Press and sat down next to Pansy, who looked up at her and, by way of greeting, said “Morning Granger, you look like shit.”

Hermione blinked at her, and opted not to respond to that comment in favour of taking a sip of her coffee. She felt like it had been a long morning but she had probably only been awake for about half an hour. Much to most people’s surprise, Hermione was not a morning person; it took her a minimum of an hour and two cups of coffee before she felt ready to deal with other people on her best days. The dynamic of having house mates was going to take some getting used to.

Theo didn’t help the matter by turning and giving her a shit eating grin before remarking “I hope you slept well, and enjoyed the personal wake-up call!”

Deciding to nip this in the bud now, as she sensed that she was in danger of Theo deciding to make a habit of letting himself into her room in the mornings, she responded by sending a mild stinging jinx in his direction.

Theo yelped and jumped slightly as her jinx made contact and looked at her with wounded eyes. She gave him a saccharine smile and took another sip of her coffee. A grin spread slowly over Theo’s face as he said “Skipping passive and going straight for aggressive. I like it, Granger, very Gryffindor of you.”

Before Hermione could reply to make sure he understood that, if he came into her room uninvited again, she would make the stinging jinx seem mild in comparison, Pansy sat up straighter and asked “Wait, Theo gave you a personal wake-up call?”

“Yes” said Hermione, scowling “I woke up and he was in my bed!”

“Why were you in Hermione’s bed, Theo?” drawled a deep voice from the doorway. Hermione smiled as Draco walked into the room. She looked at Theo to see how he would react to the unexpected appearance of her... well, they hadn’t really talked about what they were to each other yet.

Theo, however, was not at all chastened and simply huffed “For the last time, I was not *in* your bed, Sunshine, I was *on* your bed! Ow!” Theo jumped and rubbed his bum, and Hermione saw Draco smirk. Hermione concluded that Draco must have also sent a stinging jinx at Theo, as Theo triumphantly declared that Hermione’s had been more sting-y before wiggling his bum in Draco’s direction.

Turning back to Draco, Theo said “Where were you this morning, I wanted to talk to you but had to settle for your girlfriend!”

Hermione felt herself blush, but before she could feel too awkward at Theo’s assumption, Draco walked over and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead saying “Morning, beautiful.” She smiled up at him, enjoying his clean, citrusy smell and the feeling of him towering over her. To her amusement he entirely ignored Theo, who huffed and went back to cooking his pancakes.

“Good morning.” She replied, with a bright smile.

Pansy laughed and said “You weren’t that pleased to see either of us, Granger, I’m insulted.” Hermione stuck her tongue out at the other witch and said “Well, I had already had a weird conversation with Theo this morning and the first thing you said to me was that I look like shit!”

Pansy didn’t look at all remorseful as she said “Of course you look like shit, you had a difficult night and are wearing transfigured clothes. It was an observation, not a criticism.”

Hermione grumbled that somehow the distinction didn’t make her feel any better, and Pansy fixed her with a stare. During their conversation, Draco had poured himself his own cup of coffee and sat down next to her. She was pleased when he put his arm around the back of her chair and started drawing small circles on her bare arm with his finger as he sipped his coffee and watched her interaction with Pansy.

Finally, Pansy said “Well, on the bright side, at least all of your clothes being burnt beyond repair means I can dress you.”

“I don’t think my clothes were burnt beyond repair, Pansy, I got there in time to prevent the fire from spreading much.

“Smoke damage then!” snapped Pansy, clearly set on her plan to dress Hermione. Hermione frowned at her – between Pansy and Theo she was going to get wrinkles – and Pansy said “Look, think of it as a perk of living here. I have loads of samples from my line which would otherwise go to waste, so you’re actually doing me a favour.”

Draco narrowed his eyes at Pansy and said “Is that the only favour she would be doing you, Pans?”

Pansy flipped her middle finger at him but said “Well, it obviously wouldn’t hurt to have the Golden Swot be seen wearing the Parkinson line, now would it.”

“Sorry, Pansy, but if that’s your motivation then I think you’ll be disappointed. Until we have more information on what Bellatrix wants from us and why, I think I’m going to have to stay out of the public eye.”

“I said it was a perk, I didn’t say it was my reason. Sweet Salazar you make it difficult to help you, do you know that?”

It was only then that Hermione realised that Pansy was, in her own way, reaching out. Nodding, Hermione said “It’s very kind of you, thanks Pansy. When would be a good time to look at the samples?”

Waving a hand, Pansy said “I’ll get your measurements and then pick for you. You don’t have to worry about it.”

Hermione didn't have time to respond before the smell of burning caught her attention, and the three of them turned around to see Theo using his wand to extinguish a small hob fire. Coughing, Theo joined them at the island and said "Sorry, Draco, no birthday pancakes for you. What is it that muggles say? It's the thought that counts."

Draco grimaced and Hermione gasped "Draco, I'm so sorry, after everything that happened yesterday I completely forgot! Happy birthday!"

"It's fine, love, I don't like to celebrate anyway."

"You don't like to celebrate your birthday?"

"It's not a big deal."

His tone of voice told her to leave it alone, but it was clear there was a reason he didn't like to celebrate. Before she had a chance to think about it much further, Draco finally turned to Theo and asked "Why did you want to talk to me?"

"It doesn't matter now, I asked Hermione instead."

Clearly frustrated, Draco turned to Hermione with an eyebrow raised. Hermione took pity on him "He wanted to know if Bellatrix has a nose."

Draco turned incredulously to Theo "And that was important enough to wake her up?"

Theo simply hummed and said nothing.

Running a hand over his face, Draco was clearly about to say more when there was a noise from the travelling parlour and a crisp, aristocratic female voice called out "Draco! Where are you, my Dragon?"

Hermione saw Draco's face go pale, and he looked at her with slightly frantic eyes as he stood, presumably to go and greet the newcomer.

"Hermione, I'm sorry – I didn't know she'd be coming here. She's supposed to be staying in France! Will you be ok?"

Before Hermione had a chance to answer, the kitchen door swung open revealing Narcissa Malfoy.

Draco

He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. He'd told his mother to stay in France, but he should've realised that she would visit for his birthday. She was the only person aside from Theo who refused to accept his wish not to celebrate, and always did something to mark the occasion.

But the fact remained that it hadn't occurred to him that she might simply show up, and now he'd put Hermione in a situation that must, at best, be uncomfortable for her. She'd testified at his mother's trial, but that day in the court room aside he didn't think Hermione had been in a room with his mother since that night at the manor. He had no idea how she would react, and didn't have a chance to do more than apologise before his mother was striding into the room.

Not once since the war had Draco seen his mother look anything other than composed and elegant. She carried herself with grace and always seemed to be prepared for any social situation. He was therefore surprised to see her standing in the doorway of his kitchen, holding bags which he assumed contained breakfast, and looking as though she had been hit by a *patrificus totalus*.

After a few moments, his mother seemed to recover from the shock of seeing Hermione sitting in his kitchen. Her smile was back in place as she walked over to them saying "Happy birthday, darling! And, Miss Granger, how lovely to see you again!" She kissed Draco on the cheek and he saw her turn and smile expectantly at Hermione.

Before anyone else could say anything, Pansy stood up and said "Narcissa, what a wonderful surprise, it's so good to see you!" and gave her an air kiss to each cheek. Draco was sure Pansy was giving Hermione a chance to recover, and also demonstrating the customary way in which pure blood witches greeted each other. Draco's heart sank slightly as he looked at Hermione and saw she had gone pale.

Without giving either his mother or Hermione a chance to say anything, Theo bounded over next and kissed Narcissa on the cheek, echoing Pansy's sentiments. Draco appreciated their efforts, and was pleased to see that Hermione seemed to have recovered slightly from the shock. Getting to her feet, she held out a hand to his mother saying "Mrs Malfoy, it's nice to see you again."

Draco winced slightly as his mother clearly noted Hermione's extended hand, and the lack of awareness of etiquette that it represented. Draco himself couldn't care less about such things, but he didn't know how his mother would react and he really wanted this first meeting to go well, even if it was unexpected.

To his relief, his mother simply smiled and took Hermione's hand in her own saying "It's Narcissa, if you please, dear – Mrs Malfoy was my mother-in-law and the fewer reminders I have of that old crone the better!"

Hermione looked baffled, and Draco felt for her. He, of course, knew that his mother no longer believed in blood supremacy, and that she was in fact a remarkably progressive witch for someone of her upbringing, but Hermione had no way of knowing that. She composed herself and said "Narcissa, thank you, and please call me Hermione."

"Hermione, wonderful." Said his mother, looking between Draco and Hermione with a glint in her eye that caused Draco to groan internally; he recognised her scheming look and didn't particularly fancy it anywhere near Hermione.

"Well," said his mother, clasping her hands neatly in front of her and looking around the room at them all "I couldn't let Draco's thirtieth birthday go by without marking the occasion so I've brought breakfast for everyone and thought we might go to dinner this evening."

Realising that his mother didn't know about Bellatrix, Draco decided to wait until after breakfast to tell her in private. Bellatrix was an extremely difficult subject for her and, although he didn't think his mother was displeased by Hermione's presence - quite the opposite if that look in her eye had been anything to go by - he thought she'd probably had enough surprises before breakfast.

"My Dragon, I'm so sorry!" Were his mother's first words, spoken in a broken voice that hurt Draco's heart, after he had explained the events of the previous evening. They'd enjoyed a pleasant

breakfast together - his mother had brought a selection of Draco's favourite pastries from the Patisserie near their estate in France - and afterwards he suggested that he and his mother take a walk around the grounds. He knew she wouldn't take the news well and he wanted to give her privacy so that she didn't feel the need to pretend she was unaffected.

"Mother, we've talked about this. You're not responsible for her actions."

"Yes, but Draco..."

"No, mother. This is not your fault. You can't control what she does any more than I can. Do you blame me what she's done?"

"Of course not, Draco." She was silent for a few moments before asking in a small voice "Did she hurt you again?"

Draco couldn't help a small grimace but said "No, she didn't hurt either of us. We were, of course, a little shaken but Hermione managed to get us away without a confrontation. But you will understand why it would be inadvisable for us to go out for dinner this evening."

His mother took a deep breath and seemed to pull herself together; Draco could almost see her rebuilding the walls she hid behind around everyone except him. He saw her give him a look out of the side of her eye, and he could tell that she was feeling more like herself again as she said "And why, may I ask, were you with Miss Granger?"

Draco sighed. He had been planning on telling his mother about Hermione, but not until after he'd had a chance to discuss with Hermione the nature of their relationship. He knew, however, that his mother would not let the matter drop and he didn't want to lie to her.

"We were on a date, mother."

He saw her smile to herself, and had to suppress one himself as she said "I see." Her eyes were brimming with questions and Draco wondered how well she would manage to contain herself. His guess was: not well.

"And might I ask how long this has been going on?"

Steeling himself for the incessant questioning that he was inevitably about to encounter, Draco replied "If you must know, yesterday was our first date."

"Interesting. And how would you say it went?"

"You mean aside from my insane aunt rising from the dead and screaming slurs at Hermione?"

Draco regretted his flippant words as soon as he said them; he saw his mother flinch slightly. She gave no other sign of discomfort though as she replied with an air of great patience "Yes, dear, aside from that."

"It went well, I think, although I haven't had a chance to discuss anything with her given the events that followed."

"Quite." Said his mother, in a thoughtful voice, then continued "Well, no time like the present! Why don't you go back up to the house now and see if she'll speak with you. Best to know where you stand, then you can act accordingly."

“What do you mean *act accordingly* mother?”

She gave him a condescending look, which was quite an achievement given that he was over a foot taller than her. “If last night spooked her then you will need to take proactive steps to ensure it doesn’t scare her off. You’ve been pining after this woman since you were at school, Draco, so I don’t want the less sane cohort of our family to harm your chances with her.”

Draco spluttered but couldn’t entirely refute her statement so said nothing. She patted him on the arm and, without another word, herded him back inside the house.

A Difficult 24 Hours

Chapter Notes

Huge thank you to Sniper_Jade for her help with classical music references in this chapter.

Hermione

Hermione felt as though she was in a daze as Pansy took her measurements. She had forgiven Narcissa for her role in the war, although she certainly felt like the older witch carried more blame than her son, but seeing her unexpectedly had unsettled her. After seeing Bellatrix yesterday, that night at Malfoy Manor was already near the front of Hermione's mind so the additional reminder hadn't helped. She also couldn't help but wonder if the expression on Narcissa's face had been more than shock; couldn't shake the suspicion that perhaps she had a problem seeing a muggle born in Draco's home. She mentally gave herself a shake; she wasn't usually this easily affected by the opinions of others. But, she reasoned, she'd had a difficult 24 hours so it was understandable. After Pansy had shooed her away, saying she needed to focus, she decided to check on Topsey. She'd been dreading the visit; she knew it was selfish but she was well aware that the guilt would overwhelm her again as soon as she saw Topsey. She didn't want to avoid it any longer, though, so she made her way up the stairs.

She pushed open the door and paused. The little elf was still sleeping and, although she didn't want to wake her, now she was so close she had to see for herself that she was safe. Hermione crept quietly into the room, taking in the details. The curtains were closed, blocking out all light from outside, and someone (she suspected Draco) had conjured bubbles of soft light over Topsey that were gently floating around her bed. The effect was, there was no other word for it, magical. He had also conjured a gramophone which was quietly playing classical music – Tchaikovsky if she wasn't mistaken - and there was a bouquet of freshly picked fragrant roses on the bedside table. It made Hermione's heart clench and her stomach flutter to see the effort Draco had gone to for Topsey; it would be a relaxing environment for her to wake up to.

Hermione took stock of Topsey's condition; she still had a number of burns across her small body, which troubled Hermione. They hinted at more extensive internal damage needing to be addressed before the external wounds were taken care of. Magic meant that wizards and magical creatures didn't usually have the same worries about infections as muggles, so surface level burns would not be the immediate concern for the healing spells and potions that she and Draco had administered the previous night. Since Topsey was still deeply asleep, Hermione just whispered apologies to the sleeping elf and crept back out of the room.

At a loss for what to do, Hermione decided to take a bath. It was exactly like the one at Hogwarts, with multiple different taps all letting out different combinations of water and bubbles. She selected one with an orange blossom scent, and sank into the perfectly heated water. As she soaked, she allowed herself to fully relax for the first time since Bellatrix had appeared in the grounds of the restaurant. Yes, they were now facing an extremely difficult and dangerous situation, but it wouldn't help anyone if she was so jumpy that she was making poor decisions. She enjoyed the feel of the warm water cradling her body, and her mind wandered to what could have happened if

Bellatrix hadn't shown up; who else might have been cradling her body. Draco was another thing that was worrying her; they hadn't yet had a chance to discuss what they were to each other. They had only been on one date and hadn't even slept together yet, and now somehow they found themselves living together. It was something she knew she was going to have to discuss with him but, if she was being honest with herself, she was worried that his mother's visit might have changed his mind. If Narcissa did have a problem with Draco dating Hermione, would her opinion be enough to influence him? Hermione now knew him to be an extremely loyal person, and she wasn't sure whether their relationship was too new to sway him in the face of his mother's disappointment. She didn't know, and she didn't like not knowing.

When she finally gathered the willpower to extract herself from the bath – it was charmed to keep the water at the perfect temperature so Hermione's skin was extremely wrinkled by the time she got out – she dried herself off and walked into her bedroom. She saw a note on her bed next to a set of clothes that Pansy had clearly laid out for her. The note read:

Granger,

Wear these today. I want your opinion on the jeans.

The other clothes are in your dressing room.

PP

Short and to the point, but Hermione appreciated the gesture nonetheless. She dressed herself in the burnt orange flowy blouse and high-waisted dark blue jeans that Pansy had laid out for her. She couldn't work out what was different about them that would require her opinion until she tested the pockets; Pansy had included flawless undetectable extension charms on them. It was genius, and she made a mental note to tell Pansy.

As she left her room, she almost walked straight into Draco, who had evidently just been in Topsey's room.

"Oh, sorry!" they both chorused, and then each broke into small grins. She saw Draco's eyes trail over her appreciatively, and she couldn't help but do the same to him. He was dressed in his usual style, in a perfectly tailored suit, and she wondered to herself what kind of bribe it had taken to get him into jeans for bowling; she was sure he hadn't worn them voluntarily. Forcing herself to stop staring at him, she asked "How is she? I checked on her before my bath, but I know how quickly these things can change."

Draco smiled at her and said "She's doing well. I think she'll wake today. Tomorrow at the latest. It's quite usual for house elves to sink into a healing sleep when severely injured." His smile fell slightly, and Hermione decided she didn't want to know how he knew that; she remembered that Lucius had been Dobby's master when Harry first met him.

He cleared his throat and said "I'm glad I ran into you; we need to add you to the wards."

Hermione blinked, surprised. She hadn't given any thought to how it would work with her living there, but she supposed it made sense to add her to the wards. Still, she knew how strict they were about security and was touched that they trusted her enough to add her.

He seemed to read her expression, because he chuckled and took her gently by the arm, steering her down the corridor. She once again felt as though electricity was coursing through her from the

place where he was touching her, and she really wanted to get the conversation about where they stood out of the way because, if it went well, she wanted a reminder of what he could do with his hands. She dragged her mind out of the gutter as he said "Hermione, for as long as you stay here this is your home; of course we'll add you to the wards. We trust you." He paused and gave her a playful grin before he continued "Also, it would be extremely inconvenient if one of us had to apparate you in and out every time, so this is definitely easier."

She smiled at him, and he explained the process of adding her to the wards as they walked towards the entrance hall of the manor. It was extremely complicated, he wasn't lying when he said the wards rivalled those at Hogwarts, and would require some of her blood.

The process in total took a little over an hour, and Hermione was hungry by the time they arrived back in the house. They were just sitting down to eat lunch with Narcissa when Harry's silvery stag came bursting through the walls.

Hermione, please meet me at the Ministry. No one's hurt, but it is urgent.

Hermione looked around at the others in the room, who were all looking at her with apprehension, all except Narcissa who was wearing her usual (as far as Hermione could tell) calm expression. She made her apologies, and Draco stood to leave with her. Hermione refused, reasoning that he should stay and eat lunch with his mother. When he looked as though he was going to argue she pointed out that she would be apparating from their warded home to directly outside the Ministry; it was extremely unlikely that Bellatrix would work out where she was in time to intercept her even if she was tracking her at that precise moment, which Hermione also thought was unlikely. She promised that she would be on high alert, and that even if she found her, Bellatrix wouldn't be able to surprise her like she did before. Draco didn't look happy, but eventually agreed.

Hermione apparated directly outside of the Ministry and quickly crossed the threshold into the atrium. It was quiet, as it usually was on a Saturday, but there were still a couple of people milling around. She quickly made her way to Harry's office where she found him pacing a hole through the carpet. He was visibly fuming. Before Hermione could say anything, Harry exploded "Forder is a bloody liability!"

Hermione's heart sank. She'd known it couldn't be good for Harry to call her in at the weekend, but she could tell their lives were about to get unnecessarily difficult.

"What's he done?"

"He overrode my order last night, told the Aurors not to attend your house. Said the damage had already been done so it was a waste of resources, and that, if I wanted to play guard dog, I could go myself. Obviously, he didn't say that to me, or I *would* have gone myself."

Hermione felt as though a wave of fury crashed over her as she met Harry's livid gaze. "So it's been completely unguarded?"

"Yes, until about two hours ago when I went over for a report. No one was there, so my immediate concern was what had happened to them. I called it in, and that's when I was told what happened."

"I need to go home, need to see if anything's been taken."

"I've catalogued it already, Hermione. I'll tell you what I found, but I don't think it's worth the risk of you going back there."

Hermione knew Harry was right, but she could hear the blood pounding in her ears and needed an outlet for her fury. She took a leaf out of Harry's book and started pacing around his office.

Harry continued "It's mostly just superficial fire damage; you obviously got there in time to prevent the worst of it, but someone had clearly searched the place and I think someone was attacked; there was a pool of blood on the floor in the kitchen."

Hermione felt as though she had been punched in the chest as she said "That was Topsey. She's alive, but was hurt badly."

Harry winced, but didn't say anything about Topsey for which Hermione was grateful. She was barely keeping her temper under control and having to discuss what happened to Topsey wouldn't help.

"It was clear they found whatever they were looking for; I'm sorry, Hermione, the room opposite your bedroom was trashed and I'm almost certain there were things missing."

Hermione went pale. For what felt like the hundredth time in the past 24 hours she found herself wondering how she could have been so stupid. Harry immediately noticed her expression, and his expression shifted from one of fury to one of concern.

"What is it?"

"Harry, I've been stupid. That room's where I work on my personal projects."

"And you think Bellatrix was interested in one of your personal projects?"

"No, but I think she wanted one of the things I was using. You remember that I made the little null devices for muggle technology to ensure they work without magical interference?"

"Yeah..."

"That was based on something I took from one of Bellatrix's experiments. I obviously didn't take anything directly, but I saw something that looked useful and replicated it."

"Why would Bellatrix have wanted something to make sure muggle technology works around magic?"

Hermione gave Harry a pained expression. At the start of all this Hermione had resigned herself to the idea that, if Bellatrix were to return, she would probably start work on that particular project again. Hermione just hadn't thought that Bellatrix would find what she needed to restart her work in her home. Although she hadn't technically broken any security protocols, and had only seen her work on the null devices as a silly personal project of little importance, Hermione knew she'd been careless and was furious with herself.

"That's not what she was researching, Harry. She was looking for a way to nullify magic. To take back what muggle borns stole from wizards."

Harry stared at her in dawning horror. After a few moments of appalled silence, he said "But, that's insane. Wizards can't live without magic."

Hermione nodded "You're right. We don't *have* magic we *are* magic. It's at the core of who we are. Removing magic... well, in short it kills its victims. It's an added humiliation, to kill muggle borns

by stripping them of the magic that, according to Bellatrix and the other blood supremacists, they don't have any right to."

Harry had started pacing again and was mumbling to himself. She heard the words "kill" and "Forder" quite clearly. While Hermione agreed with the sentiment, and would be having words with Forder herself, she had to point out to Harry that it probably wouldn't have made a difference.

"Harry, it was unacceptable what Forder did and, trust me, I won't be letting this one go, but I don't think it would have made a difference."

Harry looked up at her in surprise, and she continued.

"In all likelihood, Bellatrix had probably already taken everything before I even got home."

"That's not the point though, Hermione. What if she hadn't? What if something had spooked her and she came back later? We just don't know, and he let his personal grudge against you get in the way of his job."

Hermione couldn't argue with that, and the more she thought about it the more she felt her fury rising again. She was in half a mind to send Garrick a howler, but thought it was probably too unprofessional to send a colleague a howler on a weekend. She'd have to wait until Monday to tell him exactly what she thought of his power play. She also made a mental note to report him to Kingsley.

"So, what's happened to the cottage?" Hermione asked Harry after a few moments where they both seemed to be trying to calm down.

"It's sealed off. I catalogued the damage and then called the team in to set up a perimeter. Next week we can get the team in to look for any indicators as to who was there, but since we're almost certain we know who it was that will likely just be a formality."

Hermione nodded and said "Thanks for doing this on a weekend, Harry."

Harry waved her off, saying it was nothing. They realised they had very little left to do, so said their goodbyes and left. Hermione disappeared as soon as she was outside of the building, appearing moments later in the travelling parlour of Draco's estate. She'd missed lunch, so went in search of food in the kitchen and found that a plate had been left for her under a stasis charm. Once she had eaten, she decided to look for Draco.

She couldn't find him on the ground floor of the manor, so decided to see if he was in his rooms. As she turned down the corridor that led to Draco's wing of the house, she heard the soft tinkling of piano music. She stopped, listening to the skillful sounds that someone was coaxing from the instrument. It had been several years since she'd played herself, but she had studied the instrument extensively as a child and she thought she recognised Mendelssohn. Unable to help herself, she followed the sound and, to her surprise, found that it led her to Topsey's room. She froze at the scene in front of her, and felt as though her heart swelled to twice its normal size.

Since she had been in the room this morning, Draco had evidently brought in a piano. And not just any piano, of course not. It was a baby grand piano; a Blüthner if she wasn't mistaken. He'd positioned it at the foot of Topsey's bed, and was sitting playing for the sleeping elf. Hermione didn't think he had noticed her enter the room; he seemed completely absorbed in the music. His face was more relaxed than Hermione had ever seen it, and she was once again staggered by his

beauty. As she watched his skilful fingers dancing over the keys, she felt her eyes fill with tears. There had been no doubt in her mind that Draco was a good man, but seeing him take such care over Topsey made her feel as though her chest had cracked open. She was sure, if someone could have seen her heart in that moment, they would have witnessed Draco's name being written across it.

She was jerked out of her vigil by the sound of Draco's voice. "Are you just going to stand there, Hermione?" He sounded amused, but he didn't stop playing.

"You play beautifully" she said, stepping further into the room, although what she wanted to say was *you are beautiful*.

Before he had a chance to reply, a sound from the bed caught both of their attention. Draco stopped playing immediately and stood out to the side of the piano, Hermione assumed so that he could get a better look at Topsey. Indeed, as she hurried to the bedside, she saw Draco recasting the diagnostic spells as the little elf stirred. After a few moments examining the results, Draco looked at Hermione and said "It looks good to me, what do you think?"

Hermione stepped closer, and peered at the information that was glowing in deep blues and greens above Topsey. If she'd been completely healthy the stats would have all been glowing green, but the blue meant that there were places where she was still healing. If there was anything concerning, it would have shown up in red, which was reassuringly absent from the readings. Hermione nodded her agreement with Draco's assessment. The remaining damage was minor, and Hermione thought Topsey would likely wake soon.

Almost as soon as she had the thought, Topsey's large brown eyes flickered open, and she let out a squeak as she surveyed the unfamiliar surroundings. Before she could panic, Hermione stepped forwards and took her hand.

"Topsey, you're ok! It's me, Hermione."

"Miss!" To Hermione's horror, Topsey's eyes brimmed with tears as she looked at Hermione.

"Topsey is sorry, Miss, Topsey is not letting them in the house but somehow they is getting inside. Topsey is not telling them anything, Miss, but they is still getting in. Topsey is not knowing how." And before Hermione could say anything, the tears spilled out from Topsey's orb-like eyes.

Unable to help herself, Hermione felt tears well in her own eyes as she sat down on the side of the bed, careful not to jostle Topsey's small body. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Draco stride around the other side of the bed and do the same thing, taking Topsey's other hand gently in his own.

"Topsey" said Hermione, voice breaking slightly with emotion "please listen to me. You have *nothing* to be sorry for, okay? Nothing. I'm the one who should be sorry, I said that you would be safe in my house but you were hurt. I'm so sorry, Topsey, but you're safe here, I promise." Hermione felt her tears spill over and silently slide down her cheeks.

"You're in my home in Wiltshire, Topsey" explained Draco, and Hermione was pleased that at least one of them had remembered to actually tell Topsey where she was. "You're very welcome here, and it's extremely well warded. You'll be safe here."

“Topsey is sorry, Miss. Topsey is not telling her old masters what they is wanting to know, but they is finding it anyway Miss. Topsey is trying to stop them, Miss, but they is hurting Topsey and Topsey is not being able to stop them.”

“Topsey, please” Hermione almost begged, feeling as though she had received a blow to the chest at the mention of Bellatrix or Rodolphus hurting her “you don’t need to apologise. I would never have wanted you to put yourself in harm's way to stop them.”

Topsey shook her head, her large ears flapping in apparent distress as she said “No, Topsey is wanting to stop them! Miss is kind and brave and noble, and Topsey is proud to help Miss!”

Before Hermione could reply, Draco said in a quiet but firm voice “Topsey, both Hermione and I understand what she’s capable of. We’ve both been hurt by her, too. We know there’s nothing more you could’ve done, and we think you were very brave to try to stop her. Thank you.”

Hermione’s head whipped around and she stared at Draco. She heard Topsey sigh and saw her slump back against her pillows out of the corner of her eye; apparently Draco’s words had been enough to allow her to relax. Hermione felt as though she was going to lose it. She was dimly aware as Draco summoned some food for Topsey, and Hermione just sat on her side of the bed while the little elf ate. When she’d finished, Hermione could see that she could barely keep her eyes open. Still fighting against herself not to cry, Hermione said “Sleep now, Topsey. Get some more rest and we’ll see you soon. Thank you for what you did.”

“Thank you, Miss.” Said Topsey slowly, as she blinked her eyelids a few times before shutting them. Without a word, Hermione stood and walked out of the room. Once she reached the hallway, she found herself exhausted and overwhelmed, and felt herself sway on the spot. She heard Draco close the door behind them, and felt his warm hands hold onto her arms, offering his support. Hermione closed her eyes against the flood of emotion threatening to drown her. Draco took her gently by the arm and led her through the door at the end of the hallway. The one to the left of her own room. His room.

In almost any other circumstances, Hermione would have been extremely curious to see his rooms. In any other circumstances, she would have been *excited* to be in his rooms. But all Hermione could focus on was the fact that Topsey had been hurt and was somehow apologising to *her*. And then there was the matter of Draco’s words to Topsey, the ones that kept circling around her mind: *We’ve both been hurt by her, too.*

She was dimly aware that Draco had led her into a small sitting room, and had a vague memory of him gently guiding her to sit down in an armchair. She realised that he must have handed her a glass of water when she found herself drinking. After what could have been anything from a few seconds to several minutes, she looked at him and said “What did you mean when you said we’ve both been hurt by her?”

Draco frowned at her, as though he didn’t understand the question. He answered anyway, in a hesitant voice “I meant that both you and I have been hurt by Bellatrix, too. I wanted Topsey to understand that it wasn’t a failure on her part to not be able to fight her off, and I wanted her to know that we understand some of what she went through. Although, given that she used to be enslaved to them, I don’t think anyone will understand exactly what she went through.”

“Bellatrix hurt you, too?”

His expression changed into one of comprehension, and he took her hand gently in his. Softly, he said “Yes, Hermione. That’s actually why I took my mother aside to tell her about Bellatrix in private. I knew she would take the news poorly, as it’s a very difficult subject for her.” He took a deep breath, and squeezed her hand slightly before continuing “My mother was... forced to watch. Whenever Bellatrix punished me.”

Hermione inhaled sharply. Before she could stop herself, she asked “It happened more than once?”

Draco gave a humourless laugh, letting go of her hand and sitting back in his chair. “Yes, it happened more than once.”

She didn’t want to know, but she had to know. “How many times did it happen?”

Draco frowned slightly, as though thinking about it, and Hermione could have kicked herself for making him relive such awful memories. After a few moments, he said “I’d say roughly twice a week for the duration of the Dark Lord’s stay at Malfoy Manor, so about a year. At first it started as punishment for my failure to kill Dumbledore; for lowering my wand. And when she saw how it affected my mother, she used it mostly to keep her in line.”

Hermione was momentarily numb with horror, before she felt her magic started building and her hair start crackling. She was dimly aware of Draco muttering something under his breath but she couldn’t focus on it. She needed an outlet. She didn’t want to damage anything with an involuntary burst of magic, so she did the only thing she could think of that might ease the crushing pressure inside her: she let out a bellow of fury, of pain and of guilt. She shouted until she couldn’t anymore, and then the dam burst and she started crying in earnest. She felt Draco sit down on the arm of her chair, and run his fingers through her hair, murmuring words of comfort that she couldn’t hear.

Eventually, her cries died down and she slowly regained control of her emotions. She didn’t understand what was happening. She’d never been overly emotional, but something seemed to have broken in her and now she was struggling to control herself. The guilt felt overwhelming and she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was letting everyone down. That if she’d been better, quicker or smarter, then they could’ve stopped this from happening.

“I’m so... so sorry, Draco.” She sniffed, when she was finally able to speak.

“What are you sorry about, love?”

“I’m sorry she did that to you. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to stop Rodolphus from resurrecting her. I’m sorry I’ve been several steps behind the whole time, and haven’t been able to work out her next move. I’m just sorry for everything.”

He ran a soothing hand up and down her back, and with the other he tilted her chin gently so that she was looking up at him.

“You have nothing to be sorry about, Hermione. You’ve not done anything wrong. We know she’s back now, and we’ll handle it.”

“I’m still so sorry.”

“You’re not the only one on the taskforce, Hermione. None of us saw this coming. What did Potter want?”

Hermione briefly explained what Harry had told her, and the conclusions she had drawn. Draco sat in silence for a few moments, clearly thinking everything through, before he asked “You said she was clearly most focused on that project. What makes you say that? And do you have any idea why?”

“It was the one she kept the most extensive notes on, and there was a whole section of her lab dedicated to it and... well, I think that is the one she used Theo for.” Draco’s face paled at that, but she carried on “She was studying the difference between muggles, muggle borns, squibs and purebloods. She had test subjects from each, and was trying to isolate what made some people magic and others not. Although she didn’t say as much in her notes, it was clear that she found no discernible differences between muggle borns and pure bloods, but by studying them against squibs and muggles she was able to isolate a compound present in magical people that isn’t there in non-magical people. As to why she did it, I think there are two reasons: humiliation, and fear. It’s a humiliating way to kill people she doesn’t deem worthy of magic, and it is an effective tool to create fear because it doesn’t just target one person. I refer to it as a null bomb, because it has a “blast” radius of about 2-3 metres. Anyone magical in that blast zone will be drained of their magic and killed. She hadn’t finished it by the time she died, but she was very close.”

Draco looked sick, and it was her turn to comfort him. She stood up which, with him sitting on the arm of her chair, made her taller than him for a change. Standing between his legs, she took his face in hers and kissed him softly. It only took a moment before he kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her closer to him. After a few moments she broke the kiss, opting instead to trail kisses down the side of his neck. He let out a quiet moan and she pulled back to look at him.

“I’m sorry, Draco, this is some birthday you’re having so far!”

He looked at her with something close to adoration and said “You’re here, Hermione. I can honestly say that makes it the best birthday of my life.”

He spoke with such obvious sincerity that it made her eyes sting. She kissed him gently again, before saying “You know. I did get you a birthday present but I doubt it survived the fire. Would you let me make it up to you?” She trailed a finger down his chest and pressed her hips harder against his to make sure he understood her meaning.

His eyes darkened and she could see the hunger in them. But he sighed, and said “Could you hold that thought, love?”

Confused, she tilted her head questioningly at him. He smiled and gently tugged one of her curls.

“As much as I’d love to take you up on that offer, you’ve had an emotional morning so I don’t want to rush anything. Also, I’m sure my mother will be done with her tea with Pansy soon and I’d rather not have any distractions when I finally get you in my bed. Worrying whether my mother is about to burst in would certainly count as a distraction.”

She was disappointed, but could see his point. The mention of his mother did, however, remind her of her earlier concerns. She debated for a moment as to whether she should ask, but, as it almost always did with Hermione, curiosity won out.

“Draco... Your mother. She seemed very shocked to see me this morning. I understand that it would be surprising but... I just wanted to check. Is there anything more to it than that? Will she have a problem with us?”

Draco stood and cupped her face in his hands. He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers before saying “I want to make something very clear, Hermione. It would make no difference to me if my mother had a problem with me being with you. She could rage and scream and throw an epic Black-family-style tantrum and it wouldn’t change my feelings for you. I want to be with you, in whatever way and for however long you’ll have me. But, thankfully, we don’t have to worry about that. My mother does not hold blood supremacist views, and hasn’t done since long before the war ended. In fact, unless I am very much mistaken, she’s quite pleased with this development.”

He winked at her, making her laugh, and she felt some of the tension of the day ease. At least that was one worry she could cross off of her ever growing list. Draco smiled at her, and it made her feel almost light hearted as he took her hand and led her out of his room.

Lovers in the Library

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for CWs

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

Draco

Draco woke the next morning feeling moderately more hopeful than he had the previous day. As he dressed, he thought for the millionth time about Hermione's offer to "make it up" to him. He personally thought he deserved an actual Order of Merlin, First Class, (or another Order of Moron, depending on how he looked at it) for turning down that offer, but he was glad he had. He had already ruined the first time they were intimate; he wasn't about to let things go any further under less-than-ideal circumstances. Given how upset she had been yesterday, he thought that certainly counted.

He checked on Topsey before heading down to breakfast. The little elf was still sleeping, but he was pleased to see that the burns on her skin had finally healed. He knew that meant the internal damage must be gone too, but he cast a quick diagnostic charm to check. Sure enough, everything came back green. He smiled to himself as he crept quietly out of the room; Topsey was going to be fine.

He'd finished his breakfast and was just thinking he might go for a fly around the grounds when he almost walked straight into Hermione in the entrance hall.

"Draco! I've been looking for you!"

He started and turned around. He couldn't help the wide grin that spread across his face at the sight of her standing in his hallway as though it were completely normal. If it were up to him, it *would* become normal. But, since they had so far only had one date, he decided to keep that thought to himself. It wouldn't do to scare her off.

"Good morning, I hope you slept well." He said as he walked over to her and brushed his lips across her forehead. She looked lovely in a casual but well fitted flowery blue dress and he felt instantly happier in her presence.

"I did, thank you." She smiled at him, and all was right with the world. She continued "Are you busy?"

"No, I've got nothing planned today."

She beamed at him as she asked "Would you mind giving me a tour, then?"

He could've kicked himself; he couldn't believe none of them had thought to give her a tour of the manor. He readily agreed, and offered her his arm to begin showing her around. He was pleased to see her face light up as she walked around the house; Pansy had done an excellent job of

redecorating. He didn't think he was imagining the little sparks between them as they walked around; he was thrilled to be touching her, and he thought she seemed to be feeling the same way. The little smile she gave him every time he took her arm emboldened him, so he moved a hand to the small of her back to guide her around the house. It took all of his focus to keep showing her around and not pull her directly into his bedroom.

He kept the best room for last, knowing it was the one that she would be most anxious to see. He indulged in a little drama for the big reveal; he was certain the room wouldn't disappoint, so he wanted to make the most of the moment. He covered her eyes with his hands as he used wandless magic to open the doors. He decided to make her wait; drawing out the suspense until they had taken a few steps into the room to maximise the impact.

"Are you ready, Hermione?" he whispered against her ear, and he was thrilled to feel a little shiver go through her. Whether it was proximity to him that elicited such a response, or the prospect of seeing the library, he didn't know and didn't want to know. He would believe it was him unless she decided to tell him otherwise.

He removed his hands from her eyes and she squealed, there was no other word for it, and he couldn't help but grin as she bounced up and down on the spot in excitement. She spun around to take it all in and, as he watched her, he felt his heart swell with affection. Someone not actively trying to pace their emotions so as not to scare off the object of their affection, would probably call the feeling love.

Hermione

Hermione didn't think she had ever seen a more beautiful room in her life. It was as tall as the manor itself, with massive floor to ceiling windows breaking up the bookshelves to allow light to stream in. There were plants scattered around the shelves and hanging from hooks, and the walls were painted in a light shade of cream. The overall effect was incredibly peaceful, although it certainly didn't have that effect on her. She was itching to explore, and could feel that she was physically vibrating.

She heard a soft chuckle next to her, and Draco's lips brushed the shell of her ear as he whispered "Go and explore." She didn't need to be told twice, although the feel of his lips against her sent an entirely different type of thrill through her and she was momentarily distracted; a feat in itself given the treasure trove in front of her.

She didn't know how long she spent wandering through the stacks, but by the time she returned to Draco he had settled down with tea service and was sitting on one of the many sofas scattered about the room, reading a book of his own. He took one look at her and laughed at the armful of books she was holding.

"Hermione, you're living here at the moment, love, you don't have to take everything with you; it'll still be waiting here."

"Trust me, if I had taken everything I wanted with me I wouldn't be able to walk right now – I'd be crushed under the weight of every single book in this library." She thought the smile on her face might now be permanent; her muscles fused in that position.

He rolled his eyes but she saw a flash of heat in them as he carefully marked his page and set his book down next to him. She watched him as he stood, conjured a wicker basket and held it out to her for her to put the books in.

“Would you like these sent to your room?”

“Yes please.” She breathed, almost unable to speak. She couldn’t put her finger on what had happened, but somewhere between him marking the page in his book and coming to stand in front of her, the atmosphere had shifted. The space between them was suddenly filled with tension, making it very difficult for her to stay standing a couple of feet away from him; the urge to be touching him, pressing against him, was suddenly overwhelming. She felt as though the teasing glances and touches they had been sharing all morning as he showed her around the manor had been leading to this. Their eyes met and she saw her own need reflected back at her; her skin felt electrified and he hadn’t so much as touched her yet. The room, which had previously felt so large, suddenly felt small as Draco’s presence grew until he was the only thing she saw.

She wasn’t sure exactly how she ended up pressed against a bookshelf, but she had no complaints as Draco’s body crowded hers. He ran a hand up her arm and tangled it in her hair, using it to gently guide her face up to his as his lips met hers in a rush of need. Her response was not gentle, and she crushed her lips against his, pressing every part of herself against him, desperate to feel him. His answering groan was enough to send her head spinning, as he grabbed her and picked her up, pinning her against the shelves with his body and supporting her there. This was more like it, she thought, as he pressed his hips into hers and she felt the evidence of his arousal against her. She moaned, and he broke the kiss to whisper “I need you Hermione” as he bit down on the lobe of her ear.

“Please!” she whimpered, driven by a desperation she couldn’t remember ever having felt before.

“Please what?”

“Please, Draco!”

He chuckled, running his nose up the side of her neck and then kissing his way back down. She slipped her hand between them, trailing it down the non-existent space between their torsos until she felt him hard against her. She was trying to maneuver her hand in a way that would allow her to grasp him when they heard footsteps on the other side of the closed door and both froze. Hermione barely had time to do or think anything before Draco said “Nope,” gathered her more securely in his arms and twisted on the spot.

The next thing Hermione was aware of was being set back down on the ground with the back of her knees pressing into what felt like a bed. Her heart was pounding and there was a building pressure between her legs that she couldn’t ignore. Before she had a chance to look around, Draco claimed her lips in another fierce kiss, with one hand cupping the back of her neck as the other explored. He trailed his fingers down over her breasts, pausing to brush over her nipples before slowly moving further down her body. She whimpered as his fingers brushed the bare skin of her leg at the hem of her dress, and then hummed in approval as his hand trailed up again, this time under her dress.

Her core clenched as his hand skimmed over the front of her knickers; he must have felt the wetness there, as he let out a strangled moan of his own. He broke the kiss, gently pressing down on her shoulders until she sat on the edge of the bed as he fell to his knees, moving their bodies so that he was pressed between her legs. They were almost at eye level like that, and Hermione’s breath hitched at the emotion written over his face as he ghosted his lips over hers.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to presume... bringing you here. I just... fuck I didn’t want to be interrupted.”

One look around confirmed her suspicion that they were, indeed, in his bedroom. She hardly cared though. Most of her mind was stuck on the fact that she was on his bed, and he was on his knees between her legs, and yet for some reason he was barely touching her. She wanted to correct that oversight as soon as possible so, chuckling she said “Draco, touch me. Please.”

“You want this?”

“I want this. I want you. Please.”

The last shred of hesitation fell from his face, as he crushed their lips back together. The frenzy from the library was back, and she was almost bowled over by the sheer passion of the kiss. His hand trailed back up her leg, and this time it didn’t stop. He bunched her dress up around her waist, and pushed her knickers aside before he slid a finger inside her. She moaned at the thrill of pleasure that went through her at the sensation of him finally touching her again, and she broke the kiss as she threw her head back. Draco took advantage of his now unoccupied mouth and trailed kisses down her neck as he slid his finger in and out of her, finding a rhythm that had her panting. He bit down gently on the spot where her shoulder met her neck, and if she hadn’t been so turned on she might have been embarrassed at the noise that left her. He turned his attention back to her breasts, but evidently considered there to be too much clothing separating them. He pulled back, gestured to her dress and asked “Do you mind if I get rid of this?”

Unable to speak, she simply shook her head. He needed no more encouragement and, one wandless spell later, she found herself sitting on his bed in just her matching lacy blue underwear. He sat back on his heels, removing his hand from her knickers and looked at her. Before she had time to feel self-conscious, or protest the removal of his hand, he said, in an awe-struck voice, “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

She felt warmth spread through her at that. Emboldened by his words, she scooted herself back further onto his bed and beckoned him forward. As he crawled forward, she noted that he was still fully clothed. That wouldn’t do. She gestured vaguely at his clothing and asked “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

Another wandless vanishing spell, and he was hovering over her body in just his boxers. She let her eyes wander over him; he was even more stunning than she had imagined. She trailed her fingers over his body, enjoying the feeling of soft skin over hard muscle. He was lean, with an athletic build and toned muscles. She took a moment to commit the sight of him to memory; she hoped to have many more moments like this, but she wouldn’t take it for granted. She traced a finger along each of the long scars that covered his chest; the result of Harry’s ill-advised use of an unfamiliar spell back in sixth year. She’d never realised the extent of the damage. Dropping her hands back down to her sides, she propped herself up on her elbows and trailed kisses along each scar where her fingers had just traced. He groaned and a soft “Hermione” escaped his lips. She leaned back, pulling him down with her so that his weight settled against her. As soon as their bodies touched, skin to skin, he pressed his hips forwards, pressing his hardness against her again. They were only separated by a few scraps of clothing now, but it was still far too much. As though reading her mind, Draco hooked a finger through the side of her knickers, sprinkling kisses down her body as he moved to allow himself to pull them off, pausing only to trace his own line of kisses over the curse scar that slashed across her torso.

He threw her knickers aside and knelt between her legs, leaning down to press a kiss to her stomach. Her stomach fluttered in response, and her heart started beating impossibly faster. The ache in her core was growing unbearable now, and she found herself mumbling incoherently as he kissed down, over her hips and settled himself between her legs. He looked up and met her eyes as he asked "Is this ok?"

"Yes, please Draco."

He grinned at her, and then leant forward and nipped the inside of her thigh, causing her to whimper. He repeated the motion on the other side, and then trailed soft kisses over where he had bitten. Before she could ask that he kindly stop teasing, he dropped his head and licked a long line up her core, flicking his tongue against her clit before sealing his mouth over it and sucking, causing her to cry out with pleasure. She could hardly get enough air in as he set a steady rhythm with his tongue, and slipped two fingers inside her to press on her inner walls. Hermione saw stars and thought she might combust from the feeling of him. He increased the pace and pressure of his movements, and she felt her orgasm begin to coil inside her.

"Draco... I'm... keep going, I'm close."

He hummed his approval, causing a further bolt of pleasure to course through her, and the heat that had been pooling in her core threatened to spill over. Draco had clearly been paying attention to what worked for her; as though he could read her mind, he sucked harder on her clit and curled his fingers inside her giving her exactly what she needed. She exploded, vision going white as pleasure coursed through every nerve in her body. She felt herself clenching around his fingers as he worked her through her orgasm.

Once she was in control of herself again, she looked down and saw Draco smiling up at her.

"Come here" she said, beckoning him up towards her. He crawled up her body, and she pushed against his shoulders until he was kneeling between her legs. She sat up and kissed his toned stomach, feeling a little thrill as he groaned, before she pulled down his boxers. He sprang free and she inhaled, the thought of how he would feel inside her making her breathless. One more wandless spell and his boxers vanished completely. She heard him mutter and the next moment she felt her bra go, too. He brought his hand up to brush over her neck, his fingers gently tilting her chin up as he captured her lips in a fierce kiss. She tasted herself on him, and groaned.

"Fuck, Hermione, I need you."

"Yes" she moaned as he pushed her back against the bed, with nothing now separating them. She heard him mutter a contraception charm, before he propped his body up over hers and reached down between them to position himself at her entrance. Anticipation rippled through her at the feel of him, so close to where she needed him. He claimed her lips once more as he pressed his hips forward, slowly entering her. He gave a few shallow thrusts, helping her stretch to accommodate him, before sliding in to the hilt. The shock of pleasure spread out from her core and a sense of rightness settled over her body as he paused, giving her time to adjust to him. Her magic tingled, and she thought he felt it too as he pulled back, gazing at her with a look of wonder in his eyes. She knew in that moment that nothing would ever feel better.

"You're mine, Hermione."

"And you're mine." She breathed.

He started to move, and she dug her feet into the bed to allow her to meet him, thrust for thrust, as he set a pace that had her toes curling.

“So perfect.”

“So beautiful.”

The praise spilling from his lips pushed her to further heights, and she cried out in pleasure. He shifted his hips slightly, allowing a deeper angle and she almost sobbed as he hit *that* spot inside of her.

“Gods, Draco, yes, keep going.”

She felt the tension coiling inside her, and it was as though every nerve in her body had woken up to experience that moment.

“Draco, I’m close.”

He smiled, and shifted his weight to allow him to reach between their bodies to circle her clit. The added touch was just what she needed, and she cried out as waves of pleasure crested over her. She saw stars, and heard Draco shout out as he thrust twice more and came inside her before collapsing on top of her.

For a few moments they just held each other, basking in the afterglow with Draco kissing everywhere he could reach on her face and neck and Hermione tracing her fingers along his back. That had been, there was no other way to describe it, mind blowing sex. She felt lighter than she had in weeks. Once they had both caught their breath, Draco rolled off of her so they were laying side by side. Their eyes met and they grinned at each other, before Draco leant down to brush a kiss across her lips.

“Hi” he said, brushing hair out of her face.

“Hi” she replied, turning her head to the side to kiss the inside of his wrist.

He tensed, and she looked over at him, confused.

“What’s wrong?”

“You don’t have to pretend you don’t notice it?”

She couldn’t work out what on Earth he was talking about. Evidently, he could read her confusion on her face as he said in a tight voice “The Dark Mark.”

“Oh.”

She couldn’t think of anything to say, because she honestly hadn’t noticed it. His left arm was now resting against her chest so, gently and giving him every opportunity to pull away, she lifted her hands and turned his arm. The mark was faded, but unmistakable.

She stared into his eyes for a moment, and saw uncertainty and fear there. It broke her heart to think that he would worry this would mean anything to her. Slowly, she leaned forward, keeping her eyes locked on his until the last second, when she looked down and kissed over the mark on his forearm.

He let out a shaky breath, and his arm twitched, but he didn't pull away. She kissed over every inch of the mark, showing him in the only way she could think of that it didn't matter to her. She released his arm and turned so that they were laying on their sides facing each other. She reached up and cupped his face.

"Draco, I don't know how to make you believe me, but to me that mark is no different than any other scar on your body. Or mine, for that matter."

He made a disbelieving noise, but she continued "You didn't ask for it, any more than I asked for this" she gestured to the curse scar across her torso. "They're both just reminders of the fact that we survived things that were supposed to kill us."

His eyes had filled with tears as she spoke. Without a word, he pressed against her shoulder so that she was once again laying on her back. He took her left hand in his, mimicking her movements and turning her arm so that the scarred letters were visible: *mudblood*.

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

"Draco, we've been over this."

"I know, but I'm just so fucking sorry for any hurt I ever caused you. Any pain you suffered because of me or my family, I want to make it up to you. Every hurt, every insult, any time I made you doubt that you are anything other than the single most extraordinary, beautiful witch I have ever met."

And, before she could say anything else, he proceeded to demonstrate exactly how he intended to make things up to her. He was extremely thorough in his apologies, meaning they didn't leave his room for several, very enjoyable, hours.

Hermione could tell straight away that Theo knew what they had spent the day doing. For one thing, he couldn't seem to stop grinning at them as they sat down for dinner. For another, he was clearly trying to make as many suggestive comments as possible as they ate.

"Hermione, isn't this soup divine. Surely it must be the best thing you've had in your mouth all day?"

"Draco, stop playing with your food and just eat it."

"I'm so happy you two came for dinner."

"Hermione, did you finish? Draco, you must be a gentleman and make sure Hermione finished."

Hermione snorted at the last one, almost embarrassing herself by spitting her wine out. Draco had evidently had enough of Theo's game and flicked his wand at his friend. It took Hermione a couple of seconds to realise that Draco had silenced Theo, and she couldn't help but laugh at the look of outrage on Theo's face. It took him next to no time to counter Draco's spell, but he sulked for the rest of the meal.

Theo perked up again as they moved to sit out on the patio to enjoy a glass of wine and the warm spring evening. He left them in the entrance hall, running up the stairs and shouting to them that he

would be right back. Draco put his hand on the small of Hermione's back to guide her through the door, and the feeling of him touching her brought back pleasant memories from earlier that day, causing a little shiver to run through her.

"Where's Pansy today?" she asked as they sat down; she hadn't seen the other witch all day.

Draco chuckled "If the evasiveness of her note is anything to go by, I believe she's seeing Longbottom."

Hermione grinned; the idea of the two of them together still felt strange to her, but if it made them happy then she was happy. Before she could comment, however, Theo came running out of the house with a wide grin on his face. Without saying anything, he handed Hermione a small knitted object.

"There, I started working on these as soon as this prat" he gestured to Draco "came back with a dopey smile on his face after seeing you back in April. I knew they'd be yours eventually."

Hermione looked at the item in her hand; it appeared to be two knitted orbs attached together. She had absolutely no idea what she was supposed to do with it.

"Thanks, Theo... it's really... what is it?" she asked in an apologetic tone, not wanting to hurt Theo's feelings.

Far from being offended, Theo just grinned even more widely "Fair, fair, it has been a very long time since I've seen them so you'll have to tell me if they aren't entirely accurate."

Hermione didn't think that answered her question in the slightest, but Draco must have caught onto whatever Theo was getting at, because he groaned and put his head in his hands. Without looking at her, he said "I'm sorry Hermione, please ignore him."

"What is it?" she asked, a little impatiently.

"It's Draco's balls! They're yours now!" Theo exclaimed, as though that was a perfectly reasonable thing to say.

"You've... knitted me... Draco's balls?"

"Yup. I knew from the moment he got back that day that they'd be yours. We were discussing how we were all convinced you'd hex his balls off for showing up at your door, which is what gave me the idea. Like I say, I haven't seen the real thing in a long time, so they might not be completely accurate, but it's what they represent that's important."

"Right." She looked over at Draco for help, but he looked as though he would've been happy to be eaten by a blast ended skrewt at that moment so she didn't think she'd get much help from him. A voice piped up from behind them, and Hermione turned to see Pansy carrying a glass of wine out onto the patio, closely followed by Neville who was looking a little sheepish but happy.

"I mean, where's the lie? We all know it's true Draco." Quipped Pansy, smirking at his obvious discomfort.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh; it was absurd, but she thought Theo was genuinely trying to be supportive. He certainly seemed pleased with himself. She nudged Draco with her shoulder and

stage whispered “They’re prettier in real life.” He rolled his eyes at her as Theo whooped and smacked him over the head.

“Ow, for fuck sake Theo!” said Draco, rubbing his head and scowling at his friend. Theo was too busy fist pumping to notice, and Hermione thought it best to change the subject.

“Neville! Sorry about that. How are you?”

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough, with the five of them chatting as they watched the sun go down. When they retired for the night, she and Draco each paused outside the doors to their respective bedrooms. Without needing to discuss it, Draco held the door to his room open for her, and that night she was lulled to sleep by the sound of his heartbeat and the rhythm of his breathing as he held her.

Chapter End Notes

CW - This chapter contains explicit sexual content. If you want to avoid reading that, then please stop when it switches to Hermione's POV after the first ***
You can resume reading after the next ***

Next Steps

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for CWs

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

Draco

Draco thought he must still be dreaming when he woke the following morning. He kept his eyes closed for several long seconds, trying to hold onto the feeling of waking up with Hermione in his bed. He could almost feel the warmth of her body tucked against his; could have sworn he felt the tickle of her hair against his face. It was a good dream, and he didn't want it to end. Draco swam fully back into consciousness when he felt someone move against him, a smile spreading quickly across his face as he realised he wasn't dreaming. He blinked the sleep from his eyes as he looked down at the incredible sight before him; Hermione, still deeply asleep, curled against his bare chest. His heart felt like it would burst out of his chest as he stared down at the witch he loved.

He lay there for a long time, just basking in the fact that she was there with him. Eventually, though, he knew they needed to get up to face the day. It was Monday, and given the events of the weekend he expected they would be in for an extremely busy week. He shifted his weight slightly, to allow him to kiss the top of her head as he squeezed her small frame into his. She made a small grumbling noise, which made him chuckle. He found it adorable that his formidable, powerful, magnificent witch was absolutely *not* a morning person.

“Morning, Hermione, it's time to wake up” he whispered into what he thought was probably her ear – it was hard to tell under the mess of curls.

“Draco?”

“Yes, love.”

He smiled down at her and helped her brush some of the hair out of her face. She was gorgeous in the morning light, and he couldn't believe his luck that she was his. She smiled at him and asked “What time is it?”

“Before seven.”

She grumbled at that, then rolled onto her back and turned her head to narrow her eyes at him.

“And why, might I ask, are we awake before seven?”

“Well,” he purred, moving closer to her so that he could brush his lips across hers “I thought we might start this week off properly.”

He pulled back and looked into her amber eyes and was pleased to see a smile spread slowly over her face.

“Oh really?” she asked in a sultry voice, still husky with sleep. “What did you have in mind?”

He rolled her so that she was facing away from him and curled his body around her, pressing his erection against her backside and moving her hair away from her neck so that he could kiss and nibble at her exposed skin.

“I think I have a few ideas.”

He reached around her body to gently circle her clit as he moved himself against her. Neither of them had bothered with clothes to sleep in, but he wanted to make sure she was ready for him. She made a little noise as he touched her that went straight to his cock, causing him to groan into her neck.

“Please, Draco” she moaned, and he almost embarrassed himself by coming there and then at the sound of her begging.

“Soon, love, I need to make sure you’re ready.”

She surprised him by grabbing his hand and moving it down and asking “Is this ready enough for you?”

His breath hitched; she was drenched.

“Is this all for me, Hermione?”

“Yes... all for you. Please, Draco” she emphasised her point by pressing herself back against him.

He lined himself up and entered her slowly, groaning as her wet heat surrounded him. He needed to take a moment to just breathe, the feeling of sinking into her almost overwhelming him. He kissed up her neck and reached back around to circle her clit once more. She moaned, and he started to move. He set a slow but deep rhythm; unhurried and intimate.

“You’re perfect Hermione” he whispered, and felt her walls flutter against him at his words. He wasn’t at all surprised that she had a thing for praise “You’re so perfect for me, like we were made to fit together like this.”

She cried out, and he could feel that she was getting close. He shifted their bodies slightly to allow him to speed up and hit the deepest spot inside of her. He felt as though his soul left his body as she whimpered and clamped down on him. He felt her tremble and then she was coming on his cock and he knew it wouldn’t matter how many times he got to do this, it would forever be the best thing he had ever felt. He followed her over the edge, groaning into her hair as his thrusts became erratic and he came inside her.

It took them both a few moments to recover enough to move. When he did, he kissed her shoulder before pulling out of her. He grabbed his wand to clean them up, and then positioned her seemingly boneless body so that she was lying across his chest. She hummed happily, and he kissed the top of her head.

“Morning” she said, making him chuckle.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

“Well, that was certainly a nice way to wake up!”

He smiled, feeling extremely pleased with himself. “Noted.”

She propped herself up on an elbow and kissed him softly before pulling back and looking him in the eye.

“What is this to you, Draco?”

“What’s what, love?”

“Well, we haven’t really talked about what we are to each other. We managed to go from first date to living together in the span of a few hours, and I just think it would be sensible to discuss this to make sure we’re on the same page.”

He felt his heart start to hammer in a much less pleasant way than earlier. He sat up, feeling as though there wasn’t enough air in the room. What was she trying to say? Did she see this as something casual?

Before he could fully spiral, she sat up and turned his face so that she could kiss him. She seemed to sense where his thoughts had gone, because she continued “To be clear, Draco, I want to be with you. Only you. I’ve got no interest in seeing anyone else, and I very much hope you feel the same way. But I don’t want there to be any misunderstandings between us.”

The relief made him almost dizzy and, before he could stop himself, he pulled her into a crushing embrace against him, kissing every part of her that he could reach (which mostly consisted of her head and the side of her face).

“Of course, I feel the same way! Hermione, I told you yesterday that I want to be with you in any way you’ll have me for as long as you’ll have me. I meant that.”

She smiled up at him,

“Okay then, so we’re doing this? Properly?”

“Yes, you silly witch!”

She swatted him playfully then sighed. “I suppose we’d better get up and face the week. It’s going to be a busy one.”

He gestured for her to go ahead. She narrowed her eyes at him, but complied, and he enjoyed the view of her walking naked from his bed to his ensuite, thinking he could get used to the sight.

Hermione

Hermione’s day had got off to a very pleasant start, but unfortunately it had started to go downhill from the moment she arrived at the Ministry. For one thing, the prospect of briefing her team on the events of the weekend made it all seem very real. For another, she hadn’t forgotten Forder’s power play, and therefore found herself spending the first part of her Monday morning arguing with a moron.

“I was perfectly within my rights as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to override the Head Auror’s orders, even if he is the Chosen One.” sneered Forder across his desk.

Hermione could have screamed. She'd tried to keep the conversation polite so far, having met with Forder to ask why he'd left her home unprotected on Friday evening. He was clearly trying to rile her up and, unfortunately, it was working.

"It has nothing to do with that and you know it. You did it for spite. Your incompetence and arrogance could have resulted in people being hurt."

"How dare you speak to me like that girl, I've worked in law enforcement for almost as long as you've been alive, and you'd do well to remember that!"

"Age doesn't equal competence, Garrick, and you'd do well to remember that!"

Realising that nothing productive would come from arguing with him, she stormed out of his office making a mental note to speak to Kingsley about him. It was one thing when he had a personal grudge against her, but something else entirely if he allowed his personal feelings to compromise his professional judgement. She couldn't imagine him leaving any other senior ministry members' homes unguarded after being attacked by Death Eaters.

She'd just about calmed down by the time she walked back into the Department of Mysteries to meet with the taskforce. They were meeting in the training room and, as she walked in, she saw Harry and Draco sitting next to each other and chatting. She couldn't hear what they were speaking about, but they were clearly having a friendly conversation and it made her heart swell. They'd been working well together over the past few weeks, and she thought they might be well on their way to becoming friends even if neither wizard would admit it.

After a few more minutes, every member of the taskforce was assembled and they were sitting in a circle of chairs to discuss the events of the weekend and plan out their next steps. Hermione had just finished explaining about the attack on her home, when a silvery lynx patronus appeared in front of her and spoke in Kingsley's voice.

Hermione, I need you to meet me in my office, now.

She met Draco's eyes, then Harry's; both of them were looking at her with concern. She sighed.

"I might've had a little shouting match with Forder this morning. I assume that's what this is about." She stood. "Harry, can you get everyone up to speed on our conversation from Saturday? I'll be back as soon as I can."

A few minutes later, Hermione knocked on Kingsley's office door and heard his deep voice tell her to come in. She steeled herself for what she was sure was going to be a difficult conversation; Forder would almost certainly have found a way to spin what had happened to try to make out that she was somehow the one who had acted unprofessionally. She knew Kingsley would be reasonable, but was angry that Forder would waste everyone's time like this.

"Hermione" said Kingsley, with a strained smile, as she walked into his office. To her surprise, Forder wasn't there.

"Hi Kings, is everything ok?"

"No, I'm afraid not Hermione. Please sit down." he gestured to the chair in front of his desk, and she sat down with a growing feeling of dread. This had to be worse than her argument with Forder for Kingsley to be looking so grave. She looked expectantly at him.

“There’s been an attack.”

“On who?”

He sighed, and pulled out a picture. For a split second, Hermione thought she was looking at a picture of herself. On closer inspection, she realised it was a woman of a similar build to her with curly hair, but a different shade of brown than hers. She was quite clearly dead.

“Who is she?” she asked Kingsley, with an icy feeling spreading through her veins.

“A muggle born witch called Nadia Hopkins. She was dropped outside the main entrance to the Ministry about ten minutes ago. The Aurors are trying to track who did it, but I don’t have much hope they’ll find anything. This was clearly sent as a message.”

“What makes you say that?” she asked, with a frown. Yes, it was suspicious that someone who looked so similar to her was left at the Ministry, but it seemed like a bit of a stretch to assume it was a message so quickly.

Kingsley looked like he really didn’t want to answer that question, but took a deep breath before pulling out another picture.

“Because of this.”

He pushed the picture across his desk and she just stared at it for a minute as she struggled to process what she was seeing. Carved into the woman’s left forearm were four words in horribly familiar writing: *Where is it, Mudblood?*

Hermione looked up at Kingsley and saw concern in his kind, brown eyes as he said “I think it’s clear this is a message intended for you.”

Hermione nodded, numbly. She stared at the picture for a few more moments before saying “She asked me the same thing on Friday. “*Where is it, Mudblood?*” but I thought, after she attacked my home, she would have what she needed. I must have been mistaken.”

“Given how quickly she seems to be escalating, I think it’s time to bring the full Auror Office in on this matter. You’ll need to work closely with Garrick and Harry to ensure you have the appropriate resources to address this threat. This is no longer simply obscure dark magic; we have a notorious and dangerous Death Eater attacking civilians.”

Hermione nodded absently, her mind whirring.

“And what about your personal security, Hermione? She’s targeted you twice now.”

Hermione blinked; she’d barely registered Kingsley’s question. Forcing her mind back to the present moment, she answered “Don’t worry about me – I’m staying with Draco, Theo and Pansy. Their wards are much better than mine were.” Hermione briefly explained her theory as to how Bellatrix had found them, and assured Kingsley that she would be extra vigilant.

As she said her goodbyes to Kingsley, Hermione couldn’t stop wondering what she had missed? What could Bellatrix possibly want badly enough to escalate so quickly? Hermione had just re-entered the training room when it hit her.

“Is everything ok with Kingsley?” asked Harry.

“It’s the horcrux.”

“What?” asked Harry, as the rest of the room turned to look at her.

“What Bellatrix is looking for. I think we’ve got her horcrux.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Draco.

Hermione briefly explained what Kingsley had told her, ignoring the concerned and sickened expressions on the faces of her colleagues, best friend and partner. She couldn’t think too hard about the message that Bellatrix had sent, or she’d be consumed by guilt. She knew, logically, that it wasn’t her fault, but she couldn’t get the poor woman’s face out of her mind.

“We haven’t given any thought to the actual horcrux so far. I think we all just assumed it must be with Rodolphus, but he wouldn’t actually have needed to have it with him to resurrect her. What if we’ve had it the whole time? A portion of her soul would certainly be something Bellatrix might escalate this quickly over.”

“But if you’ve got it, that must mean it’s...” started Draco, but Hermione interrupted him, mind spinning.

“It must be in with the stuff we took from the Lestrangle Estate. It must be hidden in with her research or the dark artifacts we confiscated.”

“But, Hermione, we confiscated over a thousand items from the Lestrangle Estate. Are you saying it’s one of those things?” asked Florence, one of the unspeakables that Hermione had worked with for years.

Hermione nodded, but Harry spoke “Surely you would’ve noticed by now, Hermione? Remember that locket? There was no way we could’ve spent any length of time around that and not realised what it was.”

Hermione thought for a moment.

“This is all purely speculation at this point, but I think this would be different. Voldemort split his soul so many times, it meant that every part would have been unstable. I think that might have made his horcruxes more volatile than average. There’s also the fact that we wore that horcrux around our necks. Although we’ve studied everything we took from the Estate extensively, none of us would’ve been that close to any one item for that long.”

“So, what you’re saying Hermione is that it could be any one of over a thousand items, and we have no way of knowing which one?” asked Penelope sharply. Harry scowled at his fellow Auror, clearly not liking her taking that tone.

“I think I know how we could test it” she replied “but it’ll be difficult and time consuming.”

“How?” asked Harry.

“Remember when you came across those Dementors whilst wearing the locket?”

Harry nodded slowly at her. She looked around at the room at large.

“Who here can cast a reliable patronus?”

The rest of the meeting passed with them discussing tactics and next steps. They agreed on three main areas of focus: (1) seeing if Hermione's theory about the cursed knife was correct and, if so, working on reverse engineering the curse to track Bellatrix; (2) finding and destroying her horcrux, if indeed Hermione was correct that they had it; and (3) damage mitigation. Hermione didn't like how much of their plan relied solely on her speculation, but it was the best they had to go on.

Unfortunately, out of the people on the taskforce, only Hermione and Harry could reliably cast a patronus. Hermione spoke to Luna, who agreed to help, but that still only left three of them, and none of them could afford to devote all of their time to testing items to see if they were horcruxes. Hermione's plan was simple; hold each item and attempt to cast a patronus. Harry, who had been able to cast a powerful patronus for years at that point, had been completely unable to while wearing the locket during the war, so she theorised that the same principle would apply. Simple, but time consuming and magically draining. There had to be a better way, but Hermione couldn't think of one.

They ended the meeting having decided that Hermione would work with Draco and the two Unspeakables to start work on the curse, and Harry and the other three Aurors would put together a wider team of Aurors to work on containing the threat and attempting to track Bellatrix by traditional means. As they left the training room, Draco took Hermione by the arm and steered her towards her office.

"Teach me" he said, as the door closed behind them.

"Teach you what?"

"Teach me how to cast a patronus. We can practice at home, so it won't have to take up any time that could be put to better use here."

She stared at him. It made sense; he was a skilled wizard so hopefully would be capable of casting the difficult charm.

"Have you ever tried before?"

He shook his head "No, no one's ever taught me and I've never thought to try."

"Ok, that makes sense. We should get started on the curse now though, so we can find out if my theory has any merit. Let's try tonight?"

"Of course." He pulled her into a tight hug before saying, in a low, worried voice "She picked a muggle born that looked like you?"

Hermione nodded. She'd known he wouldn't take it well. He squeezed her more tightly but didn't say anything else. There was a knock at Hermione's door, and they had just stepped away from each other when Harry walked in. He spared them a brief smirk that clearly said they weren't fooling him, before he turned to Draco.

"Malfoy, if the offer of staying at your Estate still stands then I'd like to take you up on it."

"Of course, Potter."

Hermione took Draco's hand and squeezed it. Harry smiled at them.

"Thanks. Gin and I agreed that if anything else happened we'd reconsider. I think this is enough to warrant the move. We were holding off because Ron is still adamantly against it, but I won't risk my family because he's being stubborn. If it's ok with you, we'll come over later today."

"That's fine, Potter. I'll let Pansy and Theo know."

Hermione smiled at Harry "Excellent timing, I'm going to teach Draco how to cast a patronus tonight – you can help!"

"That reminds me, how will we destroy it when we've found it? The horcrux, I mean. The sword vanished after the final battle, and I know McGonagall got rid of the basilisk remains – I had to help her get into the Chamber of Secrets to do it."

"I think I've got a way, don't worry" said Hermione, "let's just focus on finding out if we've got it first."

Draco

Theo had been nothing short of thrilled when Draco had told him about their expected guests after he returned home from work that evening; that hadn't surprised Draco one bit. What had surprised him, was that Pansy didn't seem opposed to the idea. He had explained the situation to her, and she had simply said "Makes sense" before she went back to working on some samples from her latest collection.

Wondering how he had got to the point where he could quite cheerfully tolerate the idea of Potters living on his estate, Draco accompanied Theo and Hermione to prepare the farmhouse closest to the manor for their guests. They had decided the safest way to transport the family was to temporarily connect Grimmauld Place to the farmhouse' floo network. The plan was for Potter to come through first, followed shortly after by Ginevra and their two young boys.

Draco heard the distinctive 'woosh' of the floo, and turned to see the fire turn green. To his surprise, two wizards walked out. He had reached his hand towards his wand before he realised that it was Potter followed by Charlie Weasley. Hermione, however, raised her wand at the two wizards.

"What was the name and breed of the creature you transported for us in our first year at Hogwarts?" she asked Charlie.

Charlie held up both hands but otherwise appeared relaxed as he said "Norbert, now known as Norberta, the Norwegian Ridgeback."

Hermione nodded and turned her wand on Potter.

"We saved two lives the night Wormtail escaped in our third year; what are their names?"

"Sirius Black and Buckbeak the Hippogriff."

Draco dampened down a pang of shame at the mention of the hippogriff he had once tried so hard to have killed, appalled at the lengths he had once sunk to out of spite. Before he had a chance to wallow, Hermione rushed forwards and hugged both wizards.

“Sorry, but I had to check.”

“No problem” said Weasley as Potter said “Good thinking.”

Draco turned to look at Theo, as he was worried his friend might be blindsided by the unexpected arrival of the object of his affection. Draco needn't have worried, though, as Theo simply stepped forward with his arms wide open.

“Potter, Weasley, I understand you've come to escape the fuckery! Welcome.”

Potter frowned at Theo and said “Please don't swear in front of the children. George taught James the word “shit” a few weeks ago and I can't tell you how long it took us to get him to stop saying it.”

Theo just laughed, which Potter didn't seem to find overly reassuring. Hermione turned to the unexpected Weasley “How come you're here? You're welcome, of course, but we weren't expecting you.”

It gave Draco a little thrill to hear her speak as the host, welcoming guests to their home.

“I've been staying with mum and dad while I work out what I'm doing next. I decided to move back from Romania and am considering a couple of offers.”

“You've moved back, for good?” Hermione asked, clearly surprised.

Charlie laughed “Yes, Hermione, with everyone growing up and having kids I thought it was about time I came home to spend more time with the family.”

Draco had been watching Theo throughout the interaction, and saw his friend's eyes light up at the mention of Weasley moving back for good.

“So are Molly and Arthur coming too?” asked Hermione.

Potter scowled “No, they're staying with my current least favourite Weasley while he sulks about us taking Malfoy up on his offer. They're staying with Ron and Padma for extra protection and to help with the kids, and Charlie's kindly doing the same for us.”

Draco scoffed, and at the same time saw Hermione roll her eyes so hard he was surprised they didn't get stuck.

Potter sighed and said “Yep. I love Ron, but he's being a dick and letting his pride put his family in danger. I don't understand it.”

“Hopefully he'll come around.” said Hermione “Let us show you guys around so you can get settled before Ginny arrives with the kids. Charlie, there's an annex to this house if you'd prefer that?”

He saw Weasley and Potter exchange a look, before Weasley replied “That would be great, thanks Hermione.”

“Well in that case, perhaps I should show Weasley the annex, and you two can get Potter settled here?” said Theo in the least subtle segue Draco thought he had ever witnessed.

The two wizards had just left when the floo lit up again and Ginny came through carrying a small boy in one arm and holding the hand of a slightly older boy with her other hand. Hermione was more subtle about it this time, Draco assumed so as not to scare the children, but put her through the same arrival protocol.

“Who played seeker on the opposing team the year you won the Quidditch cup while Harry was in detention?”

Ginny grinned at her friend “Cho Chang – we flattened Ravenclaw and I...” she looked at her sons “I was very happy afterwards and gave Daddy a big hug.”

Hermione laughed, visibly relaxing. She hurried forward and embraced the red head before turning to the two children. The older one, James if Draco’s memory served him correctly, looked exactly like a miniature Potter (minus the scar and glasses), right down to the tufts of hair sticking up at the back of his head. The younger boy had his face pressed into his mother’s neck, so Draco couldn’t see him well, but he clearly had dark hair like his brother and father.

“Hello James, this is an adventure, isn’t it!” said Hermione to the small boy, who nodded his head vigorously before launching himself into Hermione’s arms. He couldn’t have been older than five.

Hermione stood, holding James in her arms and turned to the smaller boy “Hello Al, how’re you doing?” The smaller boy, Albus, just clung to his mother and didn’t say anything.

Ginny laughed “Al’s not happy. He liked living with Rose and Hugo and doesn’t understand why we had to move. James is just excited.”

The boy in Hermione’s arms nodded again and shouted “We get to live on a farm!”

Hermione chuckled and nuzzled the small boy’s cheek “Shall we go and have a look around?”

Draco was struck by sudden inspiration.

“Would you mind if I tell Topsey the children are here? I know she’s been missing them all terribly.”

Ginny looked over her shoulder at him “Not at all, Ferret, the kids would love to see her, too.”

Hermione beamed at him, and he struggled to focus on anything other than the sight of her smile with a child in her arms as he apparated back to the main house.

As he suspected, Topsey had been nothing short of thrilled at the idea of being around children again. She was slightly disappointed when she learned that Rose and Hugo wouldn’t be there, but was delighted at the prospect of seeing Albus and James. She disappeared off to the farmhouse with a crack, and Draco was pleased that the little elf seemed happy.

He, Hermione and Harry had agreed to meet in the grounds once the Potters were settled to start their patronus lessons. To his surprise, Theo joined them.

“Alright, nerds?”

“Are you here to watch?” asked Hermione.

“No, Sunshine, I’m here to learn.”

“You want to learn to cast a Patronus?”

“Obviously” said Theo with a frown.

“Why?” the last question came from Potter.

“Because, oh Chosen One, I want to help.” Theo crossed his arms, and Draco knew he wouldn’t let it go.

“That’s very kind, Theo, but I think we’ve got it covered” said Hermione in a placating voice that did absolutely nothing to placate Theo. Before his friend could get offended, Draco turned to Hermione and asked “Why not?”

Hermione blinked at him, and Draco continued “He’s a powerful, intelligent wizard with time to spare and personal knowledge of the matters we’re investigating. We could use all the help we can get.”

Hermione stared at him for a few moments, then nodded. Theo turned to Draco and said “Aw, mate, you’re making me blush.” Draco rolled his eyes, but didn’t respond.

To Draco’s surprise, Potter led the lesson.

“Now remember, you need a powerful memory. The happiest one you can think of. Hold onto the feeling and let it fill you up. Then say the incantation *expecto patronum*.”

After about half an hour, Draco was getting frustrated as he hadn’t managed to produce more than a silvery sort of shield. Theo was having similar difficulties, and he could see that his friend was also getting frustrated. Hermione and Potter assured them that it was completely normal, and that it had taken them both some time to learn how to cast the tricky spell. That was all well and good, but they had been children when they first learned it. The silvery stag and otter had been dancing around them, and Draco was starting to find them obnoxious.

“You’re both doing well!” called Hermione encouragingly “Just remember to think of a really happy memory.”

Draco wracked his brains. Suddenly, unbidden, the image of Hermione holding a child filled his mind. Except, this wasn’t Potter’s child. It was a small girl with silvery blonde ringlets, and the hand Hermione had on her daughter’s back displayed a wedding band. His ring, his wife, his daughter. It wasn’t a memory, but he allowed the feeling to fill him up and, without losing focus, he shouted “*Expecto patronum*”.

A huge, feathered shape erupted from the end of Draco’s wand and he watched in wonder as the golden eagle soared around the grounds. Hermione squealed with delight and ran over to embrace him. He didn’t know how it had worked; it obviously wasn’t a memory he’d used, but clearly it was powerful enough to allow him to produce a corporeal patronus.

“Well done, Draco!” Hermione beamed at him.

He heard Potter say “Nice one Malfoy, although I would have put money on it being either a dragon or a snake. Gin will be disappointed it isn’t a ferret.” Draco frowned at him but didn’t

dignify that with a response.

Not one to be outdone, Theo screwed his face up and shouted “*EXPECTO PATRONUM*” but only a silver whisp escaped his wand. He turned around, looking dejected, and said “How did you do it?”

Draco gently extracted himself from Hermione, whispering “Give us a second” and walked over to his friend.

Quietly, so neither Hermione nor Potter could hear them, he confessed to Theo “It doesn’t need to be an actual memory. It just needs to be something happy and powerful, something you believe in. You can do this, mate.”

Draco saw Potter coming over, so he clapped Theo on the back and turned to face the other wizard.

“Seriously though, well done, Malfoy, that was impressive! I don’t think even Hermione learned that quickly!” Hermione scowled, as Potter handed around squares of chocolate.

“Here – I know we aren’t facing Dementors, but I always find chocolate helps.”

They had a quick break to eat their chocolate, then broke off into twos to continue practicing. Draco had managed to cast his eagle patronus four more times when he heard a whooping sound from behind him. He turned and saw a huge dragon swooping around Theo, who was dancing madly on the spot.

“MINE’S A DRAGON! Look, Draco, mine’s *actually* a dragon, not some stupid bird!”

Draco rolled his eyes but smiled at his friend, who had grabbed Potter and was attempting to get the other wizard to waltz with him. When Potter simply looked bemused, Theo ran over and kissed both Draco and Hermione on the cheeks before clapping himself on the forehead and shouting “I’ve got to tell Red the Hotter.”

And with that, Theo ran off in the direction of the farmhouse.

Draco chuckled and turned to Hermione, who was laughing at the look on Potter’s face. Potter stared after Theo for a few seconds and then shook his head.

“Well, I think that’ll do for tonight. We’ll have a few more evenings of practice to make sure you can do it reliably, but we should be ready to make a start by the end of the week. I’m going to go put the kids to bed – night you two.”

“Night, Potter.” Said Draco, taking Hermione’s hand and leading her back up to the house.

They once again ended up in Draco’s bedroom, although he was too exhausted by the effort of casting his patronus to do more than simply enjoy Hermione’s presence. She’d just climbed into bed beside him and settled down with a book in her lap when she spoke.

“I’m sorry if it seemed like I didn’t want Theo there. It wasn’t that at all. To be honest, I wouldn’t have thought he would be able to cast a patronus with his background. Most wizards who haven’t had such a traumatic childhood can’t cast it, and I just assumed... but it does make sense to have more help. I’ll add him to the taskforce tomorrow.”

“It’s fine, Hermione. I knew you were just trying to protect him; he won’t be upset with you. Particularly since he successfully cast a dragon patronus. I haven’t seen him that excited in years.” He thought about what she’d said for a moment, and had to ask “You said you wouldn’t have thought he could cast because of his childhood, but what about Potter? My understanding is that he was abused by his muggle relatives?”

Hermione frowned, clearly thinking about what he’d said. Eventually she replied “I suppose you’re right; I’d never really thought about it like that with Harry. I think, in my mind, he’s just always been able to do it since he learned so young.”

“When did you learn?”

Her frown immediately turned into a mischievous smile.

“Fifth year. Harry taught all of Dumbledore’s army. We learned right under Umbridge’s nose, and the noses of her mighty Inquisitorial Squad.” She elbowed him in the ribs, clearly playing, but he felt a stab of guilt and something else. He thought it might have been jealousy, he would never have admitted it at school, but he would have loved to have learned defensive spells right under that old hag’s nose.

She clearly read his expression, as she sighed and said “Draco, we need to be able to talk about stuff from school without you feeling guilty. You were a prat, and I’m probably going to make numerous jokes and references to your former pratishness. It doesn’t change how I feel about you now.”

He knew she was right. He gave her a teasing smile and asked “Oh really? And how do you feel about me now, little witch?”

She gave him a sly smile “You’re still a prat, but you do have your moments. And you grew up to be really quite handsome, so you’ve got that going for you, too.”

He laughed and pulled her into his side. They read in bed together and then, once again, he fell asleep holding his witch in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

CW reference to torture and murder

If you want to avoid explicit sexual content, please skip Draco's POV at the beginning of the chapter.

A Warning

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for CWs

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

Hermione

By Friday, Hermione was exhausted. She had spent most of her week with Draco and the two Unspeakables in her team, Florence and Michael, trying to determine whether her theory about Bellatrix using the knife to track their blood was correct. By Wednesday, after examining Florence and Michael's blood as control groups and comparing their samples against blood from both Hermione and Draco, they had been able to determine two things: (1) Hermione's theory had been correct, the curse on the blade did in fact track their blood; and (2) Bellatrix was using the same knife that she had used to cut Hermione. The curse was fainter on Hermione, indicating that it weakened over time, but was still detectable. It was strong in Draco, leading them to conclude that he was the one Bellatrix was most likely to follow.

Having confirmed that the theory was right, the Unspeakables got to work attempting to reverse engineer the curse. They were working on highly theoretical magic, and Hermione knew they would need to be patient. She spent all of Thursday helping them make a start on their research, but by Friday she and Harry had decided that Draco and Theo were ready to start testing the confiscated objects.

Theo whistled under his breath as he walked into the room in which they stored Bellatrix's research. Hermione had cleared it with Kingsley to bring Theo on board as an additional resource, much to Theo's delight. He seemed thrilled to be able to help, and Hermione was pleased that she had let Draco convince her.

"You weren't joking when you said thousands, Sunshine!"

"No, and I want us all to make sure we pace ourselves; it won't do to push ourselves to exhaustion. I want everyone to take breaks every hour, for at least ten minutes, and ensure you hold each item for five minutes before attempting to cast your patronus. We want to give the horcrux time to affect you before trying, or we could get false results."

Hermione spent the morning working alongside Draco and Theo. None of them were able to locate the Horcrux, but they were in good spirits when they met with Harry and the other taskforce members for lunch. The Aurors hadn't had any luck tracking Bellatrix using more traditional methods, although they were planning a weekend raid on a suspected Death Eater hideout after reports had come in about suspicious activity near Ottery St Catchpole.

That afternoon, Hermione left Draco and Theo to carry on with their work and made her way over to the lab to see how Florence and Michael were getting on. Spirits there were less high, as they were struggling to make any progress.

“You do realise, Hermione, that even if we manage this, we’ll only be able to track the knife? Not Bellatrix herself.”

“Yes, thank you Michael, I do know that. It would still be more than we’ve currently got to go on, so even though it’s frustrating we need to keep going.”

She didn’t miss Michael’s eye roll, or the sympathetic look that Florence shot her. She had worked closely with both of them for several years now, and knew they had very different styles but worked well together. Florence was slightly older, with a calm and methodical style that Hermione appreciated. Michael was hot-headed and prone to annoyance when he couldn’t work things out immediately, but was highly intelligent and tended to look at things in ways that others often missed. She was confident that, between the three of them, they would work it out; her only concern was how long it would take them, and what kind of damage Bellatrix might cause in the meantime.

They hadn’t heard about any more attacks since Monday, but Hermione didn’t let that lull her into a false sense of security. She knew Bellatrix would make another move soon; the witch was not known for her patience. Hermione was, therefore, surprised when the next move came not in the form of violence, but in the form of an emotional attack.

She had met up with Draco and Theo at the end of the work day. They had wanted to stay longer, but Hermione insisted that they keep to reasonable working hours and it was already nearly 7pm. She knew from hard experience that things were more likely to be missed if the people working on them were exhausted so she tried, as much as possible, to keep to a regular working schedule and encouraged the people she worked with to do the same. Of course, she usually took work home with her, but she thought others should do as she says and not what she does.

They had just walked out of the main exit of the Ministry when they heard a shout from further down the street.

“Malfoy, Nott!”

The three of them turned and saw Marcus Flint walking towards them, flanked by three wizards and one witch Hermione didn’t recognise. She felt Draco tense next to her.

“Flint. What do you want?”

“Oh, come now, Draco, is that any way to greet an old friend?” Flint’s words were friendly, but the tone was sneering and there was a dangerous glint in his eye. Draco must have thought so, too, as he angled his body so that he was standing between Hermione and the newcomers.

Flint’s eyes hardened. “I’d heard you’d shackled up with the mudbl…”

“Finish that word, Flint, and it will be the last thing you ever say.” Hermione was surprised at the venom in Draco’s voice.

Flint stared at him for a long moment.

“I didn’t want to believe it, but it’s true; you’ve gone full blood traitor. Your father would be ashamed.”

“I certainly hope so” sneered Draco.

“I came here to see if you could be reasoned with but, clearly, you’re too pussy whipped to know what’s best for you.”

Draco started to raise his wand, but both Hermione and Theo grabbed onto his arm to prevent him doing anything rash. Theo, whether deliberately or not, had used the movement to put himself between Hermione and Flint, too. She appreciated the gesture, but didn’t really think it was necessary.

“Nott” said Flint, with a slightly less hostile frown “surely you can see that you’d be better off with us. The world has gone to shit in the years since the war. Purebloods are being treated as less than nothing, and for what? For filth like her?” he jutted his chin in Hermione’s direction.

“I’ve got enough friends, thanks Flint. And you’re crazy if you think you’ll be better off joining with Bellatrix.” Theo was clearly fishing for confirmation of who Flint was working with; Flint fell for the bait.

“Anything’s better than this! My son DIED, Nott! In St Mungo’s. He shouldn’t have, they could’ve treated him, but they were more interested in punishing me than saving him! By the time they were done with their “Death Eater” comments it was too late!”

Hermione’s heart clenched at the broken voice, so different from a few moments ago.

Flint looked between Draco and Theo “I don’t know how you two stand it. I tried! I tried to get on with life, do it their way, but my SON. He was four years old; he was just a baby during the war and they punished him for it anyway!”

Draco asked, in a low voice “What do you want, Flint?”

“I want you to join us. After everything they did to the two of you, it’s sick to see you now playing lapdogs. Especially you, Nott.”

“Thanks for your concern, Flint, but I’m doing just fine.”

Flint’s face hardened again, and he fixed his stare on Hermione; or the sliver of her he could see between Draco and Theo’s shoulders.

“I’ve also come to give a warning. We will no longer accept being second class citizens in our own world. They said this would happen last time, and they were right. We will not tolerate a society that accepts mudbloods. Something’s coming; and if you don’t stop the spread of those who *steal* our magic, then we will take it back by force.”

With a last scornful look at the three of them, Flint and his silent cronies turned and disappeared back into the busy streets of London.

Later that evening, Hermione was sitting at her favourite spot next to the firepit with a glass of red wine in her hand and Draco’s arm around her. Across the fire, Theo was chatting happily with Charlie and next to them Pansy was sipping her drink while staring into the fire. It should have felt peaceful, but Hermione couldn’t get the confrontation with Flint out of her mind. She’d been quiet all evening, thinking it over, but she couldn’t stand it anymore.

“How could we have let this happen?”

Four pairs of eyes turned to look at her.

“How could we let what happen, love?” asked Draco.

“How could we let people be treated like that? None of you deserved to be treated like that; Flint’s son didn’t deserve to be treated like that. How did it happen?” she felt tears stinging the back of her eyes. The injustice of it all bubbled up inside her and she felt as though she wanted to crawl out of her skin.

Everyone was quiet for a few moments, before Pansy spoke up.

“They wanted people to blame, and we were easy targets; especially since many of us felt as though we deserved to be punished.”

Hermione turned to Theo “What was he talking about when he said *especially you*?”

Theo looked at her with sad eyes for a long moment before he replied.

“Honestly, Hermione, it could have been any number of things.”

“But you think you know?”

No one spoke for what felt like a very long time. Eventually, Draco broke the silence.

“Did you know Theo was arrested after the war?”

Hermione shook her head, eyes never leaving Theo’s.

“Despite never having been a Death Eater, despite never even having been *accused* of being a Death Eater, when they discovered his father had been killed overseas, they arrested him. They never said why, but we think they were looking for a way to pin his father’s crimes on him. To have someone to blame and punish.”

Across the fire, Hermione saw Charlie reach out and take Theo’s hand in his. Theo looked down in apparent surprise, but didn’t say anything.

“It was especially cruel, given the way Theo was treated by the Death Eaters. The Aurors held him for a full week, alternately beating him, using legilimency and eventually dosing him with Veritaserum. When they couldn’t force a confession or find any evidence to use against him, they grudgingly let him go.”

Hermione felt numb with horror, and felt tears slide down her cheeks. Draco brushed them away with his thumb, but Hermione couldn’t take her eyes off of Theo, who simply shrugged.

“Yeah, that was a bad week.”

“I’m so sorry Theo, I didn’t know.”

“I mean, they let children die. I don’t think a bit of rough interrogation should be all that surprising compared to that.”

Hermione shook her head, and Charlie spoke.

“Things never got better, did they?”

Pansy answered him in a soft voice, still staring into the fire.

“They got better for some people. But wizards always seem to need an enemy; some class of people to blame for all of their problems. They always have. And if your enemy also blames themselves, then it makes them an easy target.”

“We’ve got to be better than this! We’ve got to be capable of better!”

“History would suggest otherwise, Granger.” said Pansy, turning to look at her. She hadn’t spoken in the sarcastic tone she adopted when wishing to wound. She simply sounded tired.

“Well, that’s not good enough. It’s totally barbaric, and we’ve also handed Bellatrix the next generation of Death Eaters on a plate. We can and will do better.”

Draco squeezed her body against his and kissed her temple. Theo gave her a sad smile, and Pansy had gone back to staring into the fire. She caught Charlie’s eye, and he nodded at her; clearly on the same page.

Later that evening, Hermione was setting the glasses to wash in the kitchen when Charlie came in behind her.

“Did you know about any of that? About how they were treated?” he asked her, leaning against the kitchen wall and crossing his arms.

“I knew some of it; I knew it had been bad. I just hadn’t realised how bad, or how far reaching it was.”

“I agree with you, Hermione, we’ve got to be better than this. There must be something we can do.”

“I hope so. If not, history’s just going to keep repeating itself.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes, listening to the clinking sounds of the glasses washing in the sink and each lost in their own thoughts. Eventually, Charlie spoke.

“Theo... is he... I know he’s flirting with me, but I can’t tell if he’s serious.”

“He’s serious” came a low voice from the doorway.

Hermione turned and saw Draco standing there. He smiled at her, then turned to Charlie.

“I’ve known Theo all of my life. I can assure you, he’s serious. You heard some of what he’s been through tonight; that doesn’t even scratch the surface. He deals with it through humour, so it can be hard to tell. But, if you’re interested, you should let him know.”

Charlie nodded thoughtfully, then clapped Draco on the back and said goodnight to them both before heading out of the kitchen.

Hermione waved her wand to put the glasses away, and then stepped into Draco's embrace. She took a deep breath and was instantly soothed by the comforting smell of him, and the sense of rightness that settled over her whenever they were touching. As she felt his lips brush over the top of her head, she resolved that, somehow, they were going to change things for the better. She hadn't fought in a war just to allow others to suffer instead. She was Hermione Granger, and she wanted to set the world to rights on principle. But, as she fell asleep listening to the sound of Draco's breathing, she couldn't deny the fact that she wanted to make it better for the man she was falling in love with.

The next morning, Hermione couldn't help the wide grin that spread across her face as she entered the kitchen and saw Theo sitting side by side with Charlie. They both had sleep rumpled hair and, if Hermione were a betting woman, she would have put money on Charlie not having made it back to the farmhouse last night. She didn't want to embarrass them, though, so she didn't say anything other than "good morning" as she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. A plate of food appeared in front of her, and she looked around for the source. Almost immediately, a small figure appeared from the pantry.

"Topsey! You shouldn't be cooking; you should be resting!"

The little elf turned and fixed Hermione with a disapproving scowl, her little hands on her hips.

"Topsey is feeling much better now, Miss, and Topsey will thank Miss not to tell Topsey what to do. Topsey is a free elf, and Topsey is wanting to cook breakfast for Sirs and Miss."

Hermione heard a low chuckle and turned to see Draco walk into the room.

"She's got you there, love."

Hermione frowned at him, but had been thoroughly chastened by Topsey so said nothing more on the matter of her cooking breakfast. Hermione didn't miss the grin that spread across Draco's face as he took in the sight of Theo and Charlie together. Unlike Hermione, he seemed to have no qualms with embarrassing their friends. Hermione assumed it must be payback for Theo's behaviour when he discovered they were together.

"Morning Weasley, I'm surprised to see you here this early. I trust the hospitality has been to your, ah, satisfaction?"

Hermione saw Charlie blush, and elbowed Draco in the ribs as he sat down next to her.

"You prat, Draco Malfoy!"

He just smirked at her "Just getting a little revenge, love."

"I support any revenge against Theo, but Charlie hasn't done anything wrong!"

Theo sucked in a dramatic breath and mimed being stabbed, which Hermione thought was a little dramatic. Draco was completely unrepentant as he said "All's fair in love and war."

Hermione turned back to Theo and asked "Has he always been such a prat?"

Theo smirked “You might find it hard to believe, since he hid it so well at school, but yes, he has. It’s part of his inheritance, along with that incredible bone structure.”

Hermione sighed dramatically “Thank goodness for the bone structure, or he’d have nothing going for him.” She yelped as Draco tickled her, and saw that Charlie looked much more comfortable. She knew Draco wouldn’t have meant to embarrass the other wizard, but since it was all so new she didn’t want to risk too much teasing. That could come later.

They finished their breakfast, and Topsey beamed when Draco complimented her cooking. Hermione had noticed that the two had struck up a very sweet rapport; it did nothing to help pace her rapidly escalating feelings for Draco.

As they all got up to leave the kitchen, Theo spoke.

“We’ve got the ward specialists coming round today and tomorrow to adjust the wards. It’s too big of a job for us to try to do alone, and we don’t want to do anything that might compromise them.”

Hermione nodded and, thinking of the time Yaxley had managed to get past the protective enchantments of Grimmauld Place, asked “How will you have them set the wards? Will we all be able to apparate to anywhere else on the Estate, or would it make more sense to segment it?”

Draco tilted his head as he considered her question. Looking at Theo he said “We had planned to have everyone able to access anywhere, but do you think we should reconsider that?”

Theo nodded, and asked Hermione “What did you have in mind?”

“I just learned the hard way during the war that one mistake can give someone access to somewhere you don’t want them. I wonder if it would make sense to have all of us able to access the grounds, but then only the actual inhabitants of each house able to apparate directly in? We can all walk or fly over easily enough?”

They all agreed, and Hermione was pleased to see that Draco barely flinched at her mention of something bad happening to her during the war, and didn’t seem to spiral at all. It was progress.

Chapter End Notes

CW reference to past medical negligence/prejudice resulting in the death of a child

CW reference to past abuse

The Museum of Creepy Shit

Chapter Notes

CWs at the end of the chapter

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

Hermione

Hermione spent all weekend thinking about the confrontation with Flint and subsequent conversation with her friends. The more she thought about it, the guiltier and angrier she felt. She had known, they all had, that there were people targeting the children of Death Eaters. Was it an excuse that she hadn't known just how bad it was? She didn't think so, and it made her wonder who else had known but chose to look the other way.

On Monday morning, she decided to find out. She made her way up to Kingsley's office; she didn't have an appointment but he was usually able to make time for her unless he was in a meeting. Another privilege she'd taken for granted over the years. She knocked and heard Kingsley's deep rumble grant her permission to enter.

"Hermione. Lovely to see you. Did you have a good weekend?"

"Not really, Kings. Can we talk?" He frowned in evident concern, and gestured to the chairs in front of his desk.

"Of course. Is it the Lestrangle matter?"

"No, although I suppose it's related."

They sat there in silence for a few moments, Kingsley waiting for her to explain and Hermione wondering where to begin. In the end, she decided to just be blunt.

"Did you know how badly the children of Death Eaters were treated after the war?"

Kingsley blinked at her, clearly surprised.

"I was aware that some people were taking out their frustrations, but it seemed to die down quickly. Why do you ask?"

Hermione rubbed her face, feeling suddenly exhausted.

"Did you know about Marcus Flint's son?"

A look of confusion crossed Kingsley's face, and Hermione thought it was genuine. She hated second guessing the wizard who was both friend and mentor, but she had to know. She wouldn't bury her head in the sand anymore, even if it was too little, too late.

“No, I wasn’t aware he had a son.”

“He died. Kings... he died because Healers at St Mungo’s wouldn’t treat a Death Eater’s son – even though Marcus was never actually charged. They let his four year old son die.”

Kingsley stared at her for a few long seconds, before saying in a soft, sad voice “No, Hermione, I didn’t know that.”

She wanted to believe him, but needed to press on.

“And did you know about the arrest, detainment and violent interrogation of Theodore Nott Junior, who was never even accused of Death Eater activities?”

Kingsley looked uncomfortable, and Hermione felt her stomach drop.

“I didn’t know about his specific case, but I know that some in the DMLE were... over enthusiastic when rounding up Death Eaters and their supporters after the war.”

“And did you do anything about it? Forder was head of the Auror Office then. I assume he knew?”

“Look, Hermione, Forder had an exemplary record and had recently been promoted. He’d only been the Head Auror for a short while and was under a lot of pressure. When I learned of the tactics he was allowing the Aurors to use, I put a stop to it. But, yes, I did know.”

“And yet, he still got promoted to Head of the DMLE.” said Hermione, a familiar sense of frustrated anger filling her. She felt her hair spark, and saw Kingsley notice it, too.

“You know he did, was that a question?”

“My question is: why?”

Kingsley gave a frustrated sigh and sat forward in his chair, putting his elbows on the desk and interlacing his fingers as he fixed Hermione with a stare. It wasn’t unfriendly, but he knew he was being challenged and it was a relatively new dynamic for them. Hermione had never hesitated to ask questions before, but she and Kingsley usually saw eye to eye on most things.

“He’s good at his job. We were going through a period of significant upheaval when I found out about the unsavoury goings on in the Auror Office. He assured me that he would make it clear that such behaviour wouldn’t be tolerated and I thought it best not to destabilise things further. I didn’t get wind of any other issues, so I treated the matter as closed and when the time came to appoint a new Head of the DMLE he was the most qualified for the job.”

“But, Kings, you can’t honestly have believed him? You know what he’s like.”

“Hermione, I don’t have to like an individual to trust them to do a good job.”

“But he doesn’t do a good job! He’s a bully and a misogynist and now I know he’s also a bigot who’s happy to allow innocent people to be abused by his department as some kind of messed up version of vigilante justice!”

Kingsley was silent for a long time, staring at his hands on his desk and clearly thinking hard. Finally, he looked up.

“I hear you, Hermione, I do. But I can’t just remove a Head of Department for something that happened such a long time ago and which I, rightly or wrongly, let him off the hook for at the time. Let’s get the Lestrangle matter sorted and after that, if you still have concerns, we can discuss them then.”

“We will discuss it more, Kings. Draco and Theo, two people we allowed to be abused and shunned for years, didn’t hesitate to help us once they realised they could. We owe it to them, and the others, to do something about this. Even if it is ten years too late. We can’t just decide it happened too long ago to do anything about it. It’s not right!”

He nodded at her, and she decided to press further.

“And St Mungo’s?”

Kingsley’s expression darkened.

“That, I was not aware of. I will be launching an inquiry into any unexplained or unusual deaths since the war.”

Hermione nodded. She wasn’t completely satisfied with the decision, but it would do for now. It was a start, at least.

Hermione then updated Kingsley on the progress they were making on the Lestrangle matter, and the warning from Flint. She couldn’t help but point out how they had handed Bellatrix ready-made supporters, and Kingsley frowned at her as though to say she had made her point.

The next couple of days passed without anything remarkable happening. Hermione continued to split her time between working on the curse and going through the artifacts, but they didn’t make any progress on either until Thursday morning.

Hermione had spent most of the morning working with Florence and Michael on the curse, but got tired of Michael’s snappiness as his frustrations grew. She decided to take a break, and headed over to the “Museum of Creepy Shit” as Theo called the room where they kept the Lestrangle artifacts. Unfortunately, even Theo’s enthusiasm had a limit, and she walked into the room to see two dejected looking wizards slumped in their chairs, obviously taking a break.

“Hey, Sunshine” said Theo in a voice that conveyed his weariness.

Draco got up and walked over to brush his lips against Hermione’s forehead as he asked “How’s it going with the curse?”

“Slowly. I have every confidence we’ll get there, but we aren’t progressing as fast as I would’ve hoped.”

“Join the club” grumbled Theo.

“Are you two taking enough breaks? Eating enough? Casting multiple patronuses is incredibly draining.”

Draco smirked at her “Oh, we know love.”

Hermione gave him a sympathetic smile, and noticed that Theo was looking thoughtfully around the room.

“What is it, Theo?”

“Has anyone ever *Finite Incantatum*’d this lot to see if there’s anything hiding under a *Notice-Me-Not* charm or something similar?”

Hermione frowned at him.

“Of course not! We confiscated over a thousand potentially volatile dark objects. We wouldn’t have risked something like that!”

“But everything’s been examined and catalogued since then, correct? So presumably everything’s now stable if you’re letting us hold them? Or should we expect to have our body parts blown off at any minute? Because I’m telling you now, Sunshine, there’s only one way I want to be blown and that has much more to do with Red the Fitter than it has anything to do with the Lestranges.”

Hermione gave him a look to convey her opinion of his crude assessment of the situation, but had to admit that he was right. It hadn’t occurred to her before, because they usually avoided casting blanket charms on the objects they studied, but it should be safe by now.

“That’s... a good idea, Theo.”

He grinned, bowed, then skipped over to her and stage whispered “I’m not just a pretty face!”

Hermione called Luna in, as she thought it might be useful to have another pair of eyes. Luna had been helping with the patronus casting when she could, so was already familiar with what they were doing. Since there was four of them in a rectangular room, Hermione suggested that they should each stand in a corner and keep an eye out for any changes. She was almost certain the objects were safe enough to cast on, but in case she was mistaken she held a shield around each person as they each lifted their wands and, at the same time, cast *Finite Incantatum*.

Hermione couldn’t see any difference; nothing suddenly appeared, nor was there any other sign of a charm dissipating. She felt a pang of disappointment, but had just turned to Theo to say that it had still been a good idea when she heard Luna’s dreamy voice from the far corner of the room.

“Oh, look, there. You can see the tendrils of magic drifting away. It’s quite beautiful.”

Hermione whipped around, and saw Draco and Theo do the same from their corners of the room. They all walked towards the place where Luna was pointing. It appeared to be an old writing desk, which Hermione knew for a fact they had inspected at length and felt fairly confident would not be the horcrux. Suppressing another jolt of disappointment, she turned to Luna.

“I really don’t think that desk is a horcrux but, if you want, we can try it.”

Luna looked at her, and Hermione had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being judged and found wanting. She and Luna had become close over the years, as Hermione became less closed-minded and judgemental of Luna’s beliefs (she could admit she had been rather rude to the blonde witch as a teenager). She knew Luna to be an exceptionally powerful and talented witch, and valued her input on things outside the scope of her specialism. But she was also one of the few

people who ever made Hermione feel like she just didn't understand something, like she was missing a piece of fundamental information that the other witch thought was obvious.

"It's not the desk; the magic came from the top drawer."

Hermione looked and, there in front of her, was indeed a top drawer whereas, before, she knew there hadn't been. She was confident about that because she had admired the desk when it had been brought in, but wondered at the lack of drawers (it seemed like an oversight for a writing desk). She lifted her wand and instructed the others to stand back, scowling at Draco when he protested. Wordlessly, she sent out some of her magic to pull on the handle.

The drawer slid out and, there, on a small black velvet cushion, was a ring. Hermione didn't touch it immediately, and instead cast a number of detection spells to determine whether it was safe. When nothing registered, she gingerly reached out and picked it up, ignoring the worried sounds coming from Draco and Theo. The ring was comprised of a large, octagonal emerald in an ornate silver setting. She turned it over in her hand and saw, engraved on the back, the Black family motto "*Toujours Pur.*"

She felt a shudder of anticipation rush through her as she turned to look at the others in the room and, taking a deep breath, said "I think this is it." It had to be. It seemed like the perfect fit, a hidden Black family heirloom within a warded room. Holding the ring, Hermione felt a sense of unease. It was nothing as easily definable as the feeling of wearing Voldemort's horcrux, but she felt as though her magic was uncomfortable – almost like an itch under her skin.

They all stood in silence, the air thick with anticipation, as Hermione continued to hold the ring. She wanted to err on the side of caution, and had waited for almost ten minutes before Theo finally lost patience (she was surprised he lasted that long) and shouted "Come ON, Sunshine, let's test that ugly thing."

Hermione took a few breaths to steady herself; she hadn't felt this nervous conjuring her patronus since she had last faced Dementors during the Battle of Hogwarts. She closed her eyes, summoned a happy memory and cast.

"*Expecto Patronum.*"

She heard Draco and Theo gasp and, when she opened her eyes, she confirmed what she already knew to be true; her patronus had failed. Unwilling to believe it hadn't just been her failure, she passed the ring around the room. One by one the others tried and failed to cast their patronuses. Draco was the last to try and, after he failed, Hermione cast again. This time, without the ring in her hand, her silvery otter appeared, and she sent it off to Harry with a request for him to join them. If Harry's also failed, she would truly believe that they were right, that they had found it.

The four of them barely spoke as they waited for Harry to join them. There was an excited sort of tension in the air. They stayed silent, as though they didn't want to speak their hopes aloud in case doing so somehow caused it to not be true. After a few minutes that, to Hermione, felt like hours, the door burst open and Harry came striding into the room.

"You think you've found it?"

Without a word, Hermione handed him the ring. Harry stared down at it, then looked up at her and, with a growing smile, said "It feels wrong."

Hermione nodded, and Harry seemed to catch onto the feeling in the room as he stood there in eager silence until Hermione said “I think it’s safe to try, now.”

They all held their breath as Harry cast. For the first time since they were faced with the Dementors during the final battle, nothing happened. Not so much as a whisp of silver escaped Harry’s wand. Hermione couldn’t help herself; she threw herself into his arms, almost knocking him over.

“You found it!” said Harry, green eyes sparkling as he looked around at the four of them.

“Theo had the idea, and Luna found the horcrux. Hermione and I were just here for the show” joked Draco, coming over and playfully tugging on a strand of her hair.

Harry clapped him on the back, and Draco pulled Hermione into a hug “You did it, love.”

She beamed at him “*We* did it, this was very much a team effort!”

She looked around the room and smiled at everyone. Theo had flung an arm affectionately around Luna, who was staring at them all with pride. She couldn’t believe they’d found it.

“Merlin, I hope that’s the only one” quipped Harry.

“Don’t even say that, Harry! I don’t much fancy another extended camping trip!”

“So,” said Draco, frowning at the ring still clutched in Harry’s hand, “now that we’ve found it, how do we destroy it?”

Before Hermione could answer, Theo piped up “Come on, Gryffindors, step up! One of you needs to do something that straddles the line between outstanding bravery and reckless stupidity to summon the sword. I personally think someone should owl Narcissa and tell her that Draco and Granger eloped. If she thinks she missed her only child’s wedding, she’ll definitely *Avada* the messenger.”

Hermione snorted, “I appreciate the thought, Theo, but I think I’ve got a way.”

They all looked at her expectantly.

“I’ll need to get it cleared with Kinglsey first, as it’s theoretically quite dangerous, but I’m confident I can control it.”

Three sets of eyes narrowed at her; Luna alone seemed unperturbed. Hermione sighed, and braced herself for arguments. She knew her idea wouldn’t be a popular one, but she’d thought it through extensively and knew it was their best option.

“No, Hermione.” Harry seemed to have worked out what she was proposing.

“I’ve studied it extensively, Harry. I know I can control it.”

“Hermione, I’m not denying the fact that you’re brilliant, but it’s too dangerous. There must be a better way. I seem to remember you saying once that you would “*never, ever have dared use it*” – what makes this time any different?”

She knew he was concerned for her, but she was starting to get annoyed.

“This time, Harry, I’m not an unqualified teenager on the run. I’m an expert in dark magic and have been studying curses in all their forms for more than a decade.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Luna spoke up. How the blonde witch knew what they were talking about, she didn’t know, but she had long ago stopped questioning Luna’s intuition.

“She has the skill and power to control it, Harry, don’t worry. Her magical signature is quite extraordinary.”

Draco clearly hadn’t pieced it together because, in a tone that suggested great annoyance, he asked “Will one of you kindly tell us what you’re talking about?”

Harry frowned and, eyes never leaving Hermione’s, answered Draco.

“She’s going to cast Fiendfyre.”

“I can’t authorise that, Hermione.”

Hermione was back in Kingsley’s office and, once again, feeling angry and frustrated. She hoped this wouldn’t become a habit.

“Kings, how is it any more dangerous than risking Bellatrix returning *yet again* if we manage to get rid of her?”

Kingsley frowned at her “You know, for someone who was lecturing me on the ethics of law enforcement on Monday, you’re being remarkably blasé about killing someone, even if she is a criminal.”

Hermione huffed and folded her arms across her chest “I’m being realistic. If we can apprehend her without killing her, then that’s even better. But do you honestly think she’ll go down without a fight?”

“We managed to capture her at the end of the first wizarding war. What’s to say we won’t manage it now?”

Hermione sighed. “I’m not saying we should be *aiming* to kill her. But I am saying that it’s a possible outcome. If that does happen, wouldn’t you want it to be for good this time? And even if we capture her rather than kill her, we still need to get rid of the horcrux.”

Kingsley leaned an elbow on his desk and rubbed his temple. Hermione sympathised, but was unwilling to back down.

“I can control it, Kings. I know I can. I’ve studied it extensively, I know how it works, and I understand how to control it.”

“I can’t authorise you using it on Ministry property, Hermione.”

“I’m not suggesting I cast it here!”

“Well, where then?”

“We need somewhere like the Room of Requirement. Somewhere that will be able to contain the damage *if* I lose control. Which I won’t. But it would be irresponsible not to take precautions.”

“Did the Room survive the curse? I never asked.”

“Neither did I. Perhaps we could ask Minerva to check, then work on how to recreate it.”

“Why not just ask her if we can use the room?”

Hermione was shocked. “So, you’re not willing to let me use it on Ministry grounds, but you’re happy for me to use it in a castle full of students?”

Kingsley gave her a look that told her he was deeply unimpressed. “I’m aware that you’ve changed your opinion of my character this week, Hermione, but please don’t suggest that I would knowingly put children in danger. I’m suggesting we find out if the Room survived and then, if it did, use it once term has finished. I believe the school year is nearly over.”

Hermione felt her cheeks heat, and gave Kingsley an apologetic look. “I’ve not changed my mind, Kings. It’s just all got to me, but I know you wouldn’t do that. I’m sorry.”

He nodded at her, apparently accepting her apology.

“Thank you. I’ll write to Minerva immediately and let you know what she says.”

That evening, Hermione was sitting at the outdoor table finishing the meal that Topsey had served to all the inhabitants, old and new, of the Estate (which Theo had now nicknamed the “Safehouse” given the number of stragglers they had sheltering there). It still made her uncomfortable that Topsey insisted on cooking for them, but it seemed to bring the little elf joy so she bit her tongue. She’d had to compromise her stance on elf rights to a certain extent; as long as they were free, she was happy. She would’ve loved to insist on every elf receiving the same employment standards as wizards, but it seemed to genuinely upset most of them when it was suggested they should take extended holidays or live away from the houses they worked for. She’d realised she was trying to project her own beliefs onto the elves, and that wasn’t fair.

Luna had joined them at their little celebration meal, and the blonde witch sat down next to Pansy. To Hermione’s surprise, the two had seemed instantly to warm to each other. Well, it surprised Hermione that Pansy warmed to Luna; Luna was usually happy to befriend anyone. Draco seemed to notice her watching them and leaned over.

“What are you looking at, love?”

She shook her head and said “Nothing, it just surprised me how quickly they seemed to warm to each other.”

Draco chuckled, and his proximity to her ear and the tantalising sound of his voice made her shiver. “When you and Pansy crossed paths again, she wasn’t exactly at her best. She’s more relaxed here and, anyway, she and Luna were friendly at school.”

Now, that *did* surprise Hermione. “They were friends at Hogwarts?”

Draco put his arm around her and pulled her into his side, kissing her temple “Not exactly, I said they were *friendly* not *friends*. But Pansy came across some of the other Ravenclaws being unkind to Luna once – I think they were hiding her possessions – and they must have caught her in a particular kind of mood because she was having none of it. After that, they were always civil to each other.”

Hermione found that hard to believe, and couldn't help the little scoff that escaped her. Draco nudged her gently with his shoulder. “She wasn't awful to everyone around her; Gryffindors were a special case.” She looked sideways at him and saw that he was smirking. She rolled her eyes and poked him in the side.

“Ouch, witch, your fingers are pointy.”

“Most people's fingers are pointy, Ferret, they're designed like that.” Ginny sniggered at him from across the table, where she had finally won her battle with Albus to get him to eat his dinner. The young boy was apparently attempting a three-year-old's version of a hunger strike in protest at being separated from his cousins; he would still eat, but it was a battle every time. Earlier in the meal, Harry had been the victim of a vicious mashed potato assault by the irate child, and Ginny had dissolved into laughter as Harry wiped it from his glasses. Once she calmed down enough to speak she explained that it reminded her of the Christmas that Percy had come round with Rufus Scrimgeour. Hermione smiled – she supposed Ginny must be getting a bit stir crazy staying here with the children. The Quidditch season was over, and they had all agreed to limit the amount of time they spent away from the Safehouse.

At that moment, Hermione was surprised to see Neville walk around the side of the Manor. Pansy got immediately to her feet and hurried over to him, kissing him on the cheek and murmuring something that Hermione couldn't hear.

Theo spoke first “Did you walk up the driveway, Longbottom?”

Neville smiled around at them all “Hi everyone” then looked directly at Theo “yes, why?”

Theo looked baffled “It's over a mile!”

Pansy elbowed Neville in the ribs “You should've sent word, one of us would have apparated out to get you!”

Neville waved her off “It's no trouble.” At that moment, Neville was tackled by an over-excited James Potter, who was thrilled to see him. Once Neville had said a proper hello to him, Hermione asked “Have you eaten?”

When he answered that he hadn't, Topsey immediately got him a plate of food and he sat down at the long table. Hermione looked around and felt her heart swell. If someone had told her, even three months ago, that she would be here, she never would have believed it. Of course, things were difficult and dangerous with Bellatrix having returned, but she was incredibly grateful for the fact that something so wonderful had come from such an awful situation.

When they had all finished eating, Charlie and Theo took the children down onto the lawn to play, giving Harry and Ginny time to catch up with their friends. Draco summoned several bottles of wine, and they passed an enjoyable hour or so chatting. Hermione was having a nice time, but she couldn't help but wonder at Neville coming for an unscheduled visit on a school night. It was nearly the end of term, and she thought the exams were probably over, but Neville was Deputy

Headmaster, in addition to being the Herbology professor, so Hermione thought there must be a reason for his visit.

Sure enough, as they were all getting ready to head to their respective houses for the night, Neville approached Hermione and, taking her gently by the elbow, steered her a short distance away from the others.

“Is everything ok?” she thought if it had been something serious he would have said earlier, but she couldn’t help the anxiousness that spread through her.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Minerva’s writing back to Kingsley, but I said I’d come and tell you in person. It gives me a good excuse to visit, anyway.” He gave her a most un-Neville-like smirk at that and looked over at Pansy. “She’s approving Kingsley’s request, once all the students have gone home for the summer, but insists that she and Flitwick be there to help contain it if anything happens.”

Hermione scowled “I wish people would have more faith in me!”

Neville gave her a sympathetic look. “They do have faith in you, Hermione, but they also love you and want to make sure you’re safe.”

Hermione sighed. She knew it was true, but it still irritated her. She was glad Neville knew about Bellatrix, though. From what Draco had said, it sounded like Pansy had told Neville pretty much immediately. Under different circumstances, Hermione would’ve been annoyed about leaking confidential information but, in this case, she thought it was justified. While the wizarding public had been warned about a potential resurgence in Death Eater activity, they hadn’t been told the specifics in order to avoid a panic. Hermione understood the reasoning, although she didn’t necessarily agree. She was a firm believer in having as much information as possible. She was pleased someone had thought to warn Neville, though; it would have been particularly cruel for him to be blindsided by the return of his parents’ attackers, and Hermione hadn’t thought to say anything to him herself.

She patted Neville on the arm and thanked him, before saying her goodnights to the others and going upstairs to bed. She had pretty much unofficially moved into Draco’s room, as she hadn’t slept in her own room once since that first night together. She wasn’t complaining. Yes, their relationship was moving fast, but she was happy with how things were going and she wasn’t going to question it.

She found him in bed, propped up against the headboard and reading something Hermione couldn’t see the cover of. She didn’t try too hard; his chest was bare which she found extremely distracting. The man was beautiful, and it took all of her willpower to concentrate on anything else while he was undressed in her vicinity.

He closed the book and looked over at her. “Was everything ok with Longbottom?”

“Yes, he just wanted to tell me that Minerva’s approved the plan for us to use the Room to destroy the horcrux.”

She braced for his inevitable concern, and promised herself that she wouldn’t get too cross with him. He didn’t say anything as she got changed and into bed, or as she snuggled herself into his side. He simply let out a long exhale before turning slightly to face her.

“Will you let me be there?”

“What?” she hadn’t expected that. At the very least, she expected words of caution.

“When you destroy it. I’d like to be there, if that’s ok with you.”

She smiled. She knew he was worried, but appreciated the unspoken confidence in her; if he thought she couldn’t manage it, he would definitely have said something about the plan.

“Of course.”

She shifted, throwing one leg over his waist to straddle him where he sat. He looked up at her, eyes darkening, and took hold of a handful of her hair to bring her face down to his in a passionate kiss. She moved her body against his, feeling him harden through his boxers beneath her; she knew they would be tired tomorrow, but it would be worth it.

He groaned into the kiss, thrusting his hips up to meet hers and causing her to gasp. She pulled back from the kiss and settled her weight more fully into his lap, reaching up to cup his face. She ran her thumbs across his cheeks and rested her forehead against his.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not trying to stop me from doing this. For believing in me.”

He gently pulled her face back so that he was staring into her eyes, and the expression on his face made her stomach flutter.

“Hermione, I’ve never believed in anything more.”

She had no words for that, so she crushed her lips to his and they lost themselves in each other. Somehow, they shed their few remaining clothes, whether by magic or hands she couldn’t have said, and as Hermione sank down onto him, and she felt him move inside her, she knew for certain. As she stared into his beautiful grey eyes, she felt it settle in her chest; an undeniable truth that was now an essential part of her. She was in love with him.

Chapter End Notes

CW for reference to the death of a child

CW for reference to abuse by law enforcement

CW for minor sexual content at the end of the chapter

Traces of Dark Magic

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for CWs

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

Hermione

At Hermione's request, Harry joined her and Draco for breakfast the following morning as she wanted to talk to him away from any potentially prying ears at the Ministry. She updated him on her conversation with Kingsley, and explained what Draco had told her about Theo's experience at the hands of the Auror Office. Harry was horrified, as she knew he would be; he might have acted like an arse to Draco when he first tried to approach Harry back in April, but she knew he'd never condone or tolerate that sort of behaviour. Without her having to ask, Harry vowed to discover if any of those involved still worked in the Auror Office. She didn't know what he planned to do if they did, but she trusted that he would do something.

Hermione was thrilled that they'd found the horcrux, and even more so that they had an agreed upon plan to destroy it, but she knew her work was far from over. They still needed to work out how to reverse engineer the curse in order to track Bellatrix. It was all well and good destroying her horcrux, but it didn't mean much while she was still at large.

A plan was set, between herself, Kingsley and Minerva, for them to use the Room of Requirement at the end of the second week of July, which would give enough time for all students and staff to have gone home for the summer. The staff that weren't insisting on helping Hermione with the Horcrux, anyway. Hermione still wasn't overly happy at the prospect of putting others in danger, but knew the plan would never have been approved otherwise. Kingsley even insisted on having a team of curse-breakers accompany them to Hogwarts as an added layer of protection in case anything went wrong.

That gave her a week to focus fully on tracking Bellatrix. Hermione set to work immediately on Monday morning, determined that, between the three of them, they would solve the problem. Michael seemed to be in a better mood after the weekend, and Florence was as cheerful as ever. Hermione felt hopeful, and by Monday afternoon she was in full swing analysing the blood samples and trying to work out ways of tracing the curse back to Bellatrix's knife. Their main problem was that, since the knife was an inanimate object, it obviously had to have had the curse cast on it by someone else, before it could then transmit it into the blood of those it cut. They'd managed to trace each other by reversing tracking spells linked to each other's blood, but it didn't seem to work when they tried to trace it back to the knife. Something about the curse having been delivered indirectly was preventing the magic from working how they wanted it to.

By the end of the day on Monday, Hermione was starting to feel slightly dejected. She was just thinking that she should call it a day and try again tomorrow when a thought struck her. She'd run some separate tests, mostly for lack of other ideas, and now she thought she might have the answer in front of her. Hermione gave a soft gasp as her heart started picking up speed.

“I think I’ve got an idea!” she said in a voice of cautious excitement.

“What?” asked Michael, as he and Florence looked up from their own stations.

“What if we’ve been so focused on the knife, we’ve missed the obvious right in front of us? Why don’t we just trace her magical signature back to her?”

Michael frowned “Because it’s the knife that’s got the curse on it that tracks our blood. What else would we track?”

“Come over here and look at these samples.”

Hermione directed Michael and Florence to look at the four glowing orbs that were suspended over her lab table. Two of them were purely golden, whereas the other two had swirls of darkness coiling within the gold. The second two were the samples from Hermione and Draco, and the swirls represented the curse they were attempting to track.

“We isolated the curse from the knife, which is what’s shown here. But I had an idea, and ran a search for all traces of dark magic. Look.”

She waved her wand, and two more glowing golden orbs moved next to those representing Draco and Hermione. These both contained multiple colours swirling around, all of which looked distinctly ominous. Most colours were faint, but both of their orbs had conspicuous dark red patches swirling around. While Florence and Michael examined the new data, Hermione really thought about what it represented and her heart started to ache. She was looking at a representation of some of the damage done to them; the magical traces of their physical scars.

“Ok...” said Florence, clearly still not understanding where Hermione was going with this.

“Well, Draco and I have both had Unforgivable curses used on us. You’ll see faint traces of the Imperius Curse” (thanks, fake Moody, thought Hermione wryly) “but, more significantly, we’ve both had the Cruciatus Curse used on us. Specifically, we’ve both had the Cruciatus Curse used on us by Bellatrix.”

“Yes,” said Michael, looking slightly impatient.

“Well, we know of course that Unforgivables work differently to other curses. You need to really mean it, there has to be a strong emotion behind the curse for any Unforgivable to work effectively. Less so for the Imperious, but very much so for the Cruciatus and the Killing Curse. That kind of act, the intense emotion coupled with powerful magic, leaves a mark; an imprint of the caster’s magical signature.”

Florence was nodding vigorously, and Hermione felt the tingle of excitement build; the one that she associated with a breakthrough getting closer by the second.

“So, if we can isolate which imprint comes from Bellatrix, we’ve got her magical signature!” exclaimed Hermione.

“And what will we do with it?” asked Michael, with a frown. Hermione recognised the expression as his ‘thinking deeply’ frown rather than one of displeasure.

“Well, I’ve got an idea. It’s not strictly legal... in fact, it’s quite explicitly illegal, but I think it would work!”

Hermione grinned at them both.

“With her magical signature, we can use a modified *Trace* to track her!”

“The *Trace*? As in, the spell used to detect underage magic?” Michael didn’t manage, or hadn’t tried, to keep the disbelief out of his voice.

Hermione nodded and waved her wand, vanishing the other orbs of light until she was left with just the two that showed the residual marks that years of being hit by various forms of dark magic had left in both her own and Draco’s bodies. She waved her wand again, and the other colours faded to nothing, leaving only the swirling tendrils of deep red associated with the Cruciatus Curse.

“I’m almost certain we can create a modified version of the *Trace* to detect any magic, not just underage. If we can also isolate which of these signatures is unique to Bellatrix, we’ll be able to set the *Trace* to be activated specifically by her. If it works, we would get real time intelligence as to her location whenever she uses magic.”

Hermione stood there, beaming at them. It could work! They had been so fixated on the knife that they hadn’t thought to look at alternatives. She was annoyed at herself for wasting so much time, but tried not to focus on that.

Florence grinned back and said “Hermione, you’re brilliant!”

Michael, however, didn’t seem convinced. With his frown still firmly in place, which now looked to be of the displeased variety, he said “It can’t be that simple. If we could do that, surely the DMLE would never have any trouble locating suspects?”

“Well, for one thing, I don’t think anyone’s ever thought of this before. Most suspects haven’t conveniently used an Unforgivable Curse on the people directly attempting to track them so I highly doubt anyone will have ever given it this much thought before. For another thing, as I said, it’s highly illegal to even attempt to put the *Trace* on a witch or wizard once they come of age.” Hermione answered with her own frown.

He gave her a look that Hermione interpreted to mean he thought she was missing something obvious. When she didn’t say anything, he said “Exactly, even if we can work out how to do it, it’s highly illegal. Will anyone go for it? It’s a violation of some of our most fundamental rights as of-age citizens to allow us to be tracked by our magic.”

“Well, they let me volunteer to be *Crucio’d* so we have a precedent for having some leeway with things that are, strictly speaking, illegal. But you raise a good point. I personally have no issue with using this on Bellatrix, but we need to be careful who we tell and how much. I don’t want this being used outside of these very specific circumstances. There’s a lot of scope for this to be abused, so we need to be extremely cautious. Don’t tell anyone the specifics unless I give you the all clear.”

Florence clapped her hands together “So, questions of ethics aside for the time being, we need to try to isolate Bellatrix’s signature. Since both you and Draco have had the curse used on you by multiple people, we need to be careful to make sure we get it right.”

The three of them spent the next ten minutes sorting through the various magical signatures that had been imprinted onto Hermione and Draco. For her part, Hermione had three distinct signatures. Bellatrix, Florence and Michael. The latter two had used the curse on her as part of their work in the Ministry. Those two traces were fainter, and Hermione hypothesised that it was because they hadn't meant the curses in the same way that Bellatrix had. Certainly, it had hurt when they'd used it on her, but it hadn't been the same all-consuming agony that she remembered from Bellatrix at Malfoy Manor. Hermione felt sick when she saw the number of clear, distinct imprints on Draco. There were five, strong signatures, meaning that at one time or another five different people had used the curse on him and meant it. She knew about Bellatrix and Rodolphus, and assumed that Voldemort would likely have been one of them. But that still left two others. She felt a horrible urge to cry, but knew she needed to focus.

"I think I've got it." Michael called.

Hermione turned and looked at the glowing orb suspended over the lab table. Unlike the other four, this one had a centre of darkness with only the faintest golden glow around the edges, reminding Hermione of a total solar eclipse.

"You're sure?" Hermione asked, conscious they needed to get this right.

"As sure as I can be with only two samples. You've both been hit by the curse a number of times by different people, so there is, of course, the possibility that I've made a mistake."

Hermione thought about it. Ideally, they needed a control; someone they knew had *only* been subjected to the Cruciatus Curse by Bellatrix. She mentally ran through the people who might qualify. As far as Hermione was aware, Bellatrix had never tortured Harry, but Harry had been tortured by Voldemort so that ruled him out regardless. Bellatrix had almost certainly tortured Theo but, then again, so had his father. She had definitely tortured Neville, but so had Voldemort and, likely, so had the Carrows. Hermione thought briefly of Neville's parents, but quickly dismissed the idea, as it would be unethical to take blood from people who couldn't consent. They had also been Aurors, and lived through the First Wizarding War, so it was entirely possible that they had been subjected to the curse by others. Hermione felt a sense of despair, both at the fact that she was unable to think of anyone and also at the fact that so many of their generation had been subjected to such evil.

The next morning, Hermione called a taskforce meeting to update them on their progress and to ask for ideas about anyone who could be used as a control. If push came to shove Hermione was willing to proceed not having tested it if there was no one available, as the fact that she and Draco had both been cursed by Bellatrix should be enough, but she'd not given up yet. Since helping them locate the Horcrux, Luna had, unofficially, joined the taskforce and had decided to sit in on their meeting. As an Unspeakable, Hermione didn't mind the other witch being there, but did want to try to keep the meetings to the original eight of them, nine including Luna, if possible. Theo had done more than enough in helping them find the horcrux, and was now back to spending his time at home. Hermione suspected the presence of Charlie and, of course, Ginny, contributed greatly to his decision.

Hermione was surprised when Luna raised her hand.

"Yes, Luna?"

"You can use my blood."

“Your blood?” repeated Hermione, not fully understanding.

“Yes, I think it will work for what you need.”

Hermione stared at her friend. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Draco shift uncomfortably.

“You... Bellatrix used the Cruciatus Curse on you?” Hermione knew that must be what the blonde witch was saying, but she struggled to wrap her mind around it; she hadn’t known.

“Oh yes. Several times.” Luna spoke this as though commenting on nothing more remarkable than the day’s weather.

“And no one else has?”

“Someone was supposed to. But, no.”

At that, Luna looked over at Draco, who was determinedly staring at the floor. Hermione decided to give them some privacy and asked the others to leave. Everyone except Harry complied, and Hermione decided that would be fine.

“What do you mean?” she asked Luna, who was staring at her unblinkingly in the way that always made Hermione slightly uncomfortable.

“It was during my stay at Malfoy Manor.” Hermione saw Draco put his face in his hands, presumably at Luna’s characterisation of her imprisonment at the Manor as “*a stay*”. “Mr Malfoy found Draco sneaking me some food one night and, sadly, Bellatrix overheard. She tried to make Draco use the Cruciatus Curse on me as punishment, but he refused. It was very kind of him, I would have understood. But as punishment Lucius used the curse on him, and then made him watch while Bellatrix used it on me. It was quite horrible.”

Hermione was horror-struck. Draco was still leaning over with his head in his hands, but she caught Harry’s eye and knew he was feeling the same way. Pushing her personal feelings aside for the moment, she carried on with her questioning to ensure Luna hadn’t had the curse used on her by anyone else. She highly doubted Luna would have forgotten, but Hermione had to be sure.

“And no one else ever used it on you? What about the Carrows?”

Luna shook her head “They mostly left Ravenclaws alone at first; they focused on Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs and, even then, it was mostly younger students. From what I understand, they only started to target others after I had already left.”

An interesting characterisation of being kidnapped and imprisoned, but Hermione wasn’t going to question it. Hermione stared at her friend, who stared back and said, in an uncharacteristically stern voice “Use my blood, Hermione. It will work.”

Later, when it was just her, Draco and Harry in the kitchen of the Manor, Hermione explained the specifics of their plan. She’d kept things fairly high level with the rest of the taskforce, not because she didn’t trust them, exactly, but because the other Aurors did still see Forder as their boss, and she didn’t trust him. They didn’t, technically, answer to him when it came to Taskforce matters, but the night with Hermione’s cottage told her that they thought they did.

“So, we just put the *Trace* on her?” asked Harry, frowning. “Surely if we could get close enough to her to do that, we wouldn’t need to track her?”

Hermione sighed, and Draco shot her a smirk. She was pleased to see it; he’d been very subdued since the Taskforce meeting and she hadn’t had a chance to talk to him about it yet. Harry was a very clever wizard in his own way, but didn’t always grasp concepts as quickly as Hermione, or indeed Draco, did.

“What she’s saying, Potter, is that they’re going to try to use Bellatrix’s magical signature to set the *Trace* on her remotely. When a magical child first uses magic, the *Trace* applies itself automatically to the new magical signature. No one needs to get near them to do it. No record is kept of the signature, beyond the *Trace* itself, so once it breaks at the age of seventeen there’s literally no way of tracking an individual by their magic. Or, there hasn’t been, until now.”

He gave Hermione a proud look, and she smiled at him before continuing.

“I do have one quandary, though, besides the fact that what I’m proposing to do is highly illegal.”

Hermione then explained her concerns regarding what future use their discovery might be put to. She was particularly worried about what someone like Forder might do if he knew they had the ability to track people. Of course, it was only under very specific circumstances, but it still worried her. She didn’t want to inadvertently violate people’s liberties generally, just very specifically in this circumstance. Did that make her a bad person? Hermione honestly didn’t know. There were lines she was willing to cross but she was unwilling to trust others with those same lines. Did that make her a hypocrite? Quite possibly. But, if it meant they were able stop Bellatrix before she caused too much damage, she thought she could forgive herself for a little hypocrisy and blurring of ethical lines.

Unfortunately, it turned out they were already too late to stop Bellatrix from causing much damage.

Hermione arrived at Kingsley’s office at 9am the following morning to update him on their progress. She’d agreed with Harry and Draco the previous evening that the only other person she would tell the specifics to would be Kingsley (who had to be told in order to get approval for the plan).

She was surprised when she was almost knocked over by the man himself as he came rushing out of his office just as Hermione raised her hand to knock.

“Kings? What’s wrong?” His face was contorted into a look that Hermione found difficult to interpret; she thought it was somewhere between worry and anger.

“I’m sorry, Hermione, come with me.” And, without another word, the usually composed wizard grabbed Hermione by the hand and all but pulled her into his office and towards the fireplace. He shifted his grip slightly to throw floo powder into the flames that had appeared moments before, and shouted “St Mungo’s Hospital, Artefact Accidents Ward.” Hermione experienced the disorientating sensation of being pulled - somewhat unexpectedly as her mind hadn’t quite kept up with the situation - into the floo before spinning around very quickly and being spat out onto a cold, marble floor.

She followed a silent Kingsley through the bustling hospital, dodging Healers and patients alike who stopped to stare at the two of them. Eventually, they rounded a corner into what was clearly a private ward. There was a Healer standing by the side of the bed, green robes pushed up to her elbows as she cast spells on whoever was in the bed. The patient was obscured by another person, this time in Auror robes, who was watching the Healer intently.

“What’s the latest?” asked Kingsley, in a voice that clearly said he wouldn’t tolerate anything other than an immediate answer.

“We’ve never seen anything like this before, Minister, she’s got no residual magical signature at all despite time of death being sometime this morning.” said the Healer, who lowered her wand “She’s dead but we can’t understand what happened.”

Hermione felt as though her stomach had dropped several feet. Moving further into the room, she peered at the figure in the bed; it took all of her self-control to stifle the gasp that wanted to escape her.

Lying in the bed was a witch; unmoving and unmistakably dead. She had clearly been relatively young when she died, but her features were sunken and she looked almost shriveled. Hermione felt sick as she realised she was looking at a physical example of the descriptions she had read over numerous times in Bellatrix’s notes. This person had been drained of her magic. What was more, Hermione realised she recognised the witch.

“Emilie Burbage,” Kingsley confirmed when Hermione looked at him “Found this morning outside of Flourish and Blotts where she had been due to do a book signing.”

Everyone in the room stared at the figure in the bed in a sort of horrified trance. Hermione spoke first.

“It’s them, Minister.” She didn’t want to say more in front of the unknown Auror and Healer, as she knew Kingsley was trying to keep the specifics contained.

He looked at her and nodded, before saying to the others in the room “Please do not speak of the details of this to anyone at this stage.” Turning on his heel, he gestured for Hermione to follow him out of the room.

Neither of them spoke until they were back in Kingsley’s office. Hermione was busy thinking about the horrible sight she’d just seen, and the implications of both the way Emilie was killed and the fact that she was targeted, when she was brought back to the room with an unpleasant jolt as she realised that Kingsley had summoned Forder.

Forder, predictably, was furious when he realised that Kingsley had taken Hermione to St Mungo’s.

“Minister, might I remind you that, despite what Miss Granger thinks, she is not the Head of the DMLE.”

Kingsley simply looked at the other man, clearly waiting to see if he was finished or had anything else to say. When Forder did nothing more than silently fume, Kingsley spoke.

“I asked Miss Granger to accompany me because I needed her to confirm my suspicion as to who was behind the attack on Ms Burbage. It is as I feared, Garrick; Ms Burbage was drained of her

magic, and we have to conclude that Bellatrix, or at least the Death Eaters she has managed to recruit, was behind it.”

As soon as Kingsley stopped speaking, Forder turned to Hermione and fixed her with a sneer “And the Golden Girl still sees fit to consort with Death Eaters while we are, once again, being terrorised by their kind.”

Hermione felt a stab of fury. Before she could say anything, however, Kingsley spoke.

“That’s enough, Garrick. As a senior member of my government, I expect you to be able to put your personal feelings aside to focus on the matter at hand. Mr Malfoy and Mr Nott have been extremely helpful on this case, and comments like that are unhelpful.”

At that moment, there was a knock on the door and Harry walked in.

“You wanted to see me, Minister?”

“Ah yes, Harry, please sit down.”

Forder looked, if possible, even more angry at Harry’s presence. He did not, however, say anything as Harry took a seat beside Hermione.

“You may have already heard, Harry, but there has been an attack on Emilie Burbage.”

“I did hear. What’s more, so far this morning the Auror Office has received three separate reports of missing people. My team has confirmed that all those missing are muggle borns.”

Hermione’s heart sank. She’d been so pleased at the progress they had made, but clearly Bellatrix had also been busy. It made her sick to think what could be happening to the muggle borns at that very moment.

Thinking out loud, she said “Emilie was due to be doing a book signing today. *Hogwarts: A Helping Hand*... it was an account of the creation and success of the muggle born integration programme.” She looked at Kingsley, and then at Harry, who were both wearing expressions of deep concern. She didn’t bother looking at Forder.

Simultaneously, she and Harry said “Welcome Week.”

One of the initiatives that had been put in place following the war was a dedicated programme to help muggle borns and their families more fully integrate into the magical world. It had been pioneered by Emilie Burbage; a tribute to the sister she lost in the war, who had been a fierce advocate for the rights of muggles and muggle borns. It had taken several years to set up, but was now exactly the kind of introduction to the magical world that Hermione would have loved to have had when she first found out she was a witch. Muggle born children (and their parents) were now told about their magic as soon as it manifested, eliminating the years of stress most suffered as they wondered what was wrong with them. There were several events throughout the year before they officially joined Hogwarts to gradually introduce the children and their families to the magical world, including a tour of Diagon Alley, an introduction to Gringotts, and a reception at the Ministry of Magic. It all culminated in “Welcome Week”, where muggle born children took the Hogwarts Express to the school, where they and their families stayed for a week, being introduced to the professors, the Hogwarts curriculum, and even the children of wizarding families who had the option to join for the second half of the week. The programme had been a huge success, and

Hermione, along with several other prominent muggle borns, had been sponsors and advocates for it since the beginning. Now the shock of seeing her body had worn off, grief for the loss of Emilie started to set in, and rage at her murder started to rise within Hermione. Overshadowing both of those emotions, however, was a growing sense of dread as she realised what Bellatrix might be planning.

She and Harry looked at each other in horror, and Hermione voiced what they were both thinking “She’s going to attack the children.”

Draco

Hermione was furious and, as much as Draco shared her feelings on the matter, he couldn’t help but admire the sight of his magnificent witch. She was storming up and down the length of their bedroom (Draco very much saw it as *their* bedroom now), hair crackling with magic as she ranted; exactly as she had been doing for the past ten minutes.

The crux of the matter was that the Ministry, along with the Hogwarts Board of Governors, had decided to go ahead with the Welcome Week. He knew that Hermione and Harry had both argued vehemently against it, but the Ministry was still downplaying the threat, and the Chair of Governors was, unfortunately, a close friend of Garrick Forder. Hermione strongly suspected that Forder was influencing his friend; whether because he genuinely believed his department could protect a dozen children and their families from Death Eaters, or simply because he wanted to undermine Hermione, it was difficult to tell.

Draco agreed wholeheartedly with Hermione that they shouldn’t be risking the children; the event was always extremely well publicised, and there was next to no chance that Bellatrix would be unaware of it. Given her particular hatred for muggle borns, it seemed like the perfect opportunity for her to strike for maximum impact. Why the morons at the Ministry were risking it, he didn’t know. Apparently they “*didn’t want to give into terrorists*” – a position that made absolutely no sense to Draco since Bellatrix hadn’t actually made any demands – and didn’t want to create a panic by cancelling such a high-profile event – a position that made even less sense to Draco since surely it would create much more panic if children were attacked.

In addition to his worries about the muggle born children, there were two main things concerning him. His first and, if he was being honest with himself, biggest concern was for Hermione’s safety. She’d waved him off when he raised this, which did nothing to help his confidence that she was taking the threat that Bellatrix posed to her, personally, seriously. Having seen Hermione in action, he was almost certain that she outranked Bellatrix for sheer magical power and skill. But Hermione had a conscience, and there were lines she wouldn’t cross, whereas Bellatrix had none. Draco didn’t want to find out what would happen if the two of them ever faced off or, worse, if Hermione was captured. His second concern was the manner in which Emilie Burbage had been killed. Clearly, Bellatrix had been able to use the items she took from Hermione’s cottage to recreate her null bomb. He’d been holding out hope that it would take her longer, and that they’d have a chance to catch her in the meantime. Hermione had been telling him about muggle “weapons of mass destruction” and the idea that Bellatrix might be able to find more efficient ways of committing mass murder was chilling.

“It’s completely irresponsible! They’re risking the lives of *children* because they don’t want to cause a panic! It’s Fudge all over again!”

“I know, love. But Kingsley was under a lot of strain today. Let’s go and speak to him again tomorrow and see whether, on reflection, he might change his mind. He seems like a reasonable wizard.”

Hermione seemed to crumple onto the bed, as though all of the fight had suddenly been knocked out of her. Draco rolled over and pulled her towards him. He noticed that she was crying, and gently wiped her tears with his thumb. She had lost a friend today, someone she had respected and admired. He knew it had caught her off guard and, worse, he knew she felt guilty. It obviously wasn’t her fault, as he repeatedly reminded her, but his brilliant witch had a tendency to believe it was up to her alone to solve the world’s problems. He knew the fact that there were other, unknown to them personally but no less important, muggle borns missing was also weighing heavily on her.

Wanting to soothe her, he conjured the gramophone that he’d had playing in Topsey’s room and set it to play quiet music. Then, gently, he rolled her onto her front and vanished her clothes, before summoning a bowl and some scented oils from the bathroom. He cast a quick charm to warm the oil, and set to work trying to ease the tension from her muscles. She let out a low groan and he smiled.

“Try to relax, love, I’ll take care of you.”

She mumbled incoherently into her pillow as he spread the warm oil over her back, trying to infuse the action with all of the love he was feeling for her. He would tell her, but he didn’t want to scare her off by declaring himself too soon. So, instead, he did what he could to help her and hoped to Merlin that they would have all the time in the world once this was over for declarations of love, and living the life he could envisage with his beautiful witch.

Chapter End Notes

CW for references to torture

CW for references to murder

CW to brief description of a dead body

CW for references to kidnapping

Grounding Techniques

Chapter Notes

This chapter kind of snuck up on me, but I promise it will be the last time Draco has a wobble about ruining Hermione's life. Hermione, of course, is having none of it, and finds a very effective way of calming him down.

CWs at the end of the chapter.

Also, sorry I keep changing the chapter count. I feel fairly confident that it will be 30 now.

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

Draco

Draco couldn't help but worry. Bellatrix was escalating faster than even he would have expected, and he could feel in his bones that Hermione was a target. The idea of his deranged aunt anywhere near the woman he loved made him feel sick to his stomach, while simultaneously causing a cold rage and sense of determination to settle over him. He wouldn't let her hurt Hermione. Not again. He would do anything and everything in his power to prevent it.

One of those things was retrieving the final ring from his vault. There were four in total, designed to protect a traditional pure blood family. The Lord, the Lady, the heir and the spare. Well, the rings were certainly being used to protect Draco's family; just because they didn't look like the traditional idea of one didn't make it any less true. Hermione had taken it with a roll of her eyes, but less fuss than he would've imagined. It settled something in him, but he was still more anxious than he could remember being since the war. Pretty much everyone he cared about was a potential target, and there wasn't anything he could do to stop that other than aid Hermione and Potter in their attempts to track and stop Bellatrix.

All in all, Draco was uncomfortable. Paradoxically, he was also happier than he could ever remember being in his life. He went to sleep every night with Hermione snuggled up next to him, and woke every morning almost suffocating on her hair. He still didn't think he deserved her, but he wasn't going to complain. Somehow, Hermione wanted him too and, as Theo had advised all those weeks ago, he was just going to thank his lucky stars.

It was Thursday morning, a couple of days after Hermione's breakthrough on the tracking spell, and they were sitting in her lab as she and the other Unspeakables tried to perfect the process for locating Bellatrix. They were close, and it was making everyone else excited. Draco, who had more experience than any of them of how dangerous Bellatrix was, was less enthusiastic. He knew she needed to be caught; he just wished Hermione would stay far away while it happened. He knew that wasn't fair, and he would never say it out loud - they would be nowhere near putting a stop to Bellatrix if it wasn't for Hermione – but the idea of her getting hurt terrified him.

He was watching Hermione explain something to Florence when the silvery Lynx of the Minister for Magic's patronus appeared in front of them. Draco barely even blinked; he was far too used to

these people using advanced magic as an everyday method of communication to be surprised by it anymore. He was, however, surprised when the message was to him as well as Hermione.

“Miss Granger, Mister Malfoy. Please meet me in my office as a matter of urgency. No one is hurt, but I need to speak with you.”

He caught Hermione’s eye, and saw that she looked as worried as he felt. Whatever the Minister said about no one being hurt, he didn’t think it boded well that they were both being summoned.

Hermione gave a few quick instructions to Michael and Florence and they hurried out of the room together.

“I don’t like this.” Hermione said as they waited for the lift. Her left leg was giving away her nervousness as it bounced up and down.

“Neither do I.”

There wasn’t really anything else for them to say, so they lapsed into silence as the lift took them up towards the Minister’s office. Hermione took his hand in hers, and he looked down in surprise. They usually refrained from any form of touching in the Ministry, and Draco had assumed that Hermione, understandably, didn’t want people generally knowing about their relationship.

She clearly caught onto the reason for his surprise, as she raised her eyebrows at him and said, in a voice of exasperation that took him right back to their Hogwarts days, “I’m not hiding anything Draco. I don’t generally approve of public displays of affection at work, but we’re stressed and take comfort from each other. If anyone has a problem with it, they can take it up with me.”

Draco couldn’t help his smirk, both at the tone of voice and the fact that she was willing to be seen *together* with him. She’d taken his arm before their first meeting with the Minister, but that had clearly been an act of defiance rather than something for them. This was different, and he was sure anyone who could see them would be able to tell.

They arrived at the Minister’s office and took their seats.

“Thank you both for coming so quickly.”

“Of course, Kings, what’s up?”

“We’ve apprehended a known associate of Bellatrix Lestrange,” said the Minister, leaning back in his chair and giving them a pleased look.

Thinking of Rodolphus, Draco’s heart gave a hopeful leap. The wizard was nowhere near as powerful as his wife, but he was cruel and losing him would be a significant blow to Bellatrix.

“I think you both know Marcus Flint?”

As quickly as it had leapt, Draco’s heart sank. He knew Flint was involved with Bellatrix, and that made him dangerous, but he couldn’t help but feel sorry for the wizard. Flint had lost so much, and while Draco didn’t agree with the choices his old schoolmate had made, he could understand how it had happened.

“Flint? When? How? I’d like to be there when they question him; Harry won’t mind.” Hermione had spoken so quickly that the words had almost bled into one. The Minister was clearly as used to

this as Draco was, because the older wizard didn't bat an eyelid.

"The DMLE received intelligence that led them to conduct a number of raids. Most came up empty, but one team was able to apprehend Flint. I'm afraid he's already been processed and questioned."

Something about that didn't feel quite right to Draco.

"Where is he now?" he asked before Hermione had a chance to say anything.

"He is in Azkaban, awaiting trial."

"And this all happened in the space of this morning?" asked Hermione, her disbelief evident in her voice.

The Minister looked slightly uncomfortable as he answered her.

"Mostly. The intelligence came in last night, and the raids happened in the early hours of this morning."

"And why weren't we told sooner?"

"Hermione, I've only just found out myself. I called you here as soon as I was able to."

Draco could feel the frustration pouring off of Hermione as she stood up "I need to speak to Harry, I can't believe he'd process a key witness without letting me speak to him."

The Minister looked significantly more uncomfortable as he said "Harry wasn't involved in this, Hermione. The tip came in when most Aurors had left for the day, and Garrick made the decision not to disturb any members of the team who are parents without solid information. I believe Harry is being briefed as we speak."

"But this matter is being run by my team!" said Hermione in a voice that was slightly louder than Draco thought was strictly wise when speaking to the Minister for Magic.

Kingsley fixed Hermione with a stare, and Draco could see her determinedly staring back at him.

"Hermione. You are a senior and valued member of my government. You are running the elements of this matter as they pertain to unknown and complex dark magic. There is no one I would trust more to do that. But the case has changed, and is now a matter of tracking down and capturing dark witches and wizards, which is the specialism of the DMLE. While your continued work in tracking down Bellatrix specifically is invaluable, the capture and processing of... shall we say standard dark wizards is a matter I am happy to leave to the DMLE."

Hermione was clearly as frustrated as Draco, and he was rather surprised that her hair hadn't started sparking yet. Nevertheless, she sat back down.

"And you honestly believe, Kings, that Forder didn't involve Harry because of his kids, and not because he's trying to cut us out of the investigation?"

The Minister gave a tired sigh, and Draco appreciated for the first time how heavily this must be weighing on him. The man had made some glaring mistakes as Minister, but Draco thought he ultimately meant well.

“Forder is the Head of the DMLE, Hermione. I’m willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, and trust him to do his job. I know you don’t like him, but that doesn’t mean he’s incompetent. It’s important that you’re able to work together, both in this matter and in the future.” Hermione looked as though she wanted to interrupt but the Minister continued, in a slightly louder voice, “What I also wanted to tell you was that, through the use of legilimency, the Aurors have been able to ascertain that the Welcome Week is not a high priority for the Death Eaters. It sounds as though the idea was considered but ultimately dismissed. They’re looking to gather support and it seems that they didn’t want to risk undermining that support by attacking children.”

Draco spoke up “We can’t know that from examining the mind of one person. There’s no chance that Bellatrix will have told all of her followers her plans.”

The older wizard gave Draco an assessing look, as he leaned forwards in his chair and rested his forearms on his desk, drumming his fingers on the mahogany.

“I would appreciate it, Mr Malfoy, if you would share your concerns with the DMLE. You have a unique insight into this matter and I believe that they will benefit from your perspective.”

In a tone of outrage, Hermione said “Do you know how Forder treats Draco? There’s no way he’ll listen!”

Kingsley had clearly had enough.

“I trust that Garrick and the rest of the DMLE will do their job, Miss Granger, just as I trust that you will do yours. Now, I have another meeting to get to so unless there is anything else?”

Hermione remained sitting, staring at the Minister. After a few moments, Draco stood and gently steered her out of her seat and towards the door. Just before they reached it, Hermione turned around and gave a sad shake of her head before saying “I really hope you’re right about him, Kings.”

They barely spoke as they made their way back to the Department of Mysteries, both too lost in their own thoughts. Draco suggested that they might benefit from taking a moment to grab a coffee before returning to work; they both needed some time to clear their heads. The Minister for Magic had struck Draco as a man backed into a corner. Despite his words, Draco didn’t think Kingsley actually liked Garrick Forder, but there was a dangerous threat to the wizarding world and Draco understood the need to present a strong and united front.

They had only taken a few steps towards the small coffee stand opposite the Fountain of Magical Brethren (Draco had been amused to hear Hermione’s ten-minute-long rant about how it symbolises oppression and inequality after he remarked on it having been replaced after the war) when he became aware of some of the hostile stares they were getting. It reminded Draco of his first day consulting for the ministry; he supposed, with the renewed threat of the Death Eaters, he should expect hostility towards him to increase. The thought made him sad; it had felt nice to be largely accepted over the past few weeks, and he’d started to believe that there was a chance he could pick up some semblance of an ordinary life.

Almost as soon as he had the thought, an angry looking wizard stepped in front of him. Draco had the impression of a relatively tall man with greying hair and small brown eyes that were scrunched up with rage before he felt the shock of his head whipping back. He wasn’t sure what had happened, but he noticed the warm feeling of something dripping from his nose and a coppery taste

in his mouth. He barely had time to realise that the stranger had punched him in the face, before the man was flying backwards and hit the far wall with a sickening *crack*.

Draco's eyes were watering, as the sharp, stinging pain started to register, but he thought he saw the air shimmer around him. The next thing he knew, Hermione's soft hand was under his chin, tilting his face gently from side to side as she assessed the damage. She must have cast a wordless healing charm, because the next thing he knew his nose felt very hot, then very cold, before the pain vanished.

"Are you ok?" she asked, in a voice of forced calm.

Somewhere behind them, a witch in the gathered crowd shouted something that sounded an awful lot like "Death Eater whore."

Draco found that he couldn't meet her eyes as shame washed over him. He realised that the shimmering he'd seen from the corner of his eye was a shield charm; Hermione had clearly thrown one around them before she turned her attention to healing him.

"I'm fine, let's just go."

"Hang on."

Draco was barely aware of what was going on around him, but thought he heard several yelps and the sound of Hermione shouting. There was a loud ringing in his ears that had nothing to do with the blow to his head, and all he wanted was for the ground to swallow him up. Unless he wanted to try to break the shield charm that Hermione was still holding around him, which he knew he wouldn't be able to do unless she let him, he was going to have to wait for her to finish whatever she was doing. He busied himself with staring at the floor, not wanting to risk making eye contact with anyone.

Draco couldn't begin to guess how much time had passed. All he knew was that Hermione was suddenly taking him by the arm and steering him away from a fairly large crowd that now seemed to include Potter. Indeed, the Chosen One had taken over Hermione's role as Chief Shouting Officer, as the dark-haired wizard instructed the crowd to stay back. Draco saw a number of flashes going off and groaned to himself. That was just what he needed; attention from the press. He knew there would be headlines tomorrow about an ex-Death Eater being involved in a fight at the Ministry, and he'd bet a lot of money that the story would be spun in such a way as to make out that he was the aggressor.

He had the brief impression of bright sunshine before Hermione was spinning them on the spot and they appeared in the travelling parlour of the Estate. He felt a numb sense of hopelessness as she steered him up the stairs, and his ears were still ringing as she sat him down on their bed. She knelt in front of him and, gently, moved his face so that he had no choice but to meet her amber eyes, which currently showed a fierce protectiveness. His heart clenched; even after that display at the Ministry, she was still on his side.

"Hermoine." His heartbeat had picked up to dangerous levels, and he struggled to look at her; it was like trying to look at the sun.

"No." she said, quietly but firmly.

Draco was confused.

“No what?”

“No to whatever it is you’re thinking. No to whatever feeling you’ve been stuck in since that scumbag hit you. No to whatever stupid thing you’re talking yourself into doing right now. Just no.”

Draco winced, but took her hand in his. She had to see, especially after today, that he couldn’t offer her any kind of life. That, no matter what he did, he could never escape the mistakes of his past or his family name. That even she wouldn’t be able to lift him up out of the quagmire of his reputation; all that would happen would be that he would drag her down with him.

“Hermione...”

He didn’t have a chance to say anything else before she crushed her lips to his. Despite his best intentions, he was powerless to do anything other than kiss her back. She threaded her hands into his hair and pushed her small body, which was positioned between his knees, as close against him as she could manage. After a few breathless moments, during which Draco felt as though his heart was breaking clean in two, she nipped his lower lip and then spoke.

“I know what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong.”

He leaned his face into her neck, inhaling the orange blossom smell of her and holding her close while he could.

“You heard what they called you. The longer this goes on, the worse it’s going to get.”

She pulled back and looked him straight in the eye. To his surprise, the only emotion he could detect there was anger.

“Now, you listen to me, Malfoy. I don’t care what anyone else thinks. The rest of the world can go to hell for all I care, their opinions mean nothing to me. They’re wrong about you, and they don’t get to have an opinion about us.”

“Hermione, you’ll be shunned. Your career will be in danger. I couldn’t live with myself if I ruined your life.”

“I love you, Draco.”

Draco was stunned. He’d suspected how she felt, had noticed small glances and gestures that made him hope, but hearing the words aloud was like nothing he had ever experienced. The only person who’d ever said that to him before was his mother. This was, of course, completely different.

“Hermione...”

“If the next words out of your mouth are anything other than “I love you too” then I will hex you. I know you do, you know you do, and we aren’t going to let the opinions of idiots ruin this.”

Her eyes were blazing, but he saw they were also shimmering with unshed tears. He shouldn’t do it. He *knew* he shouldn’t. But he was a weak and selfish man, and this incredible witch was offering him everything he’d ever wanted.

“I love you so much, Hermione. I don’t deserve you; you could do so much better than me, but I’ll do everything in my power to be worthy of your love.”

Her tears had spilled over as he spoke, and he reached up to brush them away, vowing silently to never again be the cause of her sadness.

“You can’t keep doubting this, Draco. I can’t keep thinking you might run. I’m all in and need you to be too.”

He knew he owed it to her to make up his mind once and for all; fight for the life he wanted, or run like a coward and never know what might happen. Now that he’d regained his senses after the assault, there really was only one answer.

“You are the greatest gift of my life, Hermione. My doubt has never been about you, it’s always been about me. That I’m not good enough, that I can’t offer you what you deserve. But I love you, and if you still want me after what just happened then I’m the luckiest man alive.”

To his utter astonishment, he found himself with her wand in his face. She had leapt to her feet, and he leaned back to stare wide-eyed up into her furious face.

“You really think that of me? That I’d be somehow put off by people calling me names? Or, what, that suddenly seeing the evidence of what I already knew would make me change my mind? I don’t give my love often, Draco, but once I do it’s not easily lost. The only person capable of influencing my feelings towards you is you.”

Her wand was still in his face so, very gently, he reached up and took her wrist to move it away. She narrowed her eyes at him, but allowed it. His heart was hammering as he stood, not from fear, but from the realisation that she meant it; she loved him, and he wasn’t going to lose her. This moment, here and now, with her still choosing him after seeing a glimpse of what her life might be like, convinced him more than anything else that she was serious about him. That she knew what she was getting herself into, and wanted to do it anyway. He should’ve realised it earlier - she was several orders of magnitude smarter than he was, so of course she already knew - but this had really made him believe it. He never thought he’d be grateful for being punched in the face.

He brushed her hair out of her face and gently cupped her cheek. Slowly, giving her every chance to pull away, he brought his lips to hers. At first, he kissed her lightly; barely more than a brush. But she stood on her tip toes to deepen the kiss, and he lost himself in the feel of her for several long moments. Eventually, he pulled back to address what she’d said.

“None of this has any bearing on what I think of you, Hermione. When I panic, it’s like I can’t think past this all-consuming fear that something awful is going to happen. Lately, I seem to specifically fixate on the idea that I’m going to ruin your life. I know, rationally, that it’s not as bad as that, and that it’s your decision to make anyway, but the rational part gets stuck and the anxiety takes over.”

She looked at him thoughtfully, before dragging her hand down over his chest and resting her hand on the buckle of his belt.

“Have you ever tried grounding techniques?” she asked, with a mischievous glint in her eye. He didn’t understand the question, but would happily take this mood over the hex-happy anger of a few moments ago.

“No, what’re grounding techniques?”

Hermione hummed happily as she started to slowly circle him. “How are you feeling at the moment?” she asked as she came back around to his front with an assessing look on her face.

“Fine. More than fine.”

“Excellent. In that case, I think a practical demonstration is in order.”

She pushed him so he was sitting on the edge of the bed before she took a few steps backwards. He didn’t understand what was happening, but his breathing hitched when she started to unbutton her blouse. He decided to stop worrying about whatever was happening and just enjoy it.

“Grounding techniques are designed to help you focus on the present, the idea being that it can distract you from an anxiety spiral and calm you down. The one I’m about to teach you makes you pay attention to what your senses are telling you about your surroundings. The first step in this particular technique is for you to focus on five things you can see.”

He barely heard her because she’d finished unbuttoning her blouse. It slid down her graceful body and pooled at her feet, so she was standing there in just her black high waisted suit trousers and white lacy bra. She kicked off her heeled shoes and started removing her trousers. Slowly, she shimmied them down her lean, tanned legs until she stood before him in just her matching set of lacy white underwear. Draco’s mind went blank from need.

“You’ve not said your five things, Draco,” she said in a teasing voice, “come on, what do you see?”

“You” was all he managed to croak out, and she laughed.

“Ok, since this is your first time I’ll let you just pick one thing. So, is this enough, or do you want to see more?”

His heart was working overtime sending all of the blood in his body to his cock. The contrast from the conversation they’d been having to the game they were now playing left him slightly light-headed in the best way (although that might have been the blood to cock situation). Realising she wanted an answer he nodded vigorously, and said “More, please!”

She chuckled to herself again, before reaching around to unclasp her bra. She let that follow the same path as her blouse, before she reached down and slid her knickers off, too.

All the breath left his body at once; it didn’t matter how many times he saw her naked, the sight still filled him with awe. This beautiful, powerful, magnificent witch was his.

“How are you feeling now, Draco? Grounded in the present, or do you need a further demonstration.”

The question was difficult, and he was struggling to think. On the one hand, he felt fantastic. On the other, he wanted more.

She seemed to read his expression, because she took a few steps forward before stopping just out of reach.

“I think you’ll like the next one,” she said in a husky voice, taking another step closer so she was in touching distance “tell me four things you can touch.”

He didn't need telling twice. Whoever invented this method for stopping anxiety attacks deserved an Order of Merlin. He stood and pulled her to him, attempting to kiss her. She, however, had other ideas and moved her face away slightly.

"No, no, Draco, use your words and tell me four things you can touch."

Undeterred, he took advantage of her exposed neck and latched his mouth onto her skin, sucking, kissing and nibbling until her bossy tone was replaced by cute little moans and breathy sighs. Not wanting the game to end, he whispered into her ear "Let me show you what I can touch."

She shivered and let out a little moan, which was all the encouragement he needed. He reached down between her thighs and started to slowly tease her, never touching exactly where she wanted him to. He smiled as she made a frustrated noise and bucked her hips against him in an attempt to get him to move.

"I can touch this beautiful leg of yours," he whispered, trailing his index finger up the inside of her thigh, then skipping over where she most wanted him and trailing his finger back down her other thigh "and this one, too. Does that count as two things, or just one? Let's say just one."

He was getting into the game now, and wanted to take back some control. Luckily, she seemed more than happy to let him do just that as she looked at him with lust-hazed eyes.

"Hmmm, let me see, what else can I touch?"

He trailed his hand back up over her torso and ghosted his fingers over her breasts. She was breathing heavily now, and the movement was enticing. He reached his other hand up and cupped them both, brushing over her hardened nipples with his thumbs and causing her to gasp.

"So, these count as one as well, correct?" he asked, with a glint in his eye. Hermione nodded, and he brought his lips to her in a brief but searing kiss.

"Does that count as the third thing?" he asked and she whined this time as she nodded, his hands still playing with her breasts. He looked down and could see that she was clenching her thighs, clearly desperate for him to relieve some of the pressure he knew was building.

"So that leaves one more place for me to touch, love. But where?"

"Draco" she breathed, and he decided she'd been teased enough.

Softly, he let his hand roam back down over her body before coming to rest between her thighs. This time, he didn't hesitate as he pressed a finger inside her.

"I can feel how wet you are for me, love. That's my fourth thing."

She let out an incoherent noise that he captured with a kiss as he plunged his finger in and out of her. He shifted his angle slightly so he could press the heel of his hand into her clit and she groaned.

"What's the next step, love? The next stage of the grounding technique?"

She seemed beyond words as he continued to move inside her. He started to curl his finger and she mewled at the new pressure.

“Hermione, use your words,” he mimicked her from earlier but thought she was probably beyond caring.

“Three... three things you can... three things you can hear.”

“Good girl” he whispered into her hair, and he was pleased to feel her walls flutter; his witch enjoyed praise.

“The first thing I can hear is your breath; it’s the little breathy sounds you’re making now that are the first sign you’re close to coming.”

She whined, so he carried on.

“The second thing I can hear, is the sound of me moving in and out of you. You’re so wet for me love, that I can hear it. It’s so fucking hot, Hermione.” He could tell she was close, so he brushed her hair aside to make sure she could hear him clearly.

“The third thing I’d like to hear, Hermione, is the sound of you calling out my name as you come for me. Can you do that, my love?”

Like Draco knew she would, Hermione did as she was told. He felt her clench around him as the pleasure crested and she cried out his name. The sound went straight to his still hard cock as it twitched, reminding him that it wanted some attention, too.

Once she had come down from her high, he kissed her and gently pressed her back so that she was lying on the bed. She blinked at him as he undressed, before climbing onto the bed himself and settling his weight over her.

He gently nipped her ear and asked “What’s the next step?”

She kissed the side of his head and whispered, in a shaky voice, “Two things you can smell.”

He nuzzled his face further against her and answered “I’ll answer that one while you get your breath back. The first thing I can smell is orange blossom. It’s my favourite smell in the world because it reminds me of you. The second thing I can smell is us. I love that this room now smells of both of us, that our scents have mingled into something that’s unique to us. I love this this room is now our room, and every time I walk in, I can smell the reminder that I’m not alone anymore.”

He pulled back to look at her, and she was smiling at him, love shining from her amber eyes. His heart stuttered, and he bent down to brush a kiss over her lips.

“What’s the next one?”

She smiled. “The next one is also the last one.”

“What is it?”

“One thing you can taste.”

He pulled back and gave her a wicked grin.

“Now that, little witch, is something I will happily tell you.”

He made to move down her body, but she grabbed his face pulled him back up.

“Later, Draco, I want you inside me now.”

“What’s that muggle saying, Hermione? This is for science! We need to know if it calms me down.”

She smiled at him and said “I’ll happily indulge your scientific curiosity as much as you like later, but I need you now. Please.”

Draco couldn’t deny Hermione anything, nor did he want to. He moved back up her body, positioned himself at her entrance and sank into her, groaning at the feeling of coming home.

When they had finished, Draco rolled over and pulled her into him, basking in the feeling of rightness that surrounded him. She loved him. Things might be difficult for a while, but they would do everything they could to ensure this latest threat was eliminated. He knew from experience that people’s anger eventually faded into indifference; their relationship might never be welcomed by most, but people would eventually lose interest.

“You’re the love of my life, Hermione. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you never have any reason to doubt that again.”

She hummed, a happy, sleepy sound despite it being the middle of the day. He smiled and kissed the side of her head.

“And, if I do, all we need to do is practice our grounding techniques.”

Hermione

As they returned to the Ministry later that afternoon, this time with Harry escorting them across the atrium at her request, Hermione reflected on what had happened. She could’ve killed the wizard who attacked Draco. She’d lashed out with magic the second he was hurt, and hadn’t given a moment’s thought to the man she sent flying across the atrium. Luckily, she supposed, he only had a concussion but, in the split second after his fist connected with Draco’s face, she hadn’t cared what happened to the wizard; she just wanted him as far away from Draco as possible. It was, perhaps, arguable that Hermione following up with strong stinging hexes to both him and the witch who’d called her a “Death Eater whore” had been overkill, but she couldn’t bring herself to care.

Draco had insisted on returning to the Ministry with her – Hermione had tried to persuade him to stay at home but he, understandably, said that he’d spent a decade hiding and didn’t want to do it anymore. They returned, with their heads held high, and Harry explained what had happened after they left.

Apparently the two had wanted to press charges against Hermione, but when Harry had pointed out that they would likely face worse charges for unprovoked attacks on two Unspeakables, they backed off. It didn’t make sense to Hermione, but attacks on members of certain Ministry departments, primarily the Department of Mysteries and the DMLE, carried heavier penalties than common assault. The rationale was that their specialist knowledge was of critical importance to the functioning of the Ministry and the wider wizarding world, and therefore attacks needed to be further discouraged. Hermione disagreed with this logic, but in that moment was grateful for it. She

was confident that she would be able to defend herself if it came down to it, but it would take time she didn't have at the moment so was grateful to Harry for helping her avoid it.

She couldn't help but notice that Harry stayed very close to Draco, and she smiled to herself at the sight. She wasn't sure whether either of them was ready to admit it yet, but the two wizards had become good friends. She recognised Harry's defensive stance and the "Don't fuck with me, I killed Voldemort" glower he was giving anyone who so much as looked in Draco's direction. Everyone who knew them personally agreed that Hermione was the scarier of the two but, to the general population, the Boy Who Lived still seemed like the bigger threat. Between the two of them, she was fairly confident there would be no more attacks or comments.

They arrived back at the Department of Mysteries not even three hours after they'd left, although to Hermione it felt much longer. She'd barely had a chance to walk into the lab before she heard a squeal and was almost tackled to the floor by an extremely excited Florence.

Having just this morning been in a fight (if you could call it that), the greeting threw Hermione and part of her brain saw it as a threat. She had to take a few deep calming breaths to convince herself that it was just Florence, and that nothing bad had happened. She therefore almost missed it as the beaming witch almost shouted at her "We did it, Hermione!"

She frowned, still catching up with the situation "Did what?"

Michael came up beside Florence and threw his arm around her, giving Hermione an uncharacteristically wide smile "We've managed to set the *Trace* on Bellatrix. We can track her!"

Chapter End Notes

CW for violence

CW for abusive language

CW for a panic spiral

CW for explicit sexual content

This chapter is where the fic earns the "Inappropriate use of grounding techniques" tag.

If you want to avoid explicit sexual content, stop reading after the first *** and start reading again after the second ***

The Room of Requirement

Hermione

“I still don’t understand why they aren’t cancelling Welcome Week! Surely, they realise they’re putting a huge target on the kids!” Theo’s blue eyes were wide and worried as he looked over at Hermione from his place next to Charlie on the sofa.

Sighing, Hermione lifted her glass to her lips before answering.

“I think they’re scared of causing more of a panic. There doesn’t seem to be any political appetite to cancel, and anyway they’re hoping that we’ll be able to take her out before then and they won’t have to worry about it.”

Hermione and Draco had arrived back home after spending the rest of the working day, and then some, at the Ministry. It was gone 9pm and they were relaxing in the library with Theo and Charlie. Harry was still at the office, as the Auror teams were planning their strike on the Death Eaters, and Pansy and Neville were at the cottage with Ginny. Ostensibly they had gone over to help with the children’s bedtime, but Topsey had taken over the job with such enthusiasm that they were mostly there to keep Ginny company. After a frosty start, the two witches seemed to be getting along quite well.

Sitting with her feet in Draco’s lap, Hermione suppressed a groan as his hands found her arches and started kneading. Theo smirked at her and opened his mouth, presumably to make some kind of inappropriate comment, but Hermione prevented it by throwing a pillow at him.

Laughing, Theo whipped the pillow back at her before leaning across Charlie’s lap. Her friend sighed in contentment as the redhead’s fingers started playing with his hair and closed his eyes, apparently done with their conversation.

“That seems to be putting a lot of pressure on one single raid.” said Charlie, his freckled face creasing into a frown as he continued to run his fingers through Theo’s unruly curls.

“Agreed” grumbled Draco, who Hermione knew was also unimpressed with the decisions made that day “and they’re rushing the raid to coincide it with Hermione destroying the horcrux. The whole thing feels hurried; we have the upper hand for the first time and I don’t think we’re taking proper advantage of it.”

Hermione hummed in agreement but didn’t say anything. She was exhausted, having spent the whole latter part of the day arguing. First with Forder, then with Kingsley, then with Forder again. She’d pushed too hard with Kingsley, and as a result he was doubling down on his support of Forder. She knew Kingsley was a good man at heart, but he hadn’t been tested in a long time and she got the impression he was making decisions from a place of wanting to get the problem sorted as quickly as possible. She thought the approach was blinding him to some of the problems with Forder’s tactics, which offered quick solutions if successful, but little finesse to increase their chances of success. She understood the reasoning for rushing the raid, she just didn’t agree with it.

“And they’re sure Bellatrix will be able to tell when her horcrux is destroyed?” asked Theo, opening one blue eye and raising an eyebrow.

“No one’s sure. We don’t think so, but records about horcrux usage are extremely unreliable. I spent this afternoon researching it while Hermione was in meetings, but it looks like we’re going to have to guess. The Minister agrees with Forder, that we should err on the side of caution and assume she will know. Unfortunately, that means they are going full steam ahead with the raid.”

Theo rolled his eyes. “I should start mass-producing my Order of Morons, I feel like the Ministry has been earning a lot of those lately!”

Hermione laughed as she imagined Theo presenting Kingsley with his medal. It wasn’t beyond the realms of possibility that Theo would, in fact, do just that.

Theo continued “I actually think this Minister means well, but it’s always the well-meaning ones that are the most dangerous. They want to do the right thing, so they assume that’s what they *are* doing.”

Hermione nodded, but let the rest of the conversation wash over her. Despite the stress of the day, it was lovely coming home to discuss matters with people she cared about. It had only been in the past few weeks at the Safehouse that she’d begun to appreciate just how isolated she had allowed herself to become over the past few years. She hadn’t realised how lonely she’d become living alone, but now she was struggling to come to terms with the fact that she might have to go back to doing just that once this case was closed. She obviously wanted Bellatrix caught as soon as possible, but there was a part of her that was concerned for what it would mean for her, personally.

Draco

Draco was aware that Hermione was brilliant. She was rightly called the Brightest Witch of Her Age, she was the youngest ever Department Head at the Ministry of Magic (and for the Department of Mysteries, no less) and she regularly stunned Draco with her magnificence. But seeing her standing in a room full of influential people and watching them all defer to her as she prepared to attempt complex and dangerous magic, it really hit him again just how lucky he was.

It was the end of the second week of July, and they had travelled to Hogwarts along with a team of curse breakers who were there to provide additional support if anything went wrong. Draco refused to think about the possibility of anything going wrong and didn’t appreciate the visual reminder that others thought it might happen. It didn’t help that one of the curse breakers was Bill Weasley, who treated Draco with an aloof sort of suspicion that had Draco’s stomach in knots. He supposed he deserved it; the scars on Bill’s face were a reminder of one of Draco’s more catastrophic mistakes. They had met Professors McGonagall and Flitwick at the gates to the castle, and had walked as a group straight up to the Room of Requirements. It didn’t surprise Draco in the slightest to see his old professors greet Hermione like a friend; they had all been in the Order of the Phoenix together, had fought together, so naturally they would be fond of her. He was surprised, however, when they greeted him with equal respect, if not the same level of familiarity, and seemed to have no qualms about his presence in the castle he had once helped to breach. If he wasn’t mistaken, Flitwick had even given him a sly wink when the older wizard saw Draco squeeze Hermione’s hand in an attempt to calm.

Hermione had taken up her place in the centre of the Room of Requirement. She had been the one to open the Room and it had transformed itself into an enormous room with what looked like barriers spaced out evenly in a large circle around the point where Hermione stood. There were seven barriers in total, one for each of the people there to support Hermione as she attempted to

control Fiendfyre. Try as he might, Draco couldn't get the last time he had been in this very room out of his head; the time he had lost one of his childhood friends to the same curse the woman he loved was about to perform.

Draco took a deep breath and tried to steady his racing heart. If anyone could do this, it would be Hermione. He was also aware that, right about now, Potter was leading a large team of Aurors in the raid that should be hitting Bellatrix's hideout. DMLE workers had been monitoring Bellatrix's movements day and night, and they were fairly sure they had been able to locate the main place she was using.

Snapping his head up, Draco focused on Hermione as she rolled up her sleeves and cleared her throat. She looked around the room, eyes meeting Draco's for a second longer than everyone else's as she gave him an encouraging smile. His heart was making a valiant attempt to beat through his chest as he tried to return the smile.

"Now, I'm certain I can control this, but I need everyone to stay very still and not break my concentration. Please only interfere if you are absolutely certain I've lost control of the curse. Is everyone ready?"

No, Draco was not ready. But he saw everyone else around the room nod or otherwise signal their agreement as they took out their wands, so he mimicked them. He watched as Hermione closed her eyes and drew in a long breath. She held it for a few moments then opened her eyes as she exhaled, an expression of grim determination on her face. She set the Horcrux down on the floor in the exact centre of the room and took a few steps back.

"Pestis Incendium"

Hermione spoke the incantation in a surprisingly calm voice, but Draco felt the power of her spell wash over the room. A split second later, he heard a roaring, billowing noise fill the large space and felt a sudden, immense heat sear the exposed skin of his face and hands. He gripped his wand as his brow started to sweat and narrowed his stinging eyes against the brightness of the flames being expelled from Hermione's wand.

It wasn't anything like he remembered from those terror filled minutes after Crabbe had cast the curse during the Battle of Hogwarts. Whereas the teenage boy had lost control of the fire immediately, Hermione remained calm and in control. Whereas Crabbe had expelled huge, fiery beasts from the end of his wand, a thin stream of golden fire flowed from Hermione's. Whereas Draco had witnessed the curse more than ten years earlier with horror, convinced he was about to die a fiery death, he watched Hermione in awe. He had suspected it for a long time but, in that moment, he was convinced that she was the most powerful witch of the age. No one else even came close.

Given the effort that had gone into getting them to that moment, and the number of people gathered in case of emergency, the destruction of his aunt's horcrux was remarkably anticlimactic. On their walk through the castle, Hermione had explained about how the Dark Lord's horcruxes had fought back; had warned that something similar might happen this time. But all that happened was the ring emitted a high pitched, bone chilling wail before melting into nothing more than a molten band on the floor. There was one, panic filled moment where Hermione turned slightly and the flames continued to pour from her wand, but it lasted for no longer than a second. Draco felt another rush of power settle over the room, this time with an oddly cooling effect, and the flames appeared to reverse course, harmlessly flowing back into Hermione's wand.

They all stood there for several, long moments, hardly daring to believe they had done it. Finally, Professor McGonagall broke the silence.

“Would anyone care for a biscuit?”

Hermione laughed, and the tension in the room seemed to lift. She turned her beaming face towards him and, in full view of everyone present, ran across the room and launched herself into his arms. He couldn't help but laugh with her and, hardly noticing their audience, set her back down on the ground and kissed her with all the passion borne of his pent-up worry, love and admiration.

There was the sound of a wolf whistle from one of the curse breakers, and Draco distinctly heard Professor McGonagall clear her throat in a slightly awkward fashion. He and Hermione broke apart and grinned at each other before she turned to the rest of the room.

“We did it!”

“That, my dear, was all you,” cried Professor Flitwick. Draco saw the older wizard turn to Professor McGonagall and thought he heard him say something along the lines of “You owe me five galleons Minerva, plus fifteen years' interest.”

To his shock, Professor McGonagall rolled her eyes at Professor Flitwick before turning and smiling at Draco.

“We'll have to pass on the biscuits, Minerva, we'd better head back to Gringotts,” said Bill Weasley, looking around at all of them but not meeting Draco's eye. The wizard hadn't been overtly unfriendly, but Draco was painfully aware that this was another Weasley he had yet to win over.

“Well, I very much hope that you, Miss Granger, and you Mister Malfoy, will have time for a spot of tea in my office?”

“We'd love to, Professor, thank you.” Hermione had yet to stop smiling; she looked radiant.

Ten minutes later, they had said their goodbyes to the curse breakers and were sitting in Professor McGonagall's office along with Professor Flitwick.

“Thank you so much for letting us use Hogwarts for this, Professor, and for taking time out of your holiday to help us.”

“Oh, it was nothing dear,” said Professor McGonagall in what Draco thought might have been the most informal sentence he had ever heard the usually severe witch utter. She turned her gaze to Draco; it was somehow both friendly and assessing at the same time. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Professor Flitwick smirk.

“And Mister Malfoy, might I say how pleasant it is to see you again. I hope you've been keeping well?”

“Very well, thank you Professor.”

She smiled at him, and Professor Flitwick piped up.

“And for how long have the two of you been... reacquainted.” Draco couldn't miss the note of humour in his former professor's voice, and thought the wizard seemed inordinately pleased about

something.

Hermione gave a tinkling laugh and replied “It was Draco who first brought the threat of Bellatrix to my attention back in April.”

“I see,” said Professor Flitwick, his eyes sparkling “and you started working together closely after that?”

“Filius, you’re being very rude!” snapped Professor McGonagall as Hermione laughed once more.

Draco for his part couldn’t work out what he was supposed to do. Here he was, sitting in the office of the Headmistress of Hogwarts, having a thinly veiled discussion about his love life with his old charms teacher. His life had certainly changed drastically in the past few months. Theo was going to lose it when Draco tried to explain this to him later.

Professor Flitwick looked as though he was about to respond but, before he could, a large barn owl flew in through the open window of the Headmistresses office.

They all sat in silence as the Headmistress opened the letter and read it with a frown on her face. She looked up at them, and Draco’s stomach clenched as he saw the expression on her face.

“It’s from the Minister. He didn’t want to send a patronus in case it interrupted your focus, Miss Granger.”

Draco looked sideways at Hermione, who was staring at the older witch as though she could read the answers directly from her eyes. Before she had to ask, Professor McGonagall handed Hermione a second, folded, piece of parchment. Hermione held it out between them so that Draco could read it too.

Hermione,

Please meet me at St Mungo’s as soon as you can.

KS

St Mungo's

Chapter Notes

Artwork by the incredibly talented WinterWells.

Hermione

“What happened?” Hermione demanded of Kingsley, glancing around the room to take in the scene before her.

Hermione and Draco had apologised to their former professors and immediately used Minerva’s floo to get them to St Mungo’s as quickly as possible. Hermione had been consumed by the sharp focus that came from the specific mixture of dread and adrenaline. It had to be about the raid; the one that Harry had been leading.

As soon as they had arrived at the hospital, Hermione grabbed Draco’s hand and marched him through St Mungo’s to the emergency department. Kingsley’s message hadn’t told her where to meet him but, as the sound of a commotion increased as they approached the ward, she knew she’d been right. Something about her expression stopped anyone from trying to waylay them, and prevented anyone being stupid enough to question Draco’s presence.

Hermione had spotted Kingsley almost as soon as she entered the chaotic ward. He had been standing at the foot of a bed, deep in conversation with someone Hermione couldn’t see. As she had moved towards the Minister, something tight and painful in Hermione’s chest had relaxed; he was talking to Harry, who looked distinctly disheveled but unharmed.

Although her question had been aimed at Kingsley, it was Harry who answered her.

“We underestimated them. There were more of them than we were expecting, and they were better resourced than we had prepared for.”

Hermione’s heart sank. At the same time, the words *I told you so* threatened to leave her lips in the direction of the Minister. She managed to stop herself, though; this was not the time.

Her attention moved to the figure in the bed for the first time since she had seen that Harry was safe and well. Somehow the sight of her best friend had distracted her to the extent that she failed to notice the shock of red hair against white hospital sheets.

She gasped, and grabbed Draco’s hand. He had been standing silently beside her, his hand on the small of her back providing much needed comfort.

“What happened?”

“It was chaos as soon as we got there. I don’t think they were expecting us, exactly, but they were definitely prepared for a raid to happen at some point. Instead of trying to run, as we predicted they would, they immediately fought back.”

This had been one of the scenarios Hermione had been afraid of. The DMLE hadn't had to deal with organised dark wizards in more than a decade, and that had bled into attitudes about how to deal with them. Most discussions that Hermione had been aware of focused heavily on how to contain those that tried to flee. Not much consideration seemed to be given to what to do if the unknown numbers of Death Eaters fought back. The closest they had got to a discussion on the subject had been how best to subdue Bellatrix herself and, even then, Hermione didn't think Forder was taking the threat the witch posed seriously enough.

Harry continued "They threw up anti-apparition wards, so we couldn't even get away to regroup. After the initial shock, we managed to organise ourselves, but they matched us for numbers. There must have been fifteen Death Eaters and we just weren't prepared for there to be that many. Bellatrix was there, Hermione, and she's just as bad as you warned. She immediately fought to kill, and she managed to take down at least two Aurors."

"What happened to Ron?" asked Hermione, gesturing to the bed. Things might have been strained between them for years, but Ron was still... Ron. Hermione still cared about him, and didn't want anything bad to happen to him. She felt a flash of dread as she thought of Padma and the children.

"He jumped in front of a curse Rodolphus cast at a junior Auror."

"What kind of curse?" Hermione asked, the dread building again at the grim look on Harry's face.

"A Wasting Curse. He's lucky to be alive."

"How is he alive?" Wasting Curses were nasty. Hermione had studied them at length and, unless action was taken immediately, they were almost always fatal.

"I saw the whole thing happen. I couldn't stop it, but I managed to cast a stasis charm on Ron. The Healer's say he'll have to stay here for a few days, and he'll have a hell of a scar on his chest where the curse hit him, but he should survive."

Draco started rubbing small circles on the small of her back, which Hermione found soothing. Hermione looked at Kingsley, who had been extremely quiet during their conversation.

"Where's Forder?"

Kingsley sighed and rubbed his tired eyes.

"Informing the families of the Aurors killed. Harry would usually do it, but with Ron in critical condition Forder volunteered."

Hermione snorted. She doubted Forder's offer had anything to do with kindness; she thought it more likely he didn't want to face the consequences of his rushed decisions.

"How many were killed or injured?" she heard Draco ask Harry.

"Three killed, at least two of those by Bellatrix herself like I said. Six injured, two critically."

Hermione turned to Kingsley, who was looking at her with a wary expression.

"Something's got to give, Kings. We can't keep going on like this."

Kingsley sighed heavily and nodded.

“Stay here for a while, Hermione. Your friends need you. We’ll talk later.”

Ron didn’t wake until the following morning, by which time Harry was out of his mind with worry for his friend.

“What if he doesn’t wake up, Hermione,” Harry asked for what felt like the thousandth time “what if I was too late?”

“You heard the Healers, Harry. He’s healing. This sleep is normal. It’s a good thing.”

Harry flung himself dramatically into a chair, where Ginny stroked his hair consolingly. The red-headed witch was uncharacteristically quiet, with dark rings under her eyes. Ron had been moved to a private room as soon as the Healers thought he was stable enough, and the small room was already filled with visitors.

Draco had apparated home to tell Ginny and Charlie what had happened, and to offer to watch the children if Ginny wanted to see her brother. She had gratefully taken him up on the offer, leaving James and Albus in the hands of Topsey, Draco and Theo. Charlie had stopped on his way to the hospital to inform Padma, Molly and Arthur, and had taken an apparently very confused Rose and Hugo back to be cared for by Topsey. From what Hermione understood, Draco and Theo had called Pansy and Neville in as reinforcements once they were outnumbered by children.

This was what family was for, Hermione thought, as she watched Molly stroke Ron’s hair from his face as Padma sat on his other side holding his hand. People there to share in your best moments, and to help and hold you during your worst.

Ron stirred, and the focus in the room sharpened to one point.

“Pa..ma.”

“I’m here, sweetheart.”

Ron’s eyes fluttered open, and immediately found his wife. He gave her a weak smile and Hermione saw his thumb run over Padma’s hand. Molly immediately burst into tears, and Arthur stood from his chair to stand beside the bed. Harry seemed stunned and just stared at his friend, while Ginny seemed to have been returned to herself.

“Bloody hell, Ron. You didn’t have to do something this drastic to stop us thinking you’re a prat! You could have just admitted it and, you know, stopped!”

“Ginny! Don’t you speak to your brother like that!” Molly Weasley’s voice was sharp, even through the tears.

To Hermione’s surprise, Ginny looked chastened; something she didn’t think had happened in years.

“Wha...” Ron cleared his throat. “What happened?”

Harry started to explain, while Molly wiped her eyes and everyone else in the room stretched and started moving about. Their overnight vigil had been largely still and silent, so they seemed to

collectively decide to take a walk to allow Ron some time alone with his wife, parents and best friend.

Back at the Safehouse, Hermione couldn't suppress a laugh as she walked towards the snug off of the main living room. The adults had clearly decided they wanted the home-turf advantage, and had brought the kids up to the main house. She'd kept her word to Theo and, shortly after she'd moved in, helped him install a television in the Manor. Apparently, the Estate wasn't as imbibed with magic as Hogwarts, and she'd had little difficulty getting the technology to work. She hadn't, however, seen the room since.

The door had been transfigured to resemble a blue police box door, and she was struck speechless as she pushed it open towards the sounds of high-pitched, excited giggles. Theo had turned the room into the Tardis. The room was suffused with an orange glow from orbs that clung to the walls that Theo had spelled to lean inwards in the shape of a dome. There were branches rising from the floor towards the ceiling, that cleverly concealed hammocks and comfortable looking seating areas. All of these were strategically placed around a centre console that, from a quick glance, appeared to Hermione to be a snack stand. Indeed, Topsey was busy trying to prevent Rose from having unsupervised access to unlimited snacks while simultaneously scolding Theo. All of the seating was pointed towards the television screen, which Theo had enlarged so that it took up most of one wall. The effect was quite overwhelming but, from the sheer amount of noise coming from the four small children, they seemed to love it. The screen was currently showing some kind of cartoon pig and Hermione had to look away to prevent her eyes from watering.

She let out another, louder, laugh as she took in the two wizards in front of her. The children had obviously been playing dress up with their babysitters, and the results were... interesting. Theo was dressed as a pirate, complete with a toy sword, boots, eye patch and a spotted bandana over his unruly curls. His grin couldn't possibly have been any wider as he play duelled with a thoroughly over-excited James, who was brandishing his own toy cutlass with great enthusiasm, as Rose cheered her cousin on.

"You scallywags will never defeat the mighty Captain Theo!" cried Theo dramatically, as Rose picked up another toy sword and joined in the duel.

As Hermione watched, Theo pretended to be hit and went down to the floor where he was promptly jumped on by both James and Rose.

Grinning widely, Hermione turned to see Draco staring at her with an amused expression on his aristocratic features. Features which were currently covered in glitter to compliment the sparkling tiara and fairy wings he was wearing. Unlike Theo, he had noticed Hermione come in and raised an eyebrow at her, obviously inviting her to comment. Albus and Hugo were engrossed in sprinkling more glitter on Draco; none of the children had noticed Hermione's appearance.

That was, until she held up her wand and cast a silent *Silencio* on the television, which was beginning to give her a headache. The children and Theo all looked around in annoyance until they saw who had entered the room. At once, all five of them broke into wide grins, and the four smallest ran at Hermione with cries of "Auntie Hermione", "Auntie Miney" and "Mi Mi."

She knelt down to hug them all and they all started talking at once, telling her about their sleepover and the games they had been playing.

“Look at all of you! Are you having fun?”

They all nodded vigorously. Theo had walked over and was standing looking at the children with an affectionate expression on his face, while Draco was getting to his feet and attempting to shake some of the glitter off of his person.

“Did you do all this for the kids, Theo?”

Theo frowned at her.

“All what?”

“This!” she gestured to the room at large. “I think they’re a bit young for Doctor Who, but it certainly works for a make-shift play room!”

Theo grinned at her.

“Excuse me, Sunshine, I did this as soon as you installed the television! I think I did a rather marvellous job, myself!”

Hermione just chuckled, shaking her head as she turned to face Draco. He gave her a small grin as she wiped some excess glitter from his face.

“Hi, love, how’s he doing?”

She gave him a kiss, and he smirked as he wiped glitter from her lips.

“He’s awake and talking. We gave him and Padma some privacy, so I thought I’d come and see how you were all getting on.”

“As you can see, we’re getting along splendidly. The children wanted to play dress up this morning, but we didn’t realise that meant *us* dressing up instead of them!”

His eyes sparkled with amusement, and Hermione felt butterflies erupt in her stomach at the affectionate smile he gave the children who, in the few moments Hermione and Draco had been speaking privately, had ganged up on Theo and were taking it in turns to jab him with toy cutlasses again. Hermione was deeply amused to see that Topsey had joined in with the children; in fact, she appeared to be leading the mutiny against Captain Theo.

After the night she’d had, it mended something in her soul to see their silly playfulness.

She felt Draco’s breath tickle her neck as he leant down to whisper in her ear “Come on, love, you must be exhausted. Let’s get you some food and get you to bed.”

Hermione wanted to protest; there was so much for her to do. But the offer sounded tempting, and she was almost swaying on her feet. Perhaps she could spare a few hours to eat and sleep before she had to get back to fixing Forder’s mess.



“Bloody hell, Weasley! You look like a Kneazel that’s gone five rounds with a Chimera!”

Ron scowled at Theo’s greeting, muttering a word that sounded an awful lot like “Tossplot” under his breath. Hermione ignored him; he was here, and that was the main thing.

During his weekend in hospital, Ron had agreed to move his family to the Safehouse with much more grace than Hermione would have expected. Better late than never, she thought, but she still fully intended to keep a close eye on Ron’s attitude towards his hosts. Draco had suggested that it might be better for him to stay out of the way while they got Ron, Padma, Molly, Arthur and the kids settled in the second farm house. As much as Hermione wanted to argue, she’d had to admit it might help things go more smoothly. She felt bad about it, and if Ron had been completely well she wouldn’t have even considered allowing Draco to step aside on his own property, but the curse had taken a lot out of Ron so she thought it best to make things as easy as possible.

Theo hadn’t had any concerns about being a part of the welcoming committee, and had joined Charlie and Hermione as they helped the family get settled. Hermione was starting to doubt the wisdom of this; as far as she was aware there had never been any specific issue between Theo and Ron at Hogwarts, but Theo had been a Slytherin and therefore Ron would probably dislike him on

principle. It irked Hermione no end that Ron still allowed school prejudices to influence him as an adult, but now wasn't the time for a lecture.

Thankfully, Theo either didn't hear Ron's reply, or decided to ignore him. The move went smoothly, and by mid-afternoon the Weasleys were fully moved into their temporary home. The effort had exhausted Ron, so those not living in the farm house left to let the family settle.

Despite it being a Tuesday afternoon, Hermione was at home. She had spent all of yesterday at the Ministry, planning and finally getting Kingsley to see sense. Forder had been vocal in his criticisms of how Harry and the Aurors had conducted the raid, and had conveniently ignored how involved he himself had been in the planning of the mission. He also seemed to have forgotten that Kingsley was, at his heart, a good man. More specifically, he seemed to have forgotten that Kingsley had been there when Forder had overridden Harry and Hermione's concerns that the raid was being rushed and that they should take extra precautions since they didn't know what they would be up against.

The result was that Kingsley put Harry in charge of the practical elements of the plan to capture Bellatrix, and Hermione and Harry jointly in charge of strategy. Forder was to be kept informed of the 'big picture' elements, but to have little involvement in the day-to-day planning of their next move. To say that Forder had been furious would be an understatement. Hermione couldn't help but raise her eyebrows at Kingsley as the fully grown man slammed the door on the way out of the Minister for Magic's office after calling him "a bloody disgrace" for "letting children run this place."

One thing that they had learned from the raid was that Welcome Week was, indeed, an intended target. The Aurors had found newspaper clippings, with the dates circled (every year Welcome Week happened during the first week of August), lists of names of muggle borns, and a copy of Emilie Burbage's book which had been horribly defaced. Given how close they were to the start of the next school term, there was still a great deal of reluctance amongst the School Board and the various Ministry departments involved in setting up Welcome Week to cancel it. Harry and Hermione were, however, given a great deal of leeway to use whatever means they thought necessary to protect the students and to allow it to go ahead.

By the end of the day on Monday, Hermione had been exhausted and a headache had settled firmly behind her eyes. Kingsley had tried to insist she take a couple of days off, both to rest and to spend time with her family, but Hermione had pushed back; there was just too much to do. In the end, they had compromised and Hermione agreed to take the following morning off to help Ron and his family move in, before returning to the Ministry. She was under no illusions as to how dangerous their upcoming mission would be, so she didn't object too hard to taking one extra morning off. She wanted to soak in as much time with her family as possible, and everyone except Harry would be at the Safehouse.

Hermione was making her way back up to the Manor, intending to head straight back to the Ministry after settling Ron and his family in the Farmhouse, when she was waylaid by Ginny.

"Hermione, glad I ran into you."

"We live in the same place, Gin, it's not that surprising." Hermione smiled at her friend, who poked her in the ribs.

"I've been thinking. You know I'd been planning a big party for Harry's 30th?"

Hermione sighed. She felt awful, but had told Ginny that she didn't think it would be a good idea to go ahead with the huge party she'd planned for her husband's birthday. Since Harry had missed out on so much growing up with the Dursley's, Ginny had made it her life's mission to make sure she never let any occasion go by without making a fuss over Harry. Hermione supported this wholeheartedly, and they'd had some wonderful times celebrating her best friend over the years.

"I'm sorry Gin, I know I'm literally being a party pooper, but I just think it's too dangerous. It would be such an unnecessary risk."

"No, no, I know we can't have the party I was planning. But what if we held it here?" Hermione went to object, but Ginny cut her off.

"I don't mean invite everyone here, that would be a huge security risk, I know. But with those of us who live here... plus Neville who I think pretty much lives here anyway. What do you think?"

Hermione looked at her smiling friend, and grinned back at her.

"I think that's a wonderful idea. I don't know if I'll be able to join in, you know Welcome Week starts the Monday after Harry's birthday, but you should definitely all celebrate!"

Draco

Of all the strange things that had happened to him over the past few months, attending Potter's thirtieth birthday party had to be among the most bizarre. Even more strange was the fact that it was being hosted in Draco's own home.

Ginny and Topsey had thrown themselves into party planning over the past week and a half, and he had to admit the results were impressive. Draco had finally managed to get Pansy to admit that Longbottom had moved in for the summer, so had added him to the wards. The guest list was, therefore, entirely comprised of residents of the Safehouse, but that list had grown so much over the past few weeks that it definitely still felt like a party.

The event had started with an elaborate lunch spread, and Draco had been surprised that Topsey and the Weasley matriarch hadn't come to blows over who got to cook the food. It had been close though. Draco had stepped in at Topsey's request, and they eventually managed to settle on a compromise; Topsey got to make most of the food but Molly got to make the cake. It was a gigantic thing in the shape of a snitch, which was apparently some sort of tradition between the Potters and Weasleys. It made Draco's heart ache with a strange sort of nostalgia; a longing for a past he hadn't been a part of. His mother had always made sure to lavish him with gifts and affection on his birthdays, but it was different. His birthdays had always been very formal, and there had been much more standing on ceremony than this display of affection from those closest to Potter. If Draco had been watching from the sidelines, he would have been envious, but Potter, Ginny and even Molly all went out of their way to ensure that he was included in everything.

Hermione joined them after lunch, a compromise they had settled on the day before. It had taken some persuading, as she felt she needed to be available to discuss tactics with anyone involved in the upcoming Welcome Week plan, but Draco had finally managed to convince her that she could take a few hours off on a Saturday to enjoy her best friend's birthday. The plans were all in place, and it was unlikely anything would change at this late stage. In any event, Draco had pointed out, if anything unexpected happened she would still be contactable and would only have to apparate

away. He'd brewed her an extra strong sober up potion, which he'd put in a little vial hanging on a necklace. That way, she could enjoy a few drinks safe in the knowledge that she'd be sober again at a moment's notice if needed. The smile on her face when he handed it to her warmed his heart.

After lunch they had spent an enjoyable few hours playing games with the children in the grounds. Draco's favourite by far had been the game of Quidditch they played with James and Rose, the two eldest children. He saw the worried expression that Padma had worn as her barely five-year-old daughter got onto a training broom, but it eased slightly as Hermione showed her the shield charms she would be holding around the younger participants. In the end, it was Potter, Ginevra, James and Draco against the Weasel, Charlie, Theo and Rose. Since the children were playing there were no winners, exactly, they mostly just threw small quaffles around the pitch and helped the children score goals through the miniature hoops they had set up underneath the full-sized versions (the Weasel's attitude towards the Safehouse had improved significantly once he learned Draco had installed a quidditch pitch).

They stopped playing as soon as the younger children started to get upset that they couldn't get involved, and spent some time playing games in which they could all participate. Draco was slightly horrified when Hugo asked him to reprise his role as a fairy, but couldn't say no to the small dark-haired boy. It helped that he took after his mother much more than his father, but Draco suspected he would be unable to deny any of these children anything regardless. It had only been a couple of weeks and he'd become undeniably attached.

Dinner had been a much quieter affair, as the children were exhausted from the excitement of the day. Molly and Arthur decided to call it a night, and took all four sleeping children back to the farmhouse with them, leaving the parents to relax and celebrate Potter's birthday.

That had been a couple of hours ago and, almost immediately after they left, the drinking games had started.

"Ok, Weasley, truth or dare?" said Theo, with a definite slur to his words following his abysmal performance during 'Never Have I Ever.' Draco shouldn't have been surprised to find out that there was almost literally nothing his oldest friend hadn't done, but some of the details surprised even him. The *whole* Ravenclaw quidditch team, really?

"Dare" said the Weasel with absolutely no hesitation.

Theo pouted "Oh come on, that's boring!"

"How's it boring to pick dare?"

"You're a Gryffindork, you're always up for a dare! I bet all I'd have to do is vaguely hint that you might not have the balls to do something and you'd trip over your ridiculous troll feet trying to prove me wrong!"

Draco had noticed that Theo didn't seem to like the youngest male Weasley all that much. It came as something of a surprise to him since Theo, as a general rule, got on with everyone. Draco suspected it had something to do with how, in Theo's eyes (and Draco's too for that matter), he'd put his family in unnecessary danger out of sheer stubbornness and pride.

"Well, tough. I pick dare."

“Fine... you have to go around the circle and sniff the armpits of every person here then rank them in order of best smelling to worst!”

There was a general outcry of protest from the group, and a few went so far as to throw shoes at Theo. Trust him to pick something that would make *everyone* uncomfortable.

“Ugh, not bloody likely. Fine, truth.”

“You’ve got to drink if you switch part way through your turn.” said Theo, pouring more firewhiskey into Weasley’s glass.

Weasley, who was well on his way to being as sloshed as Theo, stared at the other wizard for a moment as though waiting for him to come into focus.

“I don’t think that’s in the rules!”

“That’s the rules, tosspot!” replied Theo.

Sensing that the drunken back and forth was in danger of turning nasty, Draco stepped in.

“You two have taken too long! Birthday boy, truth or dare?”

Potter, who had been quietly conducting himself in a rendition of ‘Happy birthday’ blinked myopically up at him. At some point in the evening the Chosen Prat had lost his glasses, and it hadn’t yet occurred to him to try summoning them. The thought struck Draco that he could summon them himself, but then the specky git would probably just break them again (as had already happened once that evening after Potter agreed to give a drunken display of a Wronski Feint as a dare. Luckily, he’d chosen one of the children’s training brooms, so hadn’t had far to fall).

“Truth!”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done at work?”

Potter started laughing hysterically and slid sideways off of his chair. The other players all gave a loud cheer and round of applause as he got to his feet and bowed, and Draco thought it might be nearly time for the drinking games to end.

Draco turned to share an eye roll with Hermione, but she was busy wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. She’d had to drink more during the “Never Have I Ever” part of the evening than Draco would have expected, and was a little tipsy. He smiled fondly at her before turning back to Potter.

Potter was still laughing too hard to answer, so Ginny answered for him as she clapped her husband on the back. Draco was impressed by the redhead’s ability to hold her drink; she’d had at least as much to drink as Potter but still seemed largely *compos mentis*.

“I know this one! It was the time after Forder called Hermione a bitch behind her back. Harry was furious, so he hit Hagrid up for some crup shit and hid small amounts all over Forder’s office.”

Draco was slightly disappointed; the story had started off promising but that was pretty tame.

Ginny must have read his expression, because she cackled. “That was just phase one! He also charmed Forder’s desk to subtly vanish any personal documents the man stored on it which,

amongst other things, resulted in him being locked out of his vault at Gringotts for a week. The final phase was to slip low doses of boil potion into his coffee every morning for a month. It was one of George's inventions, so the boils couldn't be cured by normal means. Forder couldn't walk properly for about six weeks!"

Draco heard Theo let out a long whistle, and saw Hermione look as though she was torn between her obvious amusement at the retelling of the story, and the desire to look as though she disapproved of what Harry had done.

"Holy shit, Potter! Remind me not to get on your bad side... again." Draco smirked at the dark-haired wizard who was now hiccupping and leaning against Ginny, who propped her husband up before replying for him.

"Hey, I might have the reputation as the scary one, but Harry didn't defeat old Voldy by smiling at him!"

Luckily, the drinking games seemed to come to a natural end after that. Draco looked around the circle, at the people gathered there to celebrate Potter's birthday, and felt a warmth spread through him that had nothing to do with the summer evening or modest amount of firewhiskey he had consumed. Potter had his arms around Ginny and appeared to now be serenading her with his rendition of 'Happy Birthday'. Hermione and Padma were whispering and giggling in low voices, and Theo and Charlie seemed to have snuck off somewhere together, as they were nowhere to be seen. Pansy and Longbottom had called it a night after 'Never Have I Ever' and Draco had the horrible notion that the game had given Pansy some ideas. The Weasel was fast asleep, leaning back in his chair with his mouth hanging open and snoring loudly.

Draco sat and watched Hermione chat with her friend, and was content to let the evening wash over him. The whole day, really. Monday morning would mark the start of Welcome Week, so they would need to be ready to face whatever came with that. But for now, Draco was content to enjoy a moment of peace with the people he cared about; old and new.

Aboard the Hogwarts Express

Chapter Notes

This is the penultimate chapter! I'm doing a double post today, so will also be posting the final chapter. There will then be two epilogues that I plan to post at some point over the next few days weekend. I can't believe the main story is done! Thank you so much to everyone who has followed this story, and to those who have left comments and kudos - it's meant a lot to me! I hope you enjoy the ending!

Draco

Draco blinked the blue light from his eyes as he stared around the station. He couldn't remember ever feeling as nervous as he did at that moment, waiting on Platform 9 ¾ to board the Hogwarts Express as a thirty-year-old man.

Hermione wasn't happy with him. It was the only real argument they'd had so far. She didn't want him anywhere near Welcome Week, as she thought it would be too dangerous to bring an untrained wizard into a potential conflict situation. Draco had argued that he'd proven himself capable at every turn, and surely an extra person would only work in their favour. Hermione had appealed to Potter who, as a compromise, suggested he put Draco through a condensed version of the final Auror tests. The agreement was that he would be allowed to join them if he managed to pass. He had passed, with flying colours and no small degree of smugness. Hermione had conceded defeat, if a bit ungraciously, and included him in her plans.

He understood her concerns, he really did. But the idea of her leaving him behind to potentially have to defend people against his deranged aunt drove him mad. He couldn't let her leave not knowing if he would see her again. They had deployed about two thirds of the Auror Office for the Welcome Week mission but, unless he could see her with his own eyes, he wouldn't believe she was safe. No one else, with the possible exception of Potter, would treat her safety as a priority. Certainly not Hermione herself.

"Are you ready?" he asked the small, sandy-haired boy standing next to him.

The boy nodded, a look of determination on his face. Draco ushered him onto the train, along with the others, and caught Hermione's eye as she did the same one door down. There weren't enough children to fill the train, so they had designated one carriage for this journey, with a couple of Aurors at each end for safety. The Hogwarts Express would be a difficult target, given the dangers of apparating onto a moving vehicle, but considering how well known the route was they couldn't rule it out. Draco, Hermione and the three Aurors in Hermione's taskforce eventually seated themselves in the rear carriage of the train, far away from everyone else. The logic was that, if Bellatrix was planning on attacking the train, she'd likely find it difficult to resist using her knife to appear directly where Draco and Hermione were.

As an additional step, all adults who would usually staff the train had been replaced by Aurors, including two who had been thrilled to learn how to drive the train, and another who had been less

thrilled to be pushing the food trolley. Draco thought they had made the train as safe as possible, while still keeping up appearances of normality.

“Under different circumstances, I’d like this,” Draco murmured to Hermione as they sped away from London. The three Aurors were sat one carriage over from the couple, giving them some privacy.

Hermione turned her gaze away from the window to look at him. He could see worry there, and wished he could take it away from her. He decided, if this all went well, he would take his witch away somewhere; a holiday for just the two of them sounded perfect.

“You’d like what?”

“The chance to ride on the Hogwarts Express with you.”

She smirked at him “I think you tried a few times! Weren’t you always popping into our compartment looking for trouble?”

“Yes, not at all jealous and wanting to pick a fight out of spite!”

She chuckled and took hold of his hand. Hopefully she was starting to forgive him for insisting on accompanying her. As if reading his mind, she said “I do appreciate you coming. I just wish you weren’t in danger.”

He nudged her shoulder with his own “And how do you think I feel, witch?”

She smiled at him. “I know, but I at least signed up for this. You’ve just been dragged into something you didn’t want any part of.”

He was silent for a long time. Long enough for the landscape outside to have changed from the terraced houses that marked the outskirts of London to neat fields as far as he could see. Eventually, he spoke.

“If things had been different, I would have wanted to be an Auror.”

She looked at him in surprise, and he quickly added “I know it’s not possible but... when we did those career sessions back in fifth year, I thought being an Auror sounded cool. I liked the idea of something that would challenge me, something that would make me part of something bigger than myself. And it helped that it’s considered a prestigious profession.”

“Why don’t you?”

He snorted at her to convey his disbelief, but didn’t say anything. Truth be told, the idea had been gnawing away in his mind ever since Potter let him take the tests and he passed them all easily, without even having to study. But he had to be realistic – just because Potter and Hermione accepted him at the Ministry didn’t mean anyone else did. Forder was a prime example of that, and Draco thought the older wizard would likely make it his life’s mission to ensure that Draco never joined his department.

They passed about ten minutes reading and chatting, while the sounds of several games of exploding snap filtered in through the doorway to their compartment. Draco was just starting to think the journey might turn out to be rather uneventful when he heard a number of *cracks* from the

corridor that had nothing to do with the noisy game the Aurors had been playing. He felt his heart leap into his throat as he and Hermione jumped to their feet. As they had rehearsed, they vanished the interior compartment walls and seats, so they were standing in one, long carriage. Out of the corner of his eye, Draco could make out Penelope, Priya and Gareth also on their feet with their wands out. Most of his attention, however, was taken up by the four Death Eaters in front of him.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you mudblood?” sneered Rodolphus to Hermione, brandishing Bellatrix’s knife at her. Draco was equal parts relieved and disappointed that Bellatrix wasn’t there herself. He didn’t much fancy any of them duelling her in a confined space on a moving train, but at least they would have known where she was.

None of them moved or said anything, waiting to see what would happen. Rodolphus turned to the other three and laughed as he stared down at the small forms of the Aurors who had been Polyjuiced to look like children. Now was the moment of truth, to find out if their plan had worked.

“Disguising Aurors as children! You really thought you had us, didn’t you mudblood. But the joke’s on you – we know where those kiddies are. We set up a nice little welcome party for them in Hogsmeade.”

Without another word, the five of them moved as one. They had the confirmation they needed; they had been betrayed. Draco slashed his wand through the air and engaged one of the masked figures. He was briefly aware of the others doing the same thing before his attention was captured by his opponent sending a Cruciatus Curse his way. Alright then, clearly they meant business. He dodged the curse, responding with a *Petrificus Totalus* that the Death Eater deflected. He didn’t, however, manage to dodge Draco’s silent *Stupefy*. As he fell, Draco disarmed him and caught him in an *Incarcerous*.

Turning to the others, Draco saw Hermione help Penelope subdue the last Death Eater from their carriage. Draco strode past the three immobilised bodies on the floor, before realising there should be a fourth.

“Where’s Rodolphus?”

Hermione looked angry, as she healed a cut on Priya’s arm.

“The coward disappeared.”

“Right. Let’s warn the others.”

The fight had been brief, but Draco was filled with adrenaline as they ran up the length of the train. Apparently, theirs had been the only carriage hit, as they met the small forms of the other Polyjuiced Aurors running towards the noise that must have been coming from their carriage.

“They know the others have gone to Hogsmeade. The diversion didn’t work. Penelope, please stay here to keep an eye on the prisoners and assist Carter and Mander in getting them to the Ministry once you arrive back in London. Everyone else, to Hogsmeade. Now.”

The plan had been a fairly simple one, even if it was difficult to execute. While Hermione, Draco and a small group of Aurors posed as children and their guards on the Hogwarts Express, there had been a number of portkeys set up at Platform 9 ¾ to transport people directly to Hogsmeade. Once

Hermione had gotten over her aversion to having Draco involved, they had hoped that having both of them out in the open might tempt Bellatrix to try to corner them on the Hogwarts Express, where she would have been met with a team of Aurors. They thought that being able to trace them via the curse would mean that she was able to apparate onto a moving vehicle more easily than if she had to do it without a guide, and they had been right. Unfortunately, it was only Rodolphus and a few others that had followed them and they hadn't even managed to detain all of them.

Draco felt as though he had missed a step going downstairs as he took in the scene in front of them. They had apparated directly to Hogsmeade station before running for what felt to Draco like an hour, but was probably only a few minutes, further into the valley and toward the sound of a magically amplified voice. A horribly familiar, magically amplified voice.

"They would have us welcome this filth – these thieves of *our* magic – into our world. More than that, in the last decade, pure bloods have been treated like scum. I was appalled to see the state of things, but no more! We've seen what happened when we failed last time, so we will not fail this time! *TOJOURS PUR!*"

There was an echoing cry of "*TOJOURS PUR*" from the crowd of around twenty cloaked and hooded Death Eaters. The crowd of Death Eaters that was gathered around twelve small bodies, huddled together in front of the makeshift stage Bellatrix was standing on. A small, hysterical, part of Draco's mind noted that the Black family flair for dramatics clearly ran strong in Bellatrix.

Draco had only a second to take in the crumpled form of Forder and several older members of the Auror Office (that Hermione and Potter had instructed to stay behind due to their strong loyalty to Forder) on the ground in front of the stage before his attention was once again grabbed by Bellatrix.

"And what's this? The blood traitor and the mudblood come to play?" her taunting voice grated at Draco.

"They're just children. Let them go." Hermione's strong voice carried over the space between them, followed by the hissing and jeering of the Death Eaters, who clearly disagreed.

"These aren't children. They're no better than animals! What are you going to do, mudblood? These Aurors have already tried to stop us." She spat on the still forms at her feet. They didn't appear to be moving at all, and Draco couldn't tell whether they were alive. At that moment, he couldn't bring himself to care all that much.

Bellatrix continued "We've got more than double your numbers, so what's the plan scum?"

"Just let the children go, then we can talk."

Bellatrix sneered and jumped off of the stage (which Draco could now see was composed of crates joined together with some timber on top). As if on cue, the Death Eater's closest to the children grabbed one each and stood so that the children's backs were to them, with their wands pointed down at the small figures. The crowd parted to allow Bellatrix to walk towards them, with Rodolphus and one masked figure falling into step behind her. Draco had to admit, the effect was intimidating. He glanced over at Hermione and pressed his ring, calling for reinforcements. He knew she felt it on her own hand when her eyes flicked over to him, before she refocussed on the threat in front of them.

Bellatrix's demeanour had shifted. Before, her tone had been taunting but now her eyes had darkened with anger and the air around her crackled with energy. Whereas Hermione's magic

always sparked with golden light, Bellatrix seemed to exude swirls of darkness. The two witches were opposites: light and darkness; love embodied and hate personified.

Before Draco had time to wonder where they were, Potter and Weasley arrived next to him, looking down at the rings they had borrowed from Pansy and Theo. Not only had they come, as planned they had each brought two additional Aurors by side along apparition.

“Let them go, Lestrage.” Potter called, in an authoritative voice that impressed Draco.

His aunt threw back her head and cackled, clearly delighted by the new arrivals.

“And this is what the mighty Ministry sends, is it? The ‘Golden Trio’ back again? Luck won’t save you this time, Potter! Look how many we were able to summon in a month. You’re outnumbered and outclassed.”

“This is your last chance, Bellatrix. Come quietly and end this.”

Her expression changed from gleeful to furious in a split second. It had always been the thing about his aunt that Draco found the most disconcerting; how she could switch between emotions in the blink of an eye. He gripped his wand more tightly, aware that they were reaching a breaking point beyond which was only violence.

“You filthy half-blood...”

“NOW” shouted Harry.

Draco watched as Weasley and several other Aurors expelled what appeared to be large orbs from the end of their wands. They zoomed across the space between the two groups and hung over the heads of the Death Eaters. As Hermione had hoped they would, several Death Eaters shot stunning spells at them and one even sent up a *Bombarda*. The orbs broke, drenching everyone beneath them in liquid.

Bellatrix had looked around when the Aurors cast their spell, but slowly turned back to them when she saw what had happened.

“Water, Weasley? I’m sure whatever was supposed to happen would have been impressive, but that’s what happens when the Ministry relies on incompetent blood traitors!” She screamed the last few words, and Draco was sure she would have attacked at that point, except for the noises of confusion from the Death Eaters behind her.

Where before twelve of the Death Eaters had been holding children captive, they now found themselves facing twelve, armed, adult Aurors. The Thief’s Downfall had been Hermione’s idea, and it had worked perfectly to counter the effects of the Polyjuice Potion. The Aurors wasted no time in attacking the Death Eaters and in the confusion Draco, Hermione, Potter, Weasley and the others sprinted towards the group to help.

It was chaos; the Death Eaters were completely unprepared for the additional Aurors, and several of them were unable to gather themselves in time to fight back. Unfortunately, most of them were more adaptable, and were able to engage in the fight straight away. Lights flashed in all directions as spells were cast and deflected. The disguised Aurors had evened the odds in terms of numbers, and the fact that they immediately subdued three Death Eaters gave them a slight edge. But, as

Potter had discovered during their last unsuccessful raid, Bellatrix's followers were neither unprepared nor unskilled.

Draco sent a stunning spell at a Death Eater, but he was too late to prevent the *Confringo* she had cast from hitting an Auror Draco didn't know the name of. He watched in horror as the Auror exploded, and moved quickly to avoid being hit by body parts. He suppressed his horror, and recalled Hermione's words from Taskforce Training "*Remember not to fight fair, a real enemy wouldn't.*"

Draco glanced around; in the confusion he'd lost track of where Hermione was. Before he could locate her, the same Death Eater who had just killed the Auror stepped into his path and dragged his attention away. Almost instinctively, Draco instantly cast a powerful shield charm, which deflected the Flaying Curse the Death Eater sent his way. Draco cast a Slicing Hex, which he aimed at the Death Eater's torso. She blocked it, as Draco had expected, but she didn't anticipate the silent follow up that Draco aimed at her wand hand. Draco felt a sick kind of satisfaction as the witch's hand was severed from her arm in a spray of scarlet. Making the most of the moment, Draco stunned her and cast a quick *Incarcerous* to keep her down.

Turning back, he spotted Hermione duelling back-to-back with Potter in a move they had clearly rehearsed. He felt a thrill of fear as he recognised the flying black hair of Hermione's opponent; of course she was fighting Bellatrix. He ran towards them but was once again waylaid by a Death Eater – this time, it was Rodolphus. Draco barely dodged the jet of green light that was cast in his direction, and realised he had missed death by an inch. Rodolphus was duelling to kill.

As he settled into the fight, Draco knew they were at a disadvantage. The Death Eaters were using all manner of dangerous curses, some with large blast radiuses, with no apparent regard for whether they hit friend or foe. Draco had ruled out a number of useful curses on the basis that he didn't want to risk hitting anyone on his side but that, along with his reluctance to kill, was hindering his ability to fight effectively.

As he dodged another killing curse, Draco had an idea. Remembering the move Hermione had used against him in training, he decided to go for the element of surprise. In quick succession, he cast a disarming spell, which was blocked easily, followed by a summoning spell on his opponent's robes. Taking advantage of Rodolphus' surprise, Draco grabbed the older wizard and apparated him about fifteen feet away from the main fight, just on the other side of where Hermione was fighting Bellatrix. As soon as they landed, Draco cast a strong *Protego*, pushing Rodolphus further away from the other fighters.

Draco was about to cast, about to take advantage of the extra space he had created for himself, when he heard a sound that made his blood run cold. He forgot that he was in the middle of a duel with a dangerous Dark Wizard as his entire being focussed in on the sound that cut through the battle to reach him - Hermione's cry of pain. Turning, he saw that Bellatrix had hit Hermione with something that was causing her leg to bleed heavily. Hermione didn't appear distracted, but Draco couldn't take the chance. Summoning all of his concentration, he cast the modified *Protego* that Hermione had taught him, throwing a shield over her in an attempt to deflect any attempt by Bellatrix to take advantage of her injury.

Several things happened in very quick succession. Bellatrix turned to look at Draco, her expression of fury quickly morphing into one of delight as Draco felt himself being disarmed by Rodolphus. He was aware of a *crack* of apparition as the Death Eater disappeared from behind him and then

reappeared next to Bellatrix, still holding Draco's wand. He saw Rodolphus take over the fight with Hermione as Bellatrix reached into her pocket and drew out a small, spherical object.

Draco couldn't hear the exact words over the sound of the remaining duellers, but knew Bellatrix was screaming something at him as she threw the object at his feet. Disarmed, Draco could do nothing but stare at it. He thought it would have been bigger, but the null bomb was barely larger than a snitch. He looked up in time to see Hermione cast a jet of green light at Rodolphus and turn towards him with an expression of horror on her face. There was nothing he could do. Hermione had warned them all that if Bellatrix used a bomb in a fight, they needed to apparate away as quickly as possible, as they detonated only a few seconds after being released. But Draco couldn't apparate without a wand.

Really, he thought, as he stared at Hermione - the woman he loved, who had brought him back to life and shown him what it was like to truly believe in someone – if her face was the last thing he saw, then there were worse ways to go. They locked eyes and he smiled, trying to convince her without words that it was okay. That, if this was the end for him, it had been worth it for the time he got to spend with her. Hermione's amber eyes were the last thing he saw as a strong force pushed him backwards and a bright light obscured his vision.

The Most Powerful Witch of the Age

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione

NO!

The single word reverberated around her mind as she met Draco's eyes. It was clear in his expression that he thought he was going to die. That he accepted it, even.

No.

Hermione didn't think. She was vaguely aware that, in the moments before, she had aimed a killing curse at Rodolphus but she didn't check to see if it landed. Nor did she give a second's thought to the fact that she had been duelling Bellatrix. The bomb was seconds away from draining Draco of his magic, seconds away from taking his life. But she wouldn't let it happen. She cast a banishing charm in an attempt to move Draco out of harm's way. He flew backwards, but she didn't know the blast radius of this bomb. What if Bellatrix had made it more powerful? She could only think of one thing. If it wanted to drain magic, she'd give it magic - she'd overload it with magic.

"Pestis Incendium"

If fiendfyre could destroy a horcrux, she hoped it could destroy this. At the very least, she thought, as she poured her magic into the curse, the vaguely sentient flames could keep the device busy. Fiendfyre flames were comprised of pure magic, magic that wanted to burn, that wanted to escape its caster. That was why it was so dangerous and difficult to control. Once started, the fyre wanted to continue and would pull magic out of its caster if given the chance. As a contrast, the null bomb wanted to consume magic. Once active, it would absorb as much as it could. If the cursed flames didn't destroy it, Hermione only hoped that she had enough magic in her to overpower the bomb. She was regularly told that she was the most magically powerful witch of the age, so now she would put that to the test. She just hoped Harry, or anyone else nearby, would use the time she was giving them to get Draco to safety.

Time slowed, and Hermione's world narrowed to one point of focus. Keep casting at the bomb. It must have detonated in the split second before her curse hit, because the flames were disappearing into the small device. She couldn't see anything other than the point where her magic met the bomb, couldn't feel anything beyond the immense drain on her being as she fed her power into the void. The edges of her vision started to go black, but still she carried on. She felt her body weakening and dropped to her knees when her shaking legs couldn't keep her upright anymore, but still she carried on.

The flames pouring from her wand started to flicker, and the last thing Hermione was aware of was a flash of red light before everything went dark.

Draco

If this was death, then Draco had some notes. For one thing, he was extremely uncomfortable. His eyes were still squeezed tightly shut, but if he had to guess he would say he was lying on the least comfortable mattress he had ever slept on. Either that, or he was on the ground. For another, it was noisy. He couldn't hear distinct words, but there were people shouting in the near vicinity and he wanted to ask them to stop; they were giving him a headache and he really just wanted to rest. Finally, he was in a certain amount of pain. Wasn't one of the benefits of dying supposed to be an end to suffering? He was definitely going to lodge a complaint with someone once he worked out where he was.

Draco had just decided that he didn't want to open his eyes, that he'd rather postpone the moment when he discovered where he'd ended up, when he found himself being shaken rather abruptly. His eyes flew open, and he was astonished to find that he was staring up into the blue eyed, freckled face of Ron Weasley. Yes, he was definitely going to be complaining to someone.

"Get up, you git, you're fine."

"What happened?" asked Draco, as he did as he was told and got to his feet.

"You got yourself disarmed, Bellatrix threw a null bomb at you, Hermione pushed you out of the way and then overloaded it with magic."

There was a lot to unpick in that sentence. Plus the pleasant realisation that he was, in fact, not dead. He asked what seemed to be the most pressing question first.

"Where's Bellatrix?"

"Dead."

"Dead?"

"Yep. Her and Rodolphus. Hermione hit Rodolphus with an *Avada* about one second after Bellatrix threw that bomb at you. The sadistic bitch wanted to watch it drain you of magic, and Harry hit her with a slicing hex. Took her head right off."

Draco's head was spinning. His aunt was dead? Why didn't Weasley sound happier about it? Slowly, the rest of what the redhead had told him sank in.

"Wait a moment. You said Hermione overloaded it with magic?"

Weasley nodded and pointed at a spot on the ground about fifteen feet away from where they stood. Draco's heart sank at the grim expression on his face, and his ears started to ring as he took in the horribly familiar sight of chestnut curls. Except, instead of being fanned out over his pillows, they were spilling over the grass, obscuring Hermione's face from sight but doing nothing to hide the fact that she was lying completely still.

No. No, no, no, no, no!

Draco had been ready to die. Would have happily died if it meant she was unharmed. Weasley was saying something to him, but he couldn't hear it over the roaring in his ears. He ran over to her, not caring who he pushed out of the way to get there.

"Hermione!"

He brushed the hair out of her face, noting that her eyes were closed. He dropped his forehead to hers, and felt the warmth of her skin against his. He only got a couple of seconds with her before he was being pulled away. Furious, Draco reached for his wand before remembering that he'd been disarmed.

"Get away from her, you idiot, let the Healers look at her!"

Potter's voice cut through the haze of Draco's mind.

"Healers?"

"Yes, she drained herself to a dangerous level. I had to stun her – I was worried she'd exhausted herself too far to be able to control the curse."

"She... she's alive?" Draco croaked.

Potter gave him a sympathetic look and clapped him on the back.

"Yes, she's alive! Didn't Ron tell you?"

Draco didn't respond to that. He couldn't. He fell to his knees and covered his face, overwhelmed with the flood of relief and other emotions he couldn't define. Hermione was alive. He was alive. Bellatrix and Rodolphus were dead. Somehow, they had made it.

Hermione

"I still can't believe you cut off her head! That was the coolest, most disgusting thing I've ever seen!"

The familiar voice drifted over Hermione as she swam back into consciousness. She was exhausted but extremely comfortable. It took a few moments for her mind to catch up with her but, once it did, she snapped open her eyes and looked around.

She was lying in a hospital bed, so she was obviously in St Mungo's. There were two figures standing at the foot of her bed, one with dark hair and glasses and the other with red hair and freckles. Clearly, Harry and Ron. Draco... where was Draco? Hermione's stomach clenched with worry.

"Draco?"

"Hermione!" There was a confusing rush of motion as both Harry and Ron ran around the side of her bed.

"How are you feeling?" asked Harry in a concerned voice.

"Where's Draco?" Hermione's heart was starting to pound. The last thing she remembered was pushing him away from the bomb before pouring her magic into it, hoping it would be enough to save him.

"He's fine." Ron quickly assured her. Her eye's met Harry's, and he must have realised she needed more information than that.

“He’s going to be furious with us. He’s barely left your bedside for two days, and then when we finally manage to convince him to go home to wash, you decide to wake up!” Harry frowned at her in mock annoyance.

“He’s okay?” she asked, in a voice that surprised even her with its vulnerability.

“He really is fine, Hermione. Terrified for you, obviously, but you saved his life.”

She smiled and relaxed back against her pillows, closing her eyes against the exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm her again.

“You scared the shit out of us, though!” Ron’s voice was indignant.

She cracked an eye open, which he seemed to take as an invitation to continue.

“You exhausted yourself almost beyond the point of no return, Hermione! If Harry hadn’t stunned you when he did, you’d probably have died!”

Hermione waved her hand in Harry’s general direction in a way that she hoped conveyed her gratitude. Her energy perked up slightly when she remembered the words she’d heard as she returned to consciousness.

“Who cut off someone’s head?”

When she was met with only silence, she opened both eyes and stared at her friends. Ron was grinning broadly, and Harry was looking vaguely uncomfortable.

“Uh, I did. I got a bit carried away with a Slicing Hex and cut off Bellatrix’s head.” Hermione snorted; she couldn’t help it.

“Good. You’re not in trouble, I hope?”

“No, Kingsley agreed that the use of excessive force was necessary given the circumstances. You aren’t in trouble, either.”

“For using the Fiendfyre?”

Harry looked even more uncomfortable.

“No, I think you actually might be in a bit of trouble for that. For using the Killing Curse.”

Hermione stared at him as it slowly came back to her. Rodolphus had disarmed Draco and then apparated to Bellatrix’s side to take over her duel while she threw the null bomb. Hermione remembered the feeling of dread, of knowing something terrible was about to happen. She remembered her single-minded determination to finish Rodolphus so she could help Draco. She remembered casting the curse that ended his life. She wasn’t sorry.

“Good.”

Harry and Ron both nodded and Hermione closed her eyes, succumbing to sleep.

“We’ll leave you two alone.”

“You’re sure she’s ok?”

“She’s fine, Malfoy, just tired and worried about you. You’re as bad as each other.”

“Right. Thanks Potter... Weasley.”

Hermione felt the hair being brushed off of her face, felt the brush of soft lips against her forehead and she smiled. The clean, citrusy smell of Draco filled her senses, and she breathed in deeply.

“Hi.” She managed to croak out through her dry throat.

“Hermione” Draco breathed, almost reverently “how are you feeling?”

She stretched, taking a mental note of how her body felt. As far as she could tell, she was physically fine. Just tired, and very thirsty.

“I’m fine. Could I have some water please?”

“Of course.” As he busied himself getting her a drink, she studied him. He had dark circles under his eyes and looked as though he hadn’t slept in days.

“Take small sips, you don’t want to drink too much too quickly.”

Hermione complied, although it was hard to resist the urge to drink it all at once.

After she’d sated her immediate thirst, there were some questions she needed answering.

“How are you doing?”

He looked at her, and she could feel the weight of his love and worry.

“You almost died, Hermione. Because of me.”

“Not because of you, Draco, because of Bellatrix and Rodolphus. Both of whom, might I point out, are dead.”

“But still...”

“No, don’t think like that. If you hadn’t been there, she might have killed me anyway. She hit me with *Sectumsempra*. Luckily it was only a glancing blow, but it was painful! If you hadn’t thrown that shield up and distracted her, who knows what might have happened!”

Hermione shifted slightly so she could move the bedding aside to look at her leg. Until that moment, she’d forgotten that Bellatrix had cursed her but there was the evidence; a long, jagged scar down the side of her right thigh.

Draco sat on the side of her bed and wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her gently into his side. She sighed and returned his embrace, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“What happened to the others? I know Harry killed Bellatrix and I killed Rodolphus. What about the other Death Eaters? And the Aurors? Did everyone make it? I was too busy with Bellatrix to

notice if anyone else was hurt.”

“Breathe, love.” Hermione realised that she’d said all of that in one breath, desperate for answers. She took in a long breath and let it out slowly, before looking at Draco expectantly.

“Most Death Eaters were captured. Two others were killed, but as far as we can tell they were killed by careless curses from other Death Eaters. Three Aurors were killed, but no one from the taskforce. One was killed in front of me by a female Death Eater, and two of Forder’s people were killed when they tried to apprehend the group at Hogsmeade.”

The mention of Forder caused a surge of fury through Hermione’s body. Draco must have felt her stiffen, because he brushed his lips over the top of her head before speaking.

“You were right, love. He was humiliated after the failed raid, and couldn’t stand that his attempts to blame Potter were unsuccessful. He wanted to undermine you and swoop in as the hero.”

“Have they found out exactly what happened?”

“More or less. He was arrested immediately after the fight, and Kingsley authorised the use of Legilimency to question him. He didn’t switch sides, his aim was always to stop the Death Eaters, but he wanted the credit for it, so he fed information about the train decoy to Flint in Azkaban, under the guise of interrogating him. You were right to be suspicious when he suddenly allowed Flint visitors – it was to allow the information to be passed back to the Death Eaters.”

Hermione could barely contain the rage that was pulsing through her body, and she felt her hair crackle with magic. To her slight indignation, Draco smiled widely.

“What?”

“Your magic! It must have replenished if your hair can spark again!”

Hermione huffed, but otherwise ignored his comment.

“So, if it hadn’t been for our double bluff, Forder would have endangered *children* in his attempt to get me fired?”

“It seems that way. The interrogator reported that he really did think he and the Aurors that were loyal to him would be able to contain the Death Eaters. But, ultimately, yes. He was willing to risk them.”

Hermione seethed quietly for a few minutes and tried not to be soothed by Draco stroking her hair. She wanted to be angry, but sleep was threatening to overtake her again.

“Rest, love. Everything’s under control.”

“She’s back! Sunshine’s back in the house!”

Hermione and Draco had just barely materialised in the travelling parlour of the Manor when Theo came running into the room. He ran straight towards Hermione but was waylaid by Draco stepping into his path. Undeterred from his enthusiasm, Theo picked Draco up and attempted to spin him

around. The result was a pile of tangled limbs and a great deal of swearing as Theo lost his balance and both wizards fell to the floor.

Hermione laughed, feeling lighter than she had done in a long time. It had been five days since the battle in Hogsmeade, but Hermione had been ready to leave the hospital two days ago. She'd resented the Healers' insistence that she stay in for monitoring despite the fact that her magic had clearly recovered. The worst part had been their insistence that she rest for a few days longer once she got home, meaning she wouldn't be present for the *real* Welcome Week; the one they had postponed by a week in order to catch Bellatrix without risking the actual muggle born children and their families.

"Come on, come on, the kids have set up a bed for you in the Tardis!"

"Theo, I don't need a bed. I'm perfectly fine."

Theo pouted at her.

"Come on, Sunshine, for the children!"

Hermione sighed, but conceded defeat. She followed Theo through the house and into the TV room, where she was greeted with enthusiasm by the four children. Draco had explained that no one was in a rush to move the kids again so soon, so they had all decided to wait until Hermione had been home a few days to all be closer together. Hermione was touched, and delighted in the distraction provided by the energetic children. It helped alleviate some of her frustration at her forced leave of absence from work. She had been cleared of any wrongdoing during the battle, with both Kingsley and the Chief Warlock agreeing that her actions had been justified, but they had insisted that she take two weeks on full pay as sickness absence. Hermione hadn't taken that long off work in her entire career, and she was annoyed that it was being forced upon her.

Draco, on the other hand, was thrilled. Now that the threat had passed, he was no longer needed on the taskforce, and was at something of a loss for what to do next. His shop had, unsurprisingly, been burned to the ground, and he hadn't yet decided whether he wanted to rebuild or try something new. In the meantime, he was unashamedly delighted to have Hermione at home with him.

Home.

Hermione hadn't brought up their living arrangements, but it was something she was becoming painfully aware she would have to address at some point. Harry had informed her the previous day that a team of magical builders had restored her cottage as a matter of priority, and that it was ready for her to move back into whenever she was ready. The problem was, she wasn't ready. As she settled down next to Draco in the small blanket fort the children and Theo had made for her, she couldn't imagine going back to living alone.

Hermione realised she must have drifted off, because the next thing she knew was a great quantity of long, red hair obscuring her vision. Despite there being very little room in the fort, Ginny had climbed in next to her, and was snuggling into her side. Looking around, Hermione saw Theo's curls on Draco's other shoulder and several small, sleepy bodies snuggling in around the adults.

"Hey Gin." Hermione whispered to her friend.

To her surprise, Ginny responded by punching her fairly hard on the arm.

“Ouch! What was that for?”

“For scaring me. Don’t do it again.”

Hermione chuckled and wiggled further into Draco’s side. He gave a sleepy sigh, but didn’t say anything. Apparently, this had turned into a group nap.

“I’m sorry Gin, I’ll try not to.”

“Good, because I’m going to need you even more than usual.”

“What do you mean?”

“Harry and I are about to be outnumbered, so we’ll need all the support we can get!”

Hermione was silent for a few moments as the words sank in.

“Wait, Gin! Are you...?”

Ginny nodded, a wide grin spreading across her face.

“We found out last week. The baby will be here in April next year!”

Hermione blinked tears from her eyes as she hugged her friend. On Draco’s other side, Theo sat bolt upright.

“Red... you’re pregnant?”

She grinned at him “Yep, Theo, you’ll be an uncle again.”

Hermione felt her heart swell at the look of pure delight on Theo’s face, as his eyes also filled with happy tears at their friend’s news.

Draco

“Mate, you’re going to wear through the carpet at this rate!”

Theo was sitting on the rug in Draco’s room and was, once again, knitting. His friend had been thrilled at the prospect of another Potter baby, and had immediately started knitting clothes for them. Potter had compared the results to Hermione’s attempts to knit clothes for House Elves during their fourth year at Hogwarts, which Theo had taken as a compliment until Weasley explained that knitting was about the only thing Hermione had ever been bad at.

It had been a week since Hermione had been discharged from St Mungo’s and today was the first time she had been away from him. Draco knew, logically, that the danger had passed and Hermione would be fine, but he was still nervous. What made things worse was that Hermione had returned to her cottage. Not to move back in, but to have a look around at her repaired home. The rebuild had been quick and easy, since it had been destroyed by mundane fire, and there was no reason why she couldn’t move back there straight away. Except, of course, for the fact that Draco didn’t want her to. He wanted, very much, for her to stay here with him.

The problem was, Draco didn't know how to ask her. Despite all they had been through, they hadn't been together for very long at all. He didn't want to scare her off by moving too quickly. But, he knew she loved him, and he loved her, and he wanted them to live together. Theo thought she probably wanted to stay at the Manor but, like Draco, didn't want to assume anything, and was of the opinion that they were both being idiots.

"What if she doesn't want to stay?"

"Then she doesn't want to stay right now. It doesn't mean she won't want to at some point in the future! But you need to ask her rather than just assume you know what she wants."

"Ugh!"

Draco wouldn't admit it, but the departure of the Weasleys last week and the imminent departure of the Potters had unsettled him. Although it had only been a few weeks, he'd become used to the noise and chaos of the children, and would miss having them around. Even worse was the fact that Topsey had left with the Weasleys. He'd grown fond of the little elf, and was missing having her around, although she'd told him to expect her at least once a week to make sure he was eating properly. Since he'd never had any issues with feeding himself, he thought it was likely Topsey's way of saying she'd like to come to visit from time to time, and Draco was touched. She'd been back twice so far, despite it having been less than a week, so Draco was hopeful he'd get to see her often. Weasley had already grumbled that Draco should reimburse him for part of Topsey's salary, which had earned him a scolding from the elf that Draco had thoroughly enjoyed watching. His favourite part had been when Topsey informed the Weasel that, if it wasn't for the children, she would be staying with Draco.

If it hadn't been for everyone leaving, the past couple of weeks would have been like something out of a dream for Draco. Forder had been tried, found guilty of treason, and sentenced to fifteen years in Azkaban. The Wizengamot had accepted his testimony that he hadn't been trying to jeopardize the operation, merely undermine Hermione and Potter to get them both fired, but they hadn't agreed with him that his motivations had justified his actions. Potter, much to the Chosen Git's annoyance, had been named interim Head of the DMLE until a permanent solution could be agreed upon. Hermione told Draco that she suspected he would end up being named Head permanently and that, once he got used to the idea, Potter might like spending less time in the field – particularly with another child on the way. To Draco's surprise, Potter had approached him about joining the DMLE as a trainee Auror. Draco hadn't given him an answer yet, but was pleased by the offer.

Hermione had given a public speech at the conclusion of Forder's trial. She spoke about how justice had been served, but that the wizarding community had to take a long look at itself and hold itself accountable for creating an environment where someone like Bellatrix could flourish. She spoke of prejudice and how many of Bellatrix's followers wouldn't have turned to her if they hadn't been shunned by society. She used Flint as an example, and Draco thought the general shock at how his family had been treated was genuine. He listened with pride as his witch outlined her vision for the future, and couldn't help but notice the pleased glint in the Minister's eye as she spoke. Clearly, they were both thinking the same thing; that they were sure they were watching the next Minister for Magic at work.

"Draco?"

Draco was shaken out of his thoughts by the sound of Hermione calling him from the travelling parlour. He looked at Theo, who gave him an impatient look and said "Go, you idiot! Grow a pair

and ask her, or I'll do it myself."

He was absolutely certain that Theo would, indeed, do just that. Without any further hesitation, Draco strode from his room to meet his witch. He found her in the entrance hall, looking flustered.

"Love, I've got something..."

"Draco, I don't want to..."

"Sorry, what were you saying?"

"No please, you go!"

Hermione looked at him with expectant eyes, so Draco summoned all of his courage and asked her.

"Do you want to stay here? I mean, live here. Permanently? I know it's soon, and you've just got your cottage back, and I will of course fully understand if you would prefer to move back there, but I'd love for you to stay, and this is your home if you want it to be."

She stared at him for a few seconds before launching herself into his arms.

"Yes! That's what I was about to say, I went back to the cottage but it doesn't feel like home anymore! This does, right here, with you!"

She climbed down out of his arms and looked into his eyes, beaming at him. His answering grin spread slowly across his face, and he leaned down to kiss her. As her fingers tangled in his hair and her body pressed against his, he thought about bravery. About standing on her doorstep all those months ago, finally ready to stand up for his beliefs even if nobody wanted to hear him. As they ran upstairs, hand in hand to tell Theo the good news, he thought about the scared boy he'd once been, and how he wished that he could go back and tell him that, one day, he would take a chance on someone. Someone who had no reason to help him, no reason to believe him, but she would do it anyway. And, in doing so, she'd show him what true courage looked like. She'd offer him forgiveness and, in doing so, would help him forgive himself. That, somehow, he'd win her affection and, in loving him, she would show him a life he never would have believed was possible.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I've got outlines for the two epilogues, and I plan to post those over the weekend.

I hope you've enjoyed the story! This is my first fanfic, and I was so nervous to put it online, but it's been a wonderful experience so far! Please remember to always keep fan fiction free and be kind to writers!

Epilogue 1

One year later

Draco

“Mate, you’re making my head spin! Can you just stay still for five seconds?”

“Theo’s right, dear, you need to relax!”

But Draco couldn’t relax. How could he relax when his entire future rested on him getting this right?! He looked over at Pansy, the only person in the room with him not to have spoken, and therefore the only one who might take his side. She raised an eyebrow at him and smirked.

“You know they’re right, Draco. I don’t know what you’re so nervous about!”

Great, they were all against him. Or, perhaps he was against himself and they were the ones on his side? Draco’s heart was pounding and he felt sick as he stared around the mess of his bedroom. His mother looked as composed as ever, sitting in one of his armchairs in front of the empty fireplace and sipping her tea. Pansy was sitting opposite her, watching Draco pace with an amused expression on her face. Theo was kneeling in the middle of Draco’s bed, on top of the pile of clothes that his friends and mother were supposed to be helping him pack for his and Hermione’s upcoming holiday. The one Hermione knew nothing about. All she knew was that she’d needed to book a week off work. That in itself had proved difficult – Kingsley was having Hermione shadow him more and more, ever since he revealed his plan to have her run for Minister in the next election. That wasn’t for another three years, but he wanted her as prepared as possible.

What that meant for Draco was that Hermione’s schedule had become even more full, and convincing her to take a week away from work had been difficult. Finally, with the help of his friends and mother, he’d managed it. He’d booked a week in Crete for them, which he reasoned had enough magical history to keep his swotty witch entertained alongside beautiful scenery and, hopefully, the chance to relax just the two of them. They’d managed the odd long weekend away in the year they’d been together, but this would be their first full-length holiday.

“You know why I’m nervous, Pans! Everything has to be perfect.”

“She loves you, you idiot, all you need to do is ask her!”

Draco flung himself backwards onto his bed and threw an arm over his eyes. He distinctly heard his mother tut and had to suppress the urge to tut back at her. None of the rest of them had been in his position before, so of course they didn’t understand how he was feeling. The feeling of utter terror, the vulnerability of asking someone for everything you’ve ever wanted, mixed with the hope that they might grant it.

“Draco, get up.”

There was no arguing with his mother’s tone of voice, so he did as he was told.

“Theo, dear, get off of the pile of clothes so we can pack them.”

Theo, too, did as he was told.

“Pansy, darling, I believe you have been in charge of selecting Hermione’s clothes?”

“Yes, Narcissa, they’re all ready.”

“Very well.”

With a practiced flick of her wand, his mother neatly folded and packed the clothes that Draco had been obsessing over only moments ago.

Theo snorted.

“Remember last year when you were bitching at us for dressing you for bowling and your first date with Granger? Eating your words now, aren’t you!”

Draco didn’t dignify that with an answer. Instead, he strode over and kissed his mother on the cheek. For some reason, the final step of packing their clothes had been a sticking point for Draco’s anxiety. Now that she’d helped him past that he felt significantly calmer.

“Thank you, mother. Did you bring it?”

His mother rolled her eyes but smiled at him as she reached into her robes and extracted a small, black velvet box. She held Draco’s hand for several long moments as she passed the box to him. Draco saw her eyes well up with unshed tears as she whispered “I’m so proud of you, my Dragon.”

Draco didn’t have a chance to respond before Ginny Potter walked into the room carrying baby Lily in her arms. Theo immediately ran over and took his goddaughter from her mother, cooing at the tiny baby and nuzzling his nose into the side of her face.

Looking straight at Draco, Ginny asked in a voice of incredulity “What are you still doing up here? Hermione’s going to be home any minute! You know if you let her get settled she’ll find a million things to do here and you won’t leave for another three hours at least – you need to whisk her away *immediately*.”

“Ha your mummy told uncle Draco, yes she did!” Theo commented to Lily, who simply gurgled back at him.

There was a general move towards the doorway and, in the kerfuffle, Pansy took hold of Draco’s arm and pulled him gently to the side.

“She’s going to say yes, Draco. You’re perfect for each other.”

“Draco, this place is incredible!”

Hermione was staring around the open plan kitchen/living room of their accommodation, taking in the view from the floor to ceiling windows that showed only the sparkling blue of the Sea of Crete. Draco, however, had eyes only for Hermione. He had, indeed, whisked her away as soon as she returned home from work, so she was still wearing the high-waisted trouser suit that she had put on that morning. The international Portkey had dropped them right outside their villa, and Draco had wasted no time in sending their belongings upstairs and leading Hermione inside. He’d debated

with Pansy the merits of visiting one of the many Malfoy Estates dotted across the globe, but they decided that it would be nice to go somewhere new for both of them.

Once she had finished surveying the room, Hermione turned and beamed at him.

“I can’t believe you planned all this and I had no idea! Thank you!”

“Well, full disclosure I did have some help.”

He felt honesty was the best policy, and didn’t think Hermione would mind.

“Well, it’s perfect. I love it!”

Draco felt his heart soar. The place really was beautiful, with light wooden floors, white marble surfaces, white linen furniture and accents of shades of blue through throw pillows and various other decorations. The overall effect was decidedly nautical which, given the view, seemed appropriate.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and get changed, and I’ll get dinner ready for us. Meet you back down here in an hour?”

She smiled at him and gave him a quick kiss before heading upstairs.

Draco exhaled and tried to calm his nerves. He’d decided to ask her straight away, as he was worried he’d give himself away if he waited until later in the holiday given how nervous he was. He took out the shrunken basket of food that Topsey had insisted on making for them and set about preparing the meal.

Draco had just about finished lighting the candles at the outdoor table when Hermione came back downstairs. The sun was setting, casting golden light through her hair and making her look otherworldly. As he often was, even after a year together, Draco was struck speechless at the beauty of his witch.

“Wow, this is beautiful! I can’t believe you did all of this!”

“I’m glad you like it, love. Here, sit down, I’ll pour us some wine.”

She sighed contentedly and settled down at the table as he popped open a bottle of champagne and poured them each a glass. They clinked their flutes together and Draco held his aloft as he made a quick toast.

“To us.”

The smile she gave him was radiant.

“To us.”

They started to eat, but Draco could barely taste the food as he attempted to make small talk. Usually, listening to Hermione tell him about the various wins and frustrations from her day was one of the best parts of his, but tonight he could barely listen as the small box burned a hole in his pocket.

“And we *finally* got the amendments agreed on the anti-discrimination in healthcare legislation, so that should be put before the Wizengamot at the next session. I don’t think there will be much in the way of opposition, so I’d be surprised if it doesn’t pass.”

As part of shadowing Kingsley, Hermione had taken the opportunity to get more heavily involved in the legislative process, enacting the changes she wanted to see in the world. He couldn’t have been prouder of her as she worked to fix their divided society.

“That’s great, love, I’m happy for you. Are there any particular hold outs?”

She sighed “A couple. But I think they’re starting to realise the tide of public opinion is turning, so I’m hoping, when they actually have to cast their votes, they will pass the legislation out of pure self-preservation.”

He nodded and took a long sip of his champagne. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione do the same as she gazed out over the calm water. It was a perfect late spring evening. The perfect time for Draco to do what he came here to do.

Heart pounding, he put down his glass and took Hermione’s hand in his. Clearing his throat, he spoke the words that had been longing to escape him for months.

“Hermione. This past year with you... it’s been without question the best year of my life. Nothing else even comes close. You’ve shown me a life I couldn’t have even dreamed of, and I can’t believe my luck that you choose to be with me.”

He saw that her eyes had started to fill with tears, which he sincerely hoped were happy tears, and she squeezed his hand in a way he chose to interpret as encouraging. He’d started now, so he would finish. Even though he felt as though his heart was in his throat.

“You gave me a chance when I’d done nothing to deserve it, believed in me for no other reason than your ability to see the good in people. In doing so, you healed the parts of me that the world tried to break. Your love has been the greatest gift of my life and it would be my honour if you would agree to be my wife.”

He could see that the tears had spilled over and she was crying silently, but with a delighted smile on her face. Forget his heart in his throat, his heart was in his hand as he got down on one knee. He pulled out the small ring box, opened it and held it out to her.

“I love you, and want to spend the rest of my life with you. Hermione Jean Granger, will you marry me?”

Draco had barely managed to get the words out before he was tackled to the ground in a mess of curls and kisses.

“Yes! I’ll marry you!”

“You will?”

“Of course! Draco, I love you!”

Draco felt as though he was in a daze of happiness. He barely noticed that they had left the table, had no idea how they had made it back inside the house. He was only aware of Hermione. Her lips

against his, their bodies pressed together as they celebrated their love. She was his. His fiancée and, soon, his wife. Draco already knew it, was reminded daily, but this had been the biggest reminder of all. He was the luckiest man alive.

Epilogue 2

Chapter Notes

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

Five years later

Hermione

“Well, it’s been a longer engagement than I think any of us were expecting, but we’re finally here!”

There was a ripple of amusement across the room, and Hermione saw Draco take a steadying breath. This was the part of the day she knew he had been most nervous about – standing up in front of everyone and giving a speech. He seemed even more nervous about this speech than the one he’d given at their own wedding.

“Daddy speech!”

Hermione smiled and gently shushed her three-year-old daughter, pulling her onto her lap. Carina was her father’s shadow and had been his practice audience for this speech a number of times already. Her twin brother, Leo, couldn’t have been less interested as he sat on the ground and played with the small toy dragon Hermione had won for Draco all those years ago.

Carina looked up at Hermione, an adorable scowl on her tiny face as she pointed at her father, who had looked over and given the three of them an affectionate smile. Hermione nodded to show she could see him, and kissed the top of her daughter’s head, the silver blonde ringlets tickling her nose.

“I’m honoured to be standing here as best man today, when Theo could have had his pick of anyone from the Minister for Magic herself, to the Captain of the Holyhead Harpies, to the Chosen One. But I’m thrilled he chose me. I’ve known Theo for almost our entire lives, and what a journey it’s been. I think he would agree with me when I say that there were times when we would never have believed that we’d eventually make it here. Never dared to hope that there was light at the end of a tunnel that, far too often, seemed endless.”

Hermione’s heart squeezed and she stifled a sniffle as she wiped a tear from her eye. To her amusement, Carina shushed her.

“But throughout it all, Theo’s optimism and determination to see the good in the world around him kept us going. I know I speak for both Pansy and myself when I say that, left to our own devices, we would have easily become bitter and jaded. But Theo didn’t let us. His steady friendship, unwavering support and willingness to call us out when we were being idiots, got us to where we are today.

Six years ago, I remember returning home after one of the more unusual nights of my life – my first experience of a sport muggles call ‘bowling’. Those who know me well will be unsurprised to hear that I was busy brooding, but I’ll never forget what Theo said to me. He had the biggest grin on his face as he proclaimed “*I’ve finally found my type. Sexy, red headed dragon trainers!*”

And, thank Merlin, he was right. Or, partially right. It was one, specific red headed dragon trainer who was Theo's type (although Charlie subsequently explained to all of us that he didn't actually train the dragons)."

Another ripple of laughter swept across the room, and Draco turned to Charlie Weasley.

"Charlie, you've made my best friend happier than I've ever seen him. You keep up with his mischief and have endless patience for some of his quirkiest personality traits."

At that, Theo gave a loud gasp and clapped a hand to his chest as though wounded. Draco spared him a quick smile, but his attention immediately went back to Charlie.

"In the early days of your relationship, I was sure Theo had to be exaggerating your fine qualities. Don't misunderstand me, it wasn't that I had anything against you, but I just couldn't see how someone could possibly be as perfect for Theo as he claimed you were. But I've never been happier to be wrong. You two really are perfect for each other, and I wish you a long and happy life together. So, if everyone could please stand, let's all raise a glass to the newly married couple – Theo and Charlie Weasley."

Hermione set Carina on the floor, and echoed the toast. To her great amusement, she saw Leo raise the dragon in the air. Carina, of course, raised her juice as was only proper. She turned to Pansy and smiled. Pansy's eyes were as watery as her own, though the other witch was trying her best to hide it, dabbing discreetly at her face with one hand while the other cradled her six-month old daughter, Daisy, with the other. She eventually gave up trying to hold back her emotions and handed Daisy over to Neville before stepping towards Hermione and pulling her into a hug.

"I can't believe they're finally married!" cried Pansy into Hermione's ear.

Hermione and Pansy had grown close over the years. It had taken some time, but the turning point seemed to be when Pansy realised that Hermione was sincere in her insistence that she was going to use whatever clout she had at the Ministry to make changes in the wizarding world. Hermione thought it had helped that she had exclusively worn the Parkinson Line during her election campaign, helping Pansy fully launch the line in wizarding Britain.

The crowd cheered and clapped as Draco sat down and Charlie stood to give his speech. Charlie had taken up a role in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and had quickly risen through the ranks. Hermione was thrilled to be working alongside someone who actually cared for magical creatures, and was secretly hoping the current Head of Department would hurry up and retire – she knew who she'd be backing to take their place when the time came.

Years ago, Hermione had offered Theo a role in her old team at the Department of Mysteries, but he had declined. He decided that he would prefer to dedicate his time to helping his friends care for their children alongside their demanding careers. He was, by far, the children's favourite uncle and had endless energy to play with his growing group of nieces and nephews.

Draco, to Hermione's surprise, had followed Theo's lead in declining a Ministry role. Harry, who had accepted the permanent position of Head of the DMLE, offered Draco a place on an accelerated Auror training programme in the immediate aftermath of the fight with Bellatrix. Draco had been grateful, but ultimately decided that he'd had enough fighting for one lifetime. He'd reopened his potions shop in a better location in Diagon Alley, and was happy there for a few years as his business flourished. When Leo and Carina had been born, however, Draco decided he wanted to step back from the shop to look after them full-time. He had been determined to be the father he

himself would have wanted, and it made Hermione love him more than she ever thought was possible seeing him with their children.

As the speeches concluded and the dancing started, Hermione looked around the room full of people she loved. She saw Theo twirling Molly Weasley around the dance floor, Charlie dancing with his father, and Narcissa guiding her grandchildren in an adorable attempt at a three-person waltz. As Draco approached her, hand held out in a silent request for a dance, she smiled and thought about how far they had all come.

Really, Hermione reflected, her heart swelling with affection as she danced with her husband, this wedding was a perfect example of what they had been working towards for years. The perfect example of why she had gone to war as a teenager, and fought again as an adult. Family, love, peace and acceptance. Things she knew would always be worth fighting for.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe it's complete!

Thank you so much to everyone who has read along as I've worked on this. It's my first ever fanfic and it's been so much fun to write.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!