


Medicine

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Medicine

by [CharliPetidei](#)

Summary

Healer Hermione Granger has spent two years nursing her most beloved patient, even though the world believes he's a lost cause. When it is revealed that Draco Malfoy may hold the key to a cure, she knows she'll stop at nothing to find it, but spending time with him brings its own share of unexpected side effects.

Does allowing herself to care for him mean turning her back on everything she holds dear? Does he know more than he's letting on? And are some secrets better kept that way?

A memory loss fic with a twist.

Notes

Hi!

Welcome to this new WIP of mine!

It's a bit different to my shorter stories but I hope you like it!

Warning: this story is going to be intense at times, so please read the tags and take care when reading!

I hope you enjoy! <3

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

Teeth



“Teeth,” someone said.

Hermione looked up from the inpatient sheet she was filling out to see Parvati striding towards her, grin brighter than her lime green Healer's robes.

"What?" said Hermione absently, trying to coax her brain upwards from where it had spent the last ten minutes poring over the results of a particularly complex set of diagnostic spells.

"Teeth," Parvati repeated. "I bet you I'll fix someone's teeth today."

"I see," replied Hermione, scribbling something else down on her parchment. Parvati had decided recently that she was going to rediscover her 'gift' for Divination by predicting what cases she would see each day at St Mungo's, so far undeterred by her poor track record. Hermione smiled wryly. "Alright, I'll bite."

"Ha, ha," said Parvati.

"I bet... I'll get some sort of tongue injury."

Parvati clicked her tongue in response. "You're on. You owe me a pint if you don't see any tongues today."

"A six-year-old stuck his tongue out at me in the lift earlier," Hermione said, trying not to grin. "You may need to raise the bar."

"Ugh, you're right," Parvati muttered. "Never mind. You can buy me a pint regardless. What are you doing tonight?"

"Um, I'm picking Ron up after work. So we'll probably just...hang out after."

"Again?"

Hermione looked down at her form. "Yes. Again."

Parvati nodded. "Alright. But we'll steal you away some other time?"

"Of course." She gave a smile and Parvati squeezed her shoulder, then set off down the corridor.

Hermione looked back at her clipboard. She'd written 'teeth' in the 'diagnosis' box. Blast.

Hermione loved being a Healer.

The training had been tough – long hours, unpredictable shifts, and emotionally taxing cases. But God, it was worth it. There was something so satisfying about her work. It was like every patient that walked through her door was a puzzle to solve, and, well, Hermione had always loved puzzles.

Harry was very supportive, even though she could tell that he didn't understand why she loved it so much. He couldn't stand the idea of being stuck in the gleaming white corridors of

St Mungo's all day. Investigating mysteries, stabilising dark artifacts, and putting rule breakers behind bars? Now that was much more his speed.

There was also the bonus that the bustling office life at the Ministry was perfect for him. Hermione had a sneaking suspicion that it reminded him of Hogwarts. Even his Auror partner was-

Hermione was jolted from her thoughts by a commotion at the reception desk. She'd been on her way out of the hospital for lunch when a familiar aristocratic drawl reached her ears.

"How long is this going to take?" demanded the drawl's furious owner as he scowled over the desk at the receptionist.

"There is a triage system, Mr Malfoy, you can't demand to be seen earlier simply because you're an Auror-"

"But I have paperwork to do before Potter gets to it! Do you know how horrid-"

"How horrid his handwriting is?" asked Hermione, appearing beside him with a grin.

Draco Malfoy turned away from the unwilling audience behind the reception desk and his face split into a matching smile. "Granger! You can get me signed off, right?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Always nice to hear you've come to visit," she quipped.

"What kind of friend would I be if I didn't take advantage of your medical skills?" he joked, then stepped forward to place a chaste kiss to her cheek. "It's good to see you," he said, more gently.

"Enough of that," she laughed, shoving him fondly away. "What is it this time? Skinned knee? Wobbly tooth? Every-flavour-bean up your nose?"

"How would you feel if I was dying and the last thing you did was insult me?"

"It would feel like poetic justice."

"No it wouldn't. You'd feel bad."

"If you say so." Hermione smiled at him, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "How long's the waiting time?" she asked the receptionist, who was watching the exchange with suspicion.

"About forty-five minutes," she answered reproachfully.

"Oh, Harry will definitely try to start the paperwork before then. We better get you fixed up," Hermione decided, grinning. "I'll take him, Cassie, thank you."

"But it's your lunchbreak-"

"That's not a problem, Cassie, really," she answered warmly. "My consult room is always open to friends."

“It wasn’t when I was dying last Sunday,” interjected Draco. “Some friend you are.”

“It was five a.m. And you were drunk, not dying.”

Hermione didn’t catch his response, but his grumbling followed her all the way down the corridor to her room.

“Alright then, out with it. What’s wrong with you?” asked Hermione once inside. She settled back against the wall, eyeing Draco with expectant eyes.

Allowing himself only the briefest moment of embarrassment, he slowly withdrew a hand from his pocket.

Attached to one finger was a thimble.

“I, er, had a run-in with an aggressive sewing kit,” he admitted.

“Hm,” mused Hermione, pulling his hand towards her for further examination. “How curious. You’d think a needle would be more inclined to violence.”

There was an uncharacteristic silence from her patient as he looked at her in disbelief.

“What happens when you try to remove it?” she asked.

He scowled. “The teeth sink deeper.”

“Ah. A classic Chinese finger-trap situation.”

Another silence. An accompanying eye roll. “Just get rid of it, Granger.”

“So what was it?”

“Thimble bite.”

“Yes!” roared Parvati, frightening an elderly witch in the bed behind her. “Teeth!”

Hermione laughed.

Hermione had assumed that Draco Malfoy would more or less disappear after the end of the war, but she’d been wrong. He had signed up immediately for the Ministry Auror training program instead, shocking the wizarding world with his high marks and dedication to the profession, and had then gone on to crash-land into Hermione’s life when he and Harry were made Auror partners.

Despite their emphatic protests, it didn’t take a genius to realise that Harry’s hot-headed spontaneity worked incredibly well with Draco’s more measured, cunning approach. Even

Ron, who had never quite managed to get over his distrust of the Slytherin, had acknowledged that he was a far better partner for Harry than he himself had been.

As a result, it didn't take long for Draco and Harry's grudging friendship to spill over into their lives outside of their Ministry duties. Hermione, Ron and Ginny had slowly gotten used to Draco joining them, and now, five years later, Draco was now considered a core part of their group, and a close personal friend to Hermione.

He had struggled as much as any of them after Ron's accident.

Hermione's shoes tapped against the cold floor as she rounded the corner and turned onto the Janus Thickey ward. There he was, stood with a group of other Healers, their lime green robes almost fluorescent against the white tiles.

"Hello darling," Hermione greeted, taking his hand. Ron turned to face her, a sleepy smile on his face. "How was your day?"

"Good," he answered, staring fixedly at a point somewhere above her head. "I saw a Niffler today!"

"In the hospital?"

"Yeah! A great big one with a long nose."

Hermione smiled bemusedly and squeezed his hand. "Sounds interesting. Shall we go home?"

Ron nodded and trailed after her as she set off towards the Apparition point with a final wave goodbye to the Healers.

"Was it a long day today, huh?" she asked, as they walked. "You sound tired."

No response.

"I'm doing toad in the hole tonight though," she tried. "Your favourite!"

"With lumpy gravy?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "Lots of lumpy gravy."

He smiled wider at this. "I saw a Niffler today."

When they returned home, Hermione set about putting dinner together while Ron sat at the table, fidgeting restlessly with a set of wizard's chess and mumbling to himself. Hermione distinctly heard the words 'lumpy gravy' several times.

It was a good sign, she'd been told, that he was able to fixate on things now. However it *was* the fifth night in a row that he had requested lumpy gravy, so Hermione was hoping that this latest fixation would move onto something else soon.

When she brought their dishes down to the table, Ron was staring listlessly out of the window.

“Darling,” she said softly, raising a hand to touch his arm and recoiling when he flinched. “Come on, now, it’s dinner time.”

“With lumpy gravy?” he asked again, but didn’t look at his plate.

“Yes, lumpy gravy,” she agreed, already exhausted. “Will you eat?” She held out a forkful of mashed potatoes and he quietly allowed her to feed him.

Ron’s dinner took the typical two hours, interspersed with flashes of giddy excitement about the gravy, and periods of morose sulking every time a floret of broccoli found its way onto his fork. Finally, exhausted, Hermione whisked their dishes, hers barely touched and stone cold, away.

“Time for bed,” she suggested quietly, and Ron allowed her to lead him upstairs. A quick brush of his teeth, a drag of a comb through his hair, and a wrestling match as she tried to change him into pyjamas later, she was finally able to tuck him into his bed.

“I heard a dragon roar,” he said quietly.

Huh. That was a new one.

“Did you now?” she said absently, fiddling with an outcrop of lint on the duvet. “You’re going to need a shave again soon, you know,” she decided, eyeing the bristly growth on his jaw. “How about we tackle that this weekend, huh?”

“No,” he said decisively, and rolled over to pull the duvet up to his chin.

She sighed and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Alright. I’ll ask you in the morning.”

She made to stand but a hand shot out and grasped her wrist.

“Will you read the story?”

She blinked. “What story?”

“I heard a dragon roar.”

“I... I’m sorry, darling, I don’t think I know that one.”

“Yes you *do*!” he said insistently, raising his voice.

Dreading an outburst, Hermione caved. She plopped down onto the bed beside him. “Okay, I’ll, er, I’ll try. Once... once upon a time...”

He looked at her expectantly, blue eyes wide.

“...There lived a princess?”

He nodded eagerly.

“...In a tower?”

“Not that one!” he exploded, his face reddening and fists clenching.

“Well, I’m sorry!” snapped Hermione. “I don’t know what story you want!”

His bottom lip wobbled, and her heart sank, guilt billowing up in her chest. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it-” she murmured, reaching out to console him. She cradled his head in her lap as he sobbed. “I didn’t mean to shout at you, darling. I’m just tired. I’m so sorry...”

As her words turned to noise, she stroked his hair over and over, and gradually his sobs began to fade.

And eventually, when Hermione thought that perhaps he might have fallen asleep, Ron turned his face up to look at her. In his eyes was something rare, something lucid. It was something she hadn’t seen in months.

“You look familiar,” he said.

And when he fell asleep, Hermione finally allowed herself to cry.

Fingers

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione's dreams were more like memories, these days.

While her fingers curled into the pillow beneath her head, Ron sat at the breakfast table, shovelling scrambled eggs into his mouth as if half-starved. She slid, laughing, into the seat opposite, her hands around a steaming mug of loose-leaf tea, and he smiled at her with warm eyes while the radio crooned in the background. Outside, the morning sky was amber, and plants curled delicately around the window frame, passing intricate shadows over Hermione's skin as they wafted in the breeze. Ron studied her face as someone who had known her for years, and he asked her about her work.

He pulled her hand to his across the table, and she was content.

But her cheeks were wet when the creak of her bedroom door woke her from this memory, and her vision filled instead with Ron's silhouette in the light from the hallway, staring fixedly at the wall above her head.

She sat upright, pulling the sheets to her chest as if he was a stranger. "Ron? What is it?"

He was silent for a long time, eyes never leaving the wall.

"Are you... do you need something?" Her eyes flitted to her alarm clock. 05:17.

Ron nodded. Then shook his head.

She swallowed. "Why don't you go back to bed?"

No change.

Alright. It looked like her Wednesday morning was starting now.

The house was always quiet in the mornings. It was still dark outside, and the chill from the kitchen tiles shocked the soles of her feet when she wandered down. Some almost-forgotten longing for tea flared minutely in her belly, but she summoned instant coffee from the cupboards instead, and the fancy tea leaves lay untouched, hidden behind chipped mugs and granulated sugar. She didn't bother with tea these days. She needed the caffeine too much.

The plants on the windowsill were brown and withered, and Hermione wished she had remembered to water them. She briefly considered making Ron some eggs, but the last time she had tried, he had taken a bite while it was still too hot, and subsequently dissolved into a tantrum that lasted two hours. So with a flick of her wand, she sent bread spinning into the toaster instead, turned her back on the first flickers of sunrise outside, and busied herself preparing for the day.

Ron seemed so content fiddling with the stack of coasters on the table that Hermione assumed he was having one of his better days. Between that, and his happy babbling, and the way he ate his toast without complaint, she didn't even think twice when she crossed to the small, old-fashioned television set in the corner, and flicked it on. Before the accident, she had pitched the idea to Ron, and though initially reluctant, he had ended up quite enjoying some of the 'silly Muggle shows' that Hermione liked to watch in the mornings.

So she didn't expect the alarming crash and the way that Ron scrambled to his feet with a yell.

His eyes were round with horror at the vivid, dancing pictures on the screen, at the noise blaring from it, and Hermione swore loudly, running to turn it off, but it was too late. His plate was in shattered pieces on the floor, the crumbs strewn around him, and his freckles standing out like scars against his reddening cheeks.

"Shush, shush, it's okay-" she tried, but he was lashing out now, arms swiping in blind confusion, and Hermione hated the way he didn't know his own strength, because he accidentally caught her in the shoulder with such force that her eyes watered before she could lunge for her wand.

A subtle *Impedimenta*, performed before he could notice, helped slow him, and then his fists moved like treacle as she reached for him, wrapping soothing palms around his wrists and praying that today was a day where he would tolerate her touch.

This had happened before, of course, but usually she was better at predicting when he could cope with the stimulation of Muggle technology. She must have been distracted today, not as aware as she should have been, and the guilt of it throbbed with the pain from her shoulder.

Ron crumpled forwards, jabbering nonsensical words underneath his breath while she consoled him. And as the minutes ticked by, his voice slowly calming, Hermione found herself unable to take her eyes off the broken plate on the floor.

"That's it," she said softly.

"I heard a dragon roar," he mumbled.

Hermione almost sighed with relief when she dropped Ron off at the Janus Thickety ward at the start of her shift, and it made her clench with shame.

Work was a welcome distraction, and she threw herself into every consultation, every ward round, as if it could help her forget. When her lunchbreak came, she yanked her Neurological textbooks out from her locker and began poring over them for the millionth time.

Idiopathic Limbic Disorder: An umbrella term for a group of unspecified disorders affecting a variety of cognitive functions including but not limited to behaviour, memory, learning, and motivation.

ILDs most commonly occur after a physically and/or mentally traumatic incident involving magical interference with no identifiable counter-spell. They are characterised by the absence of observable morphological change in the structure of the limbic system, which makes these conditions unsuitable for treatment through indirect (wand-mediated) surgical repair. Symptomatic regulation through sedative potions and lifestyle changes may improve patient wellbeing.

That was it. Everything that her wizarding medical education could give her. She had read those two paragraphs so many times that she could cite them aloud. In short; no one knew how or why Ron was suffering the way he was. There was no counter-spell. Surgical or medical treatment was non-existent. And all she had was the bland reassurance that maybe if she gave him enough calming draughts or left him in a padded room, he might just be alright.

She hated it.

It was the ugliest side of magic. There was a reason the Longbottoms had never quite recovered, after all. It did things to the brain that all the medical expertise in the wizarding world couldn't understand.

And the worst thing was that no one knew what had happened during his accident.

Hermione snapped her textbook shut. She had spent the two years since it happened, desperately seeking advice from medical professionals around the world. And she had vowed to keep doing so until she found a way to cure him.

She would not give up.

She refused to.

After her third coffee of the day, another hundred re-reads of all the information she could find about Ron's condition, and enough food to make up for what she knew was likely to be another half-hearted dinner that night, she was straight back into another series of consults. And when she saw the name of her first patient, her lips fell into what felt like the first true smile of the day.

She stepped through the door and locked eyes with Draco, lounging comfortably against the wall by the reception desk. "Your turn," she beamed, and he shouldered his bag to come with her, bandaged finger on clear display.

"Alright, Granger? How are you?" he asked.

"That's my question," she grinned, welcoming him inside and closing the door behind them as her eyes roved over his silver hair and steady smile. "This is just the five-day check-up for the paperwork, right?"

"Yeah," he answered, plopping into the seat and holding his bandaged finger out for closer inspection. "Though it's a bit of a waste of time, if you ask me."

She tutted, slowly unravelling the bandage. “You’d be surprised. Sometimes these things like to kick up a fuss again right when you let your guard down.”

There had been something in the thimble’s venom that had been resistant to healing spells, but patience and the slow-release therapeutic pad she’d applied had clearly done the trick. His finger was almost entirely healed, the ring of toothmarks still a little red and swollen, but vastly less noticeable than before.

He was watching her when she looked up again, and she grinned as their eyes locked.

“Look, just as I suspected,” she told him, lightly squeezing the pad of his finger. “You require an amputation.”

He rolled his light eyes. “It was funnier the *first* three times you made that joke.”

“I disagree,” she smirked. “I like teasing you. It’s one of my main sources of entertainment.”

He stared fixedly at his finger for a moment, a small smile at his lips.

“Right,” she said.

“So... is that it?” he asked hesitantly.

She chewed her lip.

It was clear that her work was almost done, that he required no more than a quick signature on his paperwork, but something in her roared that this was the first conversation she’d had with a friend in while, and she was suddenly absurdly hesitant to send him away. “I could... I could bandage it up again for you, if you like?” she suggested. “Just for another two days?”

“That sounds great,” he said instantly. And she smiled.

Hermione got to her feet and bumped her bruised shoulder against a shelf as she did so, wincing and letting out a louder ‘ow’ than she had intended.

Draco’s face was instantly a picture of concern and he was on his feet in a moment, curse his Auror reflexes. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said quickly, turning to grab her materials from a drawer. “Just a bruise.”

The silence was damning.

“It’s fine, Draco.”

“*Did it happen again?*”

She didn’t answer as she sat back down, pulling him into his seat and carefully pressing a breathable therapeutic pad over the wound. He let out a small hiss.

“Hermione-”

“Please, leave it,” she said. “You know he doesn’t understand. It’s not his fault.”

He stared at her, and his brow creased with concern. “You need some support.”

Her gut roiled in shame. “I’m more than competent at looking after him,” she snapped, flicking her wand to tighten the bandages around his finger until they yanked too hard, and he winced.

“Blast,” she muttered.

He watched her in silence as she removed the bandages and started again.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I don’t mean to be short with you.”

“It’s fine,” Draco murmured. “I know you’re protective of him.”

She nodded, not looking up from his finger.

“But you do deserve some time off, at least,” he continued.

She stilled. “I can’t,” she said desperately. “He *needs* me.”

“He doesn’t even know who you-”

“Enough,” she said sharply, heart pounding, and Draco closed his mouth. She cast a final sealing charm to finish the dressing and leaned back, breathing hard, eyes guarded. “Did you need me to sign something?”

He paused, scanning her as if he could see past her skin into the guilt that ached within her bones. “Um,” he said. “Not yet. If this bandage is supposed to last two days, why don’t you come to the pub with us on Friday night? And you can sign me off then?”

She wanted to crumple into herself. And she knew Draco saw it, saw the fall in her fingers, dropping to her lap.

She desperately wanted to say yes. But whenever she left Ron with the Healers, whenever she took time away from him... the guilt ate her alive. Because it was a moment less that she was trying to heal him.

“Please,” he said quickly. “We miss seeing you. You deserve a night away from it all.”

And that was the worst. Because she definitely didn’t.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

His lips were a hard line, but his eyes softened. He reached out a hand and squeezed her own, and she felt the warmth of affection as if he’d wrapped her in an embrace. “I’ll see you then,” he replied.

And when he kissed her cheek and then left, she wished she could follow him.

That night, Ron was in one of his better moods.

He willingly ate his dinner, laughed when she accidentally got mashed potato on his nose, and let Hermione put him to bed early enough to allow her some time to herself.

He asked for the new dragon story again, but she managed to placate him instead with a book that his Healers had given her – something about a caterpillar that he had apparently been enjoying lately. She swallowed, settled herself at the end of his bed, and began to read.

A couple of pages in, Ron started to wriggle closer. When she broke off, he stared earnestly at her until she continued, and as soon as she did, he resumed his movements. And in a matter of moments, he was shifting to place a hand on her knee. And he laid his head down in her lap.

Her heart squeezed.

She dropped a hand to curl her fingers into his red hair, and he sighed with happiness.

When she took a step back from it all, it was... bizarre.

He was the boy she had once loved, the man she had once had a complex, adult relationship with. And now he was essentially a child. Unpredictable, quick to outbursts of emotion that he didn't understand. Magic and technology alike scared him. And until such time as a cure was discovered... he would need permanent care.

She knew he didn't recognise her. That he had no idea who she was, didn't understand that she was taking care of him because she had promised it to him. But he did trust her.

And it was moments like these, these small moments of childlike affection, that reminded her of the man she had vowed to take care of.

She stayed there long after the end of the book, stroking his hair until he fell asleep.

Friday came quickly.

She was exhausted from her shift, and all she wanted to do was curl up into a ball, but she needed to get Ron home, and she needed to try and calm him enough to attempt shaving his rapidly growing facial hair, and she needed to write to a Dutch Healer who may have some promising news about a similar ILD case, and she needed to...

God.

She could feel the gravity pulling at her lips as she approached the Janus Thickey ward. In front of her was a clear display case, splattered with informational posters, and she found the curve of a fake smile in her reflection.

“Hey, Hermione!”

She looked up, and there was Harry coming out of the ward, his hands in the pockets of his Auror robes, his hair still as chaotic as ever. He smiled lopsidedly at her, and she felt the falseness melt from her expression.

“Harry,” she said warmly, and stepped forward to sigh with relief into his shoulder as he surrounded her in a hug. “How are things?”

“I’ve just been to see Ron,” he smiled. “And now I’m here to kidnap you.”

She laughed softly. “Draco got you in on his plan, did he?”

“I’m afraid he did,” he grinned, leaning back. “Are you coming?”

She peered through the circular windows in the ward’s doors, where she could see the Healers guiding Ron towards the entrance.

“I should take him home,” she said weakly. Harry’s gaze followed hers, and she saw his expression fall softly, the same way her own heart sank every time she looked at the boy who had no idea who she was.

“Draco said he lashed out at you again,” said Harry quietly, and her sunken heart contracted in her belly.

“He didn’t mean to,” she murmured.

“I know,” he frowned. “But you’re getting hurt. You told us last time that it wouldn’t happen again.”

“That was months ago-”

“It still happened.”

She eyed the floor. “Thanks, Harry,” she said. “Really. But I’m fine. We both are.”

The Healers seemed to have noticed their hesitance, and paused with Ron for a moment, just on the other side of the doors. He didn’t look in the least bit concerned.

“He’ll be fine here for an evening,” Harry said, placing a hand on her arm. “I’ve already chatted to his Healers. They said you’ve not taken a night off in two months.”

It sounded so stark, hearing it like that.

She looked once more towards Ron, at the way he was chattering excitedly to himself.

“Please,” said Harry.

It was one night. It would be okay. He would be okay.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll come.”

And knowing exactly how hard it had been for her to say yes, Harry threaded his fingers between hers and squeezed.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter!

A quick note - Ron's 'ILD' is an imaginary condition that I created for the purposes of this story. I did not want to represent any conditions that real people suffer with in an inaccurate and insensitive way, so I chose to create a theoretically plausible, though non-existent disease with a variety of cognitive symptoms. I am a vet student, not a doctor, so though I hope that my medical jargon makes sense, it is bound to contain inaccuracies due to my lack of knowledge on human medicine, and hope that any experts will forgive me!

Ears

Chapter Notes

Welcome to chapter three! I'm so sorry for the wait - life got a little busy for a while - but I think we're back to our regularly scheduled programming now!
Enjoy! <3

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

Hermione's heart fluttered like a caged bird as she and Harry made their way out of St Mungo's, and yet with every step she took further away, she felt it begin to settle, beat by beat.

"How's Ginny?" she asked determinedly, pushing the last vestiges of guilt to the back of her mind.

Harry's face lit up. "Doing well," he told her. "But maternity leave isn't suiting her much – she's bored stiff. If she had her way, she'd be on the pitch well into her third trimester."

Hermione laughed as they passed through the hidden entrance and reappeared, blinking, in the Muggle street. "Are we meeting her there?"

"Plus Neville, Draco, Blaise, and Luna," Harry confirmed, rubbing at his neck. "Actually, Ginny wanted me to ask you something before we see them all."

Hermione hesitated, coming to a stop while cars raced by. "Has this got anything to do with Molly?" she asked.

The look on his face told her everything she needed to know.

"She just wants to help," he said softly, and Hermione sighed.

"I know," she said. "And I wish she could. But the Healers said-"

"They said it was just a theory-"

"*All we have* are theories," she shot back, and he fell silent. "If they think that living with me is more likely to help Ron's memories come back, that's what I have to do."

Harry chewed his lip. "You know Molly just... She likes to ask."

"Tell her I appreciate it," Hermione murmured.

"You could tell her yourself," Harry suggested hopefully, but she shook her head.

Molly Weasley meant well. She really did. She would drop everything in a heartbeat for them both if asked. But Hermione had decided a long time ago to follow a strict routine of care for Ron, based on the very best recommendations St Mungo's had to offer. No one else could take care of him like she could, with the exception perhaps of his Healers. And it had led to more than a few disagreements.

Molly maintained that one night a week at the Burrow wouldn't hurt him.

But Hermione disagreed. The constant noise, the endless streams of visitors, and the never-ending magic were incredibly stressful for Ron – so much so that even with Hermione at his side, both Christmases since the accident had ended in tears.

And so she agreed with the Healers' theory; that every night Ron spent away from the highest possible standard of care was a step further away from recovery.

And he had to recover. He *had* to.

Her friends didn't understand why she refused to let Ron's family help with his care. But for Hermione, the pipedream of a normal life was on the line. And she couldn't afford to trust anyone but herself to make it happen.

"I understand," said Harry eventually. "Forget I mentioned it. Tonight's supposed to be fun."

Hermione took his arm. "It's forgotten. Where are we going?"

The destination turned out to be a small pub called The Wonky Dragon – a quaint establishment with old, misshapen beams and a decidedly lopsided feel to the floorboards. After greeting Ginny at the bar, who squeezed her into a tight hug and immediately offered to buy her a drink, Hermione allowed herself to indulge in a small glass of wine before approaching the table where her friends were sat.

"Hermione!" said Luna warmly, beaming up at her with kind eyes.

"It's been an *age*," grinned Neville. "Good to see you!"

And God, Hermione hadn't realised how much she had missed this.

As each occupant at the table stood to greet her in turn, she found herself seeking Draco's eyes, and he gave her a small nod, a smile at his lips.

When he leaned in to brush a kiss against her cheek, her heart began to beat just a little bit faster.

After several months away from the group's regular social activities, she was a little out of the loop, but it didn't take long to melt into the ease of company as they traded stories and jokes and laughter. Ginny's pregnancy was a popular source of conversation, but there was also news of Neville and Hannah buying their first home together, Draco being up for a

promotion, and Blaise and Luna's recent holiday to Sweden ("No Snorkacks, sadly," said Luna mournfully, as Blaise tried not to grin, "but the views really were very pretty.").

"What about you, Hermione?" Ginny asked eventually, one hand resting comfortably on her bump. "What's new with you?"

Hermione swallowed a gulp of wine as six pairs of eyes focused expectantly on her. "Oh, nothing much," she laughed softly. "Um, Parvati and I are quite busy on the wards, as always, you know. And er, I'm thinking of buying some new plants for the windowsill."

"Might I suggest-" started Neville, before Ginny swatted him with a beermat.

"Don't you *dare* mention the Wandering Dahlias-"

"The what?" Hermione blinked.

Neville's chest swelled. "They're the perfect plant for any homeowner-"

"When they say 'wandering', they mean it," said Harry heavily. "Ours were looking lovely by the porch until they decided to uproot themselves-"

"They'll come back-"

"It's been three weeks!" Ginny protested.

"I think they're sweet," Luna piped up. "They make the chicken coop look beautiful."

"We didn't plant them by the chicken coop," Blaise added, while Harry snorted.

Draco just gaped at him. "You have *chickens*?!"

"We were going to introduce you to *Celestina Warpeck* eventually," Blaise deadpanned, and the table rippled into laughter.

"Are you thinking of getting any pets to keep you company, Hermione?" Ginny asked. "I imagine you're missing having a cat in the house."

Truth be told, the thought hadn't even occurred to her. Crookshanks had passed away shortly before Ron's accident, and with everything since... she hadn't even had time to consider getting a new pet.

"Maybe one day," she said simply. "When Ron gets better."

"Do you think he will?" asked Blaise.

Oh.

The atmosphere sank like a stone. Silence descended immediately, disturbed only by the knocking of Hermione's heart at her ribs. It was an innocent question – Blaise didn't know Ron's situation as well as the rest of the others, after all – but it still stung.

She carefully slid her wine glass back onto the table.

“You don’t need to answer that,” said Draco, with a glare at Blaise.

“It’s fine,” she said quickly. “There’s not been much change lately, but, er... There is a Dutch healer that I’m planning to write to. He specialises in amnesia and other... cases like Ron’s. So I’m hopeful.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. “You think he could help?”

Hermione could feel her uneasy pulse in her fingertips. “I don’t know. According to his papers, we need to know a lot more information about the inciting incident and the events leading up to it.”

“The Prophet was really vague about the details,” said Blaise probingly, and Draco shot him a glance.

“That’s because no one *has* any details,” he said.

Hermione sighed, taking pity on Blaise’s quizzical expression. “What the Prophet said is true. Ron entered an ex-Death-Eater stronghold and got caught in an explosion. That’s it. No sordid details or conspiracies, I’m afraid.”

“And the Healer needs more information than that?” Neville asked.

Hermione rubbed her shaky fingers against the uneven edge of the table.

“Yes,” she said. “So it might just be another dead end.”

It was silent.

“I have some memories.”

She jerked her head up.

There was a faint stripe of pink across Draco’s cheekbones, his eyes guarded. “From before the accident, I mean. Just little clips of him from the weeks leading up to it. It’s probably nothing. But you could watch them, if you wanted.”

The floodgates of adrenaline opened and Hermione’s pulse leapt behind her eyes, her mouth falling open, ears ringing. “You have memories?”

“They may not help at all,” he said quickly. “But yes. There’s a lot from Auror training, some social events... and I think there’s something from the morning of the accident too.”

Everyone else was watching them, but Hermione’s eyes were only for Draco. Like she was seeing him for the first time.

In two years, she’d never thought to ask.

What if this was the missing piece she needed?

“Do you have a Pensieve?” she asked breathlessly.

He blinked, then nodded. “You’re welcome to come and look any time.”

“*Thank you.*”

Their friends’ conversation picked back up again eventually, but Hermione felt rather as if she was floating below its tide, words washing past her ears while her mind swam with possibilities. Draco was also uncharacteristically quiet, and Hermione wondered if it would be too soon to corner him that night and ask for a viewing.

As it happened, he called her attention first.

“I almost forgot! I need you to sign me off!” he said suddenly, and Hermione nearly knocked her wine glass over in her haste to scoot her chair towards him.

“Of course! How’s it been?”

He shrugged, holding out the still-bandaged finger. “It’s not bothered me.”

She gently lifted a corner of the dressing and began unpeeling it steadily, aware that Draco’s eyes were on her, and realising that her cheeks were decidedly warm. Perhaps it was the wine.

“Why don’t you use magic?” he asked after a moment, nodding towards the bandage.

“Would you like me to?”

“No! No.” Their eyes locked, his hand in hers. “I just wondered.”

She unwrapped another layer. “I like to make sure I’m doing it right.”

He was silent again, but Hermione could feel warmth prickling at her skin.

She had often thought that they became close friends *in spite of* their history. But perhaps he had actually become so important to her *because* of their history. Harry, Ginny, Neville and Luna often made her think about how it used to be, an aching reminder of who was missing from their usual circle. But spending time with Draco was such a new development that it seemed to exist outside of her relationship with Ron. It made her feel, uniquely, as if they were the only two people in the world who mattered.

And there had long been something intoxicating about that feeling.

Draco meant more to her than she thought she could possibly say.

She vanished the bandages. “Looks perfect,” she pronounced. “Do you have that form?”

As she continued to examine the tiny remaining scar, he dug in his pockets. "Sorry to make you do work stuff out of hours," he said sheepishly, passing over the parchment.

She almost laughed. "It's fine. I'm used to it."

A twinge of worry passed over his features before Hermione bowed her head to the form, finding the appropriate box to sign him off as being in full health.

"There," she said finally, patting the back of his hand.

"Thanks." His skin was warm, his eyes kind, and in that moment, their thighs brushing under the table, surrounded by the laughter of the friends and bustle of the pub around them, Hermione began to wonder when she had last felt quite so content.

"So I don't need anything else?" Draco added.

"No. You're fit for duty."

"Oh," he said, grinning teasingly. "So you're not going to kiss it better?"

Her eyes widened.

"Alright," said Harry, providing a welcome distraction as he got to his feet and helped Ginny from her chair. "We're off, everyone. Thanks so much for coming!"

While they fussed with settling the tab, Blaise and Luna were soon getting up to join them, and then Neville was sending a Patronus off to Hannah and swigging the last of his drink.

Cradling her belly, Ginny dropped to press a kiss to Hermione's forehead. "Are you heading home too?"

She shot a glance at Draco, who still had half his beer left. "Not just yet," she smiled. "I'll keep Draco company for a bit longer."

"Let us know when you get home safe," Ginny replied, and before long Hermione and Draco were left alone, the table suddenly seeming far too large for how close they were sitting.

"When are you free this week?" he asked, pulling her attention to the tiny gap between their bodies. "To take a look at the memories?"

Her pulse began to race. "Wednesday?"

"Wednesday is good," he smiled, and it struck Hermione for a moment what a handsome man he had grown into, his expression easy and open, eyes warm and good-humoured.

She was so glad that he'd ended up in their circle of friends.

"How's your shoulder?" he asked suddenly, and Hermione jolted with recollection.

"It's fine," she said instinctively.

But he knew her too well, and his eyes narrowed. "Let me see."

"I'm the Healer, not you-" she complained.

"I'm your *friend*."

The restraint wilted in her throat. "Fine," she tried to snap, but she was well aware of the weakness in her voice, and she knew Draco was too.

His triumphant expression fell abruptly when she slipped her jacket from her shoulders.

There was something shockingly intimate about facing away from him with her jacket curled down around her elbows like this, his surprised exhale ghosting across her skin. All the hairs on the nape of her neck began to prickle upwards at the sensation. Why were they so close, again?

Draco lifted his hand and traced the strap of her top with his thumb.

What felt like a year's worth of tension caught in her throat, her heart pounding in a vacuum beneath her collarbones. Goosebumps pimply her skin, but she could only look straight ahead, trying not to shiver.

She imagined she could feel every ridge of his fingerprints.

Draco was silent for so long that her stomach began to tie itself into knots.

"How bad is it?" she asked hesitantly.

She heard the uncertainty in his voice. "It's purple."

"Oh, God-"

"It's alright-" he said softly, his fingers meshing into comfortable place on her shoulder. "A very light purple. I can barely see-" He swallowed. "Barely see where his fist was."

His hand squeezed her softly, and heat flushed upwards from her abdomen, the alcohol in her veins flaring to life. She wasn't sure how long they remained there, but the loss of contact when he dropped his hand ached like a chill in her bones.

"You're not going to kiss it better?" she said without thinking.

She felt him go very still, and mortification charged through her body until she heard the tiny sound of his lips parting.

"Do you want me to?"

She couldn't breathe, let alone speak.

And then, incredibly slowly, indescribably softly, Draco bent to press a kiss to the bruise.

His hand might have been at her waist, but she couldn't be sure when every sense in her body was immediately overwhelmed.

No.

His hand was higher. At the curve of her ribs. As if she could feel the imprint of his palm on her heart itself.

Her breath hitched.

"Hermione," he said softly, and she felt his cheek brush her skin.

Something lifted inside her, and she turned slowly, looking back to meet his eyes over her shoulder.

She felt as if every blood cell in her body had dissolved into nothingness, struck motionless by the lock of their gazes. He must have been able to see the way her pulse was pounding through her veins.

It was silent.

Neither one moved.

And then his lips were pressing in again, bestowing the sweetest, most careful of kisses to the soft, vulnerable skin beneath her ear.

Oh...

Her jaw tilted upwards, eyes fluttering shut as his lips grazed her skin.

Decades could have passed.

And he didn't pull away.

His lips climbed a miniscule point higher, brushing her earlobe, and it occurred to Hermione that she was never going to see this shoulder, this neck, this ear the same way ever again, because this was the skin that had been kissed by Draco Malfoy, in the first, golden, gesture of intimacy she had felt in... what felt like forever.

And with her heart thrumming in her throat and his lips against her neck, Hermione felt the tears threaten at her eyelids.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He withdrew, while her hands trembled in her lap.

It was silent between them, the noise of the pub around them almost indecently loud.

She wished she could read him better than this – wished she could understand the look on his face, the expression in his grey eyes.

She took a breath, squeezing her hands tight, and got to her feet. “I think it’s time for me to head home,” she said quickly. “...Goodnight, Draco.”

“Goodnight,” he echoed, seemingly unable to look away.

Her ears rang with unspoken words all the way home.

Her house was blisteringly silent. Some almost-forgotten longing for chamomile tea warmed her throat before she shook her head, passing the kitchen and heading for the stairs.

And she wasn’t quite sure why, but she found herself walking past the door to the spare bedroom – her bedroom – and went instead to the old master bedroom, the one where Ron usually slept.

The bedsheets were unkempt, messy.

Empty.

And with her heart suddenly racing like a frightened animal, she slipped between the sheets.

Here, the scent of the man she had once loved filled her nose.

Here, Draco was just a friend.

Here, she could almost imagine that nothing had changed.

And as the clock ticked its way past midnight, she pressed her face into the pillows and squeezed her eyelids shut until the cotton was wet through.

Everything had changed.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I really love Molly Weasley, and it is absolutely not my plan to bash her in this fic, but Hermione is very blinkered by her situation with Ron at this stage, and is therefore a bit of an unreliable narrator - she'll only be able to see her as a mild antagonist until something changes.

See you next time - hopefully in about a fortnight :D

Thanks for reading!

Feet

Chapter Notes

I am so so so excited for you all to read this chapter - we're really getting into the thick of it now.

Can't wait to see what you think! xxx

Thank you as always to the incomparable [Leilah Moon](#) who is my constant cheerleader, beta extraordinaire, and above all, amazing friend <3

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

After a night of fitful sleep, the next day at work passed in an uneasy blur. Saturday shifts were usually unpopular, but Hermione was grateful for the distraction. Instead of allowing herself to dwell on the previous evening, she threw herself into every consultation, every clinical exam, until she was so exhausted that she dozed off in the staff room while poring over the case notes of a patient named Mr Pentrap, whose left ear kept producing a shrill whistle at odd intervals.

“Told you I’d get a toe!”

Hermione startled awake, the clipboard in her hands plunging to the floor and spraying Mr Pentrap’s clinical notes all over the tiles.

“A toe...?” she mumbled blearily.

Parvati, who had just burst in through the door, took one look at her and began to giggle, bending to collect up the notes.

“Cheeky lunchtime nap?” she teased, while Hermione flushed and attempted to un-rumple her clothing. “Well, I just treated a young wizard’s toe. He managed to transfigure it into a saxophone, if you can believe it. I think I’m getting better with these predictions.” Parvati handed the last sheet of parchment back, and Hermione tucked it sheepishly into her clipboard.

“Thanks.”

“I heard you went out last night,” Parvati added, reaching into the cupboard for a packet of crisps. “Did you have a nice time?”

Warm memories oozed like honey into Hermione’s smile. “Really nice,” she said.

“Aw,” Parvati beamed, yanking open the packet with a genial *pop*. “I’m so glad you got an evening to yourself!”

“Me too,” Hermione admitted, swallowing the guilt that thrashed at her tongue.

“Does that mean I might be able to convince you to do it more often?” Parvati asked cheekily, her eyes shining. “Cocktails sometime, maybe?”

Hermione allowed herself a grin. “That sounds lovely.”

“It’s a date!” Parvati declared. “I’ll try not to wear you out as much as the others clearly did, though, you look exhausted.”

“I think-” Hermione started, before biting her tongue. “I sometimes feel like taking time away from Ron leaves me more tired than ever.”

Parvati considered her for a second, then carefully sat down. “I think we often only realise how hard we’ve been working when we’re given time to recover,” she said softly.

Something caught in Hermione’s throat.

Parvati’s warm hand squeezed her knee. “I’ve got to go. But you take care of yourself, yeah? And we’ll go for those drinks soon?”

“I’d like that,” Hermione said, warmth bracketing her lungs.

Parvati got to her feet, tipped the crumbs at the bottom of the crisp packet into her mouth, gave Hermione a salt-dusted grin, and swept from the room. “Love you!”

Beneath her robes, Hermione’s shoulder tingled with the memory of a kiss-dappled bruise.

By the end of the day, Hermione was about ready to crawl into bed, and the journey to the Janus Thickey ward felt about a million miles long. Every step closer made the doors shrink smaller in her vision, like a mirage in the desert, and her feet grew heavier with every heartbeat.

As she finally laid a hand on the door to push it open, she heard someone call out from the other side, “Hey, Ron, look who’s here for you!”

And she had barely taken a step through before someone tall and lanky and ginger was crowding her in a hug, practically lifting her up off her feet.

“Oh-! Ron!”

Her once-boyfriend swirled her around gently, then placed her back on the floor. He looked warmly down at her for a moment, proudly exclaimed, “I saw a Niffler today!” and then crouched to the floor and began tapping at the tiles.

Hermione blinked, momentarily winded, her heart racing. She couldn’t remember the last time he’d done that – greeted her as if he wanted to see her, as if he *knew* her-

“I’m sorry!” said a burly Healer with not much hair, and even less tact, if Hermione remembered correctly. “He’s been very excitable today. I shouldn’t have wound him up like that-”

“Oh, no, it’s okay-!”

“He’s been hugging everyone in sight,” the Healer explained.

Oh. A lead ball had sunk through Hermione’s lungs, and it was settling now, dense and immovable, in her gut. She scanned his name badge. Healer Quentin. That was it.

“Right,” she said stiffly. “I see.”

Quentin folded his arms with a smile, impervious to Hermione’s hailstorm of emotions. “Are you just dropping by to see him, or are you taking him home tonight?”

“He’s coming home with me,” she said defensively, abruptly. “Like always.”

Quentin blinked. “Oh. Are you sure? You look dead on your feet-”

“Quentin,” said another Healer Hermione didn’t recognise, approaching them both and casting him a firm look. “I’ve got this. Miss Granger, my name’s Healer Daisy. Would you like to chat for a moment?”

Hermione had to curl her hand protectively around Ron’s shoulder before she could bring herself to nod. “Of course,” she said. “Call me Hermione.”

Healer Daisy looked very young for someone with such an air of authority – far too young. She had auburn hair that fell in choppy curls around her temples despite being scrunched into a bun at the back of her head, and Hermione recognised the expression she was wearing from her own medical communications training – sat somewhere between bargaining and bad news.

“We were really glad you took some time off yesterday,” Daisy said.

Setting a positive tone.

“And we wanted to talk to you about Ron’s ongoing care.”

She was setting the scene. Providing a warning shot. It was textbook, Hermione realised, and her stomach contracted.

“Is he alright?”

“Yes!” Daisy reassured her. “He’s been doing really well. There haven’t been any significant changes for some time now. And... that’s actually why we wanted to talk to you. To discuss the possibility of him staying here, at St Mungo’s, more frequently.”

There was no explanation for the adrenaline that fired through Hermione’s body at those words, the frenzied, rallying call for defence that exploded along her nervous system like a

bomb.

“*What?*”

“There have been, ah, concerns raised,” Daisy said, a crack appearing in her professional façade for the first time. “About the strain you may be experiencing as a full-time carer.”

“I’m not full-time,” Hermione said, panic rising like bile in her throat. “I only look after him at home-”

“When you’re not at work,” Daisy pointed out.

“But you said – your colleagues said – that staying with me was what was best for him!”

“And that was the best theory they could provide at the time, but what you have to consider, Miss Granger-”

“*Hermione-!*”

“Hermione...” Daisy sighed, and in the pause that followed, Hermione’s heartbeat screamed in her ears. “Two years have gone by without any changes. No sign of improvement or decline. And I know that it’s not what you wanted to hear, but it might be time to start preparing for this... situation... to be permanent.”

Hermione couldn’t breathe. “What are you saying?” she whispered.

Pity radiated from Daisy’s expression like something deadly. She moved to reach out, but Hermione recoiled so rapidly that her hand went plummeting down, strangled by gravity. She took a breath. “Two years ago, we were hopeful that Ron would recover.”

Her pulse was all she could hear.

“And now...”

“No,” said Hermione. Daisy looked stricken, but Hermione couldn’t bear to listen anymore. “No,” she repeated. “I won’t let you give up on him. If looking after him gives him a tiny chance at recovering, it’s worth it. I’m taking him home.”

She bent to take Ron’s hand, pulling him to his feet a little more roughly than necessary. “Come on, darling. It’s time to go home.”

He blinked at her, and her stomach dropped with realisation.

They’d shaved his face.

“We’re worried about *your* wellbeing, Miss Granger,” Daisy said softly.

And when Hermione turned towards her, she couldn’t hide the anger that bloomed like flames beneath her skin. “I’m *fine*,” she hissed. “*I’m* not your patient. You’re supposed to *heal* him.”

Desperation leaked through every crack in her voice.

“You have to.”

She turned to leave, Ron trailing after her.

“Please,” came Daisy’s voice, pitying and poisonous. “Just... think about it.”

Hermione let the door swing firmly shut behind her, but her fingers trembled in Ron’s grip all the way home.

Ron was mercifully placid that evening, even brushing his own teeth for a while before he got bored. He allowed her to tuck him into bed with relative ease, hair like silk across his pillow, feet sticking out the bottom of the duvet.

“I heard a dragon roar,” he told her sagely, as she stroked the smooth lines of his jaw.

“You did?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Will you read the story?”

Oh. Hermione faltered. This again?

“About the princess?” she asked.

“And the roar.”

“Oh,” she said, taken aback. “The dragon roar?”

“Yeah!” he cried, sitting up in bed, and Hermione almost laughed, coaxing him to lie back down again.

“Alright,” she said gently. “I’m going to do my best, but I don’t know the story, so bear in mind I might make a mistake. And you can’t get angry, okay?”

He blinked up at her, then nodded wisely. And for a moment, Hermione was hit with such a strong sense of familiarity that she had to close her eyes, stunned by a sort of *déjà vu* that pulled her not into the past, but into another world instead, into another life she had once planned for herself. One where Ron had never been injured, where perhaps they’d gotten married and had children like she’d hoped to once upon a time, and perhaps instead of Ron, it would be their son that she’d now be tucking into bed, stroking his soft auburn hair and whispering make-believe stories until he slipped into dreamland.

A life that could never be.

Ron touched her knee and shattered the image. “Princess?”

“Yes,” Hermione whispered. “Once upon a time, there lived a princess.” She took a breath. “But she didn’t live in a tower, did she?”

Ron shook his head, and Hermione smiled hollowly.

“She lived in a castle. With...”

He tapped his chest twice, and she frowned, unsure whether it was a clue or one of the movements he’d occasionally get into a pattern of repeating over and over again.

“With the King and Queen?”

“No,” Ron said, a stunning clarity in his voice. He tapped his chest again.

“An... evil stepmother?”

“No!”

Hermione bit her lip. “A knight.”

Silence.

“A princess lived in a castle with a knight.” She searched desperately for something else to say. “She was beautiful, and he was strong.”

No response.

“The knight fought in... quests, and battles, and rescued fair maidens from lonely towers...”

More silence. Either she was doing something right, or Ron had fallen asleep already.

Hermione made to stand. “And they were... happy.”

She almost made it to the door.

Then, “No,” said Ron softly.

She paused. “What? No what?”

He didn’t answer her, and Hermione swallowed. “They weren’t happy?” she whispered. “Ron? What story is this?”

But he’d rolled over, and now he was staring at the bedroom wall, glassy eyed.

Frustration threatened to overwhelm her.

“Why wasn’t the princess happy?” she pleaded.

But it seemed Ron had shared enough. And Hermione slipped away, mind whirling. She had to find this story.

“Ginny?”

The Potter household's living room was surprisingly empty, and Hermione sighed, the phantom taste of Floo ash in her mouth. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

She didn't like to leave Ron in the house alone, so she'd been hoping that either Harry or Ginny might be around for a quick Floo call without actually having to make the trip. "Hello?" she tried again.

"Merlin, Hermione! You gave me a fright!"

She smiled apologetically up at Ginny, who had just waddled into the room, clearly rather surprised to see Hermione's head sitting amongst the coals of her fireplace. Her belly seemed to have gotten even bigger since Friday, if that were possible.

"Sorry!" Hermione grimaced. "I'm glad you're in, though. How are you doing? I was hoping I could pick your brains for a moment."

"Oh, of course!" Ginny said, eyebrows lifting in surprise. She summoned an armchair closer to the fire, drawing her dressing gown tighter over her bump as she settled gratefully into it. "What's up?"

Hermione fidgeted for a moment, feet beginning to get uncomfortable on the cold floor of her own hearth. "It's, er, it's about Ron. The other week he mentioned a story that he wanted me to read, and I thought he'd forgotten about it, but tonight he asked me again."

"Oh! A new story?"

"Yeah. He's never mentioned it before, but now he seems quite insistent on hearing it."

"That's weird," frowned Ginny.

"Exactly," Hermione said, "especially when the Healers were telling me that his condition hasn't changed at all since the accident."

"What did they-"

"It just seems odd," Hermione said quickly, ignoring the look on Ginny's face. "Um, anyway, I was wondering whether it might be a children's book, or a fairy tale of some sort that you two had as kids?"

"Hm," said Ginny, leaning back for a moment. "And it's not something from Beedle's?"

Hermione laughed humourlessly. "Sadly, no. I think all of those stories are burned into my brain. It's something I've never heard before. Something about a, er, princess in a castle, and a knight, too, I think? And maybe a dragon? It seems a strange story, he was saying that... that the princess was *sad*."

Ginny blinked. "I can't remember anything like that."

"Nothing at all?"

“Sorry, Hermione. If it was Babbity Rabbity or something, I could help, but it sounds... unusual. Are you sure it’s a magical fairy tale?”

“No,” Hermione admitted, “but I don’t know how Ron would know a Muggle one.”

There was a pause.

“Hermione,” her friend asked eventually, “what did the Healers tell you today?”

Dread pooled in her gut. “Ah, I shouldn’t have said anything. It was just a status update. They still don’t think he’s any better.”

“Do they still think he’s *going* to get better?”

“*I* think he’s going to get better,” said Hermione firmly. “That’s what matters.”

“...Okay,” said Ginny uneasily. “Look, if you ever wanted more time off, you know we’d look after him, right?”

“I know,” Hermione snapped.

It was silent except for the crackling of the fire.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “It’s been a long day. I don’t mean to take it out on you.”

Ginny made a sympathetic noise. “It’s alright. I can’t imagine how tired you must be.”

“You might have some idea once your little one comes along,” Hermione joked, and Ginny grinned. “Where’s Harry tonight, by the way?”

“Oh,” Ginny said, “something’s going down at the DMLE today. He sent a Patronus earlier saying he’d be back late, but didn’t say much other than-”

There was a loud noise from behind her, and Ginny turned around in her seat. “Speak of the devil,” she laughed.

Harry said something that Hermione couldn’t quite hear, and then the smile fell from Ginny’s face. She jumped up and ran to Harry faster than Hermione thought possible, and the two of them broke into anxious babbling just outside of her range of vision.

She craned her neck, straining to hear, but could only make out snatches of sentences:

“...*now*...?”

“...*new evidence*... *suspicious*...”

“...*uproot it all*...?”

And then, “*How will she cope?*”

Hermione’s blood ran cold.

“ *Hermione – she’s in the fireplace -*” Ginny was saying, and then finally they reappeared, and Harry was racing over, crouching down beside the fire, a strange look in his eyes that Hermione hadn’t seen in a very long time.

“Hermione,” he said heavily, and her pulse sped up immediately, as if she knew exactly what he was about to say. “Hermione, they’ve reopened the case.”

“What case?” she whispered, simultaneously hoping for and yet dreading the answer.

Harry looked at her – no – *into* her, and Hermione was struck by how similar it felt to being examined by Dumbledore all those years ago.

“The accident,” Harry said. “*They’ve reopened Ron’s case.*”

“I just don’t understand why you have to go in today!”

She was draped, boneless, against the counter, still-steeping tea long-forgotten in her grip.

“It’s a Death Eater stronghold, Hermione, they need every Auror they can get!”

He was frozen in the middle of the kitchen, cheeks ruddy with frustration, brows creased into cross-hatched fury.

“But it’s our Anniversary! I thought we were going to do something together-”

“What about the time you were called into work on my birthday? That was more important, was it?”

“Someone was dying, Ron!”

“Yeah, and someone might die today if I’m not there!”

“But it’s not just about today! You do this all the time – whenever there’s an opportunity for you to play the hero at work, it’s like I don’t matter anymore!”

“This is pointless,” Ron snapped, turning away. “We’re having the same old argument, we never get anywhere-”

“Harry said specifically that you don’t need to go in today!”

“But I want to!”

“You’d rather go explore some mouldy old castle with a couple of curses on it than spend time with me?!”

“You know how I feel about the strongholds, Hermione, we’ve had four in the last month! What if there’s a Death Eater left-?”

“The war is over, Ron!” she screamed, her breath raw in her throat. “There are no Death Eaters left! It’s just you and this obsession with reliving a time when you were actually important!”

The silence was thunderous.

Ron stared at her, his face blazing with a disbelieving sort of fury, slowly collapsing in on itself.

“Ron, wait, I didn’t mean-”

“Yes, you did,” he said. “You don’t think I’m important.”

“Of course I do-”

“No, you don’t!” he said, louder. “You know, sometimes, it’s like you could wake up without me and you wouldn’t even care!”

Hot, bruised anger fired in her veins. “That’s not true! You’re always saying things about how I feel that aren’t true-!”

“It’s like I’m just some sort of convenience thing for you!” Ron hollered, not remotely listening. “And as soon as it gets hard, you can’t deal with me anymore! Would it kill you to support me for once in your life?!”

“I do support you!” she yelled, slamming her hand against the countertop, the deadly, traitorous thing she’d been trying so hard not to say bubbling up under her tongue-

“We fight every time we’re together!” he snapped.

“Then maybe we shouldn’t even be together!”

-too late.

Ron stared at her.

She could only stare back, breathing hard.

The silence was enormous, crushing, pressing into every atom of her body like a mechanical weight.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.

It pressed harder.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

Her mind was a mosaic of broken glass; the wreckage of a crystal future, forever doomed to crack.

He turned away. “I’m going to work.”

Grief curled in her chest. “Ron-”

But he rounded on her, eyes dark and furious. “Stop! Just – stop pretending to care! I knew this day would come! I knew you wanted to get rid of me!”

The cup in her hands crashed to the floor and smashed into a million pieces.

Hot water and tea leaves went everywhere, blanketing the tiles, Hermione's feet, and the bottom of Ron's robes with muck.

They stared at one another in silence; the last time Hermione ever saw someone she recognised in his eyes.

And then Ron whirled around and Disapparated.

The world was spinning, and it wasn't from her inadvertent collapse through the Floo network.

“Are you alright?” Ginny was asking, rubbing warm circles on her back, her voice somehow too loud and too far away at the same time. Nausea rioted in every cell, sickened to her very core. “Hermione, are you okay?”

No. No, she wasn't.

Because it was all her fault.

And now they would find out.

Chapter End Notes

Just to clarify, it was their dating anniversary, not wedding <3

Legs

Chapter Notes

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

Harry, like the worrier he was, wouldn't let Hermione leave until she'd consented to stay for a hot drink.

Ginny went straight for the loose chamomile tea leaves but she declined, insisting instead on a simple mug of black tea, so hot that that it burnt her tongue.

"It's going to be okay," Harry kept telling her as she fidgeted restlessly in the kitchen, pulling at a thread on her jumper. "Reopening the case doesn't mean anything."

"And I doubt they'll find anything we didn't already know," said Ginny. "It's not fair of them to get your hopes up."

They were so kind, and yet so misguided.

Hermione doubted they'd be anywhere near as kind if they knew it was her fault Ron had been distracted that day, her fault he'd stormed into the stronghold alone, *her fault* his life had been destroyed.

"Do you know why?" she asked tentatively. "Do they have any new leads?"

Harry sighed. "We're not too sure yet. I'm hoping there'll be a proper briefing tomorrow. But Robards is the one that submitted the paperwork, he must have his reasons."

"But why *now*?" Hermione asked.

"Must be something to do with the department reshuffle. Now that Draco's been promoted and I've taken on more of an admin role, loads of our old cases have been redistributed. Robards must have decided that there's more investigation to be done. There's even talk of viewing witness memories at the Wizengamot."

The adrenaline was instant and nauseating.

It was her deepest fear, come horrifyingly to light. If the Wizengamot asked to see her memories, they would see the true nature of her awful argument with Ron, the true role Hermione had had in his accident that day.

And the fear was white-hot in her veins.

"It's okay," said Ginny, misreading her expression completely. "They can't force you to watch any memories if you don't want to. All they're doing by reopening the case is dredging up all the painful stuff we've been trying to move past for the past two years."

Hermione put her mug down, the tea suddenly far too bitter.

“You can ignore the whole thing entirely, if you want,” said Harry. “Just focus on taking care of you and Ron, ignore whatever the DMLE is trying to stir up. I can take care of it.”

“But what if they find that someone *was* at fault?” Hermione whispered, her voice small in her throat.

Harry’s brow contracted with guilt. “Ron was on his own,” he said heavily. “The stronghold was full of dark curses and he went in alone. No one was at fault. It’s just... one of those thi-

His words choked off all too suddenly, but Hermione understood the look in his eyes, the way he turned away. Understood the way that Ginny’s hand shot out, interlacing her fingers with his and squeezing so tightly that his knuckles blanched.

“Thanks for the tea,” Hermione said, getting to her feet and wiping hurriedly at her eyes. “I should go.”

They embraced her before she left, but when she stepped into the grate, the last thing she spotted was Ginny rushing forward into Harry’s arms, holding him tight, tears shining on her cheeks. An intimacy they alone shared.

And it was loneliness that ached in Hermione’s chest long after the flames stopped spinning.

Hermione resolved to follow Harry’s advice over the next few days, focusing on everything apart from the case that was threatening to unravel her life from around her. She didn’t have the remotest idea what the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was going to investigate first, and it could be months before it got anywhere near her, so she decided to concentrate on Ron’s care. Cracking the code to his recovery before the investigation got off the ground was an unrealistic pipe dream, but it was something to pin her hopes on; something to strive for.

On Sunday, she penned a letter to the Healer she’d been researching. Godewyn Meijer was allegedly an elusive figure, but Ron’s case appeared to have caught his interest, because she received a response on Wednesday, just as she was preparing to leave for Draco’s.

As expected, Healer Meijer already had far too many cases to take on Ron’s, but he bore exciting news of a patient he had recently worked with, whose case had not yet made it into one of his publications. According to his notes, this patient had experienced symptoms similar to Ron, stemming from a potions accident three years prior. A thorough history of the patient’s life in the run-up to the accident had allowed Healer Meijer to cultivate an individualised plan of therapy, using significant events and memories to gradually restore some trace of the patient’s former self.

Such treatment was incredibly individual, highly specialised, phenomenally expensive, and so far held only a fifteen percent success rate, but nonetheless, it strengthened the hope in Hermione’s heart. If she could learn as much as possible from Draco about the circumstances surrounding Ron’s accident, then perhaps, one day, she might be able to find Ron the cure he deserved.

And so it was with new determination that she set off for Draco’s that evening.

Draco's apartment was generously sized, and its furnishings bloomed with a warmth that seeped into Hermione's bones as soon as she set foot inside. In the living room, a large L-shaped sofa bracketed a dark mahogany coffee table, upon which sat his Pensieve, already swirling with memories. Hermione sank comfortably into the cushions, gazing around the room until she spotted Draco coming back from the kitchen with two handsome amber glasses of Firewhiskey clutched in his grasp.

His shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, his sleeves rolled to his elbows, and his hair was in slight disarray – an overall vision of post-work comfort that made Hermione smile immediately, her heart leaping with a reminder of their newfound closeness.

"Thank you so much for doing this," she said, gratefully accepting one. He settled himself onto the sofa beside her, too close for her to relax, but somehow not quite as close as she wanted.

"My pleasure," he said, pulling softly at his collar. "So, um, I don't have hundreds of memories - I only save the ones I think are important at the time. And any other moments before the accident are too long ago now to recall in much detail. But of the ones I did save, there are a few with Ron in. Was there anything in particular you wanted to see?"

"Everything," Hermione admitted, taking a sip before launching into a summary of Healer Meijer's letter.

"Right," Draco said eventually. "So, from as far back as possible, then? Nothing omitted?"

"Nothing," she confirmed, and he huffed out a soft laugh, something about his posture betraying a small degree of vulnerability.

They both drained what was left in their glasses, and then Draco lifted a large wooden chest from beside the table. Within it were dozens of small vials, each bearing a label of elegant, spidery script, and while they all appeared the same to Hermione, Draco appeared to find the one he wanted almost immediately.

"Right," he said. "There's a few in here. Starting from from day one of Auror training. September 1998."

Hermione swallowed. Five years ago. She and Ron had just found a small apartment to share, caught up in the giddy excitement of newfound love. Everything had seemed bright, open. Brimming with opportunity.

And she was immediately filled with nervous energy at the thought.

Draco held the vial up to the light, then poured the silvery-white liquid atop the Pensieve, where it fanned out across the surface of the water like oil.

Draco's *memories*.

Pensive memories weren't objective. Everything she saw would be suffused with his own version of events, his thoughts, his feelings. She would be inside Draco's head; she would bear witness to events as he saw them, not necessarily how they happened. There was a startling intimacy to it, and with the recollection of his lips against her neck last week, she suddenly found herself extraordinarily lightheaded.

"Are you alright?" he asked nervously, noticing her stillness.

She nodded hesitantly, gazing into the pearlescent liquid.

She would be seeing Ron *as he had been. Before.*

"I'll warn you," Draco said, breaking her from her thoughts, "if there's anything I think might be hard to watch."

She nodded again, then took a breath, trying to imagine the oxygen blowing through her veins, clearing away the hesitation. And gently touched the tip of her finger into the Pensive.

She was hurtling down, further and further, until she made contact with hard marble flooring. Straightening up, she found herself in a large, scarcely decorated chamber that she immediately recognised as the central hub of the Auror training facility.

The hall was dotted with Aurors in trainee and qualified robes alike, chatting in small groups or milling aimlessly about, but there was an energy of nervous tension in the room, which Hermione soon realised was emanating from the owner of the memory she was watching.

Eighteen-year-old Draco Malfoy stood alone in the centre of the hall, eyes focused on a dais at one end. He was perfectly still, face blank, but Hermione noticed a soft movement in the fabric of his sleeve, her eye drawn to where he was tapping an anxious rhythm against his wand with his fingernails. She'd almost forgotten how young he looked at this age, fresh out of a war with several millennia of expectations and prejudice weighing on his shoulders. Here, his shirt was buttoned so tightly up to his neck that there was a red line against his throat, and his hair was so mercilessly slicked back that it reminded her more than ever of his eleven-year-old self, trying so very hard to prove himself.

She turned, and there was the Draco she knew best, twenty-three and clearly startled to be confronted with his younger form.

"You're so little," she smirked, and he scowled lightly at her before sighing.

"I thought I looked so grown up."

She grinned.

At that moment, there was a surge in interest at the front of the room, and Hermione spotted Kingsley Shacklebolt making his way regally to the stage.

Past and present Draco alike were focused on the Minister as he began his welcome speech, but a tug in Hermione's chest made her wander further out, scanning through the crowd until

she found – *him*.

Ron Weasley was grinning ear to ear, and the sight yanked Hermione's heart right out through her throat.

He was standing next to Harry, the two of them listening attentively, but still occasionally trading murmurs and chuckles. His shoulders were tall, arms folded comfortably, and his eyes were bright, full of the life she missed so dearly.

She didn't know how long Kingsley's speech lasted, but she watched Ron's face for every single moment, barely aware of time passing until everyone broke into applause. A hand brushed her shoulder and Draco's apologetic face appeared beside her.

"Argument warning," he muttered, and she gazed back across at the younger Draco, who was picking his way between the crowd towards Ron and Harry.

Ron clearly noticed him and tried to retreat, but didn't manage to before Draco had cleared his throat and said, "Potter. Weasley."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"I-" Draco's brows were furrowed with consternation. "I wanted to, er, apologise."

Ron looked decidedly unimpressed.

"For, well, everything. You don't need the details, I'm sure. And, er, I hope that we can be civil colleagues."

Ron just grunted.

"Um, thanks," Harry said cautiously. "I hope so too."

Draco nodded stiffly. And then, after a moment of awkward, stilted silence, turned to leave.

"We saved your life a stupid number of times," Ron burst out.

Draco's mouth twisted, biting back a retort. "I – yes." And then, as if it pained him, "*Thank you.*"

"And I reckon it's Hermione you should apologise to, anyway," Ron continued, as if he hadn't heard him.

Hermione's heart sped up in her chest. Pensieve-Draco's throat bobbed.

"I will," he gritted out. "But-"

"You know, the way you did nothing while your aunt *tortured* her-"

"I know!" Draco snapped.

There was a loud silence, several heads turning at the commotion.

Ron looked triumphant. “Careful, Malfoy,” he said bitingly. “I reckon it’ll only take a couple of temper tantrums to get your arse kicked out for good.”

The entire atmosphere of the memory seemed to darken, to roll inwards like thunder clouds.

Harry had watched the entire exchange with a look of resignation on his face, as if he’d known exactly how it would play out. Eventually, he gave a sigh. “Good luck, Malfoy,” he said stiffly.

The crowd began to file from the hall, brushing past Draco’s frozen shoulders, and Hermione watched as people glared suspiciously at him on their way out, nudging one another, muttering condemning words.

And Draco remained motionless, practically shrinking into his Auror robes until there was nothing left.

Hermione’s heart stuck in her throat. “Draco-”

But his twenty-three-year-old self shook his head in dismissal, took her wrist, and guided them on into a new memory, the world around them dissolving and reforming into new surroundings before she could think too deeply about the look on younger-Draco’s stricken face.

They were in one of the smaller training rooms this time, and Draco was about the same age, but considerably less composed than before. His outer robes had been discarded, leaving him in a black shirt and pair of slacks that accentuated the strong, deliberate lines of his limbs as he lunged forward, slashing determinedly at the air with his wand. His opponent, another Auror trainee with long blonde hair that Hermione didn’t recognise, was fighting back hard, but Draco clearly had the edge, and it wasn’t long before her wand went spinning from her hand and she was forced to concede.

Draco whirled around to face the instructor looking on, who gave a reserved nod of approval. And it was only due to the friendship they’d developed over the last few years that Hermione was able to spot the pleasant bloom of pride in his cheeks.

“Right,” the instructor said. “Weasley’s just finished his duel. Off you go.”

And Hermione’s heart fluttered in her chest as she watched Ron approach, his face set.

Ron and Draco’s first duel was brutal, movements boiling with tension. Ron radiated suspicion, clearly still mistrustful, but Draco fought decisively and honestly, and Hermione could see that Ron appreciated it. Their efforts began to draw a crowd as they traded spell after spell, long after everyone else had finished. Soon there was a thin sheen of sweat at Draco’s temple, and Ron’s face was ruddy with exertion, but as time went on, Hermione thought she could spot the faint trace of a smile in each of their faces.

It was bewildering to see, and she found herself circling the pair, fingertips outstretched as if she could learn more by touch. And the older-Draco watched, motionless except for the way

his eyes followed her about the room.

After almost twenty minutes, both men exhausted and sweating, the instructor finally called it off as a draw.

And while Hermione could see the way Ron fought to keep his expression neutral, there was something that bordered on respect in his eyes as he shook Draco's hand.

"Good duel," Draco said quietly, and Ron nodded.

"Nice one."

"That," said the future Draco, stepping closer, "was the first time we spent more than five minutes together without arguing."

"Does it count if you were fighting?" Hermione quipped, and he laughed.

"Perhaps not. Of course, he still didn't trust me for a long time, but I think that day helped. It's probably the only reason he didn't make a fuss when Harry and I were matched as Auror partners at the end of the year."

"I'm not sure I understand how a duel made you get along," she said wryly.

Draco shrugged. "Me neither. But I wasn't going to question it. I, er, well, I'm sure you can see that I wasn't very well-liked."

She opened her mouth to ask him more, but then things were swirling again, and this time the memory around them was dark.

Draco, Ron, and Harry were walking along a path on what felt immediately like a late autumn evening. The two Gryffindors were side by side, laughing, boots crunching boldly onto discarded leaves. But Draco hung back, his shoulders stooped, as if he wasn't quite sure he belonged.

Hermione followed curiously, not sure where they were going, or roughly when this was, but the nervous look on future-Draco's face made her reluctant to ask.

"Come on," said Harry suddenly from way in front. "Keep up, Malfoy. We're late already."

"Who's coming?" asked the younger Draco, unable to disguise the hint of trepidation in his voice.

"Dean, Seamus, and the girls," Harry answered, while Ron watched silently, clearly still making up his mind about Draco. "Ginny might be a bit grumpy, she's had a long week at work, but Hermione's looking forward to seeing you."

Hermione traded a panicked glance with the Draco by her side. "Is this...?"

"Yeah," Draco said.

A few short minutes later, they were all sitting around a table in the Three Broomsticks. Draco was sat so rigidly in his chair that it looked like a small nudge would knock him straight off, while Hermione's younger self kept stealing curious glances at him over the top of her wine glass as if he were an intriguing museum artifact.

"Dear God," said Hermione, as they watched from afar. "I really thought I was subtle."

Draco snickered.

They looked on as the group of unlikely acquaintances chatted over their drinks. Draco was clearly the odd one out, and looked as if he was wishing that he hadn't accepted the invitation, but seemed to brighten when Harry pulled him into conversation.

Hermione remembered that a few weeks before this night, Draco had written her a detailed letter, a letter that she'd read several times a day for about a week before she finally worked up the courage to reply. He'd taken responsibility for his past mistakes, apologised for everything he'd done, and expressed his desire to start anew now that he was going to be working so closely with Harry and Ron. This was the first night they'd met face to face, and it was clear that neither of them knew how to act.

Just at the point when Hermione was beginning to wonder why Draco was bothering to show her such an awkward memory, Ron spoke up. "Well," he said, holding his pint aloft, "here's to finishing our first year of Auror training."

"And Healer training," Hermione chipped in, and Ron grinned warmly at her, the brightness of his smile seeming to eclipse the memory for a second.

"Yes, and Healer training!" he added. "And to the hopes that Harry and Malfoy don't kill one another now that they're partners."

Everyone laughed and crashed their glasses together.

"Just think," Harry grinned, "in two years' time, we'll be qualified! Well, except Hermione, of course."

"I don't know," said Draco, amused. "If anyone can finish Healer training in three years, it'll be her."

There was a short silence, and then Ron and Hermione broke into laughter and the atmosphere eased immediately.

Hermione watched her younger self ask Ron if he wanted another drink, then get to her feet. And, curiously, she found herself noticing the way her skirt had rippled around the backs of her thighs with every step towards the bar.

She hadn't ever realised how short that skirt was before. Or how good it made her legs look.

But it wasn't until she realised that she couldn't see any *other* part of the memory that she realised why.

She forced herself to turn around and lock eyes with the real-life Draco, who had the decency to look flustered.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I didn’t know-”

“I think you did,” she said, cheeks flaming.

“If it helps, I’d had a bit of a lonely year,” he said. “I was looking at any pair of legs I could find-”

“Oh, stop it,” she snorted, flapping her hands, and he was laughing as he took her hand and they finally emerged from the memories, crash-landing back on his sofa.

“I *am* sorry,” he said again, once the world had stopped spinning. “I forgot. I’ll try to warn you next time.”

“There’s a next time?” she asked, before she could help it, and he froze.

“I mean-”

“It’s fine-”

“Can I get you a cup of tea?” Draco asked desperately.

She stared at him. Bit back a grin. And nodded.

He seemed all too keen to leave the room, but Hermione’s whirling mind had quieted enough to allow a small curl of pride to billow up in her chest. She knew herself well enough to admit that she found him attractive. And it was hard not to be pleased that at least some part of him thought the same about her.

Almost instantly, she could feel the memory of his lips at her skin. And it took strength she didn’t really have to brush it away.

She was still trying not to smile like a schoolgirl when Draco re-emerged, two mugs bobbing after him in mid-air. “I’m not sure how strong you want it,” he said, “so I’ve left the strainer in-”

“Oh,” she said immediately, “you use loose leaf?”

He blinked. “I’m sorry, I should have asked-”

“Oh, no, it’s okay.” She let the mug sail into her hands, staring down into the depths as waves of colour drifted out into the water. “I used to drink it all the time. It was special. I guess I liked that it took a bit longer, the ritual of it, you know.”

“Why did you change?” he asked, settling himself down beside her.

“I-” She cut herself off with a frown. “I guess it just feels a little... frivolous. Silly. Like there are better things to do with my time.”

There was a sympathy in his eyes that burned, too hot, in her chest.

“I drink coffee mostly these days, anyway,” she laughed breathily.

“Well then,” he said gently, “at mine, we can drink tea.”

His gaze trapped her own, held her tight while the world moved dizzily around them.

“I don’t mind, you know,” she said quietly. “If you look at me like that, in the memories.”

His shock was evident. “You don’t?”

“No.” She took a hesitant sip. “I- uh. It’s been a lonely year for me, too. It’s nice to feel... appreciated.”

Fear buzzed in every pore, moistening her fingertips until they were too slick to hold onto her mug properly. Draco stayed silent, his eyes fixed on her as she set it down. There was a mild tremor at his lip, as if he was moments away from saying something, but the time ticked by in silence until eventually she cleared her throat.

“Anyway,” she tried, brushing the clouds of tension from the air like cobwebs. “There’s something I was meaning to ask you.”

His eyes slid to his lap. “Yes?”

“Ron’s been asking for a story. And I was wondering if you had any old, obscure fairy-tales in your library.”

“Oh.” His hair suddenly looked so soft that Hermione wished she could run a hand through it. “Um, we might do.” He smiled at her, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “What’s it about?”

Hermione couldn’t get Draco out of her mind all evening, long after she’d returned home and checked in on Ron, sound asleep in the master bedroom.

They’d parted with a tight hug that still didn’t feel close enough, the luxurious taste of the tea still at her tongue. The gratitude for him showing her the memories, for being so kind to her, and for agreeing to peruse Malfoy Manor library for any signs of the elusive fairy-tale, grew wide in Hermione’s chest, and when he brushed a kiss to her cheek, her lips itched with senseless want.

She wanted far more than she should. It sucked at her lungs, tingled in her fingers, dragged at her legs. And yet as soon as she remembered herself, remembered the reason they were there in the first place, remembered the boy she had sworn to take care of, it vanished like a breath of wind.

She could want.

But she had one responsibility right now, and that was Ron.

And maybe, just maybe, if everything went right, and she managed to cure him... she could finally move on.

Hermione didn't usually indulge silly fantasies, but that night, she imagined that the bedsheets were holding her like a lover.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't bear to split this chapter up, so have an extra long one! I'd love to hear your thoughts on how the story's unfolding!

Hope you enjoyed, I'll see you in 3 weeks for the next update <3

Chest

Chapter Notes

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

As much as Hermione tried not to dwell on the events of Wednesday evening, she found herself thinking of little else for the next several days. If she wasn't thinking about the way Draco had stared at the backs of her calves as she'd walked away, it was the way he'd run his hands through his hair, or the way his thigh had been so close to her own on the sofa. Her attraction to him, slow-flowering for so long, had now bloomed into something virtually all-consuming, and she found her thoughts returning to him again and again no matter what she tried.

In fact, she had been thinking of him so often, that when she heard his voice in the St Mungo's waiting room the next week, she instantly assumed she had imagined it, and carried on her way out of the doors.

"Granger, wait-"

And she turned to find Draco waiting for her in the lobby, wearing a tentative smile above his neatly pressed Auror robes.

Her heart rate skyrocketed.

"Hi!" she said, the word somehow inadequate. "What are you doing here?"

"Total coincidence," he said, and she laughed. "I was actually hoping to catch you. Are you free for lunch?"

Excitement fluttered in her belly. "That sounds... lovely."

A short while later, they were both settled in a small café in Piccadilly, tucking into identical sandwiches. "So," said Hermione after a moment, crossing one leg over the other and pulling her plate closer. "Is there any reason you invited me out today?"

"Is the pleasure of your company not enough?" he teased, rocking back in his chair, and the immediate warmth in her cheeks left her scrambling for words before he laughed and continued. "I found something for you."

And her heart leapt as he produced something from the inside of his robes, tapped it with his wand, and turned the newly-enlarged object around for her to read.

"I was going to owl it you, but then I thought it would be nicer to give it to you face to face," he said, not quite meeting her eyes.

And her pulse quickened anew at the sight of a sheet of parchment bearing the words '*The Lonely Princess*'.

“You found it?!” she cried, and Draco made a face.

“I found the first two pages,” he said. “Nothing’s ever simple. I’ll keep looking for the rest for you, but I don’t know how much luck I’ll have – the British Magical Library doesn’t even have a copy-”

“You already checked for me?”

This time, he flushed. “Yes.”

She allowed herself to reach out and brush his hand with her own, the affection her muscles had been screaming for since they’d sat down. “*Thank you.*”

Draco turned quickly back to his lunch, but there was a proud smile on his face that did something to Hermione’s chest. She took a breath, resolving to make the most of this lunchtime.

“I’ll read it when I get home,” she said. “Tell me about your day?”

Her words kindled a soft brightness in Draco’s eyes that persisted until he walked her back to St Mungo’s and squeezed her hand like she’d been the highlight of his day.

The aged sheets of parchment were friable between her nervous fingers as she carried them upstairs that night, where Ron was already tucked into bed, fiddling with a loose thread on his pillowcase.

“Hey,” she said softly, pulling his hand away. “Don’t pull that. You’ll make it worse.”

He stared wide-eyed up at her, scratching messily at his stubble. “I saw a Niffler today.”

“Did you now? I thought you’d stopped seeing Nifflers?”

He shook his head.

“I see.” She settled herself down at the end of the bed. “I’ve got something for you.”

He didn’t react, but she pressed on.

“It’s the fairy tale you were asking for. The one about the princess? And the dragon?”

That caught his attention. “I heard a dragon roar,” he said.

“Yes, you did,” Hermione said patiently. “Would you like me to read it to you?”

He didn’t give much of a response except for tapping the mattress with his fingers, but she took it as her cue to turn over the parchment and squint at the spidery script printed across it.

“*Once upon a time,*” she began, “*a beautiful princess lived in a castle with a good knight. The good knight had honour, and magic, and a good heart, and the princess cared for him*

greatly, but they were as different as light and dark."

The change in Ron was almost imperceptible, but Hermione knew him well enough to see that he had stilled, his eyes fixed straight ahead, clearly listening carefully. She cleared her throat.

"The good knight sought adventure, fighting for fame and glory, but the princess yearned for freedom, knowledge, and peace."

A scratching sound made her look up, where she noticed that Ron was digging into the bedsheets with his fingernails, so she squeezed his hand gently until he stopped. His lips twitched briefly, and then he was back to stillness.

"While the good knight battled dark wizards and rescued witches, the princess grew lonely," Hermione continued carefully. *"But when all the dark wizards had been defeated, and all the witches were safe, the good knight would grow restless. His endless search for faraway adventures made the princess more alone than ever."*

Her heart contracted in her chest, her voice trapped inside a constricted throat.

"Not too far away, near a desolate tower, slept an equally lonely dragon," she said quietly. *"He was an outcast and had been forced away from his home by many a knight's quest. But despite his loneliness, he would greet everyone who approached with wrath and flames..."* She swallowed. *"For this was all he knew."*

"Stop."

Hermione froze, Ron's hand suddenly tight around her wrist. "I thought you wanted—"

"Stop," he said, more urgently, forehead creasing with confused anger, and Hermione let out a shaky breath, dropping the parchment and watching it flutter to the duvet.

"Sorry, darling," she said quietly, almost dizzy with adrenaline. "I'll stop. Do you want to go to bed?"

He was still frowning as she pulled the duvet up to his chin, but she began to stroke a careful hand through his hair, and his expression slowly softened into calmness as she traced patterns across his scalp.

"I'm lost," he whispered suddenly.

Her lungs seized, hand stilling. "No," she said urgently. "You're here. You're at home with me."

But he rolled over and nestled deeper into his pillows, his brows still locked in an expression of vulnerable disorientation that tugged at Hermione's heart. She moved to press a kiss to his forehead, but he squirmed away, and she leaned sharply back, breath catching.

"Goodnight," she said shakily, to no reply.

And with a pulse that fired in her veins, she reached out for the parchment.

Leaning against Ron's closed bedroom door, hands trembling, she continued to read.

From afar, the dragon watched over the princess in the castle. He saw how she was lonely when no one else was looking, how she would stare out of the window in yearning. He saw how she and the good knight grew apart.

And so, the great dragon took flight

There, it ended.

Her heart drummed at her ribs as she clung to each breath. The story had reached deep inside her, caught hold of something long overlooked, and the twist in her gut felt like the jolt before the freefall.

She had to find the rest.

Not half an hour later, when Draco's front door swung open, Hermione realised a little too late that she was turning up unannounced.

His incredulous expression soon gave way to one of concern, and Hermione realised that she was suddenly fighting to keep her face from crumpling.

"Hey," she said, trying to steady her voice. "I'm sorry, I hope this isn't a bad time?"

"Not at all," he said, "come in." And he lifted a hand to brush her arm as she ducked, round-shouldered with embarrassment, inside.

Draco's house was perhaps even more comforting than she remembered, setting foot across the threshold like sinking into a warm bath. His presence behind her shoulder, shutting the door with a heartbeat *thud*, was steadying and dizzying all at the same time, and not for the first time, Hermione found herself wondering what it might feel like to let him support her weight.

The living room wasn't as tidy as it had been the last time she was here, stacks of messy papers and coffee rings littering most available surfaces, but Hermione thought that perhaps she liked it even more this way. She turned to him, practically enchanted with his crumpled shirt and the shade of stubble at his jaw.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this," she said hurriedly, before her mind could get carried away. "I, well..." She chewed at her lip. "I don't know if I know exactly why I came."

He granted her silence for a moment, waiting for her to continue, but she didn't take it. "I was just about to put the kettle on?" he suggested eventually.

"Yes, please."

"Tea?"

And heat flurried along her skin. “That sounds wonderful.”

She tried to settle into the sofa while he busied himself in the kitchen, but she found herself itchy and uncomfortable with him so far away. And so, a few moments later she was following him, watching wordlessly. The fair hair at the nape of his neck trailed into a soft V at the ridge of his collar, and Hermione could hardly take her eyes off it as he tucked tea leaves into matching strainers and the kettle bubbled merrily behind him.

The acoustic silence soothed the cracks in her skin like rainwater.

“Did the Potters tell you about the DMLE sweepstake?” he asked, and she moved closer, wondering how many steps she’d have to take before she could wrap her arms around him.

“No?”

“It started off with a couple of people guessing what they were going to call the baby,” he grinned. “Then Finnegan saw the potential and set up a betting pool on the DMLE noticeboard.”

“Right...” Hermione grinned.

“And it was all fun and games until Potter spotted that someone had written Dolores as a joke.”

“Oh, no...”

“So, naturally,” continued Draco, smirking down at his teaspoon, “it turned into a game of ‘suggest the worst possible name for the Chosen One’s child’.”

An electric giggle burst from between her lips, and she clenched instinctively against the unfamiliar lightness.

“My personal favourite so far is Rita,” said Draco blithely. “But Fudge comes a close second.”

“Stop it!” she snorted.

“Oh, it gets worse,” he said gleefully, folding his arms. “*Lucius*.”

“No!”

“Oh, yes. I think the odds are pretty high on that one, actually.”

“Poor Harry!”

“I don’t know, I think he’s coming around to the idea of Myrtle Potter...” Draco said.

She threw a hand to her forehead, unable to hold back the laughter any longer.

“And do you want to know the best part?” His eyes were bright, teasing, and her eager breath caught in her throat at the sight of him framed in yellow light.

“What?” she asked, suddenly dizzy.

“Potter still thinks we’re serious.”

Hermione’s shoulders shook with mirth as she slapped a hand onto the counter to steady herself, head falling forwards. She laughed and laughed, Draco laughing right along with her, and if their fingertips brushed on the countertop, it was purely accidental, but *God*, Hermione wished it had been her idea.

It felt indescribably good.

And even as she sobered, gaze flicking back up to Draco’s, she realised she was desperate for the feeling not to end. He was still grinning at her, eyelids crinkled.

“You don’t have to look *quite* so pleased with yourself,” she tried to tease, but he just kept chuckling, wholly unbothered. And so she reached out, feathered her fingerprints across the top of his hand. “Thank you,” she said quietly, feeling as if her heart lay open for him to see inside her chest, her skin transparent. “You have no idea how badly I needed that.”

He was still smiling when he turned back to the tea, but the cavity in her chest begged to be pulled, desperate to spill its woes.

“I read the story to Ron,” she said softly, and watched as his hands stilled. “He didn’t like it.”

Draco’s brow furrowed.

“But it...” she said quickly. “It felt...” Now that the word was on her tongue, it felt ridiculous. “*True*.”

“A true story?”

“No, I-” The kettle suddenly reached its boiling point with a shrill whistle, and Draco turned again. “It felt true to me,” she admitted quietly. “Like it was something I’d heard before.”

“Maybe you did,” he suggested. “Stumbled across it in the library back in first year, perhaps?”

“Maybe,” she said, unconvinced. Her body was a livewire of nervous energy, desperate to do *something*, so when Draco pressed a steaming mug into her hands, it mildly alleviated the urge to touch him. She sighed audibly. “Thank you.”

And the look in his eyes made her lip tremble.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, and moisture prickled at her eyelids.

“I’m not sure,” she whispered. And she had come to expect the worry, the nervous reassurance, the panicked questions that Ginny and Harry would so often bury her in.

But Draco just nodded. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“I-” She swallowed, chewing over the impulse to say no. The rebuttal was an immediate response, a barrier constructed to prevent anyone worrying. But the temptation to let them spill over was becoming overwhelming. She could open her mouth and let all the words that had been piling up behind her lips pour out like wine; pour and pour until there was nothing left. Her tsunami of truth would require so little to unleash.

But she wasn’t ready. Not quite yet.

“No,” she said quietly. “Not right now. I think I was a bit overwhelmed, for a second, but I... I’m calmer, here. With you.” She took a steadying breath, hoping it didn’t betray with how badly she wanted to lose herself in his arms. “Thank you for asking.”

The distance between them ached, but his eyes were gentle, his smile soothing her like a balm. “Of course,” he said.

And after a few moments of silence, he puffed out a breath and gestured towards the living room, where they made their way back to the familiar territory of the sofa. Hermione was torn between sitting as close as she could and backing herself into a corner like a child, but eventually chose the latter. And Draco watched the way she curled into herself, wrapping her arms around her knees, but didn’t comment.

“I feel like my brain moves too fast, sometimes,” she said quietly. Steam from her mug drifted upwards, painting her chin with warmth. “Like I’m running a hundred different races at once, and instead of finishing them one at a time, I just keep hopping lanes. And I’m not sure I know where the finish line is.”

He chewed this over for a moment, fingernails tapping against his ceramic mug. His fair eyelashes flickered, catching the light in a way that was nothing short of enchanting.

“I know that you don’t need anyone else to take care of you,” he said. “But I think maybe you should think about taking more care of yourself.”

She blinked at him, floored. “But I do?”

There was a telling silence.

“You don’t agree?”

“I think,” he said carefully, “that you pour so much of yourself into everything and everyone else... that you sometimes get left behind.”

There was an instinctive coil of defensiveness in her chest, but she forced herself to unwind it.

He gestured to her mug. “Take the tea, for example. You like loose leaf. But you don’t spend the extra sixty seconds it takes to make it because you’re too busy giving your time to everyone except yourself.”

She bit her lip and held back the memory of Ron slamming the door behind him, tea leaves all over her socks. "It's just not worth it," she said. "I need the caffeine – I have to drink coffee."

"But you *like* tea."

She paused, brows pulled together.

"When was the last time you did something simply because you wanted to?"

And she knew he hadn't been looking for an answer, but it leapt unbidden to her mind. That night in the pub, shivering beneath his touch, sitting in the pub longer than necessary just to spend more time with *him*.

The pull in her chest tightened, forced her out of her tucked position and closer to the man she was rapidly becoming infatuated with.

"A while ago," she said softly.

She realised that she was leaning forwards, angled towards him with her palms braced either side of her lap. And as close as she was, she couldn't help but notice the way Draco's gaze flicked south, focused a little too long on her lips.

A plume of intrigue swirled up in her chest, but it scattered into tight pinpricks on the insides of her chest when he turned deliberately away.

"Would you like to watch any memories?" he asked, swallowing hard. "Or we can just talk, that's fine-"

"We could do that," she said, desperate to shift the attention from their proximity. She leant back, placed her hands in her lap. "Yes, please."

They dissolved back into silence, then, and Hermione found herself staring straight ahead at the wall while Draco busied himself bringing everything onto the table. She clung onto her mug like a lifeline, breathing in the steam and imagining that every tiny iota of fragrance was absorbing into her body, sweetening and lightening wherever it went.

She could take care of herself. She *would*.

His palm on her thigh shot a spark of electricity through her, but the contact felt effortless, natural, as if they'd done it a million times before.

"You're going to be okay," he said quietly, and she nodded, suddenly overcome once more. "Ready?"

Oxygen was as potent as a drug in her lungs when she breathed in through her nose, slow and steady.

"Ready," she whispered.

And it was with hands clasped that they entered the Pensive once more.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the long wait with this chapter! I'm already so excited for the next one <3

Mouth

This time they landed in another pub, and Hermione was only marginally more prepared than last time for the way her chest ached at the sight of Ron's face.

Draco's grasp of her hand kept her from sinking to her knees.

"Are you sure you want to do this tonight?" he asked, and she nodded.

"I'm sure," she said. "It's for him."

And Draco squeezed again before she took a step closer to the memory, their hands dropping apart.

"-telling you," Ron was saying, setting something up on the middle of the table, "if the Cannons don't win, I'll eat my wand."

"You better start chewing," Ginny grinned.

Hermione smiled and took another step closer, realising that the table's new centrepiece was, in fact, Ron's old crackling radio. And her lips pursed at almost the same time as her younger self's.

"Do you have to?" Pensieve-Hermione asked quietly, nudging Ron surreptitiously. "It rather kills the conversation, don't you think?"

Ron brushed her off, apparently not listening. "It's the biggest game of the year!" he insisted. "Listen, everyone! They're about to start!"

Hermione watched as her past self sighed loudly and turned to one person at the table who wasn't entirely fixated on the radio – Draco.

The memory seemed to glow a little brighter with her eye contact.

"Don't tell me you're Quidditch-mad too?" her younger self asked, and Draco smirked.

"Not mad enough to support the Cannons," he quipped, and she smiled in a wide, carefree way that made Hermione realise just how long it had been since she had smiled like that.

"Harry told me you're starting a placement in the Muggle Incidents and Accidents ward," Draco said, taking a sip of Firewhiskey. "How's that going?"

And even if she hadn't seen the way her younger self beamed in response, she would have remembered how that moment felt. Ron had commented very little on her next placement at the time, other to complain that she was getting home later than normal, but it had been one of the most wonderful experiences of her training. And as she watched herself begin to animatedly describe her first week on the ward, it occurred to her that Draco had always been rather a good listener. And perhaps she hadn't given him enough credit for it until now.

The memory of the night wore on, the warm conversation between her and Draco's younger selves punctuated only by the sharp blasts of the radio and Ron's overeager yelling.

"I'm sorry it's dull," said the older Draco, "I pulled this one out for you thinking there was something relevant in it, but I can't remember what."

"That's okay," Hermione smiled. "It's nice to watch."

They stared on in silence for a moment. The memory-Hermione was talking animatedly about an amusing moment in one of her practical classes, while Draco sat watching her with a fond smile on his face. Every time the radio surged in volume, the pair would grimace or make some sort of conspiratorial comment, and watching it made Hermione's stomach contract with warmth.

"I forgot that we bonded over our shared distaste for that radio," she said quietly, trying to suppress a smile.

"Distaste?" Draco smirked, as she laughed. "I *hated* it."

"I still have it," Hermione admitted. "Horrible thing."

"Do you ever use it?"

"Absolutely not."

He turned to look at her, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. And she couldn't stop herself grinning.

"I'm glad we got to know one another," she said quietly.

Draco regarded their younger selves for a moment, chatting just as warmly as they were now.

"At this stage I wasn't ever quite sure if you were enjoying my company or just pitying me," he admitted.

Over at the table, the memory-Hermione was supporting her chin in her hand as she listened to Draco talk, grinning so freely that it almost stung to watch.

"Definitely enjoying your company," Hermione said, and chose not to comment on the flush of pink that lit Draco's cheeks.

"I'm glad too," he said carefully.

At that moment, Ron let out an almighty cheer and launched himself at his girlfriend to plant a kiss on her mouth. "Eighty-forty!" he yelled. "Come on!"

Hermione watched herself laugh and shrug him off, rolling exasperated eyes. And she swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Should we move on?" she asked, and Draco made a face.

“I don’t know,” he said, “maybe just a second, I just have a feeling that something is coming up-”

“Hey, Ron,” called Neville, leaning over the table. “Are you going to be at the Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes reopening next weekend?”

“Oh,” breathed Draco. “This is it.”

“Afraid not,” Ron complained. “I’ve been pulled in to go over our raid protocols.”

Harry snorted. “Only because you’ve finally been told off for charging ahead every time?”

“So is this like an Apparition Awareness course ...?” Neville joked.

“Apparently it’s an extra six hours this Saturday for me to *‘fucking learn the protocol, Ronald’*,” Ron sighed, and everyone roared with laughter, except for the memory-Hermione, who looked more exasperated than anything. “Something about rushing off recklessly all the time, I dunno, sounds more like Harry-”

But while everyone at the table continued to laugh, Hermione found herself stricken, frozen to the spot several feet away.

She’d forgotten how he used to joke about this.

According to all his progress reports, Ron had shown exemplary conduct throughout his Auror training – except for his tendency to rush off into situations without first calculating the risk. He’d been pulled up on it time and time again, but he had never seemed to take the warnings seriously. Never seemed to understand that the protocols were there for a reason.

And now...

“That’s probably important,” she said unsteadily. She frantically tried to recall the investigation into Ron’s accident, but the memories were hazy. She’d spent the whole time in a haze of guilt and shock. “Did the Wizengamot see that last time?”

“No,” Draco answered, after a stiff pause. “They didn’t bother looking through my memories.”

There was a strange look in his eyes that Hermione couldn’t quite interpret, some sort of shuttered guilt that seemed out of place.

“I suppose they must have been satisfied with the statements you gave,” she said quietly.

“Mm,” Draco said, the line of his lips somehow brittle.

Hermione knew that he had struggled a great deal in the aftermath of the accident, grappling with the survivor’s guilt that had descended over them all. But Draco had not been with Ron and Harry at the time of the incident. And for the first time, she wondered whether that made it worse.

She took his hand, squeezing lightly. “You’re not responsible,” she told him, and felt an irrepressible surge of affection at the way he squeezed back.

“Oh,” he said suddenly, eyes fixed on his memory. “We should move on; I’ve just remembered what happens next-”

She frowned immediately. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“It’s just – it wasn’t a good moment for Ron. You don’t need to see-”

Her heart hammered. “I’d like to,” she said quietly. “Please?”

Draco’s mouth twisted in uncomfortable defeat.

And together they turned their attention back to the table, where the memory-Hermione had gotten up to go to the bathroom, and Draco had pulled his gaze away from her retreating form to look over at Ron.

“Are you doing anything for her birthday this year?” he asked.

“Hm?” said Ron, barely glancing away from the radio. “Oh, blimey, I keep forgetting that’s coming around again,” he grinned. “Er, I’ve not planned anything yet, no. But we have got those extra training sessions next week, so I probably won’t be around on the evening of her birthday anyway.”

“I thought they were optional?”

“Yeah? Oh, yeah, they might be. I dunno, I think they sound interesting. And if I tell Hermione they’re compulsory she won’t mind if we move her birthday celebrations to the weekend.” He chuckled. “Gives me more time to get a present together.”

“But isn’t the protocol review-?”

“No!” Ron roared, whipping back to the radio. “Dirty tactics, fuck off!”

Draco pressed his lips together, gaze flicking away, while the atmosphere of the memory darkened, closed inwards. “...Right.”

The radio crackled on, but Draco’s brows remained drawn together long after the conversation ended, staring down into his glass. And Hermione felt her stomach jolt with recollection.

Not long after Ron had informed Hermione that he was busy on her birthday weekend, Draco had invited her to see the reopening of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes with him. They had stood side by side while George spoke about the losses of the war, applauded him with unfaltering pride, cheered when the store doors were opened for the first time in two years. After spending all day exploring dozens of new products together, chatting and laughing as if they had been friends for years, he had walked her back home. And that was where she had hugged him for the very first time, overcome with gratitude for not being forced to spend the weekend alone.

She still remembered the way they'd drawn apart, the way he'd smiled at her, the way his hands had felt so warm either side of her waist. She'd kissed his cheek and gone inside, and from then on, he had made a point of returning the gesture whenever they reunited.

They had had so much fun together that she hadn't thought once about Ron's inability to make time for her on her birthday weekend. And it had never before occurred to her that it may been Draco's intention all along.

Her chest began to ache so hard that she had to wrap her lonely arms around it.

"You..." she started.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, coming to stand behind her. "I didn't mean for you to see that."

She squeezed her arms tighter. "It's okay," she murmured. "I think it's... important."

"But you don't want to remember him like-"

"Ron is not a perfect person," Hermione said quietly. "I've always known that."

Draco was silent, slowly drawing his gaze up to meet her eyes.

"Pretending otherwise would be... wrong," she finished. "Moving on is... hard enough already."

Another pause, but this time, Draco nodded. His shoulders lowered.

"Thank you for showing me," she said. "And thank you for being there, that weekend."

His eyes burned into hers. "I'm always here."

And as their forearms brushed, Hermione finding herself drifting closer and closer, until the memory dissolved and reformed around them.

She found herself immediately disoriented in her new surroundings. Or perhaps that was simply the way her head was spinning after Draco had leaned so close.

"Sorry," he said, a little breathlessly, "I forgot that was the end. I think this memory is from a couple of weeks later."

She planted her feet a hip's width apart and took a breath as the final clouds of vision filtered in. They were back in the Auror training headquarters, in something that she could only assume was the canteen, filled with tables and trays piled high with food.

"-little bit pointless, really," someone was saying, and she flinched at the realisation that it was Ron, assaulted by the memory of something she suddenly wasn't sure she wanted to remember. "But at least it means Robards will sign me off for two-person raids from now on."

The younger Draco was an impassive companion at Ron's side, chewing disinterestedly. "And you don't think they have a point about waiting for instructions?"

Ron snorted, but there was a guardedness in his eyes that Hermione recognised as a warning not to challenge him. He placed his elbows on the wooden tabletop. "We never did that when we were younger. Why start now? I know what I'm doing."

Draco's expression flickered, but he kept eating.

"Anyway," said Ron, spearing a forkful of lettuce and shoving it into his mouth. "Pulling me in at the weekend to go over boring stuff we studied last year is just a waste of everyone's time. I still haven't even been able to do anything for Hermione's birthday – she's still upset, you know."

"*You* mixed up your dates," Draco pointed out, and Ron huffed.

"*I know that.* But I didn't mean to. I've apologised a hundred times."

A bizarre spasm of discomfort itched its way up Hermione's spine. Listening in on a conversation about herself, even one from almost three years ago, made her feel impossibly out of place.

"Maybe you could do something this weekend," Draco suggested uncertainly.

"Ugh, don't try and help," Ron snorted. "You're half to blame."

Both Dracos looked sharply towards him. "What?"

"Showing up like a knight in shining armour on Sunday," Ron joked, mouth full. "She made a comment about '*Draco Malfoy*, of all people' – no offence – making more time for her than me. I mean, that's low."

Dangerous heat needled her skin. Behind her, Draco shifted uncomfortably.

"What are we doing this afternoon?" asked the younger Draco quickly, pink-cheeked, tearing the crust off his slice of bread as if table manners were something he'd never heard of before.

"What do you – it's that curse-breaking exercise, remember?" said Ron, frowning at him over a forkful of pasta. "You were talking about it earlier."

"Er, yes," said Draco. "Have you... had a chance to practice the diagnostic charms?"

Ron made a non-committal noise. "I'll get round to it. Honestly, you're just like Hermione –"

"Let's go," Draco said suddenly, from his position at Hermione's shoulder. She startled and fell back into him as the colours drained from the memory and they emerged once more into their seated positions in the present, the world spinning past their ears.

She turned to him with a frown. "But he was still talking –"

“The useful part of the memory was over,” he said firmly.

“I wanted to hear-”

“You didn’t need to.”

“Draco-”

“They’re my memories!” he snapped, and she stilled.

The room echoed with the quiet of a snuffed candle.

“I’m sorry,” he said immediately, raking stiff fingers through his hair.

“No,” she stopped him, “I’m sorry. I- I shouldn’t have pushed.”

She wanted to close the distance between them, break down the barriers that had risen so rapidly, but he sat immovable at the other end of the sofa, and she could practically feel the uncertainty radiating from his body.

“I really appreciate you showing me these,” she said quietly. “Every single one.”

“It’s... difficult,” he bit out, still staring straight ahead, as if protecting himself from her gaze would make the words easier to say. “I only have a few memories of him that I saved when they were still fresh. Ones that I kept because I thought they were important at the time, moments I wanted to hold onto. And watching them back just feels so... personal. Like they’re...” His eyes flitted to hers and away again. “Like I’m showing you pieces of me I never intended to share.”

She let his words sink into the silence, nodding slowly. “Well, if it helps... I like them. All those pieces.”

His cheeks reddened.

“And it means a lot to me that you’re willing to do this. For me *and* for Ron,” she added. “Thank you for trusting me with them.”

Draco pulled his gaze away and got to his feet, toeing edgily at the carpet. And from the heaviness of his expression, the subtle movements of his hands, it felt to Hermione as if Draco was at the edge of making a decision, the point just before no return.

He drummed his fingernails against his thigh, paced two steps forward, and Hermione remained silent, tension at the corners of her mouth. The urge to say something bubbled in the pit of her stomach, but something held her back. And finally, Draco spoke.

“I want to help you both.”

He turned, paused, sighed, and then turned to the chest of memories. She watched in silence as he thumbed idly through the contents, as if trying to search for something, but she noticed that when he was ready, his fingers went straight for a slim vial at the corner.

He lifted it out, his shoulders stiff.

“Before you see this,” he said quietly, “I owe you an apology.”

The responding staccato vibration of her heart knocked her off-centre, a steady acceleration of the pulse in her veins. “Why?”

“This memory – there’s several bits to it. And one of them is of a conversation I overheard that I shouldn’t have.”

“Who-”

“It was an argument between you... and Ron.”

Her mouth opened.

“But I think it’s important,” he said quickly. He sat down heavily on the sofa, drawing the vial close to his chest. “It’s relevant to him, to what happened... in the end. And I know you wouldn’t have it saved – I don’t even know if you remember – so I thought... I should show you.”

She swallowed. “Alright.” Her breath was unsteady in her throat. “And what about the other bits?”

The memory slid out of the vial, coated the surface of the Pensieve’s water in a cloud of secrecy. Draco wetted his lips. “Let’s just say it’s... personal. But I think you should see, because it leads into something else, and I-”

He cut himself off, squeezing his eyelids shut.

“Anyway,” he said. “You’ll see what I mean.”

When he looked up again, the eye contact felt as enormous as a confession.

And not knowing what she would find, but trusting Draco regardless, Hermione allowed him to lead her once more into his memories.

Arms

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione's first impression of this new memory was the soft embrace of low lighting and lilting music, overshot with giggled conversations and the clink of full glasses against one another.

She gazed around, taking in her new surroundings. The cool tile beneath her feet immediately grounded her – she was in her own flat, standing in the living room just as she had been that morning. It was almost hard to believe that she was in a memory, until she noticed Ron's old radio sitting on the table, churning out a song she didn't recognise.

All around her, people stood with drinks in their hands, chatting and laughing together, and as her eyes flitted up to a banner in the corner, her own memories came flooding back with as much intensity as her surroundings.

'Congratulations Auror Class of 2001!'

"Oh, no," she whispered, turning to Draco in panic. *"This one?"*

His lip quirked. "I'm afraid so."

"But I got *so drunk*–"

"I know," he said, a grin breaking out across his features.

"I was awful-!"

"You were charming."

And with her cheeks practically ready to burst into flames, Hermione gazed back out into the crowd.

It didn't take her long to spot Draco's younger self – as if her eyes knew automatically where to search – and she was drawn to him immediately, where he stood nursing a nearly-empty bottle of beer in the corner. There was a sort of uncertainty about his expression, as if he couldn't quite relax, and it pulled at the weight in her chest that had grown so much heavier over these last few weeks.

With a last swig, the bottle emptied and Draco turned on his heel towards the kitchen, but as soon as he put his hand on the door, there came the unmistakeable crack of Apparition from behind it, and he paused.

"Oh, you're finally home," came a bitter voice from the kitchen, and Hermione's throat constricted at the realisation that it was her own.

“For Merlin’s sake, Hermione, I don’t need this right now,” someone else replied. “Work finished late. I’m going to get a beer.”

It was Ron.

And Hermione remembered this fight all too well.

The present-day Draco hung back, watching guiltily as his younger counterpart hesitated just beyond the doorframe. He was away from the bustle of the other party-goers, caught at the perfect distance for eavesdropping, and it was with a look of overwhelming curiosity that he swallowed and leaned closer.

A subtle glance back at the older Draco rewarded her with a sufficiently embarrassed expression, but she didn’t have time to comment before the remembered argument stole her attention again.

“You said you’d be here,” the younger Hermione said. “You promised-”

“It was one of the strongholds!” Ron interrupted. “I knew they were there – I told you they were there – and they finally followed up and I was right! The number of old artifacts was incredible – I really feel like this is starting to become my thing! I couldn’t have missed it-”

“Harry and Draco were at that raid too,” said Hermione flatly. “They still got here for seven.”

Ron huffed out a sigh. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m here now, yeah? Let’s just go and forget about it-”

“No!” she shrieked. “I spent ages organising this evening for *you*, because *you* wanted to celebrate the end of your training. All our friends were here on time, asking where you were, and *I didn’t know*. And now you have the gall to turn up over an hour late and not even tell me where you’ve been-”

“You never seem like you care,” Ron sniped.

“Don’t turn this on me!” Hermione scoffed. “Of *course* I care!”

“Why don’t you act like it then? I never hear anything of it until I’ve done something to piss you off, and then it’s like fucking sixth year all over again-”

“You’re drunk, aren’t you,” she said quietly, disbelievingly. “I can’t believe this. You went and got drunk after the raid, knowing full well that I was waiting for you-”

“I just had a drink with my supervisor, Hermione, it’s not a big deal! He wanted to congratulate me, even said my Auror instincts were something that couldn’t be trained! I’m going to be taking the leads on the raids from now on – don’t you think I deserve a celebration away from my own house?”

“For Merlin’s sake, Ron, *this* is why I have to try not to care! Otherwise I’d be heartbroken every fucking weekend!”

Dead silence fell.

“You don’t mean that,” said Ron.

“What if I did? Would it make you face what’s really happening here?” asked Hermione furiously.

Ron just groaned. “You’re impossible. How am I supposed to understand you when you talk in circles all the time-?”

“I just want you to put some *effort* into me for a change, Ronald!”

“Effort? You don’t let me come near you!”

“That’s *not* what it’s about and you know it!” Hermione seethed. Even behind the door, the silence crackled, electric. “Don’t come to bed with me tonight. I won’t talk to you like this.”

“*Fine.*”

Draco had to fling himself away from the door as it crashed open, and then Ron was standing there, framed in the too-harsh light of the kitchen.

Not a word was spoken, but Ron’s eyes narrowed before he pushed past Draco and made for the living room, where his arrival was greeted with a cheer and a chorus of welcome.

But Hermione could only look back through the kitchen door, where her younger self was standing, arms wrapped around her body, tiny and vulnerable in solitude.

Draco peered guiltily at her and cleared his throat. “Is everything-”

“I’m fine,” said the memory-Hermione immediately, brushing him off. “I need a drink.”

“Let me-”

“I said I’m fine.”

And Hermione could only watch as her younger self grappled with a bottle of gin, fingers shaking, desperately trying to hold onto the tiny fragments of her composure that threatened to crumble with every heartbeat. And Draco nodded, granting her space, but still managing to read her mind enough to open a cupboard and pass her a glass in companionable silence.

Hermione watched herself hide a sob behind a nod of gratitude.

She stepped away from the sight, retreated back into the room where faceless figures from Draco’s memory danced around them. “Why did you show me that?” she whispered helplessly, feeling rather suddenly untethered, lost between time zones. “I was there, I knew about him leading the raids-”

He was at her shoulder, smelling of warmth and spice and the comfort she wanted to wrap herself up in. “You needed to see my view of it.”

Her voice wobbled, not altogether intact. “I don’t see how-”

“Trust me,” he said quietly.

And she had no idea, no clue why it was necessary to relive the argument that had finally made her realise how ill-matched she and Ron truly were, but...

“I’m sorry for listening in,” Draco said. “I really shouldn’t have. I’m so sorry.”

She didn’t know when she had reached for his hand, but his squeeze made the ground below her feet somehow more solid. And she had the feeling that it wouldn’t ever be too hard to forgive him.

They clung to one another as the movement of the party around them sped up, a distorted blur of motion as the hours raced by. Hermione watched her younger self throw back glass after glass, laughing a little too loud with her friends, orbiting at an ever-increasing distance from her boyfriend.

It was so blindingly obvious that they should have ended things before it devolved into this evident nastiness. And realising it made her sick to her stomach.

“Hermione-” said Draco, and she turned to find that the memory had settled into a quiet corner of the living room, where his younger self had just caught Ron’s eye. “Over here.”

Unease rocked in her stomach, but Draco led her closer until she couldn’t help but hear the conversation.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ron was saying gruffly. “We’re fine. Everything’s fine.”

The younger Draco chewed at his lip, debating whether to press him. “It didn’t sound fine-”

“No offence, but it’s not really any of your business,” Ron said sharply. Someone let out a high-pitched giggle from the other end of the room and he jolted with irritation. “I asked you for advice once, that doesn’t mean you get to know the details of every fight-”

“She’s lonely,” Draco said quietly, and Hermione felt her throat contract into an airless spiral.

Ron’s eyes were flinty, the angle of his jaw lined with defence. Red stubble glinted as he raised his chin. “You shouldn’t have listened in.”

And to Hermione’s surprise, it was anger that sparked in Draco’s gaze. “I know she’s lonely because she *told* me. And even if she hadn’t, it would be obvious.”

The alcohol had twisted Ron’s mouth, tainted his words with ugliness. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Why do you care about what goes on between me and Hermione-?”

“I *don’t*,” Draco gritted out. “But I thought we were friends. I’m trying to help-”

“You think you know her better, do you-?”

“Of *course* not-”

“We’re fine. I don’t need your advice, Malfoy.”

But Draco’s frustration had clearly reached boiling point. “Fuck, just *open* your eyes!” he snapped.

And Ron gaped at him, silent for the first time.

Draco’s shoulders lowered, determined. “She should be a priority,” he said shakily. “Not an afterthought.”

Hermione watched as Ron’s throat bobbed, catching on the bridge between denial and understanding.

But he never made it across.

His eyebrows lowered, shuttered and impenetrable, and then he spun on his heel and stormed away – where he immediately collided with Harry, who’d been wandering back with two beers in his hands.

From her own memory of the event, Hermione remembered it all happening very quickly.

But here, time seemed to slow down, and she watched in infinitesimal detail as the twin bottles fell to the floor and smashed with a noise like something irreparable.

Everyone in the room stared at the glass and beer froth splattered across the floor.

“Shit, sorry,” Ron laughed, his ears blazing red. “My bad, I’ll get it-”

But whether it was due to the alcohol, or the anger, or something else entirely, several frustrated flicks of his wand failed to fix a single fragment. And it didn’t take long for Draco to take over, snapping his wand at the mess and sending the bottles leaping up into Ron’s hands in one piece; the beer evaporating into thin air.

Ron glared at him, mouth a soundless ‘O’ of fury.

And as he stalked off into the kitchen in venomous silence, Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if the friendship they had worked so hard to build had ever truly recovered.

Something had changed in Draco’s face.

For a while Hermione was only able to stare, trying to understand why this twenty-one-year-old Draco suddenly looked so much more like the older version standing by her side. And she eventually concluded that it must be down to some kind of growing certainty in the lines of his mouth and the set of his brows, as if the argument with Ron had proven something he had been waiting for.

And it captivated her as he took a long drink and left the room, heading into the hallway.

There were fewer people here, scattered in twos and threes, but Draco's gaze was reserved purely for one person – the similarly twenty-one-year-old Hermione – leaning against the wall as she swayed drunkenly to the music. Her hair was wilder than ever, sticking out at odd angles from her head, her limbs moving jerkily, her nose freckled and her lower lip bitten; and yet it was as if light streamed from her like a sunrise. Golden highlights from the overhead lamps glinted at her crown and her collarbones, her lidded eyes shone with bliss, and as she tipped her head back and grinned at the ceiling, the entire memory seemed to shine just a little bit brighter.

Hermione had never seen herself like this before.

Her throat was dry. "You've, er, got a very flattering memory," she commented. But her companion didn't reply, and she turned to find the present-day Draco looking on with the same unreadable expression as his younger self.

It was almost half dazed, as if he had no idea what to do or say. And yet it was as if he had simultaneously never been surer of anything in his life.

Adrenaline coursed through her bloodstream.

Her younger self was dancing with her arms stretched joyfully above her head, rocking and arching to the beat, while the heat of Draco's attention bloomed over her skin like a furnace.

He couldn't take his eyes off her.

The memory seemed to crackle with energy, with a sort of unfulfilled potential that sat squarely between Draco's stiff hands and the girl spinning slowly on the spot, alone in the corner. And she didn't understand how Draco could possibly be sharing this with her, because it was too personal, too revealing, too intimate by far.

She could feel exactly how he had felt, could tell how badly he longed to join her, to take her hand and spin her around, to show how it felt to be held by someone who really, truly-

Her younger self spotted him.

Her eyes widened, and then she beamed, beckoning with sloppy movements and a shaky balance that threatened to give way. "Draco! Come dance," this unrecognisable version of Hermione pleaded, eyes half lidded, grasping with limp hands. "Want to – want you-"

Hermione's heart thudded with panic. "I don't remember this?!"

"How much have you had to drink?" the younger Draco asked, and God, Hermione could hear it in his voice, the tenderness, the affection that surged from his chest with every word.

"A lot," Hermione slurred. Her smile was crooked but glowing, and Draco seemed intoxicated by it. "Dance with me?"

The desire to say yes poured from every corner of the memory.

“Not right now,” Draco said carefully, letting her take his hand only to place it gently by her side and let go again. “Do you need some water?”

“You’re cute,” said Hermione, and pink bloomed not only in Draco’s cheeks, but in the air between them. “You know I like you, don’t you?”

“I think you should stop talking,” said Draco hurriedly.

“As a friend!” Hermione insisted. “I didn’t mean anything, stop it, you’re just – nice. You’re good, Draco. I like you a lot.”

Draco’s fingers fluttered at his side. “Thanks.”

“There’s something else.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Hermione-”

But her face crumpled. “I think I might be sick.”

“Oh.”

And right at the same moment as her younger self bent double at the waist, Draco’s hand seized her own, and the memory scattered into a million tiny lights as they surfaced from the memory and thumped back onto his sofa with the force of an explosion.

Though whether it was that, or the contents of the memory that winded her, Hermione didn’t know.

Draco was breathing hard, his eyes guarded, posture drawn. “I’m sorry. It’s-” He stopped to wet his lips, staring hard at the small vial in his hand. “I had to show you.”

Hermione was desperate to say something, but her words tangled together at the base of her tongue, jostling for space between her lips.

“How long did you-?” she whispered.

His face was determinedly blank. “It doesn’t matter. You needed to know, before you see more memories, but I-”

“Please, Draco.”

And maybe she should have known immediately, just from the way that her words seemed to draw the truth inexorably from his lungs.

“I never stopped,” he breathed.

She dug her fingertips into the softness of the sofa, needing an anchor for the vulnerable confession that rose so high and vast in the space between them that she was overwhelmed.

She swallowed, desperate to know and yet terrified of what it might mean. “Even now?”

His reply was instant, and he whispered it, like it was the last secret left at the bottom of a basin, no longer possible to conceal. “Even now.” His breath shuddered. “And ever since that night, I’ve always wondered if maybe-”

“Draco-”

“-you might... feel the same.”

The eye contact was hot, blistering, igniting in her chest like an oil fire that she had no clue how to put out. She could feel herself burning closer, body heat merging with his somewhere in this limbo state of not-quite and almost there-

And yet her mind rebelled, yanking against the direction her heart so desperately wanted to follow, and it flew far away from this sofa, this room, these dangerous memories that pulled her closer and closer with shimmering arms.

A man with no memory was currently asleep in what was once *their* bed.

And if he never got better, it would forever be her fault.

She dragged her gaze from Draco’s soft lips, up to the eyes that ached with want, reflected in her own.

“I didn’t,” she said carefully. “Not back then. But now, maybe, I...” Heat prickled at the back of her neck and she grasped desperately for the mug of tea on the table, long-forgotten and stone cold.

The truth lay at the end of a tightrope, and even with arms outstretched, Hermione was scared to death of falling.

“I can’t say it,” she whispered. “It’ll make it... real. And I swore – I promised myself that I’d look after Ron first, that I’d make sure he was better before I, before we...”

She could see every detail of his face, every fleck of colour in his irises, every individual hair in his eyebrows. He was so close. And when his lips parted, eyes studying her face like a prophecy, she scrambled to say something before he could open his mouth and say something to make her defences crumble.

“There are so many things I want,” she breathed, her voice trembling. “But I can’t. Ron needs me.”

The silence was no longer taut, no longer ready to snap from the tension. But the vacuum in its place was almost worse, somehow, lifeless and vacant.

“But you...” Her fingers danced mid-air, a mere impulse away from taking his hand in her own. “You *have* to know how much I wish...”

He travelled the rest of the distance, threaded their fingers together like they were always supposed to fit. And she could have sobbed at the intimacy of it.

“I wish I could,” she whispered.

Silence.

It was as close to a confession as she could possibly bear.

There was nothing more to be said, not now. But it was with the utmost gentleness that Draco lifted a hand and brushed a wayward lock of hair out of her eyes. And when her breath seized in her throat and she stared wordlessly, he simply nodded once; breathing in his acceptance of this newfound intimacy that could only serve to drive them apart.

“I understand,” he said quietly.

The shard of longing that pierced her was almost incapacitating. If she had been standing, her knees would have buckled.

But as it was, her fingers fluttered between his knuckles, and her breath escaped her lungs in a sigh.

She couldn't say it. But he knew, would always know, exactly how she felt.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay - for some sad reason I completely lost my writing mojo for several weeks and just couldn't get any further!

But I'm back now, and I'm SO very excited for the next few chapters! I hope you are too!

Face

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday to Tracey Canttouchthis! <3 You're such a hilarious and brilliant person to know, and I can't thank you enough for your wonderful support on this story! This chapter is dedicated to you, you masochistic angst lover~ xoxoxo

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

She was dizzy and unfocused when she stepped out of her fireplace and into the living room that had once been full of laughing people, now empty and bathed in shadows. Her head was spinning, and she had to cling to the mantelpiece for a second while she regained her breath, unsure if there was any possible way to set the axis of her world back to rights.

The desire to do just that had made her catch Draco's eye before she ducked into the Floo. "Harry and Ginny are coming over for dinner on Saturday," she had told him. "You should come along."

And Draco had nodded as his living room faded into emerald flame.

She regretted it immediately.

Her evenings with the Potters had first begun shortly after the accident, originally a way to socialise without having to leave Ron alone in the house. Harry and Ginny would arrive at her fireplace armed with enough food for triple their number, before starting to put a meal together while Ron looked on. She knew it was a way for them to take care of him, in the little, quiet way that his recovery plan allowed.

But there was something about having the four of them all together that dredged up old memories. And she didn't know how Draco's presence might affect it.

Ron was mercifully still asleep in the master bedroom when she made it upstairs, and she waved her wand to disable the surveillance charm she had left in the corner. She had promised herself that she would head straight to bed, but in the end couldn't resist slipping into the room, kneeling at his bedside, and touching a hand to his forehead as if it could steady her frantic heartbeat.

He stirred softly, letting out a quiet, sleepy noise that oozed with comfort, and she smiled. Silver light filtered in from a gap in the curtains, and it illuminated his freckles like a constellation.

"You're going to get better," she whispered. "I promise."

His eyelids fluttered, and Hermione found herself wondering if there was a part of him, somewhere deep down, that could still hold onto those words.

When she awoke, she was curled up on the floor of the master bedroom, and Ron was crouched at her side, playing idly with her hair.

“Oh, morning, love,” she said, voice croaky with sleep, and he jerked upright.

“Princess,” he said kindly. “Breakfast time.”

She pulled herself unsteadily to a seated position. “You’re right. Breakfast time,” she agreed, and smiled as his face lit up.

“With lumpy gravy?”

“No, but there will be something better,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “Jam and toast?”

“Jam and toast!” he beamed, and got to his feet.

“Wait – Ron-”

“Jam and toast!” he insisted, turning to stare at her as if she was barmy, and it was so like one of the old expressions he used to pull that she couldn’t help but smile.

“Fine.” She shook her head. “Naked jam and toast it is.”

His excitability continued for the rest of the morning, resulting in a chirpy ongoing narration of his breakfast and, when she wasn’t looking, the birth of an incredibly absorbing game that consisted of flicking as many toast crumbs off the table as he could until he was caught. Daring to brave the TV again, she flicked a button, and breathed a sigh of relief as Ron stared up at the screen, transfixed, allowing her five minutes to perform a surreptitious cleaning spell and set the kitchen back to rights.

Getting him dressed was something of a different matter, especially when he became spellbound by the swirl of the leaves outside the window and adopted a stance similar to a shop mannequin, making it almost impossible to dress him without magic.

But she wasn’t prepared to deal with the outburst that would inevitably follow such a spell, so she resorted to the physical labour of lifting his limbs up and down to get him into his robes, and ended up puffing and panting by the time she managed to get him out of the door.

Apparition always unnerved him, but as usual, a squeeze of his hand and a carefully timed distraction technique was enough to make the journey smooth enough to manage. The entryway to St Mungo’s was a familiar haven, one in which she could predict the rough schedule of the next several hours, and she allowed herself to exhale fully as they wandered in through the reception.

She didn't know if it was the removal of all the unknowns about her and Draco's relationship. Or the knowledge that Ron had had a sound night, and would likely behave well for the Healers at the Janus Thickey ward. But it felt like it was going to be a good day.

"Morning!" greeted Parvati, catching hold of Hermione's waist as she passed her consulting room.

"You look bright-eyed," Hermione grinned, turning to her. "What's the case prediction today?"

"Shush, you can't rush Divination," Parvati snorted. "But I did see a bunch of swords and a spider in my tea leaves this morning, so that says it all, really."

"Naturally," Hermione bluffed, and laughed as Parvati elbowed her.

They continued down the corridor while Hermione swiped a clipboard from the side and began scanning her consultation list for the day. As she watched, elegant writing appeared on the parchment before her, informing her that a certain Mr Gawain Robards from the DMLE would be coming in following an incident at work.

Consulting in the walk-in department on the ground floor meant that she saw more than her fair share of familiar faces – and a disproportionate number of these faces tended to be related to the Auror Office.

Most of the members of the DMLE were patients she enjoyed working with; they never made too much of a fuss and were keen to hear her professional judgement before going on their way – but Gawain Robards was the Head of the Auror Office, which meant that appearance of his name on her list kindled a rather different feeling in her chest.

After all, he'd been the one to break the news about Ron.

Her face fell.

Gawain Robards was not a particularly tall man, but what he lacked in stature, he made up for with a permanently grave expression and a set of dark eyes that made every glance feel like a cross-examination. Although his thinning hair sat just at the turn of grey, and the lines around his eyes had increased in number since the last time they'd met, he looked every bit the imposing authority Hermione knew him to be.

"Morning, Mr Robards. Would you like to take a seat?"

The Head Auror gave a formal nod and gathered his robes about his person as he sat stiffly, stretching one leg out at an angle that immediately drew her eye.

"What brings you here today?" she asked, her voice unexpectedly tight.

He folded his arms. His face was unreadable. "A small clumsy injury, I'm afraid. A team of us went out with some curse-breakers yesterday to investigate an old location of interest – part of an investigation for the DMLE, so quite confidential, you understand."

She nodded.

“It’s an unpredictable site,” he continued. “There was an explosion a couple of years back, and the small amount of remaining infrastructure collapsed almost as soon as we got there. I healed the mild puncture wound in my leg, but I think there must be some debris still inside.”

“Has it been painful?”

“Yes. It’s a sort of dull ache, just here-” He pointed to his calf.

“Alright,” she said, reaching for a pair of gloves. “And have you been self-medicating at all?”

He nodded. “I’ve been shooting numbing spells at it, but it’s still giving me gyp today.”

“Okay.” She pulled on the gloves and stood up. “Can I ask you to lie down on the bench here, perhaps on your left side? I’m going to have a little look.”

The Head Auror did as she asked, shifting his robes to allow her access to the injury.

She could see immediately what he meant, a dark epicentre of bruising ringed by newly granular tissue – an inexperienced but effective wound-closing charm. “I’m going to apply some gentle pressure,” she said, before putting her thumbs against his skin and listening as he let out a grunt of pain.

A wave of her wand confirmed his suspicions – there was a small foreign body lodged in the belly of his gastrocnemius muscle. She made a small, satisfied noise.

“Alright, Mr Robards,” she said. “You were right - there looks to be some debris still trapped in the site. As the wound has closed over the top, an abscess is likely to form. I’d like to remove the material and clean the wound as soon as possible to avoid that outcome. It would only take ten minutes to perform now, if you wish, or the front desk can book you in for a better time? You’ll need to rest it for twenty-four hours afterwards.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Now is fine. Best to be getting on with it.”

She smiled. “Great. Would you please lie on your front for me? Okay perfect, I’ll get started. I’ll be numbing the area first, but if you feel any discomfort, please let me know.”

She soon set to work, preparing the site and working through the spells that she knew so intimately she could have performed them in her sleep.

“How is Mr Weasley?” he asked, just as she had located the source of the problem and pointed her wand directly at it. She swallowed, summoning the foreign body free and trying to vanish every last speck of the contamination it left behind.

“He’s... much the same,” she said quietly. While she waited for her sterilising charm to work, she collected up her bandaging materials, using the noise from her equipment drawers to mask her nervousness. “I hear you’re, er... opening up his case, again.”

He made an affirmatory noise into the pillow. "I'm glad Mr Potter told you. I became concerned that the investigation was not performed as thoroughly as it should have been the first time around, what with the panic about discovering such an active stronghold. We want to make sure that no potential threats or sources of misinformation lurk within the DMLE."

There was silence as Hermione waved her wand and watched the muscle tissue of his calf begin to knit back together. "Do you have reason to believe that there are?" she asked quietly.

He seemed to turn the question over in his head for a moment, and she was already on her second layer of the bandage before he replied. "I am a very different Auror to some of the younger members of the team, Miss Granger," he said. "And I am not so quick to let go of the past. People do not change as much as they would have you believe."

She completed the rest of her bandage work in silence, trying to grasp between the lines for further meaning.

"Apologies," he said. "At this stage, the investigation is strictly confidential."

"I understand." She sealed the end of the bandage and stepped away from the bench, pulling off her gloves. "You're all done. Please rest it for twenty-four hours. You should be able to remove the dressing yourself after that time, but if there is any discharge, heat, redness or swelling, please call back in and we'll take a further look."

He was already getting to his feet and tugging his uniform back to rights when she remembered herself.

"Oh - and here's what was stuck, by the way," she added. She held up the small chip of wood that she had removed from his leg, safely held inside a glass vial. "It would have caused a much nastier problem if we hadn't gotten rid of it."

He took a closer look, the corner of his mouth tilting upwards slightly. "Funny how these horrid things can go unnoticed until they cause a problem," he said. "Thank you, Miss Granger."

And then he was gone.

Hermione would have liked to spend more time puzzling over Robards' strange words, but life got too busy again almost immediately.

Ron's temporary enthusiasm for life waned as the week went by, until he became borderline catatonic each morning, requiring an exorbitant amount of energy to rouse him. It was as if it was getting harder and harder to get him to the Janus Thickey ward each day, but she knew it must just be the cumulative effect of her decreased hours of sleep.

By the time Saturday came around, it was all Hermione could do to prise herself out of bed and settle down to a morning buried in as many memory-related textbooks as she could find before Ron woke up. Most of what she was doing these days consisted of rereading things

she'd looked at a million times before, but she was sure that if she got it clear enough in her head, then one day, something might just click.

Unfortunately, there was no such click to be found that morning. Ron awoke with a shout not long after she'd sat down, but when she rushed upstairs, the door crashed open just a little too loudly and his disorientation swiftly morphed into panic. Shoving her away when she attempted to console him, Hermione went stumbling into a bookshelf, and a toppled tome just sent things from bad to worse.

By the time she had finally managed to settle him, it was almost midday, and she came downstairs exhausted, nursing the rapidly-forming ring of bruises around her wrist from where he'd grabbed her in the midst of his distress.

On the table lay an open notebook, covered in minute scribbles. She had been starting to put together a list of Ron's characteristics that she felt were important in the run-up to the accident, in the hopes that they might somehow be helpful for a personalised memory recovery program.

And now she stopped, staring down at the pieces of the boy she used to love.

Headstrong

Need to prove himself

Pride in career

Competitive

Dismissive of rules and procedure

Determined

Auror work often takes priority over personal life

All things that, in truth, she had been vaguely aware of before. But with the addition of Draco's memories, they were all much louder and clearer in her head. And she couldn't help feeling that together, they made up the perfect storm to turn an ordinary day at work into a disaster.

Her mind flew to shattered glass, shattered porcelain.

And she bit her lip and picked up her pen to add-

Becomes reckless when emotional.

Her own guilt was staring her straight in the face.

She had almost forgotten about dinner until one heavily pregnant Mrs Potter ducked her way through Hermione's fireplace and spooked Ron so badly that he knocked three mugs off the

coffee table.

Harry followed soon after, and it was thanks to his firm grip on Ron's shoulders that the three of them managed to coax him into a seat again, muttering nervously under his breath. Knowing what needed to be done, Ginny piled herself onto the sofa, grabbed the household set of Wizard's Chess, and set about conducting an elaborate battle between the pieces while she kept up a bubbly commentary, which thankfully held Ron in rapt attention.

Harry and Hermione made their way to the kitchen to unload the groceries, and an overwhelming surge of gratitude began to settle over her as he helped wash and chop the vegetables. The overwhelming exhaustion of the week had well and truly set in, and she was sure that Harry could see it on her face, because somehow he was setting the kettle to boil and finding crockery to lay the table before it had even occurred to her to ask.

For the first time that week, she had space to think.

As she gazed around the kitchen, wondering what she could do to help, her eyes fell on Ron's old radio, way up on the shelf.

Checking to make sure that Ron wasn't peering into the kitchen, she pulled her wand out and carefully summoned the item down from its home. After spelling away the dust and fiddling with the dials a few times, she managed to track down the ever-popular Wizarding Wireless, and turned it up.

Harry looked round in surprise, his face falling into a smile. "I've not seen that thing in years," he said fondly, before his expression faltered, and Hermione knew instantly that he was thinking of their time on the run all those years ago. Ever the mind-reader, his arms were around her before she'd even realised she needed comforting too, and it wasn't until Ginny called his name from the next room that he let her go.

"You go. I've got this," Hermione said, swallowing hard as she replaced him at the hob. And he squeezed her hand one last time before heading back through the door to his wife.

But only a moment later, she heard Ginny's voice again. "Hermione, you should come too," she said, sounding almost out of breath. And Hermione dropped her spoon and rushed in to find-

Ron with a gentle hand on Ginny's belly, gazing wonderingly at the small movements from underneath.

Tears welled up immediately at her eyelids. Harry looked about the same as she felt, carefully holding Ginny in his arms as his best friend stroked the bump of his unborn niece or nephew.

Hermione wished, more than anything, that she could take a photograph.

Even though it was clear he didn't quite understand the significance of the tiny movements beneath his palm, it was the closest Ron had appeared to his old self in months.

Dinner was coming along well, the soft murmurs of Harry and Ginny from next door filling Hermione's ears as pleasantly as the radio music. And Hermione was beginning to wonder when she had last felt quite so peaceful until she heard a familiar voice that startled her into reality.

"She's in there-" Harry said warmly, and then there were footsteps approaching, and it was all Hermione could do to stay upright.

"Hi," said Draco, and she turned slowly to find him watching her from the doorway, wearing a tentative smile that spoke *volumes*.

Oh.

Oh.

Her heartbeat was so loud she could hear it.

They stood facing one another, two people with a shared secret.

"Hey," she said. And then he was striding towards her, and their arms sought one another unavoidably. He folded her into a hug, and when his lips brushed her cheek – their familiar greeting – she felt the tension prick like goosebumps along her skin.

She had thought that being honest with one another would make things easier.

But no.

She cared for him, and he cared for her, and the only thing in their way was the boy in the next room.

She wanted Draco to take hold of her and never, ever let go.

"Thanks so much for inviting me tonight," said Draco, twirling pasta around on his fork. "This is delicious."

Hermione turned from where she had been helping Ron guide a Bolognese-sauce-laden spoon into his mouth. "I can take very little credit," she grinned. "Harry's the mastermind."

"I'm a genius, I know," Harry laughed. "It's good to have you here, mate."

Ginny patted Draco's hand, beaming. "We don't hang out enough anymore. I was so pleased when Hermione said she'd invited you."

"I imagine we'll be hanging out even less in a few weeks' time," Draco pointed out, with a grin at Ginny's bulging maternity dress. "You look about ready to pop."

"I feel it," groaned Ginny. "I've had more than enough of being pregnant now."

“It looks well on you, though,” Hermione said kindly. “Fleur was telling me horror stories about Victoire.”

“Don’t remind me,” said Ginny darkly. “I’m just hoping I take after my mother – and don’t you dare make a comment, Malfoy.”

Draco grinned at her, no malice in his eyes. “You’re no fun.”

Hermione swiped the last of her garlic bread around her bowl. “I had an interesting patient this week,” she said, catching everyone’s attention. “Gawain Robards came in for a leg injury.”

Harry and Draco exchanged a look. “Was there something in it after all?” Draco asked mildly, and Hermione nodded, taking a sip of wine.

“Nothing huge,” she said. “But big enough to see why he was struggling.” She paused a moment, thinking over the cryptic conversation from earlier that week. “I don’t suppose... well, what do you two think of him?”

Harry blinked. “I mean, he’s a great Auror.”

Draco nodded, chewing determinedly on a mouthful of food Hermione hadn’t seen him take.

“He’s just...” Harry winced. “I don’t know, we don’t always see eye to eye-”

“He’s an old fart,” said Ginny loudly, and the boys pulled matching expressions of begrudging agreement. “And he’s got the stuck-in-his-ways mindset to prove it.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

And Draco sighed, putting his cutlery down. “I’m his least favourite person in the department,” he muttered. “He hasn’t forgiven my family for – well. You know. Whenever there’s a problem, he always seems much happier to link it to me.”

“But that’s-”

“Grossly unfair? Extraordinarily biased? Yeah,” said Ginny. “It infuriates me, and I don’t even work there.”

“So...” said Hermione, trying to put things together. “What does that mean for Ron’s investigation?”

The room went quiet except for Ron, who was babbling something about dragons from the end of the table.

“I didn’t think you wanted to talk about that,” said Harry tentatively.

“I still want to know what’s happening,” she protested.

And there it was again. That look between Harry and Draco. What weren’t they telling her?

“It means,” said Draco slowly, “that Robards thinks I have something to do with it. The accident.”

Her chest seized. And she could only gasp out, “But that’s impossible? Why would he-”

“He believes there’s a reason Ron went into the stronghold without following the proper protocol. We all know that he was in a terrible mood that day,” Harry explained. “But Robards thinks that it was somebody’s fault.”

“And I’m prime candidate,” added Draco flatly, staring down into his bowl.

And guilt, violent and sickening, burst into Hermione stomach.

Robards knew that someone had caused the accident.

But he suspected the wrong person.

“I’m just going to put the kettle on,” she gasped. “Two seconds-”

She rushed into the kitchen and stood over the sink, heaving dryly for several moments before giving up and sliding to the floor, lips cold and stomach writhing. On the side, the radio had lost signal, and was crackling with white noise.

Oh, God.

It was her fault. It was her fault.

Her breath juddered through her body.

What was it Draco had said last week?

She had to take more care of herself.

Draco’s face. His arms. His hands, wrapped around a mug.

Tea. She could do that. She staggered upright and flicked the kettle on before scrabbling around in the back of the cupboard for her old favourite tea leaves, accidentally knocking several other boxes onto the floor as she did. She ignored them.

Her throat was tight, a sandpaper trap threatening to squeeze closer with every moment that passed.

She spooned an overlarge number of leaves into an old strainer she hadn’t used in months, her hands shaking too much for precision.

The radio crackled again, and her stomach lurched.

Hot water. Pour.

The fridge door was too heavy, and when she finally got it open, she almost dropped the milk bottle in her panic.

Breathe.

A spoon clattered into the mug, knocked the strainer onto the side, and she picked it back up again. Lifted the milk, got ready to pour.

Another loud crackle.

And this time, it was blistering fury that filled her lungs.

Milk splashed across the countertop, tea leaves went spiralling across the floor, and with white-hot rage in her throat, Hermione whirled round and shoved the old radio off the table and onto the floor, where it smashed to pieces with a sound like the world was ending. And it was this almighty crash that finally shook the sobs free from her throat, and Hermione curled over the tiles at last with tears streaming down her face.

“Hey, are you – oh, Hermione!” The door was flung open and Ginny rushed to her side as fast as she was able, throwing her arms around her and squeezing tight. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Hermione couldn’t control the heaving of her chest, the gasping of her breath.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she kept saying pitifully, and soon Harry and Draco were running into the kitchen with horrified concern on their faces.

“It’s okay,” Ginny urged, but Hermione could only shake her head.

“No,” she wept, “no it’s not okay-!”

“I know it’s awful,” Ginny soothed, “but there’s no reason for them to implicate Draco, it’s fine, you’ll see-”

“It’s my fault!” Hermione screeched.

The room went deathly silent, punctuated only by her own frantic breaths, the tears catching at her lungs.

She tucked her face into her hands, curled in on herself. “It’s all my fault,” she said, quieter, guiltier. “We had a fight. A huge one. The morning of the accident. He was distracted, I should have stopped him going into work-”

Ginny’s face was white. “Hermione - you didn’t – this wasn’t you. You couldn’t have-”

“You don’t know that,” Hermione whispered brokenly, knowing that she was laying her head on the chopping block, readying her own palms on the cross. The quiet was as heavy as lead on her tongue, but the look in Draco’s eyes was deafening. “I was so cruel. I lost my temper and told him we shouldn’t *be* together,” she whispered. “*It’s my fault.*”

The blade fell.

Chapter End Notes

I have this whole story plotted out, and do plan on finishing it eventually, but for now it is on hiatus. I hope to return to it this summer.

Lungs

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione was ready for them all to desert her. Ready for them to see her as she truly was: someone who had been hiding a life-altering secret, someone at the root of the tragedy that had coloured their lives all this time.

She was ready for it all.

And so when Harry dropped to his knees and placed a hand on her forearm, her sobs were startled into silence.

“No,” he said calmly.

She stared at him.

“No,” he repeated. “It’s not your fault. Don’t you *dare* think that.”

The silence was filled with static.

In the corner, Ginny was watching her with the same understanding expression. “It’s alright,” she said quietly. “We don’t blame you for what happened.”

“But I-” Hermione turned to Draco. “I just don’t see how you...” A frustrated breath slipped from her throat. “Don’t you *understand*?”

His grey eyes burned with sympathy. “You think you caused the accident.”

“But we – it’s...” She clutched for the words that swam further away with every heartbeat. “You *don’t* understand.”

Ginny frowned. “Can you tell us more?”

“I *know* it’s my fault,” she said weakly. “If I hadn’t said anything that morning, if I had been more patient, if I hadn’t pushed him so far... this would never have happened. Surely you must blame me for-”

“Hermione,” Draco said gently, and she closed her mouth. “I know you might not believe us, but none of this is your fault. Not a thing.”

She stared, unblinking.

“I had an argument with Ron that morning too,” he continued, jaw tight. “But I didn’t make Ron walk into that safe house without checking for traps. And neither did you.”

Harry swallowed heavily. “It’s no one’s fault. Especially not yours, Hermione.”

The silence buzzed in her ears. And Ginny leaned forwards again, tightening her embrace, thumbs rubbing tiny circles into her shoulders.

“You can’t keep punishing yourself for something you had no control over,” she whispered.

Hermione’s lip trembled. “How do I *stop*?” she whispered.

The house was quiet. And despite Ginny’s embrace and Harry’s warm hand still on her arm, the only person she saw was Draco.

“You trust us,” he said simply.

There came a loud crashing noise from the next room and Ginny broke away.

“Ron,” Hermione said weakly, as a moan of distress punctured the air. “He needs me. I’ll help-”

“No,” Harry interrupted. “You stay here. We’ll settle him. Draco – are you alright here while we go?”

A nod from Draco and they left the room, Ron’s voice cutting off abruptly at the sight of them.

It was a fragile quiet that descended.

Draco slowly got to his knees beside her, vanishing the mess on the floor with a quick wave of his wand. “Hey,” he said softly, folding her carefully into his arms.

Hermione’s lip trembled.

“You’ve been carrying this with you the whole time, haven’t you?” he whispered.

And she couldn’t help it. The tears began again.

Harry and Ginny had long since taken Ron upstairs, but Draco had stayed right there by her side. And with time, his unwavering presence had slowly eased Hermione’s sobs into hiccups, and eventually into a wide-eyed, vulnerable silence that roared in her ears like static.

“I’m sorry,” she started, wiping at her eyelashes.

“You don’t need to apologise.”

“But your shirt...” she said uselessly, pointing to the tear-stained cotton, and he shrugged without looking at it.

“It’s fine,” he said. “You’re more important.”

Something struck raw and vulnerable in her chest, and she rubbed at the damp of her eyelashes. The air around them was laden with quiet, as dewy and fresh as a new morning. Draco touched her cheek gently and she gave him a tentative smile.

“Hey.”

The creak of the kitchen door made Hermione lean back, and she turned to find Harry regarding them at the threshold with a careful expression. He cleared his throat, gaze flicking away.

“Ginny’s reading to Ron now,” he said. “We were thinking ... perhaps it’s a good idea to take him to the ward overnight?”

The urge to protest rose briefly in Hermione’s stomach, but fell back with one look at Draco. “Alright,” she said unsteadily.

Harry’s brows rose minutely, but then he smiled. “Gin?” he called. “She said yes.”

Ginny’s response rang down the stairs as Hermione got to her feet and took a step away from Draco. The oxygen felt so much thinner in her lungs without him.

“Come here,” said Harry, opening his arms and hugging her tight to his chest. “God, I’m sorry. I wish you’d told us sooner. If we’d known-”

“I-” The word slipped out, unwieldy, before she was ready. “It’s alright. Thank you, Harry.”

He didn’t reply, but his eyes were soft.

As he let go, Ginny appeared in the doorway, her hair escaping madly from her braid. “We’ll take Ron to the hospital,” she said. “And when we get back, we can talk about this. Properly.”

Hermione’s heart swelled. “Thank you,” she said. “Really. But it’s... It’s getting late. I think I might just want to go to bed-”

Protest fired in Ginny’s eyes. “No, I don’t want you still thinking it’s your fault-”

“It’s okay,” Hermione said. “Really.” Her gaze flitted to Draco for a moment, but the look in his eyes stole her breath. She swallowed, suddenly dizzy. “I... I know you don’t blame me. And I think that’s enough, for tonight. Thank you. Can we... talk about it another time?”

She could see that Ginny and Harry wanted desperately to argue, but after meeting one another’s eyes, a silent conversation passing between them, they seemed to decide against it.

Ginny stepped forward and squeezed her into a hug so tight that she could barely breathe. “I love you,” she said fiercely. “And nothing you do is ever going to change that.”

Even after letting go, Hermione’s lungs felt small in her chest.

“Take care of her,” Harry told Draco quietly, as he ushered Ron carefully out of the door. “We’ll see you soon.”

“Thank you,” Hermione whispered again. And as she watched them leave, it was all she could do to fold her arms across her chest and wondering how she could have been so lucky to have people like Harry and Ginny in her life.

People like Draco.

The door closed softly behind them and she paused, her heartbeat suddenly loud behind her ribs.

They were alone.

She and Draco. Him and her. A silence that roared with possibility.

She didn't know who moved first, but her back bumped against Draco's chest.

And his voice was warm in her ear when he asked, “Are you going to be alright?”

Yes. No. Only if you hold me.

It was the most natural thing in the world to turn and step into his arms. She had been seeking comfort, warmth, reassurance, but her skin sparked effervescently at the contact, as if her body had discovered something else entirely in his embrace.

Her temple brushed his chin as she stared up at him. A soft frown stretched across his forehead and when his fingers fluttered against the small of her back, the urge to stretch up onto tiptoes and find his lips was almost overwhelming.

It would be that simple.

And yet she hesitated.

He tucked a small spray of hair behind her ear, pausing a moment longer than necessary. “Should I leave?” he asked gently, and she stared up at him, studying the unattainable bow of his lips.

“I don't want you to go,” she admitted. “But I'm exhausted, and I-” She tore her gaze away from his mouth, pulse shivering through her veins, voice dropping to a whisper. “*I really* want to kiss you.”

He swallowed hard, a silent confession escaping in the stuttered movement of his throat. “Is that a reason to go?” he asked slowly. “Or a reason to stay?”

The tension buzzed at her skin.

“I don't know.”

She was looking at him again, and now it was as if she couldn't stop looking. The cautious arch of his brows, the flecked grey of his wide eyes, the softness of his cheek and the line of his jaw, the way his lips parted with a sound that made her heart race.

She wanted him.

But the reality was that she was tired, and lonely, and scared. And if she kissed him now, it would be because of those feelings, and not because of the exhilarating ones that usually bubbled at her lips whenever they stood this close.

And so she exhaled and leaned away, breaking the spell.

“I’m sorry. I really don’t want you to go,” she said again. “But I think it’s best. For now.”

Draco nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“Thank you,” she said firmly, hoping desperately that he would understand how much she owed him. “For everything.”

“I’m glad you told us,” he replied. And he took a breath, tilting his head slightly. “You don’t have to do this alone anymore.”

Their goodbye ended with a brush of his lips at her forehead and the corner of her mouth at his neck until they pulled back, staring hard, the longing thrumming through every fibre of Hermione’s body.

“Goodnight, Draco,” she said, opening the door and watching him head out onto the road.

“Goodnight,” he replied. His hands sank into his pockets, eyes kind, hair gleaming in the streetlights.

“I really...” The words bubbled up before she could stop them, fizzing at her tongue. “You know,” she said quietly.

The line of his mouth quirked in affectionate response. “Me too,” he said softly.

His smile kept her warm long after he Disapparated.

Up in her bed, heart racing, the world felt wider around her than ever before; as if the pressures that she’d grown used to being suffocated by had finally eased. The oxygen in her lungs was almost overwhelming.

Her closest friends now knew the truth that had destroyed her for the last two years. And instead of turning away, they had only held on tighter. *They didn’t blame her.*

And Draco...

God.

She rolled like a cat, arching her back and stretching her limbs against the cooler side of the mattress, somehow the most luxurious thing she had ever felt.

If her friends could forgive her, perhaps one day she could too.

The next few days passed easily, her mind surprisingly quiet as the events of the dinner party began to sink in. It was as if the usual background roar of her thoughts had lessened to a gentle hum, allowing her to float through her day in relative peace.

And perhaps it was that newfound tranquillity that made Draco the main focus of her thoughts. Her mind kept turning to him again and again – not with worry and fear – but with a comforting fondness that oozed through her veins like honey.

Getting Ron ready in the mornings was still frustrating, and her heart still ached when she picked him up from St Mungo's each night, but there was a lightness to it now, a cheering reminder that she was no longer alone. Ginny and Harry sent letters filled with the kind of unconditional support Hermione had never imagined she could deserve, and even though she didn't hear from Draco for a few days, she could still feel his comfort like a talisman in her chest.

She wrote to Healer Meijer again, informing him of the progress she had made with the memories, hoping that he might spare some guidance on how she could apply them to Ron's treatment plan. The Healer's response came far quicker than she expected, and as she unfurled the letter and scanned the contents, it was to find that he had invited her to a private Fire-Call to discuss Ron's case.

It was more than Hermione could possibly have hoped for. She broke two quill nibs in her eagerness to respond.

"Healer Meijer!" she said, as soon as his face appeared in the fireplace. "Good evening!"

Godewyn Meijer was an older man of about sixty, with a smooth bald head, a white mustache, and the kind of lines around his eyes that spoke of a life lived through laughter. Hermione liked him at once.

"Healer Granger," he smiled, a soft accent rounding his vowels. "How are you?"

She came to crouch beside the fireplace, settling atop a cushion and crossing her legs. "Very well," she answered, realising with a pleasant jolt that it didn't feel like a lie. She smiled at him, her heart swelling. "Please, call me Hermione. Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me."

His eyes crinkled. "You are most welcome. I am most sorry that I do not have the availability to attend your Mr Weasley myself – I hope tonight will allow that you may begin some interventions?"

"I hope so too," she agreed, tugging at her blouse sleeves. "So far we've been using calming potions, speech and communication therapy, and otherwise generally trying to keep his life similar to the way it was before his accident. But there haven't been any significant improvements since the first month."

"Mm," said Healer Meijer. "You are his primary carer?"

“Yes. I – we – were in a relationship before the accident. He goes to St Mungo’s while I’m at work, and I take care of him the rest of the time.”

Healer Meijer nodded. “I see. And the full-time hospital care is not an option?”

She bit her lip, a million prior arguments swimming through her mind. “No.”

There was something in the old Healer’s eyes that suggested he understood all too well. “Hermione,” he began. “I will start with a warning. The likelihood of cure is very low. Sometimes we see the good signs at first, but they do not improve, and sometimes they... retreat. Get worse. I do not wish to give false hope.”

Hermione nodded.

“But... you have some *Hersenpan*, *Pensieve* memories, yes? These are good – it is most rare for people to preserve ordinary days. Have you seen these memories?”

“Yes.” She felt her cheeks heat as visions of late nights by Draco’s side flitted through her mind. “There’s a few more still to come I think, but I’ve seen some from his workplace, from a few social events... Um, Healer Meijer? Some of them are from more... emotional occasions. Is that okay?”

The Healer thought for a moment. “They are not likely to cause harm,” he said. “But I would not use this to start.” He cleared his throat, a few of the fire’s embers sputtering into the air in response. “The basis of my therapy is to introduce patients to earlier memories, small pieces of life – like a puzzle, yes? Large parts of the puzzle are made of these normal, boring days. Only a few pieces are danger, excitement, fear. By starting with the boring, we fill the puzzle quicker, you see?” He grinned at her.

“That makes sense,” she agreed. A warmth bloomed in her chest, a vulnerable spark of hope that had so long remained cold. “So... how do I use those memories?”

“By showing them to him,” he said immediately. “As you yourself have viewed them. Only not... direct. We are still experimenting, you understand. You can talk through the memories, walk the patient through the scenarios and remind them of their thoughts and feelings in the moment. Recently I have had success with the audio, allowing the patient to listen. Other times we have showed the *Pensieve* memories during dreams – it is less... confrontational, you see?”

It occurred to Hermione that some of Draco’s memories had been rather confrontational indeed, but she bit her tongue.

“Your reputation precedes you, Healer Granger,” Meijer said lightly, almost as if he could read her mind. “Undoubtedly you will have your own ideas and instincts on this particular branch of medicine. I have given you my thoughts and suggestions, but I encourage you to take them and use them in whatever way you see fit. I am confident that your Mr Weasley is in the best of hands.”

His words brushed at something velvety and vulnerable beneath her skin, and as the conversation drew to a close and she thanked him for his time, it became increasingly difficult not to let her emotions overcome her.

Ron was going to be okay.

She could heal him.

After two long years, it was all going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Only a short chapter this time, but the next one is 70% written so it won't be long <3
I'm so sorry this story has been on hiatus for so long, thank you to everyone who has waited for me! I love and appreciate every single comment, kudos, and subscription xxx

End Notes

Updates are currently irregular but aiming for one every month or so.

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Between chapters, you can find me (Charli Petidei/charlipetidei) on facebook, instagram, or tumblr <3

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