

The Aftermath

Von viv-heart

It's a wonderful summer morning when Hermione's worst fear comes true. She is standing in the middle of Diagon Alley and her hands start shaking, the books she has just purchased dropping to the ground.

Tears gather in her eyes at the thought of both the humiliation and the questions she'll have to deal with when her breakdowns become public. As if the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse weren't bad enough on their own.

Hermione doesn't notice the person approaching her with quick steps in her distress, nor how they pick up her books until a gentle hand appears on her back.

"Breath, Granger," Draco Malfoy whispers to her. "You need to breath. Yes, just like that. You are doing great." He continues talking to her as he guides her into an alley a few steps away, where he waits with her until the attack is over.

"Do you need anything else?" he asks and when Hermione shakes her head, he gives her a small sad smile.

"Take care, Granger."

Only after he leaves does she realize that he had shielded her from view with his body.

Since then, Hermione always looks for him whenever she leaves her home, feeling a little bit safer when she spots the distinctive blonde hair in the crowd. She knows it is foolish, but she is sure that he would help her again if she had another attack in public. What she doesn't know is why.

Luckily, the attacks are getting rarer and rarer with the progressing treatment, even though the healers have warned her repeatedly that she'll get them her remaining life, mostly when she is upset.

She does her best to stay calm avoiding an attack in public for a long time after that.

That is until the evening of the third Anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts and Hermione's first time going there without Ron. They broke up two months prior and she hasn't seen him since.

It would be an understatement to say she is scared, so it isn't that much of a surprise that come midnight, she is crouching in a hallway away from the main celebration, shaking heavily.

She doesn't have to look up to know who has found her when a coat is wrapped around her shaking form.

"Warmth is supposed to help," Draco says flatly. "Can I cast a few warming charms?"

Hermione nods and feels the warmth of the spells wrap around her instantly.

Draco sits down next to her and waits.

"Why?" The question slips out before she can stop herself as soon as she has calmed

down enough to be able to speak.

Draco is about to answer when a flash enlightens the dark corridor. He is on his feet before she can even blink, shouting 'Expelliarmus' and a camera lands in his waiting hand.

He pulls out the film quickly and throws the camera back to the stunned reporter, who is at the verge of crying when he catches the camera, realizing that his evening's work has just disappeared.

"If you want to talk, we should go somewhere else," Draco says, offering Hermione a hand which she gladly takes.

As soon as she is standing, he puts a hand on her lower back, guiding her gently away from the reporter. Only when they are out of his earshot, does he speak again.

"Your place, my place, somewhere in muggle London?"

Hermione blinks a few times, trying to process the question. "Muggle London," she says finally and Draco nods.

"Mind if I apparate us? I am not sure you should so shortly after..."

She puts a hand on his arm in response and he takes a deep breath and soon enough Hermione feels the familiar pull in her stomach.

When she opens her eyes, which she always closes involuntarily when apparating, they are standing in an alley she doesn't recognize.

"My favourite pub is around the corner," Draco answers the question she hasn't even asked and Hermione follows numbly. She doesn't know what to expect and if she is honest with herself she doesn't even really care. She is just glad that she isn't at the celebration anymore, getting pitied by people she doesn't know or care for, for being single at her age. At her age! She is 21 and they act as if her life is over if she doesn't start popping out babies sometime soon.

She shakes her head and Draco gives her a questioning look but they are standing in front of a rather rundown looking establishment and Hermione doesn't want to elaborate.

"Let's get inside," she says instead and Draco opens the door for her.

They get a few confused stares because of their formal attire, but nobody says anything and the bartender greets Draco as if he was a regular.

Draco leads her to a vacant table in the back and asks her what she would like so he can order. When she says tea, he nods in understanding and returns with a cup of tea for her and water for himself. She doesn't know if it is because he wants to be sober for this talk or so she doesn't feel weird.

"What do you want to know?" Draco asks as he sits down on the chair opposite her.

"Why are you helping me?" Hermione has put her hands around the wonderfully warm cup, but she is looking at him, studying him.

His hair has gotten longer in the years since the war even if it isn't as long as his father's and he is eating well again. Gone are the sickly sharp angles and dark circles so prominent during the war. Only his eyes remind her of what had been and that he didn't get out unscathed either.

He runs a hand over his face, as if contemplating what to say. "What do you want to hear, Granger? The truth, a lie, something in between?"

Hermione frowns. When he had asked her to talk to him somewhere else she had expected that he would be somewhat blunt, honest. But then again, he never was the type to speak his mind freely.

"The truth."

Draco snorts, his cheeks turning a slight pink when he realizes what undignified sound

he had just made. "Should have expected that."

He falls silent for a moment, collecting himself, before he finally sets to speak, his eyes darting between his glass and Hermione, as if he was unable to look at one for too long. "Guilt. The feeling of helplessness I grew to know too well during the war and the desire to change things, now that I can act on my own."

Hermione doesn't know what to say, settling on an encouraging hum to indicate that she is listening.

It seems, Draco has waited for something like that because he continues. "I never apologized to you for what happened and what I did or didn't – not because I don't want to or you don't deserve it. I simply think you shouldn't forgive me."

"And yet you are telling me this."

Draco smiles sadly at her words and runs a hand through his hair. "Maybe I just can't bring myself to apologize to you as long as I haven't forgiven myself. I know that I hurt you more than anybody–"

"You give yourself too much credit," Hermione cuts in, her voice like steel. "Your aunt Bellatrix, Voldemort and Dumbledore, even Ron have all managed to hurt me more. Stop the self-pity. It's not what I came here to hear."

Draco laughs at that and Hermione leans back, crossing her arms over her chest.

"What do you want to hear then, Granger? That I spend thousands upon thousands of galleons on medical research? Working on potions myself? I can start if that would make you happy."

"We both know you already do."

Draco freezes at those words.

"I looked into you after you helped me the first time," she explains. "And you should know that I can find out everything I want to."

"Than what do you want to hear from me?"

Hermione looks him into the eyes, hoping to empathise just how important this is for her. "Why are you doing this? What do you hope to gain? Forgiveness? Redemption?"

Draco's hands clench into fists on the table, his knuckles turning white. It's the only sign that he is uncomfortable with the question. "I couldn't care less if people forgive me if I can't forgive myself, Granger," he spits out. "If you want to know the truth so bad, I will tell you. It's spite. It's the least I can do to defy those dead madmen – undo what they have done step by step."

Hermione giggles at the admission, the giggles turning into outright laughter soon enough and Draco stares at her, not sure how to react. He had expected a lot but definitely not laughter.

"What's so funny?" He glares at her, but Hermione doesn't seem to mind – she starts laughing even harder.

When she finally calms down, Draco seems more uncomfortable than angry.

"You gave me the answer I expected, dare to say hoped, to hear."

Draco rises an eyebrow, daring her to explain.

"Everyone around me pities me for one thing or another, the attacks, the scars or the breakup." Hermione points to her arm with a grimace but feels calmer than in ages. The laughter was just what she had needed, even though making her laugh certainly hadn't been Draco's intention. "I hoped you would be this cynical, rational. The self-pity doesn't suit you, Malfoy and it doesn't suit me."

Draco looks her up and down, assessing her, but Hermione doesn't mind.

"What do you want?" he asks finally, carefully.

"A friend."

He is startled by those words, gaping at her for an eternity while Hermione sips from her tea.

"Why would you like to be friends with me of all people?"

Hermione puts down her cup and holds up her hand to start counting. "You are smart, you are not friends with Ron, you know what happened during the war, you helped me," she gives him a pointed look, "and you need a friend too."

"Those are shitty reasons, Granger," Draco pushes his chair back.

"Stop being a coward, Malfoy." Hermione's voice is cold and clear and Draco sits back down, waiting for her to talk.

"I don't care if you can forgive yourself or not and about all the things you do. I never thought it was your fault and you should try to understand it too. But if spite really is your main motivation, why not spite them the worst way possible and be friends with their most hated muggleborn?"

Draco sighs and runs a hand over his face. "You are serious about this, aren't you?"

"Deadly."

He sighs again and stands up. "I'll get us shots and you will explain why exactly you need a friend so bad. Enough time should have passed for you to be able to drink alcohol without triggering another, right?"

At Hermione's nod he makes his way to the counter, returning shortly after with a tray full of shots.

Each of them takes one and Hermione grins at him. "To friendship."

"To stupid ideas." Draco doesn't look too happy but downs his shot and Hermione sees herself prompted to speak.

"All my friends are either related to Ron or friends with him too – Harry is both thanks to his engagement to Ginny. I just need someone who isn't. You hate him, which makes you the best choice." She reaches for the next shot even before she finishes talking and Draco does the same.

"I hated you too."

Hermione smirks and puts down her empty glass. "Hated. You said it yourself, which means you don't anymore."

Draco groans and downs a third shot.

Five shots and several confessions later, Hermione is sure he changed his mind about this being a stupid idea when he kisses her. She is surprised but kisses him back without thinking.

She certainly wasn't hoping for this, but then again, who could have expected this turn of events? She doesn't care if Draco is doing this out of spite, thinking that even if he is, spiting those dead madmen is in her interest as well. The alcohol does the rest.

When they wake up naked in his bed, Hermione can't bring herself to regret it.

"What now?" she asks and Draco opens an eye to look at her.

"Another round?" he suggest and Hermione laughs.

"If you promise to make breakfast afterwards."

Instead of a reply, she gets a kiss.