Alchemy
by VirgoDraconis

Summary

When Hermione wakes up in a place she doesn’t remember visiting wearing a necklace she’s never seen, she has some concerns. But those worries fade to the background as she is drawn in by the unexpected presence of one Draco Malfoy, who haunts her dreams and continues to cross her path. What would happen if she strayed from the path in front of her-said no to a life with Ron and returned to Hogwarts to learn what life could look like if she followed her heart instead of her head? She might just discover that dreams can come true, even the ones you never thought to dream.

Notes

Thank you to JK Rowling, who created the characters and the universe that allow this story to told. I will be posting one chapter per week beginning February 29, 2020. It's going to be a long one, so get comfortable!

Finally, this story is dedicated to my beloved alphas--Sterl, Gray, and Ang--without whose suggestions, support, and encouragement this story would not exist.
Hermione, still struggling to wake up, was clinging to the remnants of the vivid dream she had been having. As the details slipped from her waking mind, she fought a feeling of panic that her whole life would fade to oblivion if she couldn’t remember something important. It had something to do with Ron. They were celebrating their wedding anniversary; only it wasn’t much of a celebration. Hermione was surprised by the strength of the feelings in her dream—resentment, anger, discontentment, and finally sadness.

She heard the soft bleat of a sheep somewhere in the distance. Surely that hadn’t been part of the dream. A cool breeze made her shiver, blowing away snatches of the conversation she’d been having with Ron. Hermione caught one sentence before it was gone.

“You can’t still be angry at me for being too sloshed on our wedding night to remember it!” shouted Ron. Had he been drunk on their wedding day? What an awful thing to imagine. There was light behind her eyelids now, and the last fragments of her dream evaporated in the warmth of the rising sun. How very strange.

As she struggled to open her eyes, Hermione noted a stiffness in her body that reminded her of the many times she’d fallen asleep pouring over her textbooks at Hogwarts. Had she fallen asleep at her desk again? Hermione could feel a breeze caressing her with icy fingertips and chided herself for leaving the window open. Her eyes fluttered open, and she was surprised to discover herself lying on a bed of lush grass at the foot of what looked to be an overgrown headstone. Hermione
popped up to a sitting position, regretting it instantly as her head spun. Had she fallen asleep in a
graveyard? What in Godric’s name was she doing there? Hermione’s rational mind took over,
forcing her to look around and take in the details of her surroundings. She sighed with relief. She
was not in a graveyard. She was, however, somewhere equally strange. Somehow, Hermione had
fallen asleep in the ring of a vast stone circle.

She stood up to get a better view. Birds were chirping too merrily in some nearby trees, and
Hermione shivered again. She opened her beaded bag and summoned a soft tartan blanket to wrap
around her bare shoulders. Without the distraction of the cold, she could focus on a more pressing
matter: where exactly was she? The stones, though tall, were shorter and further away from each
other than Stonehenge. Cross that off the list. She could be in Cumbria—large circle, low stones.
But then she spotted a smaller inner circle and beyond that a small village—built, it appeared, in
the midst of the circle. Not Cumbria, after all. She’d have to walk into town to confirm, but she
suspected she was in Avebury. She set off toward the village, hoping she could find a place to
purchase a newspaper and maybe a bottle of water.

She reached the village edge and stopped momentarily to stow the wool blanket in her bag—she
certainly didn’t need anyone knowing she had slept in the open field. Hermione crossed a deserted
car park and found herself on the main road of what appeared to be a quaint old village. To her left
was a brick building with darkened windows. Beyond that, a copse of trees behind a low stone wall
obscured her view of whatever structure lay sleeping in the chilly morning. To her right, a towering
wall of trees revealed the edge of a red brick and stone building wearing a small wooden name tag
—a farm of some sort by the looks of it. That wouldn’t do. She found what she was looking for
across the street. A tall brick building bore a sign that simply read, “The Shop.” Surely they would
have what she needed. She hurried across the street and ducked into the warm interior of the shop.

“Good morning, dear,” said an older muggle woman. The shopkeeper’s short gray hair and stylish
accessories deterred Hermione from telling any half-truths, convinced they would be as transparent
as the lenses on the shopkeeper’s smart emerald glasses. The less Hermione said, the better.

“Good morning,” Hermione replied politely. A cursory glance around the store revealed a local
newspaper and a small cooler that did indeed have bottled water.

“You must be here for Avebury’s Midsummer’s Eve celebration,” said the shopkeeper. It wasn’t a
question. “We have the largest stone circle in Britain, as I’m sure you know,” the shopkeeper
continued. Hermione had a vision of herself wearing a floral wreath. How very unlike her, but she
supposed she had been there— no point in denying it. In a small village like this, the locals were
bound to know the comings and goings of every resident, reserving plenty of curiosity for the
activities of outsiders.

“Yes. Lovely weather for it, too,” said Hermione remembering the warm summer sun on her skin
as it sank slowly, slowly toward the horizon. The shopkeeper beamed with pride as though she
were Mother Nature herself. Funny, these villagers. But kind all the same. Hermione smiled and
paid for her items.

“Thank you, dear. Come back now.” the shopkeeper said.

"Goodbye," replied Hermione as she left the shop. She walked to the edge of the building and
stopped to lean against an empty red telephone box. She shook the paper open and noted the date:
June 22, 1998. It was the day after summer solstice. That’s right. She had wanted to visit on that
day after reading something intriguing in a book about muggle folklore. What was it? It flitted
through her mind like a feather in the wind. The headline on the front page read, “Local Woman
Remembers Her Future and Other Midsummer’s Eve Faerie Stories.” Even Hermione, a witch who had used a time-turner in her third year at Hogwarts, laughed at the absurdity of this. It sounded much like divination, her least favorite subject—too fluffy and inaccurate. She folded the paper and swallowed a mouthful of water. She really must get home.

She walked past a lovely stone building—“The Henge Shop” the sign read—toward an opening to the field where the stones were scattered. In any other circumstance, she would have stopped to browse. It was the type of place that was bound to sell obscure books along with unique trinkets and, she’d wager, collections of gemstones polished to a high shine. Finally reaching a break to the open field, she sighed and made her way to a faraway stone behind which she could safely apparate home.

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Hermione sighed in relief once in the warm confines of her house. Though if she was honest with herself, she frequently wished she’d had anywhere else to go than back to her empty family home. When familiar grief threatened to cripple her, a simple reminder that her parents were safer where they were until the last of the Death Eaters were locked away in Azkaban, forced her back to the practical reality of the present. Wards on the house would be enough to protect her—after all, they had kept her and Harry hidden even in the middle of the open woods during the Horcrux hunt. Hermione tried not to think about the others that could never be brought back. What she needed right now was a hot shower followed by a cup of tea and some ginger biscuits, and then, perhaps, a good cry.

She trudged upstairs, tossed the beaded bag on her bed, then made her way to the bathroom. While the water heated up, she undressed. She stood before the mirror over the sink to assess her appearance. Bits of grass and dandelion fuzz clung to the thicket of curls on her head—so much for no one knowing she had slept outdoors. She plucked the flora from her hair and smoothed down a rogue curl, rolling her eyes in reluctant permission of this small vanity.

Steam billowed around her and something in her hazy reflection caught the light. A quick wave of her wand cleared the fog from the mirror revealing a delicate gold chain around her neck. It was long enough that she could lift the ring on the end of the chain to examine it without unclasping the necklace. It was a lovely thing, this ring. Vintage. A single, and rather large, cushion cut emerald was tilted on its axis so that two of the rounded corners aligned with the band. The emerald was framed by a delicate diamond halo that looked like—there was no other way to describe them—leaves. It was set on a thin gold band she suspected would fit her finger perfectly. Wherever did this come from? She thought to remove it for her shower, but it felt too dear. Instead, she dropped the necklace, letting the ring settle over her heart, then stepped into the water.

There was nothing more relaxing than a hot shower. For a minute, Hermione just stood beneath the stream of water and let it wash away the memory of the ancient stones and the dream of her unhappy marriage to Ron. She began to lather herself with lavender soap, not bothering to use the loofah that hung nearby. She closed her eyes and ran her hands from her neck to her torso passing over her breasts, across her midsection, and continuing to her hips. Hands washed lazily down one thigh to the delicate bones of her ankle.

Eyes closed, she let her mind drift unanchoring from the pain and stiffness that was slowly dissipating. Wouldn't it be luxurious to have someone else wash her? Hands moved from one ankle to the other. She could imagine someone else’s hands brushing over her calf, circling her thigh,
then roaming teasingly over the soft thatch of hair between her legs before continuing upward. A
tingling sensation began to spread from her core. Hands grazed her breasts, nipples rising in their
wake. And before she knew what was happening, she was pulled into an embrace.

Lips crushed against hers, teeth grazing her lower lip, tongue forcing her mouth open. She leaned
into the hard planes of a man in obvious want of her, losing herself to his touch.

When she finally pulled away, she looked up at a pair of steely grey eyes boring into her with a
look of desire so intense it almost knocked her off her feet. She gasped and the vision dispersed in a
puff of steam. Her heart hammered in her chest. What just happened? Was it a hallucination? A
dream? She didn’t care, she wanted more. But it was gone.

She choked down the surge of disappointment filling the empty shower. Shock and acute
loneliness fell in warm rivulets down her face. Her sex still throbbed. Without deciding to do it, her
hand felt its way toward release, pleasure ripping through her almost the moment fingers parted her
swollen lips. As she broke apart, a long-suppressed truth escaped its rationalized prison and settled
in her blissfully quiet mind: she had long wondered what could have been if she had met Draco
Malfoy under different circumstances.
Thanks to those who’ve subscribed and everyone who is reading along. I'm planning to post on Fridays (so that you have new content to read over the weekend!). This one is twice the length of the prologue. Stay tuned for chapter three next week when things begin to get more interesting!

“Harry, did you actually cook dinner?” Hermione asked. Harry had invited her, Ginny, and Ron to Grimmauld Place for dinner. She knew that Harry was looking for a flat in London. She didn’t blame him for not wanting to stay at 12 Grimmauld Place permanently, but for now, it would do.

“Don’t sound so surprised, Hermione. I had plenty of practice cooking for Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon,” Harry said teasingly, though they all knew it was very much true.

“And he’s picked up a few charms from Mum,” said Ginny proudly.

“It’s a good thing, too,” Ron said to Ginny, “because we all know you aren’t about to turn into...Harry, who’s that muggle woman who writes those books—”

“Mary Berry,” Harry answered, laughing. Harry choked back his laughter and turned away when he caught Ginny’s glare. Harry had admitted to taking a couple of Aunt Petunia’s discarded cookbooks when he left Privet Drive for good. Ron liked to flip through the pages and drool over the pictures of food.

Ginny pointed her wand directly at Ron, and he took a step backward. “Well, Ron, at least I don’t rely on Mum to cook all my food and wash my clothes.”

“She said she likes doing those things for me!” Ron retorted.

“Right,” said Ginny laughing derisively. She lowered her wand and turned to Hermione. “Let’s go set the table.” Ron walked far away from Ginny and started a loud conversation with Harry about Quidditch.

“I don’t know how you put up with him,” Ginny said to Hermione. They waved their wands and plates, silverware, and napkins floated toward the table creating four perfect place settings. Hermione felt herself burning with shame. She hadn’t had the chance to tell Ginny, but things hadn’t been going very well with Ron since she had woken up in the stone circle, not that he had noticed.

Ginny cocked her head to one side and raised her brow. “Or have you only been putting up with him?” she guessed astutely.

“Erm, well...” said Hermione. That fiery-haired witch didn’t miss a thing. Hermione lit two candles with her wand while she searched desperately for an explanation that would make sense to
Ginny. None of this nonsense about dreams and even odder daydreams.

Ginny’s expression softened. “We don’t have to talk about it right now,” Ginny said just as Harry announced that dinner was ready.

Harry carried a hot casserole dish to the table, hands bare but, Hermione guessed, protected by a cooling charm. He set the dish on the table next to the flagon of pumpkin juice Ginny had brought from the kitchen. Then, he waved his wand and conjured a salad, summoning the ingredients neatly into a large acacia serving bowl that Ron had set on the table.

Hermione clapped enthusiastically, too proud to be envious of his skills in the kitchen. Ginny only smiled at Harry, while Ron picked up a serving spoon and began loading his plate with food.

They chatted pleasantly while they served themselves and began eating Harry’s delicious dinner—a cottage pie complete with dauphinoise potatoes and a surprisingly tasty side salad.

“So Hermione,” said Harry. “Have you decided whether or not you will be joining us for Auror training?”

“Actually, I have,” said Hermione. Ron grinned, and Hermione frowned. “I’ve received a letter from McGonagall,” she pressed on. Ron’s smile faded. “She has personally invited me to complete my final year at Hogwarts, along with most of the other students from our year, of course.” She let the implication hang in the air for a moment but then hurried on before they could spend too much time thinking about the awful things that had prompted the invitation.

“And, well, I’ve accepted. I sent her an owl this morning,” Hermione finished. Ron was frowning, fork hanging limply in his hand. Harry and Ginny were smiling at her.

“That’s great, Hermione,” said Harry. “I think—”

“But Shaklebolt said he’d waive our N.E.W.T.s!” interrupted Ron. “There’s no reason to go back to Hogwarts. Hermione, what are you thinking?”

“Honestly, Ron,” said Ginny, “Do you even know Hermione?” she rolled her eyes and shook her head, then turned to Hermione. “I, for one, am excited to have you with me at Hogwarts this year.”

Hermione realized she had been clenching her teeth only when she had to relax so she could reply to Ginny. “Thank you, Ginny and Harry. Obviously, I think it was the right choice for me.”

Hermione looked pointedly at Ron.

“I’m just going to miss you, Hermione,” said Ron. Hermione exhaled. She couldn’t deny that she had thought about how odd it would be at Hogwarts without Ron and Harry as her constant companions.

“I’ll miss the two of you as well,” said Hermione. Ginny looked from Hermione to Ron.

Ron cleared his throat, abandoning his fork altogether. “Hermione,” said Ron, “you are my best friend, and I can’t imagine my life without you. Marry me.”

Ginny’s eyes were wide with surprise. Harry had closed his eyes and was shaking his head.

“Ron…” started Hermione. She couldn’t believe he had just proposed to her. “You never have to imagine a life without me,” Hermione said carefully. Ron started to smile, but she raised her hand to indicate that she wasn’t done speaking. “Whether or not that life is lived as husband and wife… I just don’t know. Just… just give me a few days to think about it.”
“Hermione,” Ron said, “if you can’t say yes right now, then you might as well say no. We all know that’s what it means, anyway.”

“Ron!” said Ginny warningly, but Hermione cut her off.

“No,” said Hermione. “Everyone does not know that is what it means, because I don’t even know what my answer is right now, though you are coming perilously close to me hexing you right out of the possibility of ever marrying anyone who doesn’t want to kiss a toad to do it!” shouted Hermione.

“Hermione,” said Ron back-peddling frantically, “no, I mean, of course, you need time to make up your mind, it’s a big decision. Think about it. It’s just... I really love you,” he finished meekly.

Why did she always end up feeling like the villain? Ginny cleared the table with a wave of her wand.

“Hey, mate,” Harry said to Ron, “can you help me bring dessert over from the kitchen?” The scraping of chairs was the only reply as they made their way to the kitchen.

Ginny leaned in toward Hermione, eyes searching, “Are you...okay?”

“Yes,” Hermione said automatically. Ginny gave her a look. “Alright, no, I’m not. I wasn’t expecting that. I can’t explain it right now, but I need a little time. I’m not ready to say no...or yes.”

“Of course,” said Ginny, nodding in understanding. Though, of course, Ginny couldn’t fully understand. If Harry had proposed, Hermione was certain Ginny would not have hesitated to say yes. Still, Ginny knew her brother, and Hermione appreciated the gesture.

Harry and Ron returned moments later with a lemon drizzle tray cake and a pot of fresh coffee, some cream, and a small bowl of sugar.

When they each had cake and coffee, Harry spoke up. “So,” he said changing the topic, “you will never believe the interesting week I’ve had.” When no one responded, he continued.

“I spoke on behalf of Malfoy and his mother during their trials,” he paused waiting for a response. Hermione’s head snapped up as a memory of her shower came unbidden to her consciousness. She tried to fight the heat that was sure to be showing in her cheeks. Ginny was staring wordlessly at Hermione; fork suspended mid-bite.

“Oh?” Hermione squeaked, avoiding Ginny’s soul-piercing gaze. If she didn’t know any better, Hermione would think Ginny was a skilled Legilimens. “Hmm,” Hermione said, kicking herself for her complete inability to respond normally. And now, even Ron was giving her an odd look.

“How did it go?” Ginny said to Harry while looking at Hermione in a way that meant she expected answers later.

“Well,” said Harry, “after the trials, Shaklebolt told me it was only my testimony that kept them both out of Azkaban.” He ate a large forkful of lemon drizzle. Ron was gaping at Harry.

“They are free?” Ron asked.

“Sort of,” said Harry, washing his cake down with some coffee. “They’re on one-year probation. Don’t know what the terms are.”

“They are free. Just like that?” repeated Ron.
“Yes, Ron,” snapped Hermione. “I think Harry made that quite clear when he answered your question two seconds ago. Of course, we know you are incapable of accepting answers you don’t want to hear.” She knew it was harsh, but she couldn’t refrain from saying it. Ron closed his mouth, stung by her words. Ginny gave her a reproving look, channeling Mrs. Weasley in startling accuracy, though she would never admit that to Ginny.

“The Wizengamot,” continued Harry carefully, “thought their actions at the end of the war displayed a sincere rebuke of Voldemort and his ways. Can’t say I blame them after the horrors they must have seen in their own home.”

But this was too much for Ron. “The horrors they saw?”

Oh, for Godric’s sake, was he going to respond with rhetorical questions every time? Hermione bit her tongue. She didn’t know why she should care so much considering what she had suffered in that house. What Ron knew she had suffered, she reminded herself. She remained quiet, her anger ebbing.

Harry ignored Ron’s question. “I would be dead if it wasn’t for Narcissa. Hell, Ron, we would all be dead if Malfoy had identified us in the manor that day.”

Ron’s face was bright red. “I’m not saying they are completely innocent or that I’m going to become Malfoy’s best friend,” Harry continued, holding up his hands in response to the look of outrage on Ron’s face, “just that they may have seen the error of their ways. Anyway, it was the right thing to do.”

“And Lucius?” said Ron through clenched teeth.

“Yes, well, that’s another story,” Harry said taking a drink of his coffee. “Lucius will be free on the condition that he brings the other Death Eaters to justice as he’s promised. Until they are all in Azkaban, Lucius will be held there himself.”

The evening finished awkwardly. Hermione promised Ginny that they would meet in Diagon Alley the following month to shop for school supplies. Ron offered to escort Hermione home, but she had refused, telling Ron that it wouldn’t be necessary since she would be apparating directly into her house. Ron left dejectedly while Hermione thanked Harry for dinner and bade him and Ginny goodnight.

Hermione was relieved, for the moment, to be alone. In her room, she undressed, then slipped on Ron’s old Chudley Cannons shirt. It was large on her small frame and soft against her skin. She turned off the lights and crawled into bed. Moonlight shone through the sheer curtains on her window falling across the foot of her bed where Crookshanks once slept. Hermione still hoped that he might return to her, but it was time she accepted that some things in life only last for a season. If you didn’t take time to appreciate the sparkle of new snow, the spring sun would melt away your chance to hold on to the only thing that was ever left behind: memories.

Hermione’s eyes began to feel heavy. She wondered whether she was taking Ron for granted. Or maybe she was only holding onto him because she was afraid of losing yet another person she loved. Her grief at the losses—of Crookshanks, of her friends and family, of her childhood—raged like a furnace, burning away every untruth, making it difficult for her to tolerate things she’d easily overlooked and ignored before. The truth was, she and Ron were really not very compatible. Their
bickering at dinner was typical of their relationship. Was love enough to overlook their considerable differences? Did she really love Ron the way a wife should love a husband? Hermione felt a heaviness blanket her body and she finally drifted off to sleep.

Ginny looked stunning. Her knee-length dress, a gorgeous shade of cerulean, was cinched with a braided brown belt just above her gracefully sloping belly. It seemed that pregnant women did have a glow about them, at least, Ginny did. Mrs. Weasley had invited family and friends to a small baby shower in honor of Ginny and Harry’s first baby—due in just two months.

A dozen round tables were scattered around the garden. Here and there guests were sitting at tables and chatting. Most guests, however, were milling around: congratulating the parents-to-be, helping themselves to the generous spread of food Mrs. Weasley had provided, or catching up with other guests. Harry and Kingsley Shaklebolt—Minister Shaklebolt, Hermione corrected herself—were laughing heartily. Bill and Percy were looking cautiously into a box George was holding out for their inspection (some new item George was testing, no doubt). Neville, Dean, and Seamus were deep in conversation near the garden wall; they didn’t see young Teddy and Victoire barreling toward them in pursuit of a garden gnome.

Hermione chuckled as she sat by herself at one of the tables on the perimeter of the gathering. Mrs. Weasley and Fleur had outdone themselves. At the center of each table were three quidditch hoops blowing bubbles that drifted around the garden. Floating just above each set of hoops was a small mobile, miniature brooms chasing little golden snitches in endless circles.

"Hermione!" said Harry sitting beside her.

"Hello, Harry!" said Hermione smiling. She looked up at the mobile. "I was just wondering if your wife is still flying."

"No, she's on leave right now. Came a bit too close to a bludger at the last game and the Harpies manager insisted she go on early leave. She’ll return soon enough—not until after the baby is born, of course."

"I'm so happy for you both, Harry," said Hermione. Harry smiled contentedly.

"So," said Harry, "when will we be attending your baby shower?"

"Mine? Harry, you know perfectly well I'm not pregnant," Hermione laughed. "Ron and I aren't even trying."

"That's not what Ron told me," he smirked.

"Oh?" Hermione said, forcing a smile to remain on her face.

"Just the other day Ron was saying—" Harry started.

"What was I saying?" said Ron taking a chair at the table. He was eating his way through a small plate loaded with sausage rolls, small Cornish pasties, mini Victoria sponges, and a few tiny Chelsea buns.

"You were telling Harry about how we are trying to get pregnant," said Hermione tilting her head and raising a brow in askance.

"I believe what I told Harry is that we were talking about having children," Ron corrected. He took
a bite of a Victoria sponge, leaving a bit of jam on the corner of his mouth. Hermione rolled her eyes. Some things would never change.

"Harry, dear, there you are!" said Molly Weasley. "You are needed for photographs." Harry shrugged helplessly as Molly dragged him away, but he was smiling all the while.

Once Harry was out of earshot, she said, "Ron, why would you say that to Harry?"

“We were talking about it,” said Ron. “Even if we aren’t planning on it right now, though I still don’t understand what we’re waiting for.”

“You know I’m not ready to have children,” Hermione said. “I’m so busy at the Ministry right now, and you have your hands full trying to build up Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes with George. We don’t have time for a child right now.” She felt like she had said this a hundred times.

"Hermione," said Ron, "there is no perfect time to have a child—just ask my mum." As much as she adored her mother-in-law, Hermione had no intention of asking Mrs. Weasley.

"You know very well I’m not waiting for ‘perfect,’ Ronald," Hermione huffed. "It just isn’t an ideal time for children...nor for this conversation."

"Luna!" Hermione stood up to hug her friend who had just made her way to their table. Ron nodded in Luna’s direction, then excused himself (probably refilling his now empty plate).

"Hello, Hermione," said Luna in that dreamy way of hers. "I was just about to predict whether Ginny is going to have a boy or a girl using the ring on a string method."

“Were you?” said Hermione.

"Ginny was having trouble removing her ring earlier—bit of swelling she said," Luna explained, "—but perhaps the one you’re wearing around your neck could work," said Luna in question.

Hermione looked down at the necklace in question. There was the emerald ring, hanging on a delicate gold chain. Luna reached out and touched the ring.

"Where did you get this?" Luna asked curiously.

"It’s an interesting story, actually," began Hermione.

Hermione woke with a start. She felt around her neck for the ring. It was tucked safely beneath the collar of the shirt—protecting her hair from the prongs of the ring that always seemed determined to tangle in her hair. Outside, the world was quiet, still dreaming in the early morning hours. The day was rousing lazily from its slumber. Hermione’s thoughts drifted toward the dream she’d just had. This preview into her possible future with Ron was telling. Her older self was not yet ready for children, and she knew it had little to do with her career despite what she’d said in her dream.

She got out of bed, ignoring the siren song of sleep. The faint blue light of dawn announced the slow ascent of the sun and she wanted nothing more than a strong cup of coffee. Hermione walked carefully downstairs, not bothering with the lights. Soon, she would have to tell Ron that she couldn’t marry him, but not yet. Right now, the only bitterness she could swallow was the cup of French Roast she wouldn’t bother to soften with cream or sugar. She brewed her coffee and drank it slowly in the quiet dawn.
The following Friday was Harry’s birthday. Harry had said a birthday party wasn't necessary, all things considered. Mrs. Weasley, on the other hand, disagreed. Despite having lost a son, or maybe because of it, she insisted that they ought to take every opportunity to celebrate, and went on to plan a surprise party for Harry. In the end, they had all agreed with Molly, remembering his last birthday when they had fled for their lives, losing Hedwig and Mad-Eye Moody in the process.

Hermione was dressed and ready for the party. She wore a green and blue plaid skirt that reached mid-thigh and a fitted, high-necked navy blue tee. She wore the necklace tucked beneath her shirt as she usually did. Then, she grabbed a handful of floo powder, stepped into her fireplace and said, "The Burrow!"

Hermione arrived, five minutes early, in a puff of ash. A quick wave of her wand removed the soot from her clothes, and she stepped out to greet Mrs. Weasley.

"Hermione, dear, I'm so glad you could make it!" said Mrs. Weasley with a smile. "You are just in time. Harry will arrive any moment. Why don't you head out to the garden with everyone else."
And Mrs. Weasley shooed Hermione out the door as she finished the last touches on a towering chocolate cake.

It was warm outside. The trees in the garden were alight with fairies, preening for guests who gushed about the effect of their glow against the gorgeous twilight sky. It was a small party, there were perhaps thirty guests in total, including some of their Hogwarts friends, members of the Order, and a few of Arthur or Harry's close Ministry colleagues. Ginny made her way over to Hermione, waving excitedly.

Just then, Hermione felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to face Ron.

"'Mione," he said in greeting.

"Ron, please don't call me that. You know I don't like it," said Hermione, hating the diminutive nickname.

"I was hoping," he continued, "that I would have heard from you earlier this week."

"I know," Hermione said. "It's just, I've been busy at the Ministry. Kingsley has asked me to do some consulting work, as I'm sure you know. It's been a whirlwind, actually. But I'm glad for the distraction," she wished she had chosen different words. "Only I'm alone at home all the time otherwise, and it's too sad," she said by way of explanation.

"Hermione, I understand," Ron said. He looked haggard, as if he hadn't slept much this week. Hermione didn't know if he'd had a rough week of Auror training or if he had been agonizing over her response to his proposal. It was probably a little of both, but she felt bad about keeping him waiting.

Just then, Mrs. Weasley stepped outside levitating a large three-tier cake with her wand, candles blazing.

"Quiet now, Harry is on his way!" Mrs. Weasley shouted. She must have had Harry added to her clock—he was practically family, especially now he and Ginny were seeing each other. They all
knew it was only a matter of time before he was an official part of the Weasley family.

"Maybe we can talk later?" Ron suggested.

"Of course," replied Hermione gently. Ginny had made her way to Hermione's side and Hermione turned to smile at her friend. Hermione felt a bit underdressed next to Ginny in her velvet slip dress, a rich burgundy that complemented her long red hair. Ginny looked Hermione up and down, a fiendish smile spreading across her face. Ginny glanced over in Ron’s direction, and when Hermione turned to look at Ron, his eyes shot up looking as if he had just been caught rifling through her delicates drawer. Hermione rolled her eyes and turned back to Ginny.

"Harry thinks we are just having a small family dinner," whispered Ginny, not wanting to break the hush that had fallen.

Just then, Harry stepped outside.

“Surprise!” they shouted, and before Harry could register what was happening the group burst into song. Ginny reached Harry's side just as they finished the last line of happy birthday.

“Make a wish!” Ginny said loudly enough for all to hear.

Harry paused for a moment, then blew out all the candles. Everyone clapped enthusiastically. Then, music began to play and everyone resumed their earlier conversations.

Even after dinner had been eaten and the cake had been served, the party continued in raucous gaiety. It seemed that Mrs. Weasley was right—everyone was in dire need of a reason to celebrate.

A bonfire blazed on a hill beyond the garden. Small clusters of party-goers sat on blankets scattered around the fire. Burning embers floated up into the sky, before bursting into tiny, glittering fireworks. Others sat at tables nursing cups of coffee or mugs of meade, chatting contentedly in the warm summer night.

Hermione watched it all from beneath a tree at the edge of the garden. As she stood leaning comfortably against the trunk, she spotted Harry and Ginny wandering hand-in-hand to a secluded corner of the garden and remembered the dream she’d had about another party in this garden. She smiled at what she hoped would be true one day.

Just then, Hermione felt a warm male figure press against her back, arms sliding around her in an embrace.

"You," whispered Ron, lips grazing her ear, "look amazing." Hermione shivered, turning her head away and he took it as an invitation to plant a kiss on her exposed neck.

"Erm, thank you, Ron," said Hermione responding to the compliment. "But," she said turning to face him, and then his mouth was on hers. He pulled her in close, kissing her with urgency of a man about to swear an oath of celibacy. Despite his fervor, Hermione found that his lips were soft against hers, and she gave in, closing her eyes in allowance of a last kiss.

She pulled away, her heart breaking at the look on Ron's face, then sat down patting the ground next to her.

"Sit," she said simply, and Ron did. For a moment they sat in silence watching the easy happiness of the others—Fleur reclining against Bill on one of the blankets near the bonfire, Mr. Weasley listening to Percy no doubt regaling his father with stories of his most recent accomplishments in the Ministry, Neville and Luna chatting animatedly at one of the empty tables.
"You're going to say no, aren't you?" said Ron, not looking at Hermione. She sighed.

"I am," she said. Hermione couldn't deny him the truth any longer. "It's not that I don't love you," she continued, "It's just..." She paused, searching for the right words.

"Just what, Hermione?" Ron said, a hard edge to his voice.

"I don't think that love is enough," she admitted quietly.

"Love is not a good enough reason to marry someone? To marry your best friend?" said Ron. "Hermione, if love isn't enough then what is?"

Hermione sighed again. "Ron, all we do is argue," she said. "We can't even have a serious conversation without one of us losing our temper. But it's not just that. We don't have the same interests and maybe not even the same values."

"Is this about me getting upset about you returning to Hogwarts?" Ron said incredulously.

"What?" said Hermione. "No. It's not about that." He was exasperating. "Once again you have not listened to what I'm trying to tell you."

"Well, excuse me for not being perfect!" Ron said angrily. Why did he always think she expected perfection?

"Ron, I understand that you're angry, but if you would just calm down—" started Hermione.

"No, you don't understand," he interrupted. "You know what? I can't do this."

Ron stood up and turned to walk away. The dam Hermione had constructed burst and a torrent of anger washed over her.

"That's right, Ron," she shouted after him, rising to her feet, "walk away! It's what you do best!"

Ron froze. He turned around slowly, eyes wide with shock.

"I came back," he said quietly.

"What do you want: a medal?" said Hermione. She felt the betrayal all over again and it fueled her rage.

"It was the locket, Hermione," Ron said.

"Oh, spare me, Ron," said Hermione. "Both Harry and I wore the locket and neither of us left, did we?"

Ron was speechless. Hermione had surprised even herself. Until the words had left her mouth, she hadn't realized she was still harboring that resentment.

"The truth is," Hermione continued as a thought occurred to her, "I don't trust you." And suddenly, she knew it was true.

"Right, then," Ron said. He turned and strode away.

Hermione leaned against the tree, dark now that the fairies had fled to another tree. She felt a searing heat in her chest and she couldn't breathe. She tried to swallow the tears burning behind her eyes, but she had a lump in her throat the size of a snitch. She slid down the trunk of the tree, head
coming to rest in her arms folded over her bent knees, and dissolved into a puddle of tears.

She didn't know how much time had passed, but she felt an arm slide around her shoulders and a head rest against hers. They sat for a few moments until Hermione felt heavy with fatigue. Her eyes began to dry.

Through a curtain of red hair, Hermione heard a voice say, "He's going to be okay, you know. And so are you."

Ginny rubbed Hermione’s back consolingly, and Hermione felt something shift. She knew, somehow, that Ginny was right. Hermione also knew that things would be different. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d just started down a different path. Whatever her life was going to be when she had been living on autopilot was irrevocably gone. And though her heart ached, she knew this path would lead to her heart’s true desire.
August 1998

Chapter Notes

It's been a crazy week over here, so thank you for your patience in waiting the extra day for this next chapter. I hope the appearance of Draco makes up for it!

She stood there, staring blankly at the supply list enclosed within her Hogwarts letter for what felt like several minutes. Hermione scarcely noticed the light jostling as shoppers made their way around her in the narrow, cobblestone streets of Diagon Alley.

Hermione had elected to return to Hogwarts to complete her final year, craving the normalcy of life at Hogwarts and the opportunity to lose herself amidst the stacks in the library. But now, as she set about the mundane task of shopping for school supplies, Hermione wondered whether she had made the right choice. She wasn't sure she could take her studies as seriously as she had before the war, before the day-to-day battle for survival, before the losses with which they were all still coping. What did an Ancient Runes assignment matter after hunting Horcruxes to take down the most evil wizard of their time? How could she care about Transfiguration when there was nothing she could do to transform her friendship with Ron to what it used to be before everything was confused. Hermione's inner scholar stirred, affronted at the very idea of—

A sharp bump and hurried "Excuse me" tore Hermione from her reveries. She looked up to see an older witch herding three children into a nearby shop. Hermione took a deep breath—registering somewhere in her subconscious the absence of the waffle-cone scent that once wafted from Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor—and quickly identified the most efficient order in which to tackle her shopping list.

Hermione set off towards Flourish & Blotts, surprised to find that most of the shops had re-opened. A few storefronts were still boarded up, but Ollivanders wasn't one of them. As she carefully navigated the crowd of back-to-school shoppers, she thought about the last time she had seen Ollivander and was glad that his son, Gareth, had taken over the shop once Garrick decided he didn't have the heart to return. And just like that, she felt a wave of gratitude for the distraction her final year of studying would provide.

Flourish & Blotts was crowded and Hermione had a lot to do before meeting Ginny for lunch in The Leaky Cauldron. After Hermione had found the last of her school books, she decided she had a couple minutes to look around for a book on muggle folklore—she still hadn't figured out why she had gone to Avebury. After a few minutes, she gave up. She couldn’t remember the author, or even the exact title. Maybe she would just look up a book on stone circles when she was back in the Hogwarts library.

While in line to pay for her books, Hermione picked up a copy of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find them from a towering stack near the line. Just before it was her turn, she noticed the publisher, Obscurus books. It triggered a memory—that was the same publisher of the book she had been looking for. Hermione paid for her books, stowed them discreetly in her magically expanded handbag, then headed toward the door of Obscurus Books—it was right here in Diagon Alley and they might be able to help her locate a copy of the book.

Obscurus Books, located on the south side of Diagon Alley, had a tiny office. Hermione entered
through the faded green door in the front and found herself in a small room. The first thing she noticed were the walls. Well, they were more like bookshelves, lined with hundreds of books. Some were very old, their leather binding worn and gilded letters fading; others were very new. Hermione wished she had hours to peruse the contents of these shelves.

“Can I help you?” said a middle-aged wizard sitting at one of the two desks in the room. He wore a checked city shirt beneath a tweed waistcoat with matching trousers. He looked intelligent but unkempt, graying hair standing at odd angles as though it was trying to take leave of his head. The other desk was vacant.


“We’ve published a great many books, young lady,” he said. Hermione suspected Obscurus Books did not get visitors often.

“I imagine you do. I’m looking for a book about muggle folklore. I’m sorry, I can’t remember the title, but it was something about which muggle beliefs are myths and which are cases of actual magic. It was really very interesting,” she said losing herself in the excitement of a good book.

“There was an entire section devoted to stone circles, maybe something about summer solstice. I was in Avebury for summer solstice, and I know there was something in the book about it. I’m sorry, that’s all I remember. Does this sound like a book you’ve published?”

The wizard stared at her for a moment, then replied, “No, it does not. However, it sounds just like the kind of book we would publish. Fascinating.”

“So, you don’t have this book?” Hermione asked, hope dwindling.

“No, I’m afraid not,” the wizard said. He had picked up his quill and was scratching away on some parchment, likely taking notes from whatever muse had just whispered in his ear. Hermione walked out of the shop without another word. She didn’t have any more time to dedicate to the search of this book; it would have to wait.

The last stop on Hermione’s list was the apothecary; she needed to restock her potions supplies. She made her way through the crowded street to the apothecary. Inside, she squeezed her way past a group of witches crowding around a barrel of leeches, past a wizard scooping eel eyes out of a jar filled with a murky liquid, and finally past a small group of young Hogwarts students, probably first years, poking at a glass case full of horned slugs. She stopped at the wall opposite the door and looked searchingly over the rows of glass jars lining the shelves in front of her.

Hermione quickly found the shrivel figs and the mistletoe berries. It took her several minutes to locate the other ingredients. Finally, she had reached the last item on her list, she scanned the shelves for rose thorns. She felt a hand press gently on her lower back, but when she turned around, no one was there. Actually, the shop was nearly empty. An older wizard was handing over a handful of sickles in return for a small paper bag full of whatever he’d just purchased, and not far away from him was one other person. She locked eyes with Draco Malfoy. He was watching her, an unreadable expression on his face. Hermione saw the glint of a silvery unicorn horn in his hands. She thought about his hands and felt warmth blossoming from somewhere just below her navel.

Hermione turned around determined to finish her shopping. What had she been looking for? Rose thorns. Right. But she was distracted, and despite her better judgment, she looked over her shoulder. He was still watching her. Hermione rearranged her expression in mock annoyance. He chuckled, and she turned away.
Hermione bumped into a nearby table and sent glittering beetles eyes skittering across the floor. She cursed under her breath and pulled out her wand to return the wares to their original location, non-magic handling be damned. When she turned back to the shelves, she found Draco standing next to her, the jar of rose thorns in one hand.

"Oh!" said Hermione. "That's what I was looking for," she blurted out. What was wrong with her?

"By all means, Granger, help yourself," Draco said holding a small silver scoop out in her direction.

Hermione took the scoop, fingers accidentally brushing Draco's. A bolt of electricity shot through her, igniting a fire beneath her skin. If he hadn't felt that, then surely he must feel the heat radiating from her like a furnace. She really must gain control of herself.

"Did you want me to reach in and pull out a handful for you?" Draco said, a smirk turning up the corner of his mouth.

"That won't be necessary, Malfoy," she retorted, trying desperately to banish thoughts of his mouth on hers. She took a small amount, then handed the scoop back to Draco. He helped himself to some before replacing the jar on a high shelf. Hermione realized he must have been replenishing his own stock when she awkwardly inserted herself. Could she be any more embarrassing? At least he would walk away now and leave her to her own self-flagellation. But he turned back toward her, studying her like some rare specimen.

"Is there something I can help you with, Malfoy?" she asked uncomfortably.

"No. I was just wondering why you were still here," he said. His words hit her like a bucket of ice water.

"Well, I would think that was obvious, Malfoy. I'm buying my potions supplies," she said bitterly. Why was she even entertaining the thoughts she'd been having of him?

"That's not what I meant, Granger," he said. He didn't have the sneer on his face she'd been so accustomed to seeing. "Take a look around the shop. Notice anything?" he asked.

"Besides the fact that it looks like we're the only ones left in here, you mean?" she answered. "Now that you mention it, that is rather odd considering how busy it was when I walked in a few minutes ago," she said trying to puzzle it out.

"So, why are you still here, when everyone else has left?" he asked.

"Because I'm not done with my shopping. I thought we just established that," she said and rolled her eyes. "Why would I leave before—" and then she realized what he was asking. "Did you cast a ward when you entered the shop?" she asked surprised.

"Yes and no," he said. "I prefer to shop without the glares and snide remarks of the general public—ex-Death-Eater and all that," he explained. "The details don't matter except that you seem impervious to it. Why is that?"

Hermione’s head was spinning. Hold on. Why was he telling her all of this? Was it possible she had misinterpreted his intention? She supposed it wouldn’t do to continue making assumptions. His grey eyes were intense, searching, and she saw the spark of something flash then fade. Her skin prickled in sudden understanding.

"Perhaps, Malfoy, I should be asking you that question," she said raising a brow. He hadn't been
expecting that. He lowered his eyes, then stared at her chest. Before she could form a feeling about it, he spoke.

"If I were you, Granger, I would keep this," he stepped closer, traced his finger down one side of the golden chain and touched the ring lightly, "out of sight." And then he lifted the ring, pressed it against the base of her throat, released it and let it slide beneath her blouse. Her breath caught, lips parted to speak words that wouldn't come. The cool metal burned a path down her chest and rested between her breasts.

For a moment, he looked at the place where he knew the ring had settled, then drew his eyes up to hers. They were inches apart and she had to tilt her head back to look up into his eyes. She breathed in his scent, something woodsy that made her think of fresh cut grass. Godric help her, a feeling of euphoria was rushing toward her like the incoming tide making her feel light-headed. And suddenly the spell was broken, tide ebbing before it had reached her.

"I... thank you... I have to go," she said, turning away before he could say anything else. She left everything behind and rushed into the crowd outside. Hermione found an empty stoop near the cauldron shop and leaned against the cool stone wall. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. The ghost of a kiss brushed her lips. Merlin’s beard, what had come over her? She felt wildly out of control, but also more alive than she ever had.

Hermione arrived at The Leaky Cauldron before Ginny and was able to find a table in a remote corner. By the time Ginny had arrived, the lunch crowd had swelled, and Ginny had to push her way past several witches and wizards to reach the chair opposite Hermione. She let her parcels drop to the floor and collapsed in the empty seat with a huff.

"If I have to hear one more first-year whinge about how first years never make the house Quidditch team, I’m going to ban the lot of them from tryouts this year!" said Ginny.

"Been spending time in Quality Quidditch Supplies?" asked Hermione smiling.

"It’s not funny. And I’m starving!" replied Ginny. They ordered food and drinks.

"So, I noticed Weasley's Wizard Wheezes is open again," said Hermione. Ginny sighed heavily, smile fading from her face.

"It is," Ginny replied. "George opened it up at the beginning of the month. He says it's prime time for Hogwarts students and since the Skiving Snackbox is a top seller..."Ginny looked like she was far away. Finally, she said, "He's convinced Fred would have wanted it this way." Ginny's eyes glistened with tears.

"Oh, Ginny," said Hermione patting Ginny's hand, "it's a lovely way for him to honor Fred's memory."

Ginny smiled, building up a dam against the sadness that had threatened, but failed, to spill over.

"Yes, well," Ginny said, regaining her composure, "he's hoping to find a partner to help him run the shop. He has his hands full, you know."

"He should think about inviting Ron to join him," said Hermione.

"Why in Godric's name would he do that?" said Ginny. "All Ron does is talk about being an Auror. Bit annoying really."
"I know," said Hermione. "But in a year or two, who knows? Ron might surprise everyone—it would be ideal for George and the shop. I just have this feeling... What?" Hermione said in response to Ginny's amused snort.

"You have a feeling?" said Ginny. "Who are you and what have you done with Hermione?"

"If you must know," said Hermione, "I saw it in a dream."

"Oh, well, since you put it that way," said Ginny.

"Okay. I know how it sounds. But it was so real; it was almost like...like a memory."

Just then, their food arrived.

"It's about time," said Ginny. "I could eat a hippogriff!" For a few moments they ate in silence.

So," said Ginny, the glint in her eyes returning, "are you finally going to tell me what's been going on with you? You owe me after I saved your arse at dinner last month."

Hermione supposed she was right. It was long overdue and Hermione desperately needed to talk to someone about all of it.

"Fair enough," said Hermione. "Let me think. I suppose I should start at Midsummer's Eve."

It all came out in a torrent of words. Hermione explained how she had woken up in the stone circle; she mentioned the book she had been searching for but couldn't find. She revealed the whole truth about Ron, starting with the decline of their relationship since June and ending with the fight at Harry's birthday party.

"That's not everything, though, is it?" asked Ginny perceptively.

Hermione shook her head and took a deep breath. Then, she told her about Draco, about the vision and, she hated to admit it, the feelings. Ginny looked at her like she'd grown two heads, but she didn't say anything. So, Hermione told her about what had just happened in the apothecary. When she finished her story, and Ginny sat wide-eyed, she pulled the emerald ring out from beneath her blouse.

"Hermione," said Ginny sounding as if Hermione was about to step on a snake, "where did you get that?"

"I can't remember, actually," said Hermione. She could practically hear the alarm bells sounding in Ginny's mind.

"And yet you are still wearing it?" said Ginny sounding very calm. "Don't you think that it might be dangerous?" Hermione knew she must have been thinking of the locket, of Tom Riddle's diary, of the opal necklace that had cursed Katie Bell.

"Yes, I have thought about it. Give me some credit, Ginny," said Hermione, though not unkindly. "I wore that locket, and this doesn't feel dark like that did. I think I would recognize if the ring were cursed or enchanted."

"Fair enough," said Ginny, "but I'd feel a hell of a lot better if you had someone in the Ministry look at that."

"Ginny, I really don't think that's necessary," said Hermione.
"I know," said Ginny, "but how about this? Harry deals with this kind of stuff in the Auror Office. He could have someone there check it thoroughly, just to be absolutely sure it's fine."

Ginny was giving her an unrelenting stare and Hermione knew she was fighting a losing battle. Hermione was reluctant to part with the necklace. And then she realized that this very attachment could be a good reason to have it inspected. Better safe than sorry, she supposed.

"Fine," said Hermione. "If it will give you peace of mind and you promise not to pester me about it again after that, I will take it in myself when I head back to the Ministry tomorrow."

Ginny smiled, "See? That wasn't so hard, was it?" she said.

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It was three days before Hermione was supposed to catch the train to Hogwarts and she still hadn’t gotten the necklace back. She had been told that they hadn’t found anything yet and that she should expect it soon, but Hermione didn’t have time to wait. She suspected Harry had something to do with the delays—probably insisting it be double- and triple-checked not only for common enchantments but also for rare and obscure curses.

Hermione decided to take matters into her own hands. And that is how she found herself striding out of the lifts on the second floor of the Ministry and colliding with Ron Weasley. He fell, rather ungracefully, to the floor.

"I'm so sorry!" said Hermione offering a hand to help Ron to his feet.

Ron grunted and rose to his feet, ignoring Hermione's outstretched hand. Her hand fell along with her hopes that they might re-establish their friendship.

"Instead of being sorry," said Ron curtly, "you could try watching where you're going. What are you doing here anyway?"

"Not that it's any of your business," replied Hermione matching his tone, "but I was having an item inspected. I'm here to pick it up from..." Bollocks! She had forgotten his name again. Jacob, no, James—no, she'd remember that—Jasper?

"Jason!" she exclaimed in triumph. Why could she never remember his name?

"You mean Kyle?" said Ron.

"No, I don't," said Hermione. Why did he always try to correct her? It was infuriating.

"There's nothing wrong with the ring, you know," said Ron. Hermione shouldn't have been surprised that Ron knew about it. "The only thing that I find odd is that you've been wearing some ring from who-knows-where," he added.

"If there's nothing wrong with it, then I don't see why that matters," said Hermione. "Besides, it's nothing to do with you."

Ron's face was turning red, indicating that he had every intention of making it about him.

"Hermione!" said Harry, emerging from a door down the corridor. He had impeccable timing, and
Hermione couldn't figure out how he always managed it.

Hermione gave Ron a tight smile, then walked past him with a brisk, "Goodbye, Ronald." She didn't turn back to see whether he had left.

"Bad luck running into Ron," said Harry. "He's been in a right state about this ring, considering, you know, you wouldn't accept one from him."

"He didn't exactly offer one, though, did he?" said Hermione.

"Er, technically, no. But I'm not going to tell him that, am I?" said Harry. "Anyway, you can take the ring home with you today. There's nothing wrong with it."

"Don't sound so disappointed, Harry," said Hermione smiling.

They entered a small office with a desk in one corner, a large stainless steel table in the center of the room, and shelves lined with countless items, each suspended in a blue sphere.

"Afternoon, Hermione," greeted a young wizard only a few years older than she and Harry.

"Hello, Ja—Jason," said Hermione. She had almost called him Jackson.

Jason summoned a blue sphere and then released the necklace into his upturned palm.

"Good news: the ring is safe to wear," said Jason. "There are no curses, hexes, enchantments, or spells of any kind cast on this ring."

Hermione smiled and turned to Harry, "I told you there was nothing weird about it."

"Actually," corrected Jason and Hermione frowned, "I did want to share two noteworthy observations. First," he lifted the ring from his hand and turned it for Hermione to see, "you'll notice small markings just here," he indicated to a spot on the inside of the band, just under the stones.

"Hmm," said Hermione. "It almost looks like—"

"—a serial number of sorts," Jason finished. "I think, though I can't be certain, that this may be goblin-made. Did they say anything to you about it when you went into Gringotts?" he asked.

"I only went to Gringotts today, and I wasn't wearing the ring, obviously," said Hermione.

"Just as well," said Jason. "You know how they are about anything they've made."

"And the other thing?" said Hermione.

"Right," said Jason as if he'd just remembered. "I said the stone was free from spells and such, but," he paused dramatically, "it does emit a small amount of magic. We did extensive testing on the effects of wearing it with several staff members and didn't notice anything different. It's most likely just the stone's natural properties—genuine emerald—and stones have been known to carry their own magic. Have you noticed anything?"

"I can't say that I have," said Hermione. Jason handed her the necklace.

"Wear it well," he said. She put it back on immediately and thanked Jason before leaving with Harry. While she waited for the lift, she turned to hug Harry.
"Thank you," she said. "I know I protested, and nothing turned up, but I do feel much better about wearing this now, and I learned something interesting," she laughed, and Harry just smiled.

"Hermione, you're practically family," said Harry. We look out for each other, always have, always will. Have a safe trip to Hogwarts. I'd say I'd write, but we both know that won't happen." They laughed and the doors to the lift slid open. Hermione offered a quick wave of goodbye as she left Harry behind.

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Hermione had arrived at King’s Cross Station early, wanting to avoid the crowds. Since the war ended, she had been on the receiving end of more admiring stares and hushed comments than she cared for; she had even been asked for an autograph a few times. Hermione didn’t believe she was any more a war heroine than any other witch or wizard that fought against Voldemort.

She had been able to slip through Platform Nine and Three-Quarters unnoticed and had quickly made her way to a compartment at the far end of the Hogwarts Express. She closed the door behind her and pulled the shades to discourage other students from joining her and then breathed a sigh of relief. Hermione pulled a worn book out of her bag and settled in for a good read.

Just as she was nearing the end of a gripping chapter, the door slid open. Hermione and Draco wore matching expressions of surprise.

“I didn’t realize this compartment was occupied,” said Draco.

“Are you trying to hide, too?” Hermione asked surprising herself with the bluntness of the question. She set her book down and looked at Draco with interest. Hermione noticed him glance at the cover of her book.

“Too?” said Draco. He closed the compartment door behind him, and Hermione’s pulse quickened.

“What reason could you possibly have to hide? You, Granger, are the wizarding world’s sweetheart.”

“Don’t make me gag, Malfoy,” she said, and he smirked. “I’m no one’s sweetheart.” Hermione thought she saw a flicker of something break through Draco’s expression. "And besides, I don't care for the attention."

"Don't you?" he said. "I've seen your picture in the papers several times this summer."

"Have you?" said Hermione. "I've only made the front page once."

"It’s called hyperbole, Granger. I haven't been combing through the Prophet saving clippings of your journey with post-war fame," drawled Draco.

"Of course not," said Hermione, though she wasn’t entirely sure it was true. How curious. "Though, for someone who is averse to attention himself, I'm surprised you decided to return to Hogwarts."

"It was decided for me," he said to Hermione's surprise. "It seems that being a good citizen includes completing my education. It's not enough that I've spent the majority of the summer repairing the castle. Then again," his expression turned dark, "there may never be enough I can do
to make up for what I've done."

Hermione just stared at him. Draco stared back, daring her to confirm what must be his worst belief about himself.

"Surely, you don't believe that after what you did for us that day," said Hermione softly.

"And what of the things I didn't do, Granger?" he said taking a step toward her and lowering his voice. "Are you so willing to forgive me for being a silent witness..." he couldn't finish, but Hermione knew what he had been about to say. She remembered him standing helplessly in the room while Bellatrix tortured her. She rubbed her forearm reflexively, the word marking her in a whisper of pale white scar tissue.

She didn't know what made her do it, but she stood up and placed her hands on his arms in a gesture that was meant to comfort—she knew as well as he did that there was nothing he could have done to stop his aunt. Hermione waited for Draco to shake her off, but he only stood there, staring at the floor, all bravado gone.

"Yes," Hermione said answering his question. He looked into her eyes, and she felt him searching her mind for the truth of it. She locked her eyes on his and brought it forward for him to see. Acquitted, forgiven, desired. She closed her eyes, and her mind slammed shut against his. She hadn't meant to reveal that. She felt flushed and dropped her hands. It was clear they had both revealed more than either had intended.

Draco stepped forward closing the space between them. She felt his fingers slide through her hair as he pulled her close. His lips brushed against her ear as he murmured, "If you knew everything, you wouldn't be so quick to forgive."

His breath was hot against her skin, and she felt his words ripple through her body. Hermione lifted a hand and rested it on his chest; she could feel his heart pounding a rhythm against her hand.

"If you knew everything," he continued, "you wouldn't feel the need to shut me out." She looked up at him then, wondering if he could possibly mean it.

Just then the compartment door slid open. "You will never believe—" started Ginny.

Draco took his time untangling his hand from Hermione’s hair, running a thumb along her jaw as he pulled away from her. The corners of his mouth lifted fractionally in a muted smile, eyes never leaving hers until he turned to face Ginny.

"Weasley," he said in greeting.

"Malf—" Ginny shot back, eyes narrowed. "You had better find a compartment before they start filling up. I assume you got here early to avoid the crowds or was it just to harass our Hermione, here?"

"Ginny!" Hermione had finally found her voice.

"Thanks for the tip, Weasley," Draco replied, ignoring her accusation. He turned and nodded at Hermione in goodbye, "Granger." He walked out of the compartment, leaving the two girls standing in silence.

Ginny closed the compartment door.

"I had no idea— Ginny started, eyes wide.
"It's fine, Ginny. It's not like we had planned some secret rendezvous," said Hermione, blushing furiously at the idea. "Honestly, I think he was surprised to see me."

"Pleasantly surprised by the looks of it," retorted Ginny, smirking.

Hermione conceded Ginny's observation with an ungracious expression, then turned back to her seat near the window.

"So," said Hermione, "what is it that I won't believe?"

Ginny's face split into a mischievous grin as she sat across from Hermione, eyes glittering. Hermione tuck away the memory of her encounter with Draco for later inspection. For now, she wanted to simply enjoy her last ride to Hogwarts with her friends. Hermione knew she had to be present for the small joys in life; these moments were the stars that lit her way when night inevitably fell. She smiled and settled in to listen to Ginny's story.

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