

End Games

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Hermione and Lucius and the prelude and aftermath of battle.

I Think I Know Enough of Hate or Prelude to Battle

Chapter 1 of 2

Hermione and Lucius and the prelude and aftermath of battle.

The prelude to battle has turned her into a shell.

The war has been dragging for years, and she is tired and numb. Weary of always being the one to hold it together, the one to be relied upon, provide solutions and brilliance and support. She has ceased to feel and is very nearly indifferent to the loss. One part of her is desperate for emotions – any kind of sensation – and another simply does not care. Somewhere, in the middle, rests what remains of her heart.

She wishes for it to be over. Wishes for the day of battle to finally dawn so that afterwards she can sleep.

One day he catches her. She is careless of course, perhaps deliberately so, and it is an easy thing for him to snatch her away. She knows she is in enemy hands, she knows he will hurt her so badly and then finish her, but she cannot bring herself to care. At least that will be an ending of sorts, and these days the only thing she craves is an end.

He circles her languidly, drawls threats and insults, tells her in that refined voice precisely how much he will hurt her. He gleefully details all the ways in which she will suffer. He is a predator with arctic eyes, a sleek wolf in snow, all graceful lines and deadly intent.

She finds that she wants to suck his icy voice into her mouth, wants to swallow his venom and malevolence and use it as the antidote to what she has become.

So she moves first, touches his cheek with one hand and pulls up the hem of her dress with the other. She feels elated when he responds to her, elated because she knows that he does not want to, knows that he is repulsed by her but unable to help himself. Their coupling is frantic and ugly and violent, and she screams in rapture and pain. He might be otherwise naked, but he refuses to remove his gloves, refuses to touch her with his bare hands. His hatred for her is intoxicating, and for the first time in a very long while she feels alive. It is disgusting and wrong, sick and so very, very sweet.

She turns to him afterwards.

"You will let me go." It is not a question, nor is it a plea.

He snarls, and punches the wall with all his force. She licks blood from his knuckles. It is delicious.

"Yes", he hisses.

"We will do this again."

"We will", he affirms, face contorted into a hell-mask of rage.

She laughs.

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And so it continues, over and over and over again. Days, weeks, months. The danger of it makes her breathless, makes her smile, and it makes him snarl and reach for her with cruel hands.

She feels so alive when he is deep within her, fucking her and bruising her and hating her. The self-loathing on his face is exhilarating, almost enough to make her forget her own self-disgust. Every time he wraps a gloved hand – oh those long, elegant fingers! – round her throat and squeezes as hard as he can, bringing her tantalisingly close to death, she comes harder than she ever has before. She refuses to let go of his eyes – amber meeting mercury and her willing him not to stop, willing him to keep crushing her windpipe until there is nothing left of her but fragments and atoms. She knows that one day he might not let up, knows that he might finally end her, and that knowledge is the sweetest of all.

She wears his fingerprints like the most exquisite necklace.

Afterwards she taunts him – mocks his warped, sick ideals, his antique promises and his betrayal – until finally he gives her what she wants and punches her, throws her into walls, calls her awful and revolting things.

She treasures every single cut and bruise. They prove to her that she is alive, that blood still courses through her veins – a fast, pitch-black river rushing for him. It ascertains that she is not just a walking dead, shuffling through mindless motions of war with broken eyes and broken mind.

Then she weeps, curses both of them, loathes herself and him with horrific intensity, and she leaves again and again, swearing to him and her that this is the last time, the very last time. He smirks lazily, and is careful to show her how much he hates her. She hates him too. Almost as much as she hates herself.

Sometimes she clumsily attempts to entice secrets out of him. Battle plans, information, strategies, anything that might justify her doing this. If she does this with him as a sacrifice for the Light, manages to inveigle something crucial out of him, maybe then she can forgive herself for what she is doing. What she has become.

He always sees straight through all her attempts and calls her pathetic.

She agrees.

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"If we meet on the battlefield, will you kill me?"

"Yes." There is no hesitation in his voice. This pleases her.

"Good. Me too."

"I know."

Then he shoves her forward and pushes into her so hard that she thinks she might fracture a rib on the edge of the table. She stops thinking.

It is bliss.

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There are times when they appear to be caught between two seconds, between coupling and derision, when they lie tangled and exhausted, afforded some small amount of peace. She trails her fingers over sharp angles and plains, journeys along deep lines of experience and marvels at how someone so refined at the same time can be so corrupt and ruined. He plays with her curls and touches her mouth, and he is almost gentle.

It is their precious time in the eye of the storm, and she is calm.

In the background there is the countdown, always the countdown, and she come to realise that she has grown to fear it. Soon what they have become together will end.

She finds the thought unbearable. And she despises herself for it.

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She sits naked on the floor. He is getting dressed – all velvet and silk, fur and embroidery – and does not look at her. So she watches him instead. He is beautiful and lupine and she wants to wrap herself around him, take him inside her and keep him there forever. But she has become too small.

He brushes his hair back and turns to her, crouches down to face her on the floor. Fingers on her temple, and a palm cupping her cheek.

"This was the last time."

She knows that he is right. She knows that in a matter of days this fucked-up prelude will be over, and then the closure she once coveted will finally be hers.

She covets it no longer.

"I suppose you are happy", she sneers in his face. "Play your cards right, and you might be the one to kill me. That will please you greatly, will it not?"

He grabs her by her elbows, drags her upright and then slams her hard into the wall. The back of her head connects with stone and she sees white light. She clings to the pain. He leans so close – long silver hair over her collarbone and her soul shattering into a million jagged pieces. His breath on her face, and her palm against his heart. She wants to clutch his heartbeats in her hand. Gloved fingers on her jaw, gentle, oh so gentle, and then brutal lips on hers. He kisses her, and it is obsession and possession, savagery and pure fury. He bites her. She bleeds.

Then, abruptly, a step back. She slides back down on the floor curled with her knees against her chest. He breathes heavily, flared nostrils, mouth stretched to a thin white line. As dishevelled as she has ever seen him. Exquisite.

She feels dead inside.

"I hate you," he says and turns to the door.

"I hate you more," she says to his retreating back.

He does not slow his steps or hesitate, but walks out, slams the door shut and is gone from her life.

She looks at the palm of her hand. She can still feel his heartbeats against her lifeline.

"Please do not die", she whispers to the empty room.

Her eyes burn dry.

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The line "I Think I Know Enough of Hate" in the chapter title is from the poem "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost.

This Living Hand, Now Warm and Capable, or the Aftermath of Battle

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione and Lucius and the prelude and aftermath of battle.

The aftermath of battle ought to be shrouded in smoke and drenched in rain. There ought to be circling ravens and thunderclouds and impenetrable darkness.

But she sees an azure sky through the branches above her. She hears songbirds trilling nearby.

It bothers her.

Then again, there are a lot of things bothering her at the moment.

It bothers her that despite the dappled sunlight on her face, she is so very, very cold. It bothers her that she cannot move at all. It bothers her that she can feel her life seeping into the moss beneath her. It bothers her that despite her sharp mind and despite the magic and power at all of their disposal, what would eventually bring her down was a well-aimed dagger to the gut.

And it bothers her that despite all the fairy tales and logic and evidence to the contrary, Dark did in the end conquer Light.

This is not how it was meant to be.

She can remember very little of the actual battle, but knows without a question of a doubt that they lost. She recalls flashes only: friends dying, blood and shit and howls. Despair. She recalls fragments of lives bathed in green, shattered like so much glass.

It is all lost, and in the end, in the grand scheme of things, her one betrayal is small and insignificant. It no longer matters. Perhaps it never did.

Now, footsteps approaching in the quiet. Slowly, carefully, but with intent. Seeking. She cannot move her head to see, but at this very moment everything is remarkably clear. She can taste dew and copper and earth. She hears grass growing, trees whispering. She feels excruciating pain and a gentle breeze in her hair. She smells wild thyme and filth.

A voice then, from somewhere behind her. Near. Soft, almost a whisper.

"It is you."

Ah. It is him.

He crouches beside her. His long hair of moonshine is matted with blood, but in his eyes she sees the dark thunderclouds she longed for earlier. Mercurial. Hard. His mouth is curved into a sneer, but whether from habit or contempt she cannot tell.

She feels calm then.

"I am about to die," she tells him. As she speaks she can feel blood in her mouth, can hear wetness in her voice. Perhaps the dagger also pierced her lung. It does not matter now.

"Yes," he says, "you are."

"I am not afraid." For some reason it is important to tell him this, it is important that her sworn enemy should know that she is facing her end bravely.

A slight twitch to his mouth, but his eyes inscrutable as always. She never could read them.

"I know you are not."

"Will you stay with me? It won't be long."

He studies her face for some time before speaking. "Yes. Yes, I believe I will."

He stands back up long enough to remove his torn, blood spattered robe, and then drapes it over her body. It makes no difference to her. She is still cold. She will be cold forever, or for a short while. Or both. Gracefully he sits down on the moss beside her and, with a gloved hand, brushes heavy curls away from her forehead.

A small part of her finds it amusing that a proud, haughty man such as he should be sitting on the naked ground. The rest of her notes that she can no longer feel her legs.

"Thank you."

He does not answer, but inclines his head. There is an ugly scratch marring his face, running from his temple down to his jaw, and she thinks that it will leave a scar. Aside from that, and his filthy hair, he is beautiful. Beautiful and cruel.

She is aware that her thoughts are wandering, but she feels that just this once she may be excused. The numbness has crept up her legs and into her stomach. Soon it will reach her chest. At least she is no longer in pain.

"Tell me something..."

At the sound of her voice, he turns faraway eyes back to meet hers. He raises an eyebrow.

"If... if I could be saved, would you do it?"

"You are quite beyond saving, my dear." He looks away again.

"Yes... But if, if there was a chance?"

"No. I would not." His voice is as final as his words, and cold. Almost as cold as she is feeling.

"I suppose that is as it should be," she breathes. She does not feel sad at his answer, nor does he seem to regret it.

"I suppose so."

"Will you tell me a story? Your voice is very beautiful, it sounds like snowfall."

This surprises a short, sharp laugh from him. "I know no stories," he says.

"You must have told some to your son, back when he was little?"

"No. Never."

She supposes that she is not that surprised. And that crushing numbness has now reached her chest, her arms. Shadows slither across her vision; she sees him as if at the end of a tunnel. For the first time she is scared. She needs to see him clearly.

"In that case," she whispers, "in the pocket of my robe... Right side."

He frowns at her, but reaches into her robes with gentle hands. He pulls out a tattered old book, a volume she has carried with her since her early teens, a keepsake from a different life.

He holds the book awkwardly in his hand. Some distant part of her is amused by his discomfort.

"Will you hold my hand?"

She sees anger in his face then, and resignation. She fancies she can also see a tinge of sadness, but she cannot be sure. Perhaps that is a vain notion, a spurious hope. Whatever it is that he is feeling, he still takes her hand in his, but he does not remove his glove. He never does. He has never once touched her with his bare hands, and right now that fills her with such emptiness and longing. And anger. She coughs wetly and can feel blood in her mouth again. He finds a handkerchief and wipes her lips.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

She looks to the book in his hand. "Page 167. Read for me then."

Without letting go of her hand, he flips the book open and finds the page she asked for. He starts reading, his voice clear and strong and glacial. She has always loved his voice.

"This living hand, now warm and capable

Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold

And in the icy silence of the tomb,

So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights

That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood

So in my veins red life might stream again,

And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—

I hold it towards you."

He finishes and looks down at her. "I..."

She wants to put her fingers to his lips, but cannot move at all. There is more darkness than light now, shadows are encroaching oh so swiftly, and she desperately clings to the sight of his face. She has always loved his face. She has always hated his face.

She sighs, and he leans close to her. She can see his grey eyes, near, so very near, and she is glad. She thinks that perhaps now, in this one moment, he views his own betrayal with less contempt and self-disgust than he once did. She hopes so.

"I would, you know," she whispers wetly. Tries to tell him. "That... for you, I would."

The incomprehension and rage and despair in his eyes are the very last things she sees.

The poem that Lucius reads to Hermione is "This Living Hand, So Warm and Capable" by John Keats.