

Never Leave You

by Brigid

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Chapter 1

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Disclaimer: These are all JKR characters... I'm just taking them out to play!

It was almost time. He could feel the anticipation and the fear that hung in the air like a cloud; when he licked his dry lips in anxiety he swore he could taste the despair. He was no longer too proud to admit that he was terrified, but not just for himself. Her hand was trembling slightly in his grasp and he could feel her erratic pulse through her wrist.

He looked at her in desperation, his little know-it-all, and knew he had to make her leave. She was his responsibility and he couldn't live with himself if something happened to her. He recognized that his chances for survival tonight were pretty non-existent, but he wanted her to live.

"Hermione." His voice was shaking, and he was trying to stop the tears that threatened to spill onto his cheeks. "Please, you have to leave. Don't tell me where you are going; I can't risk knowing in case they torture me and I tell them." He gulped, pleading with his solemn gray eyes. His fingers gently reached into her hair. *Oh gods, I'm going to miss her!*

Hermione looked into the face of the man she had fallen in love with against all odds, the boy who had once been her greatest enemy, and saw the love and the fear in his eyes. Not long after he had been tasked to kill Dumbledore, he had defected and come to fight for the good in the world. He had gone to the members of the Order and begged on his knees to give him another chance he had been traumatized by what the Death Eaters did and had made him do. He wasn't his father, no matter how hard he tried to be.

Ron, Harry and Hermione had been skeptical initially, but once he was away from the influence of his Slytherin friends and Death Eater father, the real Draco had been exposed. He was just a scared, lonely man who didn't know real love or friendship and had shown his bitterness and jealousy through his cruelty over the years. He was actually very smart, with a dry, sarcastic wit that always made her laugh. It hadn't taken her long to realize that she was more compatible to the blond Prince of Slytherin than her lifelong friend, Ron.

Suddenly, there was a loud explosion on the field where the battle was poised to take place. Draco shielded Hermione with his body, but nothing was falling from the sky. He looked up and saw the sign of the Dark Mark in the sky and watched horrified as it took on a life of its own. The snake in the Mark became alive and began striking at those on the ground like a cobra.

Hermione knew it was all over. She didn't want to leave him, she knew he was going to die tonight, but she had promised him she wouldn't stay and fight. Draco had confided in her that he didn't think he would be able to concentrate during the battle if she stayed. Throwing her arms around him a vise-like hug, she let her tears fall, silently, staining his shirt and she felt him return the death grip and felt the sobs that shook his whole body. "I love you, Draco Malfoy. I'm only leaving because you made me promise. If you hadn't I would stay here..."

"NO. I won't have you die! I couldn't bear it, Hermione." He pulled away to see her beautiful face one more time. Draco knew that he was memorizing every feature so it would be the last thing he saw when he fell. She reached up and gently brushed away the tears on his face, and he leaned into her embrace.

"I love you, too, Hermione. Be safe, be happy, live your life for me, and never doubt that I loved you with all of my soul." Both of them were crying now and kissing slowly, yet conveying all the love and devotion they had for one another. They knew it was goodbye. He pulled away and gently pushed her to further the distance. "Go. Go while you have time. Don't look back."

Another explosion and suddenly people were screaming, bolts of colored light were flying in the air. She paused, her fear catching up with her and momentarily freezing her in

place. Draco needed her to leave so he could concentrate. "RUN! Hermione, run now!" Snapping out of her trance, she nodded in acknowledgement, grim determination and loss on her face as she Apparated.

Draco's vision blurred with tears as he looked at where she had been standing. It felt like his heart had been ripped from his chest, but it was the only way to protect her. Shaking himself to focus his mind on the task before him, he charged into battle against the Dark Lord. He dodged spells and cast his own, trying to stay alive. In the back of his mind he was hoping to survive and eventually find Hermione, but he couldn't dwell on it in case it didn't happen.

He caught up to some of the other Order members and began to fight openly alongside them. Draco knew he was officially signing his death warrant, as those from the opposite side recognized the son of Lucius Malfoy fighting against his legacy. He couldn't really look around and see what was happening on the rest of the battlefield, but he could tell the death toll was high since he kept tripping over bodies and he could smell the metallic hint of blood in the air.

The fighting dragged on and even though he was tired, he wasn't too injured which gave him hope of surviving after all. Then he saw the figure heading his direction and knew that his death was near.

Her crazed expression filled him with fear. He knew what his insane aunt was capable of; he never told Hermione how lucky she was to escape her clutches alive, because he had seen her work before and he knew no one survived, either physically or mentally, when Bellatrix Lestrange was done with you. Just ask the Longbottoms.

"Tut, tut, Draco. The Dark Lord might have forgiven you for running away, but openly consorting with Mudbloods and fighting against your family is unforgivable." Her eyes flashed maniacally. *Wonder which Unforgivable she'll use first*, he thought. He knew she was going to toy with him.

"Aunt Bellatrix, can't really say it's lovely to see you. However, I'm not surprised it's you. I know Father is too weak to do it himself," Draco sneered.

She tilted her head at him, as if looking at him from a slightly different angle would allow her to see him better. Draco knew that she was preparing to strike. "CRUCIO!" His entire body was wracked with the most blinding pain. His very bones felt like they were on fire, and his mind was screaming in agony, but no sound escaped him. Draco refused to give her the satisfaction of hearing him scream out loud. Her crazed laughter filled the air as she watched her nephew writhing in a hell of her making. Bellatrix briefly wondered if he would be able to remain standing through all the torture she intended to inflict upon him tonight. She always loved the challenge of breaking people.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" A lime green jet of light flew over his right shoulder, and he saw his aunt fall lifeless on the ground. Immediately the spell ended, but the pain remained and it was so potent that he crumpled face first to the ground. *I love you, Hermione. I'm glad you got away, my love.* Draco saw her face in his mind before the world went black.

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Hermione landed in the trees behind the fighting. She knew she promised Draco she would leave and not fight, but she couldn't. He wanted to keep her alive, but she needed him to survive just as much. She watched as Draco stared at where she had been standing only seconds before and then shook himself. Hermione recognized that determined set of his jaw and his posture and knew that he was preparing himself to die.

Just the thought of such a thing nearly shattered her heart. He was such a good man, even though most people would never acknowledge such a thing, least of all himself. She remembered the times they had talked at Grimmauld Place and he admitted that he didn't think he was a person of worth, because of his background and his family's reputation. She knew he felt guilty for all the things he had done to her and her friends in school. She would never tell anyone that she had seen Draco Malfoy cry in guilt and beg for her forgiveness. He once told her that she was the only real friend he had ever had. And that was exactly why she was silently following him in the tree line.

Hermione really had meant to leave, but where could she go? Her parents were living Obliviated lives of bliss in Australia and she couldn't go home or to the Burrow or anywhere in Europe... so she stayed. He had disappeared among the throng of people, but she knew where he was, thanks to the locator charm she had activated tonight. The necklace she was wearing was sort of like a magnet tuned to Draco's magical energy field, so even if they were separated she would be able to find him. She spotted him in the middle of a chaotic fight with the Order against Voldemort's forces.

Wringing her hands in fear, she watched him dance around bodies and twirl to avoid the curses thrown at him. Hermione noticed that most of the curses were aimed at Draco and not the other members. They were trying to single him out in punishment for deserting. *If only I could do something!* But there was nothing she could do, if she started throwing curses she would give away her position and she was here to protect Draco. She had promised not to die so she wasn't going to draw unnecessary attention to herself. The goal was to get them both out of this alive.

As the fighting continued, Hermione noticed there were fewer people on both sides. Draco had wandered off slightly during the battle. He was still visible, but there was no one around to protect him. That's when she saw *her* the woman from her nightmares. She shivered and felt sick to her stomach when she realized that Draco was her target. *Oh sweet Merlin! She's going to kill him!*

Hermione stealthily made her way closer to her love and the woman who tormented her dreams. She was barely able to catch the short conversation they were having.

"Tut, tut, Draco. The Dark Lord might have forgiven you for running away, but openly consorting with Mudbloods and fighting against your family is unforgivable." Hermione knew that both she and Draco caught the threat within those words. She immediately broke out in a cold sweat and whispered a prayer to whatever gods there were to guide her.

"Aunt Bellatrix, can't really say it's lovely to see you. However, I'm not surprised it's you. I know Father is too weak to do it himself," Draco sneered. *Oh, darling, now is not the time to push your luck!*

Bellatrix tilted her head and Hermione swallowed her scream when the curse hit Draco. Somehow he remained on his feet, even as his whole body was quaking. For a split second, his head turned her way and she saw the excruciating agony written on his face. His mouth was open in a silent scream and even though his eyes were shut she was sure that blood vessels must be exploding in his eyeballs. That look was all it took for the bushy haired Gryffindor. Summoning all her hatred for the evil witch, Hermione stepped out from behind the trees and screamed the words she never expected to say.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" Bellatrix fell wordlessly to the ground, the haunting echo of her insane laughter sent shivers up Hermione's spine. She ran swiftly to Draco's side, unsure of what to do. He was lying on his stomach on the ground, his eyes open but unseeing. Tears began to cascade down her face as she reached for his wrist. His pulse was so weak she could barely feel it and he didn't respond to her touch.

"Oh, Draco," she sobbed. His eyelids fluttered and then closed. Still holding his wrist, she knew he was there but barely hanging on. "Don't leave me, Draco. I need you. You are the only one who understands me. Please, stay with me."

Hermione cast a warming spell on him to keep him from going into shock and tried to remember what potions she had in her bag. Pepper Up! She hoped it wouldn't be too much after the trauma Bellatrix's potent curse, but she had to try something before he slipped away permanently. Gently rolling him onto his back and holding his head up, she placed the vial against his lips and tried to keep most of the potion in his mouth.

Draco instinctively swallowed, almost choking on the taste of the pepper in his mouth. *Where is water when you need it?* He groaned at the residual pain in his muscles, joints, ligaments, every bloody where. *Damn, I hate that woman.* Very slowly he opened his eyes, wincing at the effort it took to do such a simple thing. He was surprised he could see since he was sure the curse was going to cause his eyeballs to explode.

It slowly dawned on him that he was alive, which meant that Bellatrix must be dead. "What happened?" Draco croaked. He had closed his eyes again in exhaustion, not really expecting an answer. He assumed that he was being toyed with by the Death Eaters and was waiting for Round Two to begin at any moment. He was not prepared for the strangled cry next to him.

Suddenly, the Pepper Up began to really take effect and he opened his eyes and turned his head slightly to see the woman he loved beside him, tears of joy streaming down her face. "Hermione? Please tell me I'm alive and you aren't my angel to take me beyond the veil."

With a watery smile and tenderness shining in her eyes, she responded, "No Draco, you are alive. Bellatrix is dead." He vaguely remembered someone casting Avada Kedavra... he sat up and looked her in the eyes.

"Why didn't you leave?"

"I couldn't. You wanted to protect me; I had to protect you, too. I'm sorry, but I c---"

Her words were cut off by his desperate kiss. Draco's hands were in her hair pulling her as close to him as possible. Her small hands clutched his shirt pulling him ever closer to her. When they broke apart to breathe, Hermione saw the fresh trail of tears on his cheeks.

"You could have died coming back."

Gently, she rested her forehead against his. "You would have died if I didn't. I would never have forgiven myself for leaving you to die, Draco. I might have lived, but I would have been empty inside without you."

The heart he always considered to be made of ice completely melted at her words. Draco looked directly into her beautiful brown eyes and replied, "Thank you, Hermione, for coming back for me. For saving me and loving me. I don't deserve you, but I love you so much."

"Oh, Draco, I love you so much! I could never leave you, ever." Once again their lips met, but in a gentle kiss that said more than their words ever could.

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Harry and Ron found them in a tight embrace when the battle was over. They could tell that both of them had been crying from the puffy eyes and tear tracks on their dirty faces. The boys were shocked to say the least. For a split second Harry wondered if they were being Imperiused, but when he saw the gentle way Draco held his best friend and then kissed her with such obvious tenderness, he knew they loved each other. Blushing, he grabbed Ron by the elbow and began to drag him away.

"Oi, what the hell, Harry? We need to kick Malfoy's ass!"

He looked at his thick friend over the rim of his glasses. "They love each other, Ron. Did you not see how gently he is holding her? They are comforting each other after a war; if we interrupted right now Hermione would hex your bits into the next century."

Ron blushed and nodded. Taking his elbow back from Harry, he began walking away on his own. Harry followed and wondered what other surprises the end of this godforsaken war would have in store for everyone.