

## I.

if i can't save us // then let me feel you / happy and safe / under my chin

### SEPTEMBER, PART ONE.

“Hermione,” Harry says. Pulling his glasses off, revealing sunken shadows underneath his eyes, staring at her with a seriousness she hasn’t seen in months. “Hermione, please.”

### SEPTEMBER, PART TWO.

DEAR MISS HERMIONE GRANGER:

This is a notice that your Ministry Marriage for Unity to **MR. DOMINIC GIDEON ROSIER**, originally scheduled for **MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2008 AT 4:00PM**, has been canceled.

Please instead report to the Ministry of Magic, Courtroom Eight on **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2008 AT 7:00AM** to attend your Ministry Marriage for Unity to **MR. DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY**.

Directions to the courtroom are enclosed in this placard and can be revealed with the command *rectio courtroom eight*. A wedding gown is not required, but highly recommended for photographs.

If you have any concerns about the Ministry Marriages for Unity, please consult the guidebook provided by the Minister, his advisors, and Wizarding World Restoration Task Force. The guidebook’s contents can be summoned with the command *revelare dux*, and the wand movement accompanying a standard Summoning Charm.

Please do not be late. Recall that the Ministry Marriages for Unity are a celebration and acknowledgement of the well-being of the British wizarding society. Consequences for missing an appointment are severe, and can be found listed on the reverse side of this placard for your convenience.

### SEPTEMBER, PART THREE.

“You can still leave,” Harry says. “Disappear, and never come back. You’ve done enough already, Hermione, *please*. Let me help you leave.”

### SEPTEMBER, PART FOUR.

#### FINAL MINISTRY MARRIAGES FOR UNITY RELEASED YESTERDAY

*written by Elisa Francis for The Daily Prophet*

The final Ministry Marriages for Unity were released over the weekend, rounding out the number of marriages this September to a total of thirty-two. These marriages, which concern the randomized matching of all eligible pureblood males to muggleborn females, are part of a nationwide effort to reduce rising tensions driven by recent, extremist movements within the population (see PAGE 8: BILL FOR HOGWARTS CURRICULUM REWRITE AGAIN PROPOSED and PAGE 13: ON THE OPEN LETTER CONCERNING THE WIZENGAMOT’S SYSTEM OF ELECTION for more information) while speaking to the progress the nation has made towards accommodating for Muggleborn individuals.

The final Ministry Marriage for Unity will take place on Tuesday, September 30th, according to Mr. Vireo Tremblay, who heads the Wizarding World Restoration Task Force. Whether or not additional mandated marriages will be added to the Marriages for Unity project is still yet to be determined.

*The Daily Prophet* also notes that insider sources initially suggested that several wealthy pureblood individuals such as Mr. Draco Lucius Malfoy (sole heir to the Malfoy estates and fortune), Mr. Theodore Elias Nott (sole heir to the Nott estates and fortune), and the duo of Mr. Rowen Lennox Selwyn and Mr. Damon Lennox Selwyn (twin heirs to the Selwyn estates and fortune), were offered an exemption from the law in return for their extensive contributions and generous donations to the Ministry since the conclusion of the Second Wizarding War ten years ago. However, *The Daily Prophet* can confirm that Mr. Malfoy is promised to Miss Hermione Jean Granger, notable war heroine... (FULL LIST OF MARRIAGES CONTINUED ON PAGE 3)

## SEPTEMBER, PART FIVE.

Inside the sterile ministry courtroom, Harry begs her with his eyes.

“Do you, Hermione Jean Granger,” the officiant says, “take Draco Lucius Malfoy to be your husband?”

Her fingers tighten around his for the briefest moment before she realizes whose hands she is holding. “I do,” she says.

“And do you, Draco Lucius Malfoy,” the officiant continues, “take Hermione Jean Granger to be your wife?”

“I do,” he says. Unmoving.

The officiant smiles. “Then I, Ralphie Lee Stewart, do now pronounce you man and wife. Please proceed to courtroom nine to take your wedding photographs.”

A hand slips behind her. The photographer, waiting at the door, grins eagerly and smooths down her floral skirt. “Just go with it,” Malfoy says, as they step out of the room and take their places in front of a gaudy assortment of cheap wedding decor. Tucking her under his chin, tilting his head, relaxing into the pose. She imagines him above her: is he smiling? Should she be smiling? The camera flashes. His hand falls away. Somewhere far on her left, Harry frowns.

## II.

if this will drown / or burn // then let us drink starlight

## OCTOBER, PART ONE.

She hardly ever sees him around the flat, but the few times she does, it's always in the middle of the night. He walks through the door with his overcoat turned up, moonlight falling across his silver hair and tumbling down his dark jeans. She wants to ask him where he bought muggle jeans from, and why she found a muggle wedding ring in its ring box the night they got married, sitting on a pillow in the bedroom he's all but given to her. She wants to ask why he married her in the first place; why all the other obscenely wealthy purebloods are still bachelors. She wants to ask why their wedding photos are being used as Ministry propaganda on the front cover of *The Daily Prophet*.

Instead, she lets him shuck off his jacket and deposit his briefcases. Reach for a mug from the cabinet over the stove; search for a tea bag he likes. He doesn't look at her, and she doesn't think

they've spoken since they first moved in. When the shadow of him and his tea inevitably disappears back down the hallway, she doesn't follow him.

It's not marriage she's experiencing, she thinks to herself often. Peaceful flat sharing at best, and a frosty silent treatment at worst. Ever since she and Harry first spent hours sitting in a coffee shop, catastrophizing back and forth endlessly over her marriage, the theories and fears they'd spun have disappeared one by one.

Instead, she's left with a lingering longing for more. Forgetting that just mere weeks ago, she was afraid for her own life: terrified that Draco Malfoy, newfangled Pureblood scion and exorbitant donor to the corrupt postwar Ministry, had requested her hand specifically to exact revenge upon the audacious Mudblood girl of his childhood.

Instead she's been faced with a husband she barely sees. A hollow feeling that grows each evening she stares at the picture on the mantelpiece: their wedding photo, his lips twisted upwards, her eyes wide, standing differently in every way than her parents did in their own, identical photo.

She'd once stood in her living room, staring at that old photograph and imagining what her own wedding could look like. How she'd do her hair; where the wedding would be; who they'd invite; where they would run off to afterwards. All the things the series of photographs her parents had left behind showed.

She's had none of those things so far. Just a husband who refuses to speak to her.

## OCTOBER, PART TWO.

She forgets all her thoughts about her marriage when Dominic Rosier's wife is found dead on a Tuesday morning. Harry sends her a letter by owl first; and then she receives three floo calls from other employees in her legal office; and then the *Daily Prophet* arrives. Hermione drops everything related to her morning cup of coffee to unroll the newspaper on her kitchen counter, only to find that the headline reads ***LATEST INVESTMENTS BY MALFOY AND BURKE FAMILIES TO FUND NEW SECURITY MEASURES FOR THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC.***

There is no mention of Rosier, or of his wife, in any of the first pages. It isn't until she flips to the end section, with the rest of the obituaries, that Hermione finds a note about Lydia Golden, a Muggleborn girl who was found by the river Thames at three in the morning; and even then, the note mentions nothing of the violent magical damage staining her ribs black and blue.

Hermione is so outraged over the murder that she forgets that she and her husband are not on speaking terms.

"Did you see this?" she demands. Slaps the paper on the table. "Rosier's wife is *dead*. The Ministry claimed these marriages were for unity and she's *dead*. What sort of unity is this a demonstration of? And there's not a word of it in the paper! Who do they think they can fool?"

He doesn't flinch. Steps around the island and opens a cupboard; pulls a mug down from the shelf and picks up the kettle she's abandoned.

"The Ministry runs its own business," he says. "There is little to be gained from being—" he waves a hand at the fist she's been clenching for the past minutes "—this upset."

His words make her forget that Harry closed his letter from this morning with *be careful around Malfoy, I don't know what he has intended for you*. That it might be smart to be afraid, because he might be one of them.

"If you think that this— *this*— " she shakes the paper for emphasis " —is something I can be calm about— " she throws her arms wide and stares at him, her body thrumming with a ferocity that tears her apart, " —the Ministry is *lying*. Their idea of security is bullshit— has been bullshit for *months*, if not years and *years*. I've launched petition after petition to protect Muggleborn citizens, demanded change after change, for them to say *nothing*, to release *this*— is this what they call justice? Is this their idea of peace?"

Her voice breaks and she hates it. Hates how being angry hurts so much. "A charade of love in exchange for the life of every muggleborn they've matched? I can't even be inside my *own home* without being terrified? As if it's not enough that I didn't even get to *choose* my own husband, live the marriage I *dreamed* of, I've been forced to have this? / could have been the one who died— " here she realizes she is crying, and dashes away the tears that have been forming in the corners of her eyes " —/ was matched to Rosier during the summer before I was assigned to you, it could have been *my body* found in the river with blatant signs of magical abuse— "

"But it wasn't."

She looks up from her rant. The mug has been emptied and set aside on the counter; he's rolling his shoulders back and straightening the sleeves of his suit jacket now. Dismissive, like he wasn't even listening to her rant; but he must have been, because he's interrupted her with determination.

"It wasn't you," he repeats. "And you have nothing to be afraid of. That *won't* be you."

With that, he turns and strides back out of the kitchen.

### III.

if we are dying // then let me rip open / and bleed love

## NOVEMBER, PART ONE.

She doesn't tell Harry about their conversation. Instead she lets him talk about his theories ("*I saw Malfoy at the Ministry again, having a conversation with the Minister.*" and "*He and Burke had lunch today at the café outside the Ministry.*" and "*Are you sure you don't want extra security?*" and, today, "*He was with Nott today, they had brunch and then sat for hours. Has he ever brought any of them back to your flat?*")

Hermione only knows to shake her head. She recalls the figure of her husband sweeping through the kitchen this morning, forgoing his usual tea to depart a half hour early. There'd been falling snow out beyond the front door when he'd opened it, and she'd had to clench her fist with the realization of a dramatically early winter. Of a month spent drafting and redrafting legislation that her heart knows the pureblood Wizengamot will never pass, all the while ignoring the ring she's moved to her bedside table and the husband who walks in silently every night.

"They're scheming something," Harry continues, pulling off his glasses to rub at his eyes wearily, "Malfoy, and all the rest of them. I'm sure of it. Rosier got rid of his wife and now he's found a pureblood woman, I heard, and when I did some investigation into Rosier himself, I found files from the Ministry addressed from Malfoy to Tremblay. Tremblay was fully set on marrying you to Rosier, you know, until Malfoy intervened?"

That evening when the front door opens and Malfoy walks in, she slips off the bar stool and helps him shrug off his heavy, snow-covered overcoat. Her fingers curl over the back of his collar, catching the inside of the gray wool and brushing over the back of his neck on accident.

He freezes, coat halfway off, Hermione's hands keeping it from crumpling to the ground. "Granger?" he asks. His eyebrows drawn up in confusion, a flicker of sudden emotion cracking through the steel of his eyes.

"Draco," she says, and feels her stomach turn over violently. His name sounds different aloud than in her head: harsher, flintier. In a way, less to be caught up over.

He lets the rest of the overcoat slip off his shoulders, and then takes the heavy fabric back from her hands to hang it up. "Did you need something?" he asks. Stiff.

She's spent the whole day thinking about what to say to him— how to break the silence, to get the answers she needs— but the last thing she'd expected is for him to ask her for what she needs.

"Er— no, not really," she says. "Could I ask you a question, though?"

They sit down at the kitchen counter, two cups of tea set between them, and for a brief moment Hermione imagines if this is what married life might look like: coming home, sharing tea, talking about their day.

But then Malfoy shrugs one shoulder and picks up the tea, sniffing it.

"I didn't poison it," she says, slightly defensively. "I wouldn't do to you what Rosier did to *his* wife." She pauses. "But you'd know all about it, if I tried, wouldn't you?"

It's a bad transition, a terrible one, really, and she feels her whole body wince with the awkwardness. Ignoring the way he stiffens across the counter and sets the tea cup back down without taking a sip.

"You wrote quite the letter to the Minister to convince him to rematch me." His eyes widen. "Detailing your thoughts and opinions on how Rosier was unstable, how his irrationality posed a risk to the image of the Marriages for Unity, how losing the nation's Golden Girl couldn't be a good look for reconciliation and that photographs with you would be better suited for publication? Did Rosier tell you himself that he planned on poisoning his wife? Does he know *you're* the reason his wife suddenly wasn't Hermione Granger anymore?"

"Granger— "

"Did you *plan* to sacrifice a random Muggleborn girl to Rosier? Did you ever think about Lydia's family? How Rosier was going to— "

"Did you *want* me to let him kill you?" he snarls. Speaking straight over every one of her words. "Do you *want* to be dead right now? Have you even once considered being *grateful* to me today, realizing that the last thing I've ever wanted for myself is to be stuck in a loveless marriage with *you*?"

"Lydia is *dead*!" Hermione shouts. "Rosier didn't deserve a wife *at all*!"

*“Lydia is not dead!”*

The kitchen turns silent. Malfoy stands up, the bar stool screeching back against the hardwood. “Lydia Golden is alive and perfectly well, because I brewed the antidote weeks before her marriage for her to take daily, and because the body found in the river was a magical dummy conjured by me *so precisely* that even the Aurors’ best men couldn’t distinguish it.”

He turns back to her in the doorway of the kitchen. “But she now lives with her family in America, something I knew for a fact you would never be willing to do, hence *my* voluntary sacrifice to spend the rest of my life with *you*. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay out of the way of the Ministry and keep your mouth shut on all the rest of this, because you can’t even *begin* to fathom how many people other than Rosier want *you* dead.”

The hallway empties. Hermione stares at the tea: two cups, untouched. And then folds her head into her hands and, for no explainable reason, begins to cry.

## NOVEMBER, PART TWO.

What starts as a petition in front of the Wizengamot to pass legislation allowing the Ministry to inform Muggleborn children of their magical capacities at the time of their birth turns into an evening catastrophe.

Standing in front of the podium at the center of the courtroom for *hours*, Hermione loses control. Arguments on muggle and magical integration programs and the danger of accidental magic and the benefits of cohesive education systems derail into a rant on systemic inequality and exclusionist policies. Rosalind Parkinson calls her a Mudblood to her face and the courtroom doesn’t even falter; Hermione steps forward to the seating gallery and points a single furious finger at Perce Everitt and suddenly three wands are drawn at her.

“*This* is why we can’t allow the like of them into society, just *look* at the uncouth behavior— ” some woman shrieks behind her, and Hermione opens her mouth to start—

“ —I haven’t done anything wrong, it’s *your* pureblood friends drawing their wands to defend their own fragile pride— ”

“*Insolent* girl!” Hector Parkinson snarls, “you don’t know *half* of what we have coming for you lot!” He raises a copy of *The Daily Prophet* into her face and shakes it, the words **BRITISH MINISTRY TO FOUND SEPARATE SCHOOL FOR MUGGLEBORN CHILDREN WITH ADAPTED & SIMPLIFIED CURRICULUM** screaming from the front cover.

“Hear her out!” some single voice hollers from the back of the chamber. Hermione whirls around as a boos ricochet across the gallery. Distantly, glass shatters.

“Is *this* what you want?” someone else yells. “To live in a society where they run about and threaten our safety— do you want a taste of what the world would look like?”

Hermione opens her mouth at the same time as a dozen other Wizengamot members.

“Have her arrested!”

“*Your vile policies threaten our fundamental safety every single day of our lives— ”*

“Show her what her kind does!”

The Parkinsons scramble to their feet, wands raised; green light flashes across the corner of her vision. All at once, the heavy bolts to the courtroom doors slam shut. Hermione ducks, stomach dropping, twisting into apparition, doubling over on the concrete when the air slams back into her body.

“Hold her down!” someone shrieks.

Hands wrap around her shoulders, and she screams. “Shut up,” the man hisses. “Do you have everything?” Her shoulders shake under the strength of his grip. “Granger, *answer me!* Do you have your wand?”

“Yes,” she whispers. Muscles going limp when she recognizes who it is. Unflinching when the crack of his apparition rends apart the shouting in the courtroom. Thinking, as they spin away into the darkness, of how foolish she was to believe that books and cleverness could change the world; thinking, as his cheek presses against her forehead, of how foolish she might be to be trusting in her husband now.

But it’s only when they spin out of apparition that Hermione looks around. Realizing that her trust has led her out of the country.

“We’re staying in France,” he says. The four words enough to explain everything, and yet nothing.

“We?” Hermione asks. Clenching and unclenching her fingers around her wand, fixating on the only question that finds its way through her comprehension.

He looks at her across the three hasty steps that now separate their bodies. “I don’t think my cover will hold on much longer now that I saved you in front of the entire Wizengamot.” His lips thin, and one elegant shoulder raises and then lowers. Wandlessly and wordlessly conjuring the most ornately beautiful wine glass she’s ever seen, and raising it up to her in an empty toast. “Happy December. Cheers to our first holiday together.”

#### IV.

if this life is ending // then let me begin / a new one

### DECEMBER, PART ONE.

His apartment in France is smaller than his flat in London.

With his hands buried deep in his coat pockets, Malfoy leads her through the few rooms. Leaving Hermione to trail a few steps behind and stare at the mess. While the apartment clearly bears a distant resemblance to order, its current state makes Hermione feel as though she is undoubtedly trespassing.

The kitchen houses an assortment of muggle appliances, far beyond just the clear glass kettle identical to the one in London. There are dishes still in the sink, and glass Tupperware in the corner of the counter bearing food Hermione tries to identify but can’t quite discern. In the living room, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in a rich, dark wood line the walls; books sit vertically and horizontally alike, tucked into every available space and yet still spilling out in small piles on the carpet. Little stickies, reminding Hermione of her time in Muggle primary school, are written upon in dark black script and litter the coffee table, where a briefcase she recognizes rests, opened to rolls and rolls of parchment.

“One bedroom,” he continues briskly, as he steps inside the last room of the apartment. Gesturing at the bed, and the layers of cream-colored bedding adorning it. There are several books stacked on the nightstand here, too; and a pair of golden, wire-rimmed spectacles is positioned at the top of the stack. The clock on the wall reads 1:48AM. “We’ll have to share until you find your own place. The bathroom is through that door.”

“My own place?” Hermione echoes.

Malfoy raises his eyebrow. “Do you intend to live with me for the rest of your life?”

She falters. *No*, she thinks. But there are more things than she can count that haven’t gone her way in the past three decades. Living with a man who deliberately saved two Muggleborn lives in the past three months doesn’t seem like a terrible deal.

“No,” she says, anyway. “Or at least, I suppose not.” She looks at the tidy bed, the open window, the full wardrobe. “Is this where you went when you weren’t at home?”

Malfoy clicks his tongue in a sharp sound of thought and acknowledgement. “International apparition license was a privilege of the Ministry. Men with my status can apparate directly out of the Ministry, too. Those privileges be revoked soon, I assume.”

There isn’t much she can think of to say in response to him. The star of modern pureblood society has voluntarily abandoned every privilege he was privy to in England for her, not hesitating a single moment, and yet his stature now is cold.

“Are you— ” she hesitates. Thinking about his words to her earlier, how he smuggled Lydia and her family out of the country months ago. “Do you plan on staying in France for the rest of your life?”

He steps out of the bedroom and leads her back into the living area. Rolling up pieces of parchment to reveal sheets of Muggle paper, covered in scribbles, in between. “Yes,” he says. “You saw the Wizengamot. Don’t tell me you still think you can convince them that Muggleborns deserve more.”

Hermione falters. He’s right; today has made that reality far too clear. There’s a feeling of exhaustion that’s seeping through her body. Settling between her ribs and beating down every fluttering feeling of fight left inside her; a realization of three decades’ worth of war being all for naught, wrenched out of her own heart,

“Do you?” she asks, instead. Ignoring the hurting deep inside of her that gapes open wider and wider, falling prey to the tiredness.

“What?” he asks. Snapping the buckles on his briefcase closed and picking up the gray scarf tossed over the back of the sofa. “Do I what?”

She’s almost afraid to repeat the question. “Believe that Muggleborns deserve more,” she says. “Do you?”

There is a beat of silence.

“I should think that would be obvious,” he says. Stiff. “I wrote a twelve-hundred word letter to the Minister to keep Rosier away from you, spent an amount comparable to your entire *yearly* salary to obtain the illegal portkey and paperwork for Lydia, and not only sacrificed but *exiled* myself in



front of the entirety of the British wizarding elite just to ensure your continued existence. Do you think I'm fool enough that I don't know the significance of my actions?"

Hermione swallows. It's growing uncomfortably hot in her cloak, but she's afraid to move a single limb, afraid the conversation will derail. "I know," she says. "But I just—"

She bites the inside of her cheek. "I'd like to hear you say it," she says. "Just once, I suppose, if that's all you can handle. Once would be enough."

Malfoy sighs. Picking up his briefcase and fisting his scarf, stepping back towards the bedroom to put them away.

"I believe it," he says. "I believe Muggleborns deserve more. I believe they *have* deserved more. I believe that all your excessively wordy and exceedingly foolish legislation should have passed, and I will continue to believe all of those things, but I am not returning to Britain, and I will not return to Britain, until someone comes up with a better plan than reading passionately from a piece of paper in front of three dozen old fools and hoping that logic and emotion will change the world."

## DECEMBER, PART TWO.

Within days, they fall into a rhythm. Seated on the carpet in front of the coffee table, Hermione applies to law firms in Lyon, goes shopping for every living necessity she's left behind, and purchases textbooks on the French language. Less than fifteen feet away, Malfoy seats himself on a bar stool in the kitchen and frowns at his sprawling paperwork. She doesn't ask him what he's working on; he doesn't ask her. They take turns cooking, and at night, she showers first and crawls into the left side of the bed, leaving the covers on the right pleated perfectly.

By the end of the week, Harry has arrived in France, too. "This is where you're staying?" he asks, undisguised surprise written all over his face. "In a Muggle neighborhood?"

"If you've got nothing nice to say," Malfoy drawls, "then don't say anything at all."

"It's not all that bad, Harry," she says. "It's better than paying for a hotel for all of the holidays, at any rate."

Harry rolls his eyes and steps farther into the living room, eyeing the books uncertainly. "Did Hermione unpack all her books already?"

"Granger *brought* none of her books, Potter. If you thought a little harder, you'd realize she's not the only one in the world who reads."

"These are *your* books?" Harry asks. Something about his persistent questioning and unfiltered judgment making Hermione anxious.

"Yes, Harry, they're his. And no, I haven't read them all yet. There's hardly been time to look for apartments, what with all the things I've had to go out and buy here. Not knowing French has really been quite the inconvenience. But did you need anything before you left?"

Harry frowns. "No," he says, waiting for Hermione to step out from behind the sofa fully before walking towards the door with her. "Are you sure you don't want to stay with me at the hotel?" he whispers. "It really wouldn't be any trouble at all."

She pulls the door back. “Really, Harry,” she says, purposefully returning the conversation to full volume, “there’s no need. It’s not so bad at all here. Draco’s been kind, he cooks three times as well as you, and the bed is incredible. I’ll see you soon.”

When the door shuts and she turns back to face the kitchen, she finds Malfoy leaning against the counter and staring at her with a frown.

“You’re under no obligation to stay here,” he says. “You do know that? If you and Potter want to share a room— ”

Hermione can’t help but snort. “No, thank you,” she says. “Harry snores *and* hogs the sheets. I’ve had to share a mattress and covers with him far too many times during the war, I’m not interested in repeating any of that business.”

Then another thought crosses her mind, and she folds her arms across her body protectively. “Unless you’re sick of me already?”

Malfoy rolls his eyes. “It’s no trouble,” he says. “You’re low maintenance.”

His explanation is enough to make her snicker. They haven’t really joked around with each other before— and if they did, she definitely can’t remember it— but this feels natural enough. “Really?” she asks. “What if I started reading your books? Could I still stay here?”

“Put them back where you got them,” he says, waving a hand at the walls. “The instant you start altering my interior design is the moment you’re kicked out.”

Hermione hums. Suddenly inspired by his words and the fresh blanket of snow outside, visible through the two large windows in the living room. “What about for Christmas?” she asks.

Malfoy stares at her. “For Christmas?”

“Could we decorate for the holidays?” she explains. A smile twitching at the corner of her lips as she latches onto this idea with increasing excitement. “Put a tree up, decorate it— stockings, of course, garlands down the bookshelves where they’d fit. That sort of thing.”

“You’re out of your mind,” he says. Making his way to the kitchen and opening the fridge as Hermione frowns, far out of his line of vision.

“My parents and I always made it the most exciting time of the year,” she says. “We don’t have to buy the tacky decorations from the department stores, you know, there’s plenty of other places to find some truly stunning things. We can shop the Christmas markets and you can put some of your exorbitant amount of money to use.”

“You’re going to dress up an apartment that you won’t even be staying in once the New Year passes?” he asks, turning back to face her. “Leaving me to do all the cleaning?”

“For goodness’ sake, Draco, I can clean it up before I move out.” She’s not sure what’s driving her to drag Malfoy out on a social trip when their usual conversation is limited to mealtime small talk, but her new vision for the apartment, transformed into silver and gold, is too captivating to resist. “Come on— we’ll make a day of it, we can get lunch out, too.”

She crosses the counter and tugs on the sleeve of his fitted sweater. Resisting the instinct to scoff disbelievingly at precisely how soft the cloth is. "Let's go," she says. Looking up at him. "Draco."

Their eyes meet. He blinks, eyes closed a heartbeat too long, and she swallows. "Fine," he says. "Fine. Let's decorate."

## **DECEMBER, PART THREE.**

"I think I'd like to take a walk," she says. Setting the papers in front of her aside and standing up from the buttery leather couch. Letting the throw blanket Draco had pulled out from a trunk in the bedroom fall down to the carpet. "You'll come with?"

It's silent in the apartment for a moment, and Hermione lets him finish his thoughts while she surveys all the new décor. There truly isn't much space in the apartment, and they'd gotten the smallest tree possible at the store; but even considering how much space it took up, the brilliant sparkle by the window and the smell of pine throughout the rooms is entirely worth it. They'd spent the entire afternoon stopping by different markets, turning ornament shopping into something of a competition of artistic taste, and the result is the most stunning combination of silver and gold Hermione could have dreamed of.

"What?" he finally responds, looking up from the counter. They've finally started talking to each other; it seems as though the thirty minutes spent debating the most appropriate stocking for the other person were enough to break any remaining tension between the two of them.

"A walk," she says, already heading towards the bedroom to retrieve one of his many scarves and her new overcoat. "The river's a little frozen, I think."

She's been a little disappointed by the lack of snow here; the snow from the other day had melted almost immediately, and there's nothing on the forecast for weeks, but the crispness of the air down the river is a feeling she never wants to trade.

There is an audible sigh somewhere behind her, and when he finally responds, he's significantly closer to where she's zipping up her boots. "Doesn't seem like I have much of a choice," Draco says. Lips twitching when she turns back to look at him, already halfway into his jacket.

"No, not really," she says, smiling back at him, letting him follow her out of the apartment and down the elevator to the wide, bustling street. Crowded in between the bustling pedestrians of the city, Hermione only barely catches a glimpse of the playground across the street, where several dozens of children seem to be celebrating a birthday party of some sort; farther down, the signs surrounding the grocery store advertise holiday cookies and assortments of deep red poinsettias.

"The neighborhood really is nice here," she starts, as they wind their way through the streets towards the Rhône.

Draco looks over at her, and she smiles loosely at him. "Yes, I suppose so," he says. "Are you implying you'll be staying in the neighborhood?"

She hums. Counting blocks of the sidewalk until the intersection as she pushes the heavy weight of her scarf back over her shoulder again and again. "I was thinking about that, actually," she starts. "As in— living together isn't so bad, is it?"

They come to a stop at an intersection and wait for the light to turn to crossing. She feels Draco step up behind her, and then his hands move to adjust her scarf, pushing its weight farther over her shoulder and pressing it lightly against her back. "I suppose not," he says. "Aside from the horrible Christmas décor, and the fact that you eat far too much of everything I cook, and the books you've started leaving everywhere, and your awful habit of opening the windows early in the morning even in the wintertime, and the amount of time I have to wait every night just to let you shower and crawl into bed before I can so much as step inside the bedroom."

The light turns to walk and Hermione pushes Draco off the curb with a little more force than necessary. "Oh, please," she says, "don't be dramatic. I've seen you admiring the tree in the evening more times than I can count, and you pick up the books I leave behind and read them too."

He shrugs noncommittally, fishing out his wallet from the depths of his long jacket and tossing several bills at a man playing the saxophone at the corner of the street.

"I was just thinking that maybe I don't need to spend my lifetime's worth of wages on an apartment in the neighborhood if we're getting along alright."

Draco's silent as they cross the next intersection and come to a halt by the river. "None of this has to be real, you know," he says. Voice dry. He slips the wallet back into his pocket and sets his elbows on the metal railing, his bare hands cradled in each other. "I married you because you'd suffered enough already. You deserved better than what Rosier would have done to you, but you deserve better than a marriage to someone you tolerate only out of proximity, too."

His words send puffs of cloudy air out in front of them, and Hermione tucks her hands into her pockets, burying her chin and nose deeper into the scarf.

"Wizarding marriages are permanent enough that attempting divorce would be foolish, but their entanglement is quite temporary. I'm sure it wouldn't be so hard for you to find someone who will fall in love with you and also understand your situation; but in the meantime, you shouldn't need to engage too much with something that's so temporary."

Hermione breathes in, long and deep, letting her eyes flutter closed as she imagines their apartment. Thinking of the way Draco's restricted himself to the far edge of their shared bed every night since they moved in out of respect to her, and how somehow, he cleared out half of his already-minimal closet space to accommodate for her things. They've only been speaking to each other continuously for less than a week, but the longer she thinks about the last three and a half months, the more she's forced to think about *him*.

"It doesn't need to be temporary," she says. Turning away from the spectacular view the river offers in the wintertime to watch him more closely. Hoping that the direction her thoughts have spiraled might be reflected by any one of his own thoughts.

"Does it?" she repeats. His eyes are on hers now, too, but he's not saying anything. She pulls her hand out of her pocket, slips one glove off, reaches for his hands. Folding her warm fingertips around his cold ones and fumbling with the motion. "Does it, Draco?"

His voice is hoarse when he answers.

“No,” he says. With a decade’s worth of exhaustion and painful relief all tied up in one word. Like she has offered him the reprieve to a wound that has been bleeding for years. “No, Hermione. It doesn’t.”

## **DECEMBER, PART FOUR.**

On Christmas morning when Hermione wakes up, Draco’s side of the bed is already empty. She sits upright and runs her hands through her hair, pausing and wincing every time her fingers catch in a snag. By the time she emerges from the bedroom, clad in her favorite ugly sweater and comfy sweatpants, Draco’s breakfast looks long finished.

“Good morning,” Hermione says, padding over to where he is seated comfortably on the sofa. Leaning over the back of the soft leather to run her hand through his hair and then lean her chin against his forehead.

Draco only tilts his head back and raises an eyebrow at her, upside-down. Still unaccustomed to Hermione’s blossoming affinity for touch, his hands twist nervously in his lap before he reaches up for one of her hands and gently pulls it down. “Good morning,” he says. “And Merry Christmas, too.”

Hermione smiles. “Merry Christmas,” she says. “Please tell me you saved some breakfast for me?”

He clicks his tongue quietly— a infrequent but odd habit for a pureblood like him that routinely makes Hermione snicker a little. “By the stove,” he says, and she reluctantly retracts her hand from his to head over to the kitchen. “It might still be warm.”

With a plate in her hand, she settles back down on the sofa next to him. Draco reaches under the coffee table and pulls out her favorite blanket, handing it to her to settle over her legs in the way she likes best.

“Did you have plans for today?” he asks, casting a glance at the clock. “10:45 is a little late to be getting started on Christmas festivities.”

Hermione nudges him with one socked foot. “I got you a gift,” she says. “I thought I’d watch you open it. Then we can go out and get lunch together with Harry, so long as you’ll tolerate it. Come back, lounge about. Cook a grand dinner. Bake cookies, if you’re willing. I found a recipe last weekend and got everything we’d need.”

“I got you a gift, too,” Draco says. Picking up a fallen blueberry from her blanket and replacing it on her plate, then stepping around the coffee table to lift up a large box wrapped in silver and tied together with a crimson red ribbon. “It’s probably best you open it now, actually, to be honest. I’m not sure how much longer they’ll be happy inside there.”

Hermione sets down her half-eaten plate of pancakes and looks at him with some alarm. “Happy inside there?” she asks. “*They?* Draco, what precisely have— ”

He reaches for her hands and places them directly on the ribbon, then guides her to tug the elegant knot apart. Uncertain, Hermione casts yet another look at Draco before she pulls the wrapping paper back and then gasps.

“Draco— ” she starts.

He doesn't let her get very far at all into her disbelief. "I know it hasn't been that long since you told me about Crooks, but luckily enough, I'm partial to cats." Their eyes meet and he smirks a little, releasing the silencing charm on the carrier to reveal the gentle squeaking and mewling of the kittens. "They're half-siblings, but they love each other to death. That white one nearly clawed my arm off when I tried to take the orange one. One is half-kneazle and the other one is all cat."

Hermione is already unlatching the carrier, breakfast forgotten, beckoning for the kittens to crawl all over her. Only when one has perched on her shoulder, tail swishing rhythmically over her back as it watches over the other kitten in her lap, does she look back up at Draco. "Oh, Draco, are you sure?" she asks. "I don't— you didn't have to— "

He straightens up, pulling down the sleeves of his emerald green sweater and shrugging easily. "I told you, I'm partial to cats. Besides, I just thought— " he looks up at her, some hesitation getting ahead of his ability to formulate words " —I thought, since you're going to be here permanently, we might as well do something ridiculous to celebrate."

Hermione curls her fingers along fragile form of the kitten in her lap. Searching for the words to properly express how thoughtful this gift was; unable to fathom how someone who hardly knew anything of her life could have come up with something like this in days.

But Draco continues before she can try to form her thoughts into coherent sentences. "I have something else, as well," he says. Sounding a little more unsure, now. "Far less grand, and it's really not a finished item at all, but still something."

Properly shocked into speechlessness, Hermione watches as Draco pulls over the thick stack of paper at the far end of the coffee table and shows it to her.

"It's slow progress," he repeats. "But I and several others have been working on the situation in Britain for years now. Judging pureblood alliances and mapping the hereditary order of Wizengamot seats. Identifying candidates for Minister, for a Minister's cabinet, for Department Heads, and so on. Working on overhauling the Ministry, essentially."

There's little Hermione can do but stare.

"It was always meant to be just the nonsensical, political part of you and your colleagues' work. We've been collecting all of your proposals, and their proposals, and compiling them into records and legal documents for our reference. Using the ideals and strategies you've drawn up to cross-check and interview candidates, and such. It's less about creating a vision for wizarding Britain, and more about finding the political mobility to secure that vision."

He rifles through the stack and then sets it back down on the coffee table. "You're under no obligation to ever read any of that," he says. "Whatever you want to know, I can explain. And all this work is still incredibly preliminary. Even with good alternate candidates, the coup required to overthrow the entire Ministry, to accuse and take into custody all the blood supremacists— it's astronomical. But this work needs to be done, and I thought that perhaps someone else who knew it better could help out."

His shoulders rise and fall helplessly as he looks up at her for the first time since starting his explanation. "I know you want to go back to London, someday," he says. "This— hopefully, this would help make that happen." Another pause, and then— "Please, stop crying," he says. Voice breaking as he reaches out to take her hand. "Did I upset you? Should we not have done— "

She's shaking her head. "No," she whispers. "Draco, this is— truly, this is incredible. I never knew that all this time, all that paperwork— has it been about this?"

His fingers squeeze hers. "Usually," he says. "We had a couple candidates for Minister I wanted to speak to before the holidays." His eyes are bright as he looks at her. "I just feel— " He stops, pauses, restarts. "There's a lot I owe to you, too many things to make up for. This is just a starting point."

She nods. She's not sure how to even begin to introduce her gift, now, but it feels unbelievably important that she does. With a wave of her hand the small golden boxes shoot out of her room to where they're sitting.

"Thank you," she says. Those two words seem like a decent start. "I can't wait to read all of your notes. After the holidays are done." She takes the two boxes and gives one to him, keeping one for herself. "My gift— it's important that you understand what this means. You know a lot about Muggle things but I don't know if you know about their weddings."

She pulls open the ribbon holding her box together and is grateful when Draco mimics her actions without question. When both boxes are open she watches as Draco holds back a sharp intake of breath.

"I found the wedding ring on my pillow when I moved in," she says. "I know this isn't quite the same ring, because my old one is still at our flat, warded up, but it wasn't hard to explain to the jeweler what it looked like."

She turns the box in her own hand to face him. "But the point of the gift isn't really remaking my ring," she says. "In Muggle weddings, it's customary for both husband and wife to receive rings." She shrugs. "I just thought— " she reaches for the flat, golden band inside her box " —even though our marriage is a little out of the ordinary, that I ought to show you how intent I am on staying."

His fingers pull her band out of the box and she can see them shaking. "Will you put mine on first?" Hermione asks. Suddenly turning shy.

Draco reaches for her hand and flattens her fingers in his palm, running his thumb along the ridges of her knuckles. Pausing to collect what looks like a thunderstorm of emotions crossing his face. "Thank you for staying," he says, quietly. The ring slips on easily, and it's her turn to reach for his hand.

She smiles, watching as his own band slips on perfectly, as their hands come together and the metal of the rings clink against one another. "Thank you for marrying me," she says. Letting the silence after their words carry around the room, as though exchanging overdue gratitude might be something along the lines of exuberant wedding vows.

Then, she leans back against the couch, setting aside the small gift box in her lap to return her attention to the kittens in front of her. "Our first Christmas together," she says, taking his hand into hers. Deciding to take a risk, and to press a soft kiss against his jaw. His lips chase her forehead as she retreats, one hand rising to cup her jaw tenderly as he leans down. A smile breaks across her face, and for the first time, she watches a similar one lifts the corners of Draco's lips all the way to crinkle the corners of his eyes.

“You’ve set the bar for gift-giving pretty high, you know?” she teases. Looking down at the cats curled in their laps, and finding not an ounce of urgency inside her to let Harry know they’ll be late for lunch. “This is quite the present.”

An arm wraps around her shoulders, pulling her more firmly into him. “I’m sure I’ll figure something out,” he says. Playing with the spare ribbon now lying around the coffee table as he thinks. “I do believe that someday, I’ll be surprising you with a flat— something grand, and unbelievably expensive, all the way back in London.”

Sheltered in his arms and buried under the weight of two sleepy kittens, Hermione lets her eyes flutter closed. Imagining the possibility— all the incredible, unbelievable possibilities. “Thank you,” she says. “That really, really does sound wonderful.”