

Meet Your Match

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Meet Your Match

by [morriganmercy](#)

Summary

After the war, Draco Malfoy seeks refuge from infamy in the Muggle world. A friendly Muggle couple takes him under their wing, but there's a problem: they are intent on setting him up with their best friend, Hermione Granger.

Or, in which the Muggle friends Hermione Granger undoubtedly would have had will not take no for an answer.

Notes

Podfic of this work is available from [Paper Crane Audiobooks on Spotify](#)

To RS, my OG beta and hype woman in every aspect of life, this is for JLJ, my precious baby bam. I can never thank you enough for giving me the courage to write this story.

Many thanks and much love to my entire beta team:

G ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) and Taylor ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) were the first people to read this story to the end, and their feedback and encouragement were absolutely invaluable to me.

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You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#) :)

I am beyond excited to finally share this story, and I am so glad you're here. Enjoy!

DISCLAIMER: I do not own the rights to these characters. No profit is being made from this work.

- Translation into Русский available: [Найди пару](#) by [Doctor_giraffe, T_ks](#)
- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [情逢对手](#) by [brownplaidscarf](#)
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The Last Night of Our Past Lives

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’m so glad you’re here! There’s someone I’ve been dying for you to meet.”

Hermione had only just finished hanging up her coat when Shannon pressed a glass of champagne into one of her hands and grabbed ahold of the other. She led her through the crowded house, continuing her monologue.

“He’s very smart. Funny, but dry. So sweet, only he’d kill me for saying that. He doesn’t say much, but what he does say is always fantastic.” She peered back over her shoulder to give Hermione a significant look. “And he’s fucking beautiful.”

Hermione rolled her eyes good-naturedly. Shannon was always playing matchmaker for the people around her. Strangely, the habit didn’t make her seem frivolous or shallow to Hermione like it had with Lavender or Parvati. Shannon had good taste and was a good judge of character, and she had known Hermione since she was a baby. She had never tried to set Hermione up before though, and she was genuinely curious to meet the bloke that had her so excited.

Of course dating a Muggle came with a unique set of challenges. She hadn’t really figured out how it would be possible to develop enough of a relationship with someone to be worth the risk of breaking the Statute of Secrecy when she’d first have to lie about the vast majority of her life. To be fair, she hadn’t really given anyone she’d met yet much of a chance. And not every relationship had to be so serious. It had been a while... maybe she could just—

That line of thinking was interrupted as they reached the kitchen, clearly Shannon’s intended destination. Several people were scattered about, fixing drinks and chatting. A tall man with platinum blond hair was leaning against the kitchen island with his back to them. Shannon dropped Hermione’s hand in favour of gripping her by the shoulders and marched her purposefully in front of him.

“Draco,” Shannon started excitedly, getting his attention. “This is the friend I was telling you about.” She let go of Hermione and stepped to the side, gesturing between them. “Hermione, this is Draco.”

Hermione stared. She could feel the shock written into every feature on her face, but she couldn’t get it under control. Draco Malfoy was standing in a Muggle kitchen surrounded by her Muggle friends in a pair of black jeans and a grey jumper and looking completely at home. The fact that her surprise was clearly reflected on his own face did little to comfort her.

His hair was different from the last time she’d seen him. Shorter on the sides and longer on the top; he wore it swept to the side and back, off his forehead. His features had continued to fill out, too. The pointiness of his youth was now completely smoothed into an angular

jawline. The high cheekbones that had become so prominent as his condition worsened during their sixth year now sat proudly on a fuller, healthier face. But she could see the war in his eyes. The colour of the icy grey rings was the same, but the silver rays that used to make them glitter with mischief and malice seemed subdued. They seemed to draw ever inward now, pulling her gaze toward the twin black holes of his pupils as though she might fall into that darkness forever. Yes, he was still fucking beautiful.

Hermione suddenly realised that entirely too much time had passed in which she and Malfoy had simply stared at each other. Shannon was glancing back and forth between them looking bemused.

“You two know each other?” she finally asked Hermione.

“Yes,” Hermione replied slowly, her eyes never leaving Malfoy’s face. “We went to school together.”

Shannon’s chin drew back in surprise. “What? Your boarding school? You went to school together since you were kids?”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded. “Seven years.”

“Six,” Malfoy corrected.

The sound of his voice broke the spell, and Hermione quickly glanced at Shannon.

“Right, six years.”

“Now, hang on a minute,” Shannon huffed, running a hand through her honey-coloured waves and looking clearly perturbed. “I’m good with a match—the *best*—and you two should have had a head start.” When Hermione and Malfoy only continued to stare at each other, she went on, “Why weren’t you together at school?”

Hermione let out a startled little laugh, suddenly remembering the reason Shannon had sought to introduce them. Malfoy’s shocked expression had faded to one of casual interest, and he quirked an eyebrow at the question. The look was so reminiscent of his younger self that Hermione found herself looking at him through narrowed eyes. She opened her mouth to reply, and he tilted his head as if he were mildly curious what her answer might be.

“I... wasn’t his type.”

A smirk spread slowly across his face at her words. She kept her narrow gaze on him, trying to convey wordlessly that she was very aware of all the myriad ways he considered her inferior: blood status, middle-class upbringing, looks, personality—

“No, that’s not it.” Shannon was tapping her index finger against her lips, considering them carefully.

“I beg your pardon,” Hermione said, staring incredulously at her friend.

"That isn't the reason," Shannon said simply, now watching Malfoy. "You're definitely his type."

Hermione gave a choked sort of scoff as Malfoy turned his piercing gaze on Shannon for the first time. Hermione, who had been quite confident in her choice of skimpy outfit for the night, was now feeling rather exposed. And watching Shannon and Malfoy communicate silently nearly a foot over her head was making her feel like someone's ridiculous little sister. Words began to tumble out of her mouth. "No—No, I'm sorry, Shannon, but that's—I mean, no—I don't think—"

"No worries." Shannon cut off her fumbling with a quick smile. "I'll get to the bottom of it." She winked, which Hermione felt was entirely inappropriate to the situation at hand. "But for now," she went on, glancing back at Malfoy, "I'll leave you two to catch up."

She was gone before Hermione could say another word.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him bluntly.

"Nice to see you, too, Granger," he drawled, taking a sip of the whiskey he'd been holding.

"These are Muggles," she said stupidly.

"Ten points to Gryffindor." He crossed one leg over the other where he leaned against the counter.

Her lips pursed as she took in his casual stance. "I mean it. Tell me what you're doing here."

"Merlin, I forgot how bossy you are."

She crossed her arms. "Oh, did you?"

He smirked again, lifting one shoulder in a lazy shrug. "No, but a little distance seems to have exaggerated the effect."

She raised both eyebrows in question when he didn't continue. He rolled his eyes.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Shannon invited me." He gestured vaguely in the direction she'd left.

"How do you know Shannon?"

"She's married to one of my mates."

"How do you know Thomas?"

"We have a class together."

That threw her. "A class? What class?"

"Well, as fun as twenty questions with Granger has been, I need a refill." He drained the rest of his glass and pushed off the counter. Hermione was still too stunned by the entire

interaction to move out of the way, and he was forced to slide past her into the crowd.

“See you around,” he said low to the top of her head as the impossibly soft cashmere on his chest brushed past her bare arm. A rush of warm, spicy scent surrounded her.

“Right... see you,” she said feebly after he was already gone. She downed her untouched glass of champagne in two gulps.

This was fine. This was completely fine. She poured another glass of champagne and finished it as quickly as the first. She was totally okay with the fact that she was at a Muggle party with Draco Malfoy. Shannon had tried to set them up. That was fine, too. Malfoy was objectively good-looking, and clearly Shannon just didn’t know him very well. Or at all. Sweet? She had said he was sweet. That actually made her feel a bit better.

Obviously Shannon knew next to nothing about him. She poured another glass, feeling indignant now, which was highly preferable to panicking. Shannon’s reputation as a master matchmaker was clearly completely off-base. Really it was irresponsible to be setting people up if you hardly knew them at all. Thinking them sweet when they were decidedly... *not* sweet. She paused with her glass halfway to her mouth. Was there a chance that Draco Malfoy *was* sweet? To Muggles? She snorted and shook her head at such a preposterous idea.

Hermione realised suddenly that she’d been staring off into space, downing champagne and making small noises of shock and outrage to herself. She squeezed out of the kitchen without making eye contact with anyone.

Draco shouldered his way through the hall and let himself out the back door. A cloud of cigarette smoke hung around a small group on the porch, but no one paid him any mind as he stumbled down the stairs and rounded the corner of the house. He leaned back against the rough brick and took several deep breaths with his eyes closed.

Fucking Granger.

He knew it was too good to last. He’d known eventually someone or something was going to come along and wreck the peaceful oasis he’d found outside the wizarding world. He didn’t deserve peace, didn’t deserve Thomas and Shannon. And now Hermione *fucking Granger* was here to remind him of it. God, the way she looked at him—hackle raised like he was about to *Avada* every Muggle in sight unless she stopped him.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. No, this was fine. He could do this. He’d been friends with the couple for months and they’d never brought Granger around before now. Surely she was a once-a-year-visit type of friend. Just someone they saw at the holidays. He would just avoid her, make it through the night, and then things would go back to normal.

Pleased with his assessment of the situation, Draco started back toward the house. The sudden recollection of Shannon's words, however, stopped him mid-stride.

This is the friend I was telling you about.

He'd been so shocked to see Granger that he hadn't even noticed the way Shannon had introduced her. He knew that Shannon's personal mission in life was to make sure that every sorry sod found someone equally sorry to love, and she *had* been mentioning a friend she wanted him to meet for several weeks now. He hadn't paid much attention nor shown much enthusiasm for the idea. It was a miracle that he hadn't blown his cover with his friends yet; there was no possible way he could make any attempt at dating a Muggle without slipping up.

But Granger was the friend? Shannon thought they'd be a good match? He nearly groaned aloud. The universe was fucking cruel.

How had Shannon described her? *Brilliant, hard-working, sexy, and fun.* He gave a snort. He didn't think anyone at Hogwarts would have described Granger as fun. No, she'd been too busy being brilliant and hard-working to be any fun. But Shannon would have only known her during the summers, outside of school. Was there a chance that Hermione Granger was fun? He highly doubted it. Sexy, however...

He started slowly back toward the door, turning the rest of the conversation over in his mind.

I wasn't his type.

Bloody hell, he'd been a cruel prick, but he didn't know if he deserved that particular punishment. He truly could have done without having to watch Granger tell him to his face that the reason they weren't together in school was that she wasn't his type. Shannon had clearly lost her touch.

The problem with intentionally trying to avoid someone is that you have to be aware of where they are so that you can be somewhere else. You can't just leave it to chance and hope that you don't cross their path. Which means you spend a lot of time looking for the person you're supposed to be avoiding. Of course, Hermione had plenty of experience with looking at Draco Malfoy. Looking *for*, rather. Looking *for* him. Although, once he was found, surely it didn't hurt to spend a bit of time looking at him. Slytherin snakes are liable to slither away at a moment's notice, so it's wise to keep abreast of their movements. Her face flamed suddenly with the thought of Malfoy moving anywhere near her breasts. *Oh, Jesus Christ,* she was drunk.

Hermione closed the door to the bathroom and leaned against it taking several deep breaths. She walked to the sink and washed her hands with icy cold water, appraising her reflection

with the kind of frank detachment that only comes with inebriation. Her curls were still manageable; no smudged eyeliner. She nodded her approval before slapping her cheeks experimentally a few times. *Hmm, a little numb. But not all the way numb*, she reasoned as she left to go find the hosts.

The annoying thing about short people is that they're hard to find in a crowd. Just when you've spotted them and their slinky silver dress, some enormous git will move in front of them and you have to start all over again. The worst part about looking for Hermione Granger, specifically, is that whenever you happen to glance over to check whether she's still where you've left her, she's likely to be looking right back at you. And the problem with Granger watching you watch her is that it makes you feel like a gigantic fucking creep when really you are just trying to make it through one sodding party so that you can get back to your normal life as soon as possible. Although when you see Granger put on a coat and notice that it doesn't cover any of the ridiculous amount of leg she's showing for December, you will be forced to consider the possibility that you are actually just a gigantic fucking creep.

Draco watched from the living room as Granger slipped out the back door of the house. He tried to rationalise his feeling of relief that she hadn't been donning her coat to leave. He reasoned that he was only concerned because Thomas and Shannon would have been upset for her to be leaving so early. They were his friends, and he wanted them to enjoy their party even if that meant he had to deal with avoiding Granger some more. It was really quite selfless of him. *Is this what it feels like to be Saint Potter?*

Hermione found Thomas and Shannon with a group of people around a fire pit in their back garden.

"Hermione, darling, perfect timing!" Shannon called out when she saw her approaching. "We were just about to go around and share the best thing that happened to us this year. It's a little tradition."

"Oh, right," Hermione said, her mind immediately going blank. Luckily, someone across the circle from her volunteered to start. She slid onto the bench next to Thomas. The first speaker had gotten a promotion. Someone's niece had been born. One couple had gotten engaged, and Hermione was completely fine with the fact that she knew Shannon had introduced them; she had to get it right some of the time. Shannon and Thomas agreed that buying their house had been their highlight. Then everyone looked at Hermione. *Fucking shit*, she'd forgotten to

think of anything. She took a gulp of champagne to stall and blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Seeing my parents again.”

Shannon gave her a sad, knowing smile and reached across Thomas to give her knee a reassuring squeeze. Thomas put an arm around her shoulders and leaned into her briefly. Hermione’s answer couldn’t have made sense to anyone else in the group, but no one seemed to mind. The girl next to her was already talking about a backpacking trip to Asia.

Hermione felt slightly stunned. It had been wonderful to see her parents again, but it had also been extremely difficult and upsetting. She’d been unable to restore the majority of their memories, so while they knew who she was, they relied extensively on what she could tell them of their lives before. God, had that really been the best part of her year? Studying for and taking her NEWTs via correspondence course had been anticlimactic and rather depressing. Starting work at the Ministry had been nice, but certainly not the best thing. A couple of lackluster first dates and regrettable one-night stands were surely not it. What had she been doing for a year?

“What about you, Draco? Other than meeting us, of course,” Shannon said, beaming.

Hermione’s head snapped up, and, indeed, Malfoy was sitting across the fire from them. The firelight seemed to give his eyes some of the glint she remembered from before.

He swallowed the final swig of whiskey in his glass and gave Shannon a smirk. “Probably getting released from prison.”

Hermione glanced around. Everyone else at the fire was laughing at that. Shannon shook her head in a manner that clearly said *classic Draco*.

When Hermione looked back at him, Malfoy was watching her. She sipped her champagne for something to do. She knew he’d been in Azkaban, of course. She had followed some of the Death Eater trials in the Daily Prophet. Okay, she had followed *his* trial. He turned himself in immediately following the Battle of Hogwarts and had waited in Azkaban for three months pending trial. He was sentenced to one year including time served and had been released in May. The details of the crimes he had committed while he was underage were sealed, but the charges were public record: torture, conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, attempted murder, and murder.

The circle must have made a full rotation because people were getting up and drifting away from the fire. Hermione felt Thomas give her shoulder a squeeze as he and Shannon headed back toward the house. She couldn’t take her eyes from Malfoy’s face. The shifting light and shadow made his expression unreadable, but he was watching her intently.

She’d wondered about the charges, of course. She knew the attempted murder and conspiracy charges probably came from his failed attempts on Dumbledore’s life and helping the Death Eaters gain access to the castle the night the headmaster was killed. Accessory made sense as well; he’d likely been present for numerous murders. But had he really been forced to kill someone?

Malfoy dropped his eyes first. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and wrapped both hands around his empty glass, covering it. When he sat back and raised it to his mouth again, there were two fingers of amber liquid inside.

She was moving past the fire before she realised she'd stood up.

Draco wasn't surprised when Granger sat down beside him. He'd spent years cataloging her expressions, and while he wasn't particularly used to being on the receiving end of them, her look of unbridled curiosity was unmistakable. When she took a deep breath to ask her first question, he brought the glass to his lips again to hide his smirk. He wondered vaguely if he'd spent more time studying her than any other subject at Hogwarts. Maybe McGonagall would issue him an honorary NEWT. Could he earn an 'O' from Granger? *Oh, fucking hell,* he was drunk.

"Has anyone ever called you out on that prison line?"

He held the whiskey on his tongue for a moment, letting it burn a little reality back into him. He'd had a plan. He was supposed to be avoiding Granger. Was it her hair that smelled so good?

He swallowed roughly. "If anyone's believed it, they haven't sought me out to chat about the details."

He saw her nod out of the corner of his eye and began a silent countdown. *Five, four, three, two, one.*

"How was it?"

He turned his gaze on her and conjured up every ounce of scathing sarcasm he could muster. "A little dreary in the winter, but Azkaban really comes to life in the spring."

To his intense surprise, she threw back her head and laughed loudly at that. He stared at her. He was immediately torn between elation at having made her laugh and panicked outrage at having miscalculated her reaction. Clearly he required further study.

"I deserved that," she said, still smiling and shaking her head lightly. "What a stupid fucking question."

"The first three months were the worst."

The smile slid off her face at once.

He looked back into the fire. "Before my trial, when there was a chance it would be forever," he went on. "That was the worst." Why was he telling her this?

“Once I had a release date, it felt manageable. I just... passed the time.” Because no one had ever asked him what prison was like.

“How?” Her voice was quiet but steady.

He shrugged. “Studying for NEWTs mostly. I couldn’t take the practical portions with my magic suppressed obviously. I did those after I got out.”

“I did a correspondence course, as well.”

He looked back at her. “You didn’t want to return to Hogwarts?”

The pain was clearly etched on her face. “No, it wouldn’t have been the same...” She trailed off looking on the verge of tears.

Of course, Potter and the Weasel would have gone straight into Auror training. “Right, how could Potter’s Golden Girl return to the scene of his former glory without him?”

She didn’t answer, but her lips tightened and her cheeks flushed pink.

“How are the Saviour and his sidekick?” he prodded. “I would have assumed this was the type of family holiday you’d spend with them.”

She ran a hand through the top of her curls, fluffing them. “They’re fine. I saw them at Christmas.”

She didn’t offer any more. He narrowed his eyes. This reticence surrounding her unfortunate male counterparts was unexpected. He didn’t like that.

“So nothing to the rumors in the Prophet of a sordid love triangle tearing the Golden Trio asunder?”

She blanched and her hand jerked so violently she nearly spilled her drink. He felt the colour drain from his own face. *Fuck me, it’s true.*

She snapped her head to him then. “That is none of your business,” she spat.

Merlin, had he said that last part out loud? He looked away quickly.

Weasley had clearly been obsessed with Granger at school, and he couldn’t imagine Potter being fussed with them getting together. Potter had been with the She-Weasel, after all. That meant Potter and Granger must have... leaving Weasley on the outs. A familiar flame of jealous rage that he hadn’t felt in years suddenly burned through his gut. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Fucking Potter. Sodding Saint Saviour Potter. The Prick Who Lived and Died and Lived Again. The Twat Who Lived Twice. How perfectly poetic. What better prize was there for saving the entirety of the wizarding world than Potter getting his Golden Girl? Draco felt sick.

“Where is he then?” he spat.

“Who?”

He gave her a withering glare. “Potter. Why isn’t he here with you?”

She looked genuinely confused at the suggestion. “He’s with Ginny in Paris. Celebrating their engagement.”

Draco felt his mouth fall open. *FUCKING POTTER*. The stupid fucking idiot had thrown over his own Golden Girl to go crawling back to the She-Weasel? He’d known Granger was the brains of the operation, of course, but he assumed Potter must have at least two brain cells to rub together. Obviously not.

He glanced back at Granger. No wonder she was looking like an abandoned crup. He rubbed a hand over his eyes. This whole conversation was a colossal fuck up. He gulped at his drink, casting about for some way to salvage the mess. *Just get up and walk away. Start avoiding her now. It’s not too late for the plan.*

“It’s Classics.” *Oh, bollocks.*

She looked up at the non-sequitur. “What?”

“The class I have with Thomas,” he clarified. “Where we met. It’s Classics. Ancient Greek and Roman works.”

She just stared at him for a moment, and he held his breath. The only sound was the crackling of the fire beside them. But then... There it was. The crease between her brows, the slight quirk of her mouth to the right. She drew breath for a question, and he let his out.

“What are you doing attending a Muggle university?”

“There’s a new department at the Ministry that helps convert wizarding records into the paperwork necessary for Muggle schools. They do identification, transcripts, test scores, everything.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, giving him a small smile. “I work there.”

“Of course you do,” he said, rolling his eyes. He knew she’d taken a job in the Muggle Liaison Office—members of the Golden Trio could hardly go for brunch without making the front page. He hadn’t known which department she’d been assigned to, though.

“But what are *you* doing attending a Muggle university?” She was looking at him searchingly. He didn’t know what she was looking for, but he was suddenly desperate for her to find it on his face.

“I wanted to continue my education.”

He was relieved that she seemed to understand the unspoken supposition that despite his impressive records and test scores, he wouldn’t have been deemed a good *fit* at any of the

prestigious wizarding academies of advanced study.

“With a change of scenery,” she said lightly.

“Something like that.”

“You seem to have done well with them.” She tilted her head in the direction of the house.

He chuckled, shaking his head at the ground. “I was terrified at first. I don’t think I spoke a dozen words to Thomas the first month I knew him.”

“It gets easier... but it never stops hurting.”

He looked up at that. She was watching the kitchen window through which the party was clearly visible in full swing. Her eyes were soft, shining in the low light. Her mouth was relaxed, the ghost of a sad smile still lingering. Her head was tilted slightly, the soft curve of her jaw disappearing under the blanket of curls. Yes, he knew this look, too. Longing, nostalgia, and a healthy dose of regret. When he didn’t respond after a minute, she turned to him.

“Lying to them.”

Draco nodded slowly, digesting her words. Pitifully, the first coherent thought that emerged was that Granger was undoubtedly *not* a once-a-year-visit type of friend to the couple. That was followed closely by the realisation that this was possibly the worst he had ever failed at sticking to one of his own plans. And that he was a prize idiot. And that he was fucked.

Suddenly, the back door of the house flew open and the party-goers streamed out onto the lawn. Shannon was leading the charge calling out, “One minute to go!”

Granger jumped to her feet cursing, and Draco followed suit, wondering what was going on. She watched the house empty out before she turned to face him.

“Erm, how much do you know about Muggle New Year’s celebrations?”

He was baffled. “Not much. I mean, nothing really.” He shrugged. “This is my first.”

“Right.” She was looking back out over the crowd again. Then down at her feet. Anywhere but at him.

“Thirty seconds to go!”

“Oh, bugger.” She rolled her eyes and tossed back the rest of her drink. She set the empty glass on the bench, and when she turned back to him, she seemed to be panting slightly.

His eyes ran over her face trying to place this look. Determination. Definitely some Gryffindor recklessness. And... heat?

He was suddenly struck with the thought that she had worn a similar expression right before she punched him in the face in their third year.

“Ten, nine...”

Her eyes flickered between both of his and then dropped to his lips. He licked them compulsively. Was that it then? Was she about to punch him in the mouth?

He looked around wildly to see what the others were doing. Surely Muggles didn’t have a New Year’s tradition of punching each other in the face!

She stepped right up to him, and he nearly toppled backwards over the bench. Would he be expected to hit Granger back? What the *hell* was going on?

“Two, one! Happy New Year!”

She raised her arms slowly and draped them across his shoulders. Her fingers slid into the hair at the back of his head, and she pulled him gently down to her. He watched, paralyzed with shock, as she parted her lips, closed her eyes, and kissed him.

His body seemed to realise that he was being kissed by Hermione Granger about three seconds before his brain caught on. Inexplicably, his arms were around her, his hands clutching at her back. She shifted one of her own hands in response, bringing it forward to cup his jaw. Her tongue teased lightly across his, and he pulled her tight against him. She let out a sigh against his mouth, and *fuck* she tasted like champagne and she smelled like vanilla and he needed to find out what other Muggle holidays involved this sort of kissing because it really was *just* the thing to ring in a new year.

Before he had time to finish considering whether Easter was a strong candidate, there was a streak of light and the explosion of a spell just beside them. He tore his mouth away from Granger’s and thrust her behind him. He pulled his wand just in time to see another jet of yellow light coming towards them. He looked frantically for the assailant, still clutching Granger with his free hand. His chest was heaving and his ears were ringing and he couldn’t make out anything in the dark corner of the yard. The next explosion lit the entire night sky with crackling green stars, and he stared up at it.

Fireworks. The neighbour was setting off fireworks.

He tried to swallow his heart down out of his throat, but his mouth was too dry. The noise of the party was filtering back in, and all of the guests in the yard were cheering for the light show. He collapsed onto the bench, dropping Granger’s hand when he realised his own was sweating. He only had a fleeting moment to appreciate the mirror image of his own panic plastered across her face. Only had a second to be relieved that he wasn’t the only one who’d misunderstood. To be glad that she’d pulled her wand, too, before she turned away from him and ran.

Chapter End Notes

Despite what just happened, I promise this is a slow burn! ;)

Thank you so much for reading!

Find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#) and please tag me if you post about this story! I would love to see it <3

Riding in Cars with Boys

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the amazing response to Ch 1! Updates will be weekly on Monday afternoons (EST). I'd love to update multiple times some weeks though, so follow me on [Twitter](#) to get those announcements! I hope you enjoy Ch 2, it's one of my favorites :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione stared at a chip in the black tile of the Ministry wall. She had actually lost her mind. After days of analysis, that was the only explanation she could come up with. Yes, she had been drunk, but even ten glasses of champagne shouldn't have made kissing Draco *fucking* Malfoy on New Year's Eve seem like a good idea. She cringed and dropped her head into one hand. God, the look on his face when she'd approached him should have been enough to change her mind. He'd looked horrified. What was she thinking? Of course he'd been horrified to have Hermione Granger, *Mudblood Extraordinaire*, slobbering all over him without any warning. Surely only shock and the fact that he was still on probation had kept him from hexing her to pieces. She would have deserved it.

She had never been thankful for a flashback before, but at least the fireworks had provided enough distraction for her to make an escape. Never mind that she'd only made it to the side of the house before she proceeded to vomit and hyperventilate in the bushes. She felt a pang of sympathy as she remembered Malfoy's pale face painted with the colours of exploding light. She wondered what memory it had triggered for him and whether it had been her friends on the other side of the curses.

The *ding* of the arriving lift pulled her out of her thoughts, and she swept her hair back off her face as she started forward. She took two steps and froze as the doors opened to reveal Harry and Ron. Harry was looking down, reading over a file, but Ron stiffened visibly at the sight of her.

"Good morning," she said, stepping in. Harry looked up immediately and closed the file, smiling brightly.

"Hey, Hermione."

"Morning," Ron mumbled from Harry's other side.

"How was Paris?" she asked as she leaned forward to press the button for her level.

Harry gave a little groan of delight. "It was brilliant! I ate so much I'll be full for a week. And you can't get more romantic than fireworks over the Eiffel Tower. It was perfect."

She looked over and couldn't help but smile at his dreamy expression.

Harry glanced at her. "How was your New Year's Eve?"

"Oh, erm." Hermione looked away quickly and shifted her bag onto her other shoulder.
"Yeah, it was okay. You know, champagne and countdown, the usual."

She saw Harry give a little nod out of the corner of her eye. "Were you with the Muggles?" he asked.

"Yes, Thomas and Shannon had a party."

"Nice."

"Yeah."

She watched the floors sweep by. Only two more. She shifted her foot in her heel. Harry held the file down at his side then moved it up under one arm as he put his hands in his pockets.

The lift dinged and the doors slid open.

"See you," she said, stepping out.

"Right. Later."

Ron said nothing.

Hermione had never been more grateful for the incalculable amount of work that went into organising a new Ministry department. She'd worked on it alongside Kingsley and the rest of the Minister's office, as well as her Muggle Liaison Office Department Head, for the better part of a year now, and there was still no end in sight. Every evening she left her in-tray empty and returned in the morning to find it refilled as if by, well, magic. The endless stream of documents and memos made the hours pass quickly and left very little time to stew over poor snogging decisions.

Although she normally finished her assignments around the time most people were heading home for the day, she had fallen into the habit of spending several more hours working at her desk or combing through the Ministry archives. She liked to think that the multitude of resources now at her fingertips was simply too great a temptation to resist, but a small part of her recognised that she was really just trading being lonely for being lonely and distracted. Yes, she had big plans for this department, and she intended to see them through, but there was no denying that the extra projects she had taken on also served as a convenient excuse to continue isolating herself. She really should have brought Crookshanks home from Australia.

When Shannon asked her to come round for Friday drinks for the fourth time in as many weeks, however, she decided to give in. She had skipped the weekly gathering so many times before the New Year's party that the couple had stopped mentioning it. Though she knew she always had a standing invitation, and it was no one's fault but her own, it had still hurt a bit. Since she had come out for the party though, they seemed to have regained hope. It felt like an opportunity to turn a corner. To spend time somewhere else besides work and her bed. Awkward lift rides with some combination of Harry and Ron really did very little to satisfy her need for social interaction.

So that Friday, Hermione left work on time for once and picked up takeaway on the way home. She dressed for the bar that she knew Shannon would eventually talk the group into going to and made her way to the nearest Apparition point. It was freezing in her short skirt, but she knew once she'd had a few drinks and they got to the crowded, stuffy pub that she would be glad of it.

After popping into sight a short distance from the house, Hermione spent the walk trying desperately to suppress the memories of the last time she'd been there. One by one, she pressed back the taste of the champagne, the glow of the fire, the heat of Malfoy's body.

She had done a good job of it, too, until Thomas opened the door to reveal Malfoy behind him, shrugging off his coat in the entryway.

She stood stupidly on the doorstep, attempting to dispel the notion that she had somehow conjured Malfoy with thoughts of him. What the hell was he doing there again? She had thought that he was just a casual acquaintance. A friend from school who you invite to your New Year's party just to be polite. But here he was at her Friday drinks, and that was just not on.

Thomas pulled her into a hug and she was treated to the sight of Malfoy giving her a death glare from over Thomas's shoulder. *Fucking hell*. What had she been thinking with that kiss?

They stood awkwardly for a moment, staring at each other while Thomas hung up her coat. Finally, Malfoy cleared his throat and addressed her.

"Granger."

She gave a little nod of acknowledgment. "Malfoy."

A burst of laughter came from further in the house, and a wave of relief washed over her with the knowledge that others were already there.

They followed Thomas into the kitchen and Hermione recognised almost everyone: a couple of employees from the café where Shannon worked, a couple of blokes from Thomas's football league and their respective girlfriends, and Janelle, Shannon's best friend from secondary school.

Hermione made a beeline for her, and Janelle fell into a dramatic swooning gesture at the sight.

"Oh my god, they let you out before ten on a Friday? How will the wheels keep turning without the woman who holds all of England together? Has the world descended into chaos already?" She looked around the room conspiratorially and added in a stage whisper, "Should we start picking off the weak ones?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, pouring herself a glass of wine. "It's incredible how that line just keeps getting funnier the more I hear it."

Janelle dropped her voice even lower and leaned in. "Well, if it comes down to repopulating the earth, just know I'm willing to do my part."

Hermione followed the woman's gaze to where Malfoy was standing near the doorway behind them. He was wearing dark charcoal grey trousers, a white shirt, and a navy waistcoat with silver buttons. He was entirely overdressed for after-work drinks, but the ensemble was so *Malfoy* that it seemed completely natural.

"Have you met him before?" Hermione asked, hoping her blush at Janelle's insinuation was minimal.

"Yeah, he came round to drinks a few times before the holidays." Janelle heaved an exaggerated sigh, tossing her sheet of sleek black hair over her shoulder. "But you know Shannon. Apparently we're not a match. I still haven't decided if it's worse to be friend-zoned on behalf of someone else."

"Trust me, you're better off," Hermione muttered into her wine glass.

"Do you know him, then?"

Hermione shrugged. "A bit."

"And are you a match?" Janelle asked eagerly, dark eyes glittering.

"Oh, would you stop with that already?" Hermione scoffed. "Who decided that Shannon gets the final say in everyone's love life?"

"I did, of course," Shannon said, materialising next to them. "And, yes, they are a match," she said to Janelle before turning to level a look at Hermione. "And, no, I'm not giving up."

"Keep your voice down!" Hermione hissed, eyes narrowing at Shannon's smug expression. "You could have at least warned me that he'd be here tonight."

"And why would I do that?" Shannon said coolly, looking down her nose at her. "I thought you'd enjoy seeing an old friend from school."

"And I would. *If* there were one here," Hermione said pointedly through clenched teeth.

Janelle gave a little squeal of delight. "Ooh, enemies to lovers, then? That's even better!"

"Alright, that's it," Hermione snapped, reaching for the bottle and splashing more wine into her glass. "I'm done with both of you."

She turned her back on their cackling and stormed across the room, planting herself firmly between two football blokes. She knew one was called Nick, and the other was... Cameron? Charles? Carl, maybe. She listened in as they discussed a recent match. Unfortunately, Hermione knew less about football than she did about Quidditch and cared even less than that. Her attention began to drift almost immediately.

She had unconsciously placed herself directly across the room from Malfoy, and he seemed to be filling her entire field of vision. Had he always been that large? His legs certainly seemed longer. Her eyes trailed up the impossibly fine-looking wool of his trousers. Undoubtedly, they were custom-made. Nothing off the rack could fit with such a perfect blend of cling and drape. She swallowed heavily as he shifted his weight onto one leg, leaning against the door frame. Were his shoulders broader, too? It seemed so, and the fitted waistcoat accentuated the taper of his long torso. He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, and Hermione felt a flush begin to creep up her own.

She remembered how soft the hair there had been there as she'd slid her fingers into it. The way she'd felt his head tilt under her hand as he'd leaned down into her. Despite the drunkenness and his shock, it had been rather a good kiss. A *bloody* good kiss, in fact. Part of her had almost thought he'd enjoyed it. He had put his arms around her, after all. He had opened to her and drawn her in close.

But obviously, that had been an instinctual reaction born out of surprise and whiskey. Any lingering doubt she had about his feelings had been extinguished by the look he'd given her in the entryway. He'd looked ready to *Incendio* her right on the doorstep. She gulped her wine and suppressed the urge to rub a hand over her eyes. How could she have expected anything else? She needed to get a handle on this, and fast, if he was going to be coming around more often. Thankfully, other than glaring at her, he seemed content to pretend the kiss never happened. She would just follow that lead.

She edged slightly along the counter so that Nick's bulk blocked Malfoy from view and tuned back into the conversation happening above her.

After what felt like hours of discussion regarding potential fundraising opportunities for new football equipment, Hermione heard Shannon alerting the group of their impending departure to the bar. A few people had objections to leaving the house, but they were promptly shouted down.

Hermione didn't bother arguing; she'd known this was coming. Janelle sidled up to her and snaked her arm around Hermione's elbow. Hermione eyed her beadily over her wine glass.

"Forgive me?" Janelle asked in a simpering voice, fluttering her eyelashes dramatically. "You know I only teased because I'm jealous."

Hermione snorted and tipped back the rest of her glass. "Don't be so ridiculous." She continued in a lower voice. "Yes, I forgive you, but please leave it. I don't want to have to hear the same thing every time he's around."

Janelle gave her a cheeky grin but mimed zipping her lips all the same.

"Come on, let's go before they leave us," Janelle said, towing her out into the hall.

They gathered their coats and assembled on the front walk. Hermione was surprised to hear Thomas say that he would drive half the group in his car. One of the other football blokes would take the rest.

She wasn't the only one surprised it seemed. Malfoy was standing on the curb staring warily at the little black sedan. He glanced over at Thomas as though double-checking whether he was serious in his intent to drive them. As he looked back to the car, his eyes lighted on Hermione for a fraction of a second.

She told herself it was only his slightly panicked expression that made her approach him. She didn't want him to slip up somehow.

"Have you ever been in a car before?" she whispered, taking advantage of Janelle's momentary distraction looking for her purse.

It was a testament to how nervous Malfoy was that he passed over making any snide comments and just shook his head.

"Well, don't worry, I've placed plenty of protective enchantments on it in case we were to crash."

His eyes never left the car, but they widened visibly at her words.

"Okay, let's go then," Thomas said, jingling his keys as he came down the front walk.

Hermione surreptitiously opened the rear door and motioned for Malfoy to get inside. He sat and scooted along the bench seat at her continued gesturing. She got in and slid to the middle to make room for Janelle. Just as Janelle was closing the door, however, pounding footsteps sounded from outside. Nick was sprinting up the pavement toward them.

"Hey, the others have already left," he panted, hands on his knees. "Can I squeeze in with you lot?"

"Yeah, of course," Shannon said from the front passenger seat. "Budge up back there."

Hermione scooted further along the seat, trying to ignore the feeling of Malfoy's thigh pressed tightly against hers. Nick tried to sit, and Janelle pressed even closer until her hip bone ground into Hermione's.

"Oh, you'll never fit like that!" Shannon said, turning around in her seat to see what was taking so long. "Lap up you two." She directed the last part to Hermione and Malfoy.

When neither of them moved, she snapped her fingers impatiently. "Come on, come on, we haven't got all night."

"You afraid she'll crush you, Draco?" Thomas added glibly from behind the wheel.

Hermione glared daggers at them.

“Now, please,” Shannon added in a sing-song voice, smiling sweetly.

Suddenly, Malfoy’s hands came around Hermione’s waist and he dragged her roughly up onto his lap. She shifted awkwardly trying to make room for Janelle’s legs as Nick squeezed onto the seat. Her elbow caught Malfoy in the ribs.

“Oof! Bloody hell, Granger.”

“Sorry,” she said quickly, grimacing. She adjusted her knees to fit behind the driver’s seat. “Sorry!” she repeated as she stood on Malfoy’s foot.

“Quit squirming!” he snarled. His hands tightened on her hips, holding her firmly in place on his thighs.

“Sorry.”

He dropped his grip as soon as she stilled.

“All settled back there?” Shannon asked lightly. “Lovely!” she answered before any of them could reply.

Thomas put the car in gear and pulled out of the spot.

Hermione focused on breathing normally as the other four in the car chatted over the music. She seemed to require all of her mental faculties to draw breath at regular intervals. Malfoy was silent behind her.

There was a loose thread in the patterned weave over the back of the headrest in front of her. It was a sort of brownish maroon. She stared at it, willing herself to think of anything besides the hard muscles under her arse.

Suddenly, the car zipped around a curve and Hermione wobbled where she was perched. She reached out for the door’s armrest to steady herself and placed her hand directly onto Malfoy’s. They both jerked their hands away at the same time, jostling sideways into Janelle.

“Oi, watch it,” Janelle admonished.

Hermione’s face was on fire. What a fucking catastrophe. Twice in two interactions, Malfoy was being forced into some kind of intimate contact with her. She wouldn’t be surprised to wake up tomorrow to a restraining order.

She turned to look out the window and noticed Malfoy tilt his head back as her hair swept over his face. Merlin, he was probably suffocating in it.

“Sorry,” she said again, quickly gathering the curls with both hands and pulling them over her shoulder. She immediately regretted the action, however, when she was subjected to a warm puff of his breath on her now exposed neck. A ripple of gooseflesh erupted down her arm and she squeezed her eyes shut in mortification. *Sweet, merciful Zeus, please don’t let him notice that.*

“Okay, new plan then!” Shannon turned in her seat, and Hermione quickly schooled her features as though she’d been listening to the entire conversation. “We’ll go to the pub first to meet up with the others. It’s a little further, but it makes the most sense. Oh, Draco, stop pulling faces! As if she weighs more than nine stone soaking wet.”

Hermione felt rather than heard Malfoy’s indignant snort against her ear and had to suppress a full-body shiver. She briefly considered dropping the protective enchantments and pitching herself out of the moving vehicle.

By the time Thomas pulled up along the curb, Hermione felt like she’d run a marathon. Every muscle in her body was fatigued from the tension of the ride. She threw open the door and scrambled out before the car was even in park.

Dashing into the pub, she situated herself between some of Shannon’s co-workers before the wannabe-cupid could suggest that Hermione and Malfoy continue their forced cuddling at the table.

Hermione recognised several students from Thomas’s program at the bar and was relieved when Thomas brought Malfoy over to introduce him. Hopefully they would stay over there, far away, where he could keep his hot, nice breath to himself.

He could kill Thomas. He really could do it. It was one thing to be a meddlesome little git, but to look so goddamn *smug* about it.

The doorbell rang just as Draco was getting out of his coat, and, surprisingly, Thomas had swung round to look at him instead of answering it.

“Oh my,” he said with exaggerated eagerness, rubbing his hands together. “I wonder who that could be.” Draco could feel his brows draw together in confusion.

Then Thomas had hit him with the most repugnant look of arrogant self-satisfaction that Draco had ever seen. And with the company he kept, including himself, that was saying something.

Thomas pulled open the door to reveal Granger on the stoop, and everything had clicked into place. Friday drinks were a very casual affair, and while he knew the couple liked to have him, they never made too much of a fuss about him coming. This week though, Thomas had been insistent. He’d double-checked with Draco several times and made cryptic comments about him not wanting to miss tonight throughout the week.

Draco realised at once that he had been coerced into attending, and Thomas hadn’t given him any warning about Granger, even after he’d already arrived. But mostly it was the fucking

look on his face that really had Draco considering a well-placed *Incendio* to the back of Thomas's head as he leaned down to hug Granger.

The prat had known he was uncomfortable about what transpired at the New Year's party. Draco had immediately decided against telling either of the couple about the kiss. Shannon was adamant enough about this whole match business, and he wasn't about to give her any additional ammunition. When Thomas asked about his reunion with Granger though, he'd been flustered and his friend had caught it immediately. Though Draco wouldn't say whether the meeting had gone well or not, it was obvious to Thomas that something had happened between them.

In truth, Draco had no idea what *had* happened between them. He had no idea what possible motivation Granger could have had for kissing him like that except that it was part of some Muggle tradition. He'd spent a week in the University library trying to find out the specifics of the custom, but he'd come up with nothing.

He had finally settled on the theory that Muggles must have to kiss whoever they are in closest physical proximity to at the stroke of midnight. That explained why Granger had jumped up and cursed when Shannon announced the time. Granger had been careless and allowed herself to be closest to him at the start of the countdown. He assumed that it must be truly terrible bad luck to avoid taking part in the tradition. That was the only logical explanation.

As for the kiss itself... Well, surely Granger's use of tongue was related to the custom as well. Perhaps a good kiss meant good luck? If that was true, he expected she'd be coming into a large inheritance from a distant relative any day now. Merlin, but it had been a good kiss.

He'd spent a dangerous amount of time over the last month considering the possibility that even though she had been forced to have her New Year's kiss with him, she might have still enjoyed it somewhat.

Of course any lingering hope of that had been thoroughly snuffed out by her frosty greeting in the hall, the way she had been so tense on his lap, and how she'd practically Apparated out of the car in an effort to be away from him. Clearly she had endured the kiss for safety's sake but had no further desire to be near him at all.

As he watched her from across the bar, he was thankful for a bit of distance after the close confines of the car ride. He had imagined what it might be like to have Granger on his lap countless times, but he had never considered that it might happen against both of their wills while they were trapped with four other people. It had been akin to torture.

Feeling the soft curve of her waist under his hands as he pulled her to him. The firm roundness of her arse nestled against legs. The heat of her thighs on his where her skirt had ridden up, leaving nothing but his trousers between them. And her hair. *God*, her hair. He'd been drowning in it. It seemed impossible that her smell of vanilla could be so strong without being cloying, but it was. It had wrapped his brain in soft, sweet silk.

The one thing he regretted about the New Year's kiss was that he hadn't had the chance to touch her hair. For so long he had imagined digging his fingers into those curls, but when he

had the chance it had been too brief. He hadn't thought.

But then she'd been sitting on his lap, and the whole beautiful mass was draped tantalisingly in his face. He'd thought at the time that it couldn't get worse than that, but then she noticed and pulled her hair away. The only thing more torturous than her curls brushing over his nose and cheeks was being confronted with the bare nape of her neck and the delicate curve of her shoulder mere centimeters from his mouth.

Every time the car accelerated and she was pressed back into his chest, that smooth expanse of skin taunted him. He wanted to open his mouth and let his lower lip drag along the back of her shoulder. He longed to press his face into the curve and fit his teeth over the tendons of her neck. He ached to run his tongue along the edge of her ear and kiss the small indentation below it.

What he actually did was attempt to flex every muscle in his body simultaneously and imagine Snape catching him wanking. The last thing he needed was a raging hard-on to cement his status in the Gigantic Fucking Creep Hall of Fame.

Raucous laughter suddenly erupted from the table, and he watched as Granger clutched the arm of the man next to her. Her face was set in a wide grin and her head tilted back until it was resting against the shoulder of the bloke on her other side. He leaned down and said something into her ear and her eyes widened in shock. She slapped a hand over her mouth, clearly scandalised by the new information. She pointed a finger at the man she was still holding, giving the other a questioning brow. When he nodded, she broke into fresh giggles.

Draco sipped his drink. He had seen Granger exchange such casual and affectionate touches with Potter and Weasley, but he'd thought those were born out of the intimacy of years of friendship. To see her display such behaviour with men he assumed were casual acquaintances at best bothered him more than he'd like. Obviously Granger was a friendly and even flirtatious person.

But not with him. The memory of her sitting on him, so rigid she might have been carved from stone, was fresh in his mind. He scoffed into his glass and shook his head as the whiskey burned his throat. What else could he expect? Granger could compose a six-foot-long essay on reasons she should be cold, tense, and unfriendly toward him. Knowing her, there was a chance she'd actually done exactly that at some point. One involuntary kiss was nothing compared to years of cruelty, and he needed to do everything he could to remember that.

Draco touched Thomas on the arm to get his attention and made a hasty excuse. Granger didn't even look over as he walked across the bar and out the front door.

Hermione woke late on Saturday. It was nearly ten, but the room was still dark. She rolled over and saw a stormy sky beyond the crowd of leafless trees outside her window. She didn't even bother trying to deny that the colour of the clouds reminded her of his eyes. The first heavy drops of rain pattered against the glass. She didn't get up to pee until the panes were coated and the outside world was completely obscured.

She crawled back under the covers and dozed. When she woke again, it was nearly two. She flopped onto her back, trying to find a position that was still comfortable after laying for so long. Her eyes drifted over the shadowed ceiling, and she replayed for the dozenth time the feel of Malfoy's warm breath ghosting over the curve of her neck. She remembered how big his hands had felt around her waist as he'd pulled her on top of him. The way his fingers had dug into the soft flesh at her sides. The way his chest had felt when the acceleration of the car had pressed her back into him.

She felt so pathetic it made her stomach turn. It was humiliating enough that he had been forced to endure touching her in such a way for the sake of social grace, but the fact that she had *liked* it, had been exhilarated by it, all the while knowing how disgusted he must have felt. She'd avoided him all night, trying to enjoy the company of the others, but she still couldn't suppress a pang of disappointment when he'd left the bar without so much as a glance at her. She rolled over, squeezing her eyes shut and pressing her face into the pillow in an involuntary cringe. God, she was fucking tragic.

The next time she woke, the sun had already set. She looked at the lamp that she hadn't touched all day and considered turning it on. Instead, she rolled back over and closed her eyes. What was the fucking point?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Your comments give me life! I promise I read every single one as soon as it comes in even if it takes me forever to reply <3

Follow me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#) for chapter aesthetic edits, song pairings, behind-the-scenes content no one asked for, and generally chaotic good vibes.

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), [bookishteddy](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing!

And if you're curious, these are my fancasts for the original characters:

[Shannon](#)

[Thomas](#)

[Janelle](#)

Dinner and Drinks at the Pub on Friday

“Oh, hey, wait! I meant to ask. Will you come to dinner and drinks at the pub on Friday with Hermione?”

Draco froze halfway between standing from behind the desk. Thomas was shoving a book into his bag. The other students filed out past them.

“Dinner and drinks at the pub on Friday?” he repeated.

“Yeah.”

“With Granger?”

“Yeah.”

“The four of us?”

“Yeah.”

Draco swallowed the impending crack in his voice. “Erm, yeah, okay, I suppose I could do that.”

“Cheers! I’ll see you later then.”

“We should have dinner and drinks at the pub on Friday with Draco.”

Hermione snapped her head up, fork suspended halfway to her mouth. She gave a feeble laugh. “Yeah, sounds great, except that there is no possible way that Malfoy will agree to have dinner and drinks with me.”

Shannon screwed up her face in exaggerated confusion. “Oh, really?” She stroked her chin in a pantomime of deep thought. “Well, that is so interesting because he’s already said yes.”

Hermione’s fork clattered on the plate. “What?”

“Just dinner and drinks, very casual, no big deal.”

“He’s agreed to go?”

“Yes.”

“To dinner and drinks at the pub on Friday?”

“Yes.”

“With me?”

“Yes.”

“The four of us?”

“Yes.”

“What time?”

“Hey, just so you know, Hermione’s agreed to go to dinner and drinks at the pub, so we’re on for Friday.”

Draco glanced sharply over at Thomas. “What do you mean she’s agreed?”

Thomas opened his notebook and thumbed to a blank page. “I mean she says she’ll go, so we’re on.”

“She hadn’t already agreed?”

Thomas looked up at him, clicking his pen. “Shannon told me yesterday that she had.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “So when you asked me the day before that, she hadn’t agreed yet? Does she know I agreed first?”

“Erm, I dunno, maybe?”

Draco scoffed.

“Does that matter?” Thomas asked.

“What? No, of course not.”

“Great, so... We’re good?”

“Yes. Good.”

This was *not* good.

Hermione straightened her blouse as she hurried down the street. It had taken her entirely too long to decide what to wear, and she was almost late.

When she pulled open the door to the pub, she immediately spotted Malfoy's blond head. He and the couple were just sitting down. Hermione shrugged off her coat and walked quickly over, relieved to see that they had left her an empty seat next to Shannon. It was considerate of the couple to sit across from each other seeing as this was *not* a double date despite what her fluttering stomach seemed to think.

"Hello, all," Hermione said brightly as she reached the table. She hoped no one noticed that her voice seemed to have climbed several octaves. She reached for her chair but paused when Malfoy stood abruptly. She stared up at him. He seemed to be regretting the action immediately.

"Malfoy."

He cleared his throat and went to sit again. "Granger," he responded rather gruffly.

She sat and greeted the other two, thankful for their reassuring presence.

As always, it was easy to chat with Thomas and Shannon. Malfoy chimed in occasionally, mostly in answer to direct questions. Hermione was largely successful in not thinking about what it had felt like to sit on his lap. She definitely didn't catch herself eyeing the breadth of his chest nor wondering if his black jumper was as soft as the one he'd worn on New Year's.

Every so often, she met Malfoy's eye over the table and had a suspicion that he was also trying to act like this was a normal set of circumstances. Like it was perfectly ordinary for them to be sitting across from each other sharing a meal.

She wondered what might have happened if Shannon really had been introducing them for the first time at that party. Would they have hit it off? She would have been intimidated by him. Even leaving aside his looks, his presence in general was so intense. But he also would have been smart and witty, and she would have been intrigued. As much as she hated to admit it, Shannon's endorsement would have held weight, too. Maybe she would have liked him.

She watched him through her lashes as he nodded along with Shannon's story. There was a faint smile on his lips, and it softened his stony exterior somewhat. She probably would have liked him. Of course he would have eventually found out about her blood status, and any hypothetical interest he might have had in her would become irrelevant. But maybe they could have been friends.

Shannon gave her a sideways glance, and she made an effort to insert herself back into the conversation. "How's your thesis coming along?" she asked Thomas.

“Mm,” he hummed as he finished swallowing a mouthful. “Good, actually. Better. I found a great resource last week, and it’s helped me break through a bit of a block I’ve had.”

“Oh, that’s good,” she said, smiling. “What about you, Malfoy? What topic have you chosen?”

He levelled a look at her over his pint glass. “Circe,” he said after a long moment.

“Oh, how interesting,” she said sincerely. “She’s certainly an important mythological figure.”

“Indeed,” he answered. She watched him for a bit, but he didn’t seem inclined to elaborate. She shrugged and was just about to take another bite of her sandwich when he spoke again.

“She’s the archetype of a predatory woman, wouldn’t you agree, Granger?”

Her mouth hung open, sandwich lingering below her chin.

“A cautionary tale for allowing sexually liberated women to amass specialised knowledge to a degree comparable to that of men?” His eyes were glinting dangerously, and a smirk was lifting one side of his mouth.

“That’s ridiculous,” she spluttered.

“Don’t you think her story is a good demonstration of how women will always take advantage of men when they are at their weakest?”

She could feel her face heating. She set down the sandwich when she realised her fingers had squeezed through the soft bread. “No. Of course, n—”

“That women cannot ever really be trusted especially in matters of—”

“No!” she nearly shouted, one hand slamming onto the table. She took a steady breath and narrowed her eyes at him. “You cannot believe that.”

“He doesn’t,” Thomas said with a wry chuckle. Hermione cut her eyes to him. Shannon was hiding a smile in her napkin. “But apparently, our professor does,” Thomas continued. “I went up and introduced myself to Draco after he spent an entire class period berating the sexist bastard about it.”

Hermione looked back at Malfoy. The gleam in his eye was still there, but she could see now that it was one of mischief, not malice.

“Oh.”

She looked down after a few seconds, wiping her hands on her napkin before brushing the hair back over her shoulders. “Well, that’s good to know, I suppose.” She thought for a moment, then looked up and added, “Personally, I’ve always thought her story was a really good example of how effective transfiguration into an animal can be as a punishment.” She quirked a brow in her best Malfoy impression and was pleased to see the anger flash across his eyes.

“Was he always so feisty in school?” Thomas asked. “I’ve been curious what a young Draco was like.”

“Oh, erm, feisty?” Hermione repeated, dropping her gaze. “I don’t know, not in classes,” she mumbled. She was sure that Malfoy was even less pleased with the change of subject than she was.

“So outside classes then?” Thomas went on, leaning forward eagerly. “Go on, what was he like?”

Hermione chanced a glance at Malfoy, and the transformation was shocking. All of the teasing laughter was gone from his face. His mouth was set in a firm line, and his eyes were hard.

“Oh, I don’t know. He was a bit of a pain, I suppose,” she said to Thomas, shifting uncomfortably. “Lots of kids are,” she added quietly.

Malfoy snorted, and she looked over at him. Again, it was as if another person had taken his seat. In the space of a second, his entire disposition had changed. His face was twisted in a derisive sneer. He might have been leering at her from across the Great Hall rather than their regular pub.

“What a Gry—Granger thing to say,” he drawled. “*You* were a bit of a pain.” He pointed a long finger at her. “Why don’t you tell him what I was really like?”

She shifted again, but she couldn’t look away from those eyes. “It doesn’t matter, we were kids...”

He scoffed, and she felt her face reddening again. Why was he doing this? Why would he want her to say anything about what he’d been like?

“Go ahead, Granger, I don’t need your loyalty.”

“It’s not about loyalty, Malfoy, there’s no point in—”

“True. Your lot relied more on idiotic blind faith than any real loyalty if I remember correctly.”

Something in her snapped at that. “Real loyalty? And what have the Malfoys ever been loyal to? Money, status, purity?” She leaned across the table, challenging him. “I know more about loyalty than you ever will.”

He matched her posture, bringing his face close to hers. He spoke so low it was almost a hiss. “Tell that to Weasley.”

She felt like he’d slapped her. She recoiled visibly, and his sneer deepened into a truly malevolent grin.

“How dare you,” she said in a shaky voice. “I loved Ron. And Harry. They were my best friends. The type of friendship you would know nothing about since it involves giving a shit

about someone other than yourself for two seconds.”

“Friendship?” he repeated, raising both brows. “Is that what it was? Because what it looked like was you spending seven years chasing after two blokes who didn’t *want* you for anything other than homework answers. Until you finally got desperate enough and blew the whole thing up in your face.”

Her whole body was shaking with rage. She could feel tears burning in her eyes and that only made her more furious. “You don’t know anything. That—that isn’t true.”

“Really, Granger?” He looked as though he was savouring his next words, swirling them around in his mouth. “Well, school’s out, and where are they?”

She gripped the edge of the table and stood so quickly her chair fell over behind her. “You’re vile,” she spat at him.

“That’s what I thought,” he said, leaning back in his chair to look up at her.

“I hate you,” she seethed.

He nodded. “I bet you do.”

She hit her hip against the table as she started toward the exit, spilling her water glass. She ripped her coat off one of the hooks by the door and burst out onto the street.

Draco squeezed his eyes shut and let his head fall back.

“Are you finished?” Thomas asked from next to him. His tone was pure ice.

Draco groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes.”

“Good, because you have three seconds to get your arse up and go fix that.”

Draco scrubbed both hands over his face and looked up at them. “I’m sorr—”

Shannon cut him off with a wave of her hand. “Get out, Draco.”

He stood without another word and half ran out the door. He skidded to a stop on the pavement, looking in every direction for a glimpse of Granger. After a second, he spotted her across the street a few buildings down. He darted through the traffic and shouldered his way into the Friday evening crowd.

“Granger!” She was still a fair distance away from him, but he was sure she could hear him calling. “Granger!” She didn’t break her stride.

His height advantage meant that he gained easily on her. She was just about to turn a corner when he grabbed her elbow. “Grang—”

“Don’t touch me!” she yelled, whirling to face him.

His stomach clenched at the sight of the tear tracks on her cheeks. How many times had he made her cry?

“You had no right!” she screamed at him. “We were scared. We had no idea what we were doing. Every day felt like it could be our last, and if it wasn’t us dying then it was going to be someone we loved because we weren’t figuring it out fast enough! And when Ron left...”

Her voice broke, and she dropped her face into her hands. “I didn’t know if I’d ever see him again. And Harry and I were alone. So alone. So *lonely*. ”

She looked back up at him then, and his breath stalled in his throat at her expression. It was completely broken. Beyond anything he’d ever seen on her face before.

“You think I don’t know what a colossal fuck up I am?” she went on. “I did what I did to survive and to keep the people I loved alive and I lost them all anyway.” She gave a harsh bark of mirthless laughter that sent a chill down his spine. “If you’re worried I don’t know how little you think of me, don’t be. I got the message a long time ago.”

Draco could tolerate her rage. He’d expected it, baited her into it. But this... this broken, defeated Granger he could not accept.

“The fuck up that *you* are?” he shot back, shaking his head. “Are you even hearing yourself? I realise it’s in your nature to be the best at everything, but I’m sorry to say that I’ll always have you topped in the ‘fucked up shit I did during the war’ category.”

“It’s not the same—” she started, but he cut her off.

“Would you shut the fuck up!” he bellowed, taking several steps forward until he was looming over her. “You can’t imagine the things I’ve done, the things I’ve seen.”

“I don’t have to imagine the things you’ve seen!” she screamed, jabbing a finger into his chest. “I have the *actual* memory of you seeing me on your fucking floor! And I will never forget what the *Cruciatus* feels like!”

“Neither will I!” he screamed in her face.

“Congratulations, we all got tortured!” she went on, throwing her hands up. “So why were you giving me so much shit in there?! ”

His restraint finally cracked. “Because I was jealous!”

Her mouth fell open, and she blinked slowly several times as though she’d been Confunded.

He growled in frustration and turned away from her. *Perfect, just fucking perfect.*

“Jealous?” she repeated, her voice quiet now.

He sighed and turned back to her, but he kept his eyes down. “Yes.”

“Of... of what?”

Potter, obviously.

“All of you,” he said flatly. That was true, too.

“Why?” She was so quiet now, he barely heard the word. Finally, he looked up and met her eyes.

“For being on the right side.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Granger shifted uneasily, and it looked like she might try to say something conciliatory. He quickly waved her off.

“Just forget it. This was...” He gestured vaguely back toward the pub. “This was a mistake.”

Before she could respond, he turned on his heel and walked away.

He rounded the first corner he could to keep himself from looking back at her. He made it thirty seconds after that before he kicked a discarded bottle and sent it shattering against an alley wall.

“Fuck!” he yelled, drawing wary looks from several passersby. He didn’t stop, didn’t hesitate. He needed to keep moving. He needed to be as far away from her as possible.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Why did he insist on sabotaging any potentially good thing that came along?

He could’ve been friends with Granger in another life. He was sure of that. He enjoyed riling her up and enjoyed it even more when she did it back. They would have challenged each other, and she would have stood up to him. They could have been friends.

But in this life? When any mention of their time at school wiped the humour off her face and sent her squirming in her seat as she tried to avoid outing him as the most despicable piece of shit Hogwarts had ever seen? Impossible.

It was bad enough for him to be reminded of his behaviour, but watching her actively trying to cover for him, for the way that he had behaved *towards her*, was too much.

He had snapped and lashed out with what he’d known would hurt the most. She had slipped up on New Year’s, giving him a hint of the intimate details surrounding the downfall of the Golden Trio. And he had made her pay for that mistake. It was a low blow, and he’d relished watching it make impact.

Her eyes had widened in shock and revulsion. She had obviously let herself forget how cruel he could be. She needed to remember.

He realised suddenly that his feet had carried him back to the pub. He could see Thomas and Shannon through the window, talking with their heads together. He'd almost forgotten about them. He rushed past the door before they could spot him.

How the fuck was he supposed to explain his behaviour to them?

Fucking Granger.

Everything had been going fine until she showed up. He'd finally had the chance to start fresh and make friends without any influence of his name, his family, his history. With Granger there though... She was like a giant mirror—constantly forcing him to reflect on the worst parts of his life, of himself. If he was honest, there was a part of him that believed he deserved that. But Granger and his friends did not deserve to be collateral damage in his inability to deal with his past.

The thought of losing Thomas and Shannon was like lead in his gut. They had provided a sanctuary he never expected to find outside the wizarding world. They'd accepted him readily into their lives, even when he had been hesitant and reserved. No matter how strangely he'd acted, they never treated him like a stranger.

He decided on the spot that he would do anything he could to keep them. He would figure out a way to protect them, even from himself. Although after the show he'd just put on, he doubted that was still his decision to make.

Apologies and Invitations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So did you fix it?” Thomas asked, sliding into the desk next to him.

Draco only hesitated for a moment. “No, I wouldn’t say I fixed it.” There was no point pretending he didn’t know what the other man was talking about.

“Well, did you apologise at least?”

Thomas was turned ninety degrees in his chair to face him full-on, one elbow resting on the desk. Draco kept his gaze on the front of the classroom. For some reason, he was hopeless at concealing his thoughts from his friend. More so than any other one he’d ever had. Draco had seriously considered whether his Occlumency only worked so well because he’d always been hiding from other magical people; no matter how hard he tried, Thomas could read him like a book.

“Erm.” Draco cast back over the conversation with Granger. “Actually, no, I don’t think I did.”

Thomas adopted a pained expression which Draco appreciated from the corner of his eye. When Draco failed to elaborate, Thomas dropped his head into the hand he’d braced on the desk. He ran his palm over his close-cropped brown hair as he settled in, seemingly preparing to be thoroughly exasperated. “What did you do, then?” he finally asked.

“I let her yell at me a bit.”

Thomas chortled at that. “Oh, you ‘let her’ did you? Trust me, Hermione may be small, but she could have had you on your arse if she really wanted to. You aren’t about to *let her* do anything.”

Draco made a noncommittal noise, internally recognising that Thomas had no idea how true that actually was. He cleared his throat.

“I actually yelled at her a bit, too.”

Thomas heaved a sigh. “Why am I not surprised?”

“The whole thing was a mistake.”

“Yeah, she said you said that.”

Draco looked at him sharply. “You spoke to her about it?”

Thomas nodded, looking put upon.

He rolled his eyes. “So why are we having this conversation?”

“Well, I had to make sure you didn’t think whatever you’d done was fixing it. It really was a very simple instruction, I can’t see where you went wrong.”

Draco gave a snort at the idea of him fixing things with Granger ever being simple. “Who says I want to fix it?”

Thomas laughed again. “Oh, please. Spare me the theatrics. It’s never been more clear that the two of you are a—”

Draco raised a warning hand. “If you say the word ‘match,’ I will slap you so hard your eyeballs will switch sockets.”

Thomas just grinned at him. “Now that we’re done pretending you don’t want to fix it, why don’t you tell me how you actually intend to do it.”

Draco squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head onto the table in front of him. The smooth wood was surprisingly cool against his forehead. “Has it occurred to you that maybe fixing things for Granger means staying as far away from her as possible?”

“No,” Thomas said simply.

“Fuck,” he muttered into the desk.

The truth was that he’d spent the last three days trying to come up with any reasonable plan of action for following through with Thomas’s request. He was unwilling to give up his friends and that meant he was going to have to figure out how to interact civilly with Granger.

“Okay,” Thomas said suddenly, clapping Draco on the back. “I’m going to assume that this is some sort of Hermione-specific lapse in what I know to be your prodigious critical thinking skills.”

Draco grunted.

“You will go to the café at seven o’clock tomorrow morning. You will buy Hermione a cup of coffee. You will apologise, and Shannon will keep an eye on you.”

Draco let his head fall to the side so his cheek was resting against the wood. He glared at Thomas through narrowed eyes. “A supervised visit? Is that really necessary?”

“Based on your most recent performance? Definitely,” Thomas said, grin still firmly in place. He grabbed Draco by the shoulder and pulled him back up off the desk. “Now quit sulking. You’ll be fine. Just try to be at least fifty percent less of a dick.”

Hermione wasn't exactly surprised when Malfoy entered the café at exactly seven o'clock, but she had doubted whether he would show enough to make a wager with Shannon.

Shannon was currently twirling her apron strings in an elaborate victory dance behind the counter as Malfoy made his way over to Hermione's table. She couldn't help smiling even though she would be bringing the wine for the next girl's night.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully as he sat down across from her.

His brows drew together, and she could tell he was unnerved by her chipper mood. She liked that.

"Morning," he said tentatively.

She watched him for a moment and then quirked a brow. "Aren't you supposed to be getting me a cup of coffee?"

Two identical streaks of pink appeared on his cheeks. "Oh, so you're all in on this plan together, are you? Do you have any idea how humiliating that is?" he snapped.

Hermione's smile widened. She braced her elbows on the table and leaned her chin on her hands. "Of course. Why do you think I'm here?"

He didn't say anything, but she could see a muscle working in his jaw. Finally, he stood up, stripped off his coat, flung it over his chair, and stalked up to the counter. He kept his back to her while Shannon prepared their drinks.

Three days had been more than enough time for Hermione to come around to the idea of hearing an apology from Malfoy. When the heat of the confrontation had faded, it was obvious to her what had happened.

Clearly Malfoy was embarrassed by the idea of his friends finding out about what he'd been like in school. She'd had the power in that situation to either tell them, or not. She wasn't surprised that he would react poorly to feeling powerless. She imagined he'd had quite a lot of that in his life. So, naturally, he'd turned the conversation on her as quickly as possible, baiting her with what he knew would hurt her the most. She'd fallen perfectly into his trap.

Ironically, he had *also* fallen into his trap after he chased her down in the street. She knew he never would have intentionally admitted to jealousy, especially not of her, Harry, and Ron.

She wouldn't tell him, but that inadvertent admission had cooled the flames of her ire more than any apology would. She'd had very strong suspicions that Malfoy was never a true believer in Voldemort. He may have harboured his inherited prejudices, but he never seemed like a soldier for the Dark. She had thought that his refusal to identify the three of them when they were brought to the Manor was the most concrete evidence she'd ever get. She never expected to hear the words from his own mouth.

He turned back from the counter with two cups. She smiled again, wondering how many of his classmates attended lectures in three-piece suits. This one was a dark slate grey. He wore a white shirt and a dark green tie with it. The cut across his shoulders was so perfect, she thought there must be some kind of charm involved. As he carried the cups with both arms bent at the elbow, the swell of his biceps was clearly visible through the flawless fit of the sleeves. She wondered what he did to stay in shape without Quidditch. She could feel the flush in her cheeks by the time he reached the table, and she cut off her thorough perusal in favour of preparing her coffee.

He was silent as she stirred in her sugar, set her spoon aside, and took a tentative first sip. When she set her cup down and looked up at him, he spoke.

“I’m sorry for the way I behaved on Friday.” He said the words quickly and let out a short breath as though he was relieved he’d made it through the sentence. “I had no right to speak about your personal affairs in such a way.” He paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. “Despite what I said, I’m not actually bothered by you betraying the Weasel’s trust. In fact, I find it rather gratifying, and I hope you’ll continue to do it at every future opportunity.”

She rolled her eyes.

“That’s beside the point, however,” he went on. “I apologise for the way I spoke to you.”

It was clear that he was finished, but she didn’t speak. She just stared at him unblinkingly. His eyes were running over her face, looking for some reaction. After nearly a minute, he shifted in his chair.

“Well?” he said, looking flustered.

“Well, what?” she asked, keeping her expression blank.

“Aren’t you going to say something?”

“No,” she said lightly, finally letting the smile spread slowly across her face. “I’m going to continue committing this moment to memory.” She held up her thumbs and forefingers at right angles, creating a frame. She closed one eye and centered the square over his face.

“Draco Malfoy... grovelling.”

It was difficult to say whether shock or outrage was the predominant emotion on his face. His eyes widened, but the pink streaks were back on his cheeks. And this time they were accompanied by an angry flush on his neck as well.

“I am *not* grovelling,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

“You are a bit.”

“I am n—”

She interrupted him with a loud slurp from her cup. “Thanks for the coffee, by the way.” She beamed.

He seemed barely able to restrain himself from throwing his own cup in her face.

She made an exaggerated glance at the wall clock behind him. “Well, as much as I’ve enjoyed watching you beg for my forgiveness, unfortunately, I’ve got to get to work.”

He mouthed soundlessly while she got to her feet. When she slung her bag over her shoulder and started toward the door, he found his voice.

“I was not beg—”

“Oh, and Malfoy,” she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder as she looked back at him. “Apology accepted.”

That cheeky little witch. Clearly she’d had no real need for an apology. This entire charade was just an excuse to take him down a peg. Maybe there was something to be said for that Gryffindor bravery after all. Not four days ago, she’d stood in front of him and cried over the loss of her friendships. And this morning she’d had the nerve not only to look him in the eye but also to tease him. Draco felt sure that if the situation was reversed and it had been Granger watching his tears fall, he’d have been likely to board the next cargo ship to Antarctica.

He was impressed. He wrinkled his nose at the realisation. But, Merlin, if she was capable of going from that level of vulnerability to ribbing him again so quickly, he was well and truly out of his depth.

She had accepted his apology. He had lost his temper, screamed at her, made her cry, and she had forgiven him. Maybe they *could* be friends. If he couldn’t handle it, maybe she could.

“Need a refill?” Shannon asked, appearing next to the table.

Draco realised he’d been turned in his chair staring at the door after Granger for far too long. He looked down at his untouched coffee. “No, thanks. Think I’ve had my fill.”

She cast a quick glance at the empty counter and then sat in Granger’s vacated seat.

“I know there’s absolutely no chance you’re going to give me a straight answer, but I can’t help myself.” She leaned in toward him. “What is the deal with you two?”

He looked up at her and didn’t bother trying to hide his thoughts. The conflicting emotions she could undoubtedly read on his face would only bolster his next statement.

“It’s complicated.”

Shannon had the nerve to actually giggle at that.

“What?” he snapped.

“Oh, nothing,” she said airily. “Just sometimes I forget how much I like being right.”

He stared at her as she got up to greet a customer.

She dropped a hand onto his shoulder as she passed him. “That’s the exact same answer she gave me.”

Hermione glanced up at a knock on her cubicle wall. Harry was leaning in the opening.

“Got a minute?” he asked.

She set down her quill. “Sure, what’s up?”

“Do you have plans on Friday?”

Her mind flashed quickly over the conversation she’d had with Malfoy that morning and the potential of seeing him at the usual Friday night drinks.

“Erm,” she hesitated.

Harry took a step into her office. “I know it’s kind of last-minute, but I wasn’t sure if you—” he ended abruptly and changed tack. “It’s Ron’s birthday. There’s a party at the Burrow. Please come.”

Of course—Ron’s birthday. God, was it already almost March?

“Oh, right.” She looked up at Harry’s hopeful expression. This time last week, she probably would have come up with an excuse, but her fight with Malfoy had jarred something loose. That was the first time she had defended her actions out loud to someone, and it turned out that she had needed to hear it more than anyone else. What happened between her and Harry in that tent had been a matter of survival.

She nodded. “Yes, of course, I’ll come.”

“Great!” he said, looking like he meant it. “Hermione, that’s great. We—” he cut himself off again. “It’ll be great to have you there. It starts at seven.”

“Okay,” she said with a small smile.

He turned to leave.

“Harry?”

He stopped in the doorway and looked back.

“Thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), [bookishteddy](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Everyone Wants to Meet the Muggles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hermione shifted her weight between her feet as she looked down at the jumble of wellies surrounding the front door. She took in a deep breath and shook off the persistent urge to simply turn on the spot and be gone. The brass knocker was chilly on her fingertips and echoed loudly through the quiet yard. She cleared her throat as she heard someone making their way to the door.

Her eyes widened momentarily when she registered that the red hair in the now open doorway was attached to Ron, but she recovered quickly.

“Happy birthday!” she said brightly, thrusting out a bottle of Ogden’s firewhiskey toward him. It was a horribly impersonal gift, and she felt rather guilty about it. To be fair, Harry had only given her two days’ notice about the party. To be even more fair, there was a time when she would have been planning Ron’s gift for weeks.

To her surprise, Ron accepted the bottle with a grin. “Thanks, ‘Mione,” he slurred. “Just when I thought I’d run out.” He reached out with his free hand and pulled her across the threshold and into a tight one-armed hug. She must have felt stiff with her shoulders at her ears, but he didn’t seem to notice.

He released her after a moment, pulling the cork out of the bottle with his teeth and taking a long pull before offering the bottle to her. She was so thrown off by his greeting that she accepted it and took a large swallow.

“Atta girl,” he said appreciatively, kicking the door closed. He took hold of her arm and towed her into the main room. “‘Mione’s here everyone, now the party can really start!”

She flushed slightly as everyone turned to face them. Mrs Weasley quickly hustled over and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Hello, dear. Oh, it’s so good to see you!”

“Hello, Mrs Weasley,” Hermione said as she reciprocated her second unexpected hug of the evening. “Thank you for having me.”

“Of course, sweetheart, of course.” She pulled back and caught sight of the bottle in Ron’s hands.

“Why don’t you let me take that, dear,” she said, reaching for it. “I’ll put it with the other refreshments.”

Ron jerked the bottle away from her hands, sloshing whiskey onto Hermione’s shoe. “I’m not finished with it yet.”

"Ron," she said tersely, "You're spilling it on Hermione."

"It's no problem," Hermione muttered, trying to extricate herself from the situation.

"Yeah!" Ron said, pulling Hermione back towards him with an arm around her shoulders. "Hermione doesn't mind getting a little messy." He shoved the bottle back into her hands and tapped it. "Go on, drink up. It's a party!"

Hermione took a small sip and tried to pass the bottle off, but Ron pressed it back into her chest.

Mrs Weasley was clearly losing patience. "You're making Hermione uncomfortable, Ron," she said in a low voice.

Ron opened his mouth to reply, but Harry intervened. He tugged the bottle out of Hermione's hands and said briskly, "Why don't I take your coat?"

"Oh, think you know what will make Hermione comfortable, do you?" Ron asked waspishly.

"It's warm in here, Ron. Anyone would be more comfortable out of their coat," Harry said in a tone one might use with a small child.

Ron scoffed and snatched the bottle out of Harry's hand. He stalked away as Hermione started on her buttons.

"I'm so sorry about that, dear," Mrs Weasley said, wringing her hands in front of her chest. "I hope you won't judge him too harshly. It is his birthday after all, and he's had a bit of a rough time of it lately."

Hermione shifted awkwardly, placing her coat in Harry's outstretched hand. "It's no problem," she repeated quietly.

Mrs Weasley patted her on the arm before turning to follow after Ron. Harry shrugged, looking sheepish, and went to hang up her coat.

Hermione surveyed the rest of the room with a tight-lipped smile and wondered briefly if she'd be able to Apparate from inside the house.

"Not all of that tension was about you."

Hermione turned to see Ginny standing in the doorway. She stepped forward and offered Hermione a butterbeer.

"Oh?" Hermione said tentatively. Ginny was not one to mince words, and Hermione usually avoided one-on-ones with her because of it. They had probably only exchanged a dozen words in private over the last year. Hermione gulped at the butterbeer.

"He just got dumped," Ginny said flatly.

"Oh, I didn't even know he was seeing anyone."

“They hadn’t been together very long.”

“Oh.” Hermione wished she had something else to say.

“Personally, I think he got cheated on. That’s why he’s handling it so poorly.”

Hermione bristled at that. The implication was subtle, but it was clear. “I never cheated on Ron.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“We weren’t together.”

“No, you weren’t.”

Hermione watched Ginny carefully, but her expression was blank. She almost looked bored.

“You know Harry never cheated on me either,” Ginny said after a moment.

Hermione swallowed thickly. “I know.”

“We weren’t together then.”

“I know.”

“And yet you’re still so twitchy around me.”

Hermione’s eye twitched involuntarily, and Ginny’s face broke into a grin. “If you did that on purpose, it was fucking perfect.”

“Sadly, no,” Hermione snapped before draining her bottle.

Ginny held out a hand for it and gestured for Hermione to follow her into the kitchen. Hermione stepped through the doorway and looked around the familiar room. Seemingly nothing had changed since the time when she thought of it as a second home. Nothing except her.

Ginny handed her another bottle and leaned back against the counter. “So, *you* know we weren’t together, and you know that *I* know we weren’t together, so why so twitchy?”

Hermione sighed. “Wouldn’t you be?”

“No, but you’re way more of a prude than I am,” Ginny said with a shrug.

“I am not,” Hermione fired back.

“Really? Who else have you slept with then?”

Hermione shifted. “What does that matter?”

“Humor me,” Ginny said before taking a long swig of her drink. “How else will I believe you’re not pining away over my fiancé?”

“Oh, congratulations, by the way,” Hermione said in a desperate bid to change the subject.

“Who else?”

Hermione gave a small groan. “No one important. One-night stands, you know.”

“How many blokes?”

“Well, two and...”

“And? That sounds promising!”

Hermione started at the new voice and turned to see George beaming from the doorway.

“And a girl I met in a club,” she finished, grinning back at him.

He swooned, clutching at his heart. “Ugh, Hermione the lady killer.” He straightened up and pulled her into a hug. “I always knew you were going to be my favourite sister-in-law.”

“You know I slept with Dean,” Ginny said as though there had been no interruption.

“And that’s my cue,” George said, giving Hermione a salute before sliding back out the door with four butterbeers clutched to his chest.

“While you all were off hunting Horcruxes,” Ginny finished.

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Make you feel better?” Ginny asked, cocking her head.

Hermione looked at her for a moment. She knew that Harry had ended things with Ginny before they left, but it did feel different knowing that Ginny hadn’t been waiting around for him. Especially since it seemed Ron had expected Hermione to be waiting for *him*.

“Yes, actually,” she admitted after a pause.

Ginny leaned forward and clinked her bottle against Hermione’s. They both drank.

“Sister-in-law?” Hermione asked, jerking a thumb at the door in reference to George.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Well, now that Ron is single again, Mum seems to be under the impression that as long as he can refrain from making an absolute arse of himself, you two will be marching down the aisle any day now.” She smirked. “Clearly everything’s going to plan.”

Hermione grimaced. “Oh, and, er, Ron? What does he think about that?”

Ginny shrugged. “When he’s not totally and completely pissed? I think he knows it’s over.”

Hermione winced, and Ginny quickly went on. “Allow me to rephrase, he knows there’s never going to be anything romantic between you. As for the rest of it...” she brought a hand up and let it drift lazily between them.

“Right,” Hermione said.

“Some party, huh?” Ginny mimed checking her non-existent wristwatch. “You’ve been here all of ten minutes and already been spilled on and bullied into a heart-to-heart.”

“Ginny,” she began, but Ginny waved her off.

“That wasn’t an apology. It needed to happen, and I got sick of waiting.” Her expression softened somewhat. “You’ve been missed, Hermione.”

“I’ve missed you all, too,” she said honestly.

“Lots of time spent with the Muggles then?”

Hermione gave a little shrug. “Yes, it’s—well, sometimes it’s nice to forget about everything for a little while.”

“I’d like to meet them,” Ginny said earnestly.

Hermione gave a little laugh. “I don’t know, it’s hard enough with Mal—er, myself. Hard enough to keep myself from slipping up,” she finished lamely. She felt a blush on her cheeks at the close call. *Hard to keep myself from slipping up indeed.* It seemed she would be lying to both sets of friends now.

Ginny was watching her carefully but didn’t push the subject. She gave a small nod. “We should probably get back in there.”

“Yeah,” Hermione said and followed her into the living room. It occurred to her that the only other person who could appreciate her situation was Malfoy. She wondered which wizarding friends he’d be lying to.

The loud rumble of the heavy doors swinging shut announced Draco’s exit from the prison. Theo looked up from where he was leaning against the rough stone wall, having already finished his own visit, and held out his hand. Draco took the proffered cigarette and inhaled a long drag. For some reason, the hot smoke always burned away the penetrating cold of the building faster than anything else. He handed it back to Theo and turned to address the other two.

“Ready to go?”

"The second we got here," Pansy said, standing and stretching.

"Honestly, Malfoy, it's not like he gets up to much in here," Blaise added, cracking his neck from side to side. "Surely you don't need a full hour to rehash it."

Draco didn't answer but led the group back to the little dock where they would board the ferry back to the mainland. He was used to their complaining. The three of them had started the routine of monthly visits as soon as Draco was sentenced. Their arrival on the first Saturday of the month had been the only thing that kept him going some days. The fact that Pansy and Blaise continued to come even though they no longer had anyone to visit spoke more of their care for him than anything they might say. Even waiting outside of Azkaban was an extremely unpleasant experience.

He knew Theo had a similar motive for accompanying him. Although Theo had the pretence of visiting his father, the others knew perfectly well that he had no real desire for Theodore Nott Sr.'s company. Theo never spoke about the visits, and they all pretended not to notice when he came out with bloodied knuckles. If bribing the guards meant that Theo got to return even an ounce of the abuse he'd endured at his father's hand growing up, Draco certainly wasn't going to object. He was more thankful for his friends' support than he could ever say, and the best thing about Slytherins was that they'd never expect him to.

In addition to the unpleasantness of the journey and the building itself, the others also had to deal with the extreme emotional toll that returning to the prison took on Draco. He was always sullen and irascible after his visits.

They made their usual detour at a small pub on the outskirts of Norwich. They stopped under the guise of breaking up the Apparition trips with a pint, but Draco knew that his friends really insisted on it in order to give him an opportunity to recalibrate before returning to the Manor.

As usual, he was silent for the first round. He listened to the other three chat as he tried to still the shaking in his hands and quiet the screaming in his mind. They may have banished the Dementors after Voldemort fell, but Draco was certain that whatever Dark magic the creatures exuded had long since seeped into the prison's walls.

Even walking over the chilled stone in his boots, he can feel it against his bare feet. He can feel the damp wall pressed into his cheek as he cowers in the corner, hands clamped over his ears to block out the sound of his own cries, the faces appearing behind his closed lids, the voice—

Someone nudged his arm, and he looked down at Theo's left hand. He held a second lit cigarette out to Draco, placing his own back between his lips.

This time had been worse than usual and they all knew it. Draco nodded his thanks and inhaled, squinting against the smoke. Blaise returned with another round, and Draco drank deeply. He tried to suppress the feeling that he knew exactly why this time had hit him harder.

When Thomas had mentioned to him on Thursday that Granger had other plans for Friday night, Draco had decided to forgo the usual get-together as well. Their morning meeting at

the café had felt like progress, and he was disappointed that he wouldn't be seeing her. The irony that a few short months ago he had been praying for the chance to see his friends without Granger's interference was not lost on him. He should have gone anyway last night. He'd spent the entire evening in his flat regretting his decision and the reason behind it.

The hangover of negativity he'd carried into Azkaban today had been enough to trigger some of the worst side effects he'd had since starting to visit.

"Something happen with the Muggles?" Pansy asked out of nowhere.

Draco's head snapped up. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you look like someone's pissed in your pumpkin juice."

"He always looks like that," Blaise added helpfully.

"Then he looks like someone's barfed in his butterbeer," she countered.

"Lovely," Theo intoned from next to Draco.

"Do you have a point, Parkinson?" Draco asked through clenched teeth.

"Well, the Muggles are the only other people you see besides us right? Did something happen with them?"

Draco hesitated. It was true, Thomas and Shannon and their Muggle friend group were the only other exception to his self-imposed isolation. And Granger. He cleared his throat.

"No, nothing."

"Well, that was pathetically unconvincing," Blaise said with a smirk.

Pansy was leaning forward now, intrigued. "You're lying, something happened." She watched for Draco's reaction. "Or you're seeing someone else besides them."

Draco felt his face heat and inwardly cursed his carelessness. His Occlumency was rusty.

"You are!" Pansy trilled. "You're seeing someone."

"I am not *seeing* anyone. Don't be ridiculous."

"Who is she? A Muggle?!" Pansy was picking up steam, her eyes going round as Draco's blush gave everything away.

"No, of course not," he said quickly, diving behind his pint glass.

"A witch then, but who?"

"It's nothing," he started. "There's no one. I don't see anyone else."

"I haven't seen anything in the papers, Pans," Theo chimed in. "You know it would be news if he was spotted with anyone."

"So they only go to Muggle places then. I mean look at us," she said, waving a hand around. "Four purebloods in this dive."

Theo gave Draco a look that plainly said *I tried*.

"Please just leave it, will you?" Draco said, dragging a hand down his face.

Pansy opened her mouth to speak again, but Blaise elbowed her in the side. "I don't know what you need the Muggles for anyway when you have us," he said.

"They're nice to me," Draco snapped.

Pansy and Blaise made identical gestures of mock affront, gasping and bringing their right hands to their chests.

"We're nice to you!" Blaise argued, while Pansy nodded fervently and adopted an innocent look.

"No, actually, you're not," Draco said flatly.

Pansy dropped her innocent expression at once and wrinkled her nose. "Well, what do you need *nice* for anyway? Are you a Hufflepuff now?"

Draco let out his breath through his nose and dropped his head back against the wall of the booth. He thought over the plotting and scheming that Thomas and Shannon had taken to recently.

"They're actually not really that nice to me either lately," he muttered. "You'd probably get along great."

"Let's do it then," Blaise said, clapping his hands together.

"Yeah, I wanna meet the Muggles," Theo added, sitting forward.

Draco stared at them. "I was joking."

"Well, we aren't," Pansy said, crossing her arms. "How are we supposed to keep the upper hand as your best friends if we can't gauge the competition?"

"Brilliant, Pans," Blaise said. "That didn't sound mental at all."

"Yeah, er, that's not why I want to meet them," Theo added. "I'm just sick of dealing with these two all the time."

"You are not meeting the Muggles!" Draco said too loudly. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and then continued in a lower voice. "It is a miracle that they are willing to put up

with me, the last thing I'm about to do is subject them to this circus." He gestured between the three of them.

"We'll circle back to it," Blaise said, grinning broadly.

Draco got up and ordered a shot.

Hermione leaned her back against the bar of their regular pub and smiled lazily. In the week since Ron's birthday party, he and Harry had both stopped by her office to thank her for coming. Ron was a little fuzzy on the details of what had happened, but he seemed to have the general impression that they'd had a good time together. Once George had wrestled the bottle of Ogden's away from him and he had a chance to shake off his ill-temper, they actually had. Ron had convinced Hermione to sing a wizard's karaoke duet with him and spun her around the room while the colourful little musical notes danced around them. Harry had joined them for an ear-splittingly off-key rendition of "We Are the Champions" that had Ginny rolling. Hermione had felt in that moment like they could have been back in the Gryffindor common room. Before Dumbledore had died, before Harry had left Ginny behind, before Ron and Hermione were sure there would never be anything between them.

Of course, more than two years of awkwardness wasn't going to evaporate overnight, but Hermione much preferred the new sheepish Ron to the old frigid one.

And now Janelle was telling a story about someone they had known in school, and Shannon was wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

Hermione's people were happy, and maybe she could be happy with them again.

She was so content, she didn't even mind that Malfoy was clearly using magic to cheat at darts. Every time he lined up a shot and threw, his jumper pulled up slightly and exposed a sliver of alabaster skin on his hip. The more he drank—and the more outraged Thomas got—the more ostentatious Malfoy became. Hermione watched from across the room as he covered his eyes with one hand and threw three bullseyes in a row with the other. Thomas was red-faced and spluttering as Malfoy raised both arms in triumph. A wide stretch of ridiculously toned abs was revealed below the edge of his jumper, and the sight made Hermione's mouth water.

She regained her composure just in time to realise that they were approaching the bar. Thomas begrudgingly paid for the next round. Again. Malfoy leaned his forearms on the bar next to Hermione and gave her a pointed look. She knew he was waiting to see if she would reprimand him for the risky use of magic in front of Muggles.

"Impressive," she said with a slight nod toward the dartboard.

He gave her a devilish smirk. “I’m a man of many talents, Granger.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” she said without thinking. Luckily, he seemed distracted taking his drink from the bartender.

“How were the boys?” Shannon asked.

Hermione realised she hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation.

“The boys?” she repeated.

“You saw them last week right?” Shannon prompted.

“Oh, right, those boys.”

Malfoy was looking at her questioningly.

“It was Ron’s birthday,” she explained. Malfoy made no attempt to hide his distaste, and Janelle snickered at his expression. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Have you met them?” Malfoy asked Shannon.

“Only once, very briefly. It was a couple of years ago now, I guess. They came by to help Hermione move some things out of her parent’s place, and I happened to be visiting mine across the street.”

“And what did you think?” Malfoy asked over his glass.

Shannon looked contemplative for a moment. “I didn’t think much of Ron, honestly.” At the sight of Malfoy’s wide grin, she smirked and continued. “Not a match,” she said behind her hand, gesturing with her head at Hermione.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said.

“I loved Harry though,” Shannon added. Hermione and Janelle both snorted at the way Malfoy’s face fell.

“Uh-oh, someone looks a little jealous,” Janelle said, elbowing Malfoy playfully. “Was this a schoolyard rivalry?”

“Oh, no,” Thomas interjected. “Don’t bring up s-c-h-o-o-l with these two or we’ll have to evacuate the bar. You should have seen the way they went at it a couple of weeks ago. I swear the air was vibrating around them.”

“It was considerate of Malfoy really,” Hermione said, enjoying the way his colour was rising. “Instead of making me tell you what he was like at school, he opted to give a demonstration.”

“He wasn’t the only one demonstrating,” Shannon said with a smirk. “I’ll be honest, I didn’t think you were the type to throw around the ‘h’ word, but it didn’t seem like your first time.”

Hermione just blinked at Shannon for a few seconds. Then Malfoy shifted next to her, and she looked over at him.

She'd said she hated him. She had forgotten that. She'd leaned over the table and spat it into his face. Hate.

He was watching her carefully. He had the same hard expression he'd worn right before he flipped the switch on her that night.

Hermione vaguely registered the appearance of Nick, distracting the others, but she only had eyes for Malfoy. She turned to face him, leaning her left arm onto the bar. Her fingertips were centimeters from *his* left arm and what she knew was there.

It was warm in the room, and she was sure that if things were different, Malfoy would have pushed up his sleeves at some point during the dart game. But she'd never seen his bare forearms. He always wore long sleeves, always to the wrist.

Her gaze slid over his hand resting on the bar. Over the long fingers and broad palm. Over the prominent veins that snaked across tendons and disappeared under his cuff. There were nearly invisible blond hairs on the back of his wrist, and her fingers tingled with the desire to reach out and stroke a soft circle over it. For him to turn his palm upward and envelope her hand in his.

Even with the most infamous symbol of evil in the history of the magical world practically at her fingertips, she still longed to be closer. It was ironic. That symbol should have been the embodiment of all the reasons she hated him most, but it wasn't. She didn't believe he wanted the Mark. She didn't believe he'd wanted to kill. She believed he wanted to live. Defying Voldemort was a death sentence, and he'd wanted to survive just like she had.

"I don't hate you," she said finally, looking up after what was probably far too long. His eyes were locked on her face.

"I hated the things you said. I hate that you can make me feel that way."

She could tell he was shocked by her honesty. It came out sounding a bit more vulnerable than she'd actually intended, but she didn't regret saying it. It was true.

It seemed like minutes passed before he turned to face her, standing to his full height. He nodded once, slowly.

He seemed so much closer like this, chest to chest, and her mouth went dry. He looked conflicted—like he was trying to decide what to say. She felt a sudden pang of panic. Maybe he thought she expected him to say that he didn't hate her either. And... he couldn't bring himself to do it.

She took an instinctive step backwards and caught the edge of Janelle's shoe. Hermione's elbow knocked into her nearly full glass and sent beer slopping onto the bar. She blushed furiously, piling napkins onto the puddle.

“You okay?” Janelle asked, looking over.

“Yes, fine. I just—erm—I think I’m going to head out actually.”

“Want me to come with you?” Janelle asked as Hermione rummaged in her bag for some notes.

“No, stay. I’m fine, really.” Hermione placed the money on the counter next to the sodden napkins.

She glanced quickly up at Malfoy and muttered, “Goodnight.” Then she turned to say farewell to the others before he could respond.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I loved seeing all of your speculation last week about what would happen at the Burrow. I hope it was as painfully awkward as you could have wished for. Special shoutout to my beta bookishteddy who described herself as having her shoulders at her ears when she first read it. I had to go back and add in that amazing descriptor :)

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), [bookishteddy](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Hate is a Strong Word

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I hate that you can make me feel that way.

Her words had been reverberating inside Draco's head for the last week. When Shannon had referenced Granger's use of the word *hate*, it was clear Granger had forgotten what she'd said. She'd looked up at him and then down at his arm for what felt like minutes—her eyes burning into his Mark. It had taken every ounce of self-control he possessed not to pull his arm off the bar and out of her view. The whole time she looked at it, he prepared himself for what she would say.

I know you hate me, Granger. It's okay if you hate me. You should hate me. I hate myself.

He had been completely unprepared for her to say that she *didn't*. That she only hated what he'd said—hated that he could make her feel *that way*. There was so much he wanted to say to that.

I know, that's why I said it. I said it to hurt you. I wanted to hurt you. I'll do it again. You should hate me. I'll hurt you.

But he hadn't needed to say anything after all. Whatever she'd seen on his face had been enough. She had shrunk away from him, spilling her drink before practically running out the door.

“You ready?” Thomas’s voice cut through his thoughts, pulling him back to the present.

“Yeah, ready,” he said, reaching down to retrieve his bag from the damp grass. He winced slightly when his fatigued muscles disagreed with the movement.

Even though his legs always burned with impending soreness as they walked off the pitch toward home, Draco liked working out with the football blokes. Ever since he'd mentioned to Thomas that he missed how school sports had kept him in shape, he'd been joining in for their conditioning sessions. He had zero ability to actually play football, and even less desire than that, but the conditioning drills were good for general fitness. They ran, they jumped, they lifted weights.

In addition to the physical benefits, the Sunday morning workouts usually helped to burn off the considerable amount of frustrated energy that he seemed to be stockpiling these days.

Usually.

Today he'd been distracted no matter how hard he pushed himself. Granger with one foot propped on a stool so her skirt hung over her thigh. Granger giving him a playful smirk and

remarking on his faux darts prowess. Granger looking up at him through her lashes before telling him *I don't hate you*.

He groaned inwardly. Merlin, the bar was truly on the floor if that's what qualified as words of affirmation for him nowadays.

"You're staying for breakfast right?"

Draco looked up and realised they'd already reached the couple's house. He would have walked right past if Thomas hadn't said anything.

He hesitated, but his stomach gave an audible growl before he could decline. Thomas smiled, gesturing for him to follow.

"You have what you need?"

"Yeah, thanks," Draco said, heading for the upstairs shower. He didn't come back to the house for breakfast every time, but it was a frequent enough routine that he kept a change of clothes and some toiletries in his bag. He stripped his shirt off on the stairs, thankful to be rid of the sweat-soaked fabric.

"I hate that you can make me feel that way."

Malfoy turns to face her, standing to his full height. He seems so close like this, chest to chest. She can feel the heat of his body through her clothes. He leans forward and places his left hand on the bar next to her, caging her between his arms. Her breath catches as he presses his body against hers, sliding a knee between her legs. He brings his head down next to hers and whispers across her ear.

"Do you hate that I can make you feel this way?"

Her arms ripple in gooseflesh, and heat is pooling below her stomach. His breath is relentless on her neck, sending wave after wave of shivers down her back. She can hear their friends talking right next to them and worries that someone will see them, hear them. But no one seems to notice.

"Yes," she barely manages.

He's kissing her roughly. Inhaling her. The pressure of his jaw working open and closed makes her head sway back and forth. His tongue sweeps across hers again and again. He's hiking up her skirt, his hand trailing quickly up the insides of her thighs to find the top of her knickers. It's slipping in, curving to cup her and then two fingers are sliding inside. She's grinding her clit against the heel of his palm as he works them in and out. He's almost lifting

her against the bar as his fingers drive up and up and up, and his voice rumbles against her ear as she comes.

“*I hate you, Granger.*”

Hermione woke with a gasp. She was panting, the adrenaline of the dream still heavy in her veins. She brought a shaky hand to her forehead, pushing back her hair. *I hate you, Granger.*

“Oh, god,” she murmured, covering her face with both hands. *I’m going to need so much therapy to unpack that.*

She dropped a tentative hand to her knickers, and even the slightest graze to her clit set off a reflexive twinging aftershock. “Oh, god,” she said again, her suspicions confirmed.

Well, this was just an impossibly unhelpful development. As if her involuntary daydreams weren’t sordid enough, now she was unconsciously bringing herself off to thoughts of him? Indulging in fantasies was all well and good, but not when she had to face the subject of said fantasies on a regular basis. Merlin, how could she look at him now that she knew what his hands felt like on her... in her?

You don’t know, she quickly corrected herself. *That was a dream. That wasn’t real. You still have no idea what it would really be like.*

But she could imagine...

She yanked back the covers and dragged herself across the room. She needed a shower. A cold shower. An ice-cold, freezing shower, during which she would not be tempted to revisit the dream for a second go. Throwing open the door, she started purposefully into the hall before she could change her mind.

She collided with what felt like a solid wall of flesh on the landing. The shock of running into something was so extreme, she didn’t even notice what was happening until she was crushed against the door frame, pinned by someone from shoulder to knee.

“Granger?!” the flesh wall cried as it peeled away from her.

“Malfoy?!” she gasped as her breath returned.

He was standing in front of her clad only in a pair of grey joggers, and her eyes raked over his naked torso. Whatever the impeccable fit of his suits had suggested, whatever the peek of skin under his jumper had hinted at, was nothing compared to the reality. He might as well have been chiselled from marble. The perfect lines of his smooth, broad chest and abs were marred only by a network of thin white scars. *Sectumsempra.* They all slanted along a similar angle beginning at his left shoulder. They branched slightly towards his right hip, almost like lightning. The most prominent one cut diagonally through the center of his chest. Right where her face had just—

Hermione gasped again, returning to herself. What was she doing? She scrambled backwards, nearly falling through the open bedroom door and slamming it behind her. She walked

backwards several paces, still staring at the place he'd just been, until she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the bureau. Her eyes widened as the true reality of the situation sunk in. She was wearing only a camisole and a pair of boy short underwear. Her hair was everywhere, her cheeks were flushed, and she was looking freshly fucked from the aftereffects of the dream. *Freshly fucked by him*, her brain added unhelpfully. Her arousal and the chill of his body—*had he been outside?*—had made her nipples painfully hard, and therefore painfully *visible* through the thin fabric of her top. She groaned audibly and collapsed face-first onto the bed.

She'd grown spoiled always having the top floor to herself when she stayed the night there. The chance of running into someone this early in the three meters between her door and the bathroom was incredibly remote. Running into *Malfoy* should have been impossible.

What the hell was he doing there? And why half-naked?!

She heard the sound of the shower turning on across the hall.

"Oh my god," she breathed. He was showering in there. He would be fully naked. Naked and wet and showering. She felt the familiar down-low tingle and jumped to her feet. She had to get out of there. She couldn't just lay there and listen to him shower, soaking through the knickers she'd already soaked once with thoughts of him. Knickers he'd seen her in! While soaked!

Dashing to her bag, she threw on her clothes. She'd freshen up in the downstairs half-bath before Malfoy got out. She could only hope he wouldn't be staying for breakfast.

Draco stared in shock as Granger toppled backwards into the bedroom and out of sight. There was a chance he could have come out of this unscathed, but that went out the window as soon as he tripped on his stupid bag and crushed her against the wall. The feel of her face pressed into his shoulder, his hips in her soft abdomen, her breasts on his chest...

He stumbled backwards into the bathroom and slammed the door, leaning against it. Merlin, she'd been in her underwear. A tight white top and surely the tiniest shorts ever conceived by man. Her nipples had been hard. He shouldn't have had time to notice that. Should have looked away as soon as he realised she was undressed. But he hadn't. He stood there and ogled her because he was a Gigantic Fucking Creep™. In their scuffle, one of her straps had slid down her shoulder, revealing the entire top of one breast. He swallowed roughly. This was going to be worse than the Library Bra Incident of sixth year.

One day, Draco was making his way out of the library just before it closed when he noticed Granger gathering her books and packing up. He stopped behind a shelf to watch her for a moment because one does not become a creep overnight. Effective creeping takes years of practice. She lifted her heavy bag onto her shoulder, but as she leaned over to pick up a book

that hadn't fit, it slipped off down her arm, landing in the crook of her elbow. Draco's eyes widened as he realised that one of the bag's buckles had caught on her shirt pocket when it fell — popping open the top four buttons and revealing a lacy pink bra and considerable swell of breasts. He held his breath as he watched her drop the bag with a sigh and slowly rebutton the shirt. Granger and her lacy pink bra accompanied him in every single shower for the next several weeks.

Draco dropped his gaze to the prominent erection tenting his joggers, then glanced at the shower.

"No," he said aloud, shaking his head. Absolutely not. He was an adult. He could control this. He was in someone else's house. Granger was just on the other side of the door. His cock gave an undeniable twitch at that thought and he felt himself growing even harder.

He slammed the faucet on and stripped, stepping under the water before it had even warmed. He closed his eyes and scrubbed his face roughly with his hands. *Granger is just on the other side of the door.* Had he locked the door?

His eyes popped open. He wasn't sure. What if Granger came into the bathroom? What if Granger came into the bathroom and saw what she'd done to him?

What if she stepped into the shower? The water would soak her tight white top and minuscule shorts. The colour of her already hard nipples would be visible almost immediately. He'd grip the neckline and yank it down to expose her breasts to him. He'd press her into the wall and close his mouth over her nipple. She'd bring her hand up between them to stroke him firmly. He'd feel her rhythm stutter every time he dragged his tongue across her skin. He'd nip her gently with his teeth, and she'd squeeze her hand around the head just the way he liked. He'd lean back to watch as she ground herself against his thigh and then reach down to press his thumb over her clit. Her mouth would fall open in pleasure and he'd feel her hand clench in time with her cunt. He would paint the tiny shorts with his come.

Draco braced himself against the shower wall with one hand. "Oh, god," he murmured as he stroked out the last of his release.

He could say it had been utilitarian. A means to an end. He couldn't very well stand around hard in the shower all day. But that would be a lie. He knew it with every cell in his still-trembling body. He'd indulged. Granger was in the next room and he'd done it anyway. That was *why* he'd done it.

He slapped his face briskly with both hands and set to actually washing. He could only hope she wouldn't be staying for breakfast.

To his credit, Thomas looked completely shocked when Hermione walked into the kitchen.

He glanced up and did a genuine double-take at the sight of her. “Hermione! I didn’t know you were still here. Shit, I sent Draco up there.”

She had only briefly considered the possibility that her friends had sent a half-naked Malfoy up to ambush her in her underwear. They were meddlesome, but they would never intentionally put her in that position.

“Yes, I know,” she said with a wry smile. “I figured that out when I *literally* ran into him in the hall.”

“Christ, I’m sorry,” he said, trying and failing to cover a laugh.

“Yeah, you sound it,” she said, rolling her eyes and dropping into one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

“Morning, darling,” Shannon called, sweeping into the room. She pecked Thomas on the cheek before turning to Hermione.

“Did you sleep well?”

Hermione felt herself flush to her hairline. *Too well.* “Yes, fine, thank you.” Her voice sounded choked and she cleared her throat. “What’s he doing here?”

“Who’s here?” Shannon asked.

“Draco’s showering upstairs,” Thomas answered. “He tags along to conditioning,” he explained to Hermione. “Said he wanted to stay in shape now that he doesn’t play sports at school.”

Hermione nodded. That explained that. In shape, indeed.

“Sometimes he stays for breakfast,” Thomas added, and Hermione looked up.

“Oh, well, I should get going then. Leave you all to it.” She cringed at how flimsy it sounded.

“Don’t be silly,” Shannon said, turning from the stove. “I’ve already got your eggs on.”

“Oh, right,” Hermione said defeatedly, collapsing back into the chair she’d half-risen from.

She heard footsteps and stiffened as Malfoy entered the kitchen behind her. He brought a wave of warm, spicy scent in with him, and it made her head swim. Surely he wasn’t standing close enough to her that she could feel the heat of his shower at her back? She had to be imagining that.

“Coffee?” Thomas asked, holding out a mug. Malfoy crossed the kitchen to retrieve it. His face was pink from lingering warmth and scrubbing, and Hermione dropped her gaze, wishing she had a similar excuse for her own blush.

“Granger.”

She snapped her head up to see Malfoy holding out another mug to her. She took it quickly, trying not to compare his real voice to the dream version.

“Can I help?” she asked Shannon, suddenly desperate for a distraction.

“Nope. It’s done,” she said with a smile, piling eggs and bacon onto plates.

Malfoy handed one to Hermione and sat across from her. She watched as he prepared his coffee. Lots of cream and lots of sugar. Just like hers.

“So, you like to stay in shape?” she blurted. *Oh, perfect. Very smooth, Hermione.*

Malfoy looked up and raised a brow.

“Erm, Thomas said you were working out?”

“Oh,” he said, looking back at his plate. “Yes.”

She nodded as the silence stretched on. What else was there to say? As a conversation starter, it was potentially her worst.

“What’s your excuse then?” he asked her.

“What?”

“Why are we graced with your presence this morning?” his tone was dry, almost irritated.

“Oh, erm, girls’ night,” she said feebly, looking over at Shannon. She was smirking behind her coffee cup.

“This one’s a lightweight,” Thomas said, pointing at Hermione with his fork. “One bottle of wine and you’re liable to find her sleeping around somewhere.”

Hermione glared at him as he flushed red. Shannon snorted coffee onto her plate.

“Fuck, I didn’t mean ‘sleeping around.’ I meant you’ll find her somewhere. Sleeping. Around. Asleep,” Thomas rambled, getting redder by the second.

Malfoy looked like someone had just awarded a thousand points to Slytherin.

“My, my, Granger,” he drawled. “I never would have pegged you as the type.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “That’s because you don’t know the first thing about me.”

It probably wasn’t the smartest thing to say, but for some reason she was riled by his implication that she came off as a prude. Especially given the fantasy he’d played a starring role in less than an hour ago.

His eyes glittered. “Oh, really? Passed around the common room were you?” he said, his light tone at odds with the crassness of his words.

She scoffed. "Hardly. You must be confusing me with your girlfriend. They didn't call her the snake charmer for nothing."

Anger flashed across his face, and she recoiled internally. What was wrong with her? She never would have spoken about another girl that way. Not even Pansy, who she vehemently disliked. Why did he get to her like this?

His fork clinked loudly against his plate as he set it down. "Well, not everyone can be lucky enough to get tag-teamed by the Dynamic Duo. Tell me, did they—"

"Hah!" she yelled, cutting him off. "Going for Harry and Ron again, Malfoy? That's tired. I'd think you lacked originality if you hadn't already told me you were *jealous*."

She watched helplessly as he registered the word. His fingers flexed on the table, and his eyes darkened dangerously.

She immediately wished that she could take it back. That she could reach out into the space between them and pluck it out of the air. She wanted to tell him she hadn't meant it. She knew he hadn't been jealous of Harry or Ron in that way. She wanted to say she'd never use his feelings about the war against him like that. Never twist his words when she knew how much it had cost him to say. But nothing came out. Every attempt died in her throat.

"Don't flatter yourself," he said, acid dripping from every word. He placed his palms on the table and stood, leaning over her. His next words were clearly directed at the couple, but he never took his eyes off Hermione.

"Sorry to eat and run," he started, his face contorting into the most convincing mask of disgust she'd ever seen. "But something's put me off my appetite."

He stalked out of the kitchen without a backward glance. When Hermione heard the front door close, she dropped her head into her hands.

"Fuck," she muttered into her palms.

Shannon sat back in her chair and took a sip of coffee. "I'll see you at the café at seven o'clock tomorrow morning."

When Hermione entered the café the next day, she immediately spotted Malfoy sitting in the chair she'd occupied during their last meeting. She walked purposefully up to the table but faltered when she noticed the coffee in front of him.

"I thought I was supposed to get that for you," she said.

He lifted the cup and took a small sip, keeping his expression neutral. “Are you the one apologising then?” he asked.

She sat. “Aren’t I?”

Before he could respond, Shannon appeared next to them and set down a cup in front of Hermione. She answered Hermione’s questioning look with a wink.

“Apparently someone thinks we both have some apologising to do,” Malfoy drawled.

“I’m sorry for what I said about Pansy,” Hermione started abruptly. “It was gross, and I don’t know what I was thinking. I always hated that nickname, even if the rumours were true. And I wouldn’t care if they were.”

Malfoy appraised her from behind his cup and then nodded slightly.

“And I’m sorry I twisted your words about... well, about what you said when we first argued,” she went on, hesitating.

He shrugged, letting her off the hook. “I had it coming. I shouldn’t have taunted you about Potter and Weasley again.”

He brought his cup to his lips, but then seemed to realise that wasn’t technically an apology. “I’m sorry,” he added, looking sincere.

“You would think you’d learn your lesson given that was what landed you here last time.”

He glanced over at the counter where Shannon was making only the feeblest attempt at pretending she wasn’t watching them and sighed. “You know, I used to be capable of civilised conversation before you came along, Granger.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know that, actually,” she said with a pointed look.

He gave a low chuckle. “Touché.”

She softened her look with a small smile. “I take your meaning though. It’s not as though I was overturning chairs every other week before you entered the picture.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes as he smirked at the memory of her storming out of the pub.

“A fair point,” he said, glancing back at the counter again. “I don’t know how many more outbursts like that they’ll be willing to tolerate.”

“How about a truce then?” she asked.

“A truce?” he repeated, looking blankly at her.

“Yeah, you know, we’ll be friendly.” She actually did roll her eyes this time as his face scrunched with distaste. “Fine, we’ll be *friends*,” she went on. “Whatever sort of behaviour

that entails for you.”

He just looked at her for a minute before tilting his head and stating, “A friend wouldn’t make you feel *that* way.”

She felt the blood rush to her cheeks almost as feverishly as it rushed south. She prayed that he’d interpret her colour as embarrassment at having those vulnerable words repeated to her.

“Right,” she said. Technically it was true for both her original meaning and the dream version.

He sat still, seemingly considering her proposition. After a moment, Hermione raised her coffee cup and held it out toward him, lifting her brows in question. His eyes dropped to it for a second, but when he looked back up, he was smiling. She returned it gladly as he reached out and clinked his cup against hers.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed my nod to the best bad rom-com of all time, The Proposal, with the hallway collision scene.

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

And as always, many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), [bookishteddy](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

There's No One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A patch of moisture was blooming on the wall in front of him. Draco watched the cinder grow dark and shiny as it gathered. When a droplet broke free and trickled downward, he had to physically shake off the phantom sensation of it sliding down the back of his neck.

“I’ve been spending time with Muggles.”

Lucius Malfoy raised his eyes slowly from the stone floor and fixed them on his son’s face. His expression didn’t change. At all. No shock, no outrage, not even a flicker of surprise.

Draco didn’t know exactly what he’d expected, but given that those were the only words he’d spoken to his father in six months of visits, he’d expected more than nothing.

He wasn’t sure why he’d even said them. Of all the thoughts that tore through his mind as he sat and stared at the wall for an hour at a time, why had those been the words that finally tumbled out?

Lucius just looked at him. Time stretched on, and Draco was determined not to shift under his father’s gaze, not to speak first. But Lucius dropped his eyes back to the floor, and Draco’s resolve broke.

“Nothing?” he asked. “You have nothing to say?”

Lucius rolled his eyes but still didn’t look back at Draco. “Tell me something I don’t know, and I might be tempted to dignify it with a response.”

Draco felt his mouth open in surprise. “Mother told you?”

Lucius inclined his head in an almost imperceptible gesture of acknowledgement.

“Why didn’t you say anything before now?”

Lucius did look at him then, and his expression made Draco’s stomach twist.

“And what, pray tell, was I supposed to glean from your behaviour that would indicate you had any interest in hearing my opinions on how you waste your time?”

Draco ground his teeth together and bit out, “That’s never stopped you before.”

To his surprise, Lucius let out a bark of genuine laughter. Draco nearly recoiled at the slightly horrific sight of mirth stretching shallow skin over gaunt features. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard his father laugh. It had to be five years at least but was probably closer to ten—long before he looked like this.

“Very well,” Lucius said, a sneer curving his lips. “Tell me about your *Muggles*.”

Draco felt his face heating at the disdainful emphasis his father placed on the word. Now that he’d goaded Lucius into asking about them, he found that he had no desire to discuss his friends with him.

“They are very similar,” he said, trying to sound vague. “I was surprised.”

Lucius looked bored. “Similar?” he drawled.

“To us, I mean.”

“With one notable exception, surely.”

“Indeed,” Draco went on. “They can’t use magic.” He let an imitation of his father’s sneer twist his face. “Just like you.”

Draco relished the moment Lucius failed to conceal his reaction to those words. His lips pressed into a thin line and his nostrils flared.

“You dare to suggest that this temporary suppression could supersede the legacy of power from one thousand years of the Malfoy line?”

“Of course not, Father,” Draco said, affecting a detached tone. “I was merely pointing out a similarity.”

Before his father could respond, a loud rapping came from the door, indicating the hour was up. Draco got to his feet and looked down his nose into Lucius’s identical grey eyes. “Though I wouldn’t be so sure how temporary it will be.” He headed to the door, saying over his shoulder, “See you next month, Father.” He paused with his fingers on the handle and turned to look back. “Or not.”

“What’s got you in such a good mood?” Pansy asked as Draco leaned his head back and closed his eyes, twin streams of smoke billowing out of his nostrils on a sigh.

“Lucy have some hilarious tale of high-security hijinks?” Blaise asked, taking the cigarette from between Draco’s fingers and inhaling a long drag.

Draco kept his eyes closed but smiled at the ridiculous nickname. He’d empty his Gringotts vaults to see Blaise say it to Lucius’s face.

“Not exactly,” he answered lazily. “Just a nice day.”

He could imagine the look the other three exchanged. The sun was hidden behind a thick curtain of grey clouds, and a piercing wind was whipping tendrils of chilly mist around the ferry. It bumped gently against the dock, and the other three stood, eager to be back on the mainland. There was a pause during which he assumed they were looking back at his unmoving form.

“Right...” Theo started. “Well, feel free to take your time soaking it in, but I’m parched.”

Draco heard the tell-tale crack of him Disapparating. Pansy and Blaise followed together a second after. Draco raised his head and gazed for a moment back out over the sea to where the prison was obscured in fog. Then he got to his feet and followed his friends, taking a deep breath before twisting into nothing.

He arrived in the small alley they used as an Apparition point several streets from the pub. It was a Muggle area, but this particular stretch of the town seemed to be mostly abandoned.

They sat at their usual table, and Theo went to get the first round. He’d barely sat back down when Pansy spoke.

“Theo has news.”

Blaise groaned from beside her. “Really, Pans?”

“Draco’s a big boy. He can handle it,” she retorted.

Draco looked at his friend beside him. Theo was avoiding his eye.

“Well, go on. Out with it.”

Theo took a long sip from his pint and then looked up at Draco. “I got a job at the Ministry.”

“That’s great,” Draco said sincerely. “I didn’t even know you were applying. What department?”

Theo looked down again, speaking to the table. “Magical Law Enforcement.”

Draco felt the first stirrings of discomfort as his friends’ behaviour started to make sense. He looked up to see Blaise and Pansy watching him.

“With the Aurors?” he asked Theo. His voice sounded constrained, thin.

Theo gave a sort of combined nod and shrug. “It’s a support position, a branch of records and archives. I won’t be an Auror, but I’ll be assisting on casework—research, evidence, profiling.”

Draco cleared his throat. “That’s great. You’ll be perfect for it.” It was true. Theo was incredibly smart, meticulous, and had an eye for pattern recognition. He was extremely well-suited to the position.

“Thanks, mate,” Theo said, looking over at him, finally. “I’m sorry,” he added quietly.

“Don’t be,” Draco said gruffly. “It’s certainly not your fault.”

Theo nodded but didn’t say more. Draco felt the cold creep of shame spreading outward from his gut. His friends should be celebrating this news, but instead, they were dreading his reaction. He regretted more than ever telling anyone about his desire to become an Auror. He’d been so stupid, so naïve after the war, but it had been all he could think about.

He’d spent the year in Azkaban studying for his NEWTs and the Auror’s Entrance Exam. His mother hadn’t had the courage to tell him that his felony conviction made the dream an impossibility. He was sure that she’d also forbidden his solicitor from telling him. Logically, it made sense. That goal had given him something to focus on, something to strive for. Without it, Azkaban would have been a much different experience for him. He knew this, but it hadn’t done much to assuage the anger and humiliation he’d felt after he was released and his application had been returned without review.

He’d clung to that hope for so long. For once he would have the chance to be on the right side. To save lives, instead of ruining them. To make a name for himself for something he could be proud of.

Theo shifted beside him, and Draco snapped himself out of his thoughts. Merlin, he was truly a selfish bastard. This was not about him.

He clapped Theo on the shoulder, letting every ounce of his admiration show on his face as he said the words he knew his friend needed to hear most. “I’m proud of you, Theo.”

When Draco Apparated into the parlour of the Manor a few hours later, the rounds of celebratory drinks sent him stumbling into the back of an antique chaise. He clutched at it, leaning forward as his head thudded violently.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered under his breath as he straightened up.

“Language, Draco.”

He turned to see Narcissa Malfoy framed in the doorway.

“Apologies, Mother,” he said, still grimacing slightly. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Good visit?” she asked, her face impassive.

He heaved a sigh and turned toward his bedroom, shrugging out of his coat and loosening his tie. He never returned straight from Azkaban to his flat, and he never brought home the clothes he’d worn there without having them laundered first. He always showered and changed at the Manor. “The usual,” he said casually.

Narcissa caught him by the elbow as he made to leave the room. “Draco, you must return next month for your usual visit.”

He scoffed and pulled his arm out of her grasp. “Had an owl already, have you? Daddy wrote to tattle on me for my little threat?”

She didn’t answer, but her eyes narrowed slightly.

“Relax, Mother. I’m sure there’s no harm in letting him sweat for an extra month.”

“Draco! This is serious. These visits are an essential part of his case for—”

“Yes, yes, his parole. I know.” Draco turned away from her again, taking several steps in his frustration. “How could I possibly forget as a central strand in the web of lies? I still don’t see how maintaining the illusion of a relationship with his Death Eater son will work in his favour.”

Narcissa’s voice was quiet when she spoke, but he could hear the edge of desperation in it.

“Every connection to the outside world is seen as a benefit. Especially connections to family.”

Draco snorted derisively. “Even this one?”

He heard the click of his mother’s heels on the marble floor as she approached him. She laid a gentle hand on the back of his shoulder.

“It doesn’t have to be an illusion, you know. You should tell him about her.”

Draco swung around to stare at his mother. “What are you talking about?”

She was wearing a warm smile. Understanding and a hint of smugness. “I’m your mother Draco, you can’t easily hide from me.”

“I’m not hiding anything!” he said, firing up. “What did you tell him? He knew about the Muggles. What did you say?”

“Only what I know to be true,” she said with a little shrug. “You’ve made friends for yourself in the Muggle world and...” She seemed to be choosing her words carefully, but her eyes held the same self-satisfied twinkle. “And you care for someone. Someone new.”

He scoffed again. “The only thing I care about is scraping together some semblance of a meaningful life from the shattered remains of a reputation that your husband left me with.”

He turned on his heel and headed for his room again, starting on the buttons of his waistcoat. He paused at the bottom of the stairs. “And there’s no one! No one new.”

Narcissa smirked at his retreating back and the bright flush of red staining the pale skin of his neck.

“There’s no one!” Hermione said for what felt like the hundredth time that night.

“Why can’t you tell us who he is? It can’t be that embarrassing,” Ginny pouted.

Hermione tutted. “Really, Ginny, so heteronormative of you to assume.”

“It’s a girl, then?” Ginny asked, perking up.

“There. Is. No. One,” Hermione repeated slowly as she stood from the sofa and made toward the door. “It’s just a matter of principle.”

Harry snorted and Ginny turned her gaze on him. “And you’re no help at all. Aren’t you curious?”

“I’m sure Hermione will tell us when she’s ready,” Harry said sagely.

“There’s no one!” Hermione called, her voice muffled from the kitchen.

Ginny heaved a sigh. “Well, if she’s not giving up anything good, I’m going to bed.” She leaned over to give Harry a kiss goodnight.

Hermione reappeared with a dish towel over her shoulder and leaned down for the remaining plates.

“Goodnight,” Ginny said, holding out her arms for a hug.

“Oh, already? Should I go?” Hermione asked, glancing at the clock.

“No, stay as long as you like,” Ginny said with a smile. “I just have an early practice tomorrow.”

Hermione stepped forward and squeezed Ginny tightly around the middle, enjoying how nice it felt.

“Goodnight,” she said when the redhead released her.

Harry picked up their assorted glasses as she watched Ginny head up the stairs. When she had disappeared from view, Hermione turned to follow Harry into the kitchen.

“Tea?” he asked, already putting on the kettle.

“Sure, thanks,” Hermione answered, sitting down at the table.

They were quiet as Harry moved around the kitchen, gathering the items for the tea service. Hermione let her gaze wander around the room. She hadn’t been back to this house since they’d lived there for several weeks planning their infiltration of the Ministry.

“You’ve really done well with the place,” Hermione said after a minute. “I hardly recognise this kitchen.”

“That’s all Ginny,” Harry said, smiling as he set down the tray. “But thank you.”

Hermione fixed her tea, oblivious to the way that Harry watched her.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” he said abruptly.

Hermione looked up at him. She hesitated for a moment, not sure how to respond.

“Harry...”

“I mean, if there is someone,” he went on. “You’re not holding back on telling me because of...” he trailed off, his hand suspended in the air between them.

“Of course not,” she said firmly. “Why would that matter?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted with a shrug. “I just—I wanted to check.”

“Well, it’s not that,” she said. “Do you believe me?”

Harry looked at her for a long moment and then leaned onto the table with his chin in his hand. “I don’t like second-guessing you,” he said. “Especially when there was a time that I knew you better than anyone.”

She looked down at her teacup.

“Didn’t I?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said quietly.

“Losing that...” Harry started, but he trailed off when she shook her head.

“It was always going to be temporary,” she said sadly. “We knew it then and it changed nothing. You were drowning.”

“We both were,” he corrected her.

Hermione shrugged. “But *you* needed to live, needed to win.”

He scoffed and pulled his arms off the table as he sat back.

“And you did,” she went on. “And that’s why I don’t regret it. Do you?”

Harry’s indignation at being reminded of his status as the Chosen One faded at once. “I wouldn’t have made it,” he said after a pause. “Not without the strength you gave me.”

Hermione inclined her head slightly and took a sip of tea.

"I shouldn't have waited so long to talk to you," he said, looking pained. "It was stupid to think that somehow things would just go back to the way they were before."

Hermione watched as he drummed his fingers on the table. She could have tried to talk to him, too. She had told herself that she was doing the right thing by staying out of his and Ginny's way. That Ron just needed time and space to get over that fact that nothing ever really materialised between them. But those were just excuses to keep running away from everything that had happened. Sometimes she felt like she never really stopped. All she had done was delay the inevitable reckoning.

She gave him an understanding smile. "If there's one thing I've learned from all of this, it's that there is no going back to what we had before the war. Not for any of us. Knowing you better than anyone else is Ginny's job, and knowing me better than anyone... Well, that's for someone else. Eventually. We don't get to be that for each other now. We were never going to, and we both knew it."

He looked solemn as he took in her words. "What do we get to be now?"

Hermione smiled. They would be the same thing they had always been. Just a little different. She reached across the table and squeezed Harry's hand when he took hers.

"Best friends."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I'm sorry our idiots didn't get to interact in this chapter, but I promise we will be back to our regularly scheduled tension next week :)

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), [bookishteddy](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)), and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Keep Me Guessing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By Draco's estimation, he and Granger had made a fairly successful transition into the role of friends. Friday drinks were no longer interrupted by screaming matches, toppled furniture, or spilled glasses. He couldn't resist pushing her buttons a bit, but she took his ribbing in stride and never hesitated to take him down a notch when she had the chance.

True, he had now seen her nearly naked. And had since imagined her fully naked a few dozen times. But that was nothing new. He cringed and decided not to spend too much time debating whether it was creepier now that they were *officially* friends.

Especially not when his new friend was currently sitting across the room from him, finishing off the last of a particularly sticky toffee biscuit. Granger was nodding, listening intently to Janelle's story, and unconsciously sucking the residual toffee off of each of her fingers. Draco watched as she opened her mouth, inserted a digit onto her tongue, and then slowly drew it out, her cheeks hollowing around it. As the tip of her tongue protruded to pay special attention to the pad of one thumb, he was forced to shift in his chair and drop his gaze.

She was seated sideways on the sofa, facing Janelle with her legs crossed, and unfortunately, she picked that precise moment to lean forward and place her plate on the coffee table. As she did so, her blouse rode up and exposed a wide stretch of smooth skin on her lower back. Tragically, this included a set of prominent dimples at the base of her spine. Draco, who had only seen her nearly naked from the front, had mostly been preoccupied with what her arse might look like in the tiny shorts. Now, it seemed he would have a new feature to obsess over. You know, how friends do.

"Right, time for a game!" Thomas announced to a chorus of groans. He looked undeterred. "It's always the same with you lot, no one wants to play and then next thing you know you're at each other's throats."

"No, that's only Hermione," Shannon said off-handedly.

Granger looked indignant. "It is not only me!"

"No one else has ever crawled over the coffee table," Thomas pointed out.

Granger huffed and pushed her curls back over her shoulder. "That was one time."

"As long as I'm not on Hermione's team," Nick chimed in, looking apprehensive.

"Oh, honestly," she snapped, rolling her eyes.

"Last time you slapped me!" Nick countered.

"Well, it's your loss," Granger said, looking haughty and not bothering to deny the allegation of physical abuse. "Surely, you recall that *Hermione*'s team always wins."

Draco was suddenly desperately curious to find out what sort of game would involve Granger crawling over tables and slapping people.

"Have you played before, Draco?" Thomas asked, holding up a box.

Draco inspected the cover though he already knew the answer. "No."

"You'll be on Hermione's team, then. It's easier if you have someone who knows you well," Thomas said.

"Hope he likes it rough," Nick muttered into his drink while Carl snickered.

"I'm sure he can handle her," Shannon said with a wink.

Granger was rolling her eyes again. Then, to his surprise, she stood up and motioned for him to follow her out into the hall.

"Strategy meeting," Granger said in response to Thomas's questioning look.

As soon as they were out of earshot, she rounded on him and began a rapid-fire monologue.

"Alright listen up, it's a guessing game. You will turn over a card facing away from you so you can't see what's written on it, but your teammates can. Your team will call out clues for you to guess what's written on the card. Shout out any guess you have, there's no penalty for wrong answers. As soon as you get the correct answer, we will motion for you to move to the next card. You'll have one minute per round and the goal is to guess as many cards as possible in that time, so go as fast as you can. Got that?"

He nodded, and she went on.

"Now, there will be clues that you'll have no hope of guessing: Muggle technology, films, etc. If I see one of those come up, I'll signal like this for you to skip it."

She twirled one of her hands in a tight circle, demonstrating the motion.

"Technically, we should have to give up a point for every skip, but this group is a bunch of pussies and they won't challenge me on it."

Draco blinked at her, mouth slightly open. He couldn't tell if he was terrified or turned on by this domineering Granger.

"When it's your teammate's turn to flip the cards, you'll help call out clues for them. No one will notice if you don't give clues for certain things, so just ignore the Muggle stuff."

He nodded and cleared his throat. "What did Nick do to get slapped?"

Her face split into a wicked grin, and she reached up and patted him twice on the cheek, hard. “Just don’t fuck up.”

She turned to head back into the sitting room, and he had to adjust himself in his trousers before following.

Thomas suggested that Draco take a turn near the end of the rotation so that he could observe and get the hang of it. The guesser stood in the center of the room across from their team on the sofa. The premise was simple enough, but he was still feeling slightly panicky about his first turn.

It went okay. He was able to figure out clues for jellyfish, waterfall, Big Ben, and armour. Thomas had been right though, the fastest guesses always came when players could use personal knowledge for the clue.

By the time Granger’s second turn came up, Draco was hitting his stride. She was an extremely fast guesser, and they had a run of lucky cards.

“We rode this to school every year!” he called out.

“A train!” she guessed immediately.

“Harry and Ron nearly died in this kind of tree!”

“A willow!”

“Your favourite dessert!”

“Ice cream!”

“The colour of your dress at the Yule Ball!”

“P-periwinkle...”

“Yes!”

“Time!” Shannon called.

Draco was thrilled. In addition to his clues, she’d also guessed something called a helicopter, beetles (though it was misspelled on the card), and Leonardo DiCaprio. The other team had taken an early lead due, in part, to his lackluster first round, and now that Granger had put them solidly ahead, he was determined to continue the streak.

On his next turn, he was able to guess the first clue—penguin—from Janelle’s description. Then Granger was on a roll.

“You always drink this at Christmas!”

“Cider?” He was surprised she knew that.

“You hate this animal!”

“The Weasel,” he said with a smirk. She looked so annoyed it was almost worth losing the point. But not quite. “Fine, a ferret.”

“That’s it!” Janelle shouted, bouncing in her chair.

He flipped the card and Granger immediately signalled for him to skip. Thomas looked murderous when Draco flipped a new card halfway through his clue.

“Hey! I was—” he began.

“Shut it!” Granger yelled, swatting blindly at him. She clipped his ear and he slid off the sofa onto the floor to escape her. She never took her eyes off Draco’s next card.

“Your favourite colour!”

“Green,” he said immediately, assuming she would think it was.

Granger sprang to her feet, cheeks flushed and hair flying, “No, it’s not you bloody idiot!” she screamed.

“Gold, then!”

Janelle cheered.

When he flipped the next card, Granger practically jumped out of her skin. “Oh, oh, the most famous wizard!”

“Harry Potter!” he screamed.

Granger’s eyes went so wide he could see white all the way around the amber irises.

“Oh, Merlin,” he muttered, realising what he’d said. Janelle cheered again. He stared at her. Granger pointed emphatically at the card. *Oh!* Of course, Merlin was the answer.

“Flip it!” Granger shrieked, dancing back and forth on her feet. Her hair had somehow grown to twice its normal size. She kept sweeping her arm in front of her face to keep her vision unobstructed. Draco would swear it was crackling with energy.

He flipped the card.

“OH! Pansy’s Valentine’s Day gift to you in fifth year!”

He gaped at her. She was hopping up and down, hands outstretched as if she could pull the answer out of his mouth.

“Cufflinks,” he said quietly.

“Time!”

Granger gave an ecstatic shout, put one foot on the coffee table, and launched herself across it at Draco. He caught her around the waist but stumbled back several steps from the impact. Her arms were wrapped tightly around his neck, and she was hooting with glee. He set her down quickly, and she bounced on her toes in front of him, still clutching his arms.

“I almost thought you weren’t gonna get that last one in time!” she said, beaming.

Before he could answer, she pulled away and tackled Janelle onto the sofa, both of them laughing.

“Looks like you get bitch slapped by Hermione either way, Nick!” Janelle taunted, and Granger cackled.

Draco stared at her. How the hell had she known about those cufflinks? They were hideous, and other than the single time that Pansy insisted he put them on, he’d never worn them. He hadn’t even seen them in years. How had she remembered that?

“Well, I believe an unconditional surrender is in order,” Thomas said, looking sulky. They had doubled the other team’s points. “Nicely done,” he added, clapping Draco on the shoulder and breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Oh, right, thanks.”

“I should get going anyway,” Janelle said, yawning and getting to her feet. Nick and Carl followed suit, and they made their goodbyes.

“How about a consolation prize?” Granger said, sweeping her hair up into an enormous bun on top of her head. “Winners do the dishes?”

“You know I’ll never turn that down, darling,” Shannon said sleepily from where she was slumped in an armchair.

Granger patted her fondly on the shoulder and then grabbed up several plates and glasses. She gestured with her head for Draco to follow. He picked up what he could carry and headed into the kitchen after her. He joined her at the sink, shoulder to shoulder, placing the dishes on the counter.

“You two were incredible in there,” Thomas said, setting down the rest of the glasses. As he went back into the sitting room, he added over his shoulder, “Like you were reading each other’s minds.”

Draco started in shock and whipped his head around to look at Granger. She was giving him an equally suspicious look.

“Were you—” they started at the same time.

“I’m not a Legilimens,” Granger hissed, looking affronted.

“Oh, don’t act like you’re not capable. I’m sure you know the theory,” Draco said, regarding her beadily.

"Wordless, wandless, and without you noticing?" she countered, hands going to her hips.

He huffed in response, and she narrowed her gaze.

"Oh, quit looking at me like that, Granger, I would never."

"Oh, really? A Slytherin would never cheat at a game?"

He glared at her, stung. "I meant I would never use Legilimency on you."

She blinked up at him for a beat and then looked chastened. Draco turned back to the sink and started grabbing plates.

After a moment, she turned as well, flipping on the faucet as she said, "I know that."

They washed in silence for a minute before she added, "I guess if you had been skimming my thoughts you probably wouldn't have come out with *Harry Potter*."

He swung around to issue a biting retort, but when he looked at her, he noticed her shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"Yes, well..." Draco could feel a smile quirking his own lips. "He is rather famous, you know."

Granger snorted and clapped a soapy hand over her mouth. He let out an involuntary chuckle. She peeked sideways at him, and as soon as their eyes met, they both burst into hysterics.

Draco was laughing, really laughing. Laughing so hard that he didn't even make any noise. Laughing like he hadn't laughed in... maybe ever.

Granger was laughing, too, clutching the sink for support and dissolving into fresh wheezes whenever she seemed to get control for a second. Draco doubled over, hands on his knees.

"*Harry... Potter*. You should have seen... your face," she gasped, eyes streaming.

"You should have seen yours! You looked like I'd suddenly Transfigured Janelle into a platypus."

That set them off all over again. They fell against each other, clutching indiscriminately at arms and the counter to remain upright, faces fixed in identical grimaces of mirth.

When Draco could finally draw breath again, he wiped a hand over his eyes and said, "Please tell me Shannon won't have recognised Potter's name."

Granger was clutching a stitch in her side, but she shook her head. "I don't think so. She didn't seem to notice anyway." Her voice was still weak with laughter.

Draco straightened up and took several gulps of air. The occasional chuckle still rumbled through him like aftershocks. Granger leaned a hip against the counter and exhaled a long breath through pursed lips. Draco looked at her.

She was flushed—a soft rosy glow over cheeks and chest. Loose tendrils had escaped her bun and were curling at her temples. Her eyes were sparkling with merriment, and her lips were set in a relaxed smile. Patches of foam from her soapy hand still clung to her chin. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

His tongue twitched behind his teeth with the urge to tell her. He wanted to tell her that looking at her felt like gazing into the setting sun. As much as her brilliance blinded him, he couldn't bear to tear his eyes away. Couldn't live with missing a single second. He wanted her to know that he had watched her happiness from the outside for all those years, but he had never known the true meaning of warmth until he had been a part of it. That he never could have imagined what it would feel like to be the one she was looking at when she smiled. To be the reason why.

He wanted to say something reckless and dangerous and real. Something there would be no coming back from. Something like, *you are fucking transcendent*.

But friends don't say things like that.

She dropped her arms to her sides, and he was suddenly very aware of how close she was.

He couldn't tell her the things he wanted to say, but he could still feel the ghosts of her casual and affectionate touches from earlier that night. If he could touch her like that, then maybe that would say enough.

He reached up slowly and dragged his fingertips gently along the edge of her jaw. Her mouth opened in a tiny gasp at his touch. He turned his hand to show her the little bubbles he'd collected before rubbing them into nothingness against his thumb.

They stood looking at each other for a long moment. They were much too close for casualness, much too intimate for friends. The intensity built around them with every second that passed. Draco could feel his heart rate increasing, his breaths drawing shallow as the moment stretched between them. His gaze dropped to her mouth. He couldn't help it. Couldn't help imagining how her lips would feel on his again after all this time. Couldn't help wondering what she would taste like without the champagne. She was so close; it would be so easy to close that gap. It was a millimeter compared to the distance he normally kept. And with the way she was looking at him, he could almost convince himself that she wanted him to. That she didn't regret that first kiss all those months ago. That all of their shared glances since then had been born out of desire and not discomfort. That she was leaning in, too.

A door closed somewhere in the upstairs hallway, and the moment broke. It didn't shatter—it just popped silently out of existence like a soap bubble in the sink. It was there and then it was gone, and they both felt it go.

Draco turned back to the dishes feeling irrationally bereft. He had played a game with Granger tonight and it had been fun. They had lost themselves in the excitement, and she had shown that somehow she seemed to know as many ridiculous things about him as he knew about her. They had laughed and they had shared a moment, and he wouldn't trade it for anything.

As she turned back to the sink and her shoulder brushed against his, he thought that a night like this could almost be enough.

Almost.

Chapter End Notes

I know I say it every time, but I am truly so thankful to every person reading this story. It means the absolute world to me. Next week's chapter is one of my favorites, but it is also very heavy. It will come with some additional trigger warnings so please heed those if necessary. Until then, if you're going to be spending time with family this week (and especially to those for whom that is an anxiety-inducing experience), I'm sending you lots of love and comfort. You will always have a family here who appreciates and supports you just as you are.

Oh! And if you'd like to play the game from this chapter and find out if any of your overly competitive friends are secretly obsessed with you, it's called Heads Up and you can download it from the app store :)

If you have an extra moment, please show some love to the works of my fabulous betas [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) and [bookishteddy](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)). I know they would both appreciate it so much right now. And thank you to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for edits on this chapter.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#). I'd love to hang out with you there!

Let it Out

Chapter Notes

TW: Brief mention of past attempted violence against a trans child

TW: Panic attack, graphic description of torture, minor blood

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione stared down at the pile of forms on her desk. She only had two hours left to finish reviewing and annotating them. In a normal week, she would have had them done by Wednesday, gotten them back from her supervisor on Thursday, and had them filed by this time on Friday. But this had not been a normal week. Normal weeks did not follow her *almost* trying to kiss her new friends.

She dropped her head onto the desk with a groan. She liked being friends with Malfoy. While she hadn't really minded fighting with him—okay, she actually liked it quite a bit—adopting the truce and the official title had allowed her to relax more around him. Apparently she'd become relaxed enough to nearly let slip that even with Voldemort's return and Umbridge's reign of terror during their fifth year, it had been overhearing Pansy bragging to her friends in the girls' toilets about those cufflinks and how Draco would be *thanking* her that had Hermione skipping dinner in the Great Hall that night. God, why did she have to get so caught up in that stupid game every time? She could only hope Malfoy wouldn't ask how she knew about them. Or why she'd remembered.

Maybe her practically bowling him over was enough to knock the thought out of his head. She still couldn't believe she'd done that. She had always been an affectionate person, and she liked touching him. In a friendly way, of course. Jumping into his arms had probably been overkill for this early in the friendship, but, Merlin, it had felt good. Very friendly. And falling asleep every night with a hand in her knickers, imagining those arms around her? *Super* friendly and not at all desperate and pathetic.

She glanced up at the clock. *Oh, good. Another ten minutes spent productively.* She considered cancelling altogether on drinks tonight. That way she could finally focus, put in some overtime, and have these ready for Monday. Technically, she still had another week of turnaround time, but she had never needed it before. The reason she'd never needed it before, she reminded herself, was that she'd spent the first six months at this job doing nothing but working—putting in twelve-hour days, sleeping all weekend, and never seeing her friends.

She ran through a quick mental checklist: Had she been in denial about her depression? Yes. Was she willing to go back to that? No. Were she and Malfoy the only ones available tonight and would her absence be painfully obvious? Yes. Was she a mature, capable witch who could put aside her hormones for an hour and thirty minutes and focus on the hopes and

dreams of young people wanting to integrate into the Muggle world? Absolutely. She picked up her quill and got to work.

“You should have seen her!” Shannon exclaimed. “Fists clenched, hair standing on end, all puffed up in self-righteous glory.”

Draco had seen her. Not in this particular instance, of course, but he was no stranger to puffed-up, self-righteous Granger. She was standing across the kitchen from him, leaning against the counter and looking sidelong at Shannon as she recounted the tale. A blush was creeping up from the V-neck of her jumper. Whether more from embarrassment or wine he couldn’t tell, but it suffused her with a rather edible glow.

Shannon turned suddenly from the cheeseboard she was preparing and brandished a tiny fork at him, emphasising a point. He wrenched his gaze away from Granger as quickly as possible and focused back on the story.

‘You get away from him this instant!’ Shannon imitated a tiny Granger’s indignant tone. “This was before I came out,” she added to Draco in explanation of the pronoun. “She couldn’t have been more than one-third this boy’s size, mind you.” Shannon turned back to the board, laughing and shaking her head fondly. “Never could abide a bully, our little Hermione.”

Draco felt rather as though Shannon had suddenly stabbed him with the tiny fork. He felt a sharp pang in his gut. Guilt, regret, disgust, and, worst of all, reality. Who the fuck was he to stand here in a Muggle woman’s kitchen, eating her food, drinking her wine, enjoying her company, thinking Granger *edible*, acting like he hadn’t been a low-down, despicable, bigoted bully himself? Who was he to forget for one second the cruelty he’d inflicted on the woman in front of him at every opportunity? Who was he to allow himself to feel for a single moment that he could just be a normal bloke having a normal evening with his normal friends?

And he didn’t miss the way Granger’s eyes flicked immediately to him at the comment. No, he saw it, of course, but he kept his eyes locked resolutely on the back of Shannon’s head, refusing to meet her gaze. Because he was a coward, too.

Thomas had entered, and his booming voice shook Draco from his haze of self-pity.

“Oh, I love this one. Mighty Mouse Hermione and the playground takedown,” he said, coming to stand next to Draco and refilling his glass. Draco murmured his thanks and took several fortifying sips.

Shannon flashed an appreciative smile over her shoulder and continued. “He just wouldn’t leave off. I was on the ground, waiting for the blow, and then I see this one march straight up

and shoved him in the chest.” Draco glanced at Granger, and she was looking apprehensive now, alternating glances between Shannon and the floor.

“Of course, the meathead barely moves, she was this big.” Shannon held up her thumb and index finger to indicate a few centimeters. “But then, the oaf hauls back to kick me, and Hermione screams ‘NO!’ and flings out her tiny little arms and the kid just goes *flying*.”

Granger met his eyes then, shifting uneasily under the weight of his stare. “He must have flown thirty feet,” Shannon went on, unaware of the story she was actually telling. “Crashed through a plastic fence and landed flat on his back in the pond.”

Draco held Granger’s gaze as their friends laughed around them. Her look was pained, almost pleading for him to understand.

He did. He knew exactly how it felt when the power built up in your chest, so tight that you felt it might choke you to death. And then when it ripped out of you, down your arms and out of your fingers, feeling like it might take your whole hand off with it—leaving you drained and dizzy and desperate, hoping you hadn’t done something terrible.

It was all too easy to picture a tiny Granger defending her friend and unleashing a burst of accidental magic on a Muggle bully. She must have been terrified. He had never considered what it would have been like for her not to understand what was happening.

Granger broke the eye contact first, looking over as Shannon reached out a hand to her. Granger took it and murmured quietly, “I couldn’t let him hurt you.”

“I know, babe.” Shannon squeezed once, and then went back to her board. “I owed you big for that day. Once everyone heard what had happened, they left me right the fuck alone. That is, until you left for school—” Shannon gave a sudden hiss of pain and cursed.

The fancy silver knife she’d been using clattered across the floor and slid to a stop against Granger’s shoe. A thin line of blood coated the tip, and as Shannon shook her cut finger, several fat red drops splattered the floor at Granger’s feet. No one else saw it. Shannon was grabbing a towel and Thomas was rushing toward her, and no one else saw the moment that Granger’s eyes went blank. The moment her breath caught and her lungs refused to fill. The moment her face contorted in remembered pain so intense you beg for Death to take you. The moment she grabbed her left arm and her knees gave out.

But Draco saw it. He was across the kitchen and holding her up before she hit the floor. He caught her under the arms and half-carried her backwards out of the room. She pressed her face tight into his shoulder and her entire body trembled. He clutched her to him with one arm as he pushed open the back door. He lowered her to sit on the bottom step of the porch and crouched in front of her.

“Breathe, Granger,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. Her eyes were unfocused, glazed with unshed tears.

He took one of her hands and placed it in the center of his chest, holding it in place with his own. “You need to breathe, Granger. Breathe with me.” He drew in a deep breath.

She squeezed her eyes shut and pulled a choked gasp in through her open mouth.

“Good, that’s it. Come on now, breathe out with me.” He pressed her hand into his sternum, carefully emptying his lungs slowly and willing her to follow.

The tears were falling now—thick stripes on her cheeks, shining in the porch light.

He placed his other hand gently under the hollow of her throat and tapped his fingers twice. “Let it out now.”

He had been talking about the breath she was holding, but when she curled forward and sobbed with her forehead on her knees, he realised how much more she had to get out.

Hermione came to with the sensation of strong arms around her. Warm hands were rubbing soothing patterns over her back and up and down her arms. A familiar scent was surrounding her. Cinnamon and cloves, maybe? A hint of wood smoke. Pine. She gladly took in several lungfuls of it. Her vision was blotchy from where she’d pressed her closed eyes into her knees, and her hand was shaking with the exertion of clutching a fistful of soft fabric.

She released her death grip first, slowly stretching her fingers out. The hands seemed to notice this and ceased their ministrations at once. She immediately missed them. She considered grabbing ahold of the fabric again in case they might come back, but her bent spine gave a twinge of protest and she drew herself up slowly instead. She pulled both of her hands to her face, wiping her nose and eyes before looking up.

“Oh, shit.”

She said it before she had a chance to think. Before she had a chance to wrap her mind around the fact that, of course, it was Draco Malfoy crouched in front of her. Of course it was those grey eyes looking every bit as desperate and helpless as they had that night when he’d watched her on his drawing room floor.

“Sorry,” she said lamely as the belated waves of shame and humiliation began to wash over her.

He gave her a look of deepest annoyance. No one else ever looked so annoyed with her. It almost made her smile. “Don’t you dare apologise for that,” he said flatly.

She opened her mouth to reply, but he cut her off. “I mean it, I will hex you in this Muggle garden.”

She did smile at that. “I meant for making a scene.”

"You didn't. I brought you out before they noticed. Though they might think you're queasy at the sight of blood now."

She nodded, looking down at where his hands rested on the wooden plank on either side of her. Close, but no longer touching. "Thank you," she said quietly.

He drew his hands onto his knees as though he'd felt her gaze on them. He didn't speak for a long moment, and then said in an almost whisper, "I have them, too."

She looked up then, but he was staring past her, over her shoulder. She was tempted to quip: Flashbacks? Panic attacks? Nightmares? Or the trifecta? But his haunted look stayed her tongue. *Trifecta it is, then.*

She ran her fingers once more under her eyes and cringed when they came away smeared with black. She cast a quick wandless *Scourgify*, knowing it would be better to go back in barefaced than streaked with mascara. She still felt puffy and swollen though, and she almost pulled away when Malfoy brought a hand to her face. He swiped his thumb gently across her cheek, and she felt the immediate relief of a cooling charm.

She sighed involuntarily as he dropped his hand slowly. "Thanks."

His thumb brushed against the short scar under her chin, and he paused. His fingers twitched against her skin, and his thumb pressed upward, tilting her head back slightly. She could feel his eyes on it almost as clearly as his finger.

The tip of the knife had barely cut her there, but the nightmare always ended the same: the quick jerk, the searing slice, and the red spray of her dirty blood pouring out to coat the carpet in front of her. She swallowed, and he pulled his hand away at the movement of her throat.

"Granger." His voice was hoarse, strained. "That night—I—I'm so sorry—"

"Please, don't," she said, looking away from him again. "It wasn't your fault."

"I should have—God, I wish I would have—"

"Stop!" she said louder than she meant to. She met his eyes again and took one of his hands. "I don't blame you for what happened. You bought us the time we needed to make it out, and we did. We made it out. That's all that matters." She squeezed his hand before letting go, praying that he wouldn't insist on apologising further. The look of horror on his face as Bellatrix carved into her was still fresh behind her eyes, and she didn't think she could bear to hear the thoughts that had accompanied it just now.

Thankfully, he just nodded and got to his feet, taking a few steps back to give her some space. She stood and rolled her shoulders, shaking her head and taking a deep, steady breath. She turned to the back door and heard him follow her up the porch steps.

"Hey, sorry about that. Are you all right?" Shannon asked as they entered the kitchen. Her finger was bandaged and the blood had been cleaned up.

“Of course, it’s no problem,” Hermione answered, trying to sound stable.

“You were about two seconds away from having Granger’s sick on your floor,” Malfoy added helpfully when Shannon looked unconvinced.

“Ah, quick thinking, mate,” Thomas said, clapping Malfoy on the shoulder.

“Well, if you’re feeling okay now, the food’s ready,” Shannon smiled weakly. “I promise I didn’t bleed on any of it.”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Hermione said, picking up one of the trays and trying to show some initiative. They took the food and wine into the sitting room.

Hermione tried to be present in the conversation. She tried to ignore the faint echo of maniacal cackling that reverberated in her mind and the constant twinge of phantom pain in her arm. She could feel Malfoy’s eyes on her when she adjusted the sleeve covering it, and she tried not to look at the bulge of stretched fabric her grip had left on the front of his jumper.

Shannon seemed nearly as distracted as they were, looking back and forth between them whenever Thomas was speaking. Hermione tried, she really did, but when she realised she wasn’t sure if she was pouring her third or fourth glass of wine, she just shrugged and sank back into the sofa. The nightmare would come regardless.

She’s forced down and the hard marble sends twin jolts of pain through her knees. Rough hands are grabbing her face, wrenching her head up. “Draco, look carefully, come closer! Surely, this is the Mudblood Granger!” His face appears before her, and recognition is written over every feature. She stares into his eyes, pleading silently. Please, she thinks desperately. Please, don’t let this be the end. Don’t let them have Harry. Please, don’t tell them it’s Harry.

She’s knocked flat onto her back, and the air rushes out of her lungs. She tries to gasp, but the pain rips through her like lightning, and she chokes on a silent scream. It’s fire in her veins and knives in her skull and her bones splintering one by one until the pieces shred her internal organs. Her spine is stretched until she’s ripped in two, and she feels the vertebrae pop like knuckles. Her skin is boiled off and glass shards rake over the exposed muscle.

It stops, and she’s writhing on the carpet, giving answers to questions she can’t hear. The pain comes again. And again. And she’s still now. Doesn’t have the strength to move. Maybe if she’s still, they’ll kill her. Please let them kill her. Please let Death come. Let this be the end.

Bellatrix's knee comes down on her chest. She feels a rib crack. She can't breathe. She's going to crush her. Her eyes fly open at the first slice of the knife on her arm. She finds his eyes again. Please, help me, Draco, she pleads silently. You know me. Please, don't let her.

Bellatrix's hand is wrenching her up by the throat, choking her. The knife is cutting under her chin. It's over now, there's no use pretending. She's screaming out loud for him. "Please, Draco! Draco, save me." She's gurgling on the spit she can't swallow. She knows soon it will be blood. "Please, Draco, I don't want to die. I don't want you to see me die."

He grabs her by the arms and pulls her out of Bellatrix's grip. He sinks to the floor, and she clutches his shoulders, scrambling into his lap. The Manor is gone. She's safe. "Draco, you saved me. I knew you would." She buries her face in his neck. "Thank you, Draco, you saved me. Thank you, thank you." She repeats it over and over while he holds her.

Then, she remembers the others and gasps. "Please, we have to find Harry and Ron. We have to help them." His voice is low and gentle when he speaks. "They're safe, Granger. You're safe. I have you." She believes him, but she wonders, "Where are they?" He's pulling back to look at her, brushing the hair off her face. "Granger, they're safe. It's April of 2000. The war has been over for almost two years. You're in Thomas and Shannon's house. It's a dream. You're safe. I have you."

Hermione stared into his familiar face, brightly lit by the lamp next to her, and a haze of black marble filled the room. She drew in a shaky breath.

"Here, take this," Malfoy said, reaching for a candle on the coffee table. She brought it to her nose and inhaled the fresh linen scent.

"And this," he said, taking it quickly from her and replacing it with a wine glass. She took a tiny sip and let it sit on her tongue.

"Now, this," he said, replacing the glass with the TV remote. She ran her thumb over the rubber buttons.

"Turn it on."

She did, and energetic, upbeat music filled the room. An infomercial for an exercise bike flashed on the screen.

He's grounding me.

She took in the rest of the furniture, the photos on the walls, the clock reading half-past four. Thomas and Shannon's house. Suddenly, she started, finger flinching against the power button and restoring the quiet around them.

"I must have screamed. They'll have heard me."

"No," he said quickly. "It's okay. I Silenced the room after they went to bed."

The realisation that Malfoy was still there in the middle of the night hit her like a ton of bricks. Her eyes fell on the armchair next to the sofa. A blanket and pillow were cast off to

the side. The coffee table had been dragged closer to serve as a footrest. His unlaced shoes were sitting next to it.

He followed her gaze and said quietly, “I thought this might happen.”

She looked back at him, and a rush of affection welled up in her chest. It wouldn’t have been the first time Thomas carried her up to the spare room. Malfoy must have asked them not to move her. He could have Silenced her instead of the whole room, but then he wouldn’t have been woken up to pull her out. He’d pulled her out. He’d saved her.

She dropped the remote she was still holding and twined her arms back around his shoulders. She hugged him tightly and sighed when she felt his arms tentatively surround her.

“Thank you,” she whispered into his neck. After a moment, she felt him give a tiny nod. The panic and fear of the dream gradually seeped out of her, forced out by the comfort and safety of his embrace. She drew back slowly, keeping her head close to his and savouring the feeling. She closed her eyes at the rasp of stubble against her cheek. He was so warm. She dug her cold fingers into his shoulders, wrapping the soft fabric of his jumper around them.

She stopped when her forehead slid against his. She kept her eyes closed, feeling the gentle draft of his exhale over her mouth.

She tightened her grip and pulled him forward. When he spoke, his lips brushed against hers.

“Granger.”

His hands were on her upper arms, holding her back. She opened her eyes and met his, brimming with concern. His chin was tucked back, pulled away from her.

She shut her mouth with a snap. *What am I doing?* She quickly released her hold on him and scrambled sideways off his lap.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I don’t know—”

“It’s okay,” he said quickly, following her to stand. “Granger—” he started, reaching out to her, but she shrank back.

Mortification burned across her face. He had helped her. She thought... She squeezed her eyes shut and dropped her head. She must have thought wrong.

“I shouldn’t have—I should go.” She grabbed up her shoes and bag, feeling for her wand inside.

“No, it’s okay,” he repeated. “You don’t have to.”

“Thanks... for everything,” she said, starting toward the door. Then, she remembered that the room was Silenced and turned on the spot.

Draco stopped mid-stride and stared at the spot where she'd Disapparated.

"Fuck!"

He grabbed his wand off the coffee table and Conjured a piece of parchment. He scribbled a note that they'd both left, slammed his feet into his shoes, and removed the silencing charm. He closed the front door as quietly as he could and Disapparated from the privacy of the stoop.

He landed in the living room of his flat and immediately flung his wand away from him. He kicked off the still untied shoes and snatched a bottle of firewhiskey from the sideboard. He reached for a glass, but it shattered before his fingers even touched it.

"FUCK!"

He wrenched the cork from the bottle and flung his head back, gulping for a three count.

Please, Draco! He squeezed his eyes shut as her voice rang out in his head.

Draco, save me. He gulped helplessly at the bottle, pacing the room.

Draco, you saved me. "No!" he yelled, bringing a hand to his face and gripping his forehead.

—*Draco*— The liquid scorched his throat as he fell onto the sofa.

I knew you would. He slammed the empty bottle down on the table.

Thank you, Draco, you saved me. He barely made it to the toilet in time for the bottle to come back up.

Thank you. Heave.

Thank you. Heave.

He collapsed back onto the floor, leaning his head against the wall. He grabbed for a towel and wiped his face. He was mortified to find tears streaming down his cheeks and flung the towel away.

He'd been nearly positive that she would have a nightmare, even with the amount she drank. Flashbacks always triggered nightmares for him. He thought that he could help, that he would understand. He hadn't been prepared for how she would sound—for what she would say. Hadn't been prepared for her to be pleading for her life the first time he heard his name on her lips. He certainly hadn't been prepared for her to go lucid and incorporate him into the dream. He clenched his eyes shut as his stomach lurched dangerously again.

He felt disgusting. Like he'd taken advantage of her weakened state to insert his own hero fantasy. *It was her fantasy*, his brain corrected unhelpfully, *she wanted you to save her*. He slammed his head back against the wall.

And the way she'd looked at him after she came out of it, after he'd grounded her, like he actually *had* saved her that night. He swallowed roughly. Her expression had been pure vulnerability. Longing and need. She wanted him to comfort her. He pulled his knees up and dropped his forehead onto them. No, she wanted the Draco who'd saved her to comfort her. That wasn't him, wasn't real.

A hollow ache was spreading through his chest. He missed the anger from before. He wished that he regretted pushing her away. He wanted to believe that he should have taken her right there on the sitting room floor because Malfoys take what they want and she was giving it to him. But he couldn't.

It would be easier to be a monster, but he wasn't one. As he slid sideways to lay on the tile floor, he thought vaguely that that realisation should be more comforting than it was right then.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I promise this is the last ~almost~ kiss. Before you yell at me too much for it, I just want to point out that there are four (4) different angst tags on this story for a reason <3

Also, I want to clarify that the light tone in which the characters discuss the bullying in this chapter is a product of very specific circumstances. Namely, only close friends being present, a lot of time having passed since the incident, and the overall focus of the story being the anecdote of what Hermione did to the bully rather than the bullying itself. Bullying of any LGBTQ+ youth is an extremely serious topic and will be addressed in a much more sober tone in the next chapter.

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Now You Know

Chapter Notes

I want to thank all of you for the wonderful reception of this story so far. I hope that you can trust me when I tell you that the angst is not there for the sake of angst but for a very specific reason. Moving forward, I want to just remind you of the "Hermione is not over the bullying" tag and point out that though it has very little to do with how she views herself, it has everything to do with how she views Draco. Now, reconciling her feelings for him in light of that, that is much more complicated. I hope you'll stick around to see how they figure it out.

TW: Brief discussion of the fetishization of trans women

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione slumped in her chair. She was tired. Tired of having this same conversation. Tired of replaying the moment Malfoy pushed her away. Tired of wondering what it meant that she hadn't seen him in weeks.

"I really don't know how I can say this any more clearly," Shannon said frustratedly, leaning across the kitchen table at her. She punctuated her next sentence with little claps on every word. "He. Wants. To. Shag. You."

Hermione's chair scraped over the floor as she pushed away angrily. "That's worse! Can't you see that?" She got to her feet and paced in front of the counter, looking miserably over at her friend.

She knew Shannon meant well. There was no way the other woman could know that she was only further cementing Hermione's worst fears about the situation. The tension between herself and Malfoy had clearly escalated to the point where she could no longer deny it, not if it was apparent even to other people. But when she had reached out to him—when she had *needed* him—he had rejected her.

If he was attracted to her, there was only one reason she could think of to explain why he had stopped her in that moment of intimacy. Only one explanation for why he might want something physical without that emotional connection. As difficult as it was for her to wrap her mind around it, it would be even more challenging to explain it to Shannon.

"If that's even true, it's not about me," Hermione said, struggling to find the right words. "It's... a fascination. A curiosity. It's subverting expectations, rebelling against his parents, and probably a dash of wanting to tarnish the 'Golden Girl,'" she finished with a grimace.

She turned and fixed the full weight of her attention on Shannon as the term finally came to her. "It's slumming."

Shannon shook her head in disbelief. “You’re barking. In what world would shagging you qualify as slumming?”

“His world.” Hermione sighed and sat back down at the table. “The world we went to school in. His family is important there. High society, arranged marriages, political alliances—all of it. And they look down on people like me.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he told me!” Hermione could feel the prickle of tears then and swiped angrily at her eyes.

She took a deep breath knowing that once she said her next words, she’d be unable to take them back.

“Because he bullied me.”

They had the impact she’d known they would. She could see the exact moment Shannon registered them. Her voice was quiet then, serious. “About what?”

“Anything. Everything.” Hermione put her head in her hands. “My hair, my teeth, my friends, my parents, my personality, my marks.” She met Shannon’s eyes again. “He called me filthy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me back then?” The hurt was clear in Shannon’s voice.

Hermione looked beseechingly at her friend and reached across the table to take her hand. “How could I with what you went through? It doesn’t compare. I had no room to complain.”

Shannon pulled her hand away roughly. “It does compare! You had room to complain because we were best friends, and that’s what friends do. You don’t think I would have wanted to know that I wasn’t alone? That you were being bullied, too? You don’t think I would have wanted to know that you understood what it was like?”

Hermione blinked rapidly, but she couldn’t stop the tears from falling. “Shannon, I’m sorry. I just wanted to be there for you.”

“You were, but...” Shannon sat back in her chair, as far from Hermione as she could get. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. “Never all the way.”

Hermione felt the withdrawal like a physical pain.

“You were always holding something back,” Shannon went on. “I knew it back then, too, but around Draco, it’s so much more obvious.” She shook her head sadly. “He’s a part of something in your life that goes way deeper than a boarding school.”

Hermione choked on a sob. “I’m so sorry. Please believe me. I wish I could tell you.”

“But you can’t.”

It wasn't a question, but Hermione shook her head anyway. She had noticed, of course, the way doubt or confusion would cloud Shannon's features over the years when Hermione was forced to give a vague explanation for some new facet of her life. Why she needed to go to boarding school in Scotland. Why she seemed to return every summer with far more scars than most school children accumulate. Why her parents would be under the care of a specialist in Sydney after the car accident that had damaged both of their brains.

Hermione had told herself that she could make up for the omissions and the lies by being the fiercest friend. That she would always meet Shannon more than halfway. That she could fill in the gaps with devotion.

But to hear Shannon voice the knowledge after all these years... For her to put into words that she had always been aware there was a part of Hermione she couldn't reach—it felt like the earth was crumbling away beneath her feet. Hermione could only hope that this wouldn't be the last straw. That her oldest friend would hold on a little longer and trust her.

Shannon was still for nearly a minute before she gave a resigned nod.

"I won't pretend to understand his motivations for how he treated you at school. You know better than anyone how I feel about bullies, and I understand why you didn't say anything before now. He's my friend, and it hurts to hear that."

Hermione nodded sadly.

"But I do know what it's like to worry about slumming. I worried every time a cis man approached me that I was just a fascination, an experience to be checked off a list. Or worse, a fetish. I know the pain that comes from someone wanting *what* you are rather than *who* you are, and I would never wish it on you, Hermione."

"I know," she said quietly.

"Maybe I'll never be able to fully comprehend the history between you two, but from what I've seen, that's not how he feels about you." As she spoke, Shannon's eyes became unfocused. She sat very still as though she was watching some scene play out before her. "There is a darkness in him, it's true, but it's not directed at you. It *matches* what I see in you. I think it's real for him."

Hermione could only stare, completely bewildered by her friend's words.

When it was clear Hermione wasn't going to respond, Shannon asked, "Do you think you could ever believe that?"

Hermione looked down at the Glamoured lines of the scar on her arm. The letters were barely discernible if you knew what to look for.

"Honestly, I don't know."

"If we're not schlepping all the way out to Azkaban, why do we still have to meet in Norwich?"

"Oh, come on, Pans," Blaise said, leaning into her. "This is our spot."

She took a dainty sip of her pint. "Be that as it may, I'm starting to think it was only tolerable by comparison to that hellhole."

"I've got a cute idea," Draco snapped. "What if you stopped complaining for five seconds?"

"Besides," Theo added as if Draco hadn't spoken. "We couldn't run the risk of Diva Draco being mobbed by going somewhere closer to the city."

Draco scowled at him. "You really want to waltz into the Leaky Cauldron and watch me get spit on?"

"That was a year ago, darling," Pansy whined. "Surely, you can't think anyone would still care enough about you to bother at this point."

"Fuck you, too, Parkinson."

"Knock it off you two," Blaise said, wagging his eyebrows. "You're turning me on."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but the sound of his name brought him up short.

"Draco!"

He looked over Blaise's shoulder and felt the colour drain from his face. Janelle was making her way through the crowd, heading for their table.

"Holy shit fuck," he breathed. His mind was racing. She was too close; there was no way he could run for it.

The other three were looking around to see the newcomer. Draco got to his feet to greet her and remembered at the last second.

"She's a Muggle," he hissed.

"Long time, no see," Janelle said as he hugged her and kissed her cheek.

"It's good to see you, too," Draco said. "What are you doing out here?"

"Visiting my gran," she said with a smile. "You?"

"Just having a drink with some old friends from school."

Janelle's brows rose as she took in the other Slytherins. "Was this some sort of special school for beautiful people? Because honestly it's getting a bit ridiculous at this point."

He laughed as he gestured to them in turn. “That’s Blaise, Pansy, and Theo. This is Janelle.”

“Hello,” Janelle said. “It’s nice to meet some of Draco’s other friends.”

“A pleasure,” the Slytherins said in unison. Draco rolled his eyes.

“So you all must know Hermione as well,” Janelle said brightly.

Draco froze. *Fuckfuckfuck*. He was truly the most stupid and useless git in recorded history. He could have said he knew them from anywhere, but he’d said school. Of course Janelle would make the connection.

Three sets of eyes shifted to him, but only Pansy spoke. “Granger?”

“Oh, right,” Janelle said with a little laugh. “The surname thing. You’d think I’d be used to it after hearing Draco say it all the time, but ‘Granger’ still sounds so strange to me.”

Draco closed his eyes. It was like a slow-motion broom crash. He could see the ground rocketing toward him, but he couldn’t pull up.

“Indeed,” Blaise said with a smirk. “Yes, we know *Hermione*.”

Draco’s eyes snapped open at Blaise’s tone. He needed to end this now.

“Actually, Janelle, we have to get going,” he said in a rush.

The Slytherins all dropped their eyes to their full pints.

Luckily Janelle didn’t seem to notice. “Me too, actually. I spotted you on my way out.”

“What a shame,” Theo said with a lopsided grin. “We’ll have to do this again sometime.”

Draco glowered at him as Janelle blushed and nodded.

She gripped Draco’s arm before turning to leave. “Don’t be a stranger,” she said with a pointed look. He gave her a weak smile despite the twinge of guilt in his stomach.

He watched as she walked out of the pub and then sank back into the booth. He dropped his face into his hands and waited for the inevitable.

“It’s Granger?” Blaise and Pansy asked together.

“Granger’s the one you’ve been seeing?” Theo added.

Draco scrubbed his hands over his face and downed half his pint.

“Yes.”

Pansy looked like Hanukkah had come early.

“But not in the way you mean it,” he added quickly. “We’re friends.”

“Bollocks,” the trio spoke in unison again.

“We are,” he argued. “Officially. We have an accord.”

“An accord?” Blaise scoffed.

“What are you a pirate?” Pansy added.

Draco clenched his jaw.

“I’m sorry to say it, mate, but staring at Granger from across a Muggle bar instead of the Great Hall does not friends make,” Theo said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“What are you talking about?” Draco asked, perplexed.

“Oh, this is precious,” Pansy exclaimed, clasping her hands in front of her chest.

Blaise stuck his hand out across the table. “Hello, Malfoy, we’re your best mates and we have eyes. Nice to meet you.”

Draco slapped his hand away. “If someone wants to explain what the *fuck* you’re talking about, that would be great.”

Theo turned on the bench to face him fully. “Draco dearest, have you or have you not been panting after Granger’s hot arse for the better part of a decade?”

Draco felt his face flush maroon. He cast an uneasy glance at Pansy. She gave him a sympathetic pout. “Oh sweetie, I’m over you now.”

He looked hopelessly at the other two. “Was I really that obvious?”

“Mortifyingly,” Blaise said.

“Devastatingly,” Theo added.

“Brilliant,” Draco said bitterly. He tossed back the rest of his pint.

“Which brings us back to your current state of affairs,” Blaise said.

“You are not friends with Granger,” Theo continued. “The only thing you are is not shagging her.”

“Unless you are,” Pansy chimed in.

“I’m not,” Draco said flatly.

“Clearly,” Blaise smirked.

Draco gave him a middle finger.

“But you’re avoiding her?” Theo asked.

"I wouldn't recommend it, darling," Pansy said. "Playing hard to get didn't go so well at school."

He glared as the three of them laughed. "I'm not," he bit out through clenched teeth.

"Well, according to Janelle, you haven't been coming around for a while," Theo pointed out.

"Is that the reason for this impromptu meetup?" Blaise asked. "You were feeling lonely without your little Muggle friend group?"

Pansy gasped. "That hurts, Draco. Really, it does."

"No," he sighed. "Well, yes—I mean, no. It is... a bit."

"Well, that clears that up," Blaise said airily.

"What happened with Granger?" Pansy asked.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "I mean, nothing that's your business anyway. I just—I thought she might want some space."

His friends surveyed him through three sets of identically narrowed eyes.

"But not shagging?" Theo asked.

"No! No one is shagging Granger!" he nearly yelled.

"I mean, someone could be," Blaise said fairly.

"Pretty little witch like that," Theo added, nodding.

"Gryffindor's Golden Girl and all. She's definitely a hot commodity," Pansy continued.

Draco gaped at them.

"Hadn't considered that, had you?" Pansy simpered.

"So exactly how much space are you giving her?" Blaise asked.

Theo answered for him. "Sounds like just enough for some other bloke to slip his—"

"No," Draco said emphatically. "There's no one. I would know."

"Hm," Pansy hummed. "No one like when you were insisting to us that there was no one?"

"No," Draco said mulishly. "Actually no one." He wiped a hand along his hairline. When had it gotten so hot in there?

"Well, if you're certain," Theo said casually.

"Then it's probably fine," Blaise finished.

Draco looked between them and fought the urge to loosen his tie. Of course he was certain. There couldn't be anyone else. Who else would understand what she was going through? Who else would have known what to do during her attacks? She'd tried to kiss him for Merlin's sake!

And he'd stopped her. He'd rejected her. And then he'd avoided her. He ripped off his tie. Why was it so *fucking* hot in this *goddamned* pub?

Pansy was watching him with her chin propped on her clasped fingers. "Having second thoughts, darling?"

Draco grabbed Blaise's pint and drank deeply. "Maybe it was too much space," he gasped out.

Theo slung an arm over Draco's shoulders and gave him a roguish smirk. "Well, you know what the Muggles say: 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.'"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Your lovely comments are always the highlight of my week.

Next week's chapter is a big one... so big that I had to split it down the middle. So, I'm going to do a DOUBLE UPDATE! Ch 11 will post on Monday afternoon as usual and Ch 12 will post on Tuesday (the 14th). I feel like I say this every time, but this section is actually my favorite part of the story and I am so excited to share it with you!

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta edits on this chapter.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)! I'd love to connect with you there.

A Perfect Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The gavel bangs and the courtroom starts to empty. The bailiff pulls him to his feet and the shackles clank loudly in the quiet room. Tears are sliding silently down his mother's face. She brings her hands up to cover her mouth, and the sight of her losing her composure in public chills him more than the cold iron on his wrists. He tries to give her a brave face. He will be strong for her. It's only a year. It could have been worse. It could have been so much worse. He should feel relieved, but a year is still a long time.

The heavy door creaks ominously as it swings open, and he thinks it's ridiculous. Like the front door of a Muggle haunted house. It's too melodramatic, too on the nose, too fucking cliché. But then the wall of cold hits him and his knees buckle. The guards are pulling him forward, but his feet won't move. They're dragging him, and the tops of his bare feet are sliding horribly over the damp stone. It would be better to walk. Why can't he walk? Because taking a single step into this place is against every instinct of self-preservation, and he's not strong enough to overcome millions of years of training. He's not strong.

They dump him in a heap in the corner of his cell. His mother isn't there, so he drops the brave face. He's trembling so hard his teeth are rattling, and guttural, wrenching sobs are working their way up his throat. The iron door clangs shut, and he cries out into the dark. A year is a long time to be this cold.

Draco woke up wheezing. His chest was painfully tight, the ring of the closing door impossibly loud in his ears. He wrenched back the sheets and brought a hand to his throat as if he could will his airway to open. Cold sweat drenched his body.

He fumbled for his wand and quickly lit the lamps around the room. He forced himself to sit up and take in the space around him. Carpet, not stone. Beige walls, not slate. Warm bed, not cold floor. Open door, not locked in.

His breathing slowly returned to a normal pace, and he glanced at the watch on his nightstand. *Wonderful*. The sun wasn't even up yet, and he was already completely over this day.

He dragged himself over to the wardrobe, picked out an outfit he wouldn't mind not seeing for a month, and then headed for the shower.

The day dawned obnoxiously warm, and Draco scowled at the blue sky and bright sun before stepping into the café. The sound of the frother burbling merrily and the pleasant scent of fresh coffee and pastries only soured his mood further. *What a disgustingly perfect day.*

As his eyes fell on Shannon, however, his contempt melted away at once. Of course she deserved a perfect day.

She spotted him by the door and flashed him a cheeky grin. “Well, if it isn’t the bearer of bad news.”

“Bearer of bad news... and gifts,” he said dramatically, producing a wrapped parcel from behind his back.

Her grin widened further as she leaned over the counter for him to kiss her cheek.

“Happy birthday,” he said as she took the present.

“Thank you, darling. Though you know that old adage about your presence being my present?”

He sighed heavily. “I’m sorry. You know there’s nowhere else I’d rather be. But I have—”

“Your family commitment,” she said gently. “I know. I’m only teasing.

“You’ll be missed,” she added with a pointed look as she moved away to prepare his usual coffee.

“Believe me, I’ll be the one missing out,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

“Well, if anything changes, you know where to find us, and we’ll be out late,” she said as she handed him the to-go cup.

He hated the hopeful expression on her face. Hated disappointing her, especially for this.

“Have a great day today,” he said, slipping a fifty-pound note into the tip jar. “You deserve it.”

Draco spent the day dragging his feet. He skulked around the Manor grounds. He pretended to read in the library. He watched idly as his mother pruned the rose bushes. There weren’t any specific visiting hours at Azkaban; he could go any time. Without needing to meet his friends to keep him on schedule, he found that he was supremely unmotivated to make the journey. He regretted telling them not to come. True, he’d only seen them last week, but now that the day of his visit had arrived, the idea of facing it alone was more daunting than he’d expected.

“What’s your hesitation, dear?” His mother’s voice broke through his thoughts. “Are you worried about something your father will say?”

“No,” he said honestly. “It’s just difficult... going back.”

She set down her clippers and sat on the bench beside him. She took one of his hands in both of her own.

“I can’t tell you enough how much I appreciate what you go through for this. How much it means to me.”

He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but it came out more of a grimace.

“I dreamed about the day I was sentenced last night.”

He felt her hands tighten at his words.

“Draco—”

“Why are we doing this, Mother?” he interrupted her. “Do you really want him out? Do you really think he deserves to be out? Do I really have to endure returning to that place for the next twenty years in the hopes of getting him out?”

Draco’s insides frosted over at his own words. It had only been a handful of months that he’d been visiting. He’d never fully appreciated the scope of twenty years.

It felt unfathomable.

“Of course I want him out, my love,” Narcissa said gently, unperturbed by his outburst. “My heart breaks every second that he’s away. Just as it did for you.”

Draco braced his elbows on his knees and dropped his head into his hands.

“How can you forgive him? How can you forgive what he’s done?”

He felt one of his mother’s palms rest lightly between his shoulder blades.

“Because he is my life, and I had to.”

“Oh! I forgot to tell you. I met some of Draco’s other friends out in Norwich last week.”

Hermione snapped her gaze up from the toenail she’d been painting. “You did?”

“Mhmm,” Janelle said, wrapping a section of hair around her curling iron.

“From school?” Shannon asked, mascara wand hovering in front of the mirror.

“Yep.”

“Who?” Hermione asked.

“Honestly, I was too stunned to listen to their names,” Janelle said with a laugh. “One bloke was a walking pair of cheekbones, the girl looked straight off the cover of Vogue, and the other, even sitting down, was the literal embodiment of tall, dark, and handsome. I mean, his eyes... I’ve never seen that colour blue.”

Hermione chuckled. “That would be Blaise, Pansy, and Theo.”

Janelle snapped her fingers in confirmation. “That’s them.”

She went back to her hair but added after a moment, “They seemed surprised when I mentioned you though.”

Hermione blotted polish all over her pinky toe. “Me?” she asked faintly. “You mentioned me?”

“Yeah, it was like they were surprised that Draco was in touch with you.”

Hermione gulped. Janelle turned in her chair to look at her. “You *really* weren’t friends at school, were you?”

Shannon caught her eye in the mirror and gave her a knowing look.

“No,” Hermione said, starting to remove the offending polish. “We *really* weren’t.”

“It’s a shame he can’t make it tonight,” Janelle went on, turning back to the mirror.

“Yeah,” Shannon said, sadly. “But you know how it is. When he has his ‘family commitment,’ he’s in no fit state.”

Hermione felt a chill settle over her at Shannon’s words. Malfoy had obviously never mentioned any ‘family commitment’ to her, but she could only imagine one thing that would be distressing enough to keep him from joining them later in the evening.

Her stomach burned with a mixture of guilt and shame. Privately, she’d been relieved when Shannon had told her he wouldn’t be coming out for her birthday. Official friends or not, she was still somewhat guarded around him, and she was excited to have this night to let loose a bit.

Especially given the special shopping trip the girls had made to procure three truly slutty outfits for the occasion.

Hermione was comfortable in her body, and she liked showing it off as much as anyone else. She’d never had any shortage of positive male—or female—attention to diminish her confidence.

Except for him.

She'd tried for years to rationalise that every adolescent girl deals with crippling insecurities. It was normal for her to fixate on the features she didn't like about herself. What was not normal, and what she could never fully explain away, was having an adolescent boy mock her about all of those same insecurities. Especially not a boy for whom she, for some reason, harboured a persistent, inescapable, immutable crush.

Even less normal was to have that boy follow her into adulthood and appear like a giant mirror, constantly reminding her of all the doubts and anxieties she thought she'd long since grown out of.

The fact that she still craved his approval was too pitiful to even begin to consider right then. One night to shake her arse in peace without his judgment didn't feel like too much to ask.

"He came by the café this morning to wish me happy birthday and bring me a present."

Hermione looked up again at Shannon's words. "That's nice. What was it?" she asked.

"I don't know," Shannon said. "I haven't opened it yet."

"Well, let's see then," Janelle said excitedly.

Shannon walked over to her desk and picked up a square parcel. She tore open the wrappings, and Hermione felt a ridiculous pang of jealousy when she realised Malfoy had given her a book. That sentiment was quashed immediately by the look on Shannon's face.

"Oh, my god," she breathed, running her fingers lightly over the cover.

"What is it?" Janelle asked, coming to stand by her.

Hermione did the same, and her breath caught in her throat as Shannon flipped through several pages.

It was a beautiful coffee table book filled with stunning photographs of the River Shannon.

There was a handsome bridge stretching across crystal blue; banks shining gold with an autumn sunset as all shades of leaves fell around them; water still as glass, reflecting trees frosted with snow like a mirror.

Hermione looked up to see that Shannon's lashes were wet, and she felt tears burning behind her own eyes. She knew how much her friend adored her namesake, especially because it was a name she had chosen for herself.

Shannon groaned lightly, "I should have opened this before doing my makeup."

They smiled and hugged her tightly.

"How did he know?" Janelle asked after a minute.

Shannon looked to Hermione, but she just shrugged. “I don’t know,” Shannon said softly.

Janelle sucked her teeth, shaking her head slightly. “Damn, he’s good.”

Shannon closed the book and held it tight to her chest. “Yes,” she said, meeting Hermione’s eyes again. “He is.”

“Don’t be petulant, Draco,” Lucius drawled.

“Then give me a straight fucking answer for once!”

Lucius cocked his head. “What was the question?”

Draco growled in frustration and stood to pace the small room. “I know you aren’t actually afraid of Muggles.”

Lucius just blinked at him.

Draco stopped after his third pass of the table. “Well?”

“I’m still waiting for a question.”

Draco shook his head in disbelief. “Do you just sit around in here and think up new ways to be insufferable?”

“Oh Draco,” Lucius tutted, bringing a hand to his chest, “would you love me if I was anything but what I am?”

“Yes, you fucking psychopath!” Draco yelled, throwing his hands up. “I would love you if you were a lot of things but what you are. An actual human being for one!”

Lucius rolled his eyes and folded his hands neatly on the metal table. “You know, I think a little more gratitude is in order.”

“Gratitude?” Draco repeated with a hysterical laugh. “Gratitude for what? My stunted emotional development and warped worldview? No? Okay, how about my debilitating PTSD? Not that either? Oh, I know, what about my sick fucking ink?” He ripped back his sleeve and shoved his Mark under his father’s nose.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about getting it touched up now that it’s faded so much,” Draco went on. He braced a hand on the back of Lucius’s chair and leaned over him. “The Muggle girls go crazy for it,” he finished with a sneer.

Lucius looked at the Mark for a few seconds before flicking his eyes up to meet Draco's. "You think you're so clever," he said quietly. "One day you will realise that everything you ever needed in life was handed to you on a silver platter."

"No," Draco said angrily, pushing off the chair. "One day *you* will realise that everything I should have had to earn was handed to me on a silver platter. The only things you made me work for—*fight* for—were the things I actually needed. The things that should have been unconditional. Your support, your acceptance, your approval." Draco swallowed the bile that was rising in his throat. "Your love."

Lucius's mouth was set in a firm line, and when he didn't respond, Draco turned away. He sucked in a deep breath as he made his way back to the other side of the table and realised his throat was shaking.

He'd cursed at his father. Called him a psychopath. Said the word *love*. Twice. He clenched his hands into fists when he noticed they were shaking, too. Azkaban always wreaked havoc on his emotional regulation, but he had never lost it like that before. Knowing his father couldn't retaliate, couldn't punish him, couldn't follow when he left was making him bold. Even if Lucius couldn't care less about Draco's opinion, it still felt good to say. He decided to say a little more.

"Thank god I had Mother for that."

Lucius frowned with distaste at the Muggle phrase and Draco shook his head in disgust. "She deserves better than you."

Lucius lifted his chin and raised both brows. "On that, my son, we are agreed."

Draco scoffed. "I can't believe I'm here right now," he said, almost to himself. "Do you know that there are people out there that care about me? That wanted to be with me today? People that know me and accept me without this mindfuck bullshit!"

"Do they?" Lucius asked, leaning forward over the table. "Do they know you, Draco?"

He opened his mouth to reply and then closed it.

"Do they *really* know you?"

Draco swallowed but still didn't speak.

"You see," Lucius went on. "I don't see how they possibly could because I know you're referring to your Muggles."

Draco's palms began to sweat. His father had a look in his eye that told him everything he needed to know about where this was going. Lucius stared him down like cornered prey.

"And I know you aren't foolish enough to have told your Muggles *anything* of importance about yourself," he went on.

"They know who I am now," Draco said, straining to keep his voice steady. "That's all that matters."

Lucius adopted a pitying expression. "No, my son, I'm afraid you're wrong there. How can they possibly accept you when they only know one chapter of your story?"

"It's not just them," Draco countered in a desperate bid. "There's... others." A mane of curls and amber eyes flashed in his mind.

"Oh, others, are there?" Lucius asked in mock fascination. "Someone who cares for you? Someone who knows everything you've done and accepts you regardless? Someone who... deserves better than you, perhaps?"

Draco's throat was closing. He pulled in a breath that whistled thinly. *He's right. They don't know. She doesn't know. She deserves better.* Blood was pounding in his ears. *You have no one. You don't deserve anyone. You'll be alone forever.*

A clanging knock on the door saved him from his spiral. *That's Azkaban talking*, he reminded himself, taking a stumbling step backwards. *It's the residual magic.* He turned from his father without another word and flung open the door. He had to get out of there now. If he let those thoughts continue, they'd consume him whole.

He took off down the corridor, half-running for the exit. Darkness was swirling around him, all the worst memories crowding forward.

Granger's screams echoed from the depths of his mind. *Draco, save me.*

"No!" he said aloud, skidding around a corner. He needed happy memories. Shannon smiling with her birthday gift. Thomas red-faced and spluttering at the dartboard. Granger laughing with soap bubbles on her face. Blaise, Pansy, and Theo smirking over their pints.

He replayed them over and over while he waited to retrieve his wand from the security desk. As soon as it was in his hand, he burst through the front doors and sprinted to the dock.

He felt the shimmer of energy as he passed through the wards and turned on the spot. He roared in pain as he was sucked through the void and only had the briefest glimpse of his London flat before he fell to the floor, unconscious.

Draco woke with the sensation of carpet on his face. He blinked several times and tried unsuccessfully to lift his head. He groaned with the memory of the Apparition trip. Why had he done that? The Manor was much too far for a single jump. He adjusted his face in the carpet and the realisation hit him. He was not in the Manor. This carpet was in his flat.

He wrenched himself off the ground and stumbled as his vision blacked out. He'd come home. For months he had successfully avoided bringing any trace of that place into his space, and now there he was, soaked in it. How could he have been so stupid?

Lurching into the bathroom, he stripped off his clothes as fast as his numb fingers would allow. Merlin, he was cold. He'd kill for a cigarette.

He flung the discarded clothes onto the shower floor and cast an *Incendio* at once, shivering as the pile burned. The flames licked blue and green with the smouldering pigments of the fine threads. Draco willed the chill to burn off with it, but waves of gooseflesh rippled over him as he felt cold stone walls pressing into his bare flesh.

He shook his head violently to dislodge the phantom sensation and Vanished the burning remains of the cloth. He couldn't wait any longer. Reaching into the shower, he turned the tap on as hot as it would go and stepped under the stream.

After an hour, the water temperature started to drop. His skin was scorched red from the heat, but he was still filled with a hollow cold. It ached between his ribs and in the marrow of his bones. He dried himself with jerky movements, his muscles fatigued from trembling. In a last-ditch effort, he slid into his bed, Conjuring quilt upon quilt to try to get warm.

A miserable twenty minutes later, however, he gave up on generating any real heat. He would have to manufacture some.

He Summoned a new bottle of firewhiskey from the living room and carefully took a sip. He let it burn his tongue before trickling it slowly down his throat, feeling the warmth spread as it hit his empty stomach. A wave of nausea rolled over him with the memory of the last time he'd drank it, and he knew he'd need to eat something to keep it down.

Wrapping one of the quilts around himself, he trudged into the kitchen and retrieved some leftover Chinese from the fridge. He sank onto the sofa with his bottle, alternating small bites and small sips until the illusion of warmth stilled his shaking hands.

He realised that he hadn't even checked the time to see how long he'd been unconscious. Shrugging his cocoon tighter, he leaned over the arm of the sofa to see the clock on the oven.

12:43 AM

He scoffed at his own stupidity. He'd been out for several hours. *Super healthy. Good show, Draco.*

The time suddenly triggered a memory, and he quickly sat back.

You know where to find us, and we'll be out late.

Something dangerously like hope flared to life in the center of his brain. He took another pull from the bottle as he considered. He could go. Seeing them would ground him better than anything else.

There are people out there that care about me, that wanted to be with me today.

He stared at his blurry reflection in the black television screen as the words replayed in his mind. He had sounded so sure when he'd said that. Even in memory, his voice was brimming with confidence.

It wasn't too late. He could go.

You don't deserve anyone.

He squared his shoulders in defiance of the shiver that threatened to ripple down his back. With a little distance, he could hear the difference now. That voice—it didn't belong to him.

Alone. Forever.

He slammed the bottle down on the table and went to dress.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Little cliffhanger here, but I'll see you tomorrow (the 14th) for the continuation <3

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Let's Pretend We Like Each Other

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This is the second part of a double update. If the last thing you read was not Draco waking up from being knocked unconscious then you missed a chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It was a little after one o'clock by the time Draco landed in the alley next to the club. The main street was filled with late-night revellers moving between the establishments, but there wasn't a queue to get in this time of night.

He made his way through the sparse crowd near the entrance, feeling the driving bass pound through him. He took a minute to let his eyes adjust to the dim light before scanning the bar. He didn't see any of them, so he made a slow circuit of the dance floor. The space was packed with bodies. The air was thrumming with the music and the energy of the dancers. He let the sensations wash over him.

He spotted Thomas and Shannon first. They were an imposing couple when she was in heels, both over six feet tall. They were completely wrapped up in each other, oblivious to the outside world, and he smiled, feeling the first stirrings of warmth in his fingertips.

He saw Janelle next, pressed up against Nick. Her arms were around his neck, and his hands were at her hips, guiding her as she moved in front of him.

A flash of hair drew Draco's eye, and his mouth fell open when he recognised Granger dancing next to them. Her curls fell around her in loose ringlets, bouncing as she moved to the music. She leaned forward slightly, and he realised that what he'd first thought was an impossibly short black dress actually ended in another pair of tiny shorts. As she swung her hips back and forth, the curves of her arse cheeks were clearly visible protruding from the bottom. His mouth filled with saliva. This woman and her shorts were going to put him into an early grave.

He didn't even notice the warmth spreading through his chest.

A new song started up, and Janelle detached herself from Nick, rushing over to grab Granger by the hips and yank her close. She and Janelle danced together, singing along to the lyrics and laughing. As he watched, Janelle put a hand on Granger's back and pushed her forward until she was folded in half at the waist and her hair draped over her face. Her hands wrapped around the ankle straps of her stiletto heels as she moved. Then, she arched her back, flipping her hair up and bringing her hands to her knees. She ground her arse into Janelle's crotch, a sultry smile playing across her lips. As the chorus finished, she straightened up, her back still tight to Janelle's front. He watched as she trailed her hands from her knees up her thighs,

along her hips, over her breasts in their tight bodice, until her arms were stretched over her head.

Draco was spellbound.

The girls separated and danced side-by-side. Granger's head was tilted back and her eyes were closed. She moved her body in a perfect sinuous rhythm, looking utterly euphoric. She was completely unburdened, uninhibited. Free.

The darkness crept in from every corner of Draco's mind. He could feel it crawling over his thoughts like roaches.

He wanted to have that. He wanted to take it from her. He wanted to pour every ounce of his pain and anger and violence and fear into her and have his release. He wanted to empty his despair into her and be free. He wanted to ruin her. He wanted to be free.

It wasn't fair. She was right there, dancing so effortlessly it was like the music was moving through her. Looking so perfect, so *golden*. How was it that the lights in the club seemed to make her glow from within? How did they create that glimmer that—

His eyes widened in shock as he realised what he was seeing.

Her magic.

He could see her magic.

A faint gold haze was surrounding her. It swirled around her like dust motes in sunlight as she danced. It moved over her, into her, shining around her, lighting her up.

It was so beautiful. He swallowed against the lump in his throat.

Suddenly, he realised he had been moving toward her. He was too close now. Any second she was going to look over and see him. Panic filled him as he imagined what he would look like to her. Lurking, leering at her from the shadows with the ghosts of the Dementors clinging to him, swathing him in black.

He knew what would happen. The second she saw him, her perfect moment would be shattered. He would watch as the light of her magic faltered—flickering and going out.

He had to get out of there. He couldn't stand to see that. He couldn't take it. *I don't want to be the reason her light goes out.*

She turned to face him before he could move. He raked his gaze hungrily over her in the last second he had before she saw him.

And when their eyes met... it was like a hundred flashbulbs going off at once. He squinted involuntarily against the sudden brightness, and when he could open his eyes again, she stood before him, pulsing gently with golden light.

He closed the gap between them in three strides.

Hermione couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so good. They couldn't have asked for a better night at the club. Everyone drank the perfect amount; every song had the perfect vibe; it was just crowded enough to get swept up in the collective energy. She danced and danced and danced, and every beat of the bass battered away another doubt, another anxiety, another fear.

When her and Janelle's song came on, she could only laugh at the perfection. With her friend grinding at her back, she felt unstoppable. Fierce. Flawless. In that moment, only one thought drifted through her mind. *I wish he could see me like this.*

She wasn't surprised to turn and see him standing there. Of course he was there. She felt so powerful at that moment, she was sure she could have summoned him to her from halfway across the world.

She was surprised, however, at the unbridled hunger in his expression. When their eyes met, a surge went through her like a tidal wave, leaving behind the distinct pulsing of her heartbeat under every inch of her skin in its wake.

She moved forward at the same time he did. When they met, she slid her hands up his chest, hardly believing she was finally feeling him under her palms. His hands came around her waist, pulling her tight to him until one of his legs was between hers and their hips were pressed together. They moved in sync to the music.

It felt like a dream. He left trails of heat on her body as he touched her: down the backs of her arms, over her hips, cupping her arse. She leaned her forehead into his shoulder, tracing his every movement behind her closed lids. Willing herself not to forget a single detail.

When he turned her to face away from him, she placed her hands over his and marvelled at the feel of her fingers slipping between his larger ones as she moved them where she wanted them. She slid them slowly up the fronts of her thighs until his fingertips caught the edge of her romper. He curled his fingers under the fabric, and his knuckles brushed the sensitive skin on the insides of her hips. It was so fucking hot that her mouth fell open on a silent gasp. He used the new leverage to pull her tight against him, and she felt his arousal pressing into her back.

It felt like a dream. She was delirious with the tangible evidence that he wanted her. It didn't matter why. She reached up behind his neck and pulled his head down next to hers. She turned her face toward him as much as she could and felt his breath ghost over her lips. Her cheek pressed against his, their open mouths hovering centimeters apart. She was in freefall. There was no stopping it now. She would meet his lips as surely as she would meet the ground. It was only a matter of when. He tugged her back again, and the pressure of his hands at her front sent a jolt through her cunt. She let out a tiny cry at the sensation, and his mouth closed over hers.

She squeezed her fingers against the back of his neck, leaning into the kiss. His lips moved luxuriously over hers, tasting her slowly, and the press of his tongue into her mouth ignited a rush of urgency between her legs.

It felt like a dream. It was dark in the club and she wasn't facing him and she'd done shots and he smelled so good and those were probably the main reasons she pulled away from him enough to ask, "Should we go somewhere?"

He nodded against her head. She grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the exit without a backward glance. After weaving through the crowd, she removed the Muggle-repelling charm from her coat and purse and pulled him out the door and into the alley. She tightened her grip in warning before turning on the spot.

Hermione didn't even have a chance to be embarrassed by the fact that she'd Apparated them directly into her bedroom before he was on her. He kissed her furiously, backing her across the room until her legs hit the bed and she sat on it.

Something had shifted. The Apparition or the sudden silence after the noise of the club or the fact that she was now alone with Draco Malfoy in her bedroom; something had jarred her back to reality.

He moved his mouth to her jaw. *He. Wants. To. Shag. You.* She squeezed her eyes shut.

He kissed under her ear. *It's not about me.*

His fingers gripped the hair at the back of her head. —*a fascination, a curiosity.*

His lips were on her throat. *It's slumming.*

She breathed in deeply through her nose and tried to relax into the sensations. It was just sex. She could do this. She wanted this. It didn't matter why.

You filthy little Mudblood.

"Wait."

He pulled back at once to look at her, and the sight of his face only confirmed it. She couldn't do it. Not like this.

She swallowed as her mind raced. This was the moment. She was barreling toward a fork in the road at full speed and she had to choose. She could end this now, for real, and she would never know what it could have been like. Or, she could relinquish every last shred of her dignity and ask for what she'd always wanted. What she needed.

She looked up into his eyes. Dignity was overrated.

"Could you... pretend that you like me? Just this once?"

Something flickered in his expression, and shame crashed over her like a bucket of ice water. She hadn't even considered that he might say *no*. She dropped her head and tried to stand

before the tears came, but his hands cupped her face and turned it back up to him.

He looked at her for a long time, concentration creasing his brow. His eyes flicked back and forth between both of hers, and she waited for him to speak.

She realised suddenly that he hadn't said a word all night. She hadn't heard his voice in weeks.

Then, his expression softened, and he rubbed both of his thumbs gently along her cheeks.

"I like you, Granger."

Her heart stuttered in her chest. She had seen plenty of emotions on his face over the years, including several new ones in the time they'd been friends. But never one like this. It was something bordering so close to reverence that her brain refused to supply a suitable word for it. The fact that he could slip into it so easily would have wrecked her if it didn't look so perfect on his features. Before she had time to fully process, he leaned in and kissed her again. It was different this time—tender, passionate, but no less intense. It left her breathless.

He pulled back and inspected her face again. "Like that?" he asked.

She nodded numbly, and he trailed his fingers down her arms, taking her hands in his.

"I like these hands," he said. He brought one up to his face and placed an open-mouthed kiss to her palm, holding her eye contact. "Is that what you want?" he asked against her hand.

She swallowed, not trusting herself to speak. Yes, she wanted that. She wanted him to see her. To like all of her parts. She nodded again, and he smiled.

"I like these fingers."

He opened his mouth and took her first two fingers into it. She gasped as his tongue slid between them, and he sucked them gently as he pulled them out.

He turned her hand and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist. Her breathing grew ragged as his tongue worked over the sensitive skin there.

She closed her eyes as he shifted his attention to the inside of her elbow. No one had ever kissed her there before, and it was so tender it made her squirm with pleasure.

She felt the puff of his breath on her neck and opened her eyes. "I like these freckles," he murmured against her skin. He pulled the strap of her romper aside and let his bottom lip drag along her shoulder.

Her brain was buzzing with his praise. Every new spot that received his attention tingled deliciously under her skin.

"I like this hair." She let out a moan as his nails raked over her scalp. He gripped the curls and pulled, tilting her head back. He captured her lips in a searing kiss. "God, I like this hair." She breathed heavily against his lips as he dug his fingers into it.

One of his hands smoothed over her curls, following them down her back until she felt him grasp the tab of her zipper. He looked at her for confirmation, and he eased it down slowly at her nod.

She moaned again at the feeling of his palms smoothing over her bare back. It felt so good that she was momentarily distracted from the fact that she was about to be sitting nearly naked in front of him. Her breath caught as he grasped the straps and peeled the garment down.

It's okay. He won't be cruel. He's pretending.

She lifted herself slightly so he could pull it over her legs and off.

When he stood back up and appreciated her bare chest, she couldn't help smiling at his expression. He quirked a brow at her. "Do I even need to say it?"

She dragged her bottom lip playfully between her teeth and nodded.

He placed his fingertips on her sternum and pushed until she was lying back on the bed. She was sure he could see the way her chest was heaving in anticipation as he kneeled over her. She watched his eyes as he let both hands trail down over her breasts, teasing her nipples with feather-light touches. She arched up into his touch with a gasp as the sensations went straight to her clit.

"I like these fucking tits."

She reached up and grabbed him by the shirt, yanking him down on top of her. They both groaned into a kiss as his erection pressed against her. She ground her hips up wantonly, desperate for contact. One of his hands tightened in her hair again, deepening the kiss. A tremor went through her cunt as his tongue slid over hers again and again. All she could think about was getting that tongue on her nipples, her clit.

They moaned in unison as he brought his other hand to cup her over her knickers. She almost pulled away, squirming in embarrassment. There was no way he wouldn't feel that she was already drenched. She squeezed her eyes shut and—

"Fuck, so wet for me, Granger. I like that."

A low groan tore out of her throat as she grabbed him by the wrist and pushed her hips up into his hand. As her head pressed back into the mattress, he dropped his kisses to the top of her breast. She felt him smirk against it as she reacted.

"I like that sound."

He kissed it again, his tongue sliding along the outer curve, but still not touching her nipple.

"Please," she whimpered, clutching fistfuls of his hair.

"I like you begging, Granger."

Another lick, along the bottom edge.

“Put your mouth on me now,” she demanded, wrenching his head back.

He met her eye and licked his lips slowly as they curved into a smirk. “I like how bossy you are.”

He held her gaze as he lowered himself back over her breast. She writhed slightly under him as his breath puffed over it. She was watching him so intently she didn’t even notice that he’d pulled back her knickers with his other hand. His fingertips slid through her slick folds at the same moment his lips closed over her nipple and she nearly flew to pieces.

She clutched his head to her chest as she cried out, tilting her hips up for him. She closed her eyes as he pressed a finger inside her. He moved it at a tortuously slow pace, making sure she felt every second of it. Her cunt clenched as his tongue flicked over her, and she felt him moan against her breast. Then, he was sliding down her body, trailing kisses as he went. He pulled his finger out for a moment to drag her knickers off, and then his hands were her on her legs, pressing her open.

She felt the fingers of one hand slide lightly over her inner thigh, pulling the skin taught.

“Fuck, I like these marks,” he said. “Like your own skin couldn’t handle these curves.” His fingers dug into the flesh of her arse as his mouth closed over the tender skin inside her thigh. He sucked hard, leaving his own red mark over the network of silvery stripes.

Hermione’s heart nearly burst out of her chest. She couldn’t tell if she was closer to crying or coming. Either way, it was the most erotic thing she’d ever experienced. He liked her stretch marks. She’d never been so wet.

By the time she felt his breath on her cunt, she almost came without him even touching her. He licked a long stripe up her slit, and she nearly screamed. He did it again. And again. And again. Each time his tongue pushed deeper into her and each time he avoided her clit.

“I like the way you taste.”

She could only whimper. She clenched her fists in the covers and waited for the next stroke, knowing it would be the one to carry her over.

But it didn’t come.

She felt the mattress shift and opened her eyes to see Malfoy kneeling over her again. She barely had the presence of mind to register the ridiculous fact that after all this he was still completely clothed.

He looked down at her, his fingertips resting lightly on her legs. She searched his face, and though his cheeks were tinged with pink, his expression was completely unreadable.

“Well, Granger,” he said finally. “Are you going to pretend you like me, too?”

It seemed to take a few seconds for his words to register. Draco's heart was thudding in his chest. Was this what it felt like to be vulnerable? No wonder he'd avoided it at all costs for his entire life. He'd nearly escalated into a full panic by the time she sat up.

Granger got to her knees, matching his posture, and began unbuttoning his shirt. She kept her eyes on his as she went. Her breathing was heavy, her pupils blown wide with arousal, and he was privately impressed with his ability to edge her so close on their first time together.

When she finished the buttons she gripped either side of the open shirt in her hands and pulled him in close.

"I like you, Draco."

He sucked in a sharp breath at that, and his smugness evaporated. She kissed him slowly, languorously, and he had time to appreciate that no matter how much he studied her, he still had no idea what to expect from this witch.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight to him, moaning into her mouth at the feel of her breasts pressed against his bare chest. She wrenched the shirt off his shoulders as the earlier intensity built between them again.

"I like... these arms," she panted between kisses, running her hands over him and squeezing at his biceps. He flexed the muscles and smirked at the sound she made in response.

"I like that stupid smirk," she said, grabbing him roughly by the chin and shoving her tongue into his mouth. Her hands were all over him, her movements growing frenzied. He caught her bottom lip between his teeth and she whined deliciously.

She pulled away and thrust her fingers into his mouth, pulling on his jaw and dragging down his lower lip.

"I like these teeth," she said breathlessly. "I want them on me."

"Where?" he asked at once.

"Here." She brought a hand to the side of her neck.

He yanked her forward by the arms and sank his teeth down where she'd touched. She convulsed against him, crying out.

He thrust her back again, but she answered him before he could even ask.

"And here."

His cock nearly exploded when he realised she was indicating her arse.

“I like when you surprise me,” he said roughly.

He pushed her back onto the bed and flipped her by the hips onto her stomach. He leaned down over her, and she cried out again as he ran his tongue over the back of one calf.

“I like... the way... you touch me,” she gasped into the pillows as he sucked on the thin skin at the back of her knee.

He slid both hands slowly up the backs of her thighs, enjoying the view as she instinctively lifted her hips off the bed. He slid two fingers back inside her and had to pause when he felt how wet she was. He was going to come before he even got his trousers off.

She moaned and thrust herself back into him. “I like your fingers.”

He leaned forward and clamped his teeth down on her arse.

“Oh, fuck!” she screamed, collapsing forward. He grabbed her by the hips and yanked her back onto her knees, plunging his fingers back in and biting her on the other cheek.

The sound she made went straight to his cock. He’d never been so hard in his life.

He grabbed her by the hips again, but she flipped herself over before he even could. She was frantic, scrabbling at his belt and the fastenings of his trousers. He slid off the bed and pulled them off. She took advantage of the respite to Summon her wand and cast a contraceptive charm. The sight of the brief glow from her abdomen had his cock leaking.

She wants it.

She tossed her wand aside and laid back on the pillows. Her eyes raked over his naked form as he crawled up her body. The faint creak of the mattress punctuated the stillness of the otherwise quiet room. He hovered over her for a moment before she reached out and took hold of him, stroking firmly a few times. He grunted and stilled her hand with his own, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Not necessary,” he ground out.

“I like your cock.” He could hear the smile in her voice, and she giggled when she felt it twitch under her hand.

He opened his eyes and smirked down at her. “It likes you, too.”

He pulled back out of her grip and buried his face between her legs. The swell of her clit was tender against his lips, and he sucked it gently, relishing the way the laughter immediately left her face. Her back arched off the bed, and she pressed her hips up into his face with a cry.

He planted kiss after kiss onto her. Each one accompanied by a soft press of his tongue.

“I like your cunt,” he murmured against her when he felt her begin to quiver again.

“Please,” she whined, pulling at his shoulders. “Get up here.”

While he could have happily stayed where he was for days, he was also grateful for the unspoken understanding that the first time—maybe the only time—she wanted to come with him inside her. He raised up over her again, planting a hand on either side of her head and kissing her deeply. He took a moment to appreciate the sight of her tasting herself on his tongue before he looked down to position himself at her entrance.

When he looked back up, her head was turned to the side and her eyes were wide. His left arm bearing the Dark Mark was directly in front of her face.

No...

Dread seized his heart in his chest, and he flinched away from her. The movement pulled her attention from his arm, but he dropped his eyes as he started to sit back on his heels. He couldn't believe it. He had let himself forget.

Suddenly, her hand came around his left wrist, holding him from drawing back any further. Eyes shining with intensity, she reached forward and ran her fingertips lightly over the faded skull and snake. He watched in shock as she leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss in the center of it.

She looked back up at him and pulled experimentally on his arm. He followed her as she laid back down, letting her place his hand back beside her head. She guided him gently down on top of her by the back of the neck, and when his weight was fully settled over her, she brought both hands up to cup his face.

“I like your darkness.”

He let out a startled noise that sounded horrifically like a choked sob, but she didn’t seem to mind. She pulled his face to hers and kissed him soundly. Her tongue slid against his as she rolled her hips upward under him. The edge of her wet cunt grazed the tip of his cock, and he groaned into her mouth. She repeated the movement, bringing her hands to his back and coaxing him forward. His entire body shuddered as the head slipped against her, and he rocked his weight onto his elbows. She moaned, rolling her hips again and pressing her heels into the backs of his thighs. As he felt his cock finally seat at her entrance, he broke the kiss and looked at her again.

“Do you like this?”

She nodded fervently. “Yesss,” she said, the word becoming a hiss as he pushed inside her.

He paused, dropping his forehead to rest against hers and breathing deeply as her walls gripped him tightly. He drew back out and slid in again, just as slowly.

“God, yes,” she said, lifting her hips to meet him. He could feel her quivering around him already.

He hitched her legs up over his hips to recreate the angle she was striving for, and her nails dug into his back as he pushed forward again. He looked down to where they were joined and

tried not to lose himself in the feeling of her moving beneath him. He kept the same slow pace, and he could tell by the sound and the feel of her that she was close.

When he looked back up to her face, however, he saw her gaze fixed on the ceiling. Her lips were parted and her eyes were wide and staring. She arched up into his next thrust, but her expression was almost panicked.

He reached up with one hand and smoothed the hair back from her face. “Look at me,” he said gently.

Her eyes locked on his at once. “Draco, I—I’m—,” she stuttered breathlessly. He felt her clench as he hit a spot within her. He stayed fully sheathed in her after that, just pressing forward, deeper and deeper, in the same rhythm.

“Oh, god, Draco, I’m—” the pleasure in her voice was bordering on pain, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Look at me,” he repeated. When she did, the words fell out of his mouth before he had a chance to consider them. “You’re safe. I have you.”

She let out a lingering cry, and her cunt clamped down on him so hard he gave an involuntary hiss. He kept up the same pattern, pressing into her as wave after wave of spasms rolled around him.

“Good girl,” he said against her lips as she came down. “That was so good.”

“Mmm,” she hummed contentedly as she kissed him slowly, and he smiled at the way her cunt fluttered at his praise.

She pushed against his shoulder and he rolled off of her onto his back. She quickly followed to straddle him, and he groaned as she sank down onto him, even wetter after her orgasm.

She arched her back at the new angle and grabbed for his hands. He let her trail his fingers down over her breasts, imitating the feather-light touches he’d placed on her earlier. She shuddered and gasped as his fingertips teased over her nipples again and again. When she couldn’t take any more, she slid his hands down to her hips and leaned onto her elbows. He dug his fingers into the flesh of her arse and rocked her forward. She let out a guttural moan as the motion brought her breasts over his face and he dragged his tongue across her.

He rocked her faster, and his breathing grew heavy at the feel of her sliding over him—taking every inch so deep, so tight, so wet, so perfect. He gave a quiet groan as he tried to maintain himself, but she changed the angle of her hips slightly, and he knew he couldn’t last. He sucked her nipple into his mouth and she clutched his head to her chest.

“Oh, fuck!” she cried out. “You’re gonna make me—”

“That’s it,” he said when she trailed off on a moan. “Be a good girl and come for me again.” He closed his teeth lightly over her, and the sound she made decimated his self-control. His orgasm ripped through him like a freight train, and his hips lifted off the mattress as he

emptied himself up into her. The inhuman noise he made was drowned out by her cry as she collapsed down on top of him. She panted into his shoulder as he massaged her arse, sliding her slowly over his cock until he was no longer pulsing.

Draco woke sometime later ensconced in a curtain of vanilla. His hands had fallen to his sides while he slept, and when he raised them, they immediately found the curve of Granger's waist. Although he could feel the consistent, comforting pressure of her weight on top of him from shoulder to knee, somehow feeling her under his hands was different. It anchored him to the reality that it hadn't been a dream.

He took a few minutes to enjoy the steady rise and fall of her back before gently rolling her onto her side. She hardly stirred, even as he slid out of her.

He retrieved his wand from his trousers and cast a cleaning charm over both of them. She looked so small lying curled on top of the bedspread, and he glanced around the room for another blanket. Not seeing anything, he grabbed a hold of the fabric on either side of her and set to shimmying the covers down. She rolled over as he gave a final tug, but she didn't wake. He drew the sheet and blanket back up and sat down next to her now covered form. He eyed the empty space in the bed next to her.

Could you pretend that you like me?

He had never expected to be given such a gift. She'd given him a chance not only to share her bed but to let the mask slip, to let the façade crack. He'd spent so long pretending *not* to like her that being given permission to let go and give in felt like an impossible luxury. It had taken everything in him not to tell her that there would be no need for him to pretend, but...

Just this once.

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. Those words had gone through him like a knife. He tried to tell himself that anyone would have made the same choice. That once was infinitely better than never. But now that he was here on the other side... How do you go on living knowing that the best part of your life is already behind you?

He reached out and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. Maybe he should stay. He was supposed to be pretending to like her. Someone who liked her would stay. He wanted to stay. But *just this once...* If she meant just this one night then he could stay. If she meant just this one time having sex then it was done, and he needed to go.

He weighed the options, but the right answer was all too obvious. Even if she had meant just this one night, there were only a few hours of that left. He wanted nothing more than to crawl back into that bed and hold her for as long as he could, but then he would be leaving an awake Granger in the morning. He'd have to face her. His stomach twisted as he imagined

some awkward conversation they'd be forced to have; most one-night stands don't agree on the one-night part beforehand. He could spare them that.

He dressed quietly, watching her for signs of waking, and tried desperately to quash his disappointment when he stood next to her fully clothed while she slept soundly on. He knelt next to the bed and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. He waited for a moment, but she still didn't stir. Letting out a heavy sigh, he placed her wand on the bedside table and Conjured a glass of water next to it.

He let himself silently out of the house and set out to start on the downhill portion of his life.

When Hermione woke, she was immediately aware that she was naked. She stayed perfectly still, trying to use every preternatural sense to determine whether someone was lying in the bed behind her. When the pounding of her heart in her ears became too distracting to sense anything else, she rolled over excruciatingly slowly.

She was relieved to find that she was alone. That relief, however, was followed almost instantaneously by crushing disappointment. He was gone.

She sat up against the headboard and pulled the covers to her chest. Of course he was gone. She had asked him to pretend, just once, and he had. And now that was over.

He'd done a good job of it, too. She had never felt anything so intense. In fact, the buildup had been so powerful, she'd been terrified for a moment that her body was going to betray her. She'd been on the brink of indescribable pleasure when everything had seized up. It was too much. Too strong. Too vulnerable. She'd been panicked, knowing that if she lost it then, she'd never get it back. But he'd grounded her. Again. He had let her be safe.

She looked around the room for some sign that he had been there. She found the first one on her desk. Her romper and knickers were folded neatly and stacked in a little pile. The sight of it made her feel absurdly like crying.

The second one was on her nightstand: a fancy cut crystal goblet filled with water. She took a sip and considered the glass; she'd never owned anything even remotely like it. He must have Conjured it. She wondered if he'd intentionally called forth something so extravagant or if his Malfoy magic simply resisted all things pedestrian. She finished the water and picked up her wand to Vanish the goblet. Her hand hovered uncertainly over it. A moment later, she set her unused wand back down and went to dress. After all, it was a very nice glass.

Thank you so much for reading!

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the absolutely wonderful response to last week's chapter.
Please enjoy this extra-long silly and fluffy one in gratitude <3

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione stared down at the glossed surface of the conference table and wondered idly what happened to people who peaked at twenty years old. Did they always know right away that it would never get better? Did they try to fool themselves into thinking the best was yet to come? Did their hope gradually wither and die as every day passed and nothing compared to what came before? Did they spend the next ten decades haunted by the memory of the most intense, incredible sexual experience of their life?

A shiver rippled through her and she bumped the elbow of the witch beside her. ‘Sorry,’ she mouthed silently and looked back up at her Department Head. This was probably an important meeting. She should be paying attention. She tucked her hair behind her ear.

God, I like this hair. She suppressed another shiver and looked down, drumming her fingers lightly on the table.

I like these fingers. She swallowed at the memory of his tongue sliding between them and dropped her hands into her lap.

I like your cunt. She shifted in her chair and kicked over the briefcase of the wizard next to her.

“Oh, sorry,” she whispered, blushing furiously. Merlin, she had to get a hold of herself. Luckily, the meeting was just being dismissed, and she scampered out of the conference room and into an arriving lift. She clutched her bag to her chest and willed her breathing to slow.

“Hello, Granger.”

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of his voice. She turned slowly and looked up into his face.

“Hello, Nott.”

He smiled, and Hermione couldn’t help but agree with Janelle’s assessment. Tall, dark, and handsome, indeed.

“Theo, if you please. Nott is my father.”

"Hello, Theo, then." She gave him a weak smile and tried for a cheery tone. "What brings you here?"

"I work here." He inclined his head to indicate the employee badge clipped to the front of his robes.

"Oh," she said, startled. "That's nice."

He chuckled. "Yes, it's been nice to see some old acquaintances again. Speaking of, I was pleased to hear that you and Draco have gotten so friendly."

Her brows rose to her hairline, and she flushed crimson. *Jesus Christ, had he told his friends they slept together?* She stammered as the lift dinged.

"I hope we can get friendly, too," Theo went on, blue eyes twinkling.

Hermione choked on her own saliva and felt bright red blotches spread over her chest. The lift doors slid open, and Theo waited, gesturing for her to exit before him.

She stared out at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. *Oh, bloody hell.* She hadn't even noticed they were heading up.

He moved his arm in front of the doors as they started to close and gave her a questioning look.

"Are you getting out?"

"Oh, erm, no actually, I have to—well, the thing is—I'm actually," she stepped backwards and thumped against the wall of the lift. "I'm heading back down," she finished, her face scrunching in embarrassment.

"Oh, right," Theo said with a shrug. He stepped out and turned back to watch as the closing doors obscured her from view.

The smile slid off his face as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of parchment. He tore it in half and wrote two identical notes.

He shagged her.

Draco didn't even lift his head when he heard the Floo roar to life.

"What the—" came a voice from the living room.

"Oi, watch it!" A second voice and the sound of an empty bottle clattering over the floor.

“Ow!” A third voice. “Would you move your arse please?”

“You were here first, you great lunk!” Sounds of empty cans and paper rustling.

The Slytherins filed into Draco’s bedroom, but he still didn’t move. He was entirely unmotivated despite the fact that he was lying face down on top of his bed, completely naked.

“What’s with the living room?” Theo asked. “You free all your house elves or something?”

“Yes,” Draco muttered into the pillow.

“Oh.”

Draco felt a thick, fuzzy blanket drop onto him, covering his lower half.

“Hey!” Pansy protested. “I wasn’t finished looking at that.”

“Well, I’ve seen enough of it to last a lifetime,” Blaise drawled, plopping into an armchair.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Draco deadpanned.

“Yes, actually,” Theo said brightly. “You can help me figure out how you managed to convince Granger to sleep with you.”

Draco looked over his shoulder so fast he cricked his neck.

“Argh! How did you know that?”

“I saw her at the Ministry today.”

Draco scrambled around to face them, gripping the Conjured blanket around his waist. “She told you?” he gasped out.

“Oh, yes,” Theo replied. “We had a lovely little chat in the lift about how big you are. She even drew me a picture.”

Draco’s mouth fell open.

Theo rolled his eyes. “Relax, brainless. She didn’t tell me anything. She didn’t have to.”

“So, what’s with the invalid act?” Blaise cut in, gesturing at Draco’s general state of disarray. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

Draco dropped his head into his hands. “It was. I mean, it is. But she—” He sighed heavily. “She only wanted it once. One time.”

Blaise and Theo exchanged a look, and Pansy narrowed her eyes.

“She told you that?” Pansy asked.

“Yes,” he said morosely.

“Before or after?”

“Before.”

“Hm,” Pansy hummed through pursed lips. She paced a couple steps along the room. “And she liked it?”

Draco flushed with the memory of how many times they’d said that word that night.

“I don’t know, I mean, yes, I think so, but—”

“Draco.” Pansy cut off his rambling, and he looked up at her. She raised a severe brow. “She liked it?”

“Oh,” he said quietly, taking in her meaning. He cleared his throat. “Erm, yes.”

“She liked it... more than once?” Pansy went on.

Draco rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “Yes.”

“And you went down on her?” Pansy asked, dropping all pretence.

“Parkinson!”

“Didn’t you?”

“Yes, of course, but—”

She waved a hand and flopped down onto the bed next to him. “Well, that settles it for her then,” she said matter-of-factly. “What about you?”

“What do you mean ‘settles it for her’?” Blaise asked.

Pansy inspected her fingernails as she spoke. “I mean, she said she only wanted it once *before* she had multiple orgasms and got her clit licked.”

The three men stared at her.

“Draco, darling,” she said with a sigh. “Despite your many, *many* unsavory qualities and shortcomings, you are a decent lay.”

Theo chuckled while Blaise smirked. Draco was so heartened by the direction the conversation was taking, he didn’t even mind the backhanded compliment.

“Trust me, she wants more,” Pansy finished.

“How can you be sure?” Blaise asked. “What about the thrill of the new?”

“Yeah, hit it and quit it?” Theo supplied.

Pansy waved them off. "No, that's for blokes. As a witch, it's not every day you meet someone who can rock your world. Especially the first time," she added with a wink at Draco.

Draco felt like a cement block had been removed from his lungs. He felt like he took his first full breath in days.

"So, what about you?" she asked him again.

"What about me?" Draco replied.

She rolled her eyes. "Did you like it?"

"God, yes."

"And you want more?"

"Of course."

"Problem solved, then," she said, making to stand. Draco grabbed her by the wrist.

"Wait, what do I do?" he asked, hating how desperate he sounded.

"Just be around," Pansy said simply. "No more space. Stick to her like a niffler on a knut, you got it?"

Draco nodded.

"And call me old-fashioned," Theo added, as the trio trouped out. "But maybe a shower, too?"

"No space!" Pansy called as the Floo roared back to life.

"I don't know. Maybe I just need some space?"

Ginny tilted her head in question as she took the teacup Harry handed her. "Wait, I'm lost. Which part of the mind-blowing sex are you wanting space from?"

Hermione sighed, nodding her thanks as Harry handed her a cup, too. "That's the problem. It was just sex."

"What's the problem with that?" Ginny asked, looking nonplussed.

"It was just sex for *him*," Hermione emphasised, setting her steaming cup down on the wooden table. "And it's—"

“Not just sex for you,” Ginny finished. “Okay, I’m starting to get it.”

“And why are we so convinced that this mystery bloke isn’t actually interested in Hermione Granger: war heroine, Gryffindor’s Golden Girl, Brightest Witch of Her Age?” Harry asked from where he leaned against the counter.

“Years’ worth of evidence,” Hermione said with a groan.

Ginny and Harry exchanged a look, and Hermione inwardly cursed her carelessness.

“He sounds like a tosser,” Harry said fairly, taking a sip of tea.

Hermione grimaced. “Yes, you would think so.”

Another look.

“So, why do you like him?”

Hermione let out a shrill laugh. “Believe me, I’ve been asking myself the same question since —er, for a long time,” she finished lamely.

“Well, erm, yeah,” Harry started after a pause, clearly trying to be supportive. “Maybe some space? To, you know, get over it?”

He looked questioningly at Ginny. “Yeah,” she added tentatively, searching around for something to say. “It’s like with bullies, just ignore them and they’ll go away.”

Hermione dropped her forehead onto the table.

The problem with trying to stick to Granger was that short of camping out on her doorstep or ambushing her at the Ministry, Draco didn’t have any way to see her. He quickly decided against dropping in on her at work—he truly couldn’t imagine anything more awkward. He also ruled out waiting in front of her house. He may be a creep, but he was not a stalker. She probably took the Floo to work, anyway.

By the time Friday night drinks rolled around, he was jittery with anticipation. He had a plan. He would follow her request to pretend that he liked her and simply ignore the *just this once* part based on Pansy’s intel. So, really, he would just be pretending to be himself. Well, himself but not when he’s pretending to *not* like her. So, just normal himself. But not the creepy, desperate version of himself. Definitely a cooler himself. Like a normal person. *God, I am so fucked.*

Things started off spectacularly badly when he was informed by Thomas that Granger was not only not there yet, but in fact, would not be attending Friday drinks at all.

“What do you mean she’s not here?” Draco gaped at him as he pulled off his jacket in the front hall.

“I mean, she couldn’t make it tonight,” Thomas said lightly, turning toward the kitchen.

“Why not? What’s wrong with her?” Draco went on, following after him.

“Nothing?” Thomas said, giving him an odd look over his shoulder. “I expect she’s just busy.”

Draco scoffed. “Do you really think so?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought.” Thomas’s brow creased in confusion as he stopped in the doorway. “We could always call her and find out?”

Draco blinked at him.

“If you want,” Thomas went on, gesturing to a plastic device on the counter. Draco stared at it.

“Okay.”

Thomas picked up half of the device and began pressing buttons. Shannon entered the kitchen and handed Draco a beer. He took a swallow as Thomas raised the top of the device to his ear.

“Who are you calling?” Shannon asked him.

“Hermione.”

“Oh,” she said, looking back and forth between them in confusion.

“Hi, Hermione?” Thomas said into the device after a moment. “Yeah, hi, it’s Thomas. How are you?”

He paused, and Draco assumed he must be listening to Granger speak. Draco took another sip while he waited.

“Great, so listen, I’ve got Draco here, and he wants to know what’s wrong with you.”

Draco choked on his beer. He really could fucking kill him.

Thomas laughed heartily at something Granger said as Shannon clapped Draco on the back. Thomas pulled the device away from his mouth and spoke to Draco.

“She says, ‘how much time does he have?’”

Draco couldn’t help smirking at her cheeky response. Merlin, he liked this witch.

“Oh, now she’s asking what’s wrong with you, Draco. She says ‘other than being a—’” Thomas paused again. “Oi, I’m not saying that! You’ve never seen his right hook.”

Draco glared at the device as Thomas paused to listen again.

“She says hers is probably better.”

Draco huffed a laugh, rubbing a hand gingerly over his nose.

“She wants to talk to you,” Thomas said, holding the device out to Draco.

He stared at it. He was so shocked by the prospect of communicating through this strange technology, he didn’t even have a chance to worry about the fact that he’d be speaking to Granger.

Thomas wiggled it at him, and Draco took it cautiously, paying careful attention to which side was the top.

He held the device to his ear and mouth as Thomas had done.

“Hello?” he asked into it.

“Hello, Malfoy.” A tinny imitation of Granger’s voice spoke into his ear, and he nearly dropped the device. He hadn’t known what to expect, but it felt quite strange, almost as if she was in his mind.

“Hello, Granger.”

“First phone call?” she asked.

He cast a glance at Thomas and Shannon who were watching eagerly. “Erm, if that is indeed what is happening, then yes.”

“They can’t hear me,” she said, doing nothing to dispel the notion that she was inside his head.

“Okay.”

“So, you wanted to know what’s wrong with me?”

He cringed slightly. “I simply asked after you. Why you weren’t here.”

“Oh,” she said, sounding a little flustered. He heard a rustle from her end and imagined her pushing her hair back over her shoulder. “Well, I’m just a bit busy is all. Busy with work.”

“Oh, I see,” he said. He looked up as Janelle entered the kitchen and the other two went to greet her. He lowered his voice a bit. “I just—erm, well, I thought I might see you tonight.”

Granger was silent on the other end, and he worried he might have been too quiet. Then, she spoke.

“Would you like that?”

A shiver ran down his spine at her tone. He wondered if he would ever be able to hear the word *like* again without blood rushing to his cock.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

A pause.

“Okay.”

He swallowed thickly. *Okay*. What did that mean?

“Do you want to come over here?” she asked in the same sultry tone. Sweet Merlin, he was about to pitch a tent right there in the kitchen.

“Yes,” he said again.

“Okay, how about... ten o’clock?”

He glanced at his watch: 8:28 PM.

“Sooner,” he said roughly.

He heard her breathe a laugh into the phone. “Okay, nine?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

“Goodbye, Granger.”

Draco set the phone down on the counter and drained the rest of the beer. At the sound of the empty bottle clunking on the counter, the others turned to look at him.

“Frightfully sorry, but something’s actually come up.” He cringed internally at the unintended pun. “I’ll just, erm, be going, then.”

He brushed a kiss across Shannon’s cheek and clapped Thomas on the shoulder.

“Thanks for the drink.”

“No problem,” Thomas called after him as he grabbed his jacket and vaulted down the front steps.

Janelle eyed the other two after the front door slammed shut. “Do you think there’s any way he thinks that was subtle?”

“About as subtle as the two of them swallowing each other’s faces last week,” Thomas said with a wry grin.

“Honestly, it’s about time,” Shannon said.

“Amen to that,” Janelle added.

They clinked their bottles together and drank to their idiot friends.

Hermione straightened the throw pillows on the sofa for the fourth time. What had she been thinking, agreeing to Malfoy coming over with only thirty-two minutes to prepare? Thankfully, she had just gotten out of the shower when Thomas called. And it had only taken half the time to do her hair and makeup. And her anxiety over the events of last weekend had led to several insomnia-fueled all-night cleaning sessions during the week, so the house was actually neater than it had been in weeks. But mentally, thirty-two minutes was really just not enough time.

Should she offer tea? Or wine maybe? Would offering alcohol imply sex? She scoffed. Surely, neither of them was under any illusion that this meeting would be for any other reason than sex... Right? She looked down at her tight, long-sleeved black lace top. It wasn’t exactly sheer, but the outline of her bra was clearly visible through the open-knit fabric.

What if he didn’t want sex? What if he just wanted to talk about what happened? What if he wanted to talk so he could tell her it couldn’t happen again?

He might not even want sex, and she was practically wearing lingerie! She glanced at the clock: 8:54 PM. *Fuckfuckfuck*. Not enough time to change. Enough time to put the kettle on though.

She started into the kitchen. Yes, she’d offer tea. That would be nice and unassuming and give the impression that she didn’t want sex. She stopped in front of the sink, kettle suspended in her hand. Wait, she *did* want sex though. Why was she trying not to give that impression? If that was why he was coming over, she certainly didn’t want to talk him out of it.

She set the empty kettle down. Okay, she would try to get a read on the situation and only offer tea if it seemed like he just wanted to talk. Maybe she should go ahead and fill the kettle, just so that—

A knock came from the front door.

Shit!

Hermione was struck by a sudden and ridiculous urge to hide and pretend she wasn't home. She set the kettle back down and walked to the door. She could do this. She could be calm. And collected. And cool. And sexy.

She opened the door. Malfoy stood on the doorstep wearing his signature black on black on black ensemble, and all rational thoughts vanished from her brain.

"Good evening, Granger."

"Tea?" she blurted. *Oh, Jesus fucking Christ, Hermione, you've got to be joking.* She cleared her throat, already feeling her cheeks burn. "I mean, hi."

He blinked at her.

"I mean, please come in," she said, stepping aside for him to pass. She took an extra moment to steel herself as she closed the door behind him. He slid off his suit jacket and hung it on a peg.

When she turned back to face him, she was surprised when he stepped forward and pulled her into a tight hug. One of his hands was slung low on her waist, and the other slid under her hair to cup the back of her neck. He drew back slightly and pressed a kiss to her cheek. Her legs turned to jelly underneath her.

She'd seen him greet Shannon and Janelle with a hug or a kiss, but he'd never done the same with her—even after they'd officially become friends. She had always chalked it up to an unwillingness to touch her, and even though that had gone out the window last week, the greeting was still unexpected.

"You look nice," he said softly when they broke apart. She enjoyed the way his eyes lingered on the delicate fabric over her chest.

"Thank you," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "So do you."

They exchanged rather shy smiles before she said, "Can I get you anything?"

"Like tea?" he asked, eyes glittering playfully.

Of course there was no way he hadn't noticed her gaffe. "If you prefer," she said haughtily.

"No, thank you," he said, now grinning openly.

She rolled her eyes and walked over to drop onto the sofa. "Well, you just let me know, then."

He joined her on the sofa, and she turned to face him, drawing her feet up and leaning one arm along the back of the cushions.

"I like your house," he said after a moment.

A wave of heat washed over her and settled below her stomach as his words echoed the way they'd spoken that night.

She must have made some sound because he looked over at her. She didn't know if he'd used that phrasing intentionally, but she thought there was some heat behind his gaze.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"You live here alone?" he asked, looking around.

"Yes," she answered. She almost added that it had been her parents' house, but she really didn't want to get into that conversation.

"You grew up here?" he asked, clearly intimating what she hadn't said.

"Yes."

"Is your bedroom now the same one? From when you were at school?"

"Yes," she said again.

He nodded slowly. "It's different than I imagined."

She stared at him. When had he thought of what her bedroom might be like?

"What did you imagine?" she asked a little shakily.

"More books."

She nearly groaned aloud. Of course, Hermione Granger, supreme swot and veritable beacon of sex appeal. She didn't dare admit that most of her books were actually in the study.

"And scarlet sheets," he added.

She quirked a brow. Now that was more like it. "Oh?"

"There weren't any Gryffindor colours at all."

"Am I to believe that your room is decked out in emerald, then?"

He smiled. "Well, if it was, it would be because emerald is actually an appealing colour."

Privately she agreed and couldn't help wondering if he did sleep in emerald sheets. Silk, undoubtedly. Would she ever get to see them?

She gave a dismissive shrug. "I slept in scarlet sheets for seven years."

"Six," he corrected.

Her eyes snapped to his as the *déjà vu* struck her.

"Right," she said. "Six."

They looked at each other. Hermione leaned her head onto the arm draped along the sofa. He seemed so relaxed. That must be a good sign. If he had come there to deliver bad news, surely he wouldn't be bothering with the small talk.

As a rule, however, Hermione hated small talk. She was much more interested in big talk. Exciting talk. And if that led into dirty talk, then, hey, she wasn't going to complain.

"Why did you want to see me tonight?"

He looked mildly annoyed. "Really, Granger? I hadn't seen you all week."

She gave a sympathetic little whimper. "Aw, were you missing me, Malfoy?"

The look of annoyance deepened. "Don't push me, Granger."

She extended one leg and literally pushed against his thigh with her foot, raising her brows in a clear challenge.

He moved faster than she ever could have predicted. In one motion, he clamped his hand around her ankle and yanked her down the cushions until she was flat on her back. She barely had time to emit a yelp of surprise before his weight pinned her down. He hovered over her for a moment and then reached up to trail one finger slowly along the edge of her jaw.

"I did warn you," he said with a smirk.

She shifted, drawing one knee up alongside him, and licked her lips as his eyes darkened with her movement under him.

"Yes," she said, tilting her chin up into his touch. "You did."

Their lips met in a kiss that Hermione felt down to her toes. The heat of his mouth burned away every second of doubt she'd had in the 132 hours since she'd woken up alone.

She brought both hands up to cup his face and pulled back slightly. She murmured against his lips, "Erm, when I said 'just once'—"

"Granger," he cut her off abruptly. "Please shut the fuck up."

"Okay," she sighed as he caught her lips again. She kept her hands on his face, loving the way his jaw moved under her fingers.

They kissed like their mouths were made for each other. Every shift of their lips and every press of their tongues sent frissons of pleasure through her body. As he opened even wider and pressed her head back into the cushions with the force of his kiss, Hermione marvelled at how this simple act could feel so profoundly good.

He was so heavy on top of her, but she relished every ounce of the weight. The way it compressed her lungs, keeping her slightly breathless, was thrilling. Even with him flush against her, she writhed beneath him, desperate to be closer.

She stretched her thumb to swipe along his bottom lip, and the feeling of her finger pressed between their mouths was incredibly arousing. His tongue swept roughly over the pad of it, and her cunt clenched in anticipation.

One of his hands was moving up along the side of her body. She arched in response as his fingers spread over her ribs. He took the invitation to slip the hand up under her top, and she felt a rush of wetness between her legs. There was something delightfully naughty about being touched under her clothes.

She moaned into his mouth as his hand slid under the cup of her bra. She moved her hands over his shoulders and paused to savour the hardness of the muscles in the arm supporting his weight. He flexed under her hand as he made more room between them to touch her. She tugged at the back of his shirt, untucking it and shoving her hands beneath it, up onto his back. It was like plunging her arms into a tub of hot water. She could hardly believe the heat of him.

Her breathing was growing heavy, but she felt like she could stay like this forever—pressed together, kissing with their hands under each other's clothes. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this thoroughly snogged. It was bliss.

His fingertips teased over her nipple, and she pushed upward, feeling it harden against his palm. All thoughts of simply staying like this evaporated as she felt him hard against her hip. She pushed up again and he groaned into her lips as she ground herself against him. He caught her bottom lip between his teeth, and she sucked in a sharp breath. She raked her hands through his hair, clutching desperately as she shifted her hips to press his hardness against her center.

They both broke the kiss in a gasp, and she was relieved when he dropped his head to her neck. She kept her fingers carded in his hair, drawing in deep breaths as he moved lower. His kisses were filthy: slow, wet, and sucking. He planted them all along her neck, shameless to the trails of saliva they must be leaving behind. He pulled a long, low moan out of her when he flattened his tongue against her collarbone and dragged a slow lick up the entire column of her throat. He finished it with a flick over her pulse point, and she shuddered as if it had hit her clit.

He sat back and brought his hands to the button of her jeans. He looked up at her. She nodded, lifting her hips as he made quick work of sliding them off. She grabbed the hem of her shirt and began to lift, but he stopped her.

“Leave it on.”

His words and his tone sent another jolt through her cunt. *Fuck, he's good at this.*

Her eyes widened as he slid backwards off the sofa to kneel next to it. He shifted her hips until she was lined up in front of him, and he leaned forward, sliding his hands up the insides of her legs.

“Can I kiss you here?” he asked, leaning his cheek against her inner thigh.

“Yes,” she said, her breath leaving her in a moan as he closed his mouth over her, knickers and all.

“Oh, fuck,” she gasped, as he moved the delicate fabric over her with his tongue. He breathed heavily onto her as his lips found her swollen clit. The knickers must have been trapping the warmth in some way because she felt impossibly hot under his mouth. The heat and the pressure without the wetness of his tongue was driving her mad.

She whined with pleasure as he moved his tongue lower and slid the tip beneath the edge of the fabric. Her hips lifted reflexively at the sensation of him grazing her slit.

“Off?” he asked, hooking his thumbs under her waistband.

“Yes,” she panted, and he drew them down.

She knew what was coming. He’d just had his tongue on her. She should have been ready, but the feeling of his mouth clamping down on her now exposed cunt was unbelievably intense after the separation of the fabric. She nearly screamed as his tongue delved into her. He slid his hands back up under her top, and she arched her back, quickly unclasping her bra but leaving it in place.

He hummed in approval as his fingers moved freely over her breasts. The sight of him teasing her nipples under her shirt and going down on her while he was still in that *fucking* black tie was so *goddamn* hot she felt like her brain was at risk of melting.

He kissed her clit like he kissed her mouth: slow and open. Each one punctuated by the suck of his lips and the press of his tongue. Hermione vaguely wondered if she should be embarrassed by the fact that she was about to come in under a minute.

That thought was promptly obliterated by the sensation of him sliding in a finger and curving it against her front wall.

“Oh, god, like that,” she said, clasping her hand to the back of his head. She remembered suddenly that he hadn’t let her come like this last time.

“Please, don’t stop,” she begged, completely certain that she would actually die if he did.

He moved his finger in response, sliding it in a matching rhythm with his mouth on her clit. Her hips rocked instinctively as the tell-tale tingle spread through her chest. She felt a sudden surge of hysterical excitement—she was about to have the best orgasm of her life.

She dropped her free hand over his where it was still busy under her shirt. She closed her eyes and leaned into the sensations. Each brush of her nipples, each suck of his lips, each press of his fingers. They worked together like instruments in an orchestra, and she could practically count down the strokes to the crescendo.

She cried out as waves of ecstasy rolled through her. She pressed her clit up into his mouth with a sinful sway of her hips, indulging in a ten-course meal’s worth of luxuriant pleasure.

Her cries became interspersed with contented hums as he slowed, and she smiled lazily at the thought that he'd felt every pulse on his fingers.

Her head lolled to the side, and she watched as he withdrew, licking his lips and fingers clean with indecent enthusiasm. When he finished, he got to his feet. He seemed impossibly tall standing over her like that. Hermione knew she should probably sit up, but she felt boneless.

When she only moved her eyes to follow him, he smirked. "Is that all you've got in you, Granger?"

"No," she said a little weakly, still holding his gaze. "Just... can't move... yet."

"Very well," he said, reaching up to loosen his tie. "I'll just have to get started without you."

She gave a contented sigh as he pulled one end of the tie through the knot. He tossed it aside without breaking their eye contact. His eyes burned into her as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt, and she feasted her eyes on every inch of bare skin that he revealed. She felt a stirring below her navel again as he slowly dragged his fingers across the top of his chest, pulling the open shirt off his shoulders.

He held her gaze as he reached down to unfasten his belt, and the sound of his zipper lowering made her mouth water. She licked her lips instinctively, and his smirk deepened.

"Something you want, Granger?" he asked, his voice low and rough with arousal.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Every ounce of her concentration was spent on taking in the sight of Draco Malfoy stripping for her in her living room.

He lowered his trousers and boxers in one, stepping out of them to stand in front of her again. He took himself in hand and stroked slowly, still watching her face.

Her mouth opened as she watched the muscles of his arm and chest ripple with the movement, and she felt herself growing wetter with every stroke. The constant thrum of arousal through her was like a low burn in her cunt.

She let her eyes trail shamelessly over every feature of him that she hadn't properly appreciated during their first time. They caught on the stark definition of the muscle where his knee transitioned into his thigh. She had never before considered herself a *knee person*, but the sight of the v-shaped indent made her slightly lightheaded. Her fingers twitched with the urge to touch it. He gave a small grunt of pleasure, and suddenly, she could move.

She sat up and reached forward, running her fingers up the sides of his thighs. There was hair on his legs. But of course there was. *Why shouldn't there be?* she mused to herself. In all of her fantasies, however, that was a detail her brain had missed. It was just another aspect confirming that this was really happening.

Her hands reached the flesh of his arse, bringing his cock nearly level with her face.

"Can I kiss you here?" she repeated back to him, letting her breath ghost over his head.

He nodded, and she opened wide to take him in. She pulled him forward gently, sliding him over her tongue until her lips met his hand. He made a highly gratifying sound as she closed her mouth and sucked hard. She pulled back and slid him in again, pressing as tight as she could with her lips. He fisted a hand in her hair and thrust hard into her mouth. It must have been involuntary because he quickly tried to withdraw, but she tightened her grip and pulled him forward, matching the rhythm he'd set.

"Fuck," he groaned, as she found his hand and placed it back on her head. He dug his fingers in, massaging over her scalp, and she moaned around him. Her sound seemed to open the flood gates because praise began spilling from his lips.

"Oh, fuck, you're so good at that."

"You're such a good girl."

"You look so good sucking my cock."

Hermione moaned with pleasure at every declaration, and her noises only continued to spur him on.

"You're such a good girl for me."

"Such a pretty mouth."

"You're so perfect on my cock."

Every word sent a twinge of desire through her, and she could feel the leather of the sofa growing slick beneath her. She spread her legs and slid against it, desperate for friction, but she cringed when it made a horrible squelching sound.

Malfoy let out a moan of disbelief at the noise and pulled himself out of her mouth. He dropped onto the sofa beside her and lifted her unceremoniously by the waist until she was kneeling over him backwards. He stripped off her top, and the bra went with it.

"Need to fuck that wet cunt," he said into the skin between her shoulder blades.

"Please," she said, her legs shaking with need.

"The charm?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes, before you got here," she said in a rush.

"Oh, fuck," he muttered with his forehead against her back.

He pulled her back by the hips, and they both groaned as she slid down over him. She couldn't support her weight. Her legs were useless underneath her as her next orgasm built already. He drove relentlessly up into her, his hands occasionally leaving her hips to skate over her breasts or brush over her clit. She arched back until her head was next to his, and he murmured his praise directly into her ear. The phrases became fractured as his pace increased.

“—feel so good—”

“—perfect cunt—”

“—come so good for me—”

Both of his hands came up to pinch her nipples, and she cried out as he thrust his tongue into her ear.

“You like that?” he asked, hands going back to her hips. She could only whine in assent.
“Such a naughty girl.”

She was dizzy with pleasure. Every second, every touch—it wound tighter within her until she felt completely out of control.

“You want to come?” he asked, panting with the force of his thrusting.

“Yes, please, yes, yes,” she begged, her hands reaching up to grab the back of his head.

“I know what you need,” he whispered, mouth against her neck. She quivered as he dropped a hand to her clit. His fingers pressed it tight back against his moving cock.

“Oh, fuck, ye—” She almost got it out before he opened his mouth and bit down. She exploded with the force of her orgasm. She might have screamed—probably did—but she couldn’t be sure because she definitely blacked out for a second.

“Fuck, you come so hard for me.”

Suddenly, he was tilting her forward, and her hands were slamming onto the coffee table. A decorative bowl crashed to the floor. He was standing behind her now, pulling her back onto him again and again.

She felt his thumbs press down on either side at the base of her spine. “Fuck, I like these dimples.”

She barely had time to smile before he cried out, and she felt the throb of him coming inside her.

He worked her back onto him a few more times, slowly winding down. When he reached forward and belted an arm under her chest, she realised her toes had barely been skimming the carpet. He slid out of her and pulled her with him as he sat, settling her sideways on his lap. She leaned her shoulder into his chest, feeling his heart thundering beneath his ribs.

“Oh, erm,” she started awkwardly as she felt his come sliding out onto his leg. He gave her a questioning look.

“Your, erm...” she trailed off, but he seemed to feel what she was referencing when she shifted on top of him.

He glanced down and licked his lips. He tilted her gently so that she fell backwards onto the cushions again, and then he pushed her knees toward her chest, eyes locked between her legs. He stared for so long she felt her cheeks start to flush.

She let out a little gasp as she felt him slide a finger back into her. He smirked as she clenched reflexively around it.

He drew the finger out and leaned over, offering it to her. She sat up and took it into her mouth, keeping her eyes on his as she licked it clean. He hummed in approval, and she leaned back against the arm of the sofa.

He bent forward then and grabbed his wand out of his trousers. He cleaned them both and the sofa in a second.

After dropping his wand onto the table, he let his head drop against the back of the cushions. Hermione gazed at the rapid rise and fall of his chest, the pink flush staining his neck, and the hair sticking slightly to his forehead. Suddenly, she realised that they'd ended up back in the same positions they had started in.

She extended her leg and prodded him with her toes again. "So, *why* did you want to see me tonight?" she asked with a smirk.

He laughed and let his head fall to the side so he was looking at her. "If that's your way of asking for round two, I'm going to need a minute."

She laughed, too. "Hardly. Satisfied doesn't even begin to cover it."

He adopted a disgustingly smug expression.

"Oh, shut it," she said, rolling her eyes before he could speak.

She stretched like a cat, enjoying the body high that only fantastic sex could bring. "What should we do, then?" she asked him after a moment.

He left the smug expression firmly in place. "I could do with some tea."

Draco smirked as Granger flashed him her mildly annoyed expression. If she thought he wasn't going to remind her of her slip up on the doorstep at every possible occasion, she was sorely mistaken.

She'd opened the door and clearly blurted the first thing that came to her mind. Draco was sympathetic, of course—he'd felt like a bumbling idiot on the entire walk over. But he was also a bit of a prick, and the look of horror on her face as her mouth betrayed her so violently

was truly priceless. The fact that she was clearly as nervous as he was had settled him at once.

He watched from his position on the sofa as she got up to satisfy his request for tea. She picked up her wand off the coffee table and Transfigured her black top into a short dressing gown. The open, lacey fabric shifted over her arse as she padded into the kitchen, and Draco thought that it probably would have been less arousing if she'd just stayed naked.

He pulled his boxer briefs back on and considered his shirt. Granger didn't seem fussed with getting dressed, and if any spontaneous opportunities for touching her arose, he didn't want any extra fabric in the way. He folded it along with his trousers and piled them neatly with his belt and tie on the coffee table.

Using his wand, he Summoned the contents of the bowl they'd knocked over. He inspected it carefully and was surprised to find that it seemed to be a mixture of detritus from a forest floor: small pinecones, leaves, seedpods, and even bits of wood. He brought it closer to his nose and, indeed, it gave off the unmistakable fresh scent of a woodland. He wondered briefly if they were potion ingredients, but dismissed that thought quickly. Surely Granger would find the idea of keeping her potion stores in a mixed-up jumble as distasteful as he did. She probably kept hers in tidy matching containers, neatly labelled with the contents and date of purchase or harvest. His cock gave a tiny wiggle at the thought, and he hurriedly set the bowl down. *Well, we all have our kinks.*

He got up and headed toward the kitchen. He paused in the doorway as he was treated to the sight of Granger running the top of one foot up and down the back of her other calf. His eyes roved over her legs, and he sent up a prayer to every deity listening that she might one day wear the tiny shorts for him.

He realised she hadn't noticed him yet, and he tilted his head as he studied her expression. It was dreamy and contented and... something else, something he couldn't place.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

She jumped a little and turned to face him. He saw that she'd been running her fingers over the spot on her neck where he'd bitten her.

She blushed slightly. "I was thinking that you're a fast learner," she said, tapping lightly on the mark.

Impressed. That was what he hadn't recognised. She'd been daydreaming about the sex, and she was impressed with his performance. Between that and her 'satisfied' comment, he was running the risk of not being able to fit his giant head through the door.

"You weren't the only one with high marks," he said with a sly smile.

He was saved from any potential retort by the whistle of the kettle, and she turned to finish preparing the tea service.

Draco liked watching the seamless way she combined magical and Muggle elements as she moved around the kitchen. Her wand was busy in her right hand, Summoning and Levitating items with little swishes and flicks, while her left hand moved deftly over the various buttons and knobs of the appliances. The routine was effortless, as if she'd been doing it for years. Which, *obviously*, he thought scathingly to himself, she had.

He'd only been living full-time in his Muggle flat for a few months. He'd gotten the place when he'd become close with Thomas and Shannon—there was no way he could explain commuting to Wiltshire every day. The more he stayed there, however, the more he realised what a relief it was to be out of the Manor. He loved his mother, and living with her (and a full staff of house elves) did have its perks, but after Voldemort had taken up residence there, Draco didn't think anything could make it feel like home again. For him, home was about comfort and safety, and those were the last things he associated with the Manor now. He'd been tortured there, Marked there, permanently disfigured there. He saw a flash of the marred skin on Granger's inner arm as she reached for a plate. So had she.

He'd noticed that she kept the scar partially Glamoured. He suspected that the same curse that kept it from healing fully also kept it from being fully concealed. Her charm blurred the lines of the cuts until the entire patch could be mistaken for the result of a bad scrape or even a burn.

Anger coursed through him as it always did when he thought of what happened to her. He clenched his fists until his knuckles popped as Bellatrix's manic face swam in front of his eyes. *That fucking bitch.* All those lives she took. All those lives she ruined. She'd held a knife to Granger's throat and—*Draco, save me.*

A small ding from the toaster oven interrupted his spiral. He drew a deep breath in through his nose and slowly uncurled his fingers. What was he doing? Granger was not ruined, was not dead. She was right there in front of him, preparing their after-sex tea. He should be basking in the moment and the fact that she thought enough of him to trouble with warming the cakes.

His thoughts came full circle as he remembered his first time attempting to use the toaster oven in his flat. He'd been distracted for only a moment when sudden, earsplitting shrieks rang out through the space. He had turned to see smoke billowing out of the appliance as his toast burned to cinders. He'd quickly siphoned off the smoke with his wand and thrown open all the windows, but he couldn't figure out a way to stop the shrieking. He had settled for casting a silencing charm over the whole flat to spare the neighbours and simply waiting for it to stop.

He'd improved somewhat as he gradually transitioned to living in a Muggle space, but he doubted he would ever have the effortlessness that Granger exuded. She was remarkable, the best of both worlds.

She turned with the tea tray and smiled when she found him watching her.

"Ready?" she asked.

He nodded and followed her back into the living room. They resumed their respective positions on the sofa and set to preparing their tea.

Draco buttered a tender little cake and tried to wrap his mind around the fact that he was having tea at ten o'clock at night in Granger's house in his underwear on the sofa they'd just fucked on. He needed to send Pansy a fruit basket. Granger drew her knees up onto the sofa, and he caught a glimpse of her bare cunt. Maybe he'd send a whole orchard.

They sipped and ate quietly for a few minutes before Draco's eyes fell back on the bowl of leaf litter.

"Granger, what exactly is that?"

She followed his gaze. "It's potpourri."

"Putrid pot?" he asked, brow creasing in confusion at the translation.

She shrugged. "I guess the meaning has changed a bit over time."

He nodded slowly. "And what is its purpose?"

"It just smells nice," she said, smiling at him over her teacup. "And it's sort of aesthetically pleasing. Woodsy."

He made a small noise of acknowledgement. So it was.

As Draco finished the last of the tea, he realised they had reached a crossroads in the proceedings. She'd offered refreshment, and enough time had passed that it wouldn't seem like she was throwing him out immediately after shagging him. Surely this was the point in the night where he should be getting dressed and taking his leave.

But he didn't want to leave. He thought back to the feeling of waking up with her sleeping soundly on his chest. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so well-rested.

But this was different. She hadn't invited him to stay that night, they had both just passed out. Now they were sitting calmly on the sofa, completely sober and completely awake. He had no idea how to instigate going up to her bedroom.

He cast around for something to say, feeling that she was liable to fill the silence by asking him to leave.

"What would you be doing right now if I wasn't here?"

He was surprised when she looked annoyed and rolled her eyes slightly. Was that an offensive question?

"Reading, probably," she said dryly. "Shocking, I know."

He smiled. "Me too."

She seemed to soften a bit at that.

“Do you always read before bed?” he asked.

“Usually.”

“In bed?” he ventured.

“Usually,” she repeated after a slightly longer pause.

“Me too,” he said again.

Well, there it was. That was the best bait he could lay out for her. Despite Pansy’s instructions to stick to Granger—and his intense desire to do just that—he would not stoop to inviting himself into her bed.

He waited as she looked at him and then around the room. Her eyes landed on the mantle where a clock was ticking quietly.

“I was actually thinking of doing that soon...” she said.

He gave a small nod.

“If you’re... ready to...”

Leave, he finished in his head. That was fine. He would leave. Tonight had gone better than he ever could have expected. Maybe he’d stay next time.

But what if there wasn’t a next time?

“Of course, you’re welcome to stay if you’d like.”

He was so busy being devastated at the thought of not having a next time, he almost missed the invitation.

“It is rather late,” she went on, “not sure... how far you have...”

He tuned back in just in time to hear her trail off with the realisation that, of course, he would just Apparate wherever he needed to go. It being too late to travel was an extremely flimsy excuse.

He’d take it.

“Yes, that would be lovely,” he said brightly. “If you don’t mind, of course.”

“Not at all!” she said at once, and he felt his heart swell at her eagerness.

She quickly tempered her tone. “I mean, of course, it’s no trouble.”

He slid along the sofa until he could easily draw her onto his lap. He threaded both hands into her hair and kissed her soundly. When he pulled back, her eyes stayed closed for a few extra

seconds as though she was dazed. He kept his face close to hers so their noses brushed as he spoke.

"Well, Granger, I suppose there's only one thing left to do."

She opened her eyes and whispered back to him. "What's that?"

"It's time to show me your books."

Hermione kept having the urge to pinch herself. Having sex with Malfoy was one thing. Having sex with Malfoy twice was another. Laying tucked against Malfoy's side with her head on his chest while they both read in her bed was something else entirely.

She'd left the realm of fantasy and was now stumbling dazedly through the land of *never in my wildest dreams*. She was off the map, officially in uncharted territory.

He made a soft huffing sound into the top of her head, and she strained her eyes sideways to see what part he was reading. The angle of the page was just out of her sight.

She tried not to read into the fact that *The Winter's Tale* had been the first book out of hundreds that he'd pulled off the shelf when they entered the study. She didn't believe in fate or signs or things of that nature. She actively ignored her inner voice reminding her that once she hadn't believed in magic either.

She tried and *failed* not to read into the fact that when she'd told him that she was named for a character in that story, Malfoy had tucked the book under his arm and refused to look at anything else. She'd offered that if he was interested in Shakespeare, it really wasn't one of his best plays. Really not even in the top five. She'd suggested that, in her opinion, *Much Ado About Nothing* was by far his funniest play, with particularly Malfoy-esque humor to boot. He'd simply said 'maybe next time.'

She tried not to read into those words, too.

He made another small sound, and she bit back a laugh at the thought that maybe she should have clarified that the character in question would be named *Hermione* and not *Granger*.

It was so odd that he was lying there next to her, reading her name over and over, while she'd never even heard him say it once.

She turned her attention back to her own book and let his words turn over in her mind.

Maybe next time.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

From Bad to Worse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The faint edge of very early morning light filtered through Draco's lashes as he woke. He made to roll over but froze when his leg encountered soft skin. He turned his head instead, and a grin broke over his face as he took in the sight before him.

Granger was sprawled in the bed next to him. Her hair was everywhere—spread so thickly around her head that he almost couldn't tell whether she was facing him or not. The only clue was a patch of strands fluttering gently with her sleep-heavy breaths. She was on her stomach, one knee pulled up tight to her chest, and the covers were kicked halfway down her other leg.

He lifted himself up on one elbow to better survey the scene. She'd put on a matching set of silky pyjamas last night: a camisole and shorts in a pale pink. The shorts were small... but loose and not truly tiny. Still, the curve of her arse where her leg was hiked up...

He cut off that line of thinking abruptly. He really needed to piss and his usual morning wood was going to make that difficult enough without any extra provocation from Granger's curves. He laid back down on the pillow, taking a few more minutes to enjoy the view in case she woke when he got up.

She'd dozed off with her book on her chest the night before, and he'd read for almost another hour listening to her soft, steady breathing. When he felt drowsy himself, he'd set both of their books aside and arranged her more comfortably.

Just like the first night, she slept incredibly soundly and hardly stirred as he moved her. He didn't move her *that* much, of course. Okay, he may have pulled one of her arms over his chest. And he might have shifted her head so that it was a little more on top of him. He supposed at one point that he might have draped one of her legs over his, but really nothing other than that.

He wouldn't deny spending several minutes stroking his hand over her hair, though. He had definitely done that, and he would have gladly continued if he hadn't fallen asleep himself.

His bladder gave a painful twinge of protest, and he slid out of the bed as quietly as possible. Checking his watch on the nightstand, he noted that it was barely after six.

After using the toilet, he stood in front of the bathroom mirror and looked closely at his reflection. The hollow look that the war and Azkaban had left him with tended to fluctuate in intensity. He had noticed it when his father was sent to Azkaban the first time. That wasn't the first domino set up in the destruction of his family, but it was the first one to fall. Everything had stemmed from that failure: his "training" with Bellatrix, getting Marked, being tasked with killing Dumbledore. By the end of his sixth year, he'd hardly recognised his own face.

When the Trio was brought to the Manor during the spring of what should have been their seventh year, he'd wondered if he looked as different to them as they did to him. He'd recognised them immediately, of course—even Potter—but they all had the same look: haunted.

From what Granger had told him, he now understood some of the personal demons the three of them had been fighting, but at the time, he'd been much too concerned with the literal demon living in his house to consider anything past that fact that they were scared, desperate, and nearly hopeless. Just like him.

He wasn't really sure when the look had started to fade. It happened gradually after leaving Azkaban. Halfway through his first semester was when the change had started accelerating. He'd started spending time with Thomas and Shannon, he'd bought his flat, he'd worked out a tentative plan for his future.

Unfortunately, he also began the visits to his father around that time. Those brought out the look again. He spent the first week of every month with sallow skin and sunken eyes.

Recently though, there were days when he felt like he couldn't even see it anymore. He could remember how it looked overlaid onto his face, but he couldn't pick out the details in the mirror.

Today was one of those days. He'd fallen asleep with Granger's comforting weight on his chest, and, like last time, he'd woken up feeling like he was finally caught up on several years' worth of fitful, tortured sleep. With her, he could rest.

He quickly washed his hands and splashed some cold water onto his face. He needed to manage this. He could *not* get used to waking up with her. He was only one time past *just once*. There were no guarantees of next time.

He cast a cleaning charm over his mouth and rinsed out the strange aftertaste it always left behind. For now, he just needed to appreciate what he had. And what he had was a sleeping Granger.

But as he'd feared, the shifting of the mattress as he got back into the bed woke her up. She stretched slowly and brought a hand up to push the hair out of her face.

"Mm, good morning," she said with a sleepy smile when she saw him.

"Good morning," he said, reaching over and brushing back the pieces she'd missed.

"What time is it?" she asked through a yawn, closing her eyes again.

"It's early," he said softly. "Go back to sleep."

She scooted over to where he was laying on his side and cuddled up next to him. "Mmm," she hummed again, burrowing in. "So warm."

He smiled and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

He had expected her to doze back off, but she continued to snuggle against him. He felt her fingertips trace across the lines of his chest, down onto his stomach, and lightly over the rapidly hardening front of his boxers.

Clearing his throat, he said, “It’s the morning,” in half explanation, half apology.

“Mhmm,” she agreed, hooking a leg over his hip and pulling herself tight against him.

He groaned at the unexpected contact, now painfully hard.

She tilted her head back and looked up at him through sleep-heavy lids. “Yes?”

Concise though it was, her question left little room for misinterpretation. He reached back to where her leg was wrapped around him and ran his fingers lightly from the outside of her ankle up to the opening of the silky shorts, marvelling once more at where he’d ended up. Her eyes closed again on a sigh as gooseflesh rippled in the wake of his touch.

“Yes.”

He pulled the covers back up over them and closed his eyes, too, sinking into the blissful warmth and comfort.

Their hands roamed everywhere, slowly sliding and pressing and pulling over skin still hot and rumpled from sleep. She alternated smoothing her hands firmly over his back and dragging her nails up along his neck and onto his scalp. He shivered every time she raked through his hair, breathing heavy kisses across her neck and chest.

He slid his hand leisurely along her thigh, stopping frequently to squeeze and knead the flesh there. When he reached the curve of her arse, his hand slipped easily under the soft, loose fabric of her shorts. He squeezed hard, and she let out a soft grunt of pleasure against his ear. He decided on the spot to abandon the frivolous plans he’d made for his future and simply devote himself to a lifelong quest of discovering all the ways Granger liked her arse touched.

He felt her reach down between them, pushing at the top of his boxers, and he rolled out from under her leg and finished sliding them off. When she felt his fingers at her own waistband, she nodded without even opening her eyes, and he smiled as he drew it down. He dropped her bottoms quickly onto the floor before picking up his wand from the nightstand and casting the contraceptive charm with the tip against her stomach.

She murmured pleasantly as he laid back down next to her, sliding his flattened palm up under her top. There was something delightfully dirty about touching her under her clothes. He spread his fingers over her ribs and watched in rapture as her nipples hardened under the thin fabric.

The tip of his nose grazed her chest as he leaned over and ran his tongue firmly over each one. She gave a soft gasp and hitched her leg back over his hip, pressing her now-exposed cunt onto him. He moaned at the feel of her wet slit sliding against the head of his cock.

He wrapped his arms around her, bending the one she was laying on up so that he could grip the back of her shoulder. He brought the other hand to her hip.

She began to rock her hips gently against him, teasing herself over the tip of his cock. A warm vanilla haze surrounded him as he buried his face in her hair. His tongue came out to trace a delicate line behind her ear as though he could taste the flavour on her skin. She gave a quiet whine, and he strengthened his grip in both hands, pulling her down onto him.

The sensation of her sliding slowly over his cock forced his mouth open, and she groaned right alongside him as he pushed against her tightness. He could feel an alternating rhythm of *squeeze* and *relax* as she took him in, the echo of it rippling steadily up the length of his spine.

When he was fully seated within her, she drew her other leg up so that her bent knee was braced against his side. He grunted at the change in pressure and rolled his hips up into her, delighting in the way her fingers tightened as he bottomed out in the back of her cunt. She pulled with the leg still over his hip and he began to move, withdrawing more and pausing longer between every thrust.

It was the best of everything morning sex should be: slow and deep and unhurried. The pace was so drawn-out and the feeling so intense, Draco felt himself beginning to drift into a dreamlike trance. The whole world narrowed to the silk of her skin under his hands, the sound of her moans in his ears, the feel of her wet heat on his cock.

He felt her quiver, and she rolled onto her back, pulling him with her. She clasped her arms around him, holding him tight under the ribs, and he let his weight sink onto her, rubbing his lower abdomen against her clit. She drew her heels up against his arse and pulled him forward at the pace she wanted.

He didn't worry about holding himself back; he was so hard he'd have no problem finishing her even if he came first. He let his head rest next to hers, keeping his eyes closed and relaxing into her halo of soft curls.

Her nails dug into his back, and he rocked forward onto his elbows as the first tremors passed between them. He didn't know if they started from him or her, he just knew they were coming together.

They moaned into each other's shoulders as the pleasure rolled through them. He felt the tingle start at the ends of his limbs, surging toward his center and out through his cock until he was blissfully spent.

He kept up the same rhythm until she loosened her grip on his back. She let out a contented sigh, and he would have moved off of her, but her fingers began trailing over him from shoulder to hip, tracing gentle patterns as they lay joined together. He supposed that she wouldn't be doing such a thing if his weight was actively smothering her, which was a great relief because it felt entirely too good for him to move away. Gradually, however, he felt her hands grow still and then lax.

He slid out of her and rolled onto his side. Her breaths were slow and even, and her hair was back over her face. He reached up and carefully brushed it aside again, tucking as much as possible behind her ear. How this witch didn't suffocate every night, Merlin only knew.

He leaned over and kissed her gently. She stirred slightly, smiling with her eyes still closed. He whispered in her ear, and she smiled wider, humming in acknowledgement.

"I'll see you Friday?" she asked groggily as he got to his feet. He paused, looking down at her.

Friday drinks. He'd almost forgotten they didn't see each other outside of that. He stared down at her closed lids as he had the distressing thought that he'd have to ask her on a real date to see her before then.

He'd like nothing more than to take her on a date, of course, but what if that wasn't what she wanted? His teeth sunk into his lip as he remembered the agonising moments immediately after he'd asked if she would pretend to like him, too. Was she still pretending?

He quickly pushed that painful thought out of his mind. Regardless of what they were doing, the situation felt so tenuous right now, he was terrified that any and all attempts to corral it into an actual relationship might simply crush it out of existence. He had waited for years. He could wait for Friday.

He knelt on the bed and kissed her again.

"Of course."

Draco had barely had time to drop *The Winter's Tale* on the coffee table when green flames erupted in his hearth. His face contorted in confusion at the thought of any of the Slytherins Flooing over this early on a Saturday.

Confusion gave way to shock as Narcissa stepped out into his living room. He stared at her. She'd never visited his flat before.

Shock gave way to panic as her eyes roved over his dishevelled appearance—his mussed hair, his open shirt, the tie and belt he still held in his hands.

She raised her eyes to his face and quirked a brow.

"Well, it's good to see I shouldn't have worried."

"Worried?" he asked, quickly buttoning what was clearly last night's shirt.

“Indeed.” She cast her eyes to the window ledge where two letters lay outside the firmly closed panes. “Poor Arden was beside himself when he couldn’t get in to deliver them.”

Draco rubbed a hand over his eyes. This sort of overbearing behaviour was one of the side effects of having her only son inducted into a cult and sent on a suicide mission at sixteen.

“Mother, I’m sorry I missed your letters, but I was out with friends. You know we sometimes meet for drinks on Fridays.”

“Which is why I sent the second one early this morning.”

He felt a flush creeping up his neck. “Well, again, I’m sorry. I must not have heard Arden tapping.”

Narcissa had the grace not to laugh in his face, but the way her mouth quirked was the aristocratic equivalent.

“It seems you had quite the night with your friends.”

Draco was drawing himself up for a conversation he really didn’t want to have about him being an adult and living on his own and her minding her own business when her gaze fell on the book.

He lunged, but it zoomed into her outstretched hand before he’d taken two steps.

She opened it to where he’d marked with a bit of parchment, and he gulped as she found the name he knew was plastered all over the page.

When she looked up, her eyes were glittering with unrepentant glee.

“Now, Mother, I can explain,” he started, but she closed the book with a snap.

“Draco, darling, please do not insult my intelligence by attempting to insinuate that this is merely a coincidence of cataclysmic proportions.”

He heaved a sigh. “I’m not.”

“Good,” she said brightly, placing the book back on the table. “Because she’s lovely.”

“I—yes, I know.”

“So talented and ambitious. Beautiful and strong. So brave and *good*—”

“Yes, thank you,” Draco snapped through clenched teeth, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I am aware. We’re... friends.”

The word hung ridiculously in the air between them, and Draco was suddenly hit with the galling realisation that he probably smelled like vanilla.

“Darling,” Narcissa started in a painfully simpering tone that Draco associated with instances in which she thought he was being particularly dim-witted. “I know that you’ve harboured an affection for this young witch for a long time now.”

Draco looked up at the ceiling and sighed, but he didn’t bother denying it. If his friends had known, it was next to impossible that his mother hadn’t known, too.

“I suppose you even told me the other day,” she went on, allowing herself a tinkling little laugh that set Draco’s teeth on edge. “‘There’s no one *new*.’”

He did not enjoy being quoted, especially not when she was implying that he’d meant it as some sort of loophole.

“It wasn’t a technicality, Mother. I said that because, at the time, there was nothing between us.”

He blinked for a moment at her widening grin before the implication of what he’d just said hit him like a bludger.

“Oh, bugger,” he muttered as he scrubbed his hands over his face. “Well, there you have it,” he went on, throwing his hands up. “I guess there’s no use pretending that you haven’t caught me coming home at the crack of dawn, half undressed in last night’s clothes, carrying a Muggle book with her name *literally* written all over it. I had really hoped that we could both be mature about this, but I see now that that was too much to ask. Yes, there is something between us now, and no, it wasn’t really true that there was nothing bef—”

“Draco,” Narcissa cut in, raising a hand gently. “Please, go get dressed. We’re going to breakfast.”

Hermione woke up feeling like she’d slept for a week. Slept for a week in a cloud. Slept for a week in a cloud where she was gently caressed by delicate sunbeams until her entire body glowed with golden light.

She stretched luxuriantly, smoothing her hands over her skin and revelling in how *good* she felt. She indulged in a tiny squeal of delight as she remembered Malfoy leaning over and whispering the most erotic words she’d ever heard from the lips of a man.

I have to go, but you should sleep as long as you like.

Sweet Merlin, he was good at this. The sex, the cuddling, the reading in bed, the sex again, the telling her to sleep in. She had no idea what they were doing. Well, she knew what *she* was doing—being well and truly ruined for any other man. As for what he was doing...

No. That was for another time. She felt better than she had in months, and she was not going to waste it wondering or worrying or wishing. She would see him on Friday, and it would be great.

Her resolve lasted through a shower, breakfast, three episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and a load of laundry. When the timer on the drier buzzed, however, she cracked.

She ran to the hearth, sank onto her knees, and threw in some Floo powder. She called out for 12 Grimmauld Place, and a moment later, Harry's head appeared in the flames.

"Can I come over?" she yelled before he had a chance to speak.

"Yeah, of course. Is everything all right?"

"No!" she shouted dramatically and ducked out of the fire. She waited a moment for him to move out of the way and then stepped in.

Hermione flew out of the kitchen hearth in a swirl of ash and soot. Looking over the kitchen table, she realised she was interrupting their afternoon tea.

"I'm sorry," she said, brushing and patting at her clothes. "That was a bit much. I'm fine, really."

"Tea?" Ginny asked as though this was perfectly normal behaviour.

"Sure, thanks," Hermione said, settling into a chair and helping herself.

"So... what's up?" Harry asked when Hermione had taken her first sip.

"Oh, nothing much," she said airily. "Just felt like getting out for a bit."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look.

"Out?" Ginny asked.

"Mm," Hermione said. "Just a bit cooped up in the house is all."

"Huh," Harry said, taking a bite of scone. "Are you sure that nothing's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Hermione repeated, sounding manic even to her own ears. "No, no, nothing wrong."

"Okay," Harry went on tentatively. "Well, it's just that you seem to be—er, well—"

"The thing is," Ginny tried, "You're—erm..."

"You're actually crying a bit? I think?" Harry finally got out.

"Am I?" Hermione brushed her hands under her eyes and found that, indeed, they were very wet. She stared dazedly at her two friends. They watched her with an equal mixture of concern and apprehension, and the level of care in their expressions was too much to take.

She burst into tears.

“Hermione!” they said in unison, getting to their feet and coming to her sides.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped out between sobs. “I’m just... so... happy.”

“Happy?!” Harry repeated as though he’d never heard the word before.

She nodded fervently, tears spilling onto her sweatshirt. “The happiest.”

Ginny was rubbing a soothing hand across her shoulders, and Hermione knew the couple must be sharing a highly significant look over her head.

“We’re glad you’re so... happy, Hermione,” Ginny said gently. “Why don’t you try to calm down a bit and tell us what happened.”

Hermione took several hiccupping gulps of air and wiped furiously at her face with her napkin.

“Being so silly. Don’t know what’s got into me.”

“My money’s on Mystery Bloke,” Harry said under his breath, and Hermione lost it all over again.

She heard the satisfying thump of Ginny smacking him upside the head.

“He’s right,” Hermione said miserably, dropping her head into her hands.

The couple gradually ceased their soothing and returned to their seats as though satisfied that this was not truly a life or death situation. Seeing as they’d all actually faced a few (dozen) of those, she couldn’t blame them.

“So, I’m guessing you saw him?” Ginny asked when Hermione had regained some composure.

“Yes.”

“What happened to getting some space?” Harry asked without sounding too accusatory.

“I did. For a few days.”

“And then...” he prodded.

“And then he asked to see me.”

A look.

“Not that I’m a relationship expert or anything,” Harry started. “But couldn’t you have said no?”

Hermione levelled him with a look. “Yes, thank you, Harry, I could have, but I decided against Plan A at that point.”

“Plan A?” Ginny asked.

“Getting space,” Hermione explained.

“Right, and what was the problem with that plan?” Ginny went on.

Hermione sighed heavily. “I realised that I recently had quite an extended period of space from him, and I still wasn’t over it.” They didn’t need to know that that period had included a lengthy stint in Azkaban.

“So, what’s Plan B?” Harry asked.

Hermione shifted a little in her chair. “Erm, no space. Getting it out of my system.”

“So, the fun option,” Ginny put in, smirking behind her teacup.

“No! I—” Hermione cut herself off. What was the point? “Well, yes.”

“And it went well or...?” Harry asked, seemingly still confused by her tears.

“Very well,” Hermione said glumly.

Harry looked at Ginny for help. She rolled her eyes but patted his hand gently where it rested on the table.

“Hermione’s falling for him, and now that she’s had a taste of how good it could be, she’s devastated to think how it will be if he doesn’t feel the same.”

Understanding dawned behind Harry’s glasses, and he nodded gravely. Hermione could only mouth soundlessly at Ginny’s succinct synopsis of the situation.

Well, there you have it. She was falling for him. Like a stupid fucking idiot.

“What am I gonna do?” Hermione asked quietly.

Ginny looked at her for a moment and then set her cup down and leaned forward. “Last time we talked, when we asked why you thought he didn’t like you, you said something about evidence. You had all this evidence?”

Hermione nodded. “Years’ worth of evidence.”

“Right,” Ginny went on. “Well, have you kept track of the clues that he maybe does like you? Is there evidence for that?”

Hermione felt a rush of hope at Ginny’s words. There was. Earlier that morning, and last night and the week before that. They were filled with evidence. Everything he’d done and said since—

Her swelling heart popped like a balloon. Everything he'd done and said since she'd asked him to pretend. It was all either evidence that he actually liked her or evidence that he was a good fucking actor, and thanks to her stupid, desperate request, now she couldn't tell the difference.

"I'm not sure I can trust him," Hermione said miserably. Harry stiffened visibly at her words.

"No, I mean—I do trust him, Harry, I'm perfectly safe." She paused for a moment as that realisation sunk in. She did trust Malfoy. She felt safe with him. Was that evidence?

"I should have said I'm not sure I can trust my perception of him. At least, not since we slept together," she explained.

"Okay, well what about before that?" Ginny asked, watching her carefully.

Before that? The last time she'd seen him before she'd asked him to pretend was... the flashback and the nightmare at Thomas and Shannon's. Cold dread filled her stomach as she remembered that night. God, it had been awful. The bloody knife was the most potent trigger she'd ever had.

But Malfoy had been there.

He'd immediately known what was happening, and he'd helped her. He'd tried to apologise for what happened to her, but she hadn't let him. He'd slept in the armchair because he'd been sure she would have a nightmare. And he'd pulled her out of it when she did. He'd saved her from the end. He'd held her and comforted her and grounded her.

And he'd refused to kiss her.

At the time, that rejection had been so painful. She had been sure it was evidence that he didn't want her, wasn't attracted to her.

But, clearly, he was. There was no faking the things they'd done since then.

That meant he'd had another reason for holding back. If she was honest with herself, a small part of her was glad he'd stopped her. That night was so terrible, and she'd been desperate with fear and pain and helplessness. She'd been excruciatingly vulnerable. No matter how much she wanted it in the moment, she would have regretted their first kiss happening like that. *Well, our second first kiss*, she corrected herself.

When they'd kissed in the club, it was magnetic—like two unstoppable forces finally unleashed on each other. What happened after, the escalation, felt inevitable.

If they'd had sex like that after the nightmare it would have destroyed her, but there was no use pretending she wouldn't have done it. If he'd let her, she wouldn't have stopped for the world.

But he hadn't let her. He'd protected her from that.

When Hermione looked back up, a single fresh tear fell from her eye. Ginny was wearing a small smile.

“Think of something?” she asked gently.

Hermione gave a little shrug. “Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Keep thinking then,” Harry said. “If this bloke’s got half a brain—and I can’t imagine you falling for someone who didn’t—then he likes you. Probably has for a long time.”

“Thanks, Harry.” She looked back at Ginny. “Thank you both.”

“Any time,” Ginny said. “Afternoon tea is always so bloody boring.”

“Hey!” Harry protested. “I like our Saturday teas.”

“Or else I would not be sitting here,” Ginny said with a fake sweet smile.

“All right, I better leave you to it,” Hermione said, smiling as she got to her feet.

“You sure you’re okay?” Harry asked as she picked up a handful of Floo powder.

Hermione considered for a moment. “No,” she said finally. “But that’s okay.” She gave them another smile before she was swept away.

By Wednesday morning, Draco was feeling reckless. He read back over the letter he’d just finished writing inviting Granger to dinner. After the third read-through, he dropped it into the bin, cast an *Incendio*, and watched as its ashes joined those of its companions.

He leaned his chin onto his hand and had another crack at rationalising. It was Wednesday already. Too short of notice to ask her to dinner tonight. That meant seeing her Thursday night at the earliest. Might as well just wait for Friday at that point. Not worth the risk to shave off a measly 24 hours.

But what if he got to see her Thursday *and* Friday night? Surely that would be worth the risk. Worth the risk of never seeing her again? Absolutely not. But that was a bit extreme. They were *friends* after all, how badly could she possibly react to the suggestion of a meal? Granted they were friends who’d had sex three times in the last twelve days, but who was counting? Not him.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered into his hand. He’d seen her Saturday morning, which meant he’d already made it halfway until Friday night. He just needed to relax, find something to distract himself, and keep his cool. Now was not the time for rash actions.

An hour later, Draco stepped into a lift. He selected his floor and settled in to wait as the bloody thing stopped at every single level. The lunchtime rush was in full effect, and he was jostled by one too many Ministry hacks for his liking.

When the doors finally slid open to reveal his destination, he was shoved brusquely through them. He carefully straightened his jacket and tie before setting out to find his target cubicle.

He felt his throat go dry when he spotted the nameplate. He resisted the urge to clear it and instead walked briskly into the doorway.

“Fancy grabbing some lunch?” he said in what he hoped would pass for a casual tone.

A head of brown curls looked up at his voice.

“Did I forget our anniversary or something?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Look, are you hungry or not?”

“I’m Nott, of course,” Theo said, grinning broadly.

“Well, I trundled right into that one,” Draco allowed. “Food? Yes or no.”

“Yeah, all right.”

The Ministry cafeteria was crowded, and Draco was immediately overwhelmed. He hadn’t expected so many people. How the hell was he supposed to spot anyone in this mob?

They filled their trays and sat along the wall near one of the fake windows. The sun was just peeking through the clouds after a spring shower. Draco craned his neck, looking around.

“She won’t be in here today,” Theo said dryly.

“Who?” Draco asked, swinging his head back to face forward.

“I saw her leaving with Potter about five minutes before you got here,” Theo said, not deigning to pretend that Draco might not know who he meant.

Draco’s jaw clenched. “Oh, lovely.”

Theo made as though he was going to stand up. “Well, I guess I’ll get going now that I’ve served my purpose as your pretence for showing up here.”

“Quit pouting,” Draco said with a scowl. “And finish your pudding.”

Theo smirked.

“So, do they go to lunch together often?” Draco asked after a moment, trying for an offhand tone.

Theo shrugged. “How should I know? I only happened to pass them in the corridor today.”

“I see.”

Theo was watching him now. “I’d expect they would though, best friends and all.”

“Mm,” Draco said noncommittally.

“You’re not honestly worried about Potter are you?” Theo asked, leaning forward onto his elbows. “I mean, you do know he’s engaged, right?”

“Yes, of course,” he snapped, and Theo’s brows rose.

“Of course, I know he’s engaged,” Draco amended. “I’m not worried.”

“You seem a little worried.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“Things not going well?” Theo asked.

“Things are going great,” Draco said snootily. “I’m seeing her Friday.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

Draco stared at his friend for a beat and then let his shoulders slump with a sigh. “It’s only Wednesday.”

Theo’s laugh boomed across the crowded room, and Draco couldn’t help giving a small chuckle of his own.

“Merlin, you’ve got it bad,” Theo said, clapping him on the arm.

“No, I used to have it bad,” Draco said, shaking his head. “Now, it’s worse.”

This was worse. How was it possible that this was worse?

Ever since Ginny had put the idea of collecting evidence into Hermione’s head, she’d been able to think of nothing else. She had spent all week doing it. Five months of interactions since New Year’s Eve and seven years before that. *Six*, Malfoy’s voice corrected in her head.

She groaned aloud. Seven years or six, it was still a lot to comb through.

She’d been dejected before, but she’d been resigned. Now, she had hope, and that was worse. She couldn’t help but wonder if her past tendency to focus on the negatives had been a subconscious attempt to save herself from the exact position she was now in. If she never even allowed the idea of Malfoy actually fancying her to surface as a possibility, she never

had to be disappointed. Every new piece of evidence she added to the *he likes me* pile felt like loading another bullet into the gun; it was just more ammunition to decimate her when he finally pulled the trigger.

She shook her head roughly as she rounded the corner. She'd be seeing him any minute now, and the last thing she needed was to come off as some pathetic, morose little—*For Merlin's sake, Granger, snap out of it!*

She let herself in through the front gate of her friends' house and thought back to how she'd felt waking up on Saturday morning—better than she'd felt in months. He'd made her feel that way. Whether he was pretending or not, the way she had felt was real. She wanted to feel it again.

She knocked on the door and heard Shannon's voice ring out.

"Come in!"

Hermione took one last deep breath before stepping inside.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Playing it Cool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Busy with work lately?” Janelle asked, leaning in the kitchen doorway.

“Yes, very,” Hermione said as she poured a glass of wine. It was actually true given that the recent romantic distractions in her life were causing her to take twice as long to get anything done.

“I suppose that’s why you haven’t been by the café in a while,” Shannon said, sounding slightly put out.

“I know, I’m sorry,” Hermione said guiltily. That was part of the reason, at least. She was also known for having a terrible poker face. “I’ll come by this week for sure.”

“Looking forward to it,” Shannon said with a genuine smile. Then, her eyes shifted to someone behind Hermione. “Hello, darling!” she said brightly.

Hermione turned and saw Malfoy over Janelle’s shoulder.

“Hello,” he said as Janelle turned to face him, too. Janelle murmured a quiet greeting as she hugged him quickly with one arm and bumped her cheek against his.

He stepped into the kitchen, and Hermione moved forward instinctively. She reached her arms out for his waist and froze. She suddenly realised that they were very, very stupid. Not once had they discussed how they would act in front of their friends. She’d been so focused on seeing him tonight, she’d completely forgotten *where* they would be. Malfoy seemed to have come to a similar conclusion and was holding his arms out in a nearly identical pose.

Hermione moved forward quickly, and they gripped each other’s forearms in a very strange embrace that was half double handshake and half chest bump. Her forehead knocked into his chin as they both wavered on going in for a cheek kiss.

They broke apart, and Hermione’s face flamed as she was keenly aware of Shannon and Janelle watching the entire debacle.

“Drink?” Shannon asked him, a lilt of humour in her voice.

“Please,” Malfoy said, sounding slightly choked.

Hermione hid behind her wine glass as they moved away together.

“Draco’s looking well,” Janelle said lightly.

“Hm? Oh, yes, I suppose so,” Hermione said.

“That colour suits him.”

Hermione glanced quickly at his navy waistcoat and trousers. They had a light grey pinstripe, an exact match to the colour of his tie. She was sure there was a matching jacket hanging in the hall.

“Mm,” Hermione hummed noncommittally, tugging unconsciously at the chiffon around her neck. She couldn’t remember ever seeing Malfoy in a colour that didn’t suit him.

Janelle rolled her eyes and walked towards the sitting room shaking her head.

Hermione stared at the floor. Okay, clearly they should have discussed this, but since they hadn’t, the only option was to pretend like everything was normal. Well, as normal as things had ever been between them. She could do that. She could play it cool. She could make it through one night.

She raised her eyes just in time to see Malfoy tilt his head back and laugh at something Thomas had said. A distinct fluttering lightness spread through her stomach, and she was reminded of the note she’d received from Ginny yesterday.

Good luck with M.B. He better be worth it.

And I mean HOT.

G.W.

Hermione sighed. Why did he have to be so bloody hot? Even the ridiculous moniker Mystery Bloke was somehow hot to her. He *was* mysterious, even to her, and she liked puzzles more than anyone.

He looked over at her and she dropped her gaze at once. She followed after Janelle, feeling her cheeks burn. *Play it cool.*

The house was actually fairly full. Hermione hadn’t realised how many people were already in the sitting room when she’d arrived. The crowd took some of her focus off Malfoy, and she snacked and chatted happily with two of the football blokes’ girlfriends.

When Shannon announced from where she was wedged in the middle of the sofa that she’d meant to grab a jar of olives, Hermione volunteered to get them. She walked into the kitchen and stopped at the sight of Malfoy refilling his glass.

He looked up and smiled when he realised they were alone.

“We’re very stupid,” Hermione said flatly.

He set down his glass and stalked over to her. He reached out and pulled her into the hug she’d been hoping for when he arrived: one arm at her waist and one hand curved around the back of her neck under her hair.

“Hello, to you, too, Granger,” he said against her ear.

She shivered, and he took another step forward, pressing her back into the counter. She felt like she might melt onto the floor if he wasn't holding onto her.

Suddenly, he let go and backed away quickly. Carl walked through the kitchen into the hallway, giving them a cheery nod as he passed. Hermione sagged against the counter, resisting the urge to shift uncomfortably in her newly damp knickers. When she looked back at him, Malfoy was smirking at her over his glass.

Oh, that's how it is? she said tartly to herself. *Well, two can play that game.*

"I'm supposed to be getting the olives."

"By all means," he said, giving a little wave of his hand.

She kept her eyes on him as she sauntered over to the refrigerator. Then, she opened the door and slowly bent over until she was nearly folded in half.

"Hmm," she said, pretending to peruse the shelves. She shifted her weight slowly back and forth between her feet, feeling the fabric of her skirt slide over the skin just below her arse. She peeked over her shoulder and was gratified to see him standing with his mouth slightly open, eyes locked on her backside.

"Oh, here they are," she said finally, straightening up and facing him again.

He shook his lightly and tutted. "So naughty, Miss Granger." He made a strange flicking gesture with the fingers of one hand.

Janelle walked in and stopped, glancing between them standing on opposite sides of the room. She grabbed a bowl of peanuts from the island and turned to Hermione.

"What's with the peep show?" she asked, popping one of the nuts into her mouth.

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione said, stunned.

Janelle pointed at Hermione's chest, and she looked down to see that the top four buttons of her blouse were undone. Her pink bra and a good deal of breast were clearly visible.

"Oh!" she yelped, turning away from them to fasten the buttons.

"You could have said something, Draco," Janelle admonished from behind her, but Hermione could hear the smile in her voice.

"Yes, I absolutely could have," he replied smoothly.

Hermione turned back around just in time to see Janelle give him a cheeky grin and disappear back into the sitting room. Hermione crossed her arms and glared at him. He smirked back as she surreptitiously drew her right index finger downward in a slow swipe.

She gave him a smirk of her own before grabbing up the olives and leaving the kitchen.

After handing the jar across to Shannon and settling back into her chair, Hermione crossed her legs and waited. She stifled a chuckle as Malfoy entered the room and struck up a conversation with Nick by the empty hearth. A few minutes later, Thomas joined them, and she heard him lower his voice to speak to Malfoy.

“Er, you’re flying low there, mate.”

Hermione brought a hand up to cover her mouth as Malfoy started, looked down, and jerked his zipper closed. He scowled at her as she failed to suppress a snort of laughter.

She went back to her wine and conversation with a smug smile, feeling his eyes boring into the side of her head.

When Hermione got up for a refill a while later, she felt a distinct draft over her thighs as she stood. She looked down, and her mouth fell open in shock. Her skirt was so short, it was hardly covering the front of her knickers. She reached behind her and could tell half of her arse was hanging out the back.

She scampered out of the room before anyone could notice, and ducked into the dark formal dining room the couple rarely used. She drew her wand to reverse the spell, but a hand closed over her wrist.

“Not so fast, Granger,” Malfoy said, backing her into the wall.

“What were you thinking?!?” she hissed, swatting his arm with her free hand. “You can see my knickers!”

“Yes,” he said, grinning wickedly down at her. “I absolutely can.”

He plucked the wand from her fingers and set it on the sideboard next to them. Her protests were cut short by the sensation of him sliding his hands up the backs of her thighs and over the knickers in question. She stammered as he squeezed her arse, pulling her against him.

“What if someone sees?” she asked breathlessly as he pressed his face into the curve of her neck.

“Muggle repelling charm,” he murmured against her skin.

“That’s not right!” she gasped weakly, twining her arms around his shoulders.

“No, Granger,” he said huskily, dragging his teeth over her throat. “It’s definitely very wrong.”

She wrenched his head up and kissed him hard. He kissed her back immediately, his tongue sliding into her mouth with an urgency that drenched her. She hadn’t expected this, but god she had missed it. The suddenness and the recklessness—and probably the crisp citrus she could taste of his wine—was making her head swim. He tightened his grip on the backs of her thighs and lifted her against him. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pinned her to the damask wallpaper.

She moaned as she felt him hard against her, and he pulled away slightly.

“Shh,” he breathed against her lips, barely audible over the low hum of voices in the adjacent rooms. “Can you be quiet?”

She nodded but let out a small whimper when he shifted one of his hands to graze over the front of her knickers.

“Ah啊,” he whispered. “Quieter than that.”

She nodded again and bit down on his shoulder as he moved the fabric aside and slipped a finger into her.

“Mm, good girl,” he purred, adding a second finger and sliding them in and out in a slow rhythm. “So quiet.”

She dug her fingers into his back as he pressed the heel of his hand onto her clit. It was still covered by her knickers and the soft fabric dragged gently against it every time he pushed his fingers in. The extra friction had her cunt squeezing around him.

She let out two quick puffs of breath as a warm tingle built low in her stomach.

“Are you sure you can be quiet?” he asked. “Maybe I should stop?”

“No, no, no,” she whispered frantically against his lips. “I’ll be good. I’ll be quiet.”

She felt him smirk against her mouth, but she didn’t care. Heat was pulsing through her now. The tension tightened. She was so close.

He kissed her again, sliding his tongue against hers in time with his fingers. A few seconds of that and she was done for.

He must have felt the first tremor on his fingers because he stopped kissing her and simply closed his lips against hers, muffling the sound he knew she would make. She squeezed at the back of his neck, pressing their mouths together as the spasms rocked through her. Her hips rolled with each one as white flashed behind her eyes. She breathed heavily through her nose, and only a few tiny moans managed to escape.

He held her up for a few extra moments, indulging in one more slow kiss before sliding his hand out of her knickers. She let her legs drop from his waist, and he set her down gently, grabbing back onto her hips when her knees wobbled. Giving in to her pleasantly blank state of mind, she sighed and let her head fall forward to rest against his chest. His heartbeat was hard and strong beneath her forehead, and remembering herself somewhat, she reached down and palmed him through his trousers.

“We should get back,” he said quietly, placing a hand over hers.

“What about you?” she whispered, looking up at him.

He smiled and reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Maybe later?” he said, raising his brows in question.

She returned his smile and pulled him down to her by the tie. “Definitely later,” she said and kissed him.

He pulled away after a few seconds sounding breathless. “No more of that if I want to leave this room any time soon,” he said.

She kissed him lightly once more and then turned to grab her wand. She removed the shrinking charm on her skirt, shaking her head as he chuckled.

“I’ll be in after a few minutes,” he said when she lingered in the doorway. She nodded and returned to the others.

Hermione was glad again for the larger group that night when she was able to drift into a conversation in the kitchen. Shannon and Thomas entered a few minutes after she did, and neither seemed to have noticed her and Malfoy’s absence. She sipped at her wine, suppressing the wild grin that kept trying to creep across her face.

He wanted to continue later. That probably meant sleeping over again. She took a moment to appreciate the irony that her excitement was greater for the non-sex part of the proceedings. Of course the orgasm she’d just had could have been contributing to that. Either way, she was very much looking forward to another evening with him. And hopefully another morning.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Janelle appearing before her.

“... later then?”

“Hm?” Hermione said, having missed the first part of what she’d said.

“I’m heading out, so I’ll see you later.”

“Oh, okay. Yes, later.” Hermione hugged her and caught sight of Malfoy entering the kitchen over Janelle’s shoulder.

“You off as well?” Thomas asked him, shaking his hand when Malfoy nodded.

“Goodnight,” Malfoy said to the room at large, his eyes resting on Hermione for an extra half-second.

“I guess it’s that time, then,” Hermione said.

“Night, babe,” Shannon said, hugging her tightly. “See you soon?”

“Yes, definitely,” Hermione said with a smile. She gave Thomas’s hand a squeeze and then headed into the hall.

Malfoy was already gone. She wondered for a second if he would go straight to her house. It was a little presumptuous, but she found she quite liked the idea of it.

She found him outside the front gate though, saying a final goodbye to Janelle. Hermione waved from the stoop as Janelle crossed the street and headed toward home.

“Apparition point?” Malfoy asked when Hermione had descended the front steps.

She nodded and they fell into step together. The night was warm and pleasantly humid in a way that made her feel held by the air. The weather was so beautiful that Hermione found herself disappointed when they reached the spot after only a few minutes. She was considering asking if he wanted to continue walking for a bit when he took her hand.

He stopped, and she turned to face him. He ran his thumb over her knuckles for a second before he spoke.

“We could go to my place if you’d like?”

She started so violently she almost jerked her hand out of his grip. His face fell immediately, and she felt a pang of guilt in her stomach. The guilt, however, was far overshadowed by panic.

He wanted to take her to the Manor? She’d never imagined having to return there. The idea alone was enough to spike her heart rate and close her throat.

Doesn’t his mother live there? her brain supplied as though that concern was somehow on a level with returning to the scene of her torture and near death.

“We don’t have to, of course,” he said quickly, obviously reading her bad reaction to the suggestion. “I just meant you don’t have to host me every time. I mean, not that I expect other times. I mean—” he cut himself off and closed his eyes for a second. “Please forget all of that.”

She squeezed his hand. “I appreciate the offer, but I can’t—I mean—I’m not—I—I don’t think I’m ready for that. Yet.” She added the last word in an attempt to soften the statement, but she wasn’t sure she would ever be ready to return to that place.

His brow was creased as his eyes ran over her face. She’d gotten used to the way he studied her face sometimes, but occasionally it still made her squirm. She tried to convey that she hoped he wouldn’t want to end the evening now that she’d turned down his offer.

After a long moment, he gave a small nod and his face relaxed a bit. “No problem. As long as you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” she said, placing her other hand over where he still held hers and turning back toward the Apparition point. She squeezed his hand again when they reached the boundary, and he tightened his grip in response.

They landed together in the front hall.

“Something to drink?” she offered as he slipped off his jacket.

“Sure,” he said. “Whatever you’re having.”

“Okay,” she said, giving him a small smile before heading to the kitchen.

She set to opening a bottle of wine and thought over potential book recommendations. She was sure he’d finished *The Winter’s Tale* by now, and if they were going to read again tonight he’d need something new. The prospect of being able to suggest nearly any book by any Muggle author was both exhilarating and overwhelming. She was torn between books that were considered important literature and ones she really truly loved. The overlap was honestly smaller than she’d like. She’d found so many of the classics by straight white men to be pitifully underwhelming. The ironically named *Great Expectations*, for example.

After pouring two glasses, she carried them toward the living room. She stopped in the hall, however, when she spotted Malfoy getting back into his jacket. He heard her approaching and turned. She felt the smile wilt on her face at his expression.

“I have to go,” he said in a hard voice.

“Oh,” she replied, brows creasing in confusion. “What—”

“Goodnight.”

He turned and walked out, nearly slamming the door behind him. She stood there holding the wine glasses and staring at the door for a full minute trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

Hermione set the glasses down on the coffee table and saw *The Winter’s Tale* where he must have left it. She picked it up, and a piece of parchment slipped out from under the front cover. Her eyes slid eagerly over the tidy letters.

*A beautiful name for a beautiful witch,
but you were right—
you deserve a more beautiful story.*

D.M.

She sank down onto the sofa, reading the note over and over and feeling more confused than ever.

Draco’s feet pounded the pavement. He thrust his hands into his pockets and walked with his head down until he didn’t feel like hexing the next person he saw.

He was such a fool.

His stomach twisted and his fists clenched as he pictured the note.

*Good luck with M.B. He better be worth it.
And I mean HOT.*

G.W.

Granger hadn't even tried to hide it. It was sitting open on the table in the entryway in plain sight. He'd hung up his jacket, reached into the pocket for her book, and there it was.

She was seeing someone else. *M.B.* The initials didn't ring any immediate bells for him, but why should they? He was only privy to an extremely small part of Granger's life. It could be anyone.

It was probably some Ministry hack who'd asked her to dinner like an actual human being. Not some emotionally unstable ex-Death Eater who just finger-fucked her in shadowy corners once a week. God, he could vomit.

What had he been thinking? Of course she would want someone who could take her out in public. Someone she could be proud to be seen with. Someone she could tell her friends about so they could send her disgusting notes of encouragement before her perfect dinner dates.

Well, he hoped this *M.B.* *was* worth it. And hot.

That was a lie. He actually hoped *M.B.* would drop dead of a sudden and disastrous wasting disease. A painful one.

That was a lie, too. It wasn't this bloke's fault. Who wouldn't want Granger? He wondered if *M.B.* knew she was sleeping with him, too. Maybe he and this poor bastard were actually in the same boat.

Well, fuck that. *M.B.* could get his own goddamn boat. And then fall out of it. And drown.

He ran a hand roughly through his hair. He had no one to blame but himself. He had never even hinted to Granger that he wanted them to be dating exclusively. Or dating at all for that matter. He had missed his chance.

She had every right.

His stomach lurched with anger again. No, she should have told him. It was true that they hadn't talked about it, but what they had shared... He squeezed his eyes shut at the thought of someone else reading with her, sleeping next to her, seeing her in the morning. Suddenly, someone bumped into him, and he snarled as he opened his eyes.

A blonde woman in impossibly high heels teetered drunkenly away from him, and he looked around. He didn't know how long he'd walked, but he didn't recognise his surroundings. The street was lined with bars on either side, and Friday night patrons were moving thickly between them. His eyes narrowed as he gazed at them.

Maybe he should fuck someone else, too.

It was extremely easy for him to attract the attention of Muggle women—something he'd discovered during his many excursions into the Muggle world in preparation for starting university. The first time one of them had glimpsed his Dark Mark had been an accident, but the way her eyes had snagged on it had him rolling up his sleeves. The idea of Lucius Malfoy seeing the hungry gaze she regarded it with was so darkly delicious to Draco that he began repeating the gesture nearly every time he went out. True, he had never actually used this unfair advantage for anything beyond chatting, but it was nice to know the option was there.

He scanned the establishments. Even if he did pull someone from there, it wasn't as though Granger would know about it. Unless he left something out for her to find like he had found the note...

Maybe he should fuck Janelle. That would really piss her off.

He made an audible sound of disgust as that unfortunate thought slid through his brain. *What the fuck is wrong with you?*

He ducked into the nearest alley and Apparated into his living room. Sinking down onto the sofa, he cradled his head in his hands. He knew with absolute certainty that he could never do such a thing, but the fact that he'd even thought of using Janelle that way made him physically ill. She'd been a good friend to him, accepting him into the group as readily as Thomas and Shannon had.

Cold sweat beaded along his hairline as his thoughts turned back to Granger. He wondered if he'd left her to seek out M.B. for comfort tonight.

Brilliant sunlight was pouring in through the window, and Hermione wished she could just curl up like a cat and nap the rest of the day away. The café had always been a comforting spot, and she regretted staying away for the past few weeks. She leaned against the glass and soaked in the warmth through her sleeve.

"Here we are," Shannon said brightly, setting down their lunches.

"Looks amazing as always," Hermione said sincerely.

"Thanks, babe," Shannon said, taking off her apron and sitting down. "And here's a little snack for later." She slid an enormous paper-wrapped cookie across the table.

Hermione thanked her and stashed it in her bag before tucking into her salad.

"Speaking of snacks," Shannon said after a moment, and Hermione shook her head at the clearly orchestrated transition, "what's going on with you and Draco?"

Hermione sighed through her nose and took a long sip of tea. "I wish I knew."

“Oh good, we’re past the denial stage.”

Hermione offered a tight-lipped smile. She hadn’t exactly avoided her Muggle friends since she’d slept with Malfoy, but she hadn’t sought out their company either. She’d hoped she wouldn’t have to have this conversation until she knew where they stood, but clearly she was much further from that than she originally thought. She respected that they were his friends too, and it wasn’t really her place to tell them anything without his consent. His abrupt departure and deafening silence in the intervening few days, however, hadn’t left her much choice.

“You slept together, yes?” Shannon asked after a pause.

Hermione gave a small nod.

“And how do we feel about that?”

Hermione poked apathetically at her plate with her fork. “We feel good about it. Mostly.”

Shannon tilted her head in question.

“He was wonderful,” Hermione said. “He made me feel... taken care of.”

Shannon gave a small smile and nodded. “I’d expect nothing less. But...” she led on.

“But,” Hermione continued. “Obviously I still have some concerns about why I’m doing this. If it’s all just a way to prove to my younger self that I could make him want me. Or to spite his younger self by making him lower himself to be with me.”

Shannon was frowning now. “I know what you mean.”

Hermione nodded a little sadly. “I know you do.”

“So, where have you left things?” Shannon asked. “Your current demeanour doesn’t exactly match with the *palpable* sexual tension that was flowing off you two on Friday.”

Hermione snapped her head up at that. Shannon was smirking slightly. “Was it that obvious?”

Shannon laughed loudly, and Hermione felt her cheeks heat. “Darling, Janelle walked in on you with your blouse open to your belly button.”

“Th-that... was an a-accident,” Hermione stammered.

Shannon adopted a faux look of understanding and nodded. “Mm, yes. You know the same thing happened to me last week.” She tutted and shook her head. “It was terrible.”

“Ha-ha,” Hermione said sarcastically. “To answer your earlier question, I have no idea where we’ve left things. We’d planned to meet up later on Friday. He came home with me and everything seemed fine. And then, he just left.”

“Left?” Shannon repeated, brows drawing together.

"Yes, I came back into the room and he said he had to go and he just walked out."

Shannon looked baffled.

"I thought maybe if there was some emergency," Hermione went on, "he would have reached out by now to explain, but—nothing."

"That is... odd," Shannon said.

"I know," Hermione sighed. "He seemed angry, but I can't think what could have happened."

The only explanation she'd been able to come up with was that he was actually much more upset about her unwillingness to accompany him to the Manor than he'd originally let on. That just seemed so unlikely though. He'd seen firsthand how badly she reacted to reminders of that night. It didn't add up.

"What are you going to do?" Shannon asked.

"I don't know," Hermione said solemnly. "See him on Friday, I guess? Try to get a read?"

"Hm." Shannon's lips were pursed with disapproval, and Hermione eyed her warily.

"I know it's not the most proactive approach," Hermione said, raising her hands in surrender, "but the idea of reaching out to ask him what happened is... highly unappealing."

Shannon's mouth twisted, and Hermione rushed on. "Nearly as unappealing as you doing it for me."

"Me?" Shannon asked, looking surprised. "I wouldn't interfere like that."

At the sight of Hermione's raised brow, she gave a little laugh. "Well, all right, I might, but not now. I did my job getting you together. It's for you two to work it out."

Hermione sat back in her chair, reassured.

Shannon leaned an elbow onto the table and gave a shrug. "So, I guess we'll see on Friday, then?"

"I guess we will."

Draco only briefly considered skipping Friday drinks. He was still debating between two courses of action, but both of them required seeing Granger.

On the one hand, he was tempted to approach the evening with the intention of demonstrating to Granger just how over her he was. Plan A: he would ignore her completely. He'd been

doing it for days already. Though there was a chance she had no idea since they didn't normally speak during the week anyway. As far as revenge strategies went, long-distance ignoring rated very low in terms of satisfaction. Ignoring her up close would be much better.

Even more satisfying than that would be Plan B: continuing to shag her in an attempt to sabotage any future relationship with M.B. He was fully aware that using sex with Granger to punish a nameless, faceless bloke he'd never even met probably had a lot less to do with the bloke than it did with getting to shag Granger. But as much as he enjoyed the burn of gratification he got from the idea of using her in such a callous way, he was sure that actually doing it would cause irreparable harm to his psyche. Going back to pretending *not* to like her while still fucking her would require emotional detachment of lethal proportions. He didn't think he had it in him. Not anymore.

Strangely, the only option that never occurred to Draco was letting Granger know that he'd seen the note and telling her that he only felt comfortable continuing their relationship if they could date exclusively.

He decided that he would know what he wanted to do when he saw her again.

Malfoy was ignoring her. It could not be more obvious. Hermione hadn't known what to expect when she arrived on Friday, but it wasn't this. Instead of the silly, awkward greeting they'd shared last week, he'd walked into the room tonight and acknowledged every single person in it except for her.

It was a smaller group, and they ended up seated around the kitchen table. Malfoy joined in the conversation as everyone swapped stories of ill-fated or disastrous kisses they'd had as adolescents and young teens. He talked, he laughed, he drank, he looked everywhere but at her. When Hermione spoke, Malfoy stared either at a spot on the table or at the wall behind her head.

The only reaction she elicited from him came when Janelle asked for one of Hermione's stories.

"What was the name of the bloke that ravaged you under the mistletoe?"

Malfoy dropped his gaze to the spot on the table, but Hermione could see a muscle in his jaw twitching.

"Cormac McLaggen," she answered.

Everyone around the table let out enthusiastic groans of disapproval, and Hermione gave a small smile.

“What was he like, Draco?” Janelle asked. Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but Janelle shushed her. “Uh-uh, you’re biased.”

Everyone looked to Malfoy. He seemed to grit his teeth before saying, “He was an utter tosser.”

More groans of disapproval and some banging on the tabletop.

“Then how did he score a date with you, Hermione?” Thomas asked.

She leaned her head into her hand, briefly covering her eyes. “All right, I’m not proud of this, but I was using him to make someone jealous.”

There was a mixture of approval *and* disapproval in the noises this time, accompanied by some sarcastic applause.

“Yes, I know,” Hermione went on, waving them off. “How very mature of me.”

Malfoy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. His knuckles were white where he held his glass.

“Guess you learned your lesson the hard way?” Janelle said playfully.

“Quite,” Hermione said, raising her glass in a mock salute.

“You’re one to talk!” Shannon cut in, poking Janelle in the ribs. “What about Hugh Campbell?”

Hermione watched Malfoy through her lashes as Janelle launched into the tale; she already knew this story. Malfoy was watching Janelle with a rather fixed-looking, thin-lipped smile.

Hermione cast back over the night when he’d left again as if being in his presence might offer some clue she’d been unable to find when she was alone.

But there was nothing. He had been fine and then he’d been angry. She wanted so badly to just ask him what had happened, but she couldn’t do it. Every time she came to the same conclusion: he had a reason for leaving, for not reaching out, and for ignoring her tonight. They weren’t together, and he didn’t owe her anything.

But if that was how he chose to end it, if this was how it was going to be between them now... Hermione didn’t think she could take it.

“And then the countdown starts.” Janelle’s voice filtered back in, and Hermione froze. She’d forgotten this part of the story.

“So, it’s ten seconds to go and we’re sort of leaned up against this wall. And then I realised I still had my cup in my hand. Now, I had a very specific vision for how this kiss was about to go and I was going to need both hands to see it through.”

Hermione’s heart rate was increasing with every word. Malfoy was watching Janelle intently now, all traces of the smile gone.

"So, I turn away for a second to ditch the drink, and then I look back, and right as the clock strikes midnight his eyes roll back in his head and he slides sideways down the wall and flops into the bushes. Unconscious."

Peals of laughter erupted from the table. Janelle mimed taking a tiny bow as the others clapped and jeered.

"I still maintain that it was fate," Shannon said sagely. "I mean Hugh Campbell for your New Year's kiss? Would you really have wanted to spend the whole next year with *him*?"

Malfoy choked on his drink as Hermione stared in horror.

"I will have you know that Hugh Campbell was the dish of the season that year!" Janelle retorted, nose in the air.

Malfoy's head swivelled slowly until his gaze was fixed firmly on Hermione's face. She felt the blood drain from it.

"Exactly my point," Shannon continued. "The *season*. He'd have been good for a few months at best, but a whole year? No way."

Hermione had been sure that Malfoy wouldn't know the implications of her kissing him that night. She had wondered what explanation he'd come up with, but it was clear from his reaction that he hadn't known the true tradition until this very moment.

And that was the last straw.

She felt tears burning in the backs of her eyes as he stared at her like he'd never seen her before. There was nothing left to hide behind. She'd had no excuse for kissing him on New Year's Eve except that she thought it might be her only chance and the thought of not doing it was more painful than any possible repercussions.

She thought she'd given up the last of her dignity when she'd asked him to pretend to like her, but it turned out there was one scrap left. And it was shredded by this final revelation.

She got to her feet. "I'm sorry, but I just realised I forgot to file some paperwork at the office," she said in a rush. "It's very important, and I need to go make sure it gets in on time."

Her shoulder bumped against the kitchen door as she stumbled past, but she made it out of the front door before the first tears fell. She swiped angrily at them as she turned the corner.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed her arm.

"What are you doing?" Malfoy demanded, gripping her hard.

Hermione wrenched her arm free and kept walking. "I'm leaving abruptly, Malfoy," she spat over her shoulder. "Surely you recognise the gesture."

He lengthened his stride and rounded on her, blocking her path.

"No, what are you doing, Granger? Why are you doing this?" He gestured between them.

"I—I don't know what you mean," she lied. He was angry. His eyes were flashing in the light of the streetlamp above them and his jaw was set.

"Yes, you do!" he said, reaching for her. "What is this? Between us."

"I don't know!" she said, pulling away again. "I don't know what's going on. You just left and..." She faltered as his eyes narrowed dangerously.

"You should have told me you were seeing someone else," he said in a poisonous tone.

Hermione's mouth fell open in shock. Of all the things she expected to hear, that was potentially last on the list. "Someone else?"

"Yes."

"But I'm not!"

She hadn't thought it was possible for him to look more furious, but that statement did it. He shook his head in disbelief.

"Wow, Granger. I actually thought you would have the decency not to deny it to my face. This is low."

She was firing up now. "I don't know what you're talking about! I haven't so much as kissed anyone else since we met again!"

"Then who is M.B.?"

"I don't know! But I'm not seeing anyone else!"

He levelled her with a look of deepest incredulity. "I saw your note."

"What note?! I don't—"

A lightbulb went off in her brain as the glimmer of recognition she'd felt at the letters M.B. flared suddenly into full-fledged understanding.

Malfoy watched the realisation dawn behind her eyes, and his face contorted into a horrible sneer as if he'd caught her in a lie. That pissed her off more than anything else.

"That's why you left," she said flatly, already knowing the answer.

"I don't like sharing, Granger," he said nastily. "Especially not without knowing it."

"You weren't sharing, you stupid bloody idiot!" she screamed. "That note was about *you*!"

She punctuated the last word with a hard shove in the center of his chest. He was so caught off guard, he stumbled back a few steps.

“Me?!” he said, his tone dripping with scepticism. “Surely, even the She-Weasel has the modicum of mental faculties required to keep track of two letters.”

“They weren’t initials for your actual name, you gormless twit! Harry and Ginny knew I was seeing someone, but I wouldn’t tell them who. They started referring to you as Mystery Bloke, M.B.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but then snapped it shut. She could see the exact moment when he realised that her explanation made more sense than whatever horror scenario he’d cooked up in his head.

She would have thought he’d be embarrassed about the way he’d acted. Maybe he would even be ashamed to have accused her so baselessly. Maybe he would stay angry to cover up those other feelings.

But there was only one emotion blooming in his eyes and spreading across his face: pure and unadulterated relief.

“That note was about me?” he asked calmly.

“Yes,” she said quietly, her anger fading as quickly as it had flared.

“You aren’t seeing anyone else?”

“No, I’m not.” Her voice came out hoarse as emotion clogged her chest. He’d been so upset at the thought of her with someone else. Could that mean...? Blood was rushing in her ears. Surely that must mean...

He took a step toward her, and she saw his throat move as he swallowed.

“Why did you kiss me on New Year’s Eve?”

She wasn’t expecting that question, and she made a small choked sound. He took another step forward and then another until he was looking down into her face.

She cast about for something to say, but finally gave a weak shrug. “I didn’t think I’d ever have the chance, and I just... wanted to.”

His eyes flicked back and forth between her own as he watched her for what felt like minutes. Then, he reached up and cupped her face. He brushed his thumbs gently over her cheeks.

“I like you, Granger.”

She felt her chin tremble, and a tear slid down onto his hand when she blinked. It sounded so real, but she had to be sure.

“Please, don’t pretend anymore.”

He gave her a soft smile and shook his head gently.

"I never was."

She closed her eyes, and the rest of her tears fell into his fingers as he pressed his lips to hers.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Welcome to the other side! :) Thank you for hanging in there with me and my idiots, and thank you especially for indulging me on this intra-chapter misunderstanding within the larger miscommunication. Hopefully you agree that it was necessary for something seismic to shake them out of their faux friends with benefits situation.

I hope you enjoy seeing how their relationship develops with this new clarity!

Many thanks as always to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

First Date

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Draco had never felt so relieved. He had acted like an arse—and he was definitely going to apologise for that any minute—but for right now, he just needed a moment to revel.

He needed to revel in the relief that Granger wasn't seeing someone else. That he didn't need to pretend to not be pretending to pretend anymore. That she had kissed him that night all those months ago not out of fear of cosmic retribution but simply because she had wanted to kiss him. Merlin, was he thankful that she had.

He dropped his hands from her face and wrapped his arms around her middle. He felt her arms drape along his shoulders, and he squeezed her tight as he Disapparated.

She didn't break the kiss for several seconds after they landed. When she finally did, she gave him a watery smile before looking around. He snapped his fingers, and lights flared into life around his living room.

Confusion clouded her face, and he felt a thrill of panic.

Bugger, she said she wasn't ready to come here yet.

“Where are we?”

“I’m sorry,” he said at once, praying desperately that he hadn’t just fucked this entire thing up again. “I wasn’t thinking. I know you said you weren’t ready to come here. We can go somewhere else if you like.”

She just stared at him for a beat and then repeated, “Where are we?”

He blinked. “This is my flat. I live here.”

She looked around the room again, and the confusion faded as she appraised it. He watched as she took in the long, floor-to-ceiling windows, the airy, open space.

“It’s beautiful.”

He felt his heart rate slowing a bit. She didn’t seem to be panicking. “If you’re uncomfortable, we don’t have to stay. If you’re not ready, I mean.”

She turned back to him and took both of his hands in hers. “Draco, last week you asked me if I wanted to go to ‘your place.’ I reacted like that because I thought you meant...”

She trailed off, and he felt his eyes bulge with shock as he took in her meaning. “The Manor? Merlin, Granger, I don’t even like going there.”

She gave a little shrug. “You never mentioned a flat.”

He glanced down at their clasped hands and shook his head, preoccupied with the idea of popping through the Floo at Malfoy Manor with Granger in tow.

“I’m very glad to see where you live,” she said when he didn’t respond.

He looked up at her and smiled. He found he quite liked the sight of Hermione Granger standing in his living room.

“I like you,” he blurted.

She blushed and looked down for a second. “I know. You said.”

“I mean, I really like you,” he went on.

She laughed and put her arms back around his neck. “I really like you, too, Draco.”

“And I really like when you call me Draco.”

“Good,” she said and kissed him lightly. “Because I really like calling you Draco.”

He kissed her back, pressing his lips against hers hard and quick, once, twice, three times.

“I’d like for you to stay here tonight. If you want to.”

She nodded, smiling and leaning in for another kiss.

“But no more sex.”

He nearly laughed out loud at the way her eyes flew open and her face fell.

“Just for tonight!” he clarified quickly. “And tomorrow. Not until I have the chance to take you to dinner on a proper date.”

She recovered herself, looking sheepish at her reaction. “No sex?” she asked.

“Right,” he said definitively.

“What about a bit of snogging?” she asked, raising one brow.

He pretended to consider it. “I suppose that could be an acceptable compromise.”

They did a bit of snogging in the living room. They also did a bit of snogging in the kitchen. They snogged for a bit up against the bookshelves as Granger selected something for before bed, and they snogged against Draco’s wardrobe as she changed into one of his t-shirts.

“Sweet Merlin, how is this shirt so soft?!?” she exclaimed as it slid over her head. “It better not be made out of baby unicorns or something.”

“Only ones that died of natural causes.”

Draco's voice was slightly tight as he adjusted himself in his trousers.

She eyed him with a smirk. "Regretting your decision?"

"Not at all," he said confidently. "Don't you know anticipation is the greater part of pleasure?"

"Hm," she hummed through pursed lips, grabbing his wrists and sliding his hands down to cup her arse under the shirt. "You know, I've heard that," she went on, gripping his shoulders and pulling until he lifted her. His eyelids dropped closed as she wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed her lips against his ear. "But I'm very much looking forward to testing it out."

They did a bit of snogging on the bed as well.

Despite her teasing, Hermione actually found Draco's request that they wait to have sex again until after their first date to be quite sweet. Now that she no longer felt like they were on borrowed time, waiting one extra night seemed very manageable.

She woke in the morning with him close at her back, his forearm pressed protectively between her breasts. She ran her hand lightly along the back of it, threading her fingers between his. Realising it was his left arm, she pulled it gently away and looked down at the skull and snake twining there. She'd always had a morbid curiosity about the Dark Mark tattoos, but she'd never thought she would have an opportunity to study one so closely, much less touch it.

She slid the pad of her thumb over it, but she couldn't feel anything—magical or otherwise. Even with her eyes closed, the inked skin felt identical to the bare space around it. Whatever magic the Mark had contained when its creator was alive was gone. She wondered if she would have been able to sense anything from it before Voldemort died. She had a sudden vision of the serpent recoiling from the touch of a Mudblood—withdrawing in on itself only to strike out at her finger. She wouldn't put it past Voldemort. An element like that would have been right up his alley.

She was one hundred percent certain that Draco had not touched her in the time between when he was Marked and the Battle of Hogwarts. She wasn't the only Muggleborn at Hogwarts though. She knew some students had been forced to torture their classmates during that last year of the war; maybe he had touched a Muggleborn then. She wanted to ask him. She wanted to ask him about being Marked, too, about the ritual. *Not exactly an appropriate topic for the first date*, she thought disdainfully.

But nothing about their relationship had ever really been appropriate. Still, there would be time for those kinds of conversations later. She hoped so anyway.

“Do you always think so loud in the morning?”

She smiled and drew the arm tight around her, snuggling back into him. “How else am I going to hear myself over your snoring?”

He scoffed against the back of her neck, and she shivered. “I do not snore. And I felt that.”

She squirmed pleasurable as he kissed along her nape and up to the back of her ear. “How did you sleep?”

“Very well, thank you,” she said. “You?”

He leaned his head against hers and ran his thumb lightly along her jaw. “Better than I have in years.”

She swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat. Hearing the sincerity in his voice after convincing herself that he’d only been pretending was overwhelming. She nodded against him.

“I should go,” she said when she found her voice again.

“Already?”

She rolled to face him and smiled. “I have a very important date tonight. I need to get ready.”

“But that’s not for hours.”

“Don’t you know absence makes the heart grow fonder?” she asked with a smirk.

He flopped dramatically onto his back with a sigh. “Well, I hardly see how that could be possible at this point, but I suppose it’s only fair that we test your theory as well.”

She shook her head in bemusement at his words. She knew she was a sucker for sweet talk, but he didn’t even seem to be trying.

“Tonight then?” she asked, resting her chin on his chest.

He pulled her in for a quick kiss. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

When Hermione landed in her living room, the phone was ringing.

“Hello?” she said, slightly out of breath.

“You know,” Shannon said loftily from the other end. “It’s rude enough to run out in the middle of a story, but then to not even call your girlfriends and tell them what happened after

your bloke chases you down the street like we're in a bloody romance novel—”

“Some of us are living vicariously through you, you know!” Janelle cut in from the other line.

Hermione smirked into the receiver. “Well, I couldn’t have called before now seeing as I just got home.”

“That sounds promising!” Janelle said.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Shannon asked.

Hermione gave a dramatic pause.

“He likes me.”

The other girls squealed into their phones, and Hermione couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face. She felt like she was back in fourth year.

“He’s taking me to dinner tonight. Our first date.”

One of the girls let out a dreamy sigh.

“You have to call us tomorrow and tell us everything,” Janelle said.

“Tomorrow or whenever you drag yourself away,” Shannon amended.

“I will, I promise,” Hermione said.

“Have fun tonight!” Shannon said.

“You deserve it,” Janelle added.

“Thank you.”

Hermione rang off and Conjured a patronus for Ginny.

“It’s not just sex! First date with M.B. tonight.”

When her otter had swirled away, Hermione went to stand in front of her closet. She’d made the mistake of trying to find out how fancy the restaurant would be by jokingly asking Draco if she needed to stop by her vault to get her good diamonds. He’d replied, completely seriously, that whatever diamonds she had at home would surely be fine. She’d immediately considered calling the whole thing off.

She knew he was rich, of course. But there was a difference between knowing in a vague academic sense that he had more gold than she could really conceive of and actually seeing it in action.

It wasn’t that Hermione was a stranger to wealth. Her parents had run a very successful practice while she was growing up. The very house she stood in was evidence enough of that

—one of the largest in the neighbourhood despite the small size of their family. It wasn’t as large as the one Shannon had grown up in across the street, but still.

More recently, her Order of Merlin, First Class designation had come with a sizable reward sum and a team of private wealth managers at Gringotts. Apparently the post-war wizarding economy was booming because the sum had nearly doubled in the last year. She wasn’t exactly set for life, but she was much closer to it than she ever expected to be at twenty. While it wasn’t really a concern that Draco would think she wanted him for his money, having quite a lot of her own did take the edge off a bit.

She considered her wardrobe, looking for a dress that would be suitable for a *home diamond* ambiance. She tried on at least ten candidates but ultimately decided on a burgundy sheath dress in a thick floral brocade fabric. The rich colour brought out the warm tones in her eyes.

Well, now that that was settled, she only had approximately eight hours to overthink and second guess every decision she’d ever made where Draco was concerned.

Hermione stood in front of the entry hall mirror, checking her makeup for the hundredth time. Draco knocked suddenly, and she jumped, breath mint clicking against her teeth as she nearly choked on it. She swallowed it roughly and took in a deep breath before going to the door.

She paused with her fingers on the handle, bracing herself for a new suit. He didn’t disappoint. It was three pieces as usual, but in a green so dark it was almost black. A crisp white shirt set off the coordinating tie.

“Hi,” she said, sounding a little breathless.

“Not going to offer tea this time?” he asked with a mock pout.

She groaned, leaning against the open door. “How many times are you going to remind me of that?”

“At least once more,” he said with a grin.

She rolled her eyes and stepped back. “Get in here before I change my mind, you prat.”

She grabbed her clutch and coat as he closed the door behind him. “Is what I’m wearing all right for where we’re going?” she asked, smoothing her hand down her side.

“You look perfect,” he said, placing a hand on the small of her back and kissing her cheek.

She didn’t think she’d ever get used to catching his scent again after being away from him. It warmed her from the inside out like firewhiskey.

“Ready?” he asked, taking her hand. She nodded and he gave a squeeze as they Disapparated.

Hermione recognised the area as they walked from the Apparition point. She’d been to a couple of the restaurants and bars there. She was relieved when he led her into an upscale but not outrageously fancy establishment.

He helped her out of her coat and noticed her smiling at the menu when he sat down across from her.

“What?” he asked.

She felt the smile broadening. “I was just thinking about the last time we went to dinner together.”

He grimaced as he recalled the disastrous meal at the pub. “Oh god, yeah, that was...”

“A bit of a catastrophe?” she supplied.

“A bit,” he agreed.

“Well, I promise not to run out tonight,” she said lightly.

“Well, if you do, I promise to go after you.”

She willed herself not to blush as he held her gaze. Luckily, she was saved by the server arriving to take their drink orders.

The wine was delicious, and Hermione found that the conversation flowed easily. Well, except for the one instance in which she was distracted by how insanely gorgeous he was and lost the thread completely. Mostly she was just struck by how surreal the entire situation seemed. She never would have believed that she would end up sitting in a romantic Muggle restaurant sharing one of the best meals she’d ever had with Draco Malfoy.

“Says the girl who thinks an advanced textbook on time theory is an acceptable choice for bedtime reading.”

Of course him making fun of her helped to restore a little reality to the affair.

She pointed an accusing finger with the hand holding her wine glass. “You said it was good!”

“Yes, good *reference* material, Granger,” he drawled.

“I... well, I like studying time,” she huffed.

“Me too,” he said, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. “It came off my shelf after all. Time travel has always been an interest of mine.”

“It is fascinating to read about, but I’ve never found any description that captures how truly disorienting it is.”

His brows drew together at her words. “You’ve time travelled?”

She nodded, taking a small bite of their dessert.

“When?”

Hermione swallowed, considering for a moment. Then, she shrugged. No reason to keep it a secret anymore. “Well, pretty much every day of third year.”

His mouth fell open.

She took another bite while he gathered himself.

“That’s how you took so many subjects!” he said suddenly.

She nodded again.

“I couldn’t figure it out,” he continued, shaking his head lightly. “I thought you must be doing independent studies with the professors on evenings and weekends, but I never saw you going—”

He cut himself off suddenly, and it was her turn to stare in shock. He took a hurried sip of wine, cheeks slightly pink.

Hermione looked back down at her plate, mind reeling. Had he really been paying that close of attention to what she was doing? In their third year? If she’d known that a year ago she would have thought it was purely in the interest of academic competition, but now...

He dropped his gaze as well and she sought to give him an out.

“You don’t have much room to talk about bedtime reading material,” she said. “Shakespeare isn’t exactly brain candy.”

He seemed relieved at the change of subject. “At least plays are meant as entertainment,” he said with a slight smirk.

“I liked your note by the way... in *The Winter’s Tale*. Thank you.”

His smile softened and he gave her a little nod.

“Of course I saw it right after you left so suddenly, so that was a bit of a mindfuck.”

Draco winced despite her light tone. “Fuck, Granger, I’m so sorry for leaving like that. It was... I lost it a bit.”

She shrugged. “Honestly, I probably would have reacted the exact same way if I’d seen another girl’s knickers in your room or something.”

A horrible, guilty expression passed over his face, and she felt her heart stop.

Oh god.

She was suddenly very aware of the fact that while she had said she hadn't been with anyone since they'd met again, he had made no such assurances. She swallowed nervously once and then again. She felt sure he must be able to see her heart pounding in her throat.

"You..." she started and had to swallow again. "Did you...?"

"No," he said firmly. "The same as you, I haven't even kissed anyone else since New Year's Eve."

She let out a shaky breath.

"But... I thought about it," he said, sounding pained. "That night, when I left... I was so angry. I thought about it."

She nodded slowly. "I understand." She did.

"I wouldn't have gone through with it, Granger. I hope you can believe that."

"I do," she said, reaching across the table to take his hand. "Draco, I can't hold your thoughts against you."

He gave a small derisive snort.

"Well, I guess I could," she amended. "But I won't. I wouldn't want you to hold my worst thoughts against me."

He looked as though he doubted she could produce a thought bad enough to warrant it.

She shook her head slowly, releasing his hand. "Trust me, it's not all Herbology facts up here. I—"

She cut herself off as a crowd of images suddenly pushed forward in her mind. Back to back days of never leaving her bed, of not eating or bathing. Hours spent sitting on the floor of a cold shower when she'd used up all her tears and still felt numb. Watching the phone ring, but not picking it up. Weeks without speaking to anyone at all. Waking up from nightmares alone and wishing she'd died at Godric's Hollow, at Malfoy Manor, at the final battle. Someone finding her body after months. Standing surrounded by crumbling stone as her wand slices through the air and—

Draco's hand closed back over hers, and he squeezed it gently. She looked up into his eyes.

"I can get... dark."

His brows were creased with concern, but he nodded.

She pulled her hand away, realising she was shaking slightly.

"Anyway," she said, forcing a small laugh. "That was probably too heavy for a first date, but..."

She trailed off on a shrug, and he straightened the sleeve over his left arm with a wry smile. “Trust me, I can take it.”

She inclined her head in acknowledgement. She believed that, and she was comforted by it. She hadn’t been pretending when she said she liked his darkness. There was something appealing about the thought that he could handle her worst. What she had never trusted to anyone else. She looked back up at him before she could dwell on that for too long. “I don’t know about you,” she said lightly, “but I could use another drink.”

Draco laughed. “Definitely.”

Granger went to the loo while he settled the bill. He helped her into her coat as they stood by the door, and then he cast a glance down at her heels.

“There’s a place I like, but it’s a bit of a walk...”

She followed his gaze and gave him a cheeky grin. “Cushioning charm,” she said, waggling her eyebrows. “Let’s go.”

They stepped out onto the street, and he felt his heart swell at the way she easily slipped her hand into his. She laced their fingers together and wrapped her other hand around his upper arm.

“So, what was the significance?” she asked as they walked.

He looked over at her. “Of what?”

She smirked. “Surely, you don’t expect me to believe that Draco Malfoy would take me to any old restaurant for our first date.”

He shook his head at how well she could predict him. “That was the first Muggle restaurant I ever went to.”

She raised her brows in encouragement, and he smiled at the memory of that night.

“I used to spend a lot of time just wandering around Muggle London. Once I’d decided to start at the University, I knew I needed more exposure, but it took me a long time to work up the courage to go in anywhere. One night, I decided to just go for it, and I walked into that place and went up to the bar. As soon as I sat down, the woman in the next seat turned to me and said something. It must have been some kind of Muggle cultural reference because it sounded like absolute gibberish. I couldn’t even fake it; I just stared at her. Then the bartender came up and she’d distracted me so much, I fumbled over the name of the drink I’d decided on ahead of time. When he brought the drinks back, I was so flustered with my Muggle notes, I put down way too much money. They both thought I was trying to pay for

her drink, and she very politely informed me that she was, in fact, married and not interested. I was so mortified I just stared at her again. She must have thought I was insane. I drank my drink as quickly as I could and fled.”

Granger stopped him by the arm, and he knew what was coming.

“It was Shannon!”

He nodded, laughing. “I’d been chatting with Thomas in class for a few weeks before he finally convinced me to come out to the pub. Shannon was there, and, of course, she immediately recognised me as the basket case from the restaurant.”

“I remember when that happened!” Granger said, laughing too. “I think she thought you’d just come out of a long coma or something. Some reason why you seemed not to know what was going on.” She shook her head. “I never even considered that she’d met a wizard, but it makes so much sense now.”

She looked up at him, and he could see his own emotion clearly reflected on her face. “That’s such an unbelievable coincidence,” she said quietly.

“I know,” he said. “When she tried to introduce us on New Year’s Eve I remember having the thought that it was like the final piece falling into place. For me to have met her that first night, and then to meet Thomas in class, and for them to have known you for years. It’s...”

“Surreal,” she said with a little smile.

“Exactly,” he said, returning it.

She gripped the front of his jacket and pressed up on her toes to kiss him. He held her tight.

Surreal was the only word for it. As shocked as he’d been to find himself being kissed by Granger on New Year’s Eve, it was nothing compared to the shock of finding himself sleeping with her, dating her, being liked by her.

She took his arm again as they started forward. He knew with absolute certainty that he didn’t deserve it, didn’t deserve her. He was wondering how she hadn’t figured that out yet when the universe apparently decided to send her a sign.

“Death Eater scum!”

A glob of spit hit the pavement at their feet.

Draco went rigid with anger. *No, no, no.* How could this happen here? How could it happen in the Muggle world, in front of her? He was just turning to look after the assailant when the kid went sprawling headfirst into a pile of garbage in the mouth of the alley they were passing.

“Oh dear, he seems to have tripped,” Granger said lightly at his side.

The boy whirled around, coated in coffee grounds and vegetable peelings. “That’s assault!” he yelled, pointing an accusing finger at Granger.

Draco looked down and saw her hand resting lightly in the pocket concealing her wand.

“That’s true. It *is* assault to spit at someone,” Granger continued in her light tone. “And an Order of Merlin, First Class recipient,” she tutted condescendingly. “The DMLE really isn’t going to take kindly to that.”

“I wasn’t spitting at you!” he yelled.

Granger’s brows rose triumphantly, and the boy baulked as he realised his confession.

“That’s what’s wrong with kids these days, Draco,” she went on, keeping her eyes on the figure on the ground. “No respect for their superiors.”

The person in front of them couldn’t be more than a few years younger than they were, but her tone was darkly patronising. Draco and the boy both watched as her grip tightened threateningly around the handle in her pocket.

The assailant seemed to be thinking better of his life choices and swallowed heavily before speaking. “M-my mistake, Miss Granger,” he said, getting hurriedly to his feet. “W-won’t happen again.”

He took off down the alley leaving a pile of potato skins behind.

Draco stared down at Granger as she watched the boy run with a satisfied smirk on her face. She released the grip on her wand and turned to face him.

He had thought to apologise. He’d been recognised with her in public, and his presence had put her at risk. He’d thought she’d be embarrassed or ashamed. Certainly she’d be put off the rest of the date and probably reconsidering the idea of dating him at all.

But she’d defended him. She’d put that little git in his place and commanded respect from him. And she’d done it with nothing more than a harmless jinx and her reputation.

Draco could only stare at her. He should thank her, acknowledge what she’d done at least, but he was utterly and completely speechless. Nothing he said would convey the depth of what that had meant to him.

So, when she broke the silence and said, “Now, how about that drink?” He just took her hand again and walked on.

When they reached the bar, they were able to squeeze into a cosy corner booth. They each drank one drink, and they talked. They talked while Draco’s arm rested along the back cushion, fingers tracing the thin strap of Granger’s dress. They talked while she draped her legs over his knee under the table. They talked while he played absently with the fingers of the hand that rested in her lap.

Draco felt like he could talk with her all night, and when they Apparated back to his flat, that's exactly what they did.

Granger perched on his kitchen island, and they took turns sharing spoonfuls of ice cream as a second dessert. They talked about Hogwarts. They talked about the past year. They talked a little bit about the war. A lot of it was pleasant; some of it was not. Draco didn't shy away though. He knew that if he was ever going to have a real shot with her, they had to hash out everything. It was going to take a long time, and it was going to hurt, but it was going to happen.

"I got it with the three of us," Granger said, tapping on the spoon. "It sucked, but I got it."

He watched her.

"You were jealous of Harry's fame, clearly. Me for my talent. Ron for his family. You always insulted the Weasleys for not having any money, but they had a big family and they cared so freely. Their father couldn't give them racing brooms, but he loved them all so thoroughly. You must have envied that."

Draco gave a curt nod. *Merlin, that brutal Gryffindor honesty is something.*

"And I was kind of okay with it," she went on. "We had each other to lean on. It was easier to brush off the comments with friends to defend and support you. Not that they didn't sting." She levelled him with a look. "You always hit your mark, but we could move on and, hey, at least we had something you wanted."

He nodded again.

"But you know who really fucking bothered me?" She leaned forward and offered him the ice cream.

He took it and heaved a sigh. "Longbottom."

She nodded. "Neville Longbottom. He wasn't popular. He wasn't good at magic. He hardly had a family left. He had nothing for you to envy. You weren't taking him down a peg; he was already on the floor."

Draco nodded along as she made her points. It was true. Every word.

"It was just..."

"Cruel," Draco finished. "Just to be cruel. Just for the satisfaction of putting someone else down so I got one extra moment of feeling like I was up."

She nodded again. "He didn't have friends the way the three of us did. I mean, we tried to be there for him, but it wasn't the same. You could have broken him. I really think you might have been close."

Draco took a spoonful of ice cream and thought.

"I wish I could say there wasn't a time when that thought would have pleased me," he said after a moment. "And in the later years, it wouldn't have. But when I was young... I had nothing but hate. My parents filled me with contempt for everyone who wasn't us, and when I found myself sharing classes and accommodations with people who were supposed to be lesser than me... it just turned to hate so quickly. And when they started to prove, objectively, that they were actually *better* than me," he pointed the spoon at Granger and shook his head. "Forget about it."

She watched him take another bite.

"So, yeah, in the early years, I would have loved the idea of breaking Longbottom. What was he to me? A worthless blood traitor and he should know it."

He sucked thoughtfully on the spoon before continuing.

"You can only hate like that for so long, though. Eventually, it gets really fucking exhausting having to look for the worst in everyone all the time. You start to wish that you could just laugh at one of the Weasley twins' jokes or be impressed when Potter makes an excellent catch or admire a beautiful girl when she puts on a ball gown. But all you know how to do is hate, so you start to hate yourself instead. The venom and the vitriol you used to love spewing become toxic in your own mouth. And you want to stop, but it's habit now. You think 'this is who I am' even though you hate it. You believe 'it's better to be feared than loved' because that's what you've been taught, and it's the only option you have left because you've made sure as shit that no one is going to love you now."

Granger was watching him carefully. Her eyes were shining with emotion, but she wasn't crying.

"And then what happens?" she asked quietly.

Draco set down the ice cream and held her gaze as he drew back his left sleeve.

"And then you meet someone who teaches you the real meaning of fear, and you realise that it doesn't matter how much you hate yourself, you have to figure out a way to love. Because despite everything you've done, you still aren't anywhere close to the monster you'd need to be in order to survive without it."

Granger slid off the counter and approached him slowly. He watched as she stepped between his feet and leaned her entire body into him. He let his chin rest on top of her head, and with her no longer looking at him, he felt the tears slide slowly down his cheeks as he continued.

"And then you go somewhere new and you meet people you've never hurt before, and you find out that maybe you can like yourself when you're around them."

"And what about when you're around someone you have hurt before?" she asked into his chest.

Draco squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed. "I'm working on it."

Granger stood there for a while just leaning on him with her hands at his waist. Despite her comforting weight against him, he felt strangely light. Sort of hollow, but not in an entirely unpleasant way. More like he had finally drained a vat of poison that had been sloshing around in his chest for a decade.

After a few minutes of silence, he placed his hands lightly on Granger's hips. He felt her draw in a breath against him before she spoke.

"You didn't break Neville, you know. He's a war hero and apprentice Herbology Professor. I think he's doing really well."

Draco nodded against her head. "That's good." He meant it.

"Also, he's like super fucking hot now so that really helps."

Draco snorted a laugh and had to extricate himself from Granger in order to honk unceremoniously into a handkerchief. When he turned back around, she had the carton of ice cream in hand again and a smirk on her face.

"I mean, smoking hot," she said, licking the spoon indecently.

Draco rolled his eyes. "That's marvellous, Granger," he said dryly.

"Way hotter than you."

Draco scoffed and snatched the spoon out of her hand, taking the bite she'd just scooped up for himself. "Don't be ridiculous," he said and kissed her with ice cream still on his tongue.

Hermione had thought that with the weight of the conversations they were having and the fact that it was now pushing three in the morning, they would probably just end up going to sleep instead of having the sex they were technically allowed to have now.

When Draco kissed her deeply with an icy tongue in his warm mouth, however, all of the anticipation of the previous night came rushing back to her. The intimacy of what he'd just shared and the fact that his lashes were still wet with tears only heightened the intensity of the moment.

She kissed him back, moving her lips over every corner of his mouth to taste the sweetness there. Then she brought her hands up to grip his jaw.

"I'm afraid I have some terrible news," she whispered against his lips.

"What's that?" he whispered back, eyes still closed.

"I simply cannot bear to wear this dress for another second."

She felt his smile against her next kiss, and his hands came up to find the zipper at her back. He drew it down and trailed his fingers over her shoulders as he slid the garment off.

His eyes widened appreciatively at the sight of the strapless bustier she'd worn to accommodate the thin straps of the dress.

"Fuck me, Granger," he muttered as her dress pooled around her feet.

"I'm planning on it," she said, hopping back up onto the island and pulling him in.

Draco had long since divested himself of jacket, waistcoat, and tie. The top three buttons of his shirt were open and his sleeves were rolled up. It was possibly the hottest he ever looked.

Her fingers moved frantically over the remaining buttons, her hands diving under the edges of the fabric to feel any available skin. Draco's hands were gripping hard at her hips, pulling her against him as they kissed.

She ripped the shirt back over his shoulders and off, taking a moment to watch her hands smooth down the planes of his chest. No, *this* was the hottest he ever looked.

She must have licked her lips because Draco asked, "Still hungry, Granger?"

She looked up from his chest just in time for him to insert a spoonful of considerably melted ice cream into her mouth. She gave a closed mouth squeal at the sudden cold as it dribbled down her chin and onto the swell of her breast. She was breathing heavily from their kissing, and when she looked down, she saw that the tight support of the bustier was giving her bosom an impressive heaving quality.

Draco leaned down and ran his tongue slowly over the drip, tilting his head to the side so she could watch his tongue against her breast. He did the same for her chin, catching her hands in his as she raised them to wipe her face. He kissed and licked over her lips until she was breathless again.

When he drew back she picked up the carton and a small spoonful. She held it up to his mouth, but when he opened, she tilted the spoon and let the contents spill straight onto his chest. He laughed and tried to move away, but she grabbed him by the belt. She pressed her other hand against his shoulder, forcing him to lean back so she could catch the drip that was running over his abs and nearing his trousers.

She traced the streak with her tongue, stopping occasionally to pay special attention to the various divots and indents of his muscles. When she'd followed it up to where it ran over his nipple, she raised her eyes to his face and watched his reaction. She slid the flat of her tongue over it, and felt the peak harden immediately. He pressed his hips forward, his breath catching and his eyes dropping closed. They only stayed that way for a second. He opened them again at once as she closed her lips over his nipple in a gentle kiss. She watched him watch the tip of her tongue as it circled the sensitive skin, and she felt his cock twitch against her knickers.

She licked the rest of the ice cream off, following one of the *Sectumsempra* scars with her tongue to give his other nipple the same treatment. Each time she licked over it, he pulled her hips forward, grinding against her.

When she closed her teeth gently around it, he let out a choked moan and pulled away. He plunged his hand into her hair and pulled her head back. Then he grabbed the carton, forgoing the spoon altogether, and dumped the remaining dregs onto her chest. She gasped as she felt the rivulets run under the fabric of her top and down onto her stomach.

He moved his mouth along her cleavage, licking and sucking and biting at the sticky, sweet skin. He used both hands to pull her chest up until her nipples were almost peeking above the edge of the garment. He ran his tongue down under the fabric, and she moaned when the tip caught each one. He pressed her back with a hand on her chest until she was flat against the marble, and his hands were frenzied as he tore her knickers off over her hips and legs.

She arched up as he cupped a hand against her cunt, and he slid his other arm under her, pulling her back up to sit. She rolled her hips back and forth at the edge of the counter as he pressed his hand onto her.

“Fuck, you’re so wet for me already,” he murmured into her shoulder. “Did you like watching me clean you off?”

“Yes,” she moaned as he slid his fingers along her slit.

She reached down and squeezed him hard through his trousers, and he straightened up with a groan, letting his eyes fall closed. She took the opportunity to lick over his nipple again, and he cried out and clenched his hand, finally curling his first two fingers inside her.

She gripped hard at his upper arms as he worked her, his fingers grazing against her walls in a perfect balance of push and pull. He brought the thumb of his other hand to slide over her clit in a matching stroke, and she dropped her forehead onto his shoulder as he coaxed her toward the edge. She was panting with the intensity of it, her mouth fixed open in a silent cry.

“Oh, fuck, I’m gonna come,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut.

“That’s it,” he breathed across her ear. “I know you’re gonna come so hard for me.”

The white-hot burn of pleasure started at her clit, and she dug her nails into his arms, willing him to keep going.

“Just like that... god, don’t stop.”

He closed his mouth over the side of her neck, licking hard. There was a moment of unbearable tightness, and then everything released. She cried out on heavy breaths as the pleasure pounded through her, holding onto him for everything she was worth. He slowed his movements as she relaxed until finally, she dropped her grip on his arms and fell back flat on the counter.

He smoothed his hands up her thighs and onto her body, squeezing gently over her breasts. He leaned over to kiss her, and she hissed against his mouth as his stomach pressed onto her sensitised clit.

“Too much?” he asked, standing back up.

“Just a little.” She cupped a hand protectively over it.

“Hm,” he hummed, grabbing her under the knees and stretching both of her legs up toward his shoulders. “I guess I’ll just have to fuck you like this, then.”

She let out a little gasp as he sucked at the tender skin on the inside of one ankle.

“Can I take this off?” he asked, running his fingers down the front of the lace still covering her.

She nodded, and he pinched the edges together, undoing the fasteners until it opened down the middle. He spread it open, trailing his fingertips over her nipples, and she replaced his hands with her own as he undid his belt and trousers. His eyes snagged on her hands at her breasts.

“I like seeing you touch yourself,” he said, tugging her further off the edge of the counter. When her thighs were flush against his chest, she felt him slide the head of his cock along her slit. He touched lightly just above her clit with a finger. “Here, when you’re ready.”

She nodded, and he gripped the tops of her thighs just above her hips. They both moaned as he slid into her, the angle impossibly tight with her legs raised. She continued skimming her hands over her body as he moved in her, and she brought her fingers to her mouth when she encountered a patch of skin that was sticky with ice cream. He groaned at the sight of her licking them clean, so she coated the first two fingers of both hands until they were shiny with her saliva. She dragged them over her nipples, and closed her eyes as his fingers tightened and he thrust harder. The force of his body colliding repeatedly with her arse was sending heat through her—but lower than usual. She could feel a deep thrum of pleasure building below her cunt.

She reached down below where they were joined and felt her wetness dripping toward her arse. She used both hands to spread her cheeks and moaned as he pounded directly against her. Every thick slide was punctuated by an impact that had the pleasure building and tightening already. She wet her fingers again and brought them to her clit.

“God, yes, show me how you do it,” he said.

Each slide of her fingers over her clit sent a buzz of sensation through her lower body until everything between her hips and knees was tingling. She let out an indulgent moan and felt the corners of her mouth lifting in an involuntary smile. It felt so good. How was it possible that it felt that good?

“You’re so fucking beautiful.”

She gasped as the unexpected praise sent a jolt of pleasure through her. He must have felt her reaction because he started talking, and he didn't stop.

"All I want to do is look at you."

"Can't ever get enough."

"Spent my whole life looking at you."

She cried out as the dam broke and ecstasy washed over her. His voice tightened as she clamped down around him, but he kept talking.

"You're so fucking hot when you come for me."

"Imagined it a thousand times."

"So much better than I thought."

She watched through her hazy afterglow as his hands moved over her arse and thighs, fingers digging in as he enjoyed the feel of her.

"Never want to stop fucking you."

She put her hands on top of his and squeezed them hard into the flesh of her arse.

"I want to feel you come inside me. Come for me, Draco."

At the sound of his name, he thrust forward with a grunt, hands slamming onto the counter as he nearly collapsed on top of her. Her legs slid off his shoulders until her bent knees were crooked at his elbows. He leaned his head against one, kissing and sucking at the soft skin as he groaned and shuddered through the rest of his release.

She reached up, sliding her fingers into his hair, and he hummed contentedly as his eyes fell shut. After several long moments spent sighing against her leg, he looked up at her.

"Good first date?" he asked with a smirk.

Hermione was mortified to feel the sudden sting of tears behind her eyes. Her throat closed with the intensity of all they had shared that night. The pain and the pleasure were too much —far too much for this soon.

She was consumed, wrecked, utterly undone by him. The potential had been there for years, always simmering in the recesses of her mind. But now, this, the reality. She was wholly unprepared for it. She blinked furiously at the ridiculousness of how much she was feeling. She swallowed against the rising emotion, but it felt like trying to force a cap onto a firehose.

"Granger..."

She shook her head slightly, trying to indicate that she was fine. She knew she shouldn't try to speak.

He slid out of her and pulled her quickly up to sit. He wrapped his arms around her back and squeezed so tight she felt like his embrace was the only thing holding her together. His fingers gripped her ribs at either side, and she buried her face in his neck. His comforting scent settled through her brain, but it couldn't suppress her thoughts. *What happens when he lets go?*

"It was just intense," she said finally, her voice sounding small.

"I know," he said, bringing one hand up to smooth over her hair.

She slumped against him as the emotional and physical exhaustion of the night caught up with her.

"We should get cleaned up," he said. She nodded.

He finished removing his trousers and led her into the bathroom. She leaned against the shower door as the water heated, too tired to take in her surroundings beyond a swirl of white marble and chrome fixtures.

Draco appeared before her, and she sighed in relief as he drew her into the hot spray. She let her eyes close as his hands moved over her front, washing away the remnants of the ice cream. She brought her head under the stream and let the warm water soothe over her raw nerves.

This was good. Better than good. It was everything she had ever wanted and more than she had ever imagined. But she still felt like she was standing on the edge of a gaping chasm, instincts screaming that it was too good to be true.

The hot water streamed over her closed lids and across her open mouth. She breathed heavily in the steam.

Then Draco's mouth closed over hers, and he was kissing her under the spray. She clutched at his wet hair, pressing against him as his tongue slid across hers. The water flowed over her lips, into his mouth, and down her chin, washing away her tears before they had a chance to form. She gave a shuddering gasp as he brought his hand up to wash between her legs.

"You're safe. I have you."

She nodded against his lips and held him tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Whew, another long one! I tell ya, the smut just eats up those words. I hope you enjoyed regardless!

Thank you to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing this week!

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

And if you're chomping at the bit for more Dramione content, I started a new WIP called [Epiphany](#) last week. I was laughing as I edited their conversation about time travel in the restaurant in this chapter. Even though I wrote that scene months ago, the timing lined up perfectly :)

Too Close, Too Fast

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Draco was frowning.

Even in his sleep, he carried a heaviness that she longed to lift from him. Hermione brought her hand up and gently brushed the hair back from his eyes. She let her finger rest on the crease between his brows. She traced over it, thumb ghosting down the bridge of his nose, but it only deepened at her touch.

Was it her? Was she part of the weight? Could he feel it, too? Something like the irresistible pull of the tide, sweeping them out into treacherous, crushing depths.

Her fingers slid over the side of his face, across his cheek, to the corner of his mouth. God, he was so beautiful. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to cover those down-turned lips with her own until he lost himself in her. Until he forgot everything he'd ever had to worry about.

But she didn't.

She got up and dressed, closing the door quietly behind her as she left.

Draco woke up feeling uneasy. He was immediately aware that Granger wasn't in the bed with him. Even with his limited experience, it was readily apparent that she was a sound sleeper. This was not a good sign.

He rubbed his hands over his face as his eyes adjusted to the morning light. The previous night had been incredibly intense. He'd felt just as overwhelmed as Granger had looked. She'd been nearly asleep on her feet by the time he got her out of the shower, drying her hair with a charm and dressing her in another t-shirt while her eyelids drooped.

He looked over and smoothed his hand across her empty pillow. He was surprised to feel that it was still warm. He heard a sound from the kitchen then, and he realised he could smell coffee brewing.

His head fell back onto the pillow. It was possible she had just woken up early, but something about the way she had reacted last night unsettled him. Maybe he'd said too much, been too blunt.

He sighed. Holding back wasn't going to do either of them any favours. He wasn't about to lie to her, and if she couldn't accept who he was then it was better to know sooner. The more

time he spent with her, the harder it would be when she left.

That thought got him moving. He might as well talk to her before writing the whole thing off. He admired his shocking maturity as he hauled himself into the bathroom.

When he emerged from his room, he saw Granger leaning over the counter, reading with a mug in her hand. She was dressed in jeans and a sleeveless top, and he wondered which articles of clothing she'd Transfigured to make them.

She looked up and smiled when she saw him. That was something, at least. "Good morning," she said.

"Morning," he answered, entering the kitchen and grabbing a mug for himself.

"I hope you don't mind," she said in reference to the coffee.

"Not at all," he said as he poured a cup. She was silent as he added cream and sugar. He leaned back against the counter and looked at her.

When she met his eye again, his stomach dropped. He knew this look, and he immediately hated being on the receiving end of it. She was nervous, unsure of herself, hesitant.

He could tell she was steeling herself to speak, so he sipped and waited.

"I've been thinking..."

His stomach was at risk of falling through the floor.

"I think I need a couple of days... a little space."

God, he fucking hated that word. He swallowed before speaking.

"Okay."

He'd tried to keep his tone even, and you would think with only two syllables that he could do it, but she practically winced.

To his surprise, she set down her mug and came to stand in front of him. She took his face gently in her hands.

"I want to be with you," she said quietly.

His stomach came rocketing back into place so quickly he felt like it collided with his heart.

"I've wanted it so much, for so long," she went on, "that I'm afraid if you let me stay here right now, I'll never leave."

He resisted the urge to throw a half dozen *Colloportus* charms at the door.

"Would that be so bad?" he asked, setting his mug down to run a thumb over her cheek.

She closed her eyes at his touch and nodded. “I think it might be.”

He traced the soft skin just below her ear as he waited, but she didn’t elaborate. “I’m not as clever as you, Granger,” he drawled. “You’re going to have to break it down for me.”

She smiled again, and he felt something inside him unclench.

“Despite the fact that we’ve known each other for years and been... *friends* for a while now, this,” she said, gesturing between them, “is still very new. And we dove straight into the deep end. I mean, even that first night...”

He nodded as she trailed off. All of their interactions had been incredibly charged by the possibility of it being their last chance. It had given everything a feeling of all or nothing, and they had gone all in every time.

“I’m glad that it’s so intense between us,” she went on. “I felt incredibly close to you after everything last night.”

He took a moment to appreciate the warmth that those words spread through his chest.
“But...” he prompted.

“But... I think it’s probably too close, too fast.”

He looked down. She was right, of course. They’d been officially dating for exactly one day and he might as well carve out his heart and hand it over to her.

He nodded. “I agree.”

She looked taken aback, and he was hit with a sudden panic that this had been a test.

“Don’t play games with me, Granger,” he snapped. “Say the word and you will never walk out that door again.”

She blushed and looked down. “No—I’m sorry, that was so immature, I—” She stopped as he tilted her chin back up.

“I thought you might fight me on it,” she said finally.

“Do you want me to fight you on it? My restraint is wearing thin, so be very careful how you answer that.”

“No,” she said. “I really think it’s the right thing. I just... wanted to be sure that you want m
__”

He cut her off with a bruising kiss. He wrapped the fingers of both hands at the back of her neck, his thumbs on her jaw. He flipped them quickly and pressed her back into the counter, opening her lips against his. She moaned as he plunged his tongue into her mouth and the morning erection that he hadn’t had a chance to attend to flared back to life with a vengeance.

“I want to be with you,” he said roughly against her lips. “I want it so much I can hardly breathe.”

She sighed through her nose, kissing him back and raking her hands up under his shirt.

“You can have as much space as you want,” he continued between kisses. “Take all the days you need.” Her hands dropped to his pyjama-clad arse and she squeezed hard, pulling him against her.

He groaned into her cheek. “Okay, I take that back. You can have until Wednesday.”

She giggled, and he kissed her softly once, twice, three times, before pulling away.

“I’ll see you on Wednesday then.”

Hermione threw herself back into her work with renewed vigour. Now that she finally knew where she stood with Draco, she found it was much easier to devote her attention back to the project she had been neglecting for the last several weeks. The daily tasks required of her position had calmed down considerably over the last few months, but she had big plans for this department, and she didn’t intend to waste any of the time or Ministry resources available to her.

Working long hours had the dual benefit of leaving her with a sense of professional satisfaction and leaving her tired enough that she didn’t regret her self-imposed lonely nights too much. She knew she had made the right decision in asking Draco for some space. If she’d let herself, she would have spent the rest of the weekend with him, and probably would have ended up asking if he had considered any baby names before Monday morning rolled around.

She stretched her tired shoulders as she waited for the lift. Now that it was finally Wednesday, she could admit that she had missed him. That was fine. They were dating. It was natural that she should want to spend time with him. She glanced down at her watch. The fact that she was literally counting down the minutes until she could get him back inside her was probably a *bit* much, but—

The lift dinged, and Hermione felt her cheeks flush with the thoughts she’d been having as the doors slid open to reveal Harry, Ron, and Theo.

“Hey, Hermione,” they all said in unison.

She stood rooted to the spot as Harry and Ron cast bemused glances at Theo. He looked back at them. Hermione was positive that Theo knew she was sleeping with Draco by now. Harry obviously knew she was sleeping with *someone*, and though Ron knew nothing, he seemed just as surprised by Theo’s greeting.

Theo looked back at her and raised his brows. She levelled him with a look that she hoped would convey that he was not to mention Draco under any circumstances if he valued keeping his manhood. He considered her for a moment before folding his lips between his teeth to suppress a smile. She nearly rolled her eyes but instead caught sight of Harry's raised brows as he looked back and forth between her and Theo. Her eyes widened as she realised that the looks they had just exchanged were probably significant enough for Harry to assume that Theo was the mystery bloke.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the lift doors slid closed in front of her.

"Oh, bloody hell," she muttered, punching the call button again. Merlin curse these insufferable contraptions. She couldn't get a single moment of peace around there.

The doors opened again, and she pursed her lips as she surveyed the three faces. Theo looking smug, Harry looking speculative, and Ron looking stumped. She stepped in and turned to face the front, giving a half-hearted 'hey' on a sigh. She looked down at her watch again.

Draco spent the intervening days trying not to be bitter about the time he could be spending with Granger. He knew she was right, but every morning waking up alone felt like a morning wasted.

His negativity about the situation, however, promptly evaporated when he was greeted on Wednesday evening by the wonderful sight of Granger answering her front door completely naked. She had jumped into his arms and Apparated them directly into her bedroom.

She looked up from where she now laid panting on his chest and gave him a wide grin.

"Hi."

"I still prefer 'tea?'" he said with a smirk.

"*Goddamnit, Draco,*" she scowled, emphasising the curse with a slap to his chest. "That was one time!"

"I know, but it was so funny."

She gave a frustrated growl and rolled off him, turning to push with her feet until she nearly kicked him off the bed.

"I think about it at least once a day," he went on, squirming as her toes tickled his side.

"So about as often as I think about hexing you then!" she shot back, sending him over the side with a final shove.

He landed on his feet with a laugh and turned to drag her toward him by her kicking legs.

He leaned over and placed a tiny kiss on the tip of her nose. “You’re adorable when you’re angry.”

She heaved a sigh but couldn’t suppress her smile. “And you’re sexy when you’re being a bastard.”

“Guess that’s why we’re a match.”

Granger froze, and he immediately regretted the words. He’d meant it playfully, but for some reason, the word *match* fell off his tongue with an impossible weight behind it. He’d never really taken Shannon’s matching seriously. He had been infatuated with Granger for a long time, but he’d never considered that they might actually make a good couple. The more time he spent with her though...

He tried to think of something else to say. He had hoped to keep things a bit lighter during this date, and he didn’t want her to think he was trying to force a conversation about their relationship.

Suddenly, the universe offered the perfect distraction. Granger’s stomach gave an impressive gurgling growl.

“Oh!” she said, bringing her hands down to cover it as Draco’s brows rose. “Excuse me,” she muttered.

“Now I know why you’re a Gryffindor,” Draco said with a laugh as it growled again even louder. “It sounds like you have a lion trapped in there.”

“I didn’t have a chance to eat after work!” she said, pushing him off by the shoulders.

He watched as she crossed to the phone on her desk. “Are you hungry?” she asked him.

“Famished,” he said, realising it was true. She flashed him a smile and dialled.

A few minutes later, she disappeared downstairs in a dressing gown and returned with what she proudly proclaimed to be the best Muggle invention of all time: delivery pizza.

As she shed the dressing gown and straddled him, Draco privately thought that there wasn’t much he wouldn’t be willing to eat if he got to do it naked in bed with Granger. But the pizza was delicious.

“So, we’re just supposed to believe that a clueless teenager is the Chosen One who will defend the universe against the forces of Darkness?”

Granger turned away from the fight unfolding on the television screen to give him an annoyingly smug look.

“Oh,” he said when he realised, shifting his back against the headboard.

“Harry wasn’t completely clueless though,” she said after a moment.

“Truly a ringing endorsement,” Draco smirked, taking another bite of pizza.

She rolled her eyes.

“Now, who is this bloke?” he asked when he’d swallowed, adjusting the sheet draped over his lap.

“Who? The sexy platinum blond one dressed in all black?” she said with a smirk of her own.
“He’s her enemy, of course.”

Draco watched as the fight progressed. The tiny blonde woman was holding her own against this enemy, having plenty of energy to trade barbs as well as blows. “But he’s in love with her,” Draco said after a moment.

Granger looked at him sharply over her shoulder, dropping her hands from her chin as she propped on her elbows. “He is not. You’ll notice he’s trying to kill her as we speak.”

Draco shook his head. “Mm, no. His heart isn’t in it. Did you hear the way he talked about her shagging that other bloke—this Parker? He’s jealous.”

“I highly doubt it,” she said, looking back at the screen. “She’s the Slayer, he’s a vampire, he would never want her.”

“He’s definitely thought about it,” Draco said confidently.

She pursed her lips, still looking unconvinced.

He shrugged. “Well, if the writers don’t put them together eventually it’s a missed opportunity. I mean, just look at the tension.”

He saw Granger tilt her head slightly, and her mouth quirked down on the left side. He smiled to himself. *You agree.*

“I’m not saying it wouldn’t be hot...” she started, shifting on her stomach so that the sheet slipped further down her back. “But he’s evil. He’s supposed to want her dead.”

“Maybe he’ll change,” Draco said.

“He’s really evil.”

“Maybe he’ll change a lot.”

She looked over at him again. He resisted the urge to look away.

"I guess we'll see," she said quietly.

"Yes, we will."

Hermione was continually surprised at how well she and Draco transitioned between light and serious conversations. He made her laugh with his wit and he drove her mad with his teasing, but he also made her heart stop with his sincerity.

They'd had sex again, and she was laying with her head on his sternum, tracing lightly over the lines of his Mark when he spoke.

"I like that you defended me... the other night."

She felt a painful squeeze in her chest as he used the phrasing they adopted when it was hard for them to say what they really meant. She stopped her tracing and spread her fingers over his ribs, pulling gently.

"Of course," she said. "You paid your debt. You're not a Death Eater anymore."

"That's not the first time that has happened."

She nodded against him, still not looking up. She suspected it was easier for him to talk this way.

"I thought not," she said. "I hope you didn't feel... emasculated. It's not that I don't think you could defend yourself, of course."

His chest moved under her head as he laughed. "Don't worry, Granger. I'm well aware that you'd make ten times the man that I am."

She smiled and started her tracing again. She felt his hand smooth over her hair and down her back as his laughter quieted. "To have you stand up for me, beside me... I was honoured."

She closed her eyes as her heart gave another squeeze. She nuzzled gently against him. "Any time."

He continued running his hand over her hair and back as she thought. She'd been wanting to say something for a while now, but it had never really seemed like the right time. This was probably as good as she would get.

"I like that you stopped me... after my nightmare."

His hand stilled on her back for a second. "Of course," he said quietly.

"I was upset at the time because I thought you didn't want me, but it was for the best. I'm glad you did it."

His hand moved again, rubbing firmly over her back and arm. "I did want you. I wanted to comfort you so badly, but it wouldn't have been right. You were... confused after your dream."

Her own hand stilled at his words. *Confused?* She'd expected him to say vulnerable.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He shifted slightly. "I mean, before you tried to kiss me, you looked at me like you thought I'd saved you."

She lifted her head and looked at him. "You did save me."

His expression hardened at once. "No, I didn't. I did nothing. I stood there—"

"No, Draco," she said quickly, scrambling to sit up. She took his face in her hands. "You saved me from the nightmare, from the end."

His brow was furrowed in confusion as he looked at her.

"It always ended the same," she continued, bringing one hand up to draw her finger slowly across her throat. "I would scream and she would slice and I would wake up gurgling and choking on imaginary blood."

She saw his throat bob with a swallow.

"Every time. Always the same. For years." She reached back up and ran her fingers lightly through his hair. "But not anymore. When you pulled me out before the end, it's like you broke the cycle. Now, when I dream of that night... every time you save me."

He shook his head. "But I didn't," he said in a voice choked with pain. "That isn't real."

"It's real to me," she said, taking both of his hands in hers. "Draco, you can't change what you didn't do that night. You can't change the past. But when you pulled me out of that nightmare, you changed the one thing you could—my future." She squeezed his hands tightly, willing him to understand. "Now, every time you save me."

His eyes searched hers for another long moment, but then he nodded slowly and reached for her. She let him pull her into a tight hug against his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. I'm so sorry I didn't stop her. I'm so sorry I let her hurt you."

Her eyes fell shut at the sound of her name.

He clung to her and rocked slightly, squeezing as though she might be torn away from him at any second. "I'm so sorry. I wish I'd saved you. I should have saved you. I'm so sorry."

"I know," she said softly, letting him get it out. "I know."

When his grip finally loosened a bit, she lifted her head to look up at him. "Even if you aren't ready to forgive yourself, I forgive you, Draco. Bellatrix would have killed you for interfering and if she didn't then Voldemort would have. And I like you alive."

He nodded again and pulled her into a kiss. When he spoke, it was a whisper across her lips.

"Thank you."

Draco woke the next morning in a sea of vanilla. He opened his eyes and saw steam pouring into the room as Granger walked out of the attached bathroom. She was dabbing at her wet hair with a cloth, and he realised the scent must be her shampoo. He debated whether it would be creepy to go ahead and buy several hundred bottles just in case they ever stopped making it.

Granger seated herself in front of a small vanity and began drying her curls. He kept still, enjoying the insight into her usual morning. She twined small sections around her finger and passed her wand over them until they were soft and springy. It only took her a few minutes to complete her whole head, and he once again appreciated the satisfying execution of a well-polished routine.

She smoothed a few different potions and products over her face before applying what he recognised as her professional makeup. Usually, when he saw her after work she only had soft tones on her eyes and a neutral colour on her lips. Occasionally, she wore a darker or brighter look to Friday drinks which he knew meant she'd had a chance to go home before coming back out.

She had worn the most elaborate look he'd ever seen her in for Shannon's birthday. Her eyes had been ringed in black shadow with amber shimmer across her lids. The effect had made her eyes glow like a cat's. He smiled as he remembered the dark red lipstick he'd cleaned off his face and neck and chest the next day. She'd looked incredible that night, but as she tinted her cheeks with a light pink he realised he'd never seen her wear anything that didn't suit her.

Suddenly, she stood up and dropped the towel she was wearing. He turned his head surreptitiously to follow her as she walked naked to the bureau. She slipped on a pair of black lace thong knickers and a matching black bra. She disappeared into her closet for a moment and returned with several black garments. The first one she put on was a tight pencil skirt. She raised up onto her toes in an approximation of high heels and turned to and fro in front of the full-length mirror, appraising the fit. Draco felt his cock pressing up into the covers as she unconsciously smoothed her hands over her arse and breasts, still only covered by the bra. She traded the pencil skirt for one that cinched her waist but flared in loose pleats over her thighs and raised up on her toes again, tilting her head back and forth as she considered.

She removed the second skirt as well and set to buttoning up a fitted black blouse. Draco assumed this would go under whichever skirt she decided on. She finished the buttons and looked down at the two options she'd draped over a chair.

"Definitely the first one."

"Jesus Christ!" she gasped, bringing a hand to her chest. "Draco, I didn't know you were up."

He raised himself up on one elbow and tilted his head as he surveyed her arse in the mirror. The tail of the blouse was covering the thong portion of the knickers and all he could see were her bare cheeks protruding from under it.

"Oh, I'm up all right."

She rolled her eyes at his innuendo but held up the first skirt. "This one?"

"Yes."

She gave him a smile as she slid back into it, tucking in the blouse before zipping it up as she walked back across the room.

"Granger?" he asked after a moment.

"Yeah?" she said, balancing on one foot in the doorway of the closet as she put on a shoe.

"How much time do you have?"

She eyed the hand he had draped over the conspicuous bulge in the blankets. "Not enough."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," she said, disappearing to retrieve the other shoe.

"What if you left the skirt on?"

She reappeared wearing a withering look. She spread her legs as far as the skirt would allow which was essentially not at all.

"I see your point," he said, defeated.

"Don't pout," she said, stopping by the edge of the bed to give him a quick peck. "How about you take me out on Saturday and I'll wear it for you then?" She flashed him a smile.

His stomach clenched. "Oh, erm, actually Saturday I won't be available."

Her face fell slightly. "Oh, you have plans. That's no problem."

"It's not that I don't want to," he said quickly as she went to finish getting ready.

"No, of course, I can't expect to have you every weekend," she said, placing items for her day into her bag.

Well, that was ridiculous. As if there was any day of the week that he wouldn't find shagging her senseless preferable to literally anything else he might be doing. Breathing oxygen included.

"You can," he said quickly. "I mean, you should. Just... not this one."

"Draco, it's fine. Of course, I expect you to spend time with your other friends."

"I'm not!" he said at once. "Well, actually, I guess I am, but that's incidental. I hardly even like those friends. I just have a previous commitment."

She looked up at that. "Your... family commitment?"

He stiffened slightly. She must have heard that phrase from Shannon. "Yes."

She set her bag down and walked to the side of the bed. He watched her as she sat down next to him.

"You visit your father?"

"Yes," he said, not meeting her eye.

"Why didn't you just tell me?"

He sighed and fell back against the pillows. "Because I didn't want you to think I visit him because I want to," he said to the ceiling.

"Why do you?"

He rubbed a hand across his eyes. It was bad enough that they weren't having morning sex, how had they ended up discussing his incarcerated father as well?

"For my mother," he said simply.

Granger nodded as though that was sufficient explanation, which for some reason compelled him to actually explain.

"Apparently, he has a better chance of getting parole at some point if it appears that he has meaningful connections to the outside world. I highly doubt it will ever happen, but it gives my mother hope."

"That's good," Granger said quietly.

"Don't be noble, Granger," he snapped. "It's not as though I expect you to give a single fuck if my mother spends the rest of her life without her Death Eater husband."

Granger recoiled visibly, and he grabbed her wrist before she could stand. "Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"I get it," she said.

"No, you don't," he said, levelling her with a look. "Going back there fucks me up for days on either side of the actual visit. Even knowing it's coming up, I'm snapping at you. I can't see you that day. It's not a good idea."

"Draco, I understand, but if you need someone... I mean, you shouldn't deal with it alone."

"I don't. My friends go with me."

"The friends you hardly like?" she asked with a raised brow.

He smirked. "Right. Those arseholes."

"Will I still see you at the pub tomorrow?" she asked after a moment.

"Yes, definitely," he said, taking one of her hands and kissing the back of it.

She glanced at the clock on her bedside table. "I really have to go."

"Have a good day."

She leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "I'll see you soon."

He nodded as she scooped up her work robes and headed downstairs. He heard flames erupt in the hearth and Granger's voice calling out for the Ministry of Magic.

He laid back onto the pillow and took a moment to appreciate the fact that Granger had left him alone in her house. He would trust her alone in his flat of course, but she was not the ex-Death Eater.

Looking around the room, he noticed several rows of neatly written white labels on the shelves under her television. He got up and looked more closely. What he'd assumed were books, were actually a set of black plastic rectangles about the size of a book. He picked up the first one and inspected the label.

BtVS S1 Ep1-4

Of course, these must be the 'tapes' she used to watch her show on demand. Draco had watched enough television in his own flat to know that you normally couldn't call up whatever you wanted to watch. She'd said the episode they saw last night had come from the fourth season. He ran his finger lightly over the intervening tapes. He couldn't help feeling a little curious about what he'd missed before that. He wondered if they'd have enough time together to cover all of the tapes; it seemed like so many.

A hollow sensation spread through his chest at the thought. How much time would he get? When would she tell him that she needed to get serious about her future and find a partner to share it with? They were young, maybe it could be years.

He dropped his head into his hand and rubbed at his forehead. Granger was not the type to spend years simply wasting time for the fuck of it. She was the type to plan meticulously and

execute her plans flawlessly. He might only have a couple of months before she came to her senses.

Well, if that was the case, he'd just have to make the most out of whatever time he had.

He put in the first tape.

When Hermione stepped out of the Floo that evening, she was stopped in her tracks by the sound of movement from the upstairs floor. She froze with her hand on her wand as her heart rate skyrocketed. She tried to listen, but blood was pounding through her ears. She'd just raised her wand to perform a *Homenum Revelio*, when she heard the distinct crack of Apparition. She cast the spell and breathed a sigh of relief that she was now alone.

She still approached the stairs with caution and crept quietly up them. She checked all of the rooms, but nothing seemed to be missing or out of place. The only clue was that the TV in her bedroom was on, snowing softly. She wondered if perhaps Draco had turned it on before he left that morning. She couldn't imagine any possible reason an intruder would have for turning on the TV.

An intruder. A slight shiver went up her spine. How was it possible? The only people who could get past her wards were those she'd brought inside them herself. It was a fairly small pool. Perhaps Ginny or Harry had needed something and just popped over? It wasn't really like them to show up unannounced. She would think they'd at least send a patronus if it was an emergency.

Should she ask to stay with Draco tonight? It was tempting...

She shook her head. No, they'd spent the last night together and she'd be seeing him tomorrow; she didn't want to seem clingy. Hermione turned off the TV and set to adding another layer of wards to prevent the entry of anyone into the house while she slept.

On Friday evening, Draco found himself faced with an unusually stern-looking Thomas at the pub.

"Everything all right?" Draco asked as he leaned against the bar. He glanced toward the table where he could see Shannon and Janelle chatting. They seemed fine.

"You tell me," Thomas said flatly.

Draco swallowed nervously. Had something happened with Granger in the last day? Had she said something about him? Had she mentioned the M.B. incident?

“I think everything is fine... with me,” Draco said tentatively.

“Just ‘fine’?” Thomas asked.

“Better than fine?” Draco tried.

“I should hope so.”

Draco shifted a little. “Did Granger say something...?”

“She did, in fact. She informed us that the two of you are now dating.”

Draco could hardly suppress his smile. He found that he was unreasonably pleased that she hadn’t even consulted him about telling their friends. It was a fact. They were dating.

“Oh. Well, yes, we are.”

Thomas turned to face him. “Good. Then allow me to inform *you* that if you hurt her, I will remove your spine through your throat.”

Draco swallowed again and resisted the urge to place a protective hand over the throat in question.

“I’ve already hurt her,” he said impulsively.

Thomas’s look sharpened. His eyes narrowed as he appraised Draco.

“This is different, yes? You could hurt her worse now than you ever could before?”

Draco’s stomach twisted at the thought. He certainly could. “Yes.”

“Then we’re understood. You, me, spine, throat, got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good!” Thomas said, reverting at once back to his normal jovial self and clapping him on the shoulder. “Ah, and here she is now.”

Draco turned to see Granger approaching the bar. She flashed him a wide smile and he took great pleasure in pulling her into a tight hug and kissing her in front of the entire pub.

“Hello, Granger,” he said, letting his forehead rest against hers.

“Hello, Draco.”

He kissed her again.

A voice came from behind him. “What, no ‘hello, Thomas’?”

Draco rolled his eyes as Granger leaned around him to smile at their friend.

“Hello, Thomas,” she said in a sing-song voice.

He felt Thomas clap his shoulder again before he moved off to rejoin the group.

“How are you?” Draco asked.

“I’m... okay,” Granger said, sounding tentative.

He bent slightly to bring their faces level. “What’s wrong?”

“Well,” she started, moving to lean against the bar next to him. “I think there was an intruder in my house.”

He felt a thrill of panic. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, I heard them moving around when I got home last night and I heard them Disapparate.”

He groaned inwardly. *Bloody brilliant.* “Oh, that is... odd.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t seem like anything’s missing, but... I’m a little worried. What if they come back?” She ran a hand through her curls, tangling them on her fingers. “I don’t know, I just... didn’t sleep very well last night.”

His stomach roiled with guilt. “Erm, what time did you say it was that you heard them?”

She looked thoughtful. “Right around seven, I think.”

“Ah!” he said, adopting a cheery tone. “Well, there you have it. That was me. I forgot—er—something when I left in the morning, and I just popped back over to get it. Must not have heard you come through the Floo.”

She stared at him for a moment, and he tried not to look shifty. Then her face relaxed. “Oh, well that’s certainly a relief. I’m glad I told you. Now I don’t have to worry.”

“Yes, right. Definitely, don’t worry,” he said, patting her hand reassuringly.

“And you used the TV?”

“Hmm?” he said, guilt coursing through him again.

“The TV was on. That was you, too?”

“Oh, yes, I just had it on for a moment before I left.” *Just for a moment. Definitely not for ten hours straight.*

“Well, that explains everything then,” she said brightly, turning to place an order with the bartender.

Draco closed his eyes for a second. He should just tell her. He hated lying to her. But he'd panicked when he'd heard her come through the Floo and realised that *just one more episode* had turned into him spending all day watching in her bed. He'd made her worry about an intruder. What an arsehole.

"How was your day?"

His eyes flew open as she turned to face him. "Oh, fine, you know. Nothing noteworthy," he said offhandedly.

She nodded and took a sip of her pint. She seemed fine now. Not worried. Maybe he'd tell her later when they could laugh about it.

"Shall we?" she said, gesturing to where the others were sitting.

"After you," he said with a smile.

The faux-intruder incident was quickly wiped from Draco's mind as he realised the full host of perks that came with dating publicly. Not only did he get to greet Granger with a kiss in front of the entire pub, but he also got to sit with his arm along the back of her chair. He got to feel her hand on his leg under the table. He got to press kisses to the top of her head when she leaned it against his shoulder. And he got to bring her refills without having to offer a round to the whole bloody table. He still bought rounds for the whole table because he was rich and he was in a good mood, but it was nice not to *have* to do it to keep from bringing undue attention to him and Granger.

The evening came to an end much too soon in his opinion. Granger held his hand as they said their goodbyes in front of the door, and he gave her a lingering kiss when the others had left.

"I should say goodnight now," he said regretfully.

"Now?" she asked.

He nodded. "I have a lot on my mind about tomorrow, and I... won't sleep well tonight. I don't want to disturb you."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You want me to leave you to have your nightmares alone?"

"Yes," he said simply.

She opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off. "Please, Granger. We said not too close, too fast. You'll have plenty of opportunities to hear me scream, I'm sure, but... not tonight. Not yet."

She adopted her look for occasions when she was accepting defeat and wasn't happy about it. He kissed her again.

"Can I see you in a few days?" she asked when he pulled back.

"Of course."

"There's actually one day in particular," she went on, looking sheepish. "I'm sure you already have plans, of course, but if you have time—I mean—if you have a few minutes, I'd like to see you before the party."

He shook his head at her hesitance. "Yes, you silly witch, I'll have time for you. As much as you want."

"Okay," she said with a shy smile. "Goodnight then, and... take care, Draco."

He nodded solemnly. "I will."

She backed away from him, stretching their clasped hands between them until her fingers slipped through his. He watched her walk until she turned the corner and then started down the street in the opposite direction. He sifted carefully through his most recent thoughts as he walked, beginning the long process of mentally preparing for Azkaban.

"You cannot actually be this naïve, Draco."

He sighed and pushed off the wall to pace again. "What are you trying to say then? Everything you said, everything you taught me... blood purity was always at the center."

Lucius shrugged. "A more convenient shorthand than the other alternatives."

"How?" Draco snapped. "How is blood prejudice more convenient than anything?" He waved his arms around them. "Look where it landed you."

"It was prudent... at the time."

"The time when you were grovelling at the Dark Lord's scaly feet?"

"I made decisions to ensure the future of this family," Lucius retorted, his colour rising momentarily. Draco watched as his father took in a deep, slow breath. "I never claimed they were the right ones."

"You never admitted to being wrong either," Draco snapped.

"If I had to make the same choice again with the same information, I would," Lucius said coldly.

"That doesn't make it the right one!" Draco screamed, finally losing his temper. "You gambled with a war! With genocide!" He dropped his hands onto the metal table and looked his father dead in the eye. "And for what? More power? More gold?"

Lucius stared back.

Draco shook his head and slumped back into the chair. “Having the most isn’t enough for you? You still needed more?”

“The world is changing, Draco. The old family names mean less and less every day.”

“So what!?” Draco yelled, slamming his hands on the table. “Why do you care? Why do you give a single shit about blood mixing? You’ve made your pureblood match, you’ve had your pureblood heir. It doesn’t affect you at all! Why can’t you just sit back and count your billion reasons to be content and leave everyone else the fuck alone?”

“Do you care nothing of influence, Draco?” Lucius hissed. “Do you intend to be a passive observer in this life?”

Draco sighed heavily. “There are other ways to gain influence, Father. Ways to earn power and respect without having to buy it or kill for it.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’ll learn all about that from Miss Granger.”

Draco felt as though his father had suddenly boxed his ears. The room went muffled, a quiet whine rising from the center of his brain. He stared in shock as his father’s lip curled into a sneer.

“Who?” Draco said feebly.

Lucius made an audible sound of disgust. “Please, son, I can tolerate your stubbornness, but watching you play dumb makes me physically ill.”

Draco swallowed, his mind racing. Surely his mother wouldn’t have said anything. She would never say anything to put Hermione in danger.

“Don’t blame your mother,” Lucius said, sounding bored again. “I lived under the same roof as you for all those years as well, if you’ll recall.”

Draco swallowed again, but he couldn’t form words.

“You know, it’s a miracle the Dark Lord was narrow-minded enough never to even suspect such a thing,” Lucius drawled. “He wouldn’t have even needed Legilimency, just one of your letters from school.”

Spots were forming in front of Draco’s eyes. Was he breathing? He looked down at his hands. They seemed very far away.

“Do you really think you’re a suitable match for her?”

Draco looked back up. His father was turned to face him fully for the first time. He was leaning forward across the table on his elbows.

“No, I—” Draco started before his father’s words had sunk in. “For her?” he repeated numbly.

“Draco, you have been carefully sculpted into what you are. You have been moulded since the day of your birth to fill a very specific role. You are dangerous for her.”

Draco was shaking his head as if he could rattle his father’s words into an order that made sense.

“You’re concerned... about Hermione’s safety?” he said finally, feeling as though he’d taken a bludger to the head.

“If you care for this girl, then you should be as well.”

“I am,” Draco said, mind still reeling. “She’s not in danger... not from me.”

Lucius shook his head roughly. “How can you be so blind? Look what has happened to her at our hands!”

Draco squeezed his eyes shut. “That’s over... the Dark Lord...”

“The Dark Lord was merely the instigator of an old prejudice,” Lucius said. He pointed an accusing finger at Draco. “You are the instrument. You always have been. It’s what you were built for.”

“Why?” Draco asked, feeling suddenly helpless. “Why did you do this to me?”

Lucius lifted his chin, drawing in a slow breath. “I determined your fate long before you were born, my son. You inherited my allegiance to the Dark Lord along with every other feature. The only way I could ensure your survival was to shape you into the perfect follower—a model Death Eater.”

Draco stared at his father. Lucius’s mouth was set in a firm line, but there was an openness in his eyes that Draco didn’t ever remember seeing before.

“Everything you said,” Draco started, sounding breathless to his own ears. “Everything you believed...”

“What I believed was irrelevant,” Lucius said with a wave of his hand. “Ever since I took the Mark, it only mattered what the Dark Lord believed.”

The word ‘Mark’ broke something in Draco. “How dare you,” he seethed, clenching his hand over his left sleeve. “How dare you claim that all of this was somehow to my benefit. How dare you force me to spend my entire life dealing with the fall out of your mistakes, your weakness. How dare you make me complicit in destroying lives!”

Draco stood, the metal chair screeching loudly across the stone floor. “I don’t care about the power, I don’t care about the gold, I don’t care about the family name, and I *really* don’t fucking care about what Voldemort believed.”

He jabbed a finger into his father’s chest, looming over him. “Maybe you’ve been steeped in it for too long to pull your head out of your arse and realise that he is dead and you don’t have to be this anymore. You have no more excuses. Nothing to hide behind. Maybe

Voldemort forced you to be what you are just like you forced me, but neither of us has to stay that way.”

Draco turned and went to the door, but a sudden thought occurred to him. “You know what, Father?” he said, looking back. “You were right about one thing. The world *is* changing, and I can’t wait to be a part of it.”

Draco appeared in the parlour of the Manor with a *pop* and a suppressed belch as the beer the Slytherins had plied him with swished violently in his stomach. He turned and jumped as he came face to face with Narcissa.

“Hello, Mother,” he said a little dryly. “Don’t worry, I’ll be out of your hair in a minute.”

“Draco,” she called as he made his way to the stairs. “After you’ve changed, please join me for dinner.”

“Mother...” he said, sighing as he turned. But she was gone. He continued up, yanking off his tie as he went.

Draco was feeling slightly more amenable to a meal after his shower and a fresh change of clothes. His father’s revelations were still spinning in his head, but the distraction was actually helping to keep the ghosts of the prison at bay.

His mother was already seated when he entered the dining room. He stepped up behind her chair and leaned down to press a kiss to her cheek.

“Good evening, Mother.”

She smiled at him as he took his seat.

“Thank you for joining me, Draco.”

“Thank you for having me. I apologise for my brusque greeting earlier.”

“Of course, darling. I know how trying these days are for you.”

He nodded and tucked in as the first course arrived.

He chewed over the meal and the conversation with his father. Though he was tempted to discuss it with his mother, the little flame of resentment that always flickered under the surface when he considered that she had been responsible for giving him Lucius as a father was burning a little brighter that night.

She had been culpable in his prejudiced upbringing whether it had been for his own safety or not. Even if his physical health had been their primary concern, neither of his parents seemed to place any importance at all on the toll it would take on his mental health.

“How are things with Miss Granger?” Narcissa asked without preamble.

Draco sighed. “Mother, we are not discussing my love life.”

“Oh!” Narcissa said, sounding pleased. “Your *love* life, is it? That’s interesting because I’m fairly certain the last time we spoke, it was your sex life we weren’t discussing.”

She took a tiny bite and beamed at him.

“Oh, fine,” Draco said, rolling his eyes. “Things are going well. We’re dating now. Officially.”

“Oh, darling, that’s wonderful,” she said, putting down her fork and clasping her hands together in front of her chest. “We’ll have to have her for dinner as soon as possible.”

“No, Mother,” he said, raising a hand. “Our relationship is still very new, and given our complicated history,” he said with a pointed look, “we are taking things slow.”

Draco thought of the way Granger had reacted when she thought he meant to bring her to the Manor. Eyes wide, face pale, pulse thrumming under his thumb.

Panic.

Even seeing Narcissa—

“But, surely, dinner—” she started in protest.

“Mother, please trust me on this. It’s not that I don’t want you to know her. There will be time enough for that, just... not yet.”

“Well, all right,” Narcissa said with a little wave of her hand that indicated she thought he was being overly fussy for no reason.

He took a sip of wine while she chewed another tiny bite.

“What about your birthday?” Narcissa asked after a moment. “Do you have anything fun planned?”

That forced a smile onto his lips. He did have something planned, but now he knew that Granger was planning something as well.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

The Buffy episode they watched is S4 Ep3 "The Harsh Light of Day." At the time this story is set, season 4 would have just finished airing so Hermione is working her way back through a rewatch having taped them all. And yes, she is an absolute legend who would force the guy she's sleeping with to watch her show on the second date.

For non-Buffy watchers, *spoiler* the "enemy" referenced here (Spike) does end up being in love with Buffy though not for another season, so this was just me having fun with Draco somehow picking up on it before there is any real indication. If you couldn't tell from the chapter text, there are parallels, lol.

And a very blatant setup here for another one of my favorite chapters next week: Draco's birthday! I hope you enjoy :)

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Birthday Sex

Chapter Notes

TW: Underage - While no sexual activity occurs between underage people in this story, this chapter includes discussion of sexual fantasies that the characters had while they were underage. Because they are being viewed through the lens of sexually active adults, I suggest considering that they are probably an exaggeration of what they actually would have wanted/done at the time. Still, I'm including the warning in case it could be upsetting.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Now keep them closed. No peeking!”

“They’re closed, Granger.”

“Okay, one minute.”

Draco heard various sounds of Granger fumbling around. She was arranging something on the desk in front of him, but it also sounded like she was messing about with something over by the wall. He kept his eyes closed as instructed.

“Okay,” she said. Then, “No! Don’t open!”

“You said *okay!*” he argued.

“I just meant, okay, next part.”

“Well, how many bloody parts are there?”

“Just one more, you prat. Now, I’m going to Disapparate, but keep them closed.”

“Disapparate?” he repeated. “How am I supposed to know when to open them if you’re gone?”

“You’ll see. Well, you’ll hear,” she said, giggling at her private joke.

“What—” he started, but he heard the crack of her vanishing before he could finish.

He stood for several seconds alone with his eyes closed, feeling like a prize idiot. He was just about to open them when a high-pitched sound reverberated through the room.

His eyes flew open and immediately fell on a wrapped box on the desk in front of him. It was about the size of a shoebox and was clearly the source of the noise. He tried to pick it up but

found that it was only a lid covering his present underneath.

He smiled and lifted the top half of the gift.

“Hello?”

“Happy birthday!” Granger called from the other end of the line.

“Who is this?” he asked with a smirk.

“Draco!” she said exasperatedly.

“No, I’m sorry, *this* is Draco. Who am I speaking with?”

His smirk widened to a grin as he heard her muttering, “—goddamn bloody bastard—”

Suddenly, Granger’s voice was replaced by a buzzing tone, and she appeared back in front of him.

“I think what you meant to say was *thank you*,” she said, crossing her arms.

He placed the receiver back in its cradle and pulled her into a hug. “Thank you, darling, it’s brilliant.”

She flushed at the term of endearment and kissed him clumsily. “You’ll need this, too.”

She handed him a handsome leather notebook, and he flipped through it to see where she’d filled in several names and numbers.

“I took the liberty of adding our mutual friends so you wouldn’t have to ask them all for their numbers,” she said, smiling. “You just press the buttons in order and it will call them. Very simple.”

“This one’s yours?” he asked, pointing at the digits on the ‘G’ page next to Granger, Hermione.

“That’s me,” she nodded. “That’s the number I just called you from. It rings at my house.”

He nodded, flipping through the book. He noticed she’d filled in digits on the ‘M’ page next to Malfoy, Draco.

“This is me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s the number I just dialled from my house. It rings here. If you want someone to be able to call you, you just give them that number. You refer to it as ‘your number’ or ‘your phone number.’”

He nodded again.

She moved over to the wall, and he saw what she’d been fiddling with. A long white cord was connecting the phone to the wall.

"You have several of these receptacles around the flat," she said, gesturing to the plastic plate. "You can plug the phone into any of them if you'd like to have it somewhere else like your bedroom."

"You keep yours in your bedroom?" he asked, remembering when she'd ordered the pizza.

"There's one downstairs, as well," she said. "They ring at the same time. If someone calls, I can answer either one."

"Thank you," Draco said again, looking down at the phone. "Thank you for teaching me."

She smiled brightly. "My pleasure."

He raised his brows. "Now, there's an idea for showing my gratitude."

She pulled her bottom lip playfully between her teeth as he scooped her up.

Ten minutes later, Draco was in the middle of enthusiastically thanking Granger by bending her over the back of the sofa when the Floo roared into life.

"Surprise!"

Draco stared in horror as Blaise, Pansy, and Theo piled out of the grate. The three of them stared back, mouths agape. Granger must have also been staring because she didn't move, but Draco could only see the back of her head.

Suddenly, he realised Granger's tits were on full display above the back of the sofa and he clapped his hands over them.

"Hey!" Pansy protested. "I wasn't done looking at those."

Blaise took pity on them, conjuring matching blankets and tossing them over. Granger caught them and arranged the first one under her arms so Draco could remove his hands from her breasts. He wrapped the other blanket around his middle, feeling uncommonly grateful that the sofa had blocked everything from the waist down.

"Can I help you with something?" Draco asked coldly, continuing the script from the last time they'd encountered him naked.

"It's your birthday!" Theo said cheerfully as though nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

"Yes, and if you hadn't noticed, I was celebrating quite thoroughly before you lot showed up."

"I should go!" Granger said with a shy smile. "You should be with your friends."

He grabbed her retreating arm and directed her to sit on the sofa. "Absolutely not. If these were really my friends, they wouldn't be cockblocking me right now."

“Oh, you’re welcome to continue,” Blaise said with a smirk. “With friends like these...”

“What do you want?!” Draco yelled.

“We want to celebrate, of course!” Pansy said.

“Well, it’s *my* birthday—”

“Oh, I’m no longer celebrating that, mate,” Blaise said, falling into an armchair and crossing his legs. “I’m officially celebrating the fact that I’ve now seen the Golden Girl’s golden girls.”

“Watch your mouth, Zabini!” Draco said, pointing an accusing finger.

To his surprise, Granger let out a giggle from the sofa. He looked down to see her cupping her breasts over the blanket.

“No one really calls them that, do they?” she asked with a grin.

“Don’t look so surprised, Granger,” Pansy said, rolling her eyes. “I’m pretty sure they’ve been the unofficial Slytherin mascots since fifth year.”

Granger blushed furiously, but she didn’t drop her hands.

Theo opened his mouth to speak, and Draco raised a hand in warning.

“Relax, Draco darling, I was just going to ask what we’re doing tonight.”

Draco let his hand fall and Theo added, “A rack like that needs a special celebration.”

Draco sent a pillow slamming into Theo’s head as Granger said, “We’re having a party at the Crown and Anchor.”

The four Slytherins stared at her.

“Granger...” Draco started, falling onto the sofa with a grimace.

The other three rounded on him.

“You didn’t invite us to your birthday party?!” Pansy screeched.

“Honestly, Draco, you don’t Floo, you don’t owl,” Blaise continued.

“We never see you anymore!” Theo whined.

“I saw you all on Saturday!” Draco fired back.

“Yeah, and a great lot of fun that was,” Pansy sulked.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Draco said. “I didn’t plan this party. It’s with, you know, the Muggles.”

He cast an uneasy glance at Granger, and she rolled her eyes. “It’s not an offensive term, Draco. I call them that, too.”

“Well, that’s perfect!” Theo said, clapping his hands together. “We’ve been wanting to meet the Muggles for ages.”

“Now, do you see what you’ve done?” Draco groaned at Granger.

“I’m sure they can make it through one night without summoning a basilisk or placing any ancient blood curses on our friends,” she said dryly.

“I like her,” Blaise announced, and Draco groaned again as Granger waggled her eyebrows at him.

“I’d like you to remember that this was your idea,” he groused. “When they blow the cover you’ve kept for a decade, you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.”

Hermione would never admit it, but she was painfully nervous about having invited the Slytherins to the party. She knew that they were all clever enough, but they were also purebloods who had no experience in the Muggle world. She only hoped that any potential slip-ups could be explained away by drunkenness. As long as they didn’t perform any actual magic... Her stomach flipped with apprehension.

She was standing at the bar with Shannon and Janelle when the four of them entered. She was glad that Draco had thought to arrive with them. It would make introductions easier.

“Oh, my God,” Janelle breathed, clutching her arm. “It’s them!”

“Oh, yes, I forgot to mention,” Hermione lied. “Draco’s best friends from school will be joining us.”

“Holy shit,” Shannon said when she spotted them. “What kind of school was this again?”

Hermione gulped at her drink.

“Happy birthday!” Shannon and Janelle cried together as Draco approached with the others. They each hugged him from one side and pressed a kiss to either cheek.

“Thank you, ladies,” he said when they released him. “Allow me to introduce—”

“Wait!” Shannon said, having regained her composure and shifted back into matchmaker mode. “Let me guess...”

Shannon pointed at the Slytherins in turn, giving Janelle a pointed look. “Cheekbones, Vogue, and Tall, Dark, and Handsome?”

“Blaise,” he said, offering a hand.

“Pansy,” she said when Blaise had finished.

“I’ll stick with tall, dark, and handsome,” Theo said, taking one of Janelle’s hands and kissing her knuckles. Janelle blushed so furiously that Hermione worried for the blood supply to the rest of her body.

“Theo...” Janelle said weakly, staring up at him.

“It’s lovely to see you again, too, Janelle,” he said, still holding onto her hand.

“Okay, well... drinks?” Hermione offered to the rest of the group as they watched the interaction.

“I thought you’d never ask, Granger,” Pansy said, shouldering past her to the bar.

Shannon turned as well, but Hermione saw a glint in her eye as she looked back at Theo and Janelle. The word was practically written across her face.

Match.

Hermione had a lot more fun drinking with Blaise and Pansy than she’d thought she would. Pansy had bullied her nearly as badly as Draco had, but now that she had an inkling of his feelings toward her when they’d been at school, she wondered how much of Pansy’s venom had been driven by jealousy. That didn’t excuse it, of course, but it made it seem smaller somehow.

Regardless, Hermione had been fully prepared to put aside their differences and grit her teeth for the sake of Draco’s birthday, but she hadn’t needed to. She liked seeing him interact with his oldest friends. They teased him just as ruthlessly as he did her, and she was pleased to note that he was adorable when he was angry, too.

“And the Yule Ball dress!” Pansy exclaimed. “Fucking hell, I wanted to rip my own ears off so I didn’t have to hear about it.”

“Kind of like I want to do right now,” Draco said, bringing his hands to his own ears.

Hermione blushed behind her drink as Shannon beamed at her.

“Pans was your date, mate,” Blaise said fairly. “You could have at least found someone else to run your mouth to about it.”

“She may have been my date, but if I remember correctly, it was *you* snogging her under the mistletoe,” Draco said with a raised brow.

Blaise and Pansy both smirked. “Excuse me for wanting to do something a little more exciting than watch Granger’s terrible waltzing,” Pansy said. “No offence,” she added with a scrunched nose.

“It’s really not my dance,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“Who was your date, Hermione?” Thomas asked.

“Oh, no!” Pansy cried.

“Not again!” Blaise exclaimed.

“I wasn’t that bad!” Draco protested.

“Bloody Viktor Krum,” Pansy said in an imitation of Draco’s drawl.

“He’s too old for her,” Blaise added.

“He’s such a great hulking lunk.”

“What does she see in him?”

“Just because he’s an international qui—” Hermione quickly stamped on Pansy’s foot.

“—lting champion,” Pansy finished with a grimace.

“A quilting champion?” Shannon repeated, looking perplexed.

“Mm,” Hermione hummed with a serious nod. “Very nimble fingers.”

“Huh,” Thomas said, tilting his head.

Draco dropped his head into his hands.

“Right, I think that’s enough reminiscing for now,” Hermione said with a stern look at the Slytherins. “Maybe we should—oh, dear lord.”

The others followed her gaze to where Janelle and Theo were tucked in the corner between the bar and the wall. They had hardly spoken to anyone else all night. Janelle was sitting on one of the bar stools and Theo stood between her knees, trailing a hand slowly along her arm as she talked.

As the group watched, they both laughed and their foreheads nearly brushed as they leaned into each other. Theo brought the hand on Janelle’s arm up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Fuck me,” Blaise said looking bemused. “That was fast.”

Shannon sipped at her drink looking smug.

“How did you know?” Hermione asked her. “You only met Theo for ten seconds.”

“I can just tell,” Shannon said with a shrug. “Sometimes it’s obvious.”

Hermione and Draco shared a look.

Shannon smiled and nodded. “Even without seeing you together.”

Hermione felt her mouth going dry.

“I know you so well, Hermione, that when I met Draco, I just knew. Immediately.”

Thomas was looking at Shannon with a dreamy expression, but Blaise and Pansy were watching intently.

Hermione tried not to shift under the weight of Shannon’s stare. She didn’t really believe in matching. Janelle and Theo were just drunk, just flirting. She and Draco were just... just a coincidence. The friend group had forced them to interact. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Draco touched her hand and it was like an electric shock passed between them. She started and looked up at him. He laced their fingers together and squeezed.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Her knees nearly gave out at the heat in his gaze. She nodded, completely oblivious to the smirks the other couples were sharing.

They walked out of the pub to a chorus of *happy birthdays* and *enjoy your nights* and *have fun you twos*.

When they landed in Draco’s flat, he immediately pulled her to him. His hands were spread along her lower back, one already slipping up under her blouse. She wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed through her nose as she sank into his kiss.

It was the best kind: hard and deep and achingly slow. He explored her mouth as if he couldn’t bear not to taste every part of her. She dragged her nails up along the soft hair at the back of his head in a way she knew would make him moan. He tightened his grip on her waist, and she felt him hard against her front already. This was her favourite part. When the kiss became heated and they breathed roughly against each other’s lips. When their tongues pressed tighter and their teeth bit harder. When the squeeze of his hands on her skin made her slick with anticipation.

“I have another present for you,” she murmured.

He didn’t slow his kiss while backing her against the sofa. “I sincerely hope that it’s finishing what we started earlier.”

She moaned as he sucked on a tender spot above her collarbone. “Yes, but there’s more.”

He pulled back and looked at her. “More?” he said, his voice low and rough with arousal.

She smiled. “I’ll meet you in your room.”

Draco sat on the edge of his bed while he waited for Granger, trying desperately to quell the nervous excitement that was building up in his chest. He turned on the lamp beside him, then switched it back off after a moment. He knew he needed to get a handle on himself. Between the interrupted sex they’d started earlier, the fact that they hadn’t had sex in almost a week before that, and whatever ‘more’ she was currently preparing, he was going to be at serious risk of embarrassing himself. Maybe the light from the closet would be better—then he couldn’t see her all that well. With a snap of his fingers, it flickered on.

She opened the door to his room then, and as soon as he caught sight of her, he quickly realised that this was going to be a multiple rounds situation. It *was* his birthday, after all. He switched the bedside lamp back on.

She stood before him in what could only be a miniaturised, lingerie version of her Yule Ball dress. A tight corset top was adorned with cap sleeves and a tiny skirt in layers of floaty ruffles. She wore thigh-high stockings clipped underneath the skirt and a pair of extremely high-heeled Mary Janes. All in periwinkle blue.

She walked slowly over to stand in front of him, and when he finally tore his eyes away from her body, he saw that she’d pulled her hair into an elegant twist at the back of her head.

“You are exquisite,” he breathed.

She smiled down at him and took one of his hands. Bringing it up to her lips, she kissed lightly across his fingertips as she spoke.

“What would you have done if you’d had me alone like this that night?”

Draco huffed a laugh. “Hmm, let’s see. I would have had a heart attack, passed out, and come in my pants.” He paused to think for a moment. “Not necessarily in that order.”

“Okayyy,” she said, drawing the word out as her smile widened. “What would you have *wanted* to do then, if you could handle it?”

He considered for a moment before placing his hands on her waist and pushing gently so that she took a step back from him. He let his eyes rake over every inch of her.

“I would have wanted to look at you.”

She drew her hands down her body in a gesture of presentation, and he got to his feet. He smiled when he realised how much closer they were to being on a level. The heels had to be nearly six inches.

“I would have wanted to see every part of you,” he continued. “From every angle. Everything I never got to see before.”

He circled her slowly, inspecting every detail. There was a break in the pattern of freckles between her shoulders where her skin was normally covered by her hair. He raised her arms one at a time over her head, watching the way her breasts lifted in the tight bodice with the movement. He bent her elbows and followed her fingertips with his eyes as they smoothed over her hair. He crouched in front of her and spread her legs, looking up at her from his knees. He stood and tilted her chin, the low light reflecting off the bronzed apples of her cheeks. His fingers suddenly felt scorching against her skin, and he stepped behind her again, pressing her gently forward until she crawled onto the bed.

“And I would have wanted to touch everything I saw.”

As she knelt in front of him on all fours, he trailed his fingertips lightly up the backs of her legs. He traced her calves, her thighs, and the curve of her arse where the ruffles hardly covered it. Her head dropped with a sigh when he traced the edge of the periwinkle thong between her cheeks.

He took her by the hips and turned her so she was laying on her back. Kneeling onto the bed, he hovered over her and slid his hands up the length of her body. He smoothed over the tops of her stockings, over the corset, and up her arms until he pinned them above her head. His heart felt as though it was beating directly in his throat. Would he ever get used to having her beneath him like this? Apparently, not yet. He held both of her hands in one of his and brought the other to her face. He traced over lips and cheeks, under her jaw, down her throat, and back up again.

“Would you have let me?” he asked, pressing his thumb against her lips.

“Yes,” she said, taking his finger in when she opened to speak. She sucked hard on it as she nodded.

Heat coursed through him at the sensation, and he leaned back to stand again, pulling her up with him. He wrapped his hands around her neck, pressing up under her chin with his thumbs.

“I would have wanted to kiss you.”

She let him tilt her head back, and he found he quite liked the idea of kissing her when she was this tall. He tried to imagine how he would have done it for the first time then, though standing with her against him—touching her this way at all would have been nearly inconceivable.

He looked into her eyes and watched as she looked between each of his own. He drew her closer and saw her lips part instinctively. He opened his mouth and pulled her in until his

nose brushed her cheek. He could feel her pulse quickening under his hands. He tilted his head and pressed his lips against hers for a few seconds before pulling away. Her eyes drifted back open and he stared at the way her lips shone with the moisture from his mouth.

“That’s probably what I would have done.”

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

“And then I would have wanted more.”

He closed his lips over hers again, but this time he didn’t hold back. After all of the nervous hesitancy was gone, he would have been mad with lust. He would have been desperate with desire. He would have dominated her mouth. He let it all flow through him as he tightened his grip and opened her lips with his own. He worked his jaw in a punishing rhythm, thrusting his tongue against hers again and again. She moaned into his mouth, and he knew that if he felt between her legs she would be wet from this.

He suppressed a smile at the thought that feeling her wet for him probably would have been the *come in my pants* moment if he really was fourteen. Thankfully, he wasn’t.

He pulled away roughly and delighted in watching her eyes roll forward from the back of her head. Her lips were flushed from the kiss.

“I definitely would have wanted to order you around a bit,” he said.

“How?” she asked, still breathless.

He gave a little shrug. “Nothing fancy, ‘get on your knees’ maybe.”

She immediately dropped to her knees in front of him, and his cock gave an alarming twitch at the sight.

“Merlin, Granger,” he muttered, palming himself through his trousers.

“What else?” she asked, looking up at him with dark eyes.

His pulse stuttered in his veins as he thought, *and this would have been the heart attack moment.*

He stared down at her, ready, waiting, willing. He knew exactly what he would have wanted, what he would have said. He’d imagined it later that very same night, with her still in her gown.

“Lick your lips,” he rasped.

Her tongue came out and licked a circle over her lips until they were shining. Warmth flared along his neck.

“Open your mouth.”

She dropped her jaw until he was staring straight down her throat. He ripped his belt and trousers open with frantic fingers as she waited. He pulled himself out and watched her swallow without closing her mouth. Gripping hard at the base of his cock and breathing like he'd run a marathon, he pressed the tip onto her tongue.

"Suck my cock."

She closed her eyes as she took him in, and he was so thankful for that. So thankful that she didn't see the look on his face as the command triggered a horrible sneering echo in his brain.

Suck my cock, Mudblood.

Her mouth was so warm, so wet, and her lips were so tight over him.

You like pureblood cock, Mudblood?

He nearly whimpered as the roiling disgust in his gut was met with a jolt of pleasure when she sucked him hard into the back of her throat. His eyes squeezed shut.

Fourth year... he would have said it. He wouldn't have meant it—he was already doubting and he certainly wasn't disgusted by the thought of her anymore, but the hate was so strong. He would have said it to hurt her, to punish her for making him want her.

He *had* said it. In his mind. When he imagined her that night on her knees, taking him in, he'd said it.

He opened his eyes and looked down at Hermione. Her head was moving in a perfect rhythm, drawing down on him so hard he was almost numb from the pleasure. She had no idea the sick, twisted fantasy she was playing a role in. He was standing there looking down at the woman he... He swallowed roughly. Someone he cared about and imagining—no *remembering*—calling her that.

The Dark Lord was merely the instigator of an old prejudice. You are the instrument. You always have been. It's what you were built for.

He felt like crying.

You are dangerous for her.

"I would have hated this," he said without meaning to speak aloud. She raised her eyes to his, but she didn't stop.

"I would have hated how perfect you were, how good you would have felt."

Her tongue pressed hard against the underside of his head and he groaned.

"I would have hated that I would have loved every second of it."

She pulled her mouth away just long enough to gasp out two words.

“Say it.”

She took him back in and he held her gaze when he spoke.

“I hated you.”

She moaned around him, and he felt himself drawing up tight.

“*I hated you, Granger.*”

She dug her nails into the flesh of his arse as the tightness left him suspended on the edge of a precipice.

“I would have hated you and... it would have made me come.”

He felt her swallow in anticipation and he lost it. His breath left him on a guttural moan as he felt the first burst like a shock along the base of his spine. She swallowed again. Her fingers gripped him tightly as he thrust into her mouth, pouring pulse after pulse down her throat.

He wanted to feel ashamed. He wished he felt regret. But all he had was pleasure so intense his vision blurred, and the blissful calm that followed.

He was vaguely aware of her getting to her feet and tugging loose his tie.

“Granger, I—” he started feebly, but she silenced him at once with a kiss.

“Don’t,” she said sharply against his lips. “Don’t say you’re sorry.”

Her fingers were rough on his chest, frenzied as she unbuttoned his waistcoat.

“But—”

“Don’t even think the things you’re thinking right now.” She kissed him again, biting hard on his lower lip. “I needed that just as much as you did.”

He stared at her as she ripped off his clothes, one article at a time.

“Every twisted fantasy, every toxic thought,” she went on, meeting his eye again when he’d stepped out of his trousers and pants. “I had them, too.”

His thoughts felt like they were sifting through a fog. *She had them, too?*

“I know what you would have said, what you would have called me.”

He felt his head shaking slowly. She grabbed hold of it, thumbs pressing hard into his jaw.

“And I still wanted it.”

“No...” He felt the air pass his lips.

She was nodding. “I would have gotten down on my knees and relished making you pour your pureblood seed into my dirty little mouth.”

He groaned as his cock gave an involuntary twitch at her words. He looked down and realised she was stroking him firmly. He was still painfully hard.

She grabbed a handful of his hair with her other hand and pulled his head back up.

“Do you still feel that way about me?” she asked.

“No, of co—”

“Would you ever call me that word again?”

“God, no, nev—”

“Good,” she said decisively, squeezing him hard. “Then fuck me like you would now.”

He could only stare at her for a moment as her words sunk in. She was looking up at him intently, eyes flicking between his own as she waited for something.

And then, he realised. She was showing him. She was showing him beyond a shadow of a doubt that there wasn’t a single ounce of that hate left in him. Not for her.

How would he fuck her now? He would worship her. Every move he made would be for her pleasure. He would never hurt or punish her unless she asked him to.

The comprehension must have shown on his face because she was nodding again.

“I’m safe with you,” she whispered.

You are dangerous for her.

He smiled as he gripped her waist and pulled her in.

“You’re safe. I have you.”

Hermione probably should have realised that the Yule Ball lingerie had the potential to take them somewhere dark. She’d thought of it as a fun chance at a do-over, a fantasy version of them having that night together.

But she’d fallen into imagining how it would have actually been between them then just as readily as he had, and she hadn’t been prepared for how it would make her feel.

She felt so profoundly relieved.

As Draco stood before her and peeled away every periwinkle layer, every vestige of that time, there was nothing but pure adoration in his eyes. The contrast of what her fantasies had been like then and the way he made her feel now was so stark, she was almost embarrassed that she'd needed a pseudo-role play to figure it out.

But whatever it had taken, she was so glad to finally be there. So glad to be there, with him, with both of them stripped bare of all the fears they'd been holding onto. Naked in their affection.

They traded praise murmured against each other's lips as he laid her back on the bed.

"You're so beautiful."

"You're so good to me."

"You're so perfect."

"You make me feel so amazing."

He let out a groan of disbelief when he brought his hand up between her legs. She clutched his head to her shoulder and spoke in his ear.

"I told you I needed it, too."

He raked his teeth over her neck and slowly slid a finger inside her. She arched into the mattress as he kissed and sucked so hard at her throat it felt like he was stealing her breath through her skin.

She moaned as he moved down her body. The feel of his mouth closing over her nipple was like molten lava through her veins. His tongue was so wet, so hot, so rough on the sensitive flesh. She pressed up into his mouth, gasping as the finger inside her sent fire through her cunt. She was clenching reflexively, writhing under the impossible heat.

He slipped off the bed to kneel in front of her, removing the finger and sliding his flattened palm up over her slit. She was drenched. She could feel it slicking his hand as it slid over her clit. He repeated the movement and she nearly came undone. The heat... how was it so hot?

"Is—is that a warming charm?" she panted as he continued rubbing over her.

"Do you like it?" he asked in a low voice. She could hear the smirk.

"Fuck, it's—it's so hot—feels so good."

"Mmm, yes it does," he said, slipping the finger back inside.

She let out a high-pitched moan, not even caring that she was practically whining, as he crooked the finger against her front wall. The heat and the pressure and the movement were so good, she nearly spontaneously combusted when his breath ghosted over her clit.

"What do you think, Granger? Can I make you come with one lick?"

“Oh, fuck,” she gasped, squeezing her eyes shut. She wanted that lick so badly. She *needed* to feel it. Might actually die without it.

“Probably,” she said.

He chuckled over her, and she almost fainted.

“Tell me when.”

She nodded, focusing on the slide of his finger. She only got one lick; she needed it to be perfect.

Everything below her belly was a haze of heat and wet and tightening pressure. Every exhale over her clit sent a low-frequency buzz of pleasure through her—a tease of what would come when she asked for it.

His movement inside her was so good, but she needed to wait, she needed to be sure. She melted into the strokes, feeling the tingle build with every press.

Suddenly, something infinitesimally small shifted, and it was perfect. She savoured the moment when she knew. She would get her lick, all she had to do was ask. She waited for one stroke, then two, then...

“Now.”

As soon as the syllable was off her lips, he pressed the flat of his tongue over her clit. He rolled it upward slowly as his lips closed around her in a luxuriant kiss.

She cried out as the spasms slammed through her. Her hips came off the mattress, but he kept his lips pressed over her, sucking just slightly as she pushed up into him. Wave after wave rolled through her as his finger stroked, drawing it out until the intensity faded.

“Good girl.”

She let out a choked breath, grabbing for his arms and pulling him up until he fell onto the bed beside her. She rolled to straddle him and sank down with aftershocks still echoing through her.

He groaned as she slid over him, down to the base in one stroke. His hands smoothed over the curves of her arse and she felt a deep tremor as he squeezed to rock her forward. On impulse, she reached back and felt again that her wetness had dripped down. Leaning forward, she took one of his hands and placed it over the center of her arse so that his fingertips just grazed the bottom of her slit.

“Touch me here,” she said against his lips.

He slid his fingertips slowly upward, spreading the slick, and they moaned in unison as the light pressure had her clenching around him. He laid his fingers and palm flat against her and pulled. An ecstatic cry fell from her lips as a familiar low thrum of pleasure built below her cunt.

“God, yes, like that,” she panted as he pressed with his hand, rocking her forward again and again.

Her skin sang as she revelled in feeling him surround her. He was everywhere. Inside, behind, underneath.

“You feel so good,” she breathed.

He crushed his mouth to hers, kissing her furiously as her core tightened.

The tension broke suddenly like a snapping string and she thrust herself down on him hard as she came. He groaned against her lips, and she felt his pulsing join her own.

His hands slid over her body, moving her slowly over him as he always did. She let her forehead rest on his and sifted her fingers lightly through his hair.

There were so many things she thought to say in that moment. *That was incredible. Thank you. I hope that was okay. I think we both needed that. I feel better than ever. I hope you're okay.*

But all that came out was, “Happy birthday, Draco.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Happy Couples

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Why did you stay away so long, Hermione?” George asked quietly.

She looked over at him before turning back to survey the wreckage of the room. Harry and Ginny had had separate celebrations for their respective stag and hen nights, but as both groups had ended up returning to the Burrow—and they were all friends anyway—the partying had only continued from there.

Harry and Ginny were curled together on the sofa, her fake wedding veil draped over his face. Ron was passed out under the kitchen table, still clutching the king he’d taken in his final chess match. Luna was asleep on top of the table, clad only in someone’s Weasley jumper. Charlie and Oliver Wood were propped together in front of the hearth. Charlie’s fingers traced slow patterns over Oliver’s back as they watched the flames.

“You know what happened, right?” Hermione said, feeling the slight slur of her speech.

George gave a wry laugh. “No secrets in a house this size. Especially not with three of the interested parties living in it.”

Hermione looked back to Ron and felt her heart clench in her chest. After more than a year of avoiding each other and months of awkward interactions, tonight had been the first time that things really felt okay between them again. He had been making an effort to stop by her desk in the Ministry or chat when they shared a lift. She finally felt like he could look at her without seeing something else.

But there was something else. Something she had never even given him a chance to forgive her for.

“Everything was so fucked up,” she said finally. “*I was so fucked up.*”

She closed her eyes and saw her wand slicing through the air. Felt the magic burn in her arm. The smoke of countless spells, the rubble of ancient stone walls, the screams of the dying.

“I felt like I lost a part of myself during the war.”

She realised at once who she was talking to and looked back over at George, horrified. “God, I’m so sorry. I’m such an idiot. I can’t believe I just said that to you.”

She quickly covered her face with her hands as shame welled up within her. George wasn’t having it though, and she felt a gentle hand shake her shoulder. “Knock it off, Hermione. It’s not a competition.”

She looked back up and felt tears sting her eyes at his understanding look.

“Everyone put too much pressure on you,” he went on. “You were expected to figure everything out and hold Harry together while doing it.”

Hermione let her gaze drift back to the couple on the sofa.

“No one blamed either of you for what happened,” he said.

She scoffed, and George rolled his eyes. “Okay, fair enough, no one reasonable. My point is, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

She shook her head, trying to suppress the sob working its way up her throat. “But I did, George, I—” she stopped and swallowed, feeling her pulse throb in her temples. “I did,” she repeated in a near whisper. “And I’m not the same person I was before.”

“Now you’re the kind of person who dates a Mystery Bloke?” he asked with a soft smile.

She huffed a laugh through her nose.

“Hermione, it was war. You don’t owe anyone an explanation for what you did to survive. Even yourself. And as for who you choose to love, well...” He looked down at Angelina’s head in his lap, and Hermione watched as he twirled the end of one of her braids between his fingers. “People won’t always understand.”

It was Hermione’s turn to place a gentle hand on his shoulder. “He would have wanted you to be happy. Both of you.”

George smiled without looking up. “I know. Believe me, he is not the one who doesn’t understand.”

Hermione watched as he shook his head slowly.

“Honestly,” George continued with a sigh. “I think we were more judgmental of ourselves than anyone else was. Worrying that it was sick or toxic. Just a way for both of us to feel closer to him.”

Hermione blinked furiously, but the tears still fell.

“But it didn’t matter how much we tried to talk ourselves out of it. It felt right. And life is too fucking short to talk yourself out of anything that brings you even one minute of real happiness, you know?”

He looked back up at her, and she smiled through her tears.

“Yes. I know.”

Hermione shifted her back against the arm of the sofa, tucking her chilly toes under Draco's thigh. "I don't understand why you're so against Riley."

Draco sneered, waving a dismissive hand at the television. "Because he's clearly written to be the safe choice. She's the Slayer for Merlin's sake! She never takes the easy way out of anything."

"Exactly," Hermione argued. "She's had to grow up way too fast; her whole life has been about pain and death. Doesn't she deserve a break from that? Something easy for once?"

Draco scoffed. "If she wants a break, she can go on bloody holiday. Her relationship is too important. She said herself that she needs the pain and the fighting and the passion. She needs the darkness. It's part of who she is."

"Even in love?" Hermione asked.

"Especially in love! Ending up with the boy-next-door type? No, you're too strong for that, too powerful."

Hermione stared at him. He was still watching the screen, unaware of what he'd said.

"What are we talking about?" she asked quietly.

He looked at her then. "I'm talking about Buffy."

"Are you?"

He shifted on the sofa, looking away again. "Of course."

"Is this about the wedding?"

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "I told you I don't give a single fuck about attending Saint Potter's wedding."

"I will tell them soon, I promise. This event just wouldn't be the—"

"The right time, yes, you've said." Draco clicked off the TV and got to his feet.

Hermione turned on the sofa to watch him pace. "If I'm ever going to have a chance at really fixing things with Ron—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Draco muttered, shaking his head.

"I thought you would understand," she said, her voice hardening.

"And I would if this was actually about what you wanted and not about protecting Weasley!"

"I hurt him, Draco!" She was on her feet now, too. "Don't you get that? This is not the time to be pouring salt in the wound, not when we've just—"

"*You* hurt him," Draco repeated, nodding. "And I suppose you held Potter down did you?"

“What?” Hermione said, not following.

“Drugged him? Knocked him unconscious, maybe?”

“What are you talking about!?”

“Potter was a willing participant in everything that happened between you,” he yelled, pointing a finger at her. “The same hurt, the same betrayal.”

Hermione opened her mouth to argue but nothing came out. That was true.

“And remind me again, how many years did Weasley spend punishing Potter?”

Hermione shook her head.

“I can’t hear you, Granger!” Draco said, holding a hand up to his ear.

“None,” she said finally.

“Not one,” Draco agreed. “Moved in with the whole brood the day after the final battle if the Prophet got it right.”

“Harry needed somewhere to go after everything! He needed family! He couldn’t go back to an empty house!” she yelled.

“An empty house like this one!?” Draco gestured around them. Hermione let her gaze roam over her parent’s living room.

“He needed help... after everything that happened...” she said, her voice growing quieter.

“He needed help like you needed help!?”

“It was diff—”

“Open your eyes, Granger! Potter got welcomed home with open arms and you got left out in the cold.”

His tone was growing icier with every word.

“Have you spotted the reason yet?” he asked.

She just looked at him.

“Come on, Hermione! You’re the Brightest Witch of Her Age, surely you can figure it out,” he said in a falsely cajoling voice.

She shook her head. She hated when he spoke to her like that, especially when he used her name to do it.

“No? Well, then allow me to spell it out for you.” His eyes narrowed. “You and Potter had an equal hand in Weasley’s betrayal, but Potter wasn’t the one Weasley wanted to fuck.”

Hermione stared at him, clenching her jaw. When she didn't respond, he scoffed and started toward the door. He ripped his jacket off the peg and didn't even look back when he spoke.

"Tell the happy couple M.B. sends his best."

She closed her eyes as the door slammed behind him.

"Not exactly how I pictured us doing this, but you do look beautiful."

"Thank you, Ronald," Hermione said, smiling up at him as she took his arm. "You clean up rather nice yourself."

Another swell of strings lilted through the air, and she gripped her bouquet tightly as they started walking.

Ginny had pulled her aside before the ceremony to assure her that she'd done everything in her power to convince Molly that it wasn't appropriate for Ron and Hermione to walk down the aisle together, but Hermione had waved her off.

There was nothing *inappropriate* about it either. Despite the fact that at one point everyone had assumed they'd end up married someday—including them—they had never really been a couple. After everything that had happened, it all felt a bit silly. And she was relieved that Ron was clearly of the same mind if he could joke about imagining them at their own wedding.

As it was, the ceremony was beautiful. Ginny was radiant, and tears streamed silently down Harry's face the entire time. Hermione was so incredibly full of happiness for her friend as she watched him receiving the hundreds of guests who wanted to be a part of this day. Nothing could fill the hole that James and Lily's absence left, but the faces of old Order members, former Hogwarts classmates, and what seemed to be nearly the entire Auror Division went a long way towards soothing the ache.

Hermione was catching her breath after her third dance with Luna when Ron joined her at the bar.

"Thought we might finally get a glimpse of Mystery Bloke tonight."

She stiffened. She'd been distracted enough not to think about the fight with Draco for all of five minutes, and she was not pleased to be reminded by the subject of it.

"I think this would have been a tad overwhelming for him," she said, taking a sip of champagne. "You Weasleys can be a bit much."

He grinned at her pointed look and elbowed her in what was surely meant to be a playful manner.

“Come on, ‘Mione,” he wheedled. “Drop the act.”

“Act?” she repeated turning to face him.

He rolled his eyes. “According to Ginny you *supposedly* made things official with this bloke over a month ago, and you still think it’s too soon to introduce him?”

“I don’t actually see how it’s any business of yours when I do or don’t do anything, Ron.”

He leaned onto the bar and brought his face close to hers. “It’s my business if you’re using a fake boyfriend as an excuse not to go out with me.”

“Go out with you?” Hermione repeated, stunned. “You haven’t even asked me out,” she said as though that was somehow the most important part of what he’d just said.

He beamed at her. “Tomorrow night? Dinner? What do you say?”

“What? No, Ron. Of course not. I am seeing someone.”

“All right, that’s enough, Hermione,” he said, dropping his obsequious tone. “Things haven’t been great between us since... everything, but I’m prepared to give you a second chance if you’ll be reasonable.”

“Give *me* a second chance? If *I’m* reasonable?” Hermione’s shock was giving way to anger as Draco’s words from the fight came back to her.

“You shut me out, Ron,” she said hotly. “You put all of the blame on me when Harry was just as much at fault as I was. It’s not as though I forced him to do anything!”

Ron’s colour was rising with every word, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I am sorry that we hurt you, but you and I were not together and never had been. Harry and I didn’t do anything wrong.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Did Harry ever tell you what the Horcrux showed him before I destroyed it?” There was a hiss to his voice that sent a chill down her spine.

“N-no. No, he didn’t.”

Ron was leering horribly, and she tried to suppress a sudden impression of his eyes glinting red in the candlelight.

“It showed him a vision, my vision, of the two of you... *together*.”

Hermione watched him with wide eyes.

“The thought of you together, of you choosing him over me... it haunted me. It possessed me when I wore the locket. It was all I could think about until I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to

get away. Away from the two of you.”

Her mouth was dry. She wanted to take a sip of her drink, but she couldn’t move.

Ron gave a terrible humourless chuckle. “Little did I know that by leaving, I was making the nightmare a reality.”

He raised his glass to her and then drained it.

“You’re right,” she said weakly, her voice sounding hoarse. “It never would have happened if you hadn’t left.”

She leaned forward in a last-ditch effort and lifted her chin. “Maybe if you can forgive yourself for leaving Harry then you can forgive me for staying with him.”

Ron’s head drew back as though she had struck him. She gave a little nod and turned to leave.

“You’d really rather be alone than be with me?” he asked in a small voice.

She looked back at him. “I’d rather be alone than with the wrong person, Ron. But as it turns out, I’m with the right one.”

He scoffed. “Hermione, you don’t have to—”

“It’s Malfoy,” she said calmly. “The person I’m with is Draco.”

She thought Ron’s eyeballs might actually fall out of his head for a second, but then his face split in a wide grin. He threw back his head and laughed. He laughed until his face was red and tears were forming in his eyes.

“Oh, Merlin, that’s good,” he said, shaking his head. “The only thing less believable than this Mystery Bloke is you dating Malfoy.”

“I am,” she said flatly. “We’ve been spending time together since New Year’s.”

Ron continued chuckling, but then caught sight of someone over her shoulder.

“Hey, Harry! Gin!” he called. “Get a load of this. Apparently, the bloke Hermione’s been hiding is Malfoy!”

“Oh, are you telling people now?” Ginny said excitedly.

“That’s great, Hermione,” Harry said, smiling and putting a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Hermione and Ron both stared at them.

“Y-you knew?” Hermione stuttered.

“Well,” Ginny started. “We didn’t know for sure, of course, but—”

“We figured it out pretty quickly,” Harry finished.

"How?" Hermione asked, her voice still sounding thin.

"Oh, I guess it was 'years' worth of evidence'?" Ginny said looking at Harry for confirmation.

"Right, yeah, 'years' worth of evidence' and 'he sounds like a tosser,'" Harry said. "I mean, honestly, Hermione, how many people openly disliked you?"

"Couple that with the mind-blowing sex," Ginny added. "I mean, he just has that vibe, you know?" Harry nodded fervently.

Ron made a choking noise, and Hermione suddenly remembered he was there. When she glanced over at him, the redness of his laughter had faded completely into a sickly shade of taupe.

She grimaced and decided to give him another moment to compose himself. Looking back at Harry, she said, "That day in the Ministry lift, I thought you might suspect it was Theo."

Harry smiled. "Nott? Nah, there was no way you could have any evidence he didn't like you. Hardly even spoke to him in school."

Hermione gave a shrug. That was true.

"But it was pretty obvious that he at least knew who it was," Harry added, looking smug. "Didn't leave many candidates."

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but Ron had finally found his voice.

"You're really dating Malfoy?"

"Yes, I am," Hermione said, feeling slightly weightless after the admission. "And we're very happy together," she added with a smile.

A sudden thought struck her. "Actually, we're in a bit of a fight at the moment, so I should probably just go and deal with that."

She stepped forward and pulled Harry and Ginny into a hug by their shoulders.

"Congratulations, you two," she said, squeezing them tightly. "I love you both so much."

"We love you, too," they said together.

She turned back to Ron and made a split-second decision before she lost her nerve.

"Think about what I said, okay?" she urged, gripping his hands. He nodded numbly, and she gave him a tight-lipped smile.

"Okay, then, I'm off," she announced.

Ginny's voice rang out as Hermione turned on the spot.

“Tell Malfoy we still expect a gift!”

Draco counted three rings before he picked up the phone. He tried to adopt a disinterested tone as though he hadn’t been looking over at the infernal device every five minutes for the last two days.

“Hello?”

“That was very convincing,” Granger informed him with a distinct smirk in her voice. “It almost seemed like you hadn’t been waiting for the phone to ring for the past two days.”

Merlin, curse this insufferable witch.

“I think you must have the wrong number,” he drawled. “I’m not acquainted with anyone dim enough to think that that was an acceptable start to an apology.”

He had to admit that was a bit rich coming from him. He certainly owed her far more of an apology than she did him, but she always knew exactly how to throw him off-kilter.

“Oh, my mistake,” she said lightly. “You see, I was trying to reach my boyfriend.”

Like that.

Draco’s breath caught in his throat. *Boyfriend.*

“... but if this isn’t him...” Granger went on hesitantly.

He cleared his throat. “Oh, well—erm—I suppose it might be the right number, after all.”

There was something unspeakably pleasant about hearing the silence of her smiling. *These Muggles really know what they’re doing.*

“Can I come over?” she asked after a moment.

“I highly suggest that you do,” he said with a smile of his own.

She appeared in front of him before he even had a chance to set the phone down. He chuckled as he took in her appearance. Her curls were pinned into elegant swirls against her head and she wore a long, sleeveless bridesmaid gown in sage green. Clearly, she’d come straight from the wedding.

“A bit formal for an apology, Granger,” he said, quirking a brow.

She hiked up the skirt of the dress and straddled his lap on the sofa. She hugged him tightly around the shoulders and spoke against his ear.

“You were right.”

“Ooh, I liked the sound of that,” he said, wiggling his shoulders in a mock shiver. “Let’s have one for this side, too.”

He turned his head to offer the other ear. She rolled her eyes but placed her lips against it.
“You were right about everything, Draco.”

“Mm, careful Granger, a bloke could get used to that.”

“Well, don’t,” she said with a smirk, linking her hands behind his neck and leaning back to look at him.

Her face grew serious after a moment. “You were right about Ron. I let him alienate me because I felt guilty, but Harry and Ginny and the other Weasleys shouldn’t have let him. I needed them, and they let me down.”

He nodded. God, it was good to hear her acknowledge for once that not everything was her bloody fault.

“And yes, he treated me worse than Harry because he wanted me for himself.”

Draco nodded again.

“He—erm—well, he tried to ask me out tonight,” she said sheepishly.

“That slimy git!” Draco snarled, trying to get to his feet.

Granger pressed down on his shoulders. “I told him I was with you.”

Draco stilled at her words. “With... me?” he asked. “Me, specifically?”

She nodded. “I told him about you. Harry and Ginny, too. Well, I guess they already knew, but yes.”

“You said my name?”

She nodded again. “Both of them.”

“How did he react?” he asked eagerly, imagining the scene.

“Well, he sort of looked like he was choking on thin air...”

Draco gave a satisfied hum.

“But that might have been because Ginny used the words ‘mind-blowing sex,’” she continued.

He barked a laugh, wrapping his arms around her middle. “Now that is the best start to an apology I’ve ever heard.”

"I am sorry," she said into his shoulder. "I should have told them sooner. I shouldn't have cared what Ron thought."

"It's okay," he said, bringing a hand to the back of her head. "I know you were just trying to avoid conflict. I shouldn't have pushed you. And I'm so sorry for the way I spoke to you. I was angry on your behalf and I took it out on you."

He felt her nod against his neck. "It's okay."

Draco felt tempted to add more. Specifically to say something like he would never let it happen again. But more than anything he didn't want to make promises he couldn't keep. He had never felt this way about anyone before, and he honestly couldn't say what he would or wouldn't do. So, he offered the only thing he was sure of.

"I'll try to be better."

Her cheek pressed against him. "I know you will."

He leaned back to look at her. "As... your boyfriend?"

She gave him a shy smile. "If you want."

He threaded his fingers into her hair and kissed her. "I want," he said against her lips.

Hermione kissed him back for a moment but then pulled away. "Hold that thought, my cushioning charm's worn off and these shoes are killing me."

She slid off his lap and turned, setting her clutch on the coffee table. As she did, she noticed a small bowl filled with various items: twigs, pine needles, what looked like tiny dried berries, and some acorns.

Her lips quivered as she spoke. "Draco... did you collect this potpourri yourself?"

He leaned forward, frowning at it. "Yes, I did, but it doesn't smell very strong. You'll have to show me where you get yours." He pressed a kiss to the side of her head before sitting back.

Hermione closed her eyes as her heart clenched at the adorableness. "I can do that."

She leaned back to slip off the strappy silver sandals and caught sight of the TV for the first time.

"Season two finale?" she asked, undoing her buckles. "We've seen this already."

Draco shrugged. "It's a good one."

She smiled and snuggled into his side, wrapping her hands around his arm. Her fingers traced lightly over the lines of his Mark.

“Yeah, it is.”

His wand is shaking so violently in his hand he's terrified he will drop it. There's no coming back if he drops it. They will never let him forget. The pain in his arm is blinding. Black spots cloud his eyes. He can hardly see. The huddled form in front of him is moaning in pain. Everyone in the room is jeering, heckling. Except him. Those red eyes sit in a silent face and watch his weakness, his fear, consume him whole.

Then the form is up, and it's at him. A blow slams into his cheek and he swears the fist hits the back of his skull. He falls to the ground. What little vision he had is gone. Only black. Black and the voices. The form is yelling now, too. “Coward. Weak. Fight me. Fight back. You're nothing. Waste of space. Worthless.” It's kicking him. His lungs are obliterated, he can't breathe.

“Disappointment. Good for nothing. Fight back. Coward.” It kicks his face. Blood pours from his mouth. Again. His ear is nearly torn off. Again. His cheek caves in. It will kill him. They will let it kill him. Maybe if he's strong enough to do the spell, the pain in his arm will stop. He's not sure, but it has to. It has to stop. It can't stay like this. It will drive him mad. Maybe that's why they're all mad.

He drags himself off the floor and points his wand. It's shaking still, but this time with rage. Rage that this is what it's come to, that everything is over for him. He never had a chance. Never got to fix any of it. This is the last night of this life. And that one, too. He screams as the magic rips out of him, taking a piece of his soul with it.

“Draco! Draco, it's Hermione. It's Granger. It's a dream. Come back to me, it's a dream.”

He flinched as hands grabbed him, and he nearly struck out at the form. But the hands were wrong. Small, soft, gentle.

“It's July of 2000, the war's been over for more than two years. You're in your flat in London. You're safe. I have you. It's Hermione. It's Granger.”

He blinked away the blackness still clouding his vision. The lamps were on, and he could see that it was his room. The hands were joined by a soft body pressing down on top of him. He wrapped his arms around it, trembling all over.

“Do you feel this?”

A blanket of hair was lowered over his face, sliding over cheeks and chin and forehead. It tickled his nose, and he drew in a sharp breath.

Vanilla.

“It’s okay, you’re okay,” she said, reaching for her wand. She Summoned her small bag and rummaged through it.

“Taste this,” she said, pushing something between his lips. The cool spice of mint immediately cut through the fog in his brain. It flooded through his mouth and up into his sinuses.

Granger.

He could see her then, eyes wide and staring as she softly stroked through his hair.

“Are you back?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, his voice hoarse from sleep and the scream.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” he said firmly, squeezing his left forearm tightly with his right hand. His arms were behind her back, but he was fairly certain she knew what he was doing. He couldn’t help it though. It was still burning.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“Just this,” he said, reaching up to press gently on the back of her head until she laid it on his chest. “I just need this.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Living with It

Chapter Notes

I was missing my babies the other day, so I wrote a little [drabble](#) on Twitter that is a prequel to this chapter. You won't miss any plot details if you skip it; it's just a little domestic snapshot :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It had been a few days since Draco's nightmare, but Hermione was still hesitant to bring it up. He hadn't asked her to talk about her nightmare he'd witnessed, but, of course, he'd known what that was about.

She had an idea about his. He'd been clutching at his Mark when he'd woken her with a scream.

Merlin, that scream. She'd never heard anything like it, and she hoped she never would again.

Her eyes traced over the skull and serpent as Draco rested his arm on the kitchen table. She should just ask him. The worst he could say was that he didn't want to talk about it. She would respect that.

Hermione had just opened her mouth to speak when she heard the unmistakable sound of a key turning in the lock of her front door. She froze.

"Hello! Anyone home?"

"Oh, my god," she breathed as Draco's head jerked up to look toward the voice in the hall.

"Greetings from Australia!"

Draco turned a confused look on her as she got to her feet. She was painfully aware that she was clad only in her knickers and his shirt from last night. It covered her easily, brushing halfway down her thighs, but still.

The Grangers entered the kitchen with wide smiles on their faces. Those smiles turned to comical o's of shock as they took in their daughter and the man in his underwear at her kitchen table. Hermione snatched up her wand and quickly transfigured a linen napkin into a t-shirt for Draco.

"Mum, Dad, what a surprise!" Hermione said weakly, going to greet them.

They each hugged her rather loosely, keeping their eyes on the stranger.

"Sorry to barge in on your breakfast, dear," her mother said, looking embarrassed. "We never expected that you wouldn't be alone."

"It's no problem," Hermione said, turning to Draco and giving him a look that was equal parts apologetic and pleading. He seemed to shake himself out of a stupor and quickly got to his feet. She cringed sympathetically as he pulled on the shirt and tugged the legs of his boxer briefs further down his thighs.

"Mum, Dad, this is my boyfriend, Draco. Draco, this is my mum and dad, Drs. Jean and David Granger."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, son," David said warmly holding out a hand.

"The pleasure's mine, sir," Draco said as he took it. "I'm sorry to be so... underdressed for the occasion."

"A boyfriend, Hermione. You could have mentioned that," Jean admonished as she shook Draco's hand.

"Mum, please," Hermione groaned. "Why don't you both grab plates. We've only just started."

"It looks wonderful, dear," Jean said as she looked over the bacon and eggs.

Hermione and Draco sat back in their chairs, poking idly at their plates.

"What do you do, Draco?" David asked as he and Jean took their seats.

"I'm a full-time student right now, sir, at University College London."

"Oh, that's very impressive!" Jean said brightly. "Is that where you met Hermione? Did you have a class together?"

"No, Mum," Hermione said quietly, not meeting Draco's questioning look. "I work for the Ministry, remember? In the Muggle Liaison Office."

"Oh, of course," Jean said, with a little shake of her head.

"How did you meet then?" David asked.

"We actually went to school together at Hogwarts," Hermione said.

"Oh, dear," Jean said with a frown. "You'll have to excuse us, Draco. I'm sure Hermione must have mentioned you, but I'm afraid our memories aren't what they used to be these days."

Jean and David shared a little laugh while Hermione stared resolutely at her plate.

"Not at all," she heard Draco say, feeling his eyes on her.

"So, that means you must be magical, too!" David said excitedly. "Show us a trick then!"

Hermione cringed at his childlike tone. She glanced up to see Draco looking at her for guidance and gave a little shrug.

He considered her for a moment before picking up his wand and tapping gently on one of the daisies in the table's centerpiece. The flower transformed at once into a delicate white and yellow butterfly. It fluttered to land on the tip of Draco's wand, and he directed it out of the open window.

Jean let out a sigh of amazement while David clapped eagerly. Draco looked pleasantly surprised, if a little embarrassed, at their reactions.

Hermione felt on the verge of tears.

"What brings you back to London?" Draco asked when it was clear Hermione wasn't going to say anything.

"This is our slowest time at the clinic," David said around a bite of bacon.

"Everyone's away on holiday," Jean explained.

"We thought we'd get in a visit to our little girl before the back-to-school rush," David went on, raising a hand to brush Hermione's chin affectionately.

Draco watched the interaction with an odd expression. "I should get going," he said suddenly, getting to his feet. "Leave you three to catch up."

"Don't be silly, dear," Jean said. "We're the ones intruding, after all."

"Although, don't stick around on our account if you have somewhere to be," David put in. "Maybe we could see you for dinner one night while we're here?"

"That would be wonderful, thank you," Draco said, smiling warmly. "It was so nice to meet you both. Please, excuse me."

Hermione watched Draco's hasty retreat and then stood herself. "I'll just go see him out," she said quietly.

She found him in her room getting dressed.

"I'm so sorry about that," she said at once, closing the door behind her. "I had no idea they were visiting."

"It's all right," Draco said as he buttoned his shirt. "They seemed surprisingly agreeable about meeting me in my pants."

Hermione sank onto the bed with her head in her hands.

"I'm sorry he asked you to do magic like that... like a party trick."

“You know I don’t mind showing off.”

“But still...” Hermione could feel her throat closing. “They weren’t like that before.”

There was a beat of silence, and she looked up as Draco knelt in front of her. “Before what?” he asked.

She blinked furiously. “Before the war.”

He was watching her carefully, eyes searching her face.

“You sent them away,” he said after a long moment. “That’s why they’re in Australia.”

She nodded. “I... I erased myself from their memories. Created new identities for them.”

She could tell Draco was shocked by that, and the tears began sliding down her cheeks. “I restored what I could, but most of it is just gone. The agreeableness is a side effect, like the way someone recently Obliviated is calm and complacent.”

He nodded, brows creased with concern, and she couldn’t hold back the sobs anymore. “They’re still my parents, of course, and I love them, but... so much of who they were is gone. I n-never thought it would ch-change their p-personalities.”

Draco leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her as she cried. “I’m sorry,” she said when she could draw a full breath. “I just wasn’t prepared.”

“You don’t have to apologise to me,” he said gently. “I understand why you’re upset.”

She nodded against his shoulder.

“You should spend some time with them,” he said, sitting back on his heels to look at her. “I’ll see you in a few days for dinner?”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

He brought his hands to her cheeks and kissed her despite the wetness. “Please don’t beat yourself up, Hermione. They were lucky to have you protecting them.”

She nodded again as new tears spilled out of her eyes.

He pause for a moment, looking as though he meant to add something more. She waited, but he simply pressed a final kiss to her forehead and stood.

He gave her a weak smile as he turned on the spot.

“How do you live with it?” Draco asked, leaning his head onto one hand.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be a bit more specific,” Lucius drawled.

“Everything you’ve done,” Draco said.

“Do you require a definition of the word ‘specific,’ my son?”

Draco gritted his teeth, beginning to regret this conversation before it had even begun.

“Do you think about the people you killed?”

His father was quiet for a long moment.

“No. Their life is over. What is there to think about?”

Draco sighed heavily through his nose and let his eyes fall shut.

“I think about their families,” Lucius continued quietly. “The people they left behind.”

Draco’s eyes snapped back open to stare at him.

“I wonder if they remember to think about them today. And when they remember them, how do they feel? Is the pain still so fresh and bright that it steals the breath from their lungs? Can they recall a fond memory and only feel the happiness without the pain? Do they wake up in the morning and forget for a moment that they are gone? Or has it been long enough that they don’t even spare a single thought for them this day.”

Draco flexed his hands under the table, trying to keep his breathing even.

“And how do you live with it?”

Lucius raised his eyes from where they had been fixed on the table. “I don’t have a choice.”

Draco gave a resigned nod.

“I understand you’re still seeing Miss Granger.”

Draco nodded again. “We’re together. I’m not going to stop seeing her.”

Lucius shook his head. “I can’t imagine which part of what I said to you last time is giving you trouble.”

“I hate to break it to you, Father, but I don’t actually require your approval for who I choose to date.”

“I’m trying to protect you from yourself. I don’t understand why you feel the need to take such a risk—”

“It’s not a risk.”

“—a girl from no wizarding family—”

“Magic is magic; she doesn’t need a wizarding family.”

“—book smarts, no real understanding of her power—”

“Don’t talk about her like that.”

“—ability to perform spells, no doubt, but to be *truly* in touch with her magic—”

“Her magic is beautiful! I’ve seen it!”

Lucius froze.

Draco drew in a shaky breath, feeling his heart pound against his ribs.

“Please tell me you do not mean what I think you mean by that.”

Draco just looked at his father.

To his surprise, a smile spread across Lucius’s face.

“Well, I understand now that I’m much too late to intervene. You love this girl.”

It wasn’t a question.

Draco cleared his throat. “As I said, I don’t require your approval, Father. Not for Hermione, nor for anything else in my life.”

Lucius’s smile widened into a grin. “No, you certainly don’t. Thank Merlin for that.”

Draco blinked at him.

“I’m sorry to say it, Draco, but you come from a long line of disappointing fathers. I’m glad I was successful, at least, in ridding you of the need for my approval.”

Draco felt his face creasing in confusion. “You did nothing but force me to seek your approval. I spent my whole life doing it.”

“And looking back now, do you find my standards to have been reasonable?”

“No,” Draco said honestly.

“And what about my methods for encouragement?” Lucius waved a hand in a whimsical gesture. “Did they inspire you?”

“No.”

“How about my approach to building your self-esteem? Do you feel I’ve instilled a strong sense of worth in you?”

Draco heard the echo of Granger's words from their conversation about Hogwarts on their first date.

"You cut me down at every opportunity," he repeated numbly. "You made me feel small. You made me feel worthless."

Draco looked back up at his father. "You bullied me."

Lucius nodded. "And do you need my approval?"

"I crave it!" Draco shouted suddenly. "I'm desperate for it!"

Lucius leaned forward. "You *want* it, Draco, but you do not need it."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but Lucius raised a brow in question.

"I... don't need it," Draco said after a moment.

"And why not?"

"Because you were so awful to me, your opinion lost all value in my eyes."

Lucius smiled again. "Precisely."

"Did you turn me into a bully so I would be so horrible to Hermione that she would never want me as a way to protect her?" Draco blurted.

Lucius let out one of his rare genuine laughs. "A truly dastardly plan, Draco. You give me too much credit."

Draco felt a smile quirk his own lips. It had been a rather ridiculous notion.

"Tell me," Lucius said. "When did you stop needing my approval?"

Draco thought. "At least five years ago, maybe six."

Lucius nodded gravely. "Then you will have an extra decade of freedom that my father denied to me."

Draco allowed himself to consider for the first time that his father may have truly lost faith in Voldemort long before the second war. Knowing what was coming, he had kept a careful balance between showing enough affection that he did not fully alienate Draco while still hurting him enough that when the time came, Draco would no longer be desperate to follow in his father's footsteps. Of course that choice had been taken away from them; something his father had still never apologised for. Draco realised that may have been intentional as well. If Lucius had tried before now, there was no way Draco would have been able to accept it. Even if he gave that impression for his mother's sake. He continued along that same train of thought.

"I still need Mother's approval," Draco said finally.

Lucius smiled again. "That doesn't concern me at all. You also come from a long line of men who somehow managed to attract a woman who is far too good for them."

"Someone who deserves better than me," Draco said, remembering his father's words.

Lucius nodded again. "I could wish for no greater gift for you, my son, than the love of a woman you do not deserve."

When Draco caught sight of the others waiting outside the walls of Azkaban, he was taken aback to see that Theo's face was bleeding. The blood from his nose had combined with that of a freshly split lip and trickled down his chin. Long drips had stained his shirt, and a dark purple bruise was already blooming across his cheek and chin.

"Merlin, Theo," Draco said without thinking. "Are you all right?"

The other three stared at him in shock. True, they never acknowledged what Theo got up to during his visits, but he never came out looking like this.

"Fine," Theo said after a moment. The filter of his cigarette was soaked with blood. Draco held out his hand in a silent request for his own. When Theo lit it and handed it over, however, Draco found that he didn't need it like he normally did.

He still puffed at it as he considered Theo. "Well," Draco said finally, handing the cigarette off to Blaise and drawing his wand. "Shall I clean you up a bit before Norwich?"

Theo stared at him for a beat and then nodded. Draco turned him by the shoulder until Theo faced him fully. He carefully siphoned off the blood from his face and shirt. He healed the split lip and placed a glamour over the bruise. He'd always been rubbish at healing bruises.

He nodded when he'd finished, and Theo turned toward the dock without another word. Blaise handed back the cigarette with two raised brows, and they followed after him.

Pansy offered to get the first round, and Draco drank deeply before turning to Theo.

"Are you going to make me ask again if you're all right?"

Blaise and Pansy watched carefully from the opposite side of the booth.

"Fuck off, Draco," Theo said harshly. "I haven't once asked you to talk about Lucius. Even when you come out looking like a stiff breeze would send you crumpling to the floor."

"Guess I'm a better friend than you," Draco said with a shrug. "Plus I've never come out with half my body weight in blood on my face."

“What part of ‘fuck off’ are you not getting?” Theo asked, looking at him for the first time. “What, you think now that you’ve got all your life problems sorted you can start in on mine? You’ve made it a couple months without calling Granger *Mudblood* and now you’re a beacon of wisdom?”

Draco recoiled and Pansy laid a hand on Theo’s arm. “Theo, honey, that was harsh.”

“I’m sorry, but I am really not in the mood for a lecture from another Death Eater descendant.”

“Fair enough,” Blaise cut in. “But unfortunately, at this table, your only other option is ‘providing material support to a terrorist organization,’” he said with a gesture between himself and Pansy.

“Here’s to the sins of our fathers,” Pansy said dryly, raising her glass.

“And mothers,” Blaise added, clinking his glass to hers.

They drank while keeping their eyes on Theo. He looked back and forth between them and then seemed to deflate.

“I shouldn’t have said that, Draco. It was out of order.”

Draco shrugged. “You’re not wrong. I don’t have any room to lecture anyone on anything. I was angling more for an active listening type situation.”

Theo let one corner of his mouth lift in a smile.

“So were you just nostalgic for Nott, Sr.’s caressing touch or did the bastard get away from you?” Blaise asked.

Theo lit another cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke before replying.

“It’s pretty fucked up. I don’t think you’d understand.”

“Try me,” the other three said in unison.

Theo chuckled and shook his head. “With friends like these...”

Blaise smirked.

Theo took another long drag before starting.

“I’ve spent all this time paying him back for the beatings I didn’t deserve, for the ones that came out of nowhere, for the ones he didn’t even bother telling me a reason for.”

Draco watched as Theo’s eyes darkened. The light faded from them like a cloud passing in front of the sun, leaving a chill like stepping into the shade.

"But there's a part of me—one of the parts he fucked up by giving me a taste for pain so young—that gets satisfaction from being punished. When I know I deserve the beating, it's like penance."

Theo tapped the ash off his cigarette and let a wry smile twist his mouth. "Cleanses the soul."

Draco and Blaise were silent, but Pansy took one of Theo's hands across the table. "Why did you think you deserved this one?"

Theo looked up at her. "You know why."

"Janelle?" Blaise asked.

Draco shifted in his seat. Merlin, he was a terrible friend. He'd been so preoccupied with Granger, he'd completely forgotten about the night of his birthday. He and Granger had only been to one Friday drinks in the past month and Janelle hadn't been there.

Theo nodded glumly. "I don't know what I was thinking getting involved with her."

"What happened?" Draco asked, feeling a prickle of protective alarm for his friend. It was his fault she'd been introduced to Theo in the first place.

"Nothing," Theo said. "We've just been talking. She gave me her phone number, but you know that kind of Muggle technology won't work at the Manor. We've been writing letters which she seems to think is terribly romantic, and I know she wants to see me again cause she only brings it up in every single one, but I'm terrified because I know I'll have to lie about everything and I'm definitely going to slip up and then I definitely won't be able to see her and I'll fuck everything up for you and Granger and it's just..."

Theo took a gasping breath as the other three stared.

"I shouldn't be anywhere near her anyway," Theo finished. "Son of the famed Muggle-killer? It's fucking disgusting."

Draco eyed Theo over the rim of his glass.

You are dangerous for her.

"So you think you might kill her?" Draco asked casually.

Theo turned to stare at him. "What the fuck did you just say to me?"

"I'm just trying to figure out your specific concern. Do you think you inherited Muggle-killing like you did those eyes?"

"No, but—"

"But you think the Nott magic is toxic? Maybe just being near her could be harmful to her?"

"No, I—"

“You think you’re some kind of Dark creature, powerless to resist the urge to hurt Muggles?”

“We get the point, Draco,” Pansy interrupted.

“Does he?” Draco asked, pointing at Theo. “Because I’m still confused on why he shouldn’t be anywhere near Janelle.”

“She deserves better than me,” Theo said dejectedly.

Draco grinned. “You’re bloody right she does. Janelle’s brilliant and you’re a wanker, and if she wants you then Merlin help her.”

Theo stared at Draco like he’d lost his mind.

“Do you think Granger deserves better than me?” he asked.

“Yes,” all three said at once.

“And if I told you I was going to step aside so that she could marry the safe choice, Ronald Weasley?”

The Slytherins all wrinkled their faces in identical expressions of distaste.

“Exactly,” Draco said, beaming at them. “She wants me, so fuck it.”

“But what I come from...” Theo said, shaking his head.

“You’re thinking about this all wrong, darling,” Pansy said gently. “Don’t you think you will appreciate her more than any Muggle bloke ever could because of what you come from? Don’t you think you will protect her more fiercely than anyone else would? Your father hasn’t ensured that you will hurt her, he’s ensured that you will cherish her.”

Draco watched the warmth seep back into Theo’s eyes.

Theo looked at him. “And lying to her...?”

Draco nodded.

“It gets easier, but it never stops hurting.”

When Draco landed in the parlour of the Manor, he was pleased to see his mother standing in the doorway.

“Hello, darling. How was—oh—”

He crossed the room and pulled her into a tight hug before she could finish. Her arms hung limply in surprise at the embrace, but she raised them after a moment to grip his shoulders.

"I'm so thankful for you, Mother," he said in a tight voice. "I don't say it enough, and sometimes I'm such a little git to you, but I hope you know how much I love and appreciate you."

He felt her draw in a tiny gasp, and he released her. Her eyes were shining as she raised a shaky hand to his face. "Oh, my son... my greatest gift," she said in a near whisper. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

He gave her a warm smile.

"There's a lot of that going around."

Hermione played with the fingers of Draco's left hand as her eyes roved over his Mark. She could hear the low steady beat of his heart under her ear, but she wasn't sure if he was asleep or not. She didn't want to lift her head in case she disturbed him.

She took in a deep breath of his scent and relished the feel of his skin against her cheek, her chest, her legs. He had spent quite a bit of time with them while her parents were visiting, but not like this. Even though she knew it was slightly ridiculous, part of her felt guilty about taking advantage of her parents' agreeableness by having Draco stay over while they were in the house. Luckily, whatever aristocratic sense of propriety had been instilled in him seemed to follow along the same lines.

She squeezed her eyes shut as a burst of affection burned through her chest. He'd been so wonderful with them. He answered their questions eagerly, even when they repeated themselves. He'd told them stories about her from their time at school. He used as much magic as possible around them, adding elaborate flourishes to even the simplest tasks.

Her father had mentioned teasing a young Hermione about things getting lost in her bushy hair, and Draco spent the rest of the two weeks Conjuring 'found' items and pretending to draw them out of her curls. The car keys, her mother's glasses, a treacle tart. Tears stung her eyes as she remembered the sound of her father's laugh every time Draco produced something more ridiculous. She thought they might be asked to leave the restaurant with the noise he'd made when her mother mentioned being chilly and Draco pulled a full-size knitted afghan out of her ponytail.

She didn't know how he managed to be so theatrical without her feeling like he was making fun of them, but he did.

And after a few days, she began to see their reactions in a new light. She saw the childlike exuberance that used to make her squirm with embarrassment and shame for what it really was.

Joy.

Her parents had always treated her like a wonder. They'd always been in awe of her precocity, her curiosity, her tenacity. The only real difference now was that they were less reserved about demonstrating it. And when her mother had wept silently as a figurine of her childhood horse came to life and nuzzled against her palm, Hermione thought that maybe that could be a beautiful thing.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Oh, and bonus points to anyone who caught in last week's chapter that Draco is re-watching the season 2 finale of Buffy because that is the first episode in which Spike and Buffy form an alliance. The beginning of it all :)

Love Like That

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentine's Day!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Well, well, well, I guess it’s just a Malfoy kind of day,” Shannon said as Draco approached the counter.

He felt his face contort in confusion at the use of his surname. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Shannon said as she started on his coffee, “that I just had the pleasure of meeting your mother.”

The confusion deepened. While Draco supposed he might have mentioned the name of the cafe he frequented in passing and Shannon was wearing a name tag, he couldn’t imagine what reason Narcissa would have had for seeking her out.

“She’s gorgeous, by the way,” Shannon continued. “I can see where you get your good looks.”

He fought back the urge to laugh at that and silently thanked the universe that Shannon would never have the displeasure of meeting the parent he truly took after.

“My mother was here?”

“Mhmm.”

“What did she want?”

“Well, she got tea to go, but it seemed like she just wanted to chat a bit. She actually invited me to lunch with Hermione.”

“Excuse me?” Draco said, praying he’d misheard.

“Yes, well, I mentioned that you two had spent some time with Hermione’s parents a few weeks ago, and she actually seemed a bit miffed about that. Said something like, ‘clearly not too soon anymore,’ and then she said she was just off to see Hermione for lunch and would I like to come along. But obviously, I’m working today.”

“Wait, lunch *today*?” Draco asked, feeling his insides turn to ice.

"Yeah, she said she was headed to surprise her at work."

"Fucking hell, what time was this?" he demanded.

"She couldn't have left more than ten minutes ago," Shannon said, clearly disturbed by his reaction. "Draco, is everything—"

But he was already out the door. If his mother walked to the official Apparition point, that would add a few minutes. He ducked behind a dumpster and turned on the spot.

He landed in an alley still several streets from the main building. He ran at a flat sprint, barrelling through the crowd in front of the Ministry visitor's entrance and shoved his way into the phone box.

"Draco Malfoy for Hermione Granger," he gasped into the receiver.

It seemed to take an eternity for the operator to accept him and issue the visitor's badge. He clipped it to his jacket as the box lowered below the street.

"Come on, come on," he chanted under his breath.

When the box stopped moving, he flung open the door and raced to the security desk. The guard gave a displeased look at his red, sweating face but accepted his wand nonetheless.

Draco practically jumped into a lift as the doors were closing, nearly crushing a tiny wizard against the back wall. He didn't even apologise but just repeatedly punched the button for the level of the Muggle Liaison Office.

He looked down at his watch. Surely, he'd gained a few minutes on his mother. But still, even a few minutes...

The doors opened and he flew out onto the floor. His eyes raked the cubicles looking for her nameplate, but before he could spot it, his mother's overly polite laugh tinkled across the space. He saw her blond head sticking up over the low wall and raced along the aisle until he reached her.

Narcissa was standing in the doorway of Granger's cubicle, so preoccupied with prattling on about whatever she was saying that she didn't even realise the way Granger was white as a sheet. She didn't see the way her fists were clenched, crumpling the parchment she held. She didn't notice the way Granger's eyes were unfocused and staring, seeing something beyond this moment. She didn't see the way Granger was trembling.

Draco shouldered past his mother and snatched Granger's wand off the desk. He threw up a silencing charm over the cubicle. He didn't know if she would scream, but he didn't want to risk it.

He spun her chair away from the desk, and away from Narcissa, and crouched in front of her. He immediately buried his face in her hair as he hugged her, his heart clenching painfully with the knowledge that seeing his face might make the flashback worse. At least she was breathing this time.

“Hermione, it’s me. It’s Draco. You’re safe. I have you.”

“Draco,” she whimpered. “Please don’t tell her it’s Harry. Please don’t tell her.”

He held her tight to his chest with one hand and stroked over her hair with the other. “Hermione, it’s August of 2000, the war’s been over for more than two years. Harry is safe. You’re at your desk in the Ministry. You’re safe.”

He felt her take in a shuddering breath and leaned back to look at her.

“Did you hear that sound?” he asked. “The lift arriving to your floor.”

She blinked several times beneath a furrowed brow, and he glanced around for another tangible sensory cue.

“Here’s your quill,” he said, reaching behind her and plucking it off the desk. He ran the feather lightly through her hands. “You were in the middle of filling out a form.”

Her breathing was starting to even out, and Draco replaced her quill with the coffee cup at her elbow. He urged her to take a sip. She did, grimacing slightly at the now too-cold beverage. He privately considered her inability to finish a cup while it was still warm to be one of her more endearing idiosyncrasies.

“You must be in the Ministry,” he said with a smirk at her wrinkled nose. “We’d never serve swill like this at Malfoy Manor.”

She let out a breath that might have almost been a chuckle. “I’m sorry—”

He pressed a finger over her lips. “Now, Granger, I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again. If I hear you say that word, I *will* hex you. Right here in the middle of the Muggle Liaison Office. They’ll have me on the next boat to Azkaban, but I won’t even hesitate.”

She did chuckle at that. Her eyes flicked quickly between both of his, but they were clear. “Thank you, Draco.”

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead, meeting his mother’s eye over the top of her head as he did it.

“Stay just like this. Don’t move,” he instructed Granger, keeping his eyes on Narcissa. “I’ll be right back with some water for you.”

She nodded, and he stood.

He moved past the desk and gestured for Narcissa to follow him. He was glad that his expression seemed to indicate that he was not going to brook disobedience. She followed him past the lifts and into an empty hallway. He rounded on her, sparing only a moment to take in her shaken appearance.

“Draco, I’m so sorry, I didn’t think—”

"No, you didn't think, Mother," he interrupted. "How could you be so short-sighted? Surely, you haven't forgotten the circumstances under which Hermione last saw you."

"No, of course. I'll never forget."

"Then it was incredibly foolish and selfish of you to come here today. I asked for you to trust my judgment that Hermione was not ready to see you, but you deliberately flouted my wishes."

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I didn't know what would happen."

"I will not apologise for protecting her privacy," Draco said firmly. "My assurance should have been enough for you, without explanation. Please take a moment to consider how a witch as independent and self-reliant as Hermione will feel about you having witnessed that."

"Of course, you're right, Draco," Narcissa said with a solemn nod. "I'd like to apologise to her."

"That is out of the question," he returned. "You will leave now, and it will be her choice if and when she sees you again. If you'd like to put an apology in writing, I will read it and pass it along to her if I feel that it doesn't contain any potential triggers."

Narcissa nodded again.

Hermione felt guilty about eavesdropping, but watching the interaction between mother and son allayed a fear she didn't even realise she'd had.

Draco was furious. She'd maybe never seen him so angry. She felt like she could practically see waves of slate grey energy pouring off of him. It looked like storm clouds swirling in a high wind. It was beautiful and terrifying and made her feel incredibly safe. Like he was a vortex of power ready to level any potential threat to her.

But despite the fury she could see within him, outwardly he was calm. He reprimanded his mother, but he did not raise his voice. He did not curse. There was no scorn in his tone. He was not cruel.

Hermione realised suddenly that she and Draco fought the way they did because of who *they* were. Because of who they were together. It was not because he was a man in the habit of screaming at or belittling women.

As Hermione watched, Narcissa was chastened, but she was not cowed. He made her understand the gravity of her mistake, but she was not afraid of him. Hermione could tell Narcissa did not think for one second that Draco might raise his hand or his wand to her.

"Please just say it, Mother. I can see you holding something back," Hermione heard Draco say.

"You won't want to hear it," Narcissa replied after a brief pause.

Draco didn't say anything but raised his brows in invitation.

"I was thinking... you reminded me of your father."

Draco's face fell at once into a hard expression. "You're right. I didn't want to hear that."

"I know your father has many flaws, Draco, but the fact that he would do anything to protect me is not one of them."

Hermione watched as Narcissa placed a gentle hand against Draco's cheek. When she spoke again, it was almost too quiet for Hermione to hear.

"It makes me so proud to see you love like that."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. It wasn't the fact that Narcissa had used that word, nor even the easy way she'd said it. What stopped her heart was the way Draco reacted to hearing it.

He didn't react at all.

He didn't seem shocked or surprised. He didn't scoff or shrug it off. He didn't argue or correct her.

He just gave a nearly imperceptible nod and stepped back toward the mouth of the hallway.

"I need to check on Hermione."

"Yes, of course. Expect my letter later tonight."

Hermione ducked behind the cubicle walls and hurried back to her chair.

When Draco appeared in the doorway, he frowned at seeing her facing the desk.

"I thought I told you not to move."

She raised a brow. "I thought you were getting me water."

He looked down at his empty hands and chuckled. He picked up her wand off the desk and Conjured a full glass for her. She smiled at the sight of the goblet that could belong to a matching set with the one on her nightstand at home.

He sat in the chair across from her desk. "I noticed you seem to like that one."

She nodded and took a small sip. "After that first night, it was all I had of you."

He shook his head. "Merlin, for such a clever witch, you can be so thick sometimes. After that first night... you had all of me." He rested his chin against steepled fingers and seemed to consider for a moment before adding, "You always have."

Hermione could feel her lips trembling as she smiled. Between that admission, what she had seen in the hallway, and the residual adrenaline from the flashback, she was feeling decidedly shaky.

"Me too," she managed around the lump in her throat.

Draco leaned forward then. "So, does a panic attack at your desk qualify you for a sick day? Because I have a class that I would really love to skive off of."

She huffed a laugh and spread her hands over the papers on her desk. "Yes, I'm actually about five days ahead anyway. Let me just tell someone I'm leaving."

He smiled as she got to her feet.

"Lovely."

Hermione wished that she could say she didn't know how she had gotten so lucky as to have someone who always knew exactly what she needed after an attack, but she did know. And it wasn't lucky for either of them.

Regardless, she could still be thankful that they had each other. Especially when Draco had given her an excuse to change her setting instead of staring at her desk for hours in a vain attempt to focus.

It was a beautiful day, and they stopped at Hermione's house so she could swap her pantsuit for a sundress and sandals. Draco opted to leave his jacket, waistcoat, and tie behind as well.

Hermione pressed up onto her toes to kiss him as they waited in line for their sandwiches. She brought her hands under his chin and surreptitiously undid another button of his white shirt. The smirk he wore when she pulled back let her know that she wasn't quite as sneaky as she liked to think, but he left it open all the same.

He suggested that they walk as they eat, and when the rest of her nervous energy had faded, Hermione was grateful again that he could so easily coax her into the techniques that she usually neglected for herself even though she knew better.

Draco kept up a flow of light conversation as they ambled, and Hermione even pretended to let him talk her into a single scoop when they passed an ice cream vendor.

The sun was hot, and Hermione savoured the cool treat as she felt sweat forming on her neck.

They came to a park that was fairly empty for a Friday afternoon and decided to sit for a bit in the shade of an old oak. Hermione Conjured a large blanket that she mimed drawing out of her bag in case anyone was looking. They sat together on it, leaning against the trunk, and when Hermione wrapped an arm around Draco's waist, she found she quite liked the way the fine fabric of his shirt was clinging to his lightly sweating body. She made a little appreciative sound as she slipped her hand underneath it, and when she looked up she saw Draco's eyes following a bead of sweat as it trickled down her cleavage.

He met her gaze and the look in his eye sent a rush of wetness between her legs that had nothing to do with the temperature. The heightened state of general arousal that accompanied her attacks often left her craving physical intimacy. While it would have been harmful for him to indulge her back before they were a couple, before she trusted him so completely, that wasn't the case any longer.

Her eyelids fluttered as he lifted a hand and brushed it back under her ear, along her hairline. She could feel that the tendrils that had escaped her bun were clinging to her neck.

"You look hot, Miss Granger," he said in a low voice. He dragged a finger along the underside of her jaw and brought it to his lips.

"Mmm, and you taste simply divine."

The hair at his temples was darkened just slightly with moisture, and a flush was gathering on his cheeks. He looked so incredible with that molten gaze fixed on her that she thought she could be content if he was the only thing she ever saw for the rest of her life. She breathed heavily through an open mouth as she watched him bring his hand back and trail it down the side of her neck, down between her breasts, and down under the edge of her dress. She closed her eyes as he continued to touch and tease over her slippery skin.

"Draco—" she gasped when she felt him lean forward and lick along the top of one breast, not even bothering to pretend it was a kiss. She pressed her hands against his chest, but the sensation of his shirt sticking to the skin there did nothing to dispel the heat pooling below her navel. She found her fingers trailing over the exposed patch at his throat, moaning as he sucked the soft skin above the neckline of her dress.

She was just about to protest the hand she felt sliding up under her skirt when he pulled out his wand. At the sound of the Notice-Me-Not charm falling over their blanket, she scrambled into his lap and began tearing at the buttons of his shirt. She closed her mouth over his collarbone as she worked, humming with satisfaction at the salty, sweet tang of him. She slipped her hands under the fabric and savoured the feel of her fingers sliding over the sweaty skin.

Both of his hands were under her dress now. He was sliding them up her thighs, squeezing tightly as they cupped her arse. Suddenly, he pulled away roughly.

"What's wrong?" she asked in response to the crazed look on his face.

He swallowed heavily. "I need to see these," he said, tapping her hips in reference to her knickers.

"Okay," she said, completely nonplussed, and started to lay back onto the blanket.

"No, no," he said in a choked voice. "Stand up."

She slid off his lap and got to her feet, forehead creased with confusion. Her bare feet stepped between his open legs and he slowly lifted the skirt of her dress in front of his face.

"Oh, thank you, sweet mother of Merlin," he gasped when the knickers were revealed to him.

"Wha—" Hermione started, but she was abruptly cut off by the sensation of him pulling her forward and kissing furiously over her front. She stifled a moan as his lips and tongue went everywhere. In the crease of her thigh, the inside of her hip, her fabric-covered clit. She braced her hands against the trunk of the tree as he murmured something about *shorts*.

When her knees were nearly ready to give out from the onslaught, he ordered her to turn around. She did, and as he hoisted the skirt up to reveal her arse, she would have thought he was injured from the sound he made.

She cried out as his teeth clamped down on her without warning.

"I'm sorry," she said at once, not wanting him to stop, "I'll be quiet."

"No, Granger," he said roughly, picking his wand back up and casting a silencing charm over them. "I want you loud."

She was loud as he repeated the same treatment he'd given her front but with teeth this time. He squeezed and bit and licked and sucked every bit of skin that was touching the knickers. A burst of wetness flooded through her when he ripped the fabric down to bite firmly over her bare cheek. He caught her when her knees eventually did give out, letting her fall gently forward onto all fours. He replaced the fabric over her arse and leaned over her back, bringing a hand between her legs from behind and rubbing firmly over her fabric-covered cunt.

"I'm going to make you come in these tiny shorts," he said into her ear. "I'm not going to take them off, and I'm not going to touch you under them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, okay, yes, yes," she gasped. Her fingers dug into the soft ground beneath their blanket as she pressed back against him.

She didn't know what had sent him into such a frenzy, but nothing ever made her feel more desirable. A sharp ache of need was spreading through her as he panted into her neck.

"I'm going to touch you through this fabric until I feel you drench it for me, can you do that?"

"Yes, I will, I'll do it, please," she begged.

"Good girl."

He belted an arm under her breasts and leaned back onto his knees, pulling her up flush against his front. She looked down to where his hand was pressed onto her. His palm was flat between her spread legs and all four of his fingers were rubbing over her clit. She could feel his wrist and forearm against her arse.

He brought the arm around her middle up to slide off the flimsy straps of her sundress, and she felt one rip as he tore the neckline down.

“Oh, god,” she moaned as his rough hand slid across her exposed nipples. Heat was burning through her cunt, and every graze of her breasts sent a twinge to her clit. If he would just put something inside her. Fingers, tongue—she would take anything.

She quickly swallowed another moan as a man passed not five meters from their blanket.

“I said I want you loud, Granger.” He pinched her nipple hard, and she cried out, convulsing against his hand. He traced his fingertips gently back over it.

“Such a good girl.”

“Please, Draco, I need you inside,” she pleaded.

He dropped the hand from her nipple down to massage her clit and slid the hand behind her backwards so that his fingertips pressed up against her entrance.

“Inside here?” he asked, pushing the damp fabric up into her. Her cunt clenched reflexively at the tease. He pressed his fingers up in a matching rhythm with the hand on her clit.

“Oh, fuck, like that,” she gasped, bringing her arms up over her head to clasp behind his neck. She rocked against his hands, clutching his head next to hers. He spoke against her ear as the tension built in her.

“Imagined fucking you in these tiny shorts for months. Prayed for it. Ever since I saw you in them.”

She was nearly delirious with the teasing press of his fingers on her. When had he seen her in knickers without fucking her? She couldn’t remember.

“Want to know a secret, Granger?”

She let out a groan of pleasure as he licked across her ear.

“I came thinking of you in these shorts not one minute after seeing you in them. In the shower. With you in the next room.”

She felt her eyes widen as the memory came to her. She’d been wearing these the morning they ran into each other at Thomas and Shannon’s.

“You did?” she gasped out.

“That was the hardest I ever came before I got inside you.”

She collapsed forward with the strength of the jolt that went through her at those words. Nearly six months ago, but she had been thinking of him, too. Naked and wet and showering. She turned to face him on her knees.

“What did you think of? Tell me.”

His tongue came out to wet his lips as he sat back against the tree.

“You riding my thigh,” he said, drawing her forward to straddle one leg. She moaned as he rocked her over the hard muscle. “My mouth on these tits,” he whispered, leaning down to lick over one nipple. Her head fell back on a soft cry as his tongue circled the peaked flesh. “Your hand on my cock.”

She reached forward and ripped open his trousers. She pulled him out and stroked firmly from tip to base. His fingers dug into her hips as he groaned through gritted teeth. She squeezed tightly under the head, swiping her thumb over the tip when a bead of moisture gathered there.

“Fuck, you’re so good at that.”

He continued rocking her against him, and she timed her strokes to the movement. He brought the thumb of one hand down to press gently over her clit, and she knew it would be soon. She rolled her hips over his leg, squeezing with her thighs. Every slide of the wet fabric was a delicious tease, and the pressure of his thumb was the perfect consistent counterpart. Pleasure was burning through her, everything drawing tight.

“You’re gonna make me come,” she gasped when the tension was unbearable.

“Do it, you perfect girl. I thought of you coming for me.”

Her cries fell out on low, heavy breaths as the pleasure crashed through her. He hissed as her hand squeezed around him in time with the contractions. He was still moving her, holding her up, but her head fell forward as the tension was replaced with the weight of relief.

“Fuck,” he muttered as he braced his forehead against hers. “Fucking perfect.” His hand closed over her wrist, stilling her movement, and he squeezed hard at the base of his cock when she released him.

The haze of her afterglow left her pliant in his arms as he laid her back onto the blanket. She felt the drag of his fingers down her thighs as he pulled the soaked knickers off. The pop of buttons off her dress as he ripped it open to expose her fully to him. The tip of his wand at her stomach. He sank down with his elbows next to her head, laying himself over her until he was seated at her entrance. She arched up into him with a moan at the combined sweat of their bodies as he pushed into her. He slid against her from chest to hip with every thrust and the slip of his skin over her nipples and clit had the pressure building in her again at once.

“Harder,” she urged him, desperate for another release. She gripped the flesh of his arse, pulling him forward. “Faster.”

He pounded into her, and everything between their bodies was wet and heat. She fisted a hand in his hair and brought his face to hers. He was panting with exertion, and she kissed and licked over his open mouth, tasting sweat on his lips.

“You feel so good in me,” she moaned as the tension tightened again. “How does your cock feel so fucking good?”

He groaned against her mouth, meeting her tongue with his own in a series of filthy kisses.

“I want to feel that perfect cunt clench around me. Be a good girl and come on my cock.”

She felt the heady excitement in her chest that meant she was past the tipping point. It could be any second now.

“Tell me when,” she said on impulse.

He moaned again, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She sank into the sensations, feeling the slide inside her through every inch of her body. His skin tightened into gooseflesh beneath her hands, and his voice was strained as he ordered her.

“Come for me, Granger... Now.”

He punctuated the word with a hard thrust, and she came apart. She dug her nails into his arse and rolled her hips up into him again and again as the pleasure rocked through her. His hips jerked, and he let out a long, protracted moan as he emptied himself inside her.

She ran her palms up his sides as he stilled, feeling his heart thundering behind his ribs as they reached his chest. He made to roll off her after a moment, but she braced her leg against him, savouring the pressure of his weight. She kissed him slowly, running her fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. When he broke away to breathe, he rested his forehead on her shoulder.

She heard a distinct mutter against her skin.

“Those fucking tiny shorts.”

Despite the exceedingly pleasant distractions of the afternoon, now that the evening was wearing on, Hermione was feeling apprehensive again. She looked up from her vanity table to watch Draco getting dressed, his hair still wet from their shower.

She didn’t want to need him for this. She’d dealt with it alone for more than two years before they started dating. He’d already helped so much by pulling her out of that nightmare before the end. She didn’t want him to have to go through that again.

"I want you to know," she started quietly, "that you don't have to stay tonight. If you don't want to."

He looked over at her, pulling the towel in his hands away from his head.

"I just mean, you've done so much already," she went on, looking away. "You don't have to go through—"

"Granger," he said sharply, cutting her off. "Please, stop talking."

She snapped her mouth shut and looked back up as he came to kneel in front of her. He wrapped his towel around her shoulders, covering the ends of her dripping curls. He used it to pull her forward and kissed her gently.

"I'm not going anywhere."

She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, nodding. At least they both knew what was coming.

She's running as fast as she can, but the hallway seems endless. Footsteps are echoing off the tiled walls from every direction, but she can't see her friends. They should be there. Somewhere. With her. But all she can see is the ghostly light of her wand, feeble in the face of all that shining black.

*She's in a room made of nothing but doors. Doors everywhere she looks. She doesn't know which one to choose. Where are her friends? She enters one, but it's a dead end. She turns back to leave and the door blasts open in front of her. She's thrown backwards, but she hears Harry's voice. He's here. She needs to find him. Needs to protect him. She looks up and silver masks fill her vision. They're here. They'll get Harry. She's backing away, firing the first spell she thinks of. The mask is closing in, she can see the Silenced mouth moving underneath. She should duck, she should hide, but it's too late. His wand is slashing and purple fire is roaring toward her, and he doesn't speak, but she feels it in her mind like a sudden migraine. **Die, Mudblood.** The shock of the pain is so severe, she doesn't even scream as she falls. She knows she's failed. They'll get Harry. She's certain of it as the darkness swallows her.*

She dives behind a stone wall just as it's blown apart. She looks back, but Ron is gone. He was just there, he must be close. The explosion of a spell throws her backwards and the hallway fills with rubble. The smoke and the dust are so thick she can hardly see. There's so much screaming, the walls are dripping with it. She runs. She needs to find Ron. They need to find Harry.

She hears a cruel laugh ring out against the stone. It's jarring compared to the screams. The twisted face is turning away, but she sees him. It's just a glimpse, but it's enough. She's never been more sure in her life. Remembered pain explodes along her ribs as she watches him turn, and rage scalds over her skin. Lupin is dead on the floor. Warm, kind eyes staring sightlessly at the ruined wall. Eyes that will never see his son grow up. Her hand shakes. She doesn't know how many this one has killed, but she imagines it's all of them. Every single nameless form littering the halls of her home. Her wand is raised. She'll do it for them. She's slicing it through the air. Exhilaration pulses through her, and a hysterical scream rips out of her throat as the words flash through her mind. Die, Death Eater.

“Granger. Hermione. It’s a dream. It’s a nightmare. It’s Draco. You’re okay. You’re not hurt.”

Hermione was thrashing wildly, screaming and clutching at the searing pain in her side. She couldn’t breathe. Every breath was purple fire, shattering her ribs and ruining her lungs.

“Breathe, darling. You need to breathe. You’re not injured. It’s not real.”

Strong hands were smoothing over her naked ribcage, soothing a pain that healed years ago. Hermione clutched at them, silently begging them to make it stop. Suddenly, the hands were gone, and she gasped in surprise as cold water splashed over her side, quenching the flames.

“Draco—” she choked out, seeing him now.

“I’m sorry,” he said at once, setting the empty crystal goblet back down. “I didn’t know how to ground you.” His hands ran over her again. “This was different. I was afraid it might have happened here.”

She looked around the room. Her bedroom. Her house. She was safe. She shook her head.

“No, not here... the Ministry,” she said weakly, still clutching her side.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” he said again. “Next time I’ll know. Next time I’ll do better.”

“Draco, it’s okay,” she said, still shaking her head. “You were perfect.”

He was staring down at her, eyes fixed on the long purple scar. She felt his fingertips graze over it.

“It was this, wasn’t it?” His voice was still rough from sleep. She nodded.

“Who did this to you?”

She swallowed the taste of bile in her throat. “Dolohov.”

A wicked grin broke over Draco’s face and his hand tightened on her ribs. “He’s dead. He can’t hurt you, Hermione. That evil bastard is dead.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, swallowing hard. “I know.”

“I saw his body at the final battle,” Draco went on, a wild gleam in his eye.

“Draco, please—”

“Someone hit him with a slicing hex so strong he was nearly cut in two, the evil fucker.”

Hermione gulped for air, swallowing repeatedly.

“It was brilliant.”

She tore back the covers and ran for the bathroom. She only just made it to the toilet before everything came up. She heaved so hard she felt like she might turn inside out. Tears poured down her face from the force of her retching. She was barely aware of gentle hands gathering her hair away.

When she was empty, she collapsed backwards and leaned against the tub. Her breathing was ragged, air stuttering through her torn throat. The scene played out across the white tile in front of her. The slice, the spurt, the splat. She tried closing her eyes, but the backs of her lids made an equally effective canvas.

A cool cloth brushed against her cheek. It cleaned her face—gently wiping her streaming eyes, her soiled chin, her sweating brow. A glass of water came to her lips, and she drank despite the churning in her gut. The cool liquid calmed the harsh burn of her throat.

Her teeth rattled with a sudden chill and warm arms gathered her up, carrying her easily, and depositing her back under her blankets.

Draco cradled her against him, rubbing soothing patterns over her back until she dozed off again. He didn’t say anything else, and she was grateful for that.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Facing Fears

Chapter Notes

A shorter update today as we get into the official beginning of the end :') When I originally wrote the last chapter of the fic, it was over 20,000 words. I have separated out and bulked up the scenes into separate chapters, but some will be shorter and pacing-wise, I think they function better if read without a week in between. For that reason, I am going to adopt the following posting schedule for the remainder of the chapters:

Ch 23 - Monday, February 28

Ch 24 - Wednesday, March 2

Ch 25 - Friday, March 4

Ch 26 - Monday, March 7

So, a triple update next week and finishing on one last Meet Your Match Monday! I sincerely hope you enjoy the way this story wraps up. I have been so excited to share it for so long, and I can't tell you enough how much it means to me that you are following along ❤️

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione ran her fingers over the covers of the books in front of her. She was sure the case she remembered was in one of them. She picked one up and thumbed through the table of contents. Nothing familiar. She dropped it and shuffled through the stacks of parchment covering the table. Why hadn't she made a note of it? She was her own worst enemy sometimes, always sure she'd remember something important at the time. She could picture the text on the page, but which—

Her face broke into a wide grin as she heard the Floo come to life in the other room. She didn't turn but instead savoured the anticipation as Draco approached her chair from behind. If waiting for him was a drug, she was sure she'd be addicted to it.

She let her eyes fall shut as his warm hands slid around her neck.

“Working late?”

She groaned with pleasure as his thumbs dug into the tight muscles of her shoulders.

“For a change,” she breathed, letting her head fall back against his stomach.

“Anything I can help with?”

She hummed with contentment as he kept up his kneading. “Mmm, yes,” she said. “That’s—ah!—very helpful.”

She felt him chuckle as his long fingers slid forward onto her chest. She sighed as they dipped below the neck of her blouse, skimming the cups of her bra.

“I wouldn’t want to distract you from your work.”

“It’s—mm—personal project. Not—oh!—Ministry.”

“Well, in that case...” He raised one hand until his fingers cupped her throat. He tilted her head back and leaned down to kiss her thoroughly. She melted as his tongue teased so sweetly over hers that it might have been dipped in honey.

He pulled back for a second, and she couldn’t resist teasing him. “Were you missing me, Malfoy?”

She felt his smile against her mouth.

“Always.”

He pressed his lips to hers again briefly and then moved away.

She gave a little whine as he took the chair opposite hers. Entirely too far away.

“I have something for you.”

She perked up at once. Pre-dinner cock? Because that could really be just the thing—

“It’s from my mother.”

Oh. A mood-killer if ever she heard one.

He produced a scroll of parchment from his jacket pocket and gave it to her. She turned it over in her hands, fingers brushing the broken wax seal.

“I read it,” he said flatly. “I told her I would.”

Hermione nodded, taking in his tense demeanour. She’d heard him tell her, though he didn’t know that.

“Should I—I mean—did you want me to read it with you here?” she asked.

“I expect you might have questions.”

“Who me?” she said in a feeble attempt at lightening the mood.

The corner of his mouth lifted almost imperceptibly. She expected it was more in deference to her than in response to any real humour. It had been more than a week, but he was still extremely upset with his mother for what had happened. Hermione remembered Narcissa saying she would write that same night. She wondered how long he’d been sitting on the letter.

A sudden thought struck her, and she set the scroll down on the table. "Draco, if there's something in here you'd prefer I didn't read, then I won't."

She searched his face, but it was impassive.

"I've accepted your apologies for everything," she went on when he didn't answer. "And what happened with your mother was an accident. I know she didn't ambush me on purpose."

His eyes dropped to the parchment on the table before he spoke. "It's your apology, Hermione. Yours to do with as you please. I don't have an opinion either way."

She felt her lips purse. He might as well have screamed that he'd rather her *Incendio* it where it sat. She couldn't really imagine what Narcissa might say that would upset him. And if it was really that bad, surely he wouldn't have given it to her. But if he was going to be stubborn about it...

She unrolled the letter.

Dear Miss Granger,

Please allow me to offer my most sincere apologies for upsetting you at your place of employment. It was not at all my intention to cause you any distress, and I am truly devastated to know that I have added to your emotional burdens. You must know that Draco had expressed to me on multiple occasions that he was not ready to formally introduce us, and it was only my selfish short-sightedness that led me to your office that day. I humbly ask for your forgiveness for my mistake.

Because I am not sure when or if I will have the opportunity to extend further apologies in person. I want to tell you here that I deeply regret my behaviour toward you in Madame Malkin's shop at the beginning of your sixth year, and of course, that horrible night at the Manor. Please know that I offer the following information not as an excuse, but as an explanation in hopes that it might alleviate any lingering concerns you may have regarding any members of my immediate family.

After the Dark Lord took up residence in our home, we were all under intense scrutiny. I hope you will think of the way Draco and I spoke to you that day in the shop, the things we said, as lines from a script written to fit the roles that we were forced to maintain. Of course, it would taste a lie to suggest that the fault lies with anyone other than my husband and myself. While the behaviour we demonstrated to you eventually became part of an identity we all put on and took off like robes, it is the most profound regret of my life that that was not always the case. I would never presume to use youth as an excuse, especially not to one such as yourself who has demonstrated more courage, integrity, and righteousness in your short life than I could ever begin to imagine for mine.

I hope I will have the opportunity to express these sentiments to you in person someday. It would be my honour to be a part of your life. Until then, please know that my son's happiness is everything to me, and I am indebted to you for every day that you see fit to favour him with your affection.

*Sincerely yours,
Narcissa Malfoy*

Draco watched her carefully as she read it through twice.

“Intense scrutiny...” she murmured. “Legilimency?” she asked, looking up at him.

He nodded.

“On all of you?”

Another nod.

“All the time?”

“A lot.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “It’s what we signed up for. I don’t know why zealots are always surprised when their masters finally turn their cruelty on them. It’s not as if he hadn’t shown his true colours.”

“You didn’t sign up for it.”

Draco didn’t seem to have anything to say to that. He dropped his eyes back to the parchment in her hands, and she did the same.

“Madame Malkin’s,” she read. When she looked back up, he was watching her again.

“That was the last time I said it to your face.”

If you’re wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood’s just walked in.

Hermione swallowed. She knew the anger she could see was directed at himself and not her, but it unsettled her all the same.

“I remember.”

“It wasn’t the last time I said it,” he went on. “There were other times, behind your back.”

She nodded. She wasn’t surprised, and it didn’t bother her anywhere near as much as it seemed to bother him. Especially if it was just...

“‘Lines from a script,’” she quoted.

He leaned back in his chair. “By then, yes.”

She brought her elbows onto the table and leaned forward to look at him. All she could see was the anger.

“You discussed keeping up appearances with your mother?”

He clearly hadn’t expected that question.

“Not explicitly,” he said after a moment. “That would have been dangerous, but...” He shrugged. “Let’s just say a lot went unspoken in the Malfoy family for the last few years.”

Hermione nodded. That made sense. She looked back down at the letter and was surprised when he spoke again.

“She knew about you though.”

Hermione glanced up. A wry smile was twisting his mouth.

“Apparently they both did.”

That shocked her. “Both?” she asked quietly.

He nodded.

“Your father knows we’re together?”

Another nod.

“How did he react?”

Draco hesitated, and she immediately regretted the question.

“No, I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that,” she said quickly.

“He wasn’t supportive, at first,” Draco said, leaning forward. “But not for the reason you would think.”

Not because he thinks you’re too good for me? She tried to silence the voice telling her that part of Draco might still think that, too.

“He’s a bit of an unknown quantity these days,” Draco went on, shrugging. “Honestly, I’m still trying to wrap my mind around some of the things he’s said lately.”

Hermione was watching him carefully. She knew when he visited Lucius, of course, but he never spoke to her about the meetings.

“Will you tell me about it?” she asked quietly.

He nodded again. “If you like.”

She gave him a small smile and looked back down at the letter.

“I’d like to meet her. Properly.”

Draco looked wary.

“I can handle it,” she said firmly. “If I’m prepared, I know I can.”

He still looked unsure.

“I think it would be good for me, Draco. Help me move past it.”

Ultimately, that was the argument that swayed him. Despite the risk for another attack, he knew that the potential benefit of dismantling one of her triggers outweighed it in the long run. Especially when that trigger was his own mother.

They met Narcissa for tea. Hermione spotted her immediately upon turning the corner. She was seated on the patio just as they had requested. Hermione spent the short walk up the street concentrating on her breathing. She took in the sight of Narcissa—outside, in the bright sunshine, in a lovely cream dress. The setting couldn’t be more different from that night, exactly as they had planned it. Draco held tight to her hand, grounding her.

Narcissa stood, beaming at the sight of them. Hermione let the other woman pull her into a gentle hug. She sank into the feel of the loving embrace, the sun warming her back.

“Hermione, please allow me to *properly* introduce my mother, Narcissa Malfoy. Mother, you have the honour of meeting my girlfriend, Hermione Granger.”

Narcissa gripped her hands tightly in both of her own. “It is wonderful to finally meet you, Hermione.”

“The pleasure is mine, Mrs Malfoy,” Hermione said, grateful that it was actually true.

“Please, call me Narcissa, dear,” she said as they took their seats.

“Very well, Narcissa,” Hermione said and then quickly added. “Before you say anything else, I’m willing to have this meeting on one condition.” Identical looks of trepidation appeared on the faces of both Malfoys.

“Of course, dear, anything,” Narcissa said quietly.

“No more apologies,” Hermione said with a smile. “At least, not for a little while.”

“So, how did it go?”

Hermione leaned her elbow onto the bar, turning to face Theo.

“It was really nice actually.”

“Narcissa is really nice,” he agreed with a grin.

Hermione returned it. “Well, yes, she is. I mean, she is *now*. To me, anyway.”

Theo’s grin edged toward a grimace. “Right.”

She shrugged. “I understand, of course. Why they had to act that way.”

Theo nodded and reached for the pint the bartender had just set down.

“I more meant that it was nice seeing her. Being able to see her. I feel like I’m one step closer to being able to return to the Manor.”

He frowned over his glass at her. “You know Draco doesn’t expect that, right? He wouldn’t be disappointed if you couldn’t.”

She picked up her own pint and looked down into it. “I know. But...”

“But Hermione Granger doesn’t like having things she can’t do?”

She smiled up at him and gave a small nod.

“Come on, let’s get these back,” she said, picking up Draco’s pint in her other hand, but Theo put out an arm to stop her.

“Wait, don’t you want to tell me more about Narcissa?”

Hermione blinked. “Erm, there isn’t really more...” She trailed off as she looked over to the table where Janelle was gesticulating wildly along with her story. Draco was laughing with a hand over his mouth.

When she looked back to Theo, she saw he’d followed her gaze to the table, and his face was drawn with apprehension.

“Theodore Nott,” she exclaimed. “Are you using me to stall?”

He snapped his head back to her. “No!” he said guiltily.

“You are!” She pointed a finger at him. “Do you even care about my meeting with Narcissa at all?”

“Of course I care!” He brought a hand to his chest. “I asked for more details just now, didn’t I?”

“Only because you don’t want to go over to the table!” Her brows furrowed. “Wait, why don’t you want to go over?”

His shoulders slumped and he faced the bar again.

“Oh gods, I’m so fucking nervous, Hermione.”

She let out a sympathetic *tsk* and set the glasses down.

“Theo, we’ve been through this a half-dozen times. You’re going to be fine.”

He gave her a pathetically morose look, and she patted his arm.

Hermione hadn’t had much to do with Theo Nott at Hogwarts. He’d always been right behind her and Draco in rankings, but she’d thought him quiet, the type to keep to himself. It turned out that Theo was not at all quiet, he simply kept to his own friends. Now that she was one of them, she was privy to his dramatics.

He stopped by her desk in the Ministry at least three times a week to talk about Janelle. He would ask questions about Muggle customs or get clarification on something she’d said in a letter. But he also asked about her as a person. Things she liked, things she’d done, plans she had. Despite Hermione’s repeated insistence that he could find out those things by talking to *Janelle*, he didn’t stop coming.

It had taken her and Draco weeks to convince him to see her in person again.

“When I’m writing a letter, I have time to think, you know?” Theo explained. “I don’t slip up. You can’t proofread a live conversation.”

“What about Draco’s birthday?” she countered, repeating her usual argument. “You didn’t seem to need any proofreading when you were cuddling her.”

“I was caught up!” Theo whined. “I wouldn’t be surprised if I did slip up without even realising.”

He looked back over his shoulder at the table again. “She’s just...” He trailed off dreamily, and Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Draco was rubbing off on her.

“What she probably is, is thirsty. Now, let’s go.”

Theo followed reluctantly as she made her way between the tables. Draco looked up as they approached.

“Did they make you harvest the barley or something?”

Hermione pretended to almost spill her pint on him.

“I was just telling Draco about the Great Waterpark Fiasco of 1996,” Janelle said brightly as Theo slid into the booth next to her.

“Of course you were,” Hermione said dryly. “Because why wouldn’t you give the only person who makes fun of me more than you extra ammunition.”

“Well, we each only got you part-time,” Draco cut in. “It’s only fair that we compare notes.”

“Is someone going to tell me what the Fiasco was?” Theo asked.

Draco and Janelle were smirking into their glasses. Hermione drew in a deep breath through her nose.

“My top came off in front of several hundred people.”

Theo scoffed and threw his hands up. “Well, that’s just perfect. Here I was, thinking I was part of an elite group, and now I find out you’ve shown them to half of London.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Hermione deadpanned.

Janelle launched back into the details for Theo’s benefit, and despite that mortifying ordeal, Hermione’s heart ached with affection as she remembered that summer.

She had gotten off the Hogwarts Express, still reeling from the fight in the Department of Mysteries and Sirius’s death, and called her best friend. To her horror, she learned that her best friend had made a *new* best friend in her absence. She was immediately prepared to hate Janelle with every ounce of petty vindictiveness she could muster. If there was a time she really needed Shannon’s friendship and support, it was then. But still, she knew she was at a disadvantage; it was unrealistic to expect that she could maintain the same level of closeness with only two and half months when Janelle would have all year to cultivate it. She had been tempted to just give up. To lock herself away in her room and wait for September to come again.

But they hadn’t let her. Instead of gloating about the fact that she got to see Shannon every day at school, Janelle admitted the first time they met that she was jealous of Hermione for getting the previous fifteen years. The trio was inseparable after that.

The first time she woke up crying at a sleepover, they listened while she explained that Harry’s godfather had died in an accident and she had been there for it. They didn’t ask questions when it happened again. On the days when she couldn’t get out of bed, they stayed in it with her. They watched her favourite movies and they read to her from trashy magazines and they stuffed her full of snacks. When they decided to go to that goddamned waterpark, they comforted her through a meltdown over the new purple scar on her ribs. And when Shannon met Thomas, Hermione and Janelle were eternally bonded in commiseration over the fact that no one would ever love them like that.

Draco squeezed her knee under the table, and Hermione leaned her head against his shoulder. Theo was hanging on Janelle’s every word, watching her face with a reverent expression as though he might die with anticipation for what she would say next.

Hermione smiled to herself. If only those girls could see them now.

Thank you so much for reading! Your comments are the highlight of my days!
(Especially since dislocating my shoulder in a fall last week. This week's edits are brought to you by an ice pack and a sling 😊).

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Broken Souls

Chapter Notes

TW: brief mention of implied sexual assault by a Death Eater against a Muggle that Draco witnessed

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

When Hermione opened her eyes, she was struck with the sudden knowledge that it was the first of September. She laid still, taking a moment to appreciate the day that had marked the stages of her life for so long. She would never forget the anxious anticipation of boarding the train that first year—she had never felt so ready or so terrified to face her future. And though the day no longer held any official significance to her, she supposed that there was no reason it couldn't still be a measure of her growth. Just the other day, Ron had stopped by her office, looking just remorseful enough as he asked whether it would be possible for him to make things up to her—as a friend—for her to agree to let him try. She was tired of holding onto the past, and recently she had learned that having grace with others often began with having grace with oneself. Draco had taught her that.

The thought of Draco reminded her where she was, and she rolled over to ask if he knew what day it was. But upon turning, she found that she was alone in his bed. She sat up and immediately spotted a note on his pillow.

*Have I told you lately that you're beautiful when you're sleeping?
Early meeting for a project. Stay as long as you like.*

D.M.

Hermione shook her head and grinned stupidly. *Merlin, he's good at this.*

She dressed and gathered up her things. As much as she would love to wait around for Draco to join her back in bed, she had no idea how long he'd be and she had a veritable mountain of laundry waiting for her at home.

She was just about to Disapparate when she realised she should leave a sweet note for him in return. Cursing her near carelessness, she crossed to his desk and pulled open one of the drawers. Not immediately spotting any blank parchment, she was about to close it when the sight of the letterhead from her Ministry department caught her eye.

She would have liked to believe that that wouldn't have been enough for her to pick up the paper. She knew he'd submitted documents to them; it wasn't a surprise. But even if the letterhead wasn't enough, the sight of her own name definitely was.

Printed in the box marked *Special Instructions* on a form she'd filled out hundreds of times was one sentence in red ink:

Student requests a case manager other than Hermione Granger.

Hermione picked up the paper. Her eyes ran over the sheet until she spotted the list of institutions Draco had requested transfer documentation for.

Yale Law School

Stanford Law School

Harvard Law School

Columbia Law School

University of Chicago Law School

Her mind was racing as she took in the list. Law schools? In the States? What—

Her eyes fell on the paper she'd uncovered when she picked up the cover sheet. Her hands were on it before she had time to think.

His transcripts from the past year.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing. It seemed like he had taken the full three years' worth of courses within the last year and few months. She knew he was brilliant, but when had he had time for this? Her eyes ran down the list of classes.

Contract Law

Public Law

Criminal Law

Jurisprudence and Legal Theory

Human Rights in the UK

Philosophical Foundations of the Common Law

Writing for Legislation

The column went on and on. Her head was spinning. His Classics course was only a bloody elective. What the hell had they been talking about for the past eight months? How could she not have known he was practically a licensed bloody barrister?

Her eyes fell on the next sheet.

We regret to inform you that we cannot consider your application to the Auror Academy at this time.

He'd wanted to be an Auror? She set it aside as the next page sent ice through her veins.

Congratulations! We are pleased to offer you a place—

Hermione ripped the whole stack out of the drawer and spread it over the desk.

—you have been accepted for early admission—

—look forward to welcoming you—

—accepted—

Her hands were shaking.

New Haven, CT

Stanford, CA

Cambridge, MA

New York City, NY

Chicago, IL

He was leaving.

USA

He was leaving the country.

Student requests case manager other than Hermione Granger.

He was leaving her.

When had this happened? Had she really been so self-absorbed that she hadn't ever asked what his plans were? Hadn't asked about any of his other classes? Was she really such a workaholic that she hadn't noticed he was taking nearly a triple course load? Her heart was banging painfully against her lungs.

She tore open the other drawers. Her fingers skated over stacks of typed manuscripts. Each one had a similar letter attached to the front.

Congratulations, your article has been accepted for publication.

Administrative Authoritarianism: How Dictators Rise within the Confines of the Law
by D. Malfoy

—selected for our next issue—

Loophole Tyranny: How Legal Discrimination Set the Stage for Genocide
by D. Malfoy

—confirming publication—

Separation is Discrimination
by D. Malfoy

Tears of pride burned in her eyes. *Jesus Christ, he has done the damn thing properly. No wonder he got into fucking Harvard.*

Despite the black pit of despair threatening to swallow her whole the moment she fully processed that he had hidden all of this from her because he was leaving, her heart still

swelled in her chest with the tangible evidence of how much he had changed. She wasn't an exception to him. He had been learning and working and writing; disseminating ideas to change others' minds. Like he had changed his.

She picked back up the letter from the Auror office and read through it several more times. She scoffed aloud. Imagine all this being wasted as an Auror.

A floorboard creaked behind her and she turned. Draco stood in the doorway watching her.

As Draco stepped into the doorway of his bedroom, he noticed Hermione standing in front of his desk. Like always, a smile instinctively curved his lips at the sight of her.

While he watched, she reached to pick up a familiar letter, and he felt the fond expression crumble off his face. His heart sank as her fingers closed over the same sheet of parchment that he had probably looked at twenty times the week it arrived.

Shame burned in his gut as she looked at it. He wanted to Summon it out of her hands, but it was too late. There was only one line to read.

One line to summarise the future she had to look forward to with him in the wizarding world. Closed doors. Polite apologies. Not even a consideration.

They'd had a good run. It was always going to end sometime. She was the Golden Girl with nothing but opportunities on her horizon. He could have that, but not in this world. Not with her.

But as he looked at her, part of him wanted so desperately to believe that she would understand. That she could be okay with it. That she could love him anyway.

And then she scoffed.

The sound hit him like a blow to the stomach, and he stepped back as though he'd been struck. The floor creaked under him and she turned.

If she hadn't just crushed his entire soul with a single utterance, he might have been tempted to laugh at the look on her face. He recognised it so clearly. It was one of her first expressions he'd learned at Hogwarts, after he'd turned them in for the dragon.

Surprise, apprehension, guilt. The look of someone who'd been caught.

He crossed the room and took the paper from her hands. His eyes narrowed as he looked down at it.

“Get out,” he said without looking up. It took every bit of control he had to keep his voice steady.

He heard her swallow roughly, and her voice shook when she spoke.

“Draco, I—”

“Leave now, Hermione,” he said, still not looking at her. He couldn’t bear to hear her empty words.

She hesitated a moment longer before crossing the room, out of his peripheral vision. He closed his eyes as he heard her pick up her bag from the bed. She paused, and he thought for a second she might try to say something else. Then, he heard the crack of her Disapparating.

“How is Miss Granger?”

Draco felt his jaw clench.

“Oh, dear. That was fast,” Lucius said, leaning back to cross his legs. “What did you do?”

He snorted.

Lucius’s brows shot up his forehead. “Something she did? Interesting...”

Draco stared down at the dimly reflective surface of the metal table, feeling morosely grateful that he didn’t have to look at himself in it. “I caught her going through my things.”

His father narrowed his eyes.

“You’re worried you can’t trust her?”

Draco didn’t answer.

“No, not that,” Lucius said, examining him carefully. “Worried she doesn’t trust you?”

He didn’t answer that either. He just lifted his eyes to look at his father.

“You think she *does* trust you,” Lucius said, tilting his head in consideration. “That’s interesting, too. So you’re worried about what she found?”

“My letter from the Auror department,” Draco said with a barely concealed sigh.

The other wizard tutted. “You didn’t tell her?”

"No, of course I didn't tell her," Draco snapped, leaning his head into his hand. "I wasn't about to broadcast my shortcomings as a potential partner. Clearly she's bright enough to figure them out on her own. I'm shocked it's taken this long actually."

Lucius leaned forward again, eyes narrowing. Draco fought the urge to squirm under his stare. He felt like the lights in the room had suddenly brightened. Like he was on display. His father's eyes searched his face and his lips parted slightly in the moment before he spoke.

"This isn't about the Aurors."

Draco felt his nostrils flare as he tried to keep his breathing steady. His heart suddenly felt much too close to his throat. It was swelling, blocking his air supply. He swallowed.

"What do you mean?"

Lucius's eyes were still narrowed, still trained intensely on Draco's face. "What else haven't you told her?"

Draco flinched, and his father's eyes widened.

"Draco..." he started, shaking his head.

"Don't," Draco said, raising a hand. "Just, don't."

In the wake of his father's realisation, his heart seemed to be shrivelling in its new foreign residence. His breath came too easy now, whistling down his windpipe and echoing around in the hollow of his chest.

"You have to tell her."

"Why?" Draco shouted, suddenly unable to bear the interrogation. "What's the point? What good will it possibly do? I just want a little more time with her. Is that so wrong?"

"Yes," Lucius said simply.

Draco shook his head, feeling the threat of tears burning in his nostrils. He'd wanted to tell her.

Well, that wasn't true. He actually wanted nothing more than to never have to have that conversation. But he hated keeping it from her. It was so selfish to allow her to be with him. To touch and comfort and attach herself publicly to him. The only thing he hated more than keeping it from her though, was the thought of losing her by coming clean. The cowardly part of him had been hoping that eventually, she would ask. He'd been waiting for it. He thought she might have been close after the nightmare she'd seen. He convinced himself that he wouldn't lie if she asked. And so he'd waited, but she never did.

"I don't want to see the way she'll look at me," Draco said when he found his voice again.

"Yes, you do."

He looked up sharply. "No, I don't! I know what—"

"No, you don't *know*," Lucius snapped, sounding almost angry. His tone took Draco aback.

"You *fear* the way she will look at you, my son," he went on more quietly, "but you do not *know*."

Draco just stared at him for a moment before nodding. It was a subtle distinction perhaps, but he saw the difference.

"Learn this lesson early and save yourself a lot of pain, Draco," Lucius said, leaning forward again. "Do not make decisions for the both of you based on how you *think* she will react. If you are going to be partners then she deserves to have her say. You must always give her the opportunity to surprise you. Do you understand?"

Draco nodded again. He did understand. It made sense. It was good advice. What the hell was going on?

Lucius finally leaned back in his chair. He crossed his arms and the corner of his mouth lifted in a gesture that only the most generous person would classify as a smile. "Good," he said with a small nod. "Then I look forward to telling you 'I told you so' next month."

Draco took a moment to straighten his tie before leaving the Apparition point. It had only been 48 hours since he'd told Hermione to get out, but for some reason the arrival of Monday morning made it feel so much more final. He needed to tell her. It wasn't fair to put it off anymore. He'd told himself at the beginning that if he was going to have a real shot with her, then he couldn't hold anything back. But the closer he'd gotten—the more he felt like a real shot was actually in the cards—the more terrified he became of ruining it. He'd allowed himself to wallow in that fear for long enough. If she was going to leave, he didn't want any more of their time together to be tainted by his cowardice.

He rounded the corner and froze. She was there, at the other end of the street, with the café between them. She looked down at her watch, and he did the same.

7:00 AM. Standard apology time.

He started forward again, some of the unbearable weight in his lungs lightening at the mere sight of her. The early morning sun was throwing brilliant coppers and bronzes off the loose plait of her hair, and Draco was suddenly devastated that he had deprived himself of even two days of touching it.

Just then, she looked up and saw him. Relief broke over her face, and she started running. He realised he was running, too. They met in the middle and she leapt into his arms, throwing

hers around his neck. He caught her around the waist, spinning a full rotation with their momentum.

“I’m so sorry, Draco. I never should have gone through your things. I didn’t mean to, but I should have stopped myself. I’m so sorry. Please, believe me.”

He smoothed a hand over her hair. “It’s okay, darling. I shouldn’t have thrown you out like that.”

“Yes, you should have!” she said emphatically into his neck. “I deserved it. Please, don’t leave me. We can figure something out. I’ve always wanted to visit America. Please, give me a chance to make it work.”

He clutched her tightly as something in his chest fractured. It wasn’t going to be him leaving. “I’m not leaving you, Granger. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Please, don’t go,” she repeated, wriggling in his grip until he set her down. She pulled back and took his face in her hands. “Please, don’t leave before I have the chance to tell you.”

“Granger—” He tried again to calm her spiral.

“Draco, I lo—”

“No!” he said quickly, covering her lips with his fingertips. He felt his eyes widen with shock at her near-declaration. “Please, Hermione, don’t say it.”

She blinked up at him. “But—”

“Please,” he said, closing his eyes against the look on her face. He felt a surge of panic at the idea of hearing those words without her knowing, without her accepting. He was furious with himself for letting it get this far. The fact that she’d even thought to say it...

“Not yet,” he managed after a moment, dropping his hand from her face. “There’s... there’s something I have to tell you.”

She looked up at him, and her expression was so earnest he felt like those amber eyes were burning a hole in him. “You can tell me anything,” she said quietly.

He blinked slowly and steeled himself. “I hope so,” he said, not even trying to manage a reassuring smile. “Not here though.”

She nodded, and he took her hand, leading her back to the Apparition point.

When they landed in his living room, Draco sat her next to him on the sofa. He angled himself toward her and looked down at their clasped hands. His own had begun to shake, and he was sure she could feel it. He felt suddenly like he was standing on the edge of a gaping chasm.

This was it. All those years of dreaming, all those months of hoping, and just a taste of the real thing. In the scheme of things, that's really all it had been. And now that he was faced with the prospect of losing her forever, he realised that no amount of time would ever have been enough.

"Granger," he started and had to clear his throat. "I want you to know how much getting to be with you these last few months has meant to me. I never thought I would have a chan—"

"Stop it," she said quietly.

He looked up at her.

Her face was gravely serious. There were slight lines forming on her forehead and her brows were lifting in the middle. Her look for fighting tears. "Stop saying goodbye."

He nodded. Of course, she knew exactly what he was doing. She always seemed to. He tried unsuccessfully to swallow the lump rising in his throat.

"I think you know what I need to tell you," he said finally, looking at her fully. "I think part of you has known all along."

She just watched him, eyes rimmed with unshed tears.

He drew in a deep breath and let it out through his nose. He unbuttoned and rolled back his left sleeve.

"I see you staring at it all the time," he said quietly, referring to the Mark, but keeping his eyes on hers. "Always touching it, always thinking. You have this look that you get when you know you have the right solution to a puzzle, but you really don't like the answer."

He watched as her eyes dropped to the symbol. They tracked over the lines in the same intense way they always did. Ever since she'd first seen it, he could always feel her eyes on it.

At first, he'd assumed that it was a kind of trauma response. Like it was so horrifying to her that she couldn't help looking at it when it was exposed. But the way she examined it, traced it absently with her fingertips. He'd realised after a while that it was fascination, not revulsion, that compelled her. And what she was fascinated with, she was curious about. The fact that she spent so much time thinking about it without questioning him told him more than enough about what she'd guessed at.

"We've talked for hours, days on end, about everything that happened," he went on, "but there's one question you've never asked me."

Her tears slid slowly down her cheeks.

"You're the Brightest Witch of Her Age, Hermione," he said gently, letting his admiration show full in his voice. "I'm sure you've figured it out by now. The way the Mark behaved, the way he used it to control us... it must have reminded you of something."

She reached out to trace the lines, and he tried not to flinch away.

"The Horcruxes," she said in a tiny voice.

He nodded even though she wasn't looking at him. His throat was closing as the pressure built behind his eyes.

She glanced up at him then. "Who was it?"

Draco blinked and felt the first tears spill from under his lids. He'd asked himself that same question so many times. Who was he? What had his life been like? Who were the people who loved him? Where were they now? How many things had he left undone, unsaid?

"I never knew his name," Draco said.

"A Muggle?" she asked after a moment.

He nodded again. That was the only thing he knew for sure.

He watched as Hermione searched his face. He knew the pain was written into every feature. He didn't have to exaggerate for her pity; it was all he could do to hold it together. Then she looked down and placed her whole hand over the Mark. When she met his eye again, he felt his resolve eroding. He knew what she would ask next.

"All of them?" Her voice was barely audible.

"Yes," he said, and his voice broke on the word. A shuddering sob fell from his lips as he tried to continue. "A Muggle for every Dark Mark."

She nodded, chin trembling.

"It had to be *Avada Kedavra*," he explained. "But I couldn't do it. Couldn't make it work."

He shook his head with the memory, tears falling onto his shirt. "Bellatrix, she *Imperiused* the man. She made him taunt me, beat me, nearly kill me. Anything to get me mad enough to do it."

"Draco, I—"

"And I did it," Draco said before he lost his nerve. "I killed him. I murdered a man. I'm a murderer, Hermione."

He'd tried to keep the strength in his voice, but her name came out barely more than a whisper. He felt his face crumple as the sobs racked through him.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. I didn't want to do it. I'm so sorry."

It was a sad approximation of all the things he really meant to apologise for.

I'm sorry you have to know this. I'm sorry you have to see it on me. I'm sorry I ever let you anywhere near it.

"I should have told you sooner," he said aloud again, squeezing her hands tightly. "But I couldn't lose you yet. I know it was wrong, but I just... I just wanted a little more time."

She reached for his shoulders, and he clenched his eyes shut and buried his face in her neck when she pulled him in. He couldn't get the words out to tell her that it had only barely worked. The spell had been weak. The man hadn't died right away. He couldn't even console his guilt with the knowledge that it had been quick. His weakness hurt everyone he touched, even the condemned.

Hermione held him as he cried, stroking a gentle hand through his hair. It was kind of her to comfort him. She'd always been so kind to him. He didn't deserve it. Not any of it. But he wasn't strong enough to pull away. He knew she would have to be the one to leave. He was under no illusion that he had it in him to go.

"Draco, look at me," she said softly when he quieted.

It seemed to take minutes before he could bring himself to meet her gaze. Her hands came to his face, thumbs wiping gently beneath his eyes. When he finally looked up, he was stunned by what he saw. Understanding? Compassion? And—

"I love you."

He sucked in a sharp breath. *No, no, no.* She must have misunderstood. He'd said it wrong. She didn't understand.

"No, Hermione, I—"

"Draco," she said firmly, silencing him. "I know what you did. And I still love you." Her eyes were still shining with tears, but her face was set, resolute.

He shook his head, but he couldn't take his eyes off her face. "I killed someone," he breathed.

"And I hate that for you," she said through clenched teeth. "I hate it so much, but I still love you."

His head was still shaking slowly. "Why?"

She wiped at the tears on her own cheeks, and he realised they were falling more thickly now.

"Would you love me any less if I murdered someone?"

He stared at her. His thoughts refused to coalesce into anything useful. "What?"

She took in a deep breath and levelled her chin. "What you saw at the final battle... Dolohov's body. It was me. I did that."

Draco felt his eyes widening. The body had looked like a sword went through it. He'd never seen such a strong slicing hex.

"Hermione, if he attacked you—"

"No," she said firmly. "It wasn't self-defence."

"If he was duelling someone else—"

"No, Draco," she said. "The fight was over. Lupin was dead."

He opened his mouth to argue again, but she stopped him.

"He never even saw me. It was murder. And unlike you," she added, closing her eyes for a second, "I wanted to do it."

He heard the chill edge in her voice and remembered her nightmare. The scream that had woken him hadn't been one of pain or fear... it had been one of fury. Feral and ferocious, she had screamed while she killed him, and he didn't blame her one bit. Bile crept up his throat as a sudden memory dropped over him like a shroud.

He's reaching forward before he realises what he's doing. All he can see is the fear in the girl's face. "Stop!" he yells as his hand closes around Dolohov's arm. Mulciber's Expelliarmus hits him in the back as Dolohov's wand swings around to dig into the hollow of his throat. "Wait your turn, runt," Dolohov spits. "Better yet, why don't you watch. Let me show you what Muggles are good for." Draco falls back against the alley wall as the full-body bind hits him. He can't move, can't look away, can't even close his eyes.

Draco blinked away the vision, focusing on the feel of Hermione's hands in his own. Dolohov was a monster and Draco was glad that he was dead, but he understood what she had meant now. He hated that she had to be the one to do it. He hated that for her.

He realised she was waiting for his response, and in that moment, nothing had ever felt easier to say.

"I love you."

She let out the breath she'd been holding and gave a tiny nod as though she was hesitant to acknowledge it too obviously. He reached up to cup her face, trying to convey every ounce of sincerity he could muster.

"I know what you did, and I still love you."

She nodded again as fresh tears slid off her cheeks. "I've never told anyone else about that before," she whispered after a moment.

Another wave of understanding hit him. Her isolation, her guilt. The help she hadn't sought after the war. He enveloped her in his arms, vowing that he would do everything in his power to help her get it. Even if that meant admitting that he probably needed help, too. She found his shoulder just as he had found hers, and he held her.

"If you want to know the things he did, the reasons I'm glad he's dead, I can tell you," Draco said with his chin on her head.

He felt her head shake slightly against his chest. "Someday, yes, I'll want to know, but... not just now," she murmured.

He pressed a kiss against her curls and let his eyes drift closed with the strength of his affection. Her weight was heavy against him, but he couldn't imagine anything more comforting. As her back rose and fell gently beneath his hands, she felt seamless—a part of him. He'd never felt this close to someone before. So close the very fiber of their beings aligned. The jagged edges of his fractured soul caught against hers. He'd torn away a piece for mercy; she'd sacrificed one for revenge. He would give up the rest of his to bring hers back, but he couldn't. All he could do was try to smooth out the rough edges until they didn't snag on everything anymore.

Draco felt untethered. Drifting again in the haze of unreality he hadn't felt since their first night together when everything had been too good to be true. She loved him. He had told her—told her the worst—and she'd understood better than he ever would have wished for her to. And she still loved him. He had the absurd thought that he was excited to tell his father.

He didn't know how long they sat like that, holding each other together in the wake of their revelations. It was long enough that when Hermione spoke, her voice seemed to come to him from across a distance.

"You're studying law?" she asked quietly.

"Hm?" He opened his eyes. "Oh, yes. I think I might actually be pretty good at it."

"Yes, it seems that way." She shifted slightly in his grip. "And you didn't want me to know?" she asked after a pause.

He felt his brows draw together. "What do you mean?"

"Student requests case manager other than Hermione Granger," she quoted.

"Oh, that," he laughed lightly. "Did you check the date? Those were the forms for last spring term. I submitted them about three days after New Year's."

He felt her head shake. "The date... I—no, I didn't even think."

"I'd just found out you worked in that department, and I was... well, I guess I was a little shy about you seeing all my documents," he admitted.

She leaned back to look at him. "That's adorable."

He rolled his eyes.

"And you're going to school in America?" she asked in a tiny voice.

He looked down at her and saw how hard she was trying to be happy for him. It made his heart feel like bursting.

“No, I’m not,” he said with a soft smile.

“But—”

“You know, Granger, if you’re going to snoop through someone’s things, you might as well do it properly.”

She blinked at him.

He quirked a brow. “Did you notice there were only American schools on that list?”

“Well, yes,” she said, looking unsure of what he was getting at.

“And you didn’t think there might be a list of UK schools lying about somewhere?” he asked in a leading tone.

He grinned as the realisation dawned in her eyes.

“There’s another list?” she asked, sounding breathless.

“Yes.”

“You’re not leaving the country?”

“No, I’m not.”

She flung herself at him. “Oh, thank Merlin, Draco, I was really trying to be optimistic, but even with portkeys, it would... it would have been...”

She trailed off and pulled back to look at him again. “I really didn’t want you to go.”

He hooked his fingers behind her neck and kissed her gently. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere,” he said against her lips. She leaned her forehead against his for a moment, and he watched her lashes flutter open.

Then, she straightened up, adjusting her position on the sofa and pushing her hair off her face.

“In that case,” she started, rolling back her shoulders and giving him the ridiculous impression that she was about to offer him a business proposal. “I need your help with something.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! This is obviously a huge chapter, and it's one I have been excited and nervous about posting from the beginning. I know it can be hard to keep minor details in mind with such an extended posting schedule, but if any of you are ever inclined to re-read after it's finished, I hope you are able to pick up on the clues for what is revealed here that are sprinkled throughout the earlier story.

I will be posting again this coming Weds (Mar 2) and Fri (Mar 4), with the final chapter posting on Mon (Mar 7).

Many thanks and much love to [arabellawrites](#) ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) and Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

You can also find me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Rewriting Rules

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hermione chewed nervously on her thumbnail as Draco looked over her documents. She watched his eyes fly over the lines of text and shifted on the sofa, trying not to read into the deepening crease between his brows. She tried not to think about how impossibly perfect this could be. She didn't want to get her hopes up. He still might not approve.

When he finished, he sat back in his chair and dragged a hand down his face. "Jesus, Granger," he started, making her smile at the Muggle phrase. "You really aren't opposed to playing the long game."

She gave a tiny shrug.

"How long have you been planning something like this?"

"Pretty much all along."

He let out a harsh puff of breath that wasn't quite a laugh. "Including forming a new department at the Ministry?"

"That was step one," she said. "Something I could do on my own."

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "And you're hardly one to talk about the long game," she went on slightly indignantly. "How long had you been planning on shagging me?"

He smirked, shuffling the papers back into a neat stack. "I wouldn't call it *planning* necessarily. More like fantasising incessantly with no clear path forward, but I take your point."

He flipped back over the top sheet. She watched as he started reading again and couldn't contain herself.

"Well," she said, bringing the thumbnail back between her teeth. "What do you think?"

He looked back up at her. "I think it's bold."

She nodded.

"It's unprecedented."

A slightly smaller nod.

"It will be met with a lot of pushback."

She dropped her gaze. She should have known—

“I think it’s bloody brilliant.”

She looked back up to find him grinning widely at her.

“You mean that?” she asked, the need for validation thick in her voice.

“Yes, I do,” he said with a nod.

“So, you’ll help me?”

He flipped back through the pages. “Everything you need for the legislation is here.”

“Yes, but my specialty is interfacing with the Muggle administrative systems. I don’t know how to write legislation. And like you said, there’s going to be a lot of pushback. It needs to be perfect. Ironclad.”

He nodded again. “Of course, I’ll help with the framing, the writing, but... that’s not really why you need me, is it?”

She leaned forward and braced her elbows on her knees. It was both a blessing and a curse to finally date someone who might actually be cleverer than she was. “We’ll need your influence in the Wizengamot,” she said in a low voice.

Draco gave her a tight-lipped smile. “Hermione, darling, I don’t have a seat in the Wizengamot,” he said in a sweetly patronising tone.

She clasped her fingers together. “Yes, you do. You’re heir to the Malfoy seat. You just aren’t filling it.”

He nodded slowly. When he spoke, the words were drawn out as though he was wondering why they were stating facts they both already knew. “Right, because I’m a felon. I can’t.”

She looked at him for a moment. “What if you could?”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you up to?”

“I haven’t called in a single favour since the end of the war.”

He shook his head and sat back. “Granger...” he said on a sigh.

“No, hear me out,” she said quickly, raising her hands. “I don’t need a favour to get you in, you’ll do that all on your own. The only favour we need is getting it brought to a vote.”

She watched as he pursed his lips, considering her words.

“They will vote to confirm you,” she went on. “How many of the seats are old families? All we need is a simple majority for a House seat.”

His eyes moved over her face and then back down to the documents still sitting on the coffee table in front of him. He rubbed a hand over his forehead.

"You know, I couldn't help but notice how you needing my help has suddenly turned into the Golden Girl throwing her proverbial weight around to bypass a rule keeping her convict boyfriend off the Wizengamot."

Hermione gave a shrug. She'd expected that objection. She knew he wouldn't easily accept the use of her influence to benefit him.

"This bill is dead in the water without a pureblood champion in the court," she said sincerely. "I wouldn't do it if I didn't need it."

"Oh, you wouldn't do it if I asked nicely?" he said, giving her a smirk as he looked up at her through his lashes.

She felt herself blushing slightly and smiled in return. "Okay, I wouldn't have done it before I read your writing, but..." she trailed off for a moment and her smile faded. She needed him to understand what his position meant to her. The potential of what they could accomplish together. "Draco, you're the real deal. You're the future of pureblood politics. We need you."

Her tone sobered him at once. He nodded. "Okay, so I'm on the court, then what?"

"Then you do what Malfoys do best," she said with a smile. "But for the right side this time."

She watched him look back down at her cover sheet, considering. Then he rested his chin on his hand and glanced up at her.

"A more cynical bloke than me might worry that this entire relationship has only been a piece in your master plan." He tapped a finger on the hundred-page stack in front of him. "It's not as though you lack the forethought."

"I didn't know there were blokes more cynical than you," she said, matching his tone. "That would have been a truly dastardly plan, but you give me too much credit."

He barked a laugh suddenly, and she sat back. "What?" she asked, slightly startled.

"Nothing, you just..." He shook his head. "You just reminded me of the last person I ever thought you would."

She blinked at him, but he waved her off. "You can see where I might get suspicious. Along with me, you get Pansy, Blaise, and Theo. Three extra pureblood, Slytherin, old family types."

"And your mother," she said with a smirk.

"That's not reassuring me, Granger."

She heaved a sigh, adopting a pained expression. "Look, if I have to keep having mind-blowing sex to further this cause, well, I'm nothing if not dedicated."

"Watch the cheek or I'll cut you off," he said, raising a warning finger.

She crossed her legs, letting her skirt ride up suggestively. “Oh, I’d love to see you try.”

“Keep it up, witch,” he said, getting to his feet and leaning over her. “And you will.”

She grabbed him by the tie and kissed him hard. Relief and excitement coursed through her. They were really going to do this.

“Have I told you lately that you’re brilliant?” he asked, bracing his forehead against hers.

“Yes,” she sighed. “But it never gets old.”

He kissed her again. “Well, you are.”

She smiled against his lips. “So are you.”

“I think we’re going to make a pretty good team.”

“I know we will,” she said, letting go of his tie to cup his cheek. “But we still have one more player to recruit.”

Draco rolled his eyes and sighed. “As long as my name comes before his on the bill.”

“Oh, fuck yes!” Theo cried when he’d finished the proposal. “Hermione, you brilliant, wonderful, witch, I could kiss you!”

“Please don’t,” Draco said, holding up a hand.

“You think it’s good?” Granger asked, clutching her pint.

“Good? I think it’s ingenious. It’s inspired. It’s... I said ingenious already, right?”

“So you’ll help?” Granger asked.

“Yes, of course,” Theo replied sincerely. “Whatever you need.”

She beamed at him. “Wonderful.”

“So when do we tell them,” Theo asked eagerly.

She and Draco shared a look.

“Not until everything is official,” Draco said seriously.

“We have to do this right, Theo. It could be a year or more, if it works at all,” Granger added.

“But a year or more for normal people, right?” Theo said. “At the rate you two work, that’s, like, barely a few months!”

Chapter End Notes

Tiny little update today, but I'll see you on Friday for a much more satisfying one ;)

Thank you for reading!

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

First and Last

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Barely a few months later

Hermione was floating. They'd been making consistent progress, but the bigger pieces were finally starting to fall into place. Kingsley had been willing to grant her favour of adding Draco's acceptance of the Malfoy House seat to the next Wizengamot full session vote. Draco had spent several weeks quietly campaigning amongst the old families, and the simple majority he needed to take the position had come easily. There was something darkly delicious about using his unfair pureblood privilege to further her Muggleborn designs.

Theo, for his part, had been putting out feelers around the DMLE. While their bill wouldn't directly interface with Law Enforcement, the close connection of the Department to the court only amplified the potential power of any allies. Other than Ron and Harry, of course, he'd been able to drum up support from several pureblood colleagues and another mixed blood status couple who were interested in participating.

She and Draco had worked on countless drafts of the legislation and although they still had the long and arduous process of getting it through the court, her Department Head had sent her an advance copy of the first round revisions as a Christmas present. She and Draco had both been overjoyed to find that they were already prepared to address nearly all of the comments and critiques. When they received the official copy next week, they would be more than ready to get to work.

Hermione still had no idea how Draco managed all of it. He was on track to finish his program with nearly twelve months to spare, and he kept up with his writing on top of working on their bill. His newest piece on how propagandist language gets incorporated into legal doctrine was his best work yet, in her opinion.

She felt him slide his hand into hers, and she squeezed it as she smiled. His warmth was a welcome reprieve against the chill of the air.

"It's almost time," he said.

"I know," she replied. "I'm just basking."

He nodded and followed her gaze as she looked out over the party. She couldn't help but think of how different things had been only a year ago. She had never expected to be this close to enacting a plan she'd had for nearly a decade. Nor that she would spend Christmas day with her parents and Narcissa Malfoy of all people. She had also never expected to be

seeing a mind healer. Even though she should have known better, it had taken Draco to convince her. Not to convince her that she needed help, but rather that she deserved it if she wanted it. She would be forever indebted to him for that. Of course, without it, she wouldn't be doing the other things she had never expected. Namely, returning to the Manor and visiting Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban.

As the countdown started, she closed her eyes. More than anything else, she had never expected to fall in love. She'd always thought that she would someday, when she was ready, but it had happened now, ready or not. When the clock struck midnight, and the crowd cheered around them, she opened her eyes and turned to the only person in the world she wanted to share the moment with.

But he was gone.

It only took her a second to spot him, but the surprise of his momentary disappearance was enough to distract the rational part of her brain from registering the fact that he was down on one knee.

"Hermione," he said, taking her hand in both of his. "When you kissed me on this night one year ago, neither of us could have predicted the path that it would set us on, but I've never been more thankful for a surprise in my entire life. Somewhere between chance and circumstance, there was you."

She seemed to be on about a three-second delay in comprehending his words. His hands were tight on hers. That seemed important for some reason.

"I can't imagine the person I would be without you, and, more importantly, I don't want to. You are going to change this sorry world for the better, and there's nowhere I'd rather be than by your side. It's where I belong."

She could feel her pulse in her throat. Her ribs would surely bruise from the hammering of her heart.

"I know I don't deserve the way you love me, but I promise to work every day to become a man who does."

Her chest clenched painfully at that notion. He deserved everything. Every happiness. All the love she could possibly hope to give him.

She felt her eyes widen as he pulled a small black velvet box out of his pocket.

He smiled, and his eyes shone silver with excitement for his next words.

"So, kiss me, Granger, because I want to spend the next year with you. And then marry me, because I want all the years after that, too."

On the word *marry*, Draco opened the box. Hermione was sure that it contained a breathtakingly exquisite diamond ring, but all she could see through the tears gathering in her eyes was a silvery blob so sparkly it was making her lightheaded.

A less confident man might have wavered in the face of her stunned silence, but Draco just smiled up at her as though he'd never been more sure of anything in his life.

"What do you say, Granger?"

She covered her mouth with both hands as a belated nervous giggle bubbled out of her. Then, she reached for him.

"Yes!" she all but shouted. "Yes! I say, yes!"

He stood and pulled her to him. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the promise of another year and then a hundred more after that. When she let go, he stepped back and took her hand again. She'd been right; he slid a breathtakingly exquisite diamond ring onto her finger.

"It's beautiful," she said, kissing him again.

"You're beautiful," he replied, kissing her back.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too."

"We're going to get married," she said as though she'd only now realised.

"Yes, now you have to," he said, adopting a mock stern expression.

"Merlin, Draco, what if I had said no?" she asked, suddenly horrified.

He smiled down at her and whispered against her lips before kissing her senseless.

"Never crossed my mind."

The combined celebration of the New Year and their engagement had left Hermione in a champagne-coloured haze of euphoria. Someone—likely her boyfriend fiancé—had gotten her into bed, and it seemed that her sleeping brain was determined to provide a play-by-play of what might have happened if she'd done a better job of holding her bubbles.

I'm going to lay myself down on top of you until you're pressed into the mattress. Then I'm going to pull all of this hair to the side so I can kiss the impossibly soft skin just at the back of your neck. You're going to feel me breathing over you. On your shoulders, on your neck, over your ears. I'll drag my teeth over the side of your neck and you'll scrunch your head down to keep me out, but you'll moan and grind against the mattress so I know you want more. I'll get a fist full of these curls and turn your head to the side so I can shove my tongue in your ear

the filthy way you like. You'll cry out and I'll know you're wet from that. Then I'll run my hand up along the side of your body, teasing everything I can reach. You'll try to roll so I can touch your tits, but I'll keep you pressed face down. You'll push that delectable arse up against my cock, but I won't fuck you yet. I'll let my fingers trail down your back and between your cheeks so I can see how wet you are. You'll be slippery as silk when I slide two fingers into you, but we can still do better. You'll thrust yourself down onto my hand as much as you can with me pinning you, and I'll bite hard on your neck. You'll scream, and I'll feel your cunt clench on my fingers. Then I'll suck on the spot I bit until I feel you quiver, and we'll do that a few more times, in a few more spots until you're begging me to let you come.

Hermione woke up moaning and writhing against the sheets. She was drenched, she could immediately tell. Merlin, she'd been grinding against the mattress. She'd never had a sex dream like that bef—

The mattress shifted under her, and she opened her eyes.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Draco said, smirking down at her.

She realised suddenly that it hadn’t been a dream at all. He’d been leaning over her, whispering into her ear what he was going to do to her. She’d nearly come, and he hadn’t even touched her yet.

She moaned into the pillow as he laid down on top of her, starting back at step one.

She would have liked to think that her pride would keep her from begging exactly on schedule, but by the third time he’d bitten down on her neck, she was too desperate to give a fuck.

“Please, Draco, please, let me come. I’ll be good. I’ll come so hard for you.”

“I know you will, darling,” he said, drawing another cry from her as he licked over her ear again.

Then, he rolled off of her and she nearly wept with relief. He would make her come now.

He grabbed her by the hips and flipped her over, kneeling between her legs. She gasped and shuddered as he slowly pushed his thumb inside her, pressing over her clit with his palm. There was something especially dirty about him using his thumb. She closed her eyes and smoothed her hands down over her belly knowing it wouldn’t take long.

But then he withdrew, and she felt him draw one of her own hands down instead. He liked to watch her touch herself sometimes, so she picked back up where he’d left off. She slid her palm over her clit and felt him press her middle two fingers inside. She worked them in and out in a slow rhythm, knowing his eyes were on her.

Suddenly, he made a sound she’d never heard before, and her eyes flew open as she felt his come falling onto her thighs.

“Oh, shit,” he gasped, clutching himself. “Oh, fuck, it was too hot.”

She followed his gaze downward and her mouth fell open when she spotted the brilliant diamond ring glittering merrily from where it was currently nestled against her cunt.

“That?” she asked, unable to stifle a giggle at his dazed expression. “Seeing that made you come?”

He groaned, squeezing the base of his traitorous cock. “Shit, I can’t remember the last time that happened.”

She giggled again.

“That’s just about enough out of you on the subject,” he warned with a poke to her belly.

She drew her hand from between her legs and wiggled her fingers, watching the diamonds catch the light.

“That’s a little possessive, Draco,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“You’re goddamn right it is,” he said, leaning his head back over her. He took her hand again. “You’re wearing *my* ring because you’re *my* fiancée, and I liked seeing you touch what’s *mine* with it on.”

He leaned forward and licked up the length of her slit. She gasped at the sudden sensation.

“This cunt is *mine*.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he silenced her by sliding his two fingers back inside.

“Ah-ah, Granger. You like it. You like being mine.”

“No,” she moaned as he pressed them deeper, her languid smile belying her words. “Too possessive.”

He shifted his weight forward and plunged his other hand into her hair. He tugged gently, tilting her chin.

“Oh, really?” he asked in a low voice. He tightened his grip until her scalp was tingling. She felt her entire body heat with the rush of his hold on her. The feel of his strength, the weight of him above her. It would be a lie to even suggest that he didn’t possess her, body and soul. And he knew it. “You’re *mine*.”

She gasped as her cunt clenched around his fingers. Hermione had always considered herself a feminist, but *fuck* it felt amazing to be desired so fiercely.

He gave her a wicked smirk before plunging his tongue into her mouth.

“You belong to *me*.”

She cried out as he pressed the heel of his hand over her clit.

“This cunt is *mine*.”

Heat was pulsing through her again as all of the anticipation from before came rocketing back. She couldn’t even argue with his statement. He knew every inch of her body better than anyone. Knew exactly how to curl his fingers and squeeze and press in a way that made her

“Please, Draco...”

His words brushed over her lips. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to fuck me now.”

He pulled his hand away and positioned himself back between her legs. He lifted one of her thighs as he pressed forward, his fingers still slick with her arousal. She felt him nudge against her entrance, and then, he stopped.

“Who do you belong to?”

She gave a desperate groan, tilting her hips against him. “You.”

“You’re mine,” he rasped into her neck.

“Yes,” she whined, arching up into him. The tip of his cock teased along her slit, making her shudder.

“Say it.”

“I’m yours.” The words trailed off into a moan as he finally pushed inside her. She clutched at his back, feeling the tension tighten already as he stretched her.

“You’re mine,” he repeated, pressing her thigh further back.

“Fuck, yes, I’m yours,” she said as he hit the perfect spot again and again. Her mouth fell open in a silent cry as an impossible pressure built within her.

“Who do you come for?” he growled in her ear.

“You,” she practically sobbed. “Only you, Draco.”

“That’s right.”

The tension broke and pleasure exploded through her. Her head came up into his shoulder as the strength of the spasms curled her forward.

He groaned over her as her pulsing triggered his own. He collapsed on top of her, still moving slowly, and she could just make out a single whispered word.

“*Mine*.”

A month was enough time for Hermione to start getting used to the idea of being engaged, but unfortunately, it wasn't nearly enough time for her to get used to the idea of all of their friends finally interacting.

While Draco had been mostly successful in being cordial with Harry and Ginny—and only very occasionally Ron—Hermione couldn't help but feel like the addition of the other Slytherins to the mix was bound to bring out the attitudes of the good old days in everyone.

"This will be fine," she said lightly, her fingers twining nervously in the beaded front of her gown. "It'll be great. Everything will be fine."

Draco stopped walking and gripped her by the forearms. "You need to relax."

"I am relaxed!" Hermione squeaked.

He raised a brow at her.

"Okay, I'm not relaxed..." she allowed. "I'm excited! It's going to be great."

Draco shook his head lightly but couldn't suppress a chuckle. "I doubt it will be great, but it will definitely be fine. You don't have to worry."

"Right!" she said, nodding. "I'm not worried."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead before turning to push open the doors.

Hermione stepped through them and felt as though her jaw might actually come unhinged. She stared around the ballroom, eyes bulging as she attempted to take everything in.

"Oh, my g—" She didn't even have time to finish her breathless declaration before the hostess swept down on them.

"Darlings!"

Narcissa pulled her into a hug, kissing the air next to her cheek. "You look wonderful, Hermione."

"Thank you, Narcissa," Hermione started, still staring into the room. "But this—this is too much. You shouldn't—"

"Oh, don't be silly!" Narcissa tittered, turning to hug her son. "It's going to be a splendid evening."

"Everything looks great, Mother," Draco said, placing a hand on the small of Hermione's back. "Thank you."

"Yes, thank you!" Hermione repeated, recovering herself somewhat. "Thank you for doing all of this. It's..."

Hermione trailed off as she turned in a slow circle. It seemed that she spotted another extravagant detail for every second that she looked. Constellations twinkled in a cloudless sky from the ceiling overhead, and moonlight somehow seemed to stream in from every window. Gossamer drapes stretched from floor to ceiling and shimmered in a non-existent breeze. A row of brilliant crystal chandeliers in the center of the room reflected the silver-white light into every corner, giving the entire space an ethereal glow. High top tables were clustered around the dance floor, each one topped with a floral candelabra centerpiece that surely would have been a fire hazard in the Muggle world. Elves in tiny tuxedos were doling out glasses of champagne onto floating trays.

"It's perfect," Hermione finished finally.

Narcissa beamed at her. "Well, there are a few last minute touches to finish, but the guests should be arriving soon."

With that, she swept off again.

"We'll wait here to receive them as they arrive," Draco said.

Hermione nodded absently, still looking around the enormous room. "Speaking of guests... I'm thinking I should have invited, oh, I don't know, about a hundred more?"

Draco smiled down at her. "The space will adjust to accommodate the size of the party. It won't seem empty."

Hermione stared at him for a moment and then broke into a grin. "I love magic."

He squeezed her hand in response. "Of course, with all of the Weasleys attending, we may actually be into expanding it a bit."

"Oh, god," Hermione moaned, nervous dread filling her once more. "Please, promise me you'll behave?"

"I will if he does," Draco said with a smirk.

"It's an engagement party, Draco," Hermione said crossly. "I really think he's gotten the picture by now."

Draco lifted her left hand, curling her knuckles to his lips. "And in case he forgets..." He dropped his gaze to her ring as he kissed the backs of her fingers.

Hermione's breath caught, her eyes locked on his mouth. "Too possessive," she breathed, as he let his bottom lip roll between his teeth. A raised brow told her that he'd clearly caught her as she shifted her hips.

"You like it."

She felt herself melting into him. Exactly *how* soon would the guests be arriving? He looked so delectable in his formal robes. Maybe they could—

Hermione gave a yelp of surprise at the crack of an elf appearing next to them.

“Nilly is presenting Drs. Jean and David Granger, sir and miss.” The elf swept a tiny arm at the open doors as the Grangers walked in.

“Hermione!” her mother exclaimed, rushing forward.

“Hi, Mum,” she said, hugging her tightly.

“Have you seen these little creatures, Hermione?” her dad asked in lieu of a greeting as he wrapped Draco in a hug. “They’re marvellous! Excellent service!”

Nilly beamed.

“Yes, Dad, they’re great,” Hermione said as he turned to her. Draco smirked at her over her mother’s shoulder. They were still finding galleons stashed all over the Manor as the elves tried to return their wages, but Rome wasn’t built in a day.

“Did you do all this, Hermione? It’s wonderful!”

“Oh, no, Mum, actually it was all—”

“Jean! David! So glad you could make it!” Narcissa arrived in a swirl of robes, clasping hands and exchanging kisses with the Grangers.

“Narcissa, this is truly spectacular!” David exclaimed. “How *do* you get the lights to twinkle like that?”

“Oh, well, making stars is a family specialty,” Narcissa said, tossing a wink over her shoulder as she towed the Grangers away.

“Well, that was subtle,” a new voice cut in.

Hermione and Draco turned to see Theo leaning in the doorway.

“Haven’t even made it down the aisle yet, and she’s already starting on the hints,” Blaise said stepping around him.

“Trust me, that wasn’t the start,” Pansy said, shouldering her way between the other two. “You should have heard what she said about Granger at tea last week.”

Hermione opened her mouth to inquire further, but another familiar voice cut her off.

“—would have bet my left bollock Hermione would never end up here again.”

“Please, keep your bollocks to yourself, Ronald,” Ginny snapped.

Harry stopped in the doorway, eyes wide as he took in the group before him. “Oh.”

Ginny smirked from where she held his elbow. Ron's face appeared behind them.

"Hello, snakes," Ginny said lightly.

"She-Weasel," Pansy said with a nod.

"It's Potter," Harry said flatly.

"We know your name, Potter," Blaise said.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I meant her name."

"We know that, too," Theo said, smirking.

"Then use it," Harry snapped.

"Okay!" Hermione said brightly, clapping her hands together. An elf appeared at the noise, holding a tray laden with champagne glasses. The eight of them dove toward it at the same time.

Hermione watched the others over the rim of her flute as she gulped. It could be going worse.

"Great champagne!" Ron said too loudly when they'd all nearly downed their glasses.

Draco rolled his eyes.

"Great drinks, great memories, what could go wrong?" Pansy said, lifting her glass in a toast.

"Great memories?" Ginny repeated with a raised brow. "Like you trying to sell out Harry to Voldemort in the middle of the Great Hall?"

"Exactly!" Pansy said, flashing them a grin.

"Or you trying to kill us in the Room of Requirement?" Harry asked Draco.

"You had my wand, Potter."

"Yes, and that actually ended up working out quite well if you recall," Harry said hotly.

"Harry," Hermione said in a soothing tone. "Draco didn't start that fire."

"Don't help me, Granger!" Draco snapped.

"Doesn't anyone have any memories of me?" Theo said with a pout.

"Y'know, now that you mention it," Ron started, looking pensive and stepping between Draco and Harry. "I don't really. Are you sure you went to Hogwarts?"

Theo sneered at him. "Pretty sure, Won-Won."

Ginny snorted into her glass and then grinned. "I like him."

“Cheers, *Potter*,” Theo said, clinking his glass to hers but raising a brow at Harry.

Harry rolled his eyes. Hermione thought that would probably have to do for now.

“Funny how things work out,” Theo said, spinning her under his arm.

Hermione let her eyes wander around the room. Her father was leading Narcissa out onto the dance floor. Her mother was deep in conversation with Arthur Weasley. Draco was laughing at something George had just said.

“You mean like the fact that you’re dancing with a Muggleborn in the ballroom of Malfoy Manor?” she asked.

“No,” Theo said, smiling down at her. “Like the fact that the Golden Girl is marrying Draco Malfoy.”

Hermione glanced down at her feet. “I don’t know why you say it like that.”

“Yes, you do,” Theo said. His tone made her look back up. His face was uncharacteristically serious. “He never thought he’d have a chance with you, and he dwelled on it. For years.” Theo spun her again. “Honestly, he was dead depressing to be around for a while there.”

Hermione’s heart gave a painful twinge at the thought of all the time they’d wasted.

“Of course, Azkaban really helped with that,” Theo went on. She couldn’t help laughing, but she shook her head to show her disapproval.

“What I mean to say is, thank you for giving him a chance, Hermione.”

Her laughter faded as she considered his words. That phrase didn’t really fit what had happened between them. She’d taken chances, taken risks, but it wasn’t as though there was a single moment when she’d made a conscious choice to see him differently. Both of them had just kept showing up. If anything, their friends had taken the choice out of their hands.

Hermione smiled up at him, and shook her head again. “You know who we really have to thank for that.”

Theo nodded, returning her smile, but she could see the sadness hidden in its corners. “I wish they could be here tonight.”

Hermione sighed and squeezed his hand. “Me too.”

Draco found himself agreeing with Ronald Weasley for the first time in his life. At one point in time, he also would have probably bet his left bollock that Granger would never return to the Manor.

And he probably would have bet the right one that he'd never end up sitting on a sofa with The Weasel in the Manor library, totally and completely pissed.

He was currently very glad that no one had ever offered either of those bets.

Draco wasn't surprised that they'd ended up here. Ever since they'd worked Granger up to returning, the library had been her safe haven in the house. It became the center of operations as they worked on their bill, and it was always the place she slipped off to when she had the chance.

When she'd pulled him through the doors tonight after all of the guests had left, he'd been terribly disappointed to find an extra half dozen people crashing what he'd thought was going to be an illicit after-hours rendezvous. Clearly only *most* of the guests had left.

Several hours and several bottles later, Theo was riled up about something.

"Now hold on," he said, slapping a hand onto the table and slurring slightly. "This wants thinking about."

Draco took a sip of his firewhiskey, trying to retrace the topic of conversation. He'd been devoting all of his attention for the last several minutes to getting his hand as far up the slit of Granger's dress as possible without her noticing. He chanced a sideways glance at her and had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Her brows were furrowed in a desperate attempt to appear more sober than she actually was.

"It's got to be me with three," Pansy said confidently.

"No, no," Theo said. "Only two. That's a tie with Draco, Granger, and Blaise."

Draco looked around the circle. Two what? What were they tied for?

"What about us?" Pansy said incredulously, gesturing between herself and Theo.

Theo grimaced. "That doesn't count."

"I'm counting it!" Pansy retorted, sounding scandalised.

"Well, I'm not," Theo said, wiggling his head in a pompous manner. "You have two."

"It's not a fair competition," Ginny protested. "Two of us are siblings!"

Theo waved her off and pointed to the others in turn. “Now, two for Granger means one for Weasley. One each for Mr and Mrs Potter. Two for Blaise, and one for me.”

“Wait, are we talking proper shagging?” Weasley asked. “Because if so, then you’ve got this side all wrong.” He gestured broadly at the Gryffindors, sloshing whiskey onto his trousers.

Draco was starting to cotton on.

“All wrong?” Theo repeated, looking blank.

Weasley nodded. “Zero for me.”

Theo’s brows rose comically. “Weasley! Zero?!” He sounded outraged.

“No one in this room,” Weasley said with a shrug. Draco smirked inwardly. Well, he hoped it was inward.

Theo took an extra moment to scowl at Weasley’s prudish betrayal before starting again.

“Okay, so one for Granger—”

“No, still two,” Granger said from next to him.

Theo snapped his head to her. He narrowed his eyes as though she was somehow in cahoots with Weasley to purposefully obscure the truth. After a moment, however, Potter’s awkward shifting caught his attention. Suddenly, he looked to Draco.

“*That’s* why you were worried about Potter?!”

“I was *not* worried about Potter!” Draco said scathingly.

“Sweet Merlin,” Theo said, his hands flopping dramatically to his sides. “I’ve got this side all wrong.”

“Let me save you the trouble, mate,” Blaise cut in, leaning back to stretch his crossed legs out in front of him. “It’s me... with *four*. ”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Potter said under his breath before tossing back the rest of his whiskey.

“Four?!” Theo, Pansy, and Draco cried in unison.

Blaise’s smirk widened and he inclined his head ever so slightly.

Draco whipped his head to look at Granger and found her staring back at him.

“Not me!” they said together.

Weasley had already proclaimed his zero, and Draco already knew about Blaise with Pansy and Theo, which meant the only other two were...

The She-Weasel was grinning broadly, and Potter’s hands over his face were doing nothing to cover the flush creeping up his neck.

“Bloody hell,” Weasley said from next to him.

“What? When? How?” Granger stammered from his other side.

Ginny spared a sympathetic glance at her husband’s covered face before speaking. “You know how we went to Italy for our honeymoon...”

“Bloody hell!” Weasley repeated, much more loudly.

Draco couldn’t help but agree. Again.

“I’m coming in third behind Saint Potter?!?” Pansy screeched.

“Oh, god,” Potter groaned into his hands.

“So I have to shag Theo, Granger, *and* Weasley before the night’s out to win this thing?” she went on.

Theo grabbed Granger’s left hand and lifted it up, looking outrageously besotted. “Sorry, love, but we’re spoken for.”

“Unbelievable!” Pansy yelled, flinging an arm in Weasley’s direction. “He’s not worth it just to tie!”

“No offence,” she added belatedly, nose scrunched.

Weasley looked as though he’d been Confunded.

As Draco glanced back and forth between the two of them, all he could think was that stranger things had happened this year.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't think I was gonna leave you without some smut and banter for the road now did you?

I know it's probably far too soon for these idiots to be getting engaged, but I couldn't resist the parallel with the first chapter! Spoiler alert, it works out fine because I said so :)

Thank you so much for reading! I'll see you on Monday for the final installment :')

Many thanks and much love to Katie ([TikTok](#), [Twitter](#)) for beta editing.

Come hang out with me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#)!

Part of Your World

Chapter Notes

This is the final chapter! I updated three times last week, so if you only read on Monday please go back and double-check that you haven't missed anything :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Several more months later

Hermione, Draco, and Theo sat across the kitchen table from Shannon, Thomas, and Janelle. Hermione pulled three stacks of papers and three pens out of her bag and set them on the table in front of her.

"I just want to say, this is very ominous," Thomas said with a weak chuckle. The six of them stared at each other.

Hermione had a speech prepared. She'd practised. She knew what she was going to say. Or she had. Now that they were sitting here and it was actually happening, the only thought going through her mind was that she might be on the verge of fainting. Draco placed his hand on her knee and she jolted slightly. He gave her what was probably supposed to be an encouraging smile.

"Okay," Hermione began, noting the tremble in her voice. "You all are well aware that there have been things we haven't been able to tell you. Things about ourselves, about our lives, stories that don't add up."

The three Muggles nodded in unison, looking wary.

"Well," she went on. "We will finally be able to explain things to you, but we have some forms from the government that you'll need to sign first. Now, we can't explain to you why you're signing before you do it, so there's a significant amount of trust required on your part. And I should warn you that if you were to repeat or go public with what we share with you, there will be extremely severe consequences for you. Consequences which I vehemently opposed at all stages of negotia—"

"Granger," Draco said firmly, interrupting her tirade.

"Right," she said, smoothing a hand over her hair. "Well, there are severe consequences, so of course if you need time to think about it, we'll understand."

The three Muggles stared at them. Janelle's mouth was slightly open. Shannon looked nearly as faint as Hermione felt.

"Blimey," Thomas said, breaking the silence from the other side of the table. "You really are spies."

"Spies?" Draco repeated after a pause.

"Yeah, of course!" Thomas said excitedly. "It all makes sense. I bet that school you all went to was a secret spy school, wasn't it? Start 'em young, that's what they always say."

Hermione opened her mouth, but Janelle turned to look at Thomas.

"Spies? Are you mad?" she scoffed. "Can you imagine this one blending in anywhere?" Janelle pointed an accusing finger at Draco. "With that height? And that hair? And that face? I mean, he is *hauntingly* beautiful. Truly unforgettable. Be the most useless spy in the history of the world," she muttered under her breath.

"Sorry, love," she added at the sight of Theo's raised eyebrows.

"No, no," Theo said, raising a conciliatory hand. "He's been haunting me for years."

Draco rolled his eyes.

"Well, what's your theory then if you're so clever?" Thomas asked Janelle.

She straightened up and eyed them all. "Clearly, they're in witness protection," she declared with a little nod.

Hermione shifted in her seat.

"I expect they all worked together to bring down some kind of crime syndicate," she went on. "Had to testify against a mafia boss or something."

"Bringing down a crime syndicate isn't too far off," Draco allowed.

"You didn't exactly work *together* though, did you," Theo pointed out.

"Some of us didn't work at all," Hermione shot back, leaning forward to look at him.

"I think they're mutants," Shannon announced confidently. "Like the X-men."

Everyone stared at her.

"Hermione has super strength," she added after a moment.

"Well, actually, I mean, there is a genetic component—"

"Granger!"

"Right, well, look, will you sign or not?" Hermione finished rather lamely.

The three Muggles glanced at each other and then leaned forward as one to take the forms.

Hermione watched as they each signed the bottom line next to their printed names. The only other text visible on the page was the printed names and signatures of five witches and wizards.

They all sat back when they'd finished, and Hermione nodded to the others. She, Draco, and Theo drew their wands and tapped in the center of the blank pages. The Muggles' eyes widened identically as text appeared on the papers.

They all leaned forward to read, but Shannon was the first to look up. Clearly the letterhead was all she needed to see.

"It's magic?" she asked in an awed voice. "That's what you were hiding?"

Hermione nodded, feeling tears sting her eyes. She'd been waiting for this moment for so long, but nothing could have truly prepared her for it. For years she'd dreamed of being able to share her life fully with her oldest friend. To let her know the best part of her. Who she was. What she'd done. The plans she had. There was so much to sort through. So many conversations to redo. And Hermione couldn't wait to get started.

"I'm a witch," she said at last.

"And you two?" Janelle asked, gesturing to Draco and Theo.

"Wizards," they said together.

Janelle nodded numbly.

"There are more of you?" Thomas asked. "Your school?"

"Yes," Draco said. "It was a school of magic. There's an entire wizarding world existing in secret right alongside this one."

"And yesterday," Theo said, "it would have been illegal for us to tell you about it. But luckily, these two don't like playing by the rules." He jerked a thumb at Hermione and Draco. "Well, actually, I guess they like playing by the rules so much that they spent the last year changing the bloody rules to suit them."

Shannon was looking back and forth between the three of them. "You changed the law for us?"

Hermione nodded. "Eventually, hopefully, it will be for everyone, but you're the first three. Our pilot program."

Draco pointed to the list of names on their forms. "Each of you has a sponsor—that's each of us—and four co-sponsors. They are witches and wizards who have vouched for you as someone valuable to add to our community. Someone trustworthy."

Shannon looked up again. "Harry and Ron? But they don't even know me."

"They do know you," Hermione said. "I've been telling them about you for a decade, Shannon."

"And even if she hadn't," Theo added, taking Janelle's hand across the table. "Once we finished telling everyone how amazing you are, there was no shortage of people willing to sponsor all three of you."

Hermione watched as her friends struggled to comprehend the bombshell that had just been dropped on them. She wasn't unsympathetic. She certainly understood better than Draco or Theo how they were feeling.

"What are the consequences?" Shannon asked suddenly.

Hermione took a deep breath. "If our government determines that you've put the secrecy of the magical world at risk, they will take your memory of it... and of all the magical people you've met."

Shannon's eyes widened in horror. "But that's... my whole life with you, Hermione."

"And," Hermione pressed on as Draco took her hand under the table. "As your sponsor, they would take my memories of you, too."

"Jesus Christ," Thomas breathed. "That's..."

"An incredible risk," Draco said. Thomas nodded slowly, looking dumbstruck.

"But you're worth it," Theo finished.

"And hopefully it won't always be that way," Hermione added quietly. "We still have a lot of work to do."

The six of them traded glances for a minute, and it seemed that no one knew what to say next. Hermione felt apprehension begin to coil in her gut. Maybe this had been a mistake. The forms were magically linked to copies in her department—it was too late for any of them to change their minds. She should have tried harder to impress upon them the severity of the situation. They couldn't have really appreciated it from what she'd said.

Then, Janelle broke the silence.

"Can you... show us something?" she asked a little shyly.

Shannon and Thomas looked eagerly between the three of them.

Hermione smiled as Draco and Theo picked up their wands again.

"We'll show you everything."

Two years later

“Hello?”

“Hermione, it’s me. You need to get over here right away and bring Draco. It’s Lydia.”

“We’ll be right there,” Hermione said into the receiver, panic gripping her at Shannon’s tone.

Hermione set down the phone and called up to the second floor.

“Draco, get down here! We need to go right away.”

Draco’s head appeared over the bannister. “Go? Go where. It’s starting in less than two hours.”

Hermione sighed in exasperation. “Yes, I understand, darling, but the VCR is set to record and something serious is happening.”

Draco scoffed but started down the stairs. “More serious than the entire world getting sucked into the mouth of hell starting with Sunnydale? It’s only the bloody series finale, Granger.”

“It’s Lydia!” she said, stamping her foot.

She heard a distinct thump as Draco jumped the last half dozen steps. He crossed the room in two strides.

“What’s the matter? Is she all right?” he asked quickly.

“That’s what we’re meant to be finding out. Now, come on!”

She grabbed his hand and Apparated them into their friends’ living room.

“In here,” Thomas said from where he was waiting by the entrance to the kitchen.

They followed him through the doorway and immediately spotted Lydia, strapped into her high chair. She squealed and waved two chubby fists at the sight of her aunt and uncle entering the room.

They crossed to where Shannon was sitting in front of the baby, a jar of food and a rubber spoon in her hand.

“What is it?” Draco asked, extending an index finger that Lydia immediately wrapped in her tiny fist.

“Look at this,” Shannon said, taking a scoop of the broccoli baby food. She brought the khaki green spoonful under Lydia’s nose, and the baby pursed her lips and shook her head.

“Now watch,” Shannon said as if they weren’t already. She pressed the spoon against Lydia’s lips, and as soon as it touched her skin, the contents shimmered and transformed into a honey,

golden mush. Lydia happily opened up and chomped down on the new bite.

Hermione and Draco's mouths fell open in shock.

"Watch!" Shannon said again, repeating the procedure. Once again, Lydia shrank away from the dark green spoonful, but when it touched her lips, it changed. This time Shannon pulled the spoon away from the baby and thrust it unceremoniously into Hermione's still-open mouth.

She closed her lips and tasted the food.

"Apple," she said numbly.

"Ah-po!" Lydia agreed.

"From broccoli!" Shannon yelped, dumping a spoonful of the original food into Draco's mouth.

"Eugh!" he grimaced as he reflexively swallowed the green mush. "Merlin's pants, Shannon, that's revolting. No wonder she's changing it."

"She's changing it!" Shannon screeched. She performed the ritual again as if they hadn't quite caught on.

"I think she's had enough, darling," Thomas said soothingly, taking the little spoon from his wife's hand. Lydia smacked happily.

Hermione's mind was racing. She looked back and forth between the baby and her parents. Then she looked at Draco.

"I don't understand," he said quietly, rubbing his thumb gently over the minuscule digits still gripping his finger. "She's Muggleborn?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, stepping forward. She trailed her fingers over baby-soft curls in the exact same shade as Shannon's.

"Shannon," she said, looking up from the little face. "What does your matching feel like to you?"

Shannon stared at her as if she couldn't possibly imagine what relevance this had to the broccoli-apple situation at hand.

"Matching?" she said blankly.

Hermione elaborated. "Yes, when you see a match. Or when you meet a match. What's it like?"

She hadn't really taken the idea of matching very seriously for most of their lives. After she'd met Draco again, however, there had been a couple of comments that made her wonder. And

the way Shannon sometimes behaved when she spoke of matches. And now with Janelle and Theo, too...

“Well, it’s not always the same,” Shannon said with a shrug. “Sometimes two people look the same to me, but not what they actually look like.” She shifted slightly on her feet, clasping her hands in front of her and then releasing them again. “Something inside them looks similar,” she said finally, gesturing between Hermione and Draco.

Hermione nodded.

“When it’s a strong match though,” Shannon went on, sounding more hesitant. “Sometimes I feel like I can see them together... later.”

“Later?” Draco repeated.

“You mean... in the future?” Hermione asked.

Shannon looked at Thomas. He nodded, and she shrugged again. “I guess so.”

“Can you give me an example?” Hermione asked.

Shannon huffed a laugh and gave them both a pointed look. “Well, when I first met Draco I saw you two on your wedding day.”

They stared at her.

“Excuse me?” Hermione croaked, feeling as though all of the air had just gone out of the room.

Shannon nodded. “I felt it that first night at the bar,” she said to Draco. “There was some connection, but I didn’t have any context and you left so quickly...”

“But when I saw you again in the pub,” she went on. “It was much more distinct. Like a haze around you, an image in the background. Clear as day, Hermione in her wedding dress.”

“You mean,” Hermione started, shaking her head. “My actual dress? The one I wore?”

Shannon nodded again, a soft smile curving her lips. “The very one. Remember what I said when you first tried it on?”

Hermione felt a shiver up her spine. Shannon had been there with Janelle, Ginny, and Pansy when she picked out her dress. Tears had formed in her eyes as she held Hermione by the waist and smiled at her.

“You look just as beautiful as I knew you would,” Hermione quoted breathlessly.

She glanced at Draco. He looked visibly shaken. Shannon was grinning at them. “Well, I didn’t think it would help matters at the time to tell you that I knew you’d end up married. But now you know why I wasn’t giving up without a fight.”

Hermione couldn't suppress the smile that tugged at her lips as she looked at Draco. She didn't know if she believed that they were meant to be, but there was no denying that they were a match.

Lydia began to fuss at no longer being the center of attention, and they watched as her mother scooped her up.

Thomas and Shannon looked back and forth between them.

"Do you think Shannon's matching could be... something more?" Thomas asked.

Hermione and Draco shared a look.

"It certainly sounds like it," Draco said, and Hermione could tell that he was just as baffled as she was. "Divination is the least understood branch of magic, but..."

"A vision of the future seems like a pretty clear indicator," she finished.

Hermione took a moment to look at her friend. She thought of everything they'd experienced together in the two years that she'd known the truth. If there was one thing Hermione truly understood about magic, it was that she would never know everything there was to know about it. The idea that Shannon could be a carrier of some magical line or a Muggleborn herself was so wonderfully perfect that she felt like laughing. After all they'd gone through to bring her into this world, she might have belonged there all along. Hermione was tempted to see that as a beautiful irony, but the truth was, they hadn't done it just for her. She and Draco had personal motivations, of course, but in that moment, Hermione knew with perfect clarity that it had really been for all of the others like them. The witches and wizards living and loving in halves.

She stepped forward then, and Shannon spoke quietly, just to her.

"Do you really think she could have gotten it from me? That I'm... magical?"

Hermione smiled as that word evoked the lifelong admiration she'd held for the woman in front of her. One that went far beyond anything so trivial as the ability to cast spells.

"Yes," she said softly, reaching up to wipe a tiny smear of broccoli from Shannon's cheek. "But then, I always thought so."

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Well, I would be lying if I said I didn't have tears in my eyes as I type this. I truly cannot thank you all enough for being here with me—even if you are finding this fic after it's already complete. Telling this story has meant the world to me, and I truly hope that it was something special for you, too. When I started out, I told myself that if I could write one person's smutty comfort fic then I would be more than happy. I hope this little version of my favorite world gave you something you needed :) If you are so inclined, please leave me a comment letting me know your thoughts or your favorite parts or anything at all really. I am gonna be attempting to stave off the impending pit of depression by finally finishing my replies to all of the comments on each chapter. I would love to hear from you!

With that being said, I'm not done with this universe yet! If you haven't already, please consider subscribing to my author page so you don't miss out on any of the epilogues, deleted scenes, or companion pieces that will be coming in the future.

Update I was planning to address this in a companion piece set during that last two year time jump, but I have gotten a few questions so I want to mention it here. Normally, I am of the opinion that trans folks (like any parents) do not owe anyone an explanation about how they have their children, but because I have very heavily implied that Lydia is genetically related to Shannon, I will explain that Shannon used fertility preservation before transitioning, and Lydia is a product of those frozen gametes and a donor egg. A surrogate carried the pregnancy. In my mind, when Shannon and Thomas try for another baby, they will use his sperm :) I hope that clears up any lingering questions! Thanks as always for showing so much love to my original characters! <3

Update 3/1/25 Now a series! Click next work below for Draco and Hermione's wedding!

If you're looking for more of my Dramione writing, please check out:

[Epiphany](#) - multi-chapter WIP with time travel, alternate timelines, no Voldemort AND Voldemort wins AU, and one adorable owl

[Sugar Bowl series](#) - one shot series (that probably should have been a multi-chapter fic) featuring Sugar Daddy Draco and Stripper Hermione, an age gap, soulmates (just trust me), and lots of smut with lots of feelings

You can also follow me on [TikTok](#) and [Twitter](#) for future updates :)

Oh, and lastly, I'm going to put these links in the beginning for those who come after, but in case any of you WIP readers are curious, these are my fancasts for the original characters:

[Shannon](#)

[Thomas](#)

[Janelle](#)

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by [PaperCranePodfics](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!