

Love Potions and Their Many Uses

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Love Potions and Their Many Uses

by [Accio_Saucy](#)

Summary

All Hermione wanted was a quiet year back at Hogwarts. Instead, she is tricked into drinking a Love Potion with Draco Malfoy. Smut, angst and questions follow, mainly who planted this Love Potion and why?

Notes

[Official LPATMU Playlist](#)

A big thank you to [Tiesnasia](#) for putting this Playlist together on Spotify!

- Translation into Español available: [Filtros de amor y sus muchos usos](#) by [Dama_Gris](#)

Invigoration

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Familiar by Agnes Obel



Returning to Hogwarts post-war felt like stepping into an old dream. The castle had been repaired in time for the new school year, erasing any physical signs of one of the most important battles perhaps in wizarding history. Hermione suspected the only scars left were carried by each and every witch and wizard who now walked the halls.

Not at this hour however.

Most people were asleep this early in the morning, which is why Hermione chose this moment to head off to an empty potions lab for some quiet study.

Hermione had carefully planned out her agenda to squeeze in as much homework time as humanly possible. Every day she would wake up at the crack of dawn and choose various empty classrooms to practice for her N.E.W.T.s Hermione especially liked studying during the early hours of the morning since they were the most peaceful and quiet - hours she found herself yearning for more and more.

Hermione could hardly believe she was back at Hogwarts, back to a normal life. The previous year had been like living in a nightmare that never seemed to end; months filled with uncertainty, spent in a tent with Harry and Ron; the Gringotts break in; the torture in Malfoy Manor at Bellatrix's hand; the constant worry and fear of failure, of being caught by Voldemort before they had the time to find all his Horcruxes. Sometimes she woke up in the middle of the night, in a cold sweat, expecting to still be in the tent and not in a comfortable four poster bed.

If Hermione had been studious before the war, she was a veritable learning machine now. She found that by keeping her mind occupied with memorising and reciting, she could stop herself from thinking about too many unpleasant memories. Flashbacks that interrupted her train of thought. Faces of people they hadn't been able to save. Screams and shrieking in her ear.

Where did you get this? What have you done, you stupid girl?

Hermione screamed and writhed on the floor. All she could feel was blinding pain scraping at her bones and flesh. Black hair tickled her brow from where Bellatrix leaned in, greedily watching Hermione suffer.

Studying also helped fill another particular void - two in fact. This was the first time Hermione found herself without Harry nor Ron. Harry had been scooped up by the Ministry's Auror Department and Ron had opted to join George and Lee Jordan with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Neither Harry nor Ron had been too keen on returning to Hogwarts for their last year. Hermione had been very vocal about her disapproval, though, deep down, she knew it was partly for selfish reasons that she harped on about the importance of N.E.W.T.S. The thought of being without them, especially when she had come to rely on their company so heavily, was daunting.

"You'll be brilliant Hermione. Just think of all the extra work you'll be able to do instead of helping Ron finish his Transfiguration essays" Harry had assured her during their last supper at the Burrow before the start of term.

Ron had snorted into his pudding, and glanced over at Hermione, his ears red.

That summer had been a complicated one. Retrieving her parents from Australia had been extremely taxing. Snogging Ron on occasion had brought her pockets of happiness, however she found that talking to him about mundane subjects was increasingly arduous. Ron was funny, charismatic and always there when she needed someone. He was the only other person in this world who understood what the last year had been like for her and she could talk to

him about how much she had worried for Harry, knowing Ron had felt exactly the same. Their mutual friendship with the Boy Who Lived was something that connected Hermione and Ron deeply. Watching Harry carry the burden of the wizarding world on his shoulders, the fear that gripped her every time Harry's scar burned, the sense of duty to Harry's mission of destroying the Horcruxes - only Ron knew how that felt.

Only Ron understood her nightmares.

She'd lost her virginity to Ron that summer.

That being said, Hermione realised he was still the same old Ron in a lot of other ways. Stubborn. Sulky. Dismissive at times. He was disinterested in all the things she was interested in. The few things he liked to discuss at length bored her to tears: Quidditch and Wizard's chess. He was also keen on helping George and Lee test some new developments for the joke shop and, unfortunately, Hermione had unknowingly been the test subject for quite a few. She learned that she hated pranks and that they made her prissier than usual, according to Lee.

Hermione and Ron were connected by the deep bond of their shared, life-altering experiences, but their everyday interests were ruefully different. Hermione knew her and Ron would always have love for each other. However, she couldn't help wondering if their romantic connection was sustainable.

And then Hermione was to be off to Hogwarts and, with the prospect of a long-distance relationship looming, it became even harder for her to imagine her future with Ron.

One night it became clear to both of them.

"Be honest, Ron. If neither of us had ever met Harry, do you think we would have still been best friends at Hogwarts?"

"Er..."

Ron's hesitation confirmed it to both of them. They were different people. They ended things amicably, though in the following weeks, Hermione found she missed Ron. Not because she was romantically attached to him, but because she had been able to talk to him about the previous year and feel understood, and vice versa. Talking about it helped her heal. He had been a terrible boyfriend but an excellent therapist.

Now that she was at Hogwarts on her own, she missed that presence in her life terribly.

The closest friend she had at Hogwarts was Ginny who was now in the same year as her. This meant they now shared a dorm and classes. It felt good to have a best friend so close by that was also a girl for a change. Hermione felt she could open up about certain things that she never could entirely with Harry nor Ron. Mundane things like period cramps and who was dating who, the sort of thing Harry and Ron would go glassy-eyed over. That being said, Ginny was a lot more extraverted. Ginny wanted Hermione to hang out with her Quidditch mates. Ginny wanted Hermione to come to parties. Ginny also hated the library.

"I want a career in flying brooms, Hermione, I don't need to sit in a dusty old room memorising the goblin rebellion of 1892. I'll see you at supper though!"

"It was 1612." Hermione muttered, earning herself an eye roll from Ginny.

Hermione understood but still couldn't help feeling a little lonely.

Especially since she was attending meals in the Great Hall less and less these days, opting to hide away in the library during those hours.

The truth was, she hadn't expected her sudden popularity and it was overwhelming. Hermione was constantly being bombarded by admirers from all corners, asking questions and requesting a replay of how the events of Voldemort's downfall had been brought about. Given she was the only one from the Golden Trio to return to Hogwarts, she was pelted left and right by students who wanted to hear the account first-hand. In the past, Hermione had always been overshadowed by Harry's exploits and Ron's charisma. She very suddenly felt thrust into the spotlight and the little bits of time she could grab to herself became more and more fleeting. Groups of Gryffindors clapping her on the back and cheering her name loudly in the halls. Hufflepuffs bustling up to her and asking for an autograph and pushing baked goods into her arms. Ravenclaws cornering her in classrooms to praise and discuss the complicated bits of magic that had needed to be performed in order to overthrow You-Know-Who. Hermione, for probably the first time in her life, felt a tingle of gratitude at Slytherin house for seeming to be the only one that left her alone.

It was draining. Especially since each time the topic of the war was brought up, it brought all the traumatic memories back to the surface. With no one she could trust enough to confide in, and yet with everyone wanting to hear her account, Hermione retreated more and more into herself and her work, avoiding others as much as possible.

Hence, this was why she was settling into the potions lab at the fresh hour of seven in the morning, taking out her textbooks and tools. She could breathe normally here.

Upon opening the ingredients cabinet in the classroom, she was pleased to find everything she needed. As Hermione filled her tray, pushing bottles around, she noticed a couple of phials that were carefully labelled as Invigoration Draught in neat, curly writing. Hermione smiled a little in relief. She had been studying later at night than she should be this week, and could use an energy boost. These Draughts had similar effects to a shot of Espresso and they seemed to have been left here in aid for some tired student in need. Hermione added one to her tray and returned to her cauldron, eager to get started.

As Hermione was about to unstopper the potion, the door opened. Hermione's head shot up in indignation. Who else could possibly want to brew potions at this time? Her heart sank as she saw the familiar white blond hair and Slytherin robes enter the room.

She had been as surprised as anyone else to see Malfoy back at Hogwarts. He had tried to murder Dumbledore after all, not to mention he had sided with Voldemort and been branded a Death Eater. No one really expected any of Voldemort's allies to return to Hogwarts, however there were still quite a few of them who had. Hermione could only guess at why, though she wondered if perhaps some of them had defected to their side before the war's end or had

provided sufficient intel to capture the remaining Death Eaters. The fact that a lot of them had been eighteen or younger during the war had probably bought them a bit of clemency from the Wizengamot as well. Hermione knew she had to trust that McGonagall had her reasons for allowing so many questionable students to return, though that didn't stop Hermione from being wary.

There was a certain justice to be had from all this though. All the Slytherins who had bullied Muggle borns in the past were getting their own medicine back. Hermione had heard that several Slytherin purebloods kept ending up in the Hospital Wing due the amount of people hexing them. Theodore Nott, the son of a known Death Eater, had been challenged to duel after duel though rumour had it he hadn't turned down a single one. Blaise Zabini and another student who Hermione knew only by his last name of Harper, were too intimidating to be bullied, however were deliberately ignored and people could be heard whispering rude things far too loudly in their vicinity.

Draco Malfoy had it the worst. No one wanted to talk to him unless it was to throw insults. No one wanted to be seen with him unless it was to torment him. The betrayer who let Death Eaters into Hogwarts. The snake who attempted murder on Dumbledore. The spoiled rich pure blood who housed Voldemort in his family's Manor. Even other Slytherins seemed to stay away from him, not wanting his reputation to infect theirs even worse.

Hermione knew he deserved it. Even before the war, Malfoy had been a toerag of a human being.

Though there was a small part of her that remembered last year, when they had been taken captive in Malfoy Manor. She remembered Malfoy being there and being ordered to identify a heavily disfigured Harry Potter. She had been sure Malfoy would have given Harry up, Harry who had been his enemy at school, who had repeatedly outwitted and embarrassed him and had gotten in the way of Malfoy's mission to eliminate Dumbledore. Harry who had inadvertently almost killed Malfoy with a brutal Sectumsempra curse. And yet Malfoy claimed he was unable to identify him. She wondered if Malfoy had purposely tried to protect them or if he had simply been terrified of making a mistake.

Malfoy hesitated for a moment in the entrance of the class, appraising her with an unreadable expression. He stood there for far too long, seeming to war with himself before finally deciding to step inside the room. Hermione noticed how gaunt and tired he looked as he strode purposefully to the cauldron furthest from hers. His usual sneer was gone, as well as his swagger from simpler times. Now he walked quickly, avoiding eye contact and attending to his business. It was almost surreal how much he had retreated into himself. She half expected him to throw a diatribe slighting her blood status, like the good old days. But Malfoy seemingly had nothing more to say to her.

As much as Hermione loathed sharing a room with him, there was no way he was scaring her off. She had been here every Friday morning since the start of term! Why did he have to pick now over any other time to do his potions work?

It dawned on her that perhaps he had come to the same conclusion as her: this was the quietest time of day with the least amount of students out and about. No doubt he had every

reason to want to avoid as many people as possible, given how everyone unanimously seemed to hate him.

Hermione surprised herself by feeling a pang of pity as she snuck a glance at Malfoy while he walked to the supply cabinet for ingredients. She couldn't help but wonder how much he regretted. She recalled how Harry had once confided in her that he'd witnessed Malfoy hesitate that night on the tower with Dumbledore. How he'd lowered his wand at Dumbledore's promise of mercy. Would Malfoy have chosen a different fate then and there if he could have?

There was the sound of a clink of glass which Hermione interpreted as Malfoy snatching the other Invigoration Draught. She found she was correct as he turned and she saw it in his hand.

Malfoy caught her staring. Hermione quickly lowered her gaze to her cutting board. She heard his footsteps as he returned to his cauldron, still silent. The air in the room felt unbearably tense.

Resigned to sharing a potions lab with the person she detested the most at Hogwarts, she unstopped the Draught and took a hearty swig. She would need all the energy she could get, if she was going to share a lab with Malfoy.

She caught a brief whiff of new parchment before the potion sloshed down her throat. Odd...she didn't remember Invigoration Draughts smelling of...

Hermione blanched, dropping the empty phial with a clatter on the desk. No....surely not...perhaps she had imagined the scent. She looked over at Malfoy who had glanced up at the noise and was glaring at her. She suddenly felt a warmth in her stomach. Oh no. No no no. She knew right away what she had swallowed, and it was absolutely not an Invigoration Draught at all. How did such a dangerous concoction end up so mislabeled in the store cabinet? She knew she had maybe a second or two before the effects would kick in. She had to warn him.

"Malfoy!" Hermione screeched, causing him to jump at her sudden outburst, "Don't drink that!"

She jabbed a shaky finger at the twin Invigoration Draught already in his hand.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"And why the hell not?" He asked, his voice low and hoarse. Hermione would have been surprised at how different he sounded compared to before the war if she hadn't been in such a panicked state.

"B-because it's ...it's not what you..." Hermione found herself struggling to get the words out. Her thoughts seemed to weigh heavy in her head and sifting through them began to feel like slogging through mud.

Malfoy's alarmed expression turned into a smile, cold and with no humour as he watched her flounder. He unstoppered the phial.

"Don't!" Hermione's shriek was strangled.

"Don't tell me what to do."

Her eyes widened in horror as Malfoy brought the potion to his lips. She realized her frantic warning, to his ears, had sounded more like a challenge. She wanted to shout, scream at him that it wasn't a Draught at all, it was love potion! Someone had mislabeled Amortentia! But she knew, too late, the potion was taking effect on her, inhibiting her thoughts. She could feel her body become suddenly lighter. Her head felt cloudy, her thoughts swirled together. She felt heat on her cheeks, in her stomach, between her...oh god no...not between her legs...

Malfoy's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed down the potion in one heavy gulp. He looked back at Hermione with loathing and triumph and then suddenly, he lost what little colour he had in his face.

"No..." he murmured, his eyes going wide in horror.

"I told you not to! I don't know how that got there!" Hermione answered shrilly, her heart beating. "Someone must've put it there...because..." She grasped at words, trying to explain but she didn't have a single clue why two bottles of Amortentia masquerading as an energy boost were shoved in the potions cabinet for unsuspecting students to stumble upon.

Draco took an unsteady step towards Hermione. His eyes pierced into hers, accusing, looking as confused as she felt.

"What now?" He hissed through clenched teeth.

She didn't have an answer. She found herself thinking about the sweat on his brow and neck. She noticed for the first time how intense his eyes were. His strong chin. His hands were balled into fists and Hermione's face flushed hot as suddenly, an unbidden image of those hands on her body forced its way into her mind.

A halo of light seemed to emanate from Malfoy's pale hair and all she could think about was how handsome he was. How clever. Did it matter that he had worked for Voldemort? That hardly diminished any of his qualities. How did it take her so long to notice how wonderful he was?

"It was you..." she whispered.

"I-what?"

"*You* made the Amortentia. You made me fall in love with you." Her tone was bathed in adoration instead of accusation.

"Snap out of it Granger! This isn't Amortentia."

She shook her head and some of the fog cleared. She found it took her an immense conscious effort to keep it at bay. Her eyes widened.

"The potion smelt of new parchment and mown grass...my Amortentia odours. Although it was yellow instead of the usual pearly sheen colour. I suppose any form of glamour charms could've disguised it."

Hermione rubbed her forehead. Every thought seemed to cost her an ungodly effort.

"I...I feel infatuated with you. Amortentia makes you fall for the caster. But why would you...why would you drink it?"

"Because I didn't make it!" Malfoy snapped in frustration. He stumbled forward into a nearby table and clutched the sides. His knuckles turned white. He seemed to be concentrating hard.

"So...someone is making Malfoy love potions?" Hermione questioned, bewildered.

Malfoy sneered at her and it almost felt like old times.

"I'm feeling the same way towards you. Clearly this is some kind of...alternative strain that makes you fall for the first person you see..."

Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth. So Malfoy felt the same thing she was feeling but for her. A chill ran up her spine knowing what that could mean.

"But...but why?" She murmured to herself. It was increasingly hard to concentrate. Her vision was blurring and only Malfoy seemed to float into focus, his face still seeming to shine in an angelic way. All her thoughts kept being shoved aside so that she could bask in his brilliance.

"Get out of here!" Malfoy hissed. She realised he was shaking. Probably from the effort to keep the potion's effect at bay. She remembered he was a practised Occlumens which was perhaps why he seemed to be mentally resisting better than she was. Again she marvelled at how smart and strong he was. He must've noticed the glassy look in Hermione's eyes as he seemed to become increasingly more agitated.

A part of her knew he was right. She could leave and wait out the effect of the potion in her dorm. She took a shaky step towards the door. Immediately, she felt a mental pull in the opposite direction. Malfoy's presence was calling to her.

"I don't know if I can fight it..." Hermione whimpered and her eyes clamped shut. She tried to block out the image of Malfoy, but it seemed to be burned onto the inside of her eyelids.

"Are there no counter spells to this stupid drink?" She said with desperation, glancing helplessly at her wand on the table.

"No. But Madam Pomphrey will have an antidote." Malfoy seemed frozen in place, staring at a point on the wall in front of him.

She didn't want to go to Madam Pomphrey. She wanted to go to him, feel his body against hers. A fire ignited between her legs and she gasped.

"Granger...Go to the hospital wing...It'll be easier if we're not in the same room...I'll go after you..." Malfoy's voice was strained. He said each word carefully, as if he was concentrating hard on his pronunciation. His cheeks were flushed.

His voice echoed in her mind as he spoke to her. A shiver travelled up her body. She found herself succumbing to the fog in her mind. She took a step and then another, and before she knew it, she had floated over to Malfoy. She felt like she was in a dream. A wonderful dream.

Hermione could smell his scent, a musky smell of some type of woody cologne. It was driving her wild. He was still looking straight at the wall though she saw him flinch when she approached. He glanced at her. His pupils were extremely dilated. He looked so angry that it made her heart hurt.

"You don't want to do this." Malfoy took a shaky step back when Hermione leaned into him. "Go to the hospital wing, now! I can't hold it off for much longer! Don't make me hex you!"

His brow was sweating slightly from the exertion of keeping his thoughts sound. She could sense he was having more difficulty fighting it as time wore on. She took another step towards him as he backed away from her, attempting to put the table between them. Hermione trailed after him relentlessly. She wanted the potion to take hold of him as well. Couldn't he see how blissful she felt? They could be with each other and think of nothing else. No war. No pain. Only love.

"I want to be with you," She said in a simpering voice she barely recognized as her own.

Malfoy was up against the stone wall. She was barely a foot from him. Her hands were on his chest. He twitched hard as she touched him but she felt a thrill when he didn't push her away.

The material of his robes felt soft though she could feel his firm chest underneath. Her heart began frantically beating against her ribcage. She seemed hyper aware of the sensation of his shirt slithering under her fingers. It was as if all her senses had been increased just to look at him. Touch him. Smell him. Another thrill of shivers shot through her body as she wondered if this was how he was feeling about her. The place between her thighs began to throb.

Malfoy suddenly grabbed both her wrists. His eyes captured hers. They were a beautiful grey and Hermione felt she could lose herself in them for hours. An electric current seemed to shoot up her arms at the warmth of his hands. She let a small sigh escape from her lips and she noticed his body tense.

"Please..." A small part of her was disgusted at how close to a moan it sounded. She leaned in and pressed her body to his. He was as still as a statue.

Something stirred in her mind.

"Draco, I can't...can't fight it...I'm so sorry..." she said weakly.

"Yes you can." Malfoy's voice was a hoarse rumble in his throat. His tone seemed to reverberate inside her. If he was shocked at hearing her say his first name so easily, he hid it. Hermione's hips undulated gently, almost unconsciously, against his. He sucked in his breath. His hands shook a little as he clutched her wrists.

"And what if I don't want to?" Hermione whispered longingly.

Her breathing heavy, she began to rub her hips firmly against his, pressing him tightly against the wall. She moaned and her eyes fluttered as she was certain she could feel his arousal. His hips bucked slightly towards hers and she gasped. Every small touch felt like fire.

"Don't you want this?" She murmured shyly, contrasting sharply with how boldly her body was reacting to him.

Malfoy opened and closed his mouth, struggling with himself for a moment.

"You know I do," He finally answered barely above a whisper, his breath ghosting across her lips.

Hermione sighed in happiness. She disengaged one of her wrists from his loosening grip and slid a hand down between his legs. She grabbed at his crotch, running her fingers over his protruding bulge before squeezing him firmly. He was rock hard. Malfoy hissed, his head falling back against the stone wall.

"You'll regret this when it's over. We both will" Malfoy protested softly, though he let go of her wrists and began to slide his hands down her waist. She let a small moan burst against his neck.

"Don't think about that. Just be here with me."

Hermione unzipped his trousers and clumsily pulled his erection out from his black boxers, swirling her thumb over his tip and feeling elated as she felt the wetness of his precum there. Malfoy grunted as she touched him. He hiked up her skirt and grasped handfuls of her ass while Hermione stroked him slowly. She marvelled at how thick he felt and how comfortable she was touching him. He was certainly a decent size. Her pulse quickened as his hands teased the corners of her knickers.

"Are you sure?" Malfoy whispered, their noses almost touching. Hermione's knees were weak.

"Yes, yes, *please*. I don't think I've ever needed anything so bad."

Malfoy groaned.

He pulled her knickers aside and she felt his fingers tentatively playing with her lips.

"You're so wet." He remarked, in awe. His index nestled in her slit, rubbing circles around her entrance. Hermione's forehead pressed into his shoulder as she gently rocked against his hand, now holding his cock more for support than for his pleasure. She was panting and squirming, urging him to continue.

“Yes, Draco, yesss...” she hissed.

His finger slipped inside her and she cried out, her head jerking back.

"Oh god, yes, I want you, I want this. Please keep...keep touching me like that, Yes yes yes!" She was babbling everything that came to mind as she felt his teeth hungrily latch onto her neck, his fingers plunge deep inside her. She tilted her head back, giving him full access to nibble and suck at her neck. He curled his digits inside her, exploring slowly as she cooed and wriggled at all his touches. All the while she could feel his breath on her as he whispered things to her.

“You’re so perfect...love how you feel...so warm...”

He had clearly fully succumbed to the potion and Hermione was jubilant. She wrapped her arms around his neck and clenched her eyes shut as his fingers began to take control of her, forcing her to gasp. The way he touched her was incredible. She loved him so much, she felt ready to burst. How had they never done this before? It was heaven. She wanted to feel this way with him forever.

She moaned hard as she felt his fingers plunge harder and deeper inside her at a steady rhythm. She raised a knee and Draco hiked it up against his waist, giving him better access to her pussy. She rocked eagerly against his hand.

Hermione could feel her orgasm approach. She gripped his neck and chanted “Don’t stop, don’t stop, please don’t stop!”

Hermione came undone with a loud moan, her knees buckling from the intensity. Malfoy held her up, continuing to finger her until her body was finished. She was breathing hard as if she had run a marathon. Had she ever come that hard simply by being fingered?

Malfoy didn’t give her time to reflect on it. His hands were on her hips and he spun her so that her back was now pressed against the wall. .

"Oh!" She squeaked softly. His eyes bored into hers and she felt herself blush. There was a need glinting in his grey irises, a longing that frightened and exhilarated her. She truly felt in this moment, Draco wanted nothing more than to devour her and she wanted nothing more than to let him.

His mouth came crashing into hers. Their lips had barely collided and his tongue was already pushing into her mouth. She opened for him eagerly. Their kisses were messy and heated. Demanding and greedy. Hermione arched into him, making wanton, breathy noises in her throat while she let him ravage her. It felt so good to be so wanted by the one person she wanted the most. He crushed her against the wall and she pressed her body into his, always yearning for more of his touch and never feeling satiated.

She felt him yank her underwear down with the sound of fabric tearing. She knew what was coming, Her whole body was crying out for it. Malfoy hiked up her leg once more and she allowed him. It drove her mad to have him manhandle her how he needed.

Something nestled between her pussy lips and Hermione's eyes fluttered. She knew it definitely wasn't his fingers this time. This was happening, it was really happening.

"Do it, yes, take me!" She whined, bucking her hips feverishly.

He paused. Something flickered in his eyes. Doubt? Hermione frowned.

"Please Draco, I need you in me! I'll burst if you don't!" she begged. What was he waiting for? Could he not see she would fall to pieces if she couldn't have him?

"Tell me you love me."

Hermione froze. She didn't expect that.

She looked at him, really looked. He had a pained expression. His brow was knitted and his body was tense, waiting. She melted at his sentimentality.

She ran her hands up his neck and pressed her forehead to his.

"*Of course*" she said softly, and meant it. "I love you Draco. I love you so much. All I can think about is how wonderful you are. How could you ever doubt it?"

His exhale was ragged, his shoulders sagging a little in relief. Hermione's heart felt ready to explode.

The tip of Draco's cock pushed past her lips and sunk into her dripping entrance. Her cunt was so aroused that he slid in deep almost immediately. Draco knelt slightly, hitching his hands around Hermione's thighs and she hopped up, her legs wrapping instinctively around his waist. The movement gave the extra push he needed to be buried inside her up to the hilt. He shoved her roughly against the wall, keeping them both upright. Her arms tightly wrapped around his neck and she buried her face in his shoulder to muffle her cries as he began to make love to her.

His first few thrusts were gentle, but once he found his rhythm, he began to earnestly pound her. She had never felt anything like it. She couldn't think. Each time he plunged into her depths, her mind went blank in ecstasy.

Hermione could feel her clit rubbing against the fabric of his robes, making all the pleasurable sensations even more intense.

"Oh god, Draco, yes yes yes! Oh please, *please* don't stop!" Hermione pleaded, her nails digging into his back. Draco grunted hard, seeming to revel in her encouragement as he doubled his efforts.

"I love being inside you, Hermione" he panted "I love making you mine".

Her heart pounded as he said her name.

"I love you, Draco! Oh god, *I love you*"

She wasn't even thinking about her words anymore. They tumbled from her, candid and lust-filled. As she orgasmed for the second time, all she could think about was how she had never orgasmed this hard in her life. Her toes curled and her whole body was molten lava. She was in love with him and he was making her his. What more did she need in life? Was there anything else?

Her pussy convulsed as she came, tightening around his shaft. Draco gasped, burying his head in her neck and hair.

"Hermione...I'm...I'm close!" Draco barely managed to articulate. She could sense panic in his voice.

"Do it" She panted breathlessly, her legs tightening around his waist with her last bit of strength, "Make me yours".

At her last words she felt him collapse against her, felt his cock buried deep inside her as he filled her with his seed. She mewled happily at the sensation of him twitching between her walls, and she clenched a couple of times to make sure he gave her every last drop. He was kissing her neck, biting her, sucking her. He needed her to know every inch of her was his to take.

"I love you, I love you" he murmured over and over into her hair and she mmm'd happily.

"I love you too. That was...incredible."

She took his mouth with hers, kissing him deep and long. Their tongues met, slow this time. Languid. She kissed him like she meant it, and felt him return the favour. His hands gripped her waist as she slid her legs down but still kept him close. She would never let him go, ever again.

There were sounds in the hall outside the room. Voices. Murmurs. She didn't care.

Only kissing Draco mattered.

Class is beginning soon.

So what? Nothing was more important than being here with him.

A small voice in her head insisted.

You'll be late. Plus, you're a mess right now. And you're kissing Draco bloody Malfoy.

She pushed the nagging voice aside. She didn't want to go back to the real world. She wanted to stay in this rose colored dream. Everything was simple here. She loved Draco and he loved her and no feeling could be better than this.

The voices in the corridor reached a steady buzz. The fog in her mind seemed to lighten.

Snap out of it! This has gone on for long enough!

Hermione opened her eyes. She felt like she was waking up in the middle of the night. Groggy, her vision blurred momentarily. She started to become acutely aware of Malfoy's hands on her waist, his lips caressing hers.

Oh no. No, no no. What in Merlin's name had they *done*?

Something was trickling down her thigh and she realised what it was with growing horror.

She had just had sex with Draco Malfoy.

"Malfoy..." she murmured between kisses. He was still under the influence of the potion.

"Malfoy!" she said a bit more urgently.

"What is it, love?" he asked dreamily and she flinched. Surely she hadn't sounded this... lovey-dovey? She cringed inwardly as flashes of her begging for him to shag her resurfaced. She felt ill.

She couldn't look at him. She knew he was on the brink of returning back to normal as well.

It didn't take long. A heartbeat later and she could feel his body stiffen against hers.

There was a tense moment where they both simply stared at each other in shock and embarrassment.

He yanked himself off her and stuffed himself back into his pants. He turned away hastily, hurrying back to his potion equipment without a word. She felt cold at his departure.

What was there to say? They had both been essentially tricked into loving each other. Her brain felt like it was trying to catch up to everything that just happened. Judging by Malfoy's prolonged silence, the same was true to him. The only sound in the room was the bustling of Malfoy cleaning up his station.

"I'm sorry that happened." he finally said in a strained voice.

Snapping out of her state of shock, Hermione quickly began to return her misshapen clothes to rights. Thankfully she was able to vanish and conjure fresh undergarments without Malfoy seeing. He was still resolutely keeping his back to her.

"I-it's fine. Well, it's not, but there wasn't anything we could do, really. We were p-poisoned."

Hermione choked a little on the last words, the reality of the mental violation hitting home.

"Are you all right?" Malfoy asked, his back still to her. He stopped putting his things away. He stood there stiffly, waiting for her answer.

Before she could say anything, he scoffed.

"No, you're not alright," His voice was strained. "I've essentially just...just forced myself on you." She could hear him fumble something as he resumed packing his book bag.

“We were *both* drugged against our knowledge. And I wasn’t exactly...non-consenting either...”

She turned away, feeling embarrassed and ashamed. It was hard not to regret her actions even though she knew those actions weren’t hers. A surge of anger suddenly invigorated her.

“I’m going to figure out who did this. Even if it was an accident, why someone would be dabbling in such hazardous potion-making is questionable at best. There’s a reason love potions are banned at Hogwarts and, frankly I’ve never understood why more of these kinds of things aren’t illegal!”

Hermione tried to focus on her outrage. Feeling angry was better than feeling humiliated and tricked. Still, she hated how unnaturally high her voice was even though she couldn’t stop ranting.

“If someone is leaving these around the school it is extremely dangerous not to mention wildly unethical. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was grounds for expulsion. If it’s an alternative strain to Amortentia perhaps I can find a book in the Restricted section that can- wait, where are you going?”

“Class, Granger. It’s almost nine.”

Hermione jumped. How had two hours gone by?

She took a deep breath and looked down to find her hands were shaking.

She felt in no right mental state to go to class. Her brain was already reeling with what just happened. She felt like she needed a shower. That being said, not attending class with N.E.W.T.s on the horizon was making her feel even more anxious.

“You don’t look well. You should take the morning off.”

Hermione bristled. She did not appreciate him dictating what was best for her. She also didn’t want him to see how distraught she was.

“I could say the same to you,” she said briskly, gathering her own things. Malfoy’s eyes narrowed.

Hermione made sure to pocket the empty potion bottle for evidence and further inspection.

“I’ll also need to notify the Headmistress,” she added, smoothing her skirt in a business-like way, “Teachers and students should be aware so they can keep an eye out for-”

Malfoy swooped down on her before she could finish her phrase. Hermione squawked in surprise at his sudden closeness.

“You’ll do no such thing.”

His voice was cold and lifeless. Hermione couldn’t help but wince. It was a drastic change from moments before, when he had warmly told her he loved her. She felt whiplash from the

personality switch.

She squared her shoulders.

“Of course I will! What if there are more of these lying around? Do you want to subject what just happened to us to more students? It isn’t right! If anything we were lucky that we...”

A flush crept up her neck and she faltered. A snide voice in her head finished her sentence for her.

...That we enjoyed it. Or at least you did. But did he?

Hermione shoved the voice away. Was she sick to have liked what had happened? She needed to unpack that later. Right now, Malfoy was staring at her, though some of the irritation in his features had subsided.

“I’ll get expelled from Hogwarts,” Malfoy said. His voice was still cold, though this time, Hermione could sense an undercurrent of anguish.

“Why would you get expelled? You didn’t do anything wrong!”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but my being an Ex-Death Eater has put me on thin ice. I think there are quite a few people here who would like me gone and any excuse will do. Being involved in this could look very bad for me.”

Hermione considered his words carefully. She could tell Malfoy was uncomfortable talking about his past, even in this brief mention. Sweeping this under the rug wasn’t right. But could he get expelled for this?

“Why do you want to stay so badly? Why even come back to Hogwarts?” Hermione suddenly demanded. She couldn’t help feeling annoyed at Malfoy even though she knew what just happened wasn’t his fault. Why did it have to be him, of all people? How come the one time he had to show up in the potions lab at the same time as her, they also happened to fall into the same trap?

“Surely another school would have been easier to integrate and it’s not like you don’t have the money. You could have started fresh in a new country if you wanted.” She crossed her arms and glared at him.

Malfoy looked like he wanted to throw something. His nostrils flared. She expected him to insult her and storm out. Let him! She needed someone to direct her anger to and he was the perfect target. He took a deep breath and surprised her.

"Because I'm sick of being a coward."

Hermione hadn’t been prepared for such a vulnerable response. She didn’t know what to say. She uncrossed her arms and eyed him warily.

Malfoy looked away, turning back to his desk and making a show of scraping the last few flyaway pieces of parchment into his bag.

Hermione cleared her throat.

“I’ll still need to tell McGonagall about the potion. I’ll leave you out of it. I’ll say I found it on my own and knew what it was.”

“And how will you explain why the bottle’s empty?” Malfoy asked quietly, still keeping his back to her.

“I’ll...err...tell her I drank it and...”

“And what? And say you just somehow knew it was an alternative strain of Amortentia? It would’ve been impossible to know that if we hadn’t both taken it at the same time. Amortentia makes you fall in love with the caster, but we fell in lo- we were drawn to each other.”

Malfoy faltered, but regained his composure quickly.

“Who will you say you fell in love with? There are too many holes in your story if you dodge the truth, Granger. Plus, McGonagall has decades of experience watching students waffle around in front of her, she’ll know if you’re hiding something. If you go to her, you’ll have to tell her everything.”

"Well we can't not say anything!" Hermione spluttered, "This could happen to someone else and it would be our fault for keeping silent!"

Malfoy swung his bag over his shoulder, heading for the door. He paused before leaving and sighed.

“You know what? Tell her what you want. You’re right. I’ll...deal with whatever problems if they happen.”

“Malfoy, wait!” Hermione burst out as he opened the door. He stopped again. Even though he still wouldn’t look at her, she could tell he was listening.

“That night at the Manor. Did you know? That it w-was Harry?”

There it was. The question she had wondered since she had first seen him at the start of term. She almost didn’t have the courage to ask. But curiosity got the better of her and she didn’t know if she would ever get the opportunity to ask again. Would he be angry at her for bringing it up?

The silence was deafening. She waited, holding her breath.

“No. He was too disfigured. I couldn’t be sure.”

With that final curt response, Malfoy rushed off before Hermione could answer.

She slowly finished gathering her things, thinking hard. She couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that, for a Slytherin who had served Voldemort, Malfoy was rather poor at lying.

Temptation

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack: Until We Bleed by Kleerup (with Lykke Li)

Madam Pince glared at Hermione through her spectacles as if trying to X-Ray her. Hermione tried to look nonchalant. She was perfectly in her right to take out books from the Restricted section for N.E.W.T.s studies. Granted she could understand her particular selection seemed suspect.

“It’s for a potions essay” she tried to justify quickly and then clamped her mouth shut as Madam Pince’s thin eyebrow arched suspiciously.

Hermione began sweeping *Love Potions and Their Many Uses, Dangerous Concoctions to Seal the Heart, Amare Potio for the Lonely Soul* and a few others into her bag.

Hermione hurriedly left the library, clutching her book bag to her chest, her face red. This was the second time today that she’d felt further embarrassment in the aftermath of the morning’s events. The first was when she’d made a visit to Madam Pomphrey for a contraceptive potion. Luckily the matron seemed accustomed to the nature of Hermione’s visit, though Hermione couldn’t help but blush when Pomphrey insisted she take at least three month’s worth of doses.

The day dragged on and Hermione felt distracted through all of it. She’d had to use a mix of healing and glamour spells to get rid of all the love bites and hickeys Malfoy had left on her neck. Part of her wanted to laugh at the absurdity of having love bites from Malfoy. Another part still couldn’t believe it actually happened. She thanked every god that she didn’t have any classes with him that day. She still wasn’t sure how she was supposed to feel about seeing him in day to day life. Was she supposed to ignore him or nod at him in a Hello-we-shared-another-deeply-traumatic-experience kind of way.

Malfoy was absent at supper. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was thinking along the same lines as her.

Hermione sat with Ginny and Neville, though her mind kept wandering off.

“Party at Ravenclaw tower tonight!” Ginny nudged her and Hermione snapped out of her thoughts.

“Oh! Er...I have some studying to do unfortunately. Next time, for sure.”

“That’s what you said last time!” Ginny griped, exasperated “It’s okay to take a break you know. Plus tomorrow’s Saturday, you’ll have all day to colour code your notes then.”

Hermione reddened at Ginny's jibe though Ginny wasn't wrong. She did still need to do that. Normally she didn't mind Ginny's over-the-top enthusiasm for events, but today she was especially not in the mood to be coaxed to an outing.

"I have an extra-credit Arithmancy essay to finish" Hermione lied, knowing how little Ginny cared about the subject. Ginny feigned a yawn and Hermione inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she was off the hook.

"Fine. Be boring. You know where to find us if you change your mind."

"Are the other houses going too?" Neville asked innocently.

Ginny grinned mischievously.

"Why? Are you going to try and snog Hannah Abbott again?"

"I-You- *I didn't snog her, it was just a kiss!*"

Ginny cackled as the banter picked up with Seamus and Dean joining in to poke fun.

Hermione managed a smile. It was nice to see so many familiar faces had returned to Hogwarts. Considering a substantial part of the student body had spent last year hiding away in the Room of Requirement planning for a war, it wasn't a surprise that many of them returned to redo their last year properly.

Over the loud noise, Ginny leaned in and spoke to Hermione in a low voice no one could hear.

"Seriously, are you alright? You look a bit peaky today."

Hermione couldn't help but feel warmly at how much Ginny resembled Molly when she was looking out for people.

"Just tired I think. I'll take advantage of the quiet dorm tonight to catch up on some sleep."

Ginny nodded and leaned into Hermione in a comforting way.

It pained Hermione not to tell Ginny everything on her mind. She felt like she desperately wanted to confide in someone. At the same time, it was all so fresh and she still didn't know what she thought about it all. She wasn't prepared to witness her friend's pitying face when she revealed what she had done under the influence of love potion. She also wouldn't put it past Ginny to Bat-Bogey hex Malfoy for the rest of the year, even if he had been a victim in this situation as well.

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Hermione spent the night reading as much on love potions as she could. It kept her mind busy. It kept her from thinking too hard about all the emotions she was feeling.

The dorm was unnaturally quiet. Everyone was at Ravenclaw and would probably stay there 'til late in the night, if not 'til tomorrow morning. Inter-house parties were becoming much more commonplace, which was positive. It meant the former rivalry between houses was dying out, no doubt in part because of how people had united over wartimes.

Hermione rubbed her sore eyes. She really was tired.

She closed her book and rolled onto her back, turning the lights out with a flick of her wand.

With nothing to occupy her thoughts, the emotions of the whole day finally came rushing in.

Tears began to fall hot and fast and Hermione indulged herself in a good, loud cry. She needed it. She realised she'd been holding it in all day. She cried because she'd had unconsenting sex. She cried because she was confused by how much she liked it. She cried because when it was over she'd felt so...hollow. Finally she cried because who could she tell? She was embarrassed by the whole thing, and the fact that it happened with the one person she had hated the most at Hogwarts did nothing to help. She couldn't even bring herself to go to McGonagall, even though she knew she should. Malfoy was right. She couldn't think of a cover story convincing enough without implicating him. And she couldn't involve anyone else without having to tell *them* the truth. Plus Malfoy might face expulsion. Did Hermione want to be responsible for that?

He deserves it, a voice in her head asserted. *Think of everything he put you through. All the times he tried to get Harry expelled. He called you slurs. He Let Death Eaters into Hogwarts. He tried to kill Dumbledore.*

If someone had asked her to describe Draco Malfoy before the war, she would have called him a nasty, prejudiced, entitled, cruel, spoiled prat.

He was so different now though. The constant pained look in his eyes. The way he kept to himself.

Not for the first time Hermione wondered if Malfoy would have switched sides if he could have. She remembered seeing him at the Manor. He was like a shadow of a person. Flinching every time Voldemort swept his beady eyes around the room. What must it have been like, for someone so young to be thrust so early into Voldemort's inner circle?

Hermione shivered. She couldn't imagine what it must've been like for Malfoy, to have Voldemort living in his home, terrorizing him and his whole family and proably torturing them as well.

Did nightmares keep Malfoy from sleeping as well? Was that why he looked so tired?

And then there was the way he looked at her while under the influence of the potion.

Hermione felt her face heat up. It was a rush to be looked at like that, like she was the only person who existed.

Tell me you love me.

Hermione felt her stomach flutter at the memory. His hands on her... in her.

It was, without a doubt, the best sex she'd ever had (she silently apologized to Ron). Truthfully it had also been the happiest she'd felt in awhile too. No traumatic memories of war. No stress of exams. No loneliness. Only Draco's arms around her.

She flinched at mentally using his first name in her thoughts. It felt so familiar now, yet still strange. He had always been Malfoy to her. Malfoy who had called her a Mudblood. Malfoy who had tried to get Buckbeak sentenced. Malfoy who had sided with Umbridge.

Draco who had made love to her.

Everything was so messed up.

She had felt so good with him.

She was coming to terms with the fact that her feelings for Draco had been a fabricated lie. But what did that mean? Would she only be able to feel that kind of happiness under the influence of a powerful love potion? Would she spend the rest of her life chasing that feeling with someone else? Would images of Draco fucking her against the wall haunt her til her last breath?

Heat pooled between her legs. She clenched her thighs together. She hated that the memory of their tryst was arousing her while she was so distressed over it all.

Think about something else. Anything else.

She reached for her wand on the bedside and summoned her book bag. Pulling out the phial, she studied it.

The label on the front was written in neat, elegant, compact writing. Invigoration Draught.

Invigoration my arse.

The writing gave off an aura of someone orderly, detail oriented. Hermione could already eliminate some names based on handwriting she already knew. She was pretty sure she had helped most Gryffindors in her year with their homework at some point and no one wrote like this.

Amortentia was a fifth year potion, which ruled out anyone under that grade as the culprit.

Considering it was an alternate strain of Amortentia meant that the recipe was either home brewed or found in an obscure book. If it was one of the books in the Restricted Section then only a seventh year (and technically eighth year) would have access. Hermione was top in potions and, while she felt confident she had the skill to make something like this, it would require thorough research and several tests. The person who brewed this was definitely extremely talented in potions.

An innocent experiment? Hermione highly doubted it. The more she considered it, the more this seemed premeditated. But to what end?

To recapitulate, the person who made this was most likely a seventh year, not in Gryffindor house. Someone orderly and who excelled at potions.

Hermione froze. This meant theoretically that the person was in her N.E.W.T.s level potion class. A chill went up her neck.

She ticked off the names.

Zabini Blaise. Theodore Nott. Draco Malfoy. Daphne Greengrass. Ernie Macmillan. Hannah Abbott. Padma Patil. Micheal Corner. Luna Lovegood.

She felt certain she could count Malfoy off the list of suspects unless he was a very convincing actor.

Perhaps he *was* a convincing actor.

Hermione took a moment to investigate this angle.

She remembered that he had been second in class, only next to her. He would be plenty intelligent to pull off a potion of this calibre. But why?

Why would he take a chunk of time out of his schedule to brew this potion, pretend to hide it in the cabinet, and then deliberately drink it when he was alone with her?

It made no sense.

No, it had to be someone else. But who?

Suddenly her heart sank. She realised she would have to face Malfoy in potions class at some point. An array of uncomfortable emotions floated to the surface at the thought.

Hermione tried to sleep. She really did. Her brain was far too occupied to let her. Rather than be tortured by her thoughts running in circles, she summoned *Love Potions and Their Many Uses*.

She opened the book to the first page.

I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell.

To die upon the hand I love so well.

-William Shakespeare

Odd to find a Muggle poet quoted in a Wizarding textbook. While Hermione had come across some familiar names in the Hogwarts library (apparently Lord Byron, Margaret Atwood and Mary Shelley had been wizards) Shakespeare had not been one of them.

Then again, from everything Hermione had perused, Shakespeare remained, to her at least, one of the greatest poets.

Proof that Muggles can teach wizards a thing or two, she thought with satisfaction.

She read late into the night, until her eyes were bloodshot. Even then, she read on, until she fell asleep on top of the book, as dawn cracked the horizon.

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Hermione paused in her tracks, sniffing the air like a crazed animal.

Fresh parchment. Mown grass.

The odour was wafting from the potions lab.

It was Saturday, seven in the morning. She'd awoken after a couple hours. A nightmare had shaken her up and she couldn't get back to sleep.

Where did you get it, filthy Mudblood? Crucio!

She decided she would use the calm early hours to test out some of the love potion theory she'd read last night.

Though it seemed someone was already in the lab.

And they were brewing Amortentia. Or a version of it.

Hermione cast a quick silencing charm on her footsteps as well as a Disillusionment spell. She approached cautiously. The smell was stronger. Could it be the Invigoration Draught culprit?

She couldn't believe she had lost a night's sleep wondering about who made it, when by simple chance she was about to catch them red handed.

Hermione cast another non verbal silencing charm on the door to mask any creaks and pushed it open a fraction of an inch.

She could just barely see the edge of a cauldron. The fumes were wispy and rising in spirals, a definite sign of the classic Amortentia brew. Easing the door open, Hermione shifted to get a good view of the brewer.

“*You!*”

Hermione burst into the room, her bushy hair crackling with indignant electricity, her Disillusionment charm dissipating immediately. Her wand was pointed directly at a flabbergasted Draco Malfoy.

“What the hell!?” He shouted, narrowly missing slicing his finger off with a cutting knife.

“You’re making the so-called invigorating potion! How could you- How *dare* you-You’re the one who poisoned us?”

“Careful who you accuse so brazenly, Granger,” Malfoy replied coldly, carefully setting down his knife.

“Then explain yourself! Why are you making it now?”

Malfoy eyed her wand warily.

“Put that thing down would you?” he growled, “And what exactly are you insinuating? That I deliberately drank my own love potion to get a shag? Do I really look that desperate?”

“I don’t know! You aren’t exactly a beacon of trust and philanthropy either!”

Hermione noticed his upper lip twitch in the slightest, the only indication that he was irritated. He sighed, and his shoulders sagged. She noticed the purple bags under his eyes. It dawned on her that she felt as tired as he looked.

“For your information, I’m trying to replicate the potion we had the misfortune of sampling yesterday. If I can figure out how it was made, it might give me a clue as to who planted it in the first place.”

Hermione lowered her wand, but kept it tight in her hand. She approached the cauldron and peered in. At a closer look, it was very close to the original Amortentia, though slightly off. It was too much on the pink side, the wisps a little too thick.

“This is only a test batch” Malfoy continued, “I had to go from memory since all the books on love potions seemed to have been checked out of the library.”

Malfoy shot her a look and Hermione had the grace to look sheepish.

“I-I might’ve taken out a book or two yesterday afternoon.”

“I surmised.”

“Madam Pince thinks I’m up to no good.”

“And are you?”

Hermione’s face heated up instantaneously. Something about the careful way he said it seemed to have so many hidden implications.

To avoid analysing too closely the bubbling feeling in her stomach, Hermione leaned in to examine his potion. It wasn’t quite Amortentia but it was very impressive for someone who was going by memory alone. This brew in particular had a lot of finicky stirring techniques in a very specific order.

“This is... really good considering you didn’t have the recipe.”

“I try to memorise every potion I make.”

Hermione looked up in surprise.

“Why? Isn’t it easier to just keep all your books on hand? That’s what I did last year when we...when we were on the run.”

It was the first time she’d mentioned last year of her own volition since her return to Hogwarts. Malfoy was staring at her and she felt the weight of his gaze. Heavy with unknown thoughts.

“I find the more I commit to memory, the easier it is to work under pressure and to improvise,” Draco answered quietly, “What if one day I don’t have access to a book? A few seconds can be the difference between life and death.”

Hermione fell silent, mulling things over. The smell of Malfoy’s woody cologne mixed with the smells of parchment and grass wafting from the cauldron. It was an oddly harmonious combination.

“Wait a minute...Does this mean you want to track down who made the potion? I thought you wanted to stay out of it.”

“No, you *assumed* that. I merely wanted to keep teachers from getting involved. But I’m curious to know who is trying to poison unsuspecting students. And why.”

Something about his tone set off alarm bells in Hermione’s head.

“You have an idea who it might be.”

It wasn’t a question.

“Perhaps.”

Pause.

“*Well?*” Hermione demanded impatiently, “Spill it then! Who is it?”

“And what are you going to do once you know who it is?”

“Bring them to the authorities of course! What they’re doing is incredibly wrong and should be stopped!”

“Ah.”

Malfoy sneered

“Malfoy,” Hermione said menacingly, pulling herself up to her full height, “Tell me who it is.”

“No.”

“But why? Don’t you care who this could hurt?”

“Don’t you dare say I don’t care.”

Malfoy glared at her with pure venom. She deflated a little under his cold tone.

He took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I’d want to hear the person in question’s point of view first, before flinging them at McGonagall. Maybe it was an honest mistake. Maybe they purchased it from an outside source not knowing what it was.”

Hermione hadn’t considered this perspective. Perhaps the potion had been acquired by some kind of independent brewer. No doubt black market. She felt the energy leave her body. This meant literally anyone could have gotten their hands on it. At the same time, if Malfoy had a hunch on who it was, it meant it might be someone who was a friend of his, whom he wanted to protect. A Slytherin.

Malfoy interjected her train of thought.

“I’m surprised you haven’t already tattled everything to the Headmistress. You’re positively quivering with judgemental zeal.”

Hermione bristled back up.

“I haven’t told because-”

Bloody hell. She couldn’t tell him. She hadn’t shared the information because she couldn’t face McGonagall knowing the truth might be whittled out of her. She might have to admit that her and Malfoy had been subjected to the effects. That’d they’d made love. That she’d liked it. The latter, more than anything, kept her mouth shut. The idea that anyone could know just how much she had liked it was...horrifying.

Malfoy was looking at her expectantly and she had to find a way to back out of the subject. *Anything.*

“Hold on...” she squinted at him, “If you think you already know who did it, then why are you bothering to replicate the potion? Why not just go confront them?”

Draco froze. He looked down.

“It’s an impressive bit of brewing. I want to learn from it.”

She might’ve believed him but he said it almost too casually.

“You aren’t planning on...on taking it again?” She asked, her voice trembling a little bit. She gripped her wand. She watched Malfoy clench his hands into fists.

“I- no. I wouldn’t take it again, no.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. When he spoke again, his voice was softer.

“It was...it was just nice to forget about everything for a while, that’s all.”

Hermione felt a huge lump rise in her throat. She understood too well. Uncomfortably well. The peace of mind. The mix of happiness, bliss, pleasure, ecstasy, crashing in waves of varying intensity. The unhappy memories that had plagued her all year, vanished for a worry-free couple of hours.

And Godric, it felt so nice just to not feel lonely.

“There’s no harm in just...just trying to make it to learn,” she said. Her voice was so small she wasn’t sure if Malfoy heard. He seemed fixated by a faded burn mark on the table.

“Trying to make it to learn” Malfoy echoed, his eyes slightly out of focus. He said the words as if he didn’t quite believe them. Hermione didn’t blame him. She wasn’t sure that she believed herself either.

There was a long, awkward silence.

Would you take it again with Draco Malfoy? The snide voice in Hermione’s head made her blush.

The worst part was that Hermione knew the answer and it wasn’t ‘no’

“I have all the books. The recipe might be in one of them.”

Her voice was far too squeaky.

“I could help you find it if you want. I’ve already done a lot of research...no harm in learning the theory, as you say...”

He looked at her as if he was trying to find something on her face. Hermione shifted from one foot to the other, silently chastising herself for even contemplating brewing this potion with Malfoy of all people. What was she *thinking*?

“Actually n-nevermind... You probably don’t want my help. I don’t even know why I offered, silly of me to presume-” Hermione laughed shrilly, turning to leave. Her face was overheating and she felt weak and lightheaded. She needed to get out of there. She needed air. And probably sleep. She couldn’t look at Malfoy.

“Do you have the books in that overstuffed bag of yours?”

Hermione almost didn't hear him as she was clattering to the door. She paused and slowly turned to face him.

He was looking at her, his expression neutral. He wasn't hostile nor sneering. He looked at her with rapt attention. She felt her neck heat up. There was something in his gaze, but Hermione couldn't quite put her finger on it. He was always so hard to read. Probably another thing that came with Occlumency training.

“R-Right. Right, well, I have this book in particular that I was reading last night. I can give you a run through of what I've researched so far.”

Hermione bustled over, all business, pulling tomes out of her magically enlarged bag. She continued to prattle on about facts and ingredients, while rifling through pages. If she could talk about potion-making, she could ignore the warm feeling in her neck and the fluttering in her stomach. This was for theory only after all. No need to over-analyse anything.

The hours passed on.

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“And where have you been all day?”

Ginny scooted over to make room for Hermione on the common room couch by the fire as she poured over charts for Quidditch formations. She was Captain for Gryffindor this year.

“I've been overviewing my N.E.W.T.s potions in the lab” Hermione answered distractedly, plopping herself down next to Ginny. “How was the party last night?”

Ginny looked up from her charts and did a cartoonish double take.

“Good god, you look awful. Did you sleep at all last night?”

Hermione frowned.

“Been having a bit of trouble with that...” she muttered, pulling out her homework planner. Ginny's expression softened. Ginny knew about Hermione's nightmares since she'd had plenty of them herself. It must've been difficult to be here without Harry. They had been inseparable for the whole summer.

“The party was great” Ginny grinned, trying to lighten the mood, “You missed Ernie and Cho arguing over the proper way to charm a dancing beetle. Neville snogged Hannah as per my predictions and I'm pretty sure they'll be going steady any day now.”

Hermione chuckled, “I can’t say I’m all that surprised. They’ve been pairing up with each other in Herbology since the start of term.”

“Right? Oh, also Greengrass and Zabini made an appearance which was...weird.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. Slytherins mostly kept to themselves these days and weren’t exactly welcomed by the other houses.

“They were invited?”

“Blaise knows Padma. I didn’t realise they were all that close, but apparently enough to get an invite. It was so awkward. Pretty sure Dean and Justin Finch-Fletchley tried to get into a row with Zabini, but Luna of all people managed to diffuse that bomb.”

Hermione snorted. “No!”

“Yep.” Ginny grinned, “started dancing between them and waving her arms like a great bird. Godric, I love her. You should’ve seen the look on both their faces.”

The two girls continued to chatter.

Finally, Ginny was called over by her Quidditch teammates and Hermione curled up by the fire, her homework planner open and ready for colour coding. She allowed her mind to digest the events of this morning as she absently tapped some squares purple.

She had gone positively barmy and was recreating a love potion with Draco Malfoy.

Even if she and Malfoy had agreed it was for the purpose of learning, she knew very well that wasn’t the main reason she had embarked on this endeavour. Her heart was beating just thinking about it.

She wanted him again. Not regular Malfoy. Love potion Malfoy.

She kept returning to the feeling of having someone caress her, compliment her, love her in a way she craved. It was such an addicting feeling, one she doubted she could ever feel without the influence of a powerful love potion. Did a love like that even exist?

She thought about her parents, about Harry and Ginny, Arthur and Molly. Their love ran deep, a love built on a strong foundation of trust, acceptance and respect. No doubt there was also physical attraction, passion and lust. She had felt it at the beginning of her relationship with Ron.

But to Hermione, love was about stability, about knowing you could lean on the other person and they would hold you. You could talk to them about hardships and problems and they would be ready to listen and compromise. Love endured.

The love potion was definitely not love.

It was, however, torrid, desperate, fiery. It felt like a volcano of emotions needing to erupt, blocking out everything else.

Real love could be painful.

But fabricated love was only joy.

And to have that fabricated love returned was like nothing Hermione had ever felt.

Was Malfoy chasing that same feeling? Why else would he agree to work with her to make this abomination of a potion? But did he want to take it again with her? Or was he planning to poison someone?

Her blood ran cold.

No, he had said so himself; he was on thin ice at Hogwarts. He wouldn't risk it all just for a couple of worry-free hours.

It was just nice to forget about everything for a while.

She shivered at the memory of his words and how they hit home with her.

She accepted that if she was willing to shag her enemy in order to have a moment's reprieve from the world, she must be desperate. At least she could say the same for him, as well. Maybe that's what made this all so enticing. She knew she could have a worry-free experience with someone who had zero expectations from her. And vice versa.

He only wants to do it with you because you're the only one bonkers enough to go along with such a ridiculous scheme, she thought bitterly. But why did that bother her so much? Wasn't she using him for the same reason?

She thought back to what they had discovered that day.

They both had rifled through her books until Hermione found a recipe that sounded eerily similar to what they had drunk.

Amor Videri

The love potion they'd drunk had been disguised to resemble the sunflower yellow of an Invigoration Draught, which meant they didn't even know what the real potion actually looked like. According to the recipe on Amor Videri, this particular concoction was a bright pink with very little steam. The recipe was very similar to Amortentia, which explained the similar odour. Between the two of them, it would be very do-able to make.

Hermione and Malfoy agreed that something as simple as a colour changing charm could have been applied afterwards, to masquerade it as Invigoration Draught. They would need to test it out and see.

Something that surprised Hermione was that Malfoy was an attentive listener. He interrupted with a question or precision every now and then but it was always pertinent. Hermione had realised that she had very few friends that were willing to listen to her talk about potion theory for hours at a time. Harry and Ron tried their best, but it never took long

for Harry to begin to fidget and Ron would usually crack a joke about her being a walking encyclopaedia and that would be the end of it.

“Where will we make it? It might be a little suspicious if we brew it here. The lab is usually empty in the mornings, but even so, I don’t know if we want to risk it,” Hermione said, tapping her chin. “I’ve made Polyjuice potion in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom in second year, though I don’t fancy doing that again. The smell isn’t ideal and nor is...well, Myrtle.”

Malfoy slowly raised his head from his book to look at her.

“You made Polyjuice in second year? Whatever for?” he drawled in a bored way, though she could tell he was curious. Hermione blushed crimson, recollecting exactly why but not wanting to tell him.

“Just for learning. Much like what we’re doing now” she said hastily. Malfoy arched a disbelieving eyebrow and continued to observe her in that pondering way he did.

"I don't want to return to Myrtle's hidey hole either" Malfoy said blankly, his eyes darkening. Hermione remembered with a jolt that Myrtle had been a witness to when Harry had cast Sectumsempra on Malfoy. She winced.

“We could use the Room of Requirement,” Malfoy suggested after a beat. His voice wavered but only slightly.

“Are you- Are you sure?”

“It’s the only place where we would be sure not to be walked in on. As long as we don’t use...”

“We’ll design a room specifically for potioneering, of course” Hermione finished. She could tell he was fighting back emotions. She knew he had spent most of the sixth year there, fixing the Vanishing cabinet. That Room also must bring back all sorts of memories he no doubt would be happy to leave far behind.

“Peachy,” he answered tightly.

Malfoy was excellent at keeping his emotions hidden, though Hermione noticed a shadow of pain sweep over his features. She wondered what he was thinking for the umpteenth time that day.

“Shall we say next Saturday then? I prefer the morning schedule personally, though if seven is too early, we could make it later-”

“You don’t have to do this, Granger,” Malfoy interrupted. His cold grey eyes bore into her warm brown ones. Hermione felt a chill seep into her.

He was giving her an exit.

He knew as much as she knew where this was potentially going.

She held his gaze.

“I want to,” she said softly.

His eyes widened a fraction.

“Saturday it is then. Don’t be late” she added quickly, gathering her things and taking her leave. She didn’t want Malfoy to know how badly she needed this.

More nightmares plagued her that night.

Distraction

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Catch And Release by Silversun Pickups

The week dragged on. Hermione found herself more distracted than usual, her mind constantly anticipating Saturday. She felt nervous and scared but also...excited?

Malfoy was quite a lot more different than she thought he would be. The main difference was that he wasn't a bully anymore. He had a snide sense of humour but he didn't try to insult her with every sentence. Did he even believe in pureblood nonsense anymore? She made a note to ask him. She decided that if they were to brew this potion together, she would take the time to get to know him a little better. If he showed signs of being a twat, she'd pull out of the whole operation.

Not that they were going to shag at all. They were making this potion for learning purposes, first and foremost, she reminded herself. Neither had mentioned anything about drinking it again and Hermione certainly wasn't going to broach the subject.

That being said, she found it increasingly difficult not to replay over and over the way he had touched her, kissed her and...more. Intrusive thoughts of how his cock felt in her hand and how his tongue felt down her throat plagued her all day. These thoughts left her knickers damp and her thighs sore from clenching them together to calm her throbbing nethers. Throughout her days, she could hardly wait for bedtime, when she could cast a hasty Silencio on her bed hangings and furiously masturbate her aches away only to wake up the next morning still feeling sexually frustrated.

As if her newfound constant horniness wasn't bad enough, seeing Malfoy in potions class became an added challenge.

She walked into the room and almost dropped her books in surprise at the sight of him. She had been so preoccupied about avoiding any thoughts about him that she had completely forgotten to mentally prepare herself for seeing him again in everyday life.

He looked up at her. His greys met her browns. Flashes of his hands on her thighs and his fingers in her cunt burst into her brain.

You don't want him. It's Love Potion Malfoy you're interested in. She tried to remind herself.

Still blushing firetruck red, she wrenched her gaze from his and hustled over to her desk, knocking painfully into another one in her haste to move past him.

"Hello, Hermione. You look in a hurry to start," Luna remarked dreamily as Hermione collapsed in the seat next to her.

Hermione was spared to have to answer when Slughorn entered the room, beaming around. He looked a little greyer since after the war, a little gaunter, though his old jovialness remained, albeit a little more withdrawn.

She couldn't help stealing a glance at Malfoy. He quickly turned his head. She frowned. Had he been looking at her?

"Welcome, welcome everyone. Before we start, your essays on antidotes for venom are due today. May I have a volunteer to collect them for- yes, Miss Granger! Energetic as always! Certainly, certainly please bring them on my desk right here, if you please."

Hermione's hand had shot up the instant he'd offered. She saw a few people titter and roll their eyes but she ignored them. This was it. The perfect opportunity to get a look at everyone's handwriting to see if any matched with the Invigoration Draught culprit. She smirked to herself.

She began gathering essays, glancing down quickly at each person's writing and analysing as much as she could.

Luna's writing couldn't be more far off. It was large and swirly, some of the i's and margins dotted with funny little rune-like symbols Hermione didn't recognize.

Ernie's was too compact, Hannah's was too messy. Corner's too spiky. Padma's too round.

She hesitated the most at Daphne's though, after quick scrutiny, she realised Daphne's a's and y's were far too stylized.

"Move it along would you? Or are you planning to read each essay before you hand them in?" Daphne said primly.

Hermione flushed and hurried on her way. Neither Nott nor Blaise fit the bill either. When Hermione reached to collect Malfoy's, he handed it to her and their fingertips touched. She almost dropped the pile as an electric current seemed to shoot up her hand from the simple contact. She fought back the now familiar throb between her legs. Good Godrick, could she not even brush against his fingertips now without unravelling?! She thought she imagined the ghost of a smirk cross his features as she turned away.

Love Potion Malfoy, not regular Malfoy! Regular Malfoy probably shags like a troll in heat.

Somehow, she wasn't entirely convinced that was true.

She glanced down at his handwriting. Neat. Simple. Orderly.

But not a match. Although she already knew it wouldn't be.

She sighed and placed the essays on Slughorn's desk, her shoulders sagging as she returned to her cauldron. She felt like she was searching for a needle in a haystack at this point.

She couldn't wait for this day to end so that she could scramble back into bed and touch herself some more.

//

The Room of Requirement, as always, did not disappoint. It even perhaps went a little overboard.

As Hermione stepped in through the brass door on Saturday morning, she noted how the Room had taken her request to "make a room where we can brew a love potion in secret" a bit too literally.

There was a thick table laden with all and any tools imaginable, including an expensively well-made cauldron Hermione envied. The walls were lined with shelves and shelves of books, bottles and baubles displayed in an orderly fashion.

Potions aside, the Room was decorated in fluffy heart-shaped carpets and long red, velvet curtains hung from the walls. In a corner was an alcove that nestled a king-sized heart shaped bed, covered in rose petals and silk sheets.

Hermione felt her neck, her cheeks and, to her horror, her crotch light up with heat. Why did she have to specify it was a love potion when she'd called to the room?

Hermione shut her eyes to concentrate on rearranging the decoration to a more proper state.

"I didn't realise you were such a romantic about potion-making, Granger."

Hermione's head snapped around so hard she swore she heard her neck crack.

"I didn't mean for it to look like this!" She burst out, embarrassed, "I asked for a lab to brew love potions and the Room seemed to think...I was just trying to set it to rights!"

"Hmm. Leave it. I think it fits the theme rather well," Malfoy drawled, examining some bottles on one of the shelves. Hermione squinted and saw, with horror, an array of scented candles and massage oils.

She huffed in frustration and stomped over to the cauldron, yanking out the book with the recipe and laying it flat so both could see.

They began to gather what they would need.

"Did you find the culprit hidden in the potions essays?" Malfoy asked casually.

"Spotted that, did you? No," Hermione sighed and shot Malfoy a dirty look, "Perhaps you could just tell me who your lead is so we can get to the bottom of this."

Malfoy gathered a handful of plums for juicing, taking his time to reply.

"I can't do that. You'll alert the press. I don't think I've ever seen a bigger tattle tale in my life."

Hermione took a step towards him in frustration.

"I am *not* a tattle tale! How about this, you let me confront this person with you and I'll swear not to turn them in unless you agree with me."

Malfoy turned to look at her. She hated how his grey eyes gave her shivers, even if she hadn't drunk any potion.

"And how am I supposed to trust you won't go back on your word?"

"You're already trusting me with this, learning this potion together. You're also trusting me not to blab about what happened to us, which I haven't. We're already both neck deep in this situation, what's a little further? Besides,"

She picked up a pestle and primly began to ground some seeds into a powder, "I'm a Gryffindor. Self-righteous and moral and all that tosh. That should be proof enough that I wouldn't go back on my word."

Malfoy chose not to answer though she hoped he was thinking it over. Hermione observed him crushing a prune with the flat of his knife to extract some juice. She had only seen one other student use a knife like that in what felt like a lifetime ago.

"You've been trained by Professor Snape."

Malfoy looked up from his work. She felt like she would never get used to the way he always searched her face before answering her.

"Yes. He tutored me most summers."

"Were you...were you close?"

Malfoy seemed to be deciding whether to answer or not.

"He was a friend of my father's. He came round for tea regularly. My father liked to keep him close because of his influence at Hogwarts."

Hermione winced at the memory of Lucius Malfoy. She didn't find it hard to believe Lucius was the type of man who only kept friends who served a purpose.

"My mother told me Snape had made an Unbreakable Vow to protect me in sixth year."

Hermione gaped.

"To protect you from Voldemort?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed at the name.

She waited for Malfoy to elaborate though he didn't seem to want to. He looked like he had said too much.

"I'm sorry, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I shouldn't've asked in the first place," Hermione offered.

Frankly she was surprised he'd mentioned the Vow at all. She'd wondered why he felt comfortable sharing that out of nowhere.

Malfoy was silent for a beat, perhaps wondering the same thing.

"It's fine. We've shagged after all, so you may as well know a tidbit or two about my past."

Hermione squeaked and almost dropped the heavy book she was holding. Malfoy smirked, emptying some of the plum juice into the cauldron. Hermione could've sworn he'd almost broken into a smile.

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There it was. A bubbling pink potion that, in theory, would make you fall in love with the first person you laid eyes on.

Making it with Malfoy had been surprisingly smooth. They worked well together, complimenting each other's tasks and rarely stepping on each other's toes.

They'd talked about mundane things like the best way to find and prepare certain ingredients. Hermione discussed her study challenges for N.E.W.T.s and Malfoy shared his own. They both stayed away from any serious subjects involving any more Unbreakable Vows, though Hermione found she didn't mind talking to Malfoy about school. She'd always known he was smart, since he was second in their year, but in the past, his intelligence had been majorly overshadowed by his being a huge prat. Now that he was no longer a pompous ass however, Hermione could appreciate his insight. She'd even forgotten to feel awkward and embarrassed around him.

Malfoy scooped up a phial of the thick, pink liquid and stoppered it. Pulling out his wand, he tapped the phial, casting a non verbal glamour. The potion shifted colour until it was a bright, sunflower yellow.

Hermione pulled out an Invigoration Draught she had brewed the night before. They compared the two. The difference was seamless.

"What do you smell?" Hermione suddenly asked.

"New broom smell, fresh and woody. Apple tarts."

"You like Apple tarts?"

"They were my favourite growing up. My mother hated it because I'd always make a mess eating them. I learned proper table manners rather quickly so that she'd let me eat them again."

Something about the idea of a miniature Malfoy with a face covered in pastry made Hermione break into a smile.

"I smell new parchment and-"

"Freshly mown grass. You told me."

Hermione gaped.

"You... You remembered?"

"Of course. Only a dunce would be in love with grass."

She whacked him on the arm and almost choked in surprise when he laughed. A soft, full laugh. Had she ever heard him do that? She'd heard him laugh in a mean way, when he used to make fun of people. But never in an honest way.

They fell silent.

Hermione felt her heart beat faster. Why did she feel so hot all of a sudden? She watched Malfoy swirl the potion in the phial, admiring its bright colour. It glowed softly.

"Well, I suppose this is it then. We've done what we set out to do. We have the recipe." He turned the potion over in his hand.

She nodded. Her stomach was doing flops.

She tried not to think about why her pulse was racing but the reason was glaringly obvious.

She wanted to take a sip.

Wanted to relive that heated moment.

Wanted Malfoy to take her over and over until their time was up.

She had been thinking about it all week, after all.

It was a ridiculous notion. One that absolutely could not happen.

Malfoy's low voice seeped into her inner monologue.

"Although I suppose we'll never really know if it works for sure if we don't try it."

Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat as he turned to face her, his eyes glittering.

She was breathing fast. Was he insinuating what she thought he was? She opened her mouth but found her throat was dry and she had no idea what to say.

"But perhaps best to vanish it."

Malfoy pulled his wand out of his robes and gave it a wave.

"*Evanesc-*"

"Wait!"

He paused, his wand pointed at the cauldron staring at the swirling pink liquid, his face alight from its glow.

"M-Maybe we should keep some. Just in case we... We need it for proof or..." Hermione stammered, wringing her hands.

"This potion is dangerous, Granger. *Unethical*."

"I know that, I'm just saying-"

"You're not planning on *taking it* again, are you?"

She knew he was mocking her. Using the same words she had thrown at him previously. Well fine, he wanted to play dirty then she could too.

"You said so yourself. We won't know we got it right unless we try it."

It was so satisfying to see Malfoy, usually so guarded with his expressions, look at her in utter shock. Hermione almost smirked in pleasure. Then, out of nowhere he took a step towards her. She squared her shoulders and stared determinedly back at him.

"You would drink this again. Right now."

"For...for the sake of learning."

"You're not serious."

Hermione pursed her lips in a thin line.

"Aren't you?"

Draco stared at her for a beat longer and then smirked.

"Okay then, Granger. I'll call your bluff."

He waved his wand and conjured a second phial. He levitated it over the cauldron, dipped it in and floated it over to Hermione. She took it.

"Bottoms up?"

"I'm game if you are."

Malfoy was still looking at her with a slight smile, as if he didn't truly believe her.

"Granger, I am going to drink this. If you want out, you need to say so now."

"I'll drink it if you do."

Malfoy's smile faded and he looked at her with a more serious expression. Hermione returned his gaze unflinchingly. Something shifted in the atmosphere and Hermione was sure they both could feel it. They weren't playing games anymore.

"On three then"

"On three."

The look he gave her was burning. She could tell part of him still didn't think she'd do it. But perhaps a larger part of him wanted her to? She could already feel heat on her skin, between her legs before she'd even taken the potion. What they were about to do was foolhardy, reckless and she had no idea what was going through his mind.

All she knew was that she wanted to be loved and wanted to forget. This potion provided the perfect storm.

He counted down to three and they both took a swig. Hermione recognized the effects immediately.

Her head felt cloudy. Her body felt light. Her face was warm. Heat pooled in her stomach and arousal burned. But instead of fighting the potion this time, she let herself plummet into its embrace.

"It worked!" She breathed. Draco stood before her, as magnificent as ever. He closed the gap between them and already had her in his arms. It was as if suddenly they were connected by a magnet. She had a visceral need to be as close to him as she could.

"You're brilliant. I couldn't have done this without you," his breath was hot on her mouth and then he was kissing her, deep and slow.

"No, it's you, you're so clever," Hermione gasped between kisses, her hands scrambling to touch his chest, his neck, his hair.

"I want you," he groaned and leaned in to lick a long strip up her neck before sucking down.

Her heart skipped a beat as she writhed in his embrace, fighting to get closer to him so he could kiss more of her skin.

While he continued to kiss her neck, Hermione moved her hands to his chest, unbuttoning his shirt.

He shrugged it off and she admired how well toned and lean he was. His pale skin seemed to glow, lit by only the eerie light of the potion still swirling in the cauldron and the torches on the walls. The firelight flickered, giving the whole room an otherworldly feel.

"I want to see you too," he murmured, his fingers teasing along her exposed collarbone.

She could barely take her own shirt off fast enough. A few buttons popped as she quickly grappled at her blouse. Normally Hermione was quite shy when undressing for someone for the first time. But this time she shed her shirt and then her skirt with assurance. She confidently stood in her cream coloured bra and matching panties knowing Draco loved her and would never make her feel self conscious.

She was immediately proven right.

He ran his hands up her sides, appraising her.

"You're beautiful," he murmured, placing a kiss on her shoulder. His hands moved up to cup her breasts and she sighed, leaning into his hands. He kneaded her, coaxing out little moans from her.

"You're exquisite" he rumbled, pulling down her cups and taking a hard nipple in his mouth. She gasped hard, arching and clutching his hair.

"Oh yess, Draco, yesss!"

She hissed as his tongue swam in circles around her areola. His hands reached behind her and, after a bit of struggle, unclasped her bra. It fell off her shoulders, freeing her modest breasts. She was now naked save for her panties, stockings and shoes.

He picked her up and planted her on the nearest potion worktable, kissing her over and over and repeating sweet compliments to her in between. She felt like she was the prettiest, smartest person in the world with him. Her chest swelled with affection.

He began to kiss her neck, then down between her breasts. She panted and whined, wiggling on the desk. Her arousal was burning, urging her to satiate it.

"Please..." she moaned, "Please..."

Lower he went, peppering kisses across her stomach and hips. He parted her thighs roughly and she squeaked in surprise.

He took off her left shoe, and then her right. He was gentle, careful, caressing her inner thighs as he did. He left her knee-high stockings on, however.

"Draco what are you...what- Ohhh!"

He ran his tongue up her slit and over her panties. Her leg twitched and her head fell back and she moaned low and feral.

"Already soaking wet. I love it" He breathed, pulling her panties aside and sliding his tongue between her lips.

"I love you, Draco! Oh Godric, please don't stop!"

His tongue slithered into her hole. Her moans were mounting. Her chest was heaving with each heavy breath. His mouth made her weak.

He dipped his tongue in and out of her, warming her up. He licked upwards, capturing her clit between his lips. She cried out. He suckled and teased her. A finger slid easily inside her and she bucked against it.

Hermione alternated between shutting her eyes tight in ecstasy and opening them to watch the blond head nestled between her legs.

Another finger was added. He finger-fucked her, slowly at first. Then hard. Just how she liked it. She arched her back, her wobbly arms barely keeping her upright on the desk.

"Yes! Yes, right there! Just like that!"

He obeyed, working her until a final cry indicated her well-deserved orgasm. Her whole body tensed, her thighs clamping around his head. She felt dizzy from the force of it. Her arms gave out and she was lying with her back flat on the desk, breathing hard.

Hermione was still recovering when he pulled his fingers out of her. And then suddenly, his cock was pushing inside her.

She immediately bucked her hips up to meet him and he grunted in surprise as she took him all the way in one thrust.

He was on top of her, his chest pressing into hers, his hips thrusting in and out. She grabbed his back, digging her nails in. He leaned in and kissed her. They both moaned into each others' mouths.

"I love you. God, I love you," He panted, picking up his pace, "You're going to make me come so fast."

"Please come for me," She begged, wrapping her legs around his waist. She clenched her walls around him and he grunted in a way that gave her a thrill. She leaned up and whispered in his ear, "I love you, Draco. I love you so much."

He gasped and she felt his cock twitch inside her as he spilled everything he had. She clamped her thighs tight around him, undulating her hips against him. She milked him as much as she could, squeezing her pussy until he collapsed on top of her.

She laughed, deep and throaty as he panted on her. Their sweaty chests stuck together. She never wanted him to leave. Thankfully, he seemed in no hurry.

"It always amazes me how wet you get" he chuckled in her ear. She smiled, kissing his cheek and then his lips.

"I want to lie here with you forever" she murmured, stroking his hair.

He smiled and she wanted to cry. He looked so peaceful, so content.

"I love seeing you look this happy"

"I don't have much to be happy about these days. Except you. Brewing potions with you has been like inhaling fresh air after holding my breath for years."

Hermione swelled with warmth. She felt a tear slide down her cheek.

Draco's expression shifted to concern.

"What's wrong, love?"

"Nothing, I just...I love you so much. I can't stand the thought of you suffering."

"Don't worry about it. I'll be fine with time. If you're with me, I feel like I'll be able to deal with everything else."

"I'll never leave you."

She stroked the side of his face and he held her hand. The space on the desk was limited but neither cared. The bed in the alcove that the Room had generously supplied was entirely forgotten. The smitten pair were entranced with one another. They held each other close, basking in their love.

After a moment she felt him slowly harden against her leg again. She moaned. Her need began to rise in response.

"Take me again" she hissed in his ear, before biting his lobe. He groaned.

She slid off the desk and placed both hands on the nearest wall, bending over. She wiggled her ass enticingly.

Draco's mouth fell open.

"You're so unbelievably sexy" he groaned, joining her.

He bent over her, caressing each cheek.

"Such a good girl," he murmured.

Hermione felt her pussy clench involuntarily at the words and she let out a garbled moan.

"Oh? You like it when I call you that?" Draco chuckled.

Hermione blushed and wiggled her hips more insistently as an answer. It didn't take long before she was rewarded by Draco's tip easing past her pussy lips.

Her eyes rolled.

Where before he had penetrated her frenetically, in a passionate haste, this time he savoured her, the head of his cock bobbing in and out of her teasingly.

Hermione trembled in frustration. Her need to be fucked by the man she loved was turning into an urgency.

"Fuck me Draco, please, please"

"Tell me you love me" he ordered, his voice smooth like honey. His tip inched in slowly, prolonging the suspense.

Hermione huffed in frustration, her pussy feeling ready to explode.

"I love you, I love you now please, please please-"

"Mmm Good girl," Draco rumbled and pushed his cock in all the way.

She almost came from those words alone.

He gripped her hips and gave her what she wanted. He pounded her hard and rough and she indulged in every minute of it.

A shiver ran up her spine and her insides quivered, alerting her to her impending orgasm.

"I'm...oh god, I'm close!" She whined.

As Draco's hips slapped noisily against her buttocks, Hermione felt a bit of the fog lift in her mind.

Oh no no, not now!

She gasped, trying to clutch onto the feeling of dreamlike fog, but it was slipping through her metaphorical fingers.

Draco Malfoy is fucking you.

The lucidity of it all should've made her libido die down, but for some reason, the thought made something flair up inside her. Maybe because it was so wrong. Maybe because it had been so long since she'd had such a good shag from someone. Maybe because despite all his flaws, Draco Malfoy was still an attractive man - that's right, she said it. She wasn't below admitting that much to herself.

Whatever it was that spurred her arousal, Hermione decided to embrace it because she needed release so bad in that moment.

"Don't stop please, please, I'm coming!"

Her pussy convulsed and she cried out as her orgasm crashed into her. Draco continued to pound her and she could hear his grunts increase as her walls clenched him over and over, gushing their pleasure.

"I'm coming too..." Draco moaned through clenched teeth and joined her.

Hermione arched into him, her orgasm abating as his rose in full force. There was something completely satisfying about reaching pleasure as a unit. He clutched her hips and she mewled and quivered beneath him, whispering a jarble of affirmations that made no sense. Her mind was blank and all she could do was *feel*.

He pumped her a few more times and she bucked her hips for him, wanting him to finish strong. She felt him shudder against her, then slowly ease out, though his hands lingered a moment longer on her hips.

"Did I hurt you?" He asked, his voice full of concern. She noticed the smooth airiness to his voice had ebbed out, a sign that Malfoy had returned to his senses as well.

Hermione stood, though she was a bit wobbly. She covered her breasts, suddenly self-conscious. All the normal feelings of being naked in front of someone rushed back. She felt vulnerable and self-conscious.

He probably thinks I'm ugly now that he's off the potion.

Malfoy looked away as she covered herself.

"No, I'm fine."

The atmosphere was incredibly awkward.

"What should we do with the rest?" Hermione asked, glancing at the cauldron before quickly picking up her skirt.

"I suppose the responsible thing would be to vanish it. We know it's effective beyond a doubt."

Malfoy was pulling his boxers back on. He stood and looked at her. She wished now more than ever she could know what he was thinking.

"Unless you want to keep it " he added with what seemed like a hint of hesitation.

"It's a small batch. Maybe only about ten hours worth".

"Indeed."

"Well...what if it's inconsistent? Maybe we should d-do more tests...just to make sure it mixed all the way through..."

Malfoy observed her while she nervously put a shirt on, picking up and dusting her robes.

"I don't understand you," he finally said.

"What?"

"I know why I want to escape. But you...You're a war heroine. You have your close friends to write to. You have a disgustingly well rounded family. You have admirers worshipping you left and right. Everyone cares about you. Why do you need an escape?"

Hermione slowly donned her robes, wondering how much to tell him. The way he looked at her; there was nothing accusing or malicious in his stare. Only confusion and honest curiosity.

She fiddled with the hem of her skirt and decided to tell him the truth.

"It's not so much the people around me. it's...me the problem. I keep seeing faces of dead people, I keep reliving horrible...horrible memories and they d-don't want to go away. I keep thinking what if...what if there was more I could've done?"

She could feel tears welling in her eyes and she was angry at them for giving away how tormented she was.

"I hate feeling powerless yet I'm trapped in this loop in my head that reminds me of all the times that I was. As for family...I'll be moving out of the house at the end of this school year. My parents love me but they don't trust magic under their roof anymore. Or me."

Malfoy waited for her to continue.

Are you really going to bare your soul to Draco Malfoy?

Oh but she wanted to. She'd been holding onto these feelings since the beginning of the school year and here was someone attentively listening who understood pain. Even if it was Malfoy, he'd already seen her naked anyway. What was one more piece of her?

"I erased their memories of me before the war and sent them to Australia. When I went to retrieve them afterwards...well...I can't blame them for feeling betrayed. I'm just thankful they're safe."

Hermione angrily swiped at a tear that fell and turned away. She didn't want Malfoy to see her fall apart.

"Your parents...they'll come around."

"How can you know that?" Hermione said thickly, trying to keep from outright bawling.

"Because they're your family. They raised you, love you. That doesn't just go away. It might take them some time but family bonds are strong, it takes a lot to sever them. You did what you did to protect them. You probably saved their lives."

Hermione took a moment to wipe a few more tears away before taking a shaky breath.

"Thank you, Malfoy," she finally managed, relieved her voice no longer sounded like she was holding back sobs.

"That night at the Manor. I knew it was Harry."

Hermione turned, surprised. Draco was looking straight at her. She couldn't help noticing he was still only wearing his boxers. He looked vulnerable but also...she felt she'd never truly seen him before until now. So raw.

"By that time I figured I was going to die, it was only a matter of when. And then Potter shows up in the Manor with you and Weasel. Seeing him there, against all odds. I felt hope for the first time in a long time. It was the strangest thing, feeling *relief* at seeing Harry Potter. I found myself believing that if anyone was able to end this nightmare, it was him."

Malfoy sat on a chair and buried his head in his hands.

"I thought if I could just buy some time, then Potter would find a way to wiggle his way out of it. He always did somehow. And then Aunt Bella tortured you."

Malfoy gripped his hair. Hermione stayed rooted to the spot, horrified by how broken Malfoy looked.

"And all I could do was let it happen. I realised how truly useless I was."

Malfoy seemed to spit each word like a bad taste in his mouth.

"You of all people. You, who stood up to people like me. You, Miss Know-It-All, who was never afraid to voice your opinion. You, who no matter how hard I tried, I could never surpass you in a single class. You were an unbeatable force. And there you were, being tortured right in front of me."

He looked up at her and Hermione had never seen anyone look so anguished.

"I've seen a lot of people tortured in that house. I've done some of it. I've had it done to me. But when it was you, somehow, it hit the hardest. If they could get to you, they could get to Potter and then what hope did we have left? So when you talk about feeling powerless...I understand a thing or two about that. The only difference is that you fought for the right thing and I cowered."

"You've done a lot of horrid things Malfoy, but you're not to blame for what happened in the Manor. You were scared. We all were," Hermione said gently and tentatively sat on the table a foot from Malfoy.

He looked at her, unconvinced.

"You're a better person than what you used to be. I wouldn't...I wouldn't be here if you weren't."

Malfoy's eyes widened. They seemed shinier than before. His face moved a fraction of an inch towards hers. For a wild moment, Hermione thought he was going to kiss her. Instead he pulled back, clearing his throat.

"I..." he seemed at a loss for words.

His gaze wandered over to the rest of the potion.

"I suppose I'll clean up here then," he finally said lamely.

"Don't vanish it."

Malfoy looked at her, barely concealing his startlement.

"Are you sure?"

"Only if you want to keep it. We both have to agree."

Slowly, Malfoy nodded.

Hermione conjured a glass container and began to syphon the potion inside with her wand. Malfoy observed her in silence, though this time it felt comfortable as opposed to awkward.

They promised to pick a time for their next meeting and parted ways. Hermione felt a pang as she headed back to Gryffindor tower. She realised she didn't want to be alone.

It was only when she got into bed that something Malfoy had said under the influence of the potion floated back to her.

Brewing potions with you has been like inhaling fresh air after holding my breath for years.

She wondered if there was any truth to that at all or if it was just the potion speaking.

She yawned and fell straight asleep.

Transaction

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Run, Run, Run by Tokio Hotel

The next time they met, Hermione felt that the mood was different. The dynamic between them had shifted.

There was no more pretence. They both were clearly using Amor Videri to escape their reality together. Which included shagging.

Hermione could hardly believe she had gotten herself into this...whatever weird thing this was. She wasn't even sure if she could call it friends with benefits since she didn't know if Malfoy and her were even friends.

At the same time, she had confided in him about her parents, and he had shared a painful part of his past. Even if they weren't friends so to speak, she did trust him. If anything, they were business partners, fulfilling a mutually beneficial agreement. It seemed cold to put it that way in her mind, but Hermione found it fit their situation the closest.

She was the first to arrive and she waited nervously, fidgeting next to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, who seemed too busy teaching his trolls ballet to notice her. Thank goodness. She didn't fancy being quizzed by a nosy portrait just in this moment.

Malfoy was fifteen minutes late. Hermione had begun to feel foolishly stood up so she was in a bit of a mood when he arrived.

"This whole thing is embarrassing enough without you making me wait outside, wondering if you'll show!" She huffed with her arms crossed, as he strode up to her.

Malfoy arched his eyebrow.

"I got held up," he said evasively.

She noticed his tie was crooked and his hair was slightly mussed. He looked calm as usual, however.

"Is everything okay?" Hermione asked, unfolding her arms.

Malfoy shrugged.

"I'll open the Room."

Hermione frowned, recognizing the pointed subject change.

"Fine, but less velvet and hearts this time."

"Not much of a romantic, Granger? Not even a cherub or two?"

Hermione snorted loudly, "I'd hardly qualify what we're doing as romantic" she scoffed though she felt her cheeks heating up.

Malfoy studied her for a moment and finally answered "Fine, I'll keep it simple."

A fancy bronze door with a gold frame materialized with the Room number 483 engraved on a plaque.

When they entered, Hermione gasped.

Windows from floor to ceiling spanned the far wall revealing a picturesque cityscape. Long, white curtains cascaded down on the sides. Rich persian rugs stretched along the floor. The furniture was elegant and European, with gold trims and tones of brown and beige. Warm globes of light floated above their heads. A king size bed with far too many decorative, tasselled pillows was the main attraction.

It was a hotel room and clearly one of the richest Hermione had or ever would set foot in.

"This is.... *simple* ?" Hermione said shrilly.

"We're in the Morgen Stern, a wizarding Hotel in Germany. My father and mother took me here once for the Quidditch EuroCup. There's the connecting door that leads into their chambers. And yes, it's one of the simpler five star hotels, internationally speaking."

Hermione approached the windows and looked down. A perfect replica of wizarding Berlin spanned before her. Even the feel of the glass on her palm felt real. Not for the first time she marveled at the magic it must've taken to design such a Room in Hogwarts.

"That sounds incredible. It must've been a really nice memory for you to recreate this room so vividly."

"It was. One of my happiest actually."

Malfoy closed the door and took a seat in one of the chairs, lazily watching Hermione marvel at the view.

Hermione could see Malfoy reflected in the glass, watching her. It was so hard to imagine him here, anticipating a Quidditch game, happy in a pure, non-vindictive way. The closest she'd ever seen him to that kind of happy was when he was under the influence of Amor Videri.

She knew it must be hard for Malfoy to return here. It felt oddly personal for him to share this with her yet at the same time, no one could deny it was a gorgeous suggestion considering what they were about to do. She could see her face pinken in the reflection of the window.

She turned to face him.

"Before we do anything, there are things we need to discuss. I think we should set some ground rules."

Malfoy raised a skeptical eyebrow but nodded once for her to continue.

Hermione started pacing back and forth, wringing her hands.

"Firstly, let's agree that this situation is extremely abnormal and either of us can call it quits at any time for any reason."

Malfoy sneered.

"I'm not holding you hostage Granger. You could walk out this very second if you wanted to."

The way he said it made Hermione wonder if he was testing her. She ploughed on.

"Secondly, we agree not to tell anyone unless discussed with the second party."

"Definitely agree. I don't fancy being lynched by your mob of fanatics."

Hermione glared and continued on, not to be distracted from everything she needed to say.

"If we do decide to end...whatever this is, we'll destroy any remaining potion and never speak of this again."

"Naturally," Malfoy drawled, giving her a sardonic bow in his seat. Hermione ignored his theatrics.

"Finally, I've decided against telling any teachers about our unique situation. I'd rather not have to...to divulge the details to McGonagall especially."

Malfoy continued to listen attentively. Hermione noticed him lean towards her in his chair ever so slightly, his eyes following her as she paced.

"That being said, I still want to get to the bottom of whoever planted that potion. The more I think about it, the more I get a bad feeling from it. I need you to tell me who your lead is."

Hermione finally stopped walking, turning to look determinedly into Malfoy's face, her hands balled into fists. She was ready with her arguments should he refuse her.

Malfoy sighed and held his hands out in concession.

"Fine."

"F-fine? Just like that? You were all set to keep it a secret last time we talked!"

"Yes, but you're bloody stubborn and I know you won't give it a rest until I tell you. Besides, if we're to continue our arrangement, I think we need to trust each other to a certain degree anyway. I'll tell you my suspicions but I do have conditions."

"Oh?"

"If we find anything out, we decide what to do with that information together. If we don't agree, we do nothing."

"Well, what do you plan on doing with any information we might find?"

Malfoy sat back and folded his hands together.

"I can't answer that. It will depend on who put that potion there and why they did it."

Hermione pursed her lips.

"Well if you're not planning on turning them in then why do you even want to know who did it?"

"Because Blaise Zabini and I were once friends and I owe it to him to give him the benefit of the doubt."

Hermione inhaled sharply.

"You think Zabini planted the potion?"

"No idea, but he has more knowledge on love potions than anyone else I know."

Hermione sat down on the bed, mulling it over. Blaise Zabini. He was very attractive and Hermione could definitely recall seeing at least a few different, nameless Slytherins on his arm over the years. He didn't have the reputation as someone who got around per se, but she had the distinctive impression that Zabini was a person who got what he wanted. Incidentally, His mom had had over seven husbands. Hermione grimaced.

"How can you trust someone like that? How do you know he isn't going around poisoning others?"

Malfoy clenched his jaw.

"Blaise is many things, but he'd never stoop so low. He has seen a lot of...damaging consequences first hand. I'm more worried someone else might've gotten wind of his reputation and that he might be coerced or blackmailed into making it. This is why I didn't want to tell you, I knew you would assume the worst in him."

Damaging consequences. Hermione couldn't help but wonder what those were. Was Zabini's mother trapping her husbands with Love Potions? What must that have been like, to grow up around?

Hermione finally nodded.

"Fine. We'll see what Blaise has to say."

Malfoy returned the nod, his shoulders relaxing a little.

There was an awkward pause.

Hermione opened her mouth to break the painful silence just as Malfoy did the same.

"So are-"

"You-"

Malfoy stiffened and Hermione smiled with uncertainty.

"This is awkward. How do you want to proceed? Should we say a few words first?"

"A few words? What is this, a burial?"

"Well, you can't say you don't feel weird about it too! We used to hate each other! I'm not even sure if we still don't!"

"Do you hate me?"

Hermione was taken aback. Malfoy looked at her, imploringly.

"No."

"Why not? You should."

"I...I've seen people far worse. It sort of puts things into perspective."

When Malfoy next spoke, his voice was soft, quiet, each word weighed carefully.

"I've done horrible things to you and your friends. I understand why you want to escape but what I don't understand is why you choose to do this with me."

"Frankly I don't quite understand why you would do this with me either. Given all those aforementioned horrible things."

Malfoy stood and strode over to the window. She could see the frustration on his face reflected in the glass.

"Don't divert the question. You could shag anyone you wanted to. You're a bloody savior of wizard kind, people are probably lining up for just a *chance* to take you out. You could have a decent bloke shower you with public affection and do this with you every night. I understand you want to forget, but is it really worth getting into bed with someone like me? Take a couple of Draughts of Peace and find some delightful wizard with a neat and tidy background whom you don't have to regret being with every time the Amor Videri wears off."

Hermione could read his implication perfectly clear; he thought she was better than this. Than him.

And then understanding hit her.

He hates himself.

As he should, a voice in her head sneered.

But he had already buggered enough in her life. Now he wanted to back out of their business deal when she actually needed- no wait, she didn't *need* him - *wanted* him here?

Her lips pursed in a thin line. She stood abruptly and strode over to him. He turned to face her. They were about an inch apart.

"Maybe I don't want a decent bloke to shower me with affection! I can barely trust anyone here because most of them didn't give a Knut about me before the war! I spend my days holed up in the library, trying to focus on my studies so that I don't have to think about how awful everything was and how I have no one to talk to! So yes, if I want to come here to forget and have great sex every now and then, I'll do it even if it is with the biggest prat on earth! Because despite all your many, *many* flaws Malfoy, at least we both know why we're here, no strings attached. A simple shag and an hour of peace where I can stop being everyone's bloody *savior* !"

She was breathing hard. Bugger him, and his impassable face devoid of expression. She needed to calm down.

"Sure, this arrangement is unorthodox, but it suits me just fine. Besides, we're not technically shagging, are we? We're both significantly different under the potion, practically different people. It's more like we're...we're sleeping with different versions of ourselves."

She realised for the first time that she was so close to him that the smell of his cologne was invading her senses.

"Different people," he echoed, his eyes boring into her.

"Yes," she breathed, her voice lowering, "You're much less arrogant when you're under the influence. Nicer too."

Malfoy laughed hollowly. " *Nicer* ," he drawled, "I suppose you're right then. I'm nothing like myself. Though you're quite different, too. Less uptight. And much more..."

His eyes flickered across her face. She fought not to blink, not wanting to seem flustered by his stare.

"Pliant."

The way he said it made her shiver. Her face heated up.

"Oh really?"

"Yes. You're also *so* very eager. And affectionate. It's...enticing."

Hermione cleared her throat. He wasn't really complimenting her, he was complimenting love potion Hermione. Then why did it make her stomach do flip flops?

"Well, you're very gentlemanly in an...aggressive kind of way," (why was her voice so breathy?) "And also quite...um... *attentive* ."

Malfoy exhaled softly. She bit her lip. The sexual tension was thick enough to slice. She wanted him.

"Shall we?" he murmured.

Hermione's body almost convulsed at his words. She was high on emotions and she felt reckless with abandon. Her body screamed for him to touch her though somehow she knew he wouldn't try anything until they'd taken their dose of Amor Videri.

Rummaging in her robes, she pulled out her wand and waved it. Two phials shot out of her bookbag and hovered between them.

She knocked back the phial and Malfoy followed suit.

The taste was now familiar. The effects hadn't even yet taken hold of Hermione when Malfoy's mouth hungrily crashed into hers.

Her love for him grew as his tongue entered her mouth and she eagerly sucked on it.

Her hands were at his belt while he unbuttoned her blouse with fumbling motions.

Her breasts were hugged in a black lacy bra this time and Malfoy groaned at the sight.

"You look beautiful, love" he murmured, pushing her onto the bed. His head disappeared under her skirt and Hermione mewled as his tongue warmed her up over her matching black panties.

"Please, Draco!" She cried and she felt his obedient fingers pull her panties down and spread her lips. She arched hard, squeezing his head between her thighs. He moaned and she felt her nether region throb at the sound.

"I want you," she moaned huskily, "Fuck me please, I need it so bad!"

Draco emerged from under her skirt, grinning.

"Patience, love. We're just getting started. And may I add I love how filthy you get when you're turned on."

Draco shed the rest of his clothes, his cock springing up at the ready when he slid his boxers down. Hermione wiggled on the bed at the sight of it. She wanted him in her so bad that she could cry. She flung off her open blouse and unclasped her bra, hoping her breasts would entice him into sheathing himself inside her, pronto. She went for her skirt but he grabbed her wrists.

"Leave that on," his voice low and firm. Her pussy clenched.

He kissed her, climbing on top of her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and panted as she felt his erection rub against her skirt, between her legs. The thin material separating their parts was driving her mad.

"Draco...Dracooo..." she begged for him, rubbing herself hard against his bulge. He groaned and dove down to take a nipple in his mouth. His teeth grazed her nub and she cried out. He clearly was enjoying this slow tease of her senses far too much.

When Hermione couldn't take it anymore, she swung her hips, toppling him to the side. Her nipples were wet from his kisses. He laughed in surprise, a full laugh that made her chest swell.

She straddled him, her skirt draping over his hips. She ground down until his shaft nestled between her sopping lips. Draco gasped, his eyes going wide.

"Not so fun is it? Being teased?" She giggled, leaning in to kiss him fully as she angled the head of his cock in her entrance. She could feel him try to push inside her warmth, but she pulled back just enough so that his bulbous tip rested on the cusp of her hole.

"Hermione," Draco was panting, his chest rising under her hands, " *Please* , let me in."

"Mmmm...Maybe just a little..."

Hermione pushed down so that half of Draco's length slid inside her, before squeezing her walls and popping him out.

"Hermione!" Draco's head fell against the mattress in frustration and he bucked his hips. She laughed as he bounced her on his lap.

"Tell me you love me," she purred, copying him. Draco smiled up at her, the most loving smile just for her. She melted. She felt like they had been together for years and years. It was so easy to be with him.

"I love you so much. Forever."

She sighed and slid down his shaft, gyrating her hips until Draco's cock was nestled in as deep as it would go. He groaned and pushed his hands under her skirt and up her thighs until he was gripping her waist.

"Ride me. Use me until you cum."

She couldn't resist his order. She obeyed, slamming herself down on him, rocking and rubbing her clit on his hips. She was already so close.

Draco pounded upwards into her, whispering words of encouragement.

"Yes, just like that. You are so good, love. Use me as much as you want..."

His hands gripped her ass as she came hard, collapsing forward onto his chest and crying out his name. When her hips began to lose their rhythm, Draco compensated by pounding into her harder and faster. Her orgasm was long and ferocious, giving her no mercy.

"Godric, I love you! I love you so much," she panted, gripping his shoulders. He mmm'd contentedly against her hair, rubbing her back. It took her a moment to recover. She could still feel Draco buried in her. Slowly she began to rock her hips again, regaining her strength. She felt Draco twitch inside her and it relit a fire in her stomach. Slowly, slowly, she grinded in his lap until her arousal returned with renewed fervour.

She rode him again until he came while clutching her tits, his head falling back hard against the mattress. His eyes rolled and his mouth hung open in a silent cry as his cock pulsed over and over.

"You're...That was...Can't even....Talk..." Draco panted and Hermione laughed happily at the effect she had on him.

In their post coitus haze, they cuddled on the bed. She finally discarded her skirt and nestled into the crook of his arm, their naked bodies pressed together. He stroked her hair and she traced his chest. They were so close that the king size was wasted on them.

"What do you love most about me?" She asked lazily, trailing a finger around his nipple.

"Hmmm, let's see...what I love most? I love that you talk passionately about everything and how you stand up for what you believe in. I feel like you live to make the world better and I admire that very much. I feel like I could be a better person when you're with me."

Hermione hid a grin on Draco's shoulder. She loved his words of affirmation.

"What do you love about me?" He asked, kissing her hair.

She nibbled him gently on the shoulder as she thought.

"I love how safe I feel with you. I love how you listen to me, really listen. I feel like you want to hear what I say, instead of pretending to listen because you don't want to hurt my feelings. You make me feel like you care about my opinions."

She paused, lost in thought for a moment.

"When did you stop thinking I was a Mudblood?"

Draco made an unpleasant sound in his throat.

"I was a complete idiot to ever call you that. I wish I never did."

"I know. But still, was there a turning point for you?"

Draco continued to rake his hands through her hair, giving Hermione goose pimples.

"I don't think I ever truly did think that. You were better than me at everything, and calling you slurs was an easy way to put you down to make myself feel better. I was a stupid, insecure prat and I was threatened by you. So I lied to myself and bought into all the pureblood nonsense just so that I could feel superior."

Draco sighed.

"I truly don't know how you love me. You're so easy to love but I'm...a piece of work."

Hermione hugged Draco closer and kissed his neck.

"You're not that person anymore," she answered simply.

"Still...actually I have a bit of an embarrassing confession. I think part of the reason I was so cruel to you was...I couldn't handle fancying someone that was...so different from everything I was."

Hermione perked up.

"You...you fancied me? You're kidding!"

Draco chuckled at her disbelief.

"I'm afraid I did. I wanted to convince myself you weren't worth my time but meanwhile I couldn't stop thinking about you. I handled it all extremely poorly and I'm so sorry. I should've apologized to you a long time ago, for so many things."

Hermione leaned in and kissed his lips softly. Hearing him apologize for his wrongs under normal circumstances would have made her feel extremely vindicated. But with Amor Videri she could only be filled with forgiveness and love. Of course, she would forgive him immediately. He would never hurt her now. They were soulmates.

"So when did you start fancying me?" She asked, playfully pinching his nipple.

"Errr...actually...it was ah..."

"Oh come on! You can tell me,"

Hermione took Draco's face in both her hands and looked pointedly at him. "Spill!"

"Ugh, fine. When you slapped me in third year...I err...may have gotten hard from that. Which was probably why I had such a stupid look on my face after."

Hermione stared at him blankly for a moment before bursting into peals of laughter. She rolled on her side as Draco watched her, smiling sheepishly.

"You-! I-! Merlin's beard, that...I would have never imagined it had *that* effect on you!"

Draco rolled his eyes but he was clearly amused at her mirth.

"So you like getting slapped? Maybe we could test that out again sometime," Hermione teased when her laughter finally died down.

"I mean, the thought alone is already getting me hard..."

Hermione gasped gleefully and boldly reached down between his legs to squeeze at his rock hard erection. They both groaned.

Draco sat up and she climbed on top of him immediately, straddling him. She rubbed her pussy against his shaft until she was dripping and let him slide into her.

She pressed both hands into the wall on either side of his head and used that as leverage to work him up and down. He buried his face in her breasts with his hands on her waist, cupping and squeezing her buttocks every now and again.

Their pace quickened, the bed rocked, their moans intensified. The slapping of their bodies was deafening, as she slammed down on him. Thank Godric the Room was soundproof, Hermione couldn't help but think as she came hard once more, crying wantonly to the ceiling. As she arched and clenched him in a vice grip, Draco shuddered.

"I'm cumming too, love," he grunted, and, true to his word, he thrust up into her one last time, giving her everything he had.

He hugged her close and they crumpled into an exhausted heap against the pillows.

"Don't ever leave me." She pleaded softly, nuzzling into his neck.

"Leave you? Never. I could never. If anything, I should be the one saying that."

"I want to be with you always," Hermione whispered.

They held each other intimately in this position, with her on top of him, tracing each other's backs with their fingers. Hermione could feel him soften inside her but she didn't pull off. She savoured being one with him.

It was in this position that Hermione finally gained clarity. She pulled away from Malfoy and immediately covered her breasts. It always felt so embarrassing when she regained her senses. Much like how she imagined waking up after a one night stand would feel, except instead of lasting a night, it was only a few hours.

His hands were still on her hips but Hermione couldn't bring herself to look at him.

Instead, she peeled herself off Malfoy's lap and began frantically searching for her clothes.

She needed to process... *everything* . Did Malfoy apologize to her? Was it even real? She said many things she didn't mean under the influence of Amor Videri, so logically he would too.

Though she *had* said that she'd loved he was a good listener. Was that true? A part of her could admit that, yes, she did find him more attentive than most. She was struggling with that thought. How much of what she said did she mean? She obviously didn't love Malfoy. But the potion seemed to bring out tidbits of truth amongst the love-hazed dream. She needed to think.

She turned to glance at Malfoy who was uncharacteristically quiet.

She almost forgot all her worries as she guffawed at his expression. He was still sitting on the bed, clutching the covers around his waist, looking beyond mortified.

"Was any of it true?" She asked him, "the apology you gave me was quite heartfelt."

Malfoy swallowed hard and slowly looked up at Hermione. You'd think she was a giant spider by the look of horror on his face.

She could see his pupils shift as he prepared his answer.

"Yes...I...Yes. I meant it."

His voice was hoarse.

Hermione froze. For some reason she hadn't been ready for that answer even though she knew Malfoy had certainly enough to apologize for. Maybe because she was still coming to terms with how different he was now, compared to before the war. The old Malfoy would have apologised for nothing and no one, no matter how wrong he was.

She didn't know how to feel about this apparently sincere display. Certainly, she'd fantasised about making him grovel for all his wrong doings. But because of the potion, he'd given her essentially a drunk apology and in her own inebriated state she'd forgiven him far too quickly!

"I can see why love potion is considered so dangerous. On some level it acts like Veritaserum, though unfortunately it also makes the drinker non-credible. Still, it gives a lot of power to whoever would administer it."

They both fell silent, lost in their own thoughts.

Malfoy finally broke the silence.

"I am...truly sorry. For calling you names and treating you the way I did and...for everything. If I could take it back I would."

Hermione blinked and then nodded slowly, taken aback by his penitence. A shadow of anguish passed over Malfoy's features, a shadow she had come to associate with him reliving difficult memories. It was subtle but she was slowly learning to read him and she'd seen that expression on him a lot lately.

Unlike her enamoured self, she wasn't ready to forgive Malfoy entirely just yet, though she knew if they continued as they did, it was only a matter of time before bridges were either mended or blown up. It was a frightening thought either way.

"And the rest? About you fancying me? Was that true too?"

Malfoy grimaced and covered his face with his hands, groaning. Hermione couldn't help smirking.

"Yes."

Her cheeks went pink and she tried not to feel too pleased. It was proving difficult. It was exhilarating to know her old bully was now at her mercy. But also...something stirred deep inside her.

"So when I slapped you it really did give you an erection?"

"Salazar, Granger! Yes, okay? Bloody well yes it did! It was the hottest thing to ever happen to me at that age and..."

"And what? Oh god, Malfoy, did you *wank* to me?"

"Enough! I've said far too much already! Bloody may as well tell you my Gringotts account number and the password to all my vaults while I'm at it. Blasted potion..."

He trailed off, continuing to mutter curses as he sunk into the covers. Hermione was positively gleeful over his embarrassment. Malfoy, who was always an impenetrable fortress of emotions, reduced to a muttering pile.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at the sight. A full laugh. She felt like she hadn't laughed this much in ages and Merlin how it felt good.

Malfoy sat back up, watching her with a curious expression.

When the giggles started to ebb, Hermione finished donning her robes.

"Same time next week?"

Malfoy's eyes widened a fraction.

"I...yes if...if you still want to. Same time, next week."

She smiled at him. A real, genuine smile.

Investigation

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Hush by The Marias

"Earth to Hermione? Are you even listening?"

"Oh! Sorry, sorry, I was just..."

"Yes, yes thinking about homework, I know."

Hermione blushed. Her head was indeed full of thoughts but she was relieved Ginny couldn't read her mind. Except Ginny was scrutinising her with a stare that gave Hermione the impression that perhaps Ginny could.

"So are you going to tell me what you're really thinking about?"

"What? I don't know what you mean. Why would I be thinking of anything else, N.E.W.T.s are time consuming enough as it is withou-"

"I'm going to stop you right there, Hermione Jean Granger. I've seen six brothers try to pull a fast one on mum on many occasions, whether it be sneaking out of the house or hiding questionable substances under the mattress so you can be certain I know the tell-tale signs of when someone is hiding something. Now spill."

"Don't be silly Ginny, I'm not hiding anyth-"

"Hermione."

Ginny sighed her name and Hermione was sad to see her friend looked hurt.

"I thought we were best friends, you should know you can tell me anything" Ginny admonished. "You've been skipping parties and some mealtimes, you disappeared Saturday and missed a legendary game of Exploding Snap I might add. And you can't say you were in the library nor the potions lab, nor the spells labs, nor the Great Hall because I looked for you everywhere. So are you going to tell me who you're secretly snogging or do I need to wring it out of you?"

Hermione choked on her saliva, sending herself into a coughing fit.

"Ginny! I am not *snogging* anyone!"

"Well, if it isn't that then what is it? Everyone thinks you're ignoring them and it's hard to defend you when it kind of feels like you are. We hardly hang out anymore unless it's supper on the occasion you show up and when I can ambush you when you're reading in bed."

Hermione reddened. She had indeed been reading in bed just now, when Ginny burst through the door loudly announcing "they needed a friendship talk."

Hermione was, however, acutely aware that she needed to meet Malfoy soon to put Operation Talk to Blaise Zabini into effect. They had decided an evening during the week would be the least conspicuous meeting time, especially right before supper time when everyone was either in the Great Hall or in their common rooms. Still, Ginny was owed an explanation.

Sighing, Hermione closed her book, putting it away in her bag.

"I'm sorry Gin, you're right. I have been avoiding people. I just...it feels like a lot, you know? Being back at Hogwarts and...and everyone wanting to *do* things with me, including people I've never met. I've always just been so used to it being Harry, Ron and me, and I was just in a much better headspace before the war so even when there were parties and bigger gatherings, I was fine. It seems like now so many people want to be around me to just...ask me about last year and it's just...so exhausting to always have to avoid those discussions so I've just shut myself away."

Ginny nodded and sat down next to Hermione, throwing an arm around her shoulders.

"I get it and I'm sorry. I know I've been pestering you a lot lately about going places. How about the next Hogsmeade trip we just make it you and I? There's one coming up next Saturday and we could do some shopping together?"

Hermione smiled and hugged her friend back. It felt like a weight was lifted from her chest to be able to share these thoughts with Ginny. At the same time, Hermione couldn't help feeling extremely guilty for hiding the biggest secret at all.

"That sounds perfect. Listen, I have an appointment I need to get to but thanks for taking the time to talk with me. I really appreciate it. And I promise I'll make more of an effort too, I really do. I've been a rubbish friend to you lately."

Ginny gave Hermione one last squeeze.

"Consider it water under the bridge! You can make it up to me by treating me to Butterbeer on Saturday" Ginny grinned, wiggling her eyebrows. Hermione laughed and looped her arm through Ginny's as they descended the stairs to the common room. Ginny was quickly accosted by a group of her rowdy Quidditch friends and Hermione left her to them, exiting through the painting.

///

Hermione found herself crammed in a secret alcove behind one of the many Hogwarts tapestries.

Malfoy had asserted that Zabini would most certainly not divulge anything if Hermione was present. Hermione, however, insisted on wanting to hear the conversation first-hand, in case she could pinpoint a detail Malfoy might miss.

Their compromise was to hide Hermione in one of the secret alcoves (Hermione knew of this particular nook from having scoured the Marauder's Map with Harry only too often). Malfoy would meet Zabini here and she would be able to eavesdrop without arousing any suspicion from their suspect.

Finally, she could hear the sounds of careful footsteps approaching. A voice that was unmistakably Blaise Zabini's demanding tone broke the silence.

"What do you want?"

Zabini's voice was a quiet one so Hermione was surprised at how well she could overhear him. She wondered if the alcove or even the tapestry contained ancient eavesdropping magic. It wouldn't surprise her, knowing the school had a myriad of hidden secrets.

"Hello to you too, Blaise," Malfoy drawled.

"Cut to the chase. I have places to be. I only agreed to be here out of courtesy."

"Glad ten years' worth of friendship gains me your *courtesy*," Malfoy answered drily.

Hermione heard a small, exasperated sigh.

"Malfoy, don't be like that. You know it's not personal. You've simply sunk too low. Regaining a good image is hard enough these days, and associating with you just looks bad."

"We all look bad, Blaise. We chose to follow a genocidal madman. It's going to take more than cutting ties to regain your *good* public image," Malfoy sneered.

"Yes, but you have a particular target on your back, don't you?" Zabini replied smoothly, "I heard you got chased around the school on Saturday by a bunch of Ravenclaws out for your blood."

Even though Hermione could hear perfectly clear, her head was pressed against the tapestry as much as she dared. She frowned, remembering how Malfoy was late to their meeting on Saturday, looking a little dishevelled. He had been running from Ravenclaws? Why hadn't he said anything?

"I'd hardly call that a chase. A bunch of bumbling idiots running around with their eyes closed more like," Malfoy drawled, sounding unaffected.

"That's not how the rumor goes. I've heard at least three different versions, each involving you in different states of humiliation."

Draco made a sound between a grumble and a snort. Zabini spoke again.

"A considerable amount of people are claiming they'll make you pay for your part in the war. They want your head on a spike. I'm not sure you're taking this seriously enough."

There was silence except for some shifting. Hermione hazarded a guess that Malfoy had answered with a shrug.

"Listen," Zabini's voice lowered, "For what it's worth, I don't fancy seeing you speared on the end of a pitchfork. Keep a low profile, all right? Don't do anything stupid. Now. What is it exactly you asked me here for?"

There was a pause.

"I found a bottle of Amor Videri, hidden in the potions lab."

Hermione heard a clinking sound as Malfoy took the phial out from one of his robe pocket. It sounded like he was handing it to Zabini.

"Invigoration Draught..." Zabini read the label slowly, "Quite the ruse." There was a definite tightness in his voice.

"I want to find out who planted it."

There was a long silence.

"I take it you were able to safely wait out the effects, or you undoubtedly wouldn't be standing here now," Zabini said drily

Hermione could feel her face heat up.

Play it cool, Malfoy, she prayed. If Zabini found out Malfoy and Hermione had fallen prey to the potion together... Well, she didn't want to think about it.

"What makes you think I drank it?" Malfoy retorted with a slight sulk that made Hermione roll her eyes.

"Why else would you be wanting to chase down the potioneer who did this, if not for revenge? I know I would". The scorn in Zabini's voice was evident.

"Any idea who might've made it?" Malfoy asked.

"Are you accusing me?" Zabini asked, a warning in his tone.

"Don't be stupid. You know I don't think you did it and if you did, I highly doubt it was of your own free will. I'm only asking in case you have an idea of who's responsible. No doubt there are people out there who've heard rumours of your affiliations with these types of potions."

After a brief pause, Zabini's voice returned, softer this time.

"Most people don't realise how devastating Love Potions can be. Their effects are almost always underestimated, though in my opinion, a Love Potion can be worse than an Unforgivable. I never understood why they aren't illegal."

Yes, exactly!

Hermione felt understood. She'd been saying that for years, after all. Her sense of triumph was only briefly marred by the fact that she was in complete agreement with a student who used to think her bloodline was inferior, and maybe still did. She could hear the subtle sound of Zabini turning over the bottle in his hands.

"I wasn't forced to make anything like this, if that's what you're asking. Although, I *was* at a Ravenclaw party recently and that Micheal Corner bloke from their House had a bit too much to drink. Stumbled over like I was his bosom friend and began asking questions. I would've hexed him but that git Dean Thomas and his bland friend Finch-Fletchley had to step in and *save* him from me. Pair of idiots."

"What sort of questions did Corner ask?"

"Wanted to know if Amortentia was the strongest love potion or if there were others. Said he had heard that the expression "love at first sight" originated from a potion. He mentioned my mother and that's when I took out my wand to hex him. Conversation stopped there."

Hermione couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness for Zabini. It must've been hard enough growing up with so many different fathers. But to find out your own mother might've used dangerous means of coercion to make it happen was another thing entirely. Zabini spoke of his mother with a bitter tone. Malfoy had a similar bitterness when he talked about his past. Scars that faded but never truly went away.

"From my experience, generally there are two types of people who would brew a potion like this," Zabini went on. "Not the typical joke shop trinket, but a fully-fledged Love Potion. The first are psychopaths, like my mother dearest. Her incapacity for love leads her to manufacture it in the most direct and profitable way to get what she wants, with no regard to anyone. She also gets a sick pleasure out of the control."

"The second type is the naive lover. They delude themselves into thinking that once the person they fancy takes Amortencia, they'll have no choice but to see how great they would be together, and they'll fall hopelessly in love even after the effects wear off."

Hermione was horrified. Zabini spoke about all of this in a calm tone, as if he was discussing the weather, but clearly he had had some awful, first hand experiences. She felt terrible for overhearing all of this. This seemed too personal for her ears.

"Micheal Corner is too dimwitted to be a psychopath, but if he *is* the person who made this, you can be sure there is some unfortunate person he is pining over. Was there anyone else in that potions lab when you found this?"

Hermione inhaled sharply.

“No, just me,” Malfoy answered tonelessly.

Zabini made a sound in his throat. Was that scepticism? Or was he thinking things over?

“Funny, you never really quite struck me as Micheal Corner’s type. That, or the potion was never intended for you,” Zabini answered.

Malfoy didn’t reply.

“It seems like Ravenclaws are thirsty for your blood these days. First they chase you down, now this. Tread carefully, Malfoy, I mean it. You know this school is looking for any excuse to dump out all the ex-Dark Lord riff raff like you and I.”

Hermione heard footsteps as Zabini took his leave.

“Oh, and one more thing. If you do find the pathetic rag who did this, send them an extra curse from me.”

The quiet footsteps returned, the sound growing faint until Hermione was sure Zabini had gone.

She carefully pulled the tapestry aside to reveal Malfoy standing alone in the narrow hall. He looked paler than usual and his hands were balled into fists at his side.

“Well, what do you think about all this?” Hermione asked in a shaky voice.

Malfoy looked up at her and she was startled at the anger on his face. Pure rage seemed to shoot out of his eyes, his mouth pulled back slightly in a snarl.

“I am going to k-”

Suddenly, voices echoed in the hall along with the sound of footsteps. A group was rapidly approaching the turn into the very hallway they were in.

“*Quick!*” Hermione hissed and pulled the flap back so that Malfoy could clamber in.

The alcove was big enough to comfortably fit one person. Two people, however, proved to be a tight squeeze. Hermione’s shoulder was jammed against Malfoy’s chest, and her hair tickled his chin.

The voices turned down the hallway and grew louder. Excited chattering rang out. It sounded like a gaggle of second or third years returning from supper, excitedly going over essays and spells. To Hermione's horror, the group stopped right outside the tapestry.

Hermione gasped as one voice in particular spoke quite loudly, as if it were right next to her. She had underestimated how efficient the eavesdropping enchantments in the alcove were and it took her by surprise.

Malfoy's hand clamped over her mouth, muffling the rest of her gasp. If the students hadn't heard that then surely they could hear her heart thumping loudly in her chest. Thankfully, the chatter continued, unphased.

Hermione held her breath. She felt warm. Hot, even. Malfoy's hand over her mouth seemed to kickstart a feeling within her. Her body was tingling with a familiar sensation. The same feeling of desire she felt right before they were about to drink Amor Videri.

Sexual tension.

She tried to fight the urge bubbling in her stomach but it was proving difficult.

"I can't believe Flitwick gave us so much homework-"

"Right? I can barely keep up. I do like Flitwick though. McGonagall scares the living daylights out of me-"

"I swear that woman never blinks! Have you seen it happen-"

"D'you know who you're taking to the Halloween Ball by the way-"

And on and on it went.

Did they need to chatter like hens right here?? Hermione thought angrily. She was starting to feel cramped, not to mention the growing throb between her thighs. Malfoy still had his hand over her mouth, yet she made no move to persuade him to move it.

She didn't want to feel this way about Malfoy. Love potion Draco was different. It was okay to shag love potion Draco because it wasn't really him, nor was it really her. They were love potion versions of themselves that didn't really exist and somehow, Hermione was able to rationalise their tryst as okay this way.

What she wasn't prepared for, was this feeling about needing to tear Malfoy's clothes off and ride him into the sunset without the aid of the potion at all. With his body so close and his hand on her, she wanted so badly to just arch into him until his cock magically slipped inside her. She realised the thought frightened her. And exhilarated her.

"Do you think they'll be Jack-o-lanterns? The last time I saw some, they were bewitched to cackle and recite spooky poems-"

"I *love* that! What will you dress up as-"

Hermione decided to shift in place. Maybe if she could turn her back to Malfoy, she would be able to ignore the persistent need to snog him senseless.

She turned away from him and his hand slackened on her mouth. She could feel his body recoil slightly. Maybe he couldn't stand being this near her when he wasn't on the potion.

She finally was able to twist as silently as possible so that her back was against his chest, and that's when she felt it. Despite feeling Malfoy shy away from her, the space in the alcove was

so restricted that it was impossible for her to miss the sensation of his erection pressing up against the small of her back.

A low moan burst out of Hermione's mouth and Malfoy's hand immediately clamped back down on her. Her eyelids fluttered. He had had no choice but to lean in when he muffled her and now she could feel the full force of his hard cock pressing into her robes.

"Did you hear that?" Someone far too close to the tapestry asked.

Hermione held her breath. So many emotions battled inside her. The fear of getting caught. The need to rub herself wantonly against Malfoy. The excitement that he would have such a bodily reaction in her presence. The humiliation at feeling so aroused by him.

"Probably just one of the ghosts flitting about. The Bloody Baron gave me the biggest scare the other day-"

The chattering soon picked up.

But Hermione hardly felt relieved. Instead she was basking in the feeling of how Malfoy still held her close. She decided to throw caution to the winds. She wanted him so badly right now and her rising sexual frustration was clouding her judgement.

She arched her back, pressing into his erection. She could hear the smallest intake of breath behind her. After a heartbeat, Malfoy answered her by pressing his hips into her.

Hermione whimpered, though Malfoy's hand kept in the sound. She was sure he heard it however, as he began to earnestly grind into her backside. She returned the favour, pushing back into him. The softest panting sounds began to fill the alcove. Malfoy stilled, and fell silent before resuming his grinding, but quieter this time. Hermione shivered. His self-control was turning her on quicker than his cock was.

Feeling cheeky, she stuck her tongue out and lapped at his hand. She felt him shudder against her. He gripped her mouth tighter, egging her on but warning her to stay quiet at the same time.

She stuck her tongue out again and licked him longer. She took one of his fingers into her mouth and sucked on it. Softly. Running her tongue up and down the length. Then hard, taking the full digit in up to the knuckle and hollowing her cheeks.

Malfoy's head fell forward as she did. He pressed his mouth into her shoulder. She smiled around his finger, knowing he was trying his best to stay silent.

"Two can play that game," Malfoy whispered hoarsely in her ear. She suddenly felt his other hand on her thigh. It traveled up her skin and then under her skirt. He pressed his fingers between her thighs and into her mound over her panties and rubbed down. Stars erupted in Hermione's vision.

His finger in her mouth wasn't enough to stifle the moan Hermione made.

Some of the voices outside paused.

"I'm not daft, I *swear* I heard something!" someone exclaimed.

Both Hermione and Malfoy froze. Hermione inwardly cursed herself. Why did she have to give in to her desires at such an awful time??

"Maybe we should head out. Before the Bloody Baron decides to make another appearance."

Hermione could've laughed with relief as she heard several voices agree. The sound of people talking started to recede as the crowd began to move away from them. Malfoy almost immediately began to rub her pussy again however, and Hermione promptly forgot how close they had just been to getting caught seconds ago. He was more forceful this time, finding her clit and making good work of it. He touched her firmly instead of teasingly, egging on her orgasm this time. Hermione allowed herself to moan more openly, hiking up her skirt to give him better access.

"*Please...*" she whispered.

She heard him groan softly as he pulled her sopping panties aside and slid two fingers inside her. She gasped hard just as more voices could be heard outside.

Malfoy clamped his hand back over her mouth, but continued to mercilessly fingerfuck her. Hermione bit down on her lip and tried her best, her very best, not to utter a word. A small whimper here and there managed to escape, but overall she did very well. The voices that passed them in the corridor didn't pause in their step for a second.

"Good girl," Malfoy whispered in her ear, his breath hot.

While she wasn't entirely quiet when she came, she did better than she expected.

When Malfoy pulled his fingers out of her, she grabbed his wrist and brought his hand to her mouth, sucking her juices off him in a bold maneuver that surprised even herself. She was even more surprised to find she thoroughly enjoyed how she tasted on him, and lapped him clean. Malfoy was breathing hard as she did. His cock pressed insistently against her. She positively glowed at how this seemed to turn him on.

"Your turn," she whispered huskily, further hiking up her skirt and robes in the process.

Malfoy clearly didn't need telling twice.

She heard his belt buckle unclasp and felt him pull down her panties.

As his cock nestled between her thighs, more voices could be heard walking by. At this point, Hermione could hardly give a care in the world. The whole of the wizarding world could peep behind the tapestry if they wanted, as long as Malfoy put his cock in her *asap*.

Malfoy waited as the voices grew louder. Hermione wiggled against him. He was so *close* to being inside her. He tried to immobilise her gyrating hips with his hands, but Hermione was done being good. She wanted to be naughty. He had her pressed against the far wall of the alcove. She reached between her thighs until she could feel the head of his cock sandwiched

between them. She rubbed her thumb over his tip which, to her delight, was already slick with precum. He hissed in his breath. His fingers dug into her thighs.

The voices finally faded and Malfoy was free to give her what they both wanted. Hermione found herself feeling thankful for his caution after all. When he entered her they both moaned loudly in unison, a sound that would definitely have been audible outside.

He began to fuck her, doing a surprisingly good job of it, despite the cramped space. They were far too noisy. Their combined noises of pleasure. The heavy breaths. Every now and then Malfoy had to pause his fucking while more voices passed by. Hermione was finding it difficult not to move her hips up and down. She caved once and continued to bounce on him when a couple more people passed by. Malfoy's discipline was impressive however, and he kept silent, both his hands grappling to control her moving hips. This time when the voices disappeared, he fucked her even harder. She felt like she was being punished for her insolence yet rewarded for enticing him at the same time.

"I'm...I'm cumming..." Malfoy whispered and groaned hard.

Hermione wanted to tell him she was cumming too, but the force of her orgasm took her breath away. They both collapsed forward against the wall. She mewled and clenched, her hips still bucking weakly. He was panting hard, his forehead resting on her shoulder. She could feel his chest heaving against her back. She was panting too.

"That was...that was too risky...we could've gotten into so much...trouble..." she panted, but found herself grinning like a cat with milk.

"You're one to talk, wiggling your hips about like that and making a ruckus," Malfoy murmured back, though the way he said it made it sound more like a compliment than a critique.

"Well, what about you? You didn't exactly go about in the quietest way either!"

"Mmm, I suppose not. I'm rather fond of eliciting the most indecent noises out of you though."

She giggled in a most un-Hermione way. Godric, he had her acting like she had a silly schoolgirl fancy. *Did* she fancy him? Now that she shagged him outside of the potion how much would things change between them?

Regaining her breath, Hermione pushed herself up off the wall.

"I suppose it's good we got that out of our system. I'd been meaning to tell you that this Saturday I won't be able to make our usual time. I'll be at Hogsmeade with Ginny."

She stood a bit straighter and tried to put her panties back on, though everything felt clumsy in such a small space. She could feel Malfoy shift behind her, rearranging his clothes and tucking his appendage away.

"It doesn't have to be Saturday. We could make it another day if you want," he said slowly.

Hermione definitely felt her cheeks heat up at his words. She could feel his eyes on her. Did that mean he wanted to see her sooner? Evidently he probably wanted to take the potion again.

"Oh! Well...well yes, we could reschedule. When would work for you?"

"Now?"

Hermione squeaked.

"N-now? But it's...it's getting late. There's curfew, we wouldn't have enough time to get back to the dorms since the potion lasts about two hours."

"We can spend the night there."

Hermione gaped.

"Spend...the night? You...you want to spend the night there? With me?"

"Yes, Granger, I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to."

"I...Ginny...the girls will wonder where I am. I can't tell them the truth."

"Don't tell me Hermione Granger, the smartest witch at Hogwarts, can't think up a small white lie to sneak out of her dorm for a night?"

She felt like her mind was racing. Spend the night in the Room with Malfoy? That seemed like a potentially disastrous idea. And yet...why did she feel a sense of deep regret when she considered saying no?

While she tried to formulate thoughts in her current state of shock, Malfoy cleared his throat.

"No, you're right, it's too sudden. I shouldn't've sprung it on you like that. Just let me know when you can, all right?"

"Ok. Ok yes, let's do it."

It felt like all her blood was rushing to her ears. Like her face was on fire. Like her stomach was doing backflips.

There was a small pause.

"You...you want to? Right now?"

"Yes! Yes, oh why not? We've already...already started things here so might as- might as well," she answered quickly.

She turned to look at Malfoy.

It was hard to make out his face in the dark, especially since her back was to him and she had to crane her neck to see him. Was he smiling? She squinted but couldn't be sure.

"Excellent," he replied.

Even though he was always so guarded with his emotions, Hermione could've sworn she could hear the smile in his voice.

Exploration

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Just Tonight by The Pretty Reckless

They decided to take different routes to the Room of Requirement to avoid any uncomfortable encounters.

Hermione arrived first and she couldn't help feeling a little worried. Last time Draco had apparently been chased down by Ravenclaws right before their meeting.

Luckily he was only a beat behind her.

She felt her chest swell as she saw him appear at the end of the hallway, striding purposefully towards her. His hair, despite their little alcove adventure, was still perfectly in place, parted to the side. She envied that, knowing hers probably looked far more dishevelled. He really was handsome. She found it was easier to admit it to herself, the more time they spent together.

Her breath caught in her throat as he stood in front of her, close enough for her to smell his woody cologne, but keeping a respectful distance.

"I'll open it this time" she said, wanting to sound in control though the slight quaver in her voice betrayed her nerves. Now that they had been intimate without the potion, she felt like things were even more murky between them. How had they gotten here? It had happened so fast and Hermione felt overwhelmed. At the same time, a burning part of her wanted to say sod it all. Did every single thing need to be analysed? Lately it had felt so good to just do what she wanted without thinking through the consequences. She had spent so long thinking about nothing *but* the consequences.

A door appeared, this time made of a handsome wood. A quaint, hand painted sign hung on a nail with "Bienvenue" written in cursive with a small snowman next to it.

Inside was a rustic but well furnished cabin bedroom. The bed, chairs and table were made out of carved and varnished wood. The quilt that lay across the bedspread looked hand stitched. There were various framed pictures hanging from the walls with landscape art or french mantras such as "L'Hiver, on aime ça!". None of the paintings moved. But Hermione knew they wouldn't, since this was a Muggle resort.

"My parents used to take me skiing in France and we stayed at this lovely little ski lodge," Hermione explained, gesturing around.

She felt a small lump in her throat. It made her feel more emotional than she thought it would, being back here. She hoped one day her and her parents could repair everything between them, enough to come back to this lodge someday.

"Skiing?" Malfoy asked, squinting at one of the paintings.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Nevermind, you'd probably think it's silly. I know this isn't a five star hotel or anything, but I like it here. It was one of my favourite places to visit. I just loved how cosy it felt."

Malfoy turned to look at her.

"I like it," he said, surprising her, "It does feel...like you. Warm."

"Well...um, good then," Hermione said lamely, backing into the bed and sitting down nervously.

The way Malfoy looked at her...she felt vulnerable. Like he was x-raying her thoughts. There was also something...predatory in his eyes? It was hard to put a word on it. But before when she'd felt his gaze was intense, now it felt positively heart-stopping.

"Right, so...So I suppose I'll get the potions out, then," she muttered. She despised how nervous she sounded.

She took out her wand and gave it a wave, trying to regain control of herself. As per their usual routine, two phials of Amor Videri shot out of Hermione's bag and hovered between them. They each took one.

Malfoy sat on the bed beside her, turning the small bottle in his hand.

She unstopped hers, but Malfoy didn't move.

"Is something wrong?" She asked timidly.

He looked up from the phial and into her eyes. She felt frozen on the spot. His face was getting closer to hers. She couldn't move. His breath was on her mouth.

"I was thinking maybe we could try...without the phials," he murmured. Hermione's breathing was shallow. Was he serious? Did he not want the addictive, floaty feeling of the potion anymore?

"But...I thought...don't you want to forget?"

"I don't think I need to anymore" he answered and cupped her chin. He hesitated for a brief moment, giving her the option to back away. Instead she closed the short distance between them and their lips met.

It was everything. It was glorious. Her whole body vibrated at the kiss, as their mouths tentatively moved against each other.

She hastily placed her phial on a bedside table and then proceeded to snake her hands up and around his neck. His fingers wound their way into her messy hair. They both fell against the cushions, now kissing deeply. Their mouths opened. Their tongues intertwined.

It was funny to Hermione how they'd just shagged in a secret nook, yet this kiss felt even more intimate. It was technically their first one, where they were both in their right minds. It certainly felt like a first kiss to Hermione. Each time she was under the influence of Amor Videri, she felt like a huge part of her brain tapped out, only leaving an obsession for Draco. Now she was fully there, with all her thoughts and feelings. And all she could think about was how amazing it felt when he sucked on her tongue.

It felt raw. Very unlike the dreamy, illusory haze that the potion created, yet the fire and hunger were still there. It wasn't a lie anymore when Hermione wanted nothing more than to give herself to Draco. And the elation she felt knowing he wanted the same thing, without any Amor Videri manipulation, was so freeing.

When Draco began to unbutton her top however, Hermione felt her nerves begin to bubble back.

She realised he could sense it when he paused.

"Are you sure this is okay?" He asked.

"I- yes. It just feels funny, doesn't it? Like it's our first time but we've also done this loads before. I'm just...nervous, I suppose?"

"You're right, I guess technically it is our first real time. To be honest, I've been wondering for a while what it would be like without the potion. The whole time we were in the alcove I was thinking about kissing you and then..."

He groaned as he cupped her cheek and kissed her, his touches full of reassurance. She couldn't help gripping his shoulders and arching into him. It felt so good.

When he broke off the kiss, they were both out of breath.

"You can stop me at any time. Even right now if you want. Just say the word. I don't want you to feel...pressured or..."

Hermione couldn't help but swoon. She never knew that his concern for her could be such a turn on, but the way he wanted to make sure she was consenting only made her feel reassured and wanting more.

She nodded, smiling up at him and then craned her neck to take another kiss. Her hips found his. They ground themselves against each other. Heat was rising.

She began to undo his shirt in a frenzy and he unceremoniously flung it to the side. His strong chest over hers did wonders to her arousal. He undid the rest of her top.

"Draco..." she was moaning, feeling the bulge in his pants rub between her legs. He groaned against her neck and hurried to unclasp her bra and peel it off.

Hermione covered her breasts in reflex. It felt so strange to feel so vulnerable with him. What if the experience off the potion wasn't as good?

Again, Draco seemed to sense her discomfort.

"We don't have to do this. I'll even understand if you want to leave. Or we can just...talk if you want."

Hermione could feel him pull away and she felt a sudden sense of panic.

She reached out to grab his arm in reflex and Draco looked at her with unmasked surprise.

"No...I'm sorry, I'm just...it's a lot, you know?"

"You have nothing to feel sorry for. If you don't want to do this without the potion, I completely understand. I was...maybe it was a mistake to suggest it."

"Why...Why didn't you want to take the potion tonight?"

Draco rested his hand on her waist, trailing soft, comforting circles with his thumb.

"I suppose...I began noticing how I felt with you without it. At first I wanted to take Amor Videri because the effects pushed all my problems away. I also liked being with a partner who didn't flinch away from my dark mark. Or who wasn't sleeping with me for the thrill of being with an ex-Death Eater. Or had any expectations from me other than a quick fuck. I was pretty sure we were both on the same page with that. And fucking you was... *is* mindblowing by the way. But then, I realised that even when we were off the potion, I still felt...normal with you. I started to look forward to our meetings not because I wanted to swallow that ghastly pink stuff, but because I wanted to see you."

Hermione was speechless. Draco continued, though his words seemed to drag with more difficulty.

"I've...been thinking about you a lot lately. I.."

He trailed off, looking lost.

Hermione felt a part of her melt. She understood him. He was as confused about this as her.

"I've been thinking about you a lot too. I guess I've been trying to figure out what we are. We were sort of flung into all of this and it's all been happening so fast. I feel like my brain can't keep up with how I'm feeling."

Hermione pressed a hand to his chest, searching to comfort herself as well as him. She was surprised to feel how fast his heart was beating.

"I know I like these moments with you," Hermione went on, "for a while I was trying to convince myself otherwise, because of our history. I thought I just liked getting high off the euphoria of the potion and all that mattered was that I was with someone who was taking it for the same reasons. But after what just happened in that alcove... I think it's more than just

Amor Videri. I like it when you touch me, with or without it. We have good chemistry. You know, I've been reading up on a lot of this lately-"

"How *surprising* ."

Hermione swatted Draco playfully.

"I'm serious! I've read about all the different recorded cases and the varying effects. Generally taking Amor Videri will fog up your thoughts and create a dreamlike, euphoric state. It also ingrains an obsession within your mind of the first person you see. In these cases generally the drinker becomes very clingy, very sycophantic and extremely infatuated. But... um...it doesn't necessarily increase libido or the sexual nature of the person."

Draco frowned.

"But that's the first thing that happened to us. I quite vividly recall you jumping me until I had little choice but to succumb to your wiles. Not that I'm complaining."

Hermione rolled her eyes but her cheeks reddened considerably.

"I...what I mean to say is, the way we're *both* all over each other when we drink it is... not the norm. Granted I wasn't able to find any cases of two people taking the potion together. So that might be one of the reasons why we immediately jumped to...to sex. But there's also the possibility that...well..."

"That we're very sexual people in general?" Draco asked doubtfully.

"Well, yes that *could* be it but it also could mean..."

"...that we wanted to shag each other before taking the potion," Draco supplied for Hermione.

"Well, yes."

"Well, I suppose it's no secret now that I had a bit of a schoolboy fancy for you. So yes, on my end I would say that is accurate. What about you? Did you ever think about tumbling me into your bed? "

Draco looked far too amused at Hermione's hesitation.

"I...I mean you're certainly handsome, but I'm sure you already knew that."

"That's not what I asked. Tell me, Hermione, did you ever touch yourself while thinking about me?"

Draco leaned in and nipped her collar. Hermione felt her insides turn to jelly.

"N-no I...well not before the potion."

"So you *did* touch yourself after our first encounter?" Draco murmured the question against the skin of her neck. She trembled.

"I...I might've...ah!...Maybe once or twice...mmm..."

She made soft noises of surprise and longing every time Draco kissed her neck, her jaw and the delicious spot right under her ear. He still had pants on and she badly wanted to rectify that situation.

Her hands began to fumble at his belt buckle. Draco helped her undo it, flinging it to the side and undoing his pants' zipper. Their breaths were getting heavier. Hermione was no longer feeling self conscious. Her need for him was rising and overshadowing any lingering nerves.

"Tell me," he said in a low voice that made Hermione's skin pebble with goosebumps, "what *exactly* did you think about when you touched yourself?"

He took a nipple in his mouth while she tried her best to babble an answer.

"I was thinking about...about how you were touching me with your hands and...ahnn!"

He bit down softly on her nub and she shuddered, bucking into him, reflexdly. He answered her by grinding his rock hard erection against her, causing her to gasp.

"And?" Draco prompted, looking down at her.

"And how you fingered me...ahn...and how it felt when you...when you fucked me."

Draco groaned hard, pressing his forehead into Hermione's shoulder.

"Please..." she moaned, "Please...I'm ready now. I need you in me so bad."

And then, their mouths smashed together.

They clumsily shed the rest of their clothes between hot and messy kisses.

As his bare cock grinded deliciously between her already sopping lips and his tongue wrestled with hers, Hermione noticed more and more the differences without the potion.

The friction between their bodies felt sweatier. The noises they both made were sharper to the ear. She noticed how much clumsier they both were. She could feel the mattress shift beneath them as their bodies moved, and could hear the creaking of the bed. Everything was more grounded.

It was the difference between a painting and real life. A painting everything would be smoothed over and there was only emphasis on certain details the artist wanted to draw your eye to. But in real life, you could see everything, hear everything. You could decide how to feel, what to hear, what to focus on. It was raw.

It was better.

When Draco finally slid inside her, Hermione couldn't believe how good it was.

He fucked her missionary and though they had already cycled through more ambitious positions, this one was perfect considering, to Hermione, this felt like their first real time. She wanted to savour how his cock felt inside her.

He looked down at her, watched as his thrusts made her writhe and cry out.

She wrapped her legs around him, and bucked her hips upward to match his cadence.

They were both panting.

"Wait, wait!" Malfoy shouted. His cock pulled out with a wet squelch, falling onto Hermione's hips with a wet thud. He ducked his head down, breathing hard.

"What is it? Are you okay?"

Hermione was panicking. Did he change his mind? Did he come to his senses and realise he didn't want her? Did she hurt him somehow? All of the above? A feeling of dread was starting to seep in when Draco caught his breath.

"I'm...going to cum too fast like that. I just need a quick moment."

Hermione let out a laugh in her relief. She hadn't expected such a normal answer. It was almost surreal. It was like she had forgotten what normal sex without the aid of a magical potion or complicated feelings was like.

Draco looked down at her, a little stricken by her laugh, which only made her giggle more.

"No, don't worry, it's not what you think it's just...I don't know, I thought you wanted to stop or leave or-"

"Absolutely not," Draco said firmly, visibly relieved as well. "I think you're having *too* good an effect on me actually."

"Mmmm...I don't mind if you cum fast. It's actually quite sexy."

Hermione reached between them to take Draco's cock in her hand. Her pulse raced as she stroked him, feeling her juices on his shaft. Draco hissed and she saw his arms on either side of her head tremble.

"Hermione, I'm really not going to last long-"

"Then cum for me. You have all night to make it up to me."

He groaned at her words and shuddered hard as she slid him back inside her. She arched so that his tip pummeled her to the end.

They both moaned.

She bucked her hips and Draco unravelled before her.

It took him three thrusts until he came and she mewled in pleasure as he collapsed on top of her, breathing hard.

"Sweet Salazar," he wheezed, "I will *definitely* have to make it up to you."

They kissed and cuddled and Draco made good on his promise two more times after that. They retried several positions they had already done, though each one felt new and exciting since it was their first time sober.

Finally, sticky from sweat and other substances and exhausted from the thorough workout, they crumpled in a pile of limbs on the bed.

Hermione took a moment to admire Draco's body and appreciate how toned he was. He was on the thinner side but with plenty of muscle built in from Quidditch.

For the first time, Hermione also ran her hands over the scarring on his body. The biggest ones on his chest must've been from the Sectumsempra curse. There were a lot of smaller ones as well, ones she could only assume were from during the war.

The dark mark on his arm seemed to stand out as well. How had she never taken the time to really notice any of this before?

It dawned on her that it must've been because when they were naked together, either her brain was addled with potion or she was scrambling to put her clothes back on in the aftermath. She realised Amor Videri filled her with thoughts on how wonderful Draco was without even really knowing him. It glossed over details, tricking her mind into obsession with a fake dream. She had been shagging an illusion and it was only now that she had the real thing, that she understood the extent of the lie that Amor Videri truly was. Love was knowing everything about someone, every scar, every unique trait. Amor Videri covered all that up in order to create the perfect, filtered fantasy.

Draco seemed to be thinking along similar lines as he ran his hands over her own scars. Over the long slash below her chest where Dolohov had struck her in the Department of Mysteries. Over the many smaller but still visible scars from injuries sustained at the Battle of Hogwarts. Finally, he traced the outline of the faded Mudblood scar on her forearm, given to her by his aunt.

She looked up at him. His brows were furrowed together in pain.

"Hey," she whispered, pulling his chin up to face her, "It's all over now, okay? We both have scars from that time, but we're healing. That's what's most important."

"I can't believe I used to think like that," he said, his hand covering the slur on her arm.

"I don't know how you can be with me. Don't I remind you of all...all that?"

Hermione thought about it.

"I mean, you do but..." she spoke carefully, mulling things over as she crafted what she wanted to say, "But I feel safe talking about it with you. You don't pester me with questions,

maybe because you also know what living through hell during the war was like. But I feel like you listen to me, with no judgement or hidden agenda. So many people keep reminding me or asking me about what happened, but I don't think they want to help me heal. They only want...I don't know, to be associated with a war heroine or Harry Potter's clever friend. But not you. And I appreciate that you've talked to me about what it was like for you too."

Draco was propped on one elbow, watching her carefully as she spoke, like he was hanging onto her words. Hermione continued her train of thought.

"I know we have a lot of history. And it confuses me a lot because I find myself enjoying the time I have with you now. We were kind of thrown into getting to know each other in an unconventional way, but now that I'm here, I feel like it was exactly what I needed at the right time. And I feel guilty about it because I don't think I should forgive you so easily. What does that say about my self-worth? But at the same time, am I supposed to just be unhappy then? Unhappy and self-respecting? Does that make me a better person?"

"I feel a lot of guilt too," Draco answered, looking away, though not before Hermione could see the torment on his face, "Mainly because I know I should leave you alone. I have no right to ask you to spend time with me, not after everything I've done. But I can't help myself from wanting to see you even though I know it's selfish to keep asking you for your time. And I'm glad that you choose to see me as well, despite our history. Even though we spend time together, you have no obligation to forgive me. I don't think they have to be mutually inclusive."

"Doesn't it though? Dwelling on all the ways you hurt me only seems like it would tarnish what we have. I'd rather move past it and just see where this goes."

"I don't deserve it," Draco said firmly, though he pulled her in and held her close to his chest, in a silent action of gratitude.

They lay there next to each other for a moment, enjoying each other's physical touch.

Hermione broke the silence after a time.

"Shall we label this as friends with benefits then? I feel like we're past being in some weird in-between place between enemies and love potion victims,"

Draco nuzzled into her nest of hair.

"'Friends with Benefits' does have a nicer sounding ring to it than 'love potion victims'"

"There's something else we should probably discuss."

"I'm all ears."

"After what Zabini said about how dangerous love potions are...I really do think McGonagall needs to be notified."

Draco nodded.

"You're right."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"You agree? I thought you were against it?"

"I was, but I've changed my mind. That Micheal Corner schmuck could be dangerous. You know that poison could have been intended for you? You probably frequent that lab more than anyone. If this Corner bloke is trying to poison you, I want as many people after his hide as possible."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I highly doubt he wanted to poison *me* . But I did hear a rumour that he has a secret girlfriend, so maybe she might be in trouble."

"A secret girlfriend? Where did you hear that?"

"I don't divulge my sources," Hermione said teasingly, poking Draco in the side. The rumour had come from Ginny and Hermione knew for a fact that Ginny herself had excellent sources, being the social butterfly that she was.

"It's settled then," Hermione said in a business-like way, "We'll go to McGonagall tomorrow."

" *We* ?"

"Yes, *we* . Listen, it'll be embarrassing but she doesn't have to know we shagged. We'll just tell her we drank the potion, had a lovey-dovey conversation and that'll be it. People don't usually jump straight to shagging on love potion so I think she'll believe us. You won't be expelled if you come clean about it with me. I'll vouch for you."

Draco observed her carefully. He seemed to be looking into her depths. She wondered what he found there. He took a deep breath.

"Alright, I suppose it is the best way to handle it. What about that berk Micheal Corner?"

"Well," Hermione said slowly, "We don't have any proof it was him, only allegations. He might've just been really drunk at the party and said some stupid things he didn't mean, though it *is* suspicious."

"Still, in case it is him, I don't relish the idea that he gets to traipse around, planting more of those things while we wait for the higher ups to figure it out. And...I mean...it was bad enough that you were forced into...falling for me. But what if it happens to you again and it's someone else? What if it's *him* ?"

Hermione was startled by the look of unbridled disgust that twisted Draco's features.

"First off, I don't plan on going around drinking unattended liquids, especially not after the whole love potion debacle, so you can rest assured I'll be fine. Secondly, like I said, I'm pretty sure he has a *girlfriend* , so if anything, she should be the one we need to help. And lastly,

despite the feeling of deep violation, in some ways I was happy it was you. Maybe I never mentioned this before but...I...err...um..."

Hermione trailed off, embarrassed. Draco's look of anger softened into something like affection and curiosity.

"Your suspense is killing me,"

"Ugh...I- Fine. I really liked how...how we...our chemistry that first time. I was confused after, because I thought I hated you but couldn't stop thinking about how good it all felt to...t-to be with you."

Hermione pursed her lips, hoping she didn't sound desperate.

Draco smiled and Hermione warmed up immediately as he held her close, almost crushing her in his arms.

"I liked it too. A lot. You had always been off limits to me, in my mind, even though I had always thought you pretty and far too intelligent. We were just so different. But then, there we were in the potions lab, and you wanted to be with me, and I didn't want to give in to you because I didn't want you to hate me even more afterwards. But I could feel my brain giving in to you. And then, to finally take you up against the wall - well, it was probably the singular most erotic thing that'd ever happen to me. No wonder I couldn't stop thinking about you afterwards."

Draco nuzzled into her hair, giving Hermione the chance to blush without his eyes boring into her.

"But I must say," Draco added, "for all the pomp and circumstance the potion creates, I much prefer shagging you silly without it."

Hermione reddened, though she arched appreciatively into Draco's body.

They talked late into the night, trading and comparing stories about their past years at Hogwarts. Neither even bothered to ask how late it had gotten.

After a time, when Hermione's voice started to grow hoarse and her eyes started to droop, she drifted off to sleep in Draco's arms.

She slept soundly.

Infatuation

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Give You What You Like by Avril Lavigne

The meeting with McGonagall went better than planned, though still extremely awkward.

Hermione didn't quite like the disparity between the pitying look McGonagall had given her, versus the suspicious one she had thrown at Draco. Hermione emphasized several times that *both* her and Draco had fallen prey to this imposter of a potion, while McGonagall examined the empty phials (Draco had turned his in as well) on her desk, prodding them with her wand every now and then.

After Hermione's explanation of the events (She glossed over most of the truth about what had happened during the potion. A 'passionate discussion about our love and plenty of hand-holding' seemed like enough of a story to satisfy the Headmistress), McGonagall seemed to look at Draco with a little more sympathy.

"This must have been an ordeal for both of you. Thank you for coming to me. I'll look into this situation immediately, Hogwarts takes matters like this very seriously."

Hermione nodded.

"Do you have anything else to tell me? No? Very well, off you go. Miss Granger, will you wait a moment? I have a quick matter to discuss with you."

Draco inclined his head and took his leave, though Hermione saw him glance at her before closing the door. She felt a pang. She'd hoped they'd be able to head down together.

"Please, have a seat."

Hermione sat.

"I wanted to personally make sure you were okay. As much as I will give Mr. Malfoy the benefit of the doubt, I know you both have been at odds since the start of your first year at school. He also has a reputation of being cruel to people who have non-magical families. Is there anything else I should know? Did he hurt you?"

Hermione bristled. She knew McGonagall meant well, but it was hard not to take offence when Draco had handled things as well as anyone could have.

He certainly handled you well this morning.

Hermione blushed and drove that erring thought away.

"Not at all. He was actually very apologetic even if he didn't do anything wrong. We've talked since and it's helped me to move past it. He's changed a lot since the war and I can tell he feels remorse."

"Indeed," McGonagall seemed very surprised by Hermione's statement, judging by how high her thin eyebrows were raised.

"All the same, I'd advise you to be careful Miss Granger. Dumbledore did once mention to me he had hopes that the Malfoy boy wouldn't inherit his father's prejudices. While I'd like to believe it as well, a little prudence never did anyone wrong."

"I have no doubt in my mind that Draco Malfoy is not his father," Hermione replied firmly.

McGonagall's eyebrows were practically grazing her hairline.

"Very well, Miss Granger. That is very good of you to say. I know he's certainly been through a lot."

McGonagall's gaze lingered on Hermione a while longer, while Hermione fidgeted in her seat.

"You are dismissed," the Headmistress finally concluded, shuffling some papers on her desk, "if there are any other questions or information you'd like to come forward with at a later time, please don't hesitate to find me in my office. You are always welcome."

Hermione nodded, rising and heading out the door, relieved it was over. She wasn't sure how she felt about that last bit about returning with information. Information on Draco?

"One last thing, Miss Granger."

Hermione stiffened and turned, a foot out the door.

"Yes, Headmistress?"

McGonagall paused, seemingly straightening the papers in front of her. She finally looked up and Hermione was startled at how earnestly McGonagall looked at her.

"Thank you. For all that you've done. I'd never gotten the chance to properly say it."

There was a definite mist in the Headmistress' eyes, a sight that was a rarity from McGonagall. Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat and felt an immense wave of affection towards her former Transfiguration teacher. She smiled warmly and nodded, which McGonagall returned with feeling.

McGonagall suddenly whipped back into her usual stern countenance and shoo'd Hermione from her office.

As Hermione closed the door behind her, she was surprised to find Draco waiting just before the spiraling staircase.

"Were you eavesdropping?"

"Of course not. McGonagall has wards all around her office. I was waiting for you."

Hermione, still reeling a bit from the emotion of her final words with the Headmistress, could only gape, at a loss for words.

"I- Well, that's...You didn't have to do that."

Draco shrugged as if it were no big deal, though Hermione noticed his ears were a little pink.

Together, they stepped onto the moving staircase, trading shy glances as they descended slowly.

"Before we parted ways for the week, I wondered when you wanted to meet next. I know you'll be busy this Saturday."

"Oh! Yes, well, there's the Saturday after the next."

"Certainly. So about a week and a half from now."

Hermione nodded.

Pause.

"A week and a half is...a substantial amount of time."

Hermione couldn't help but smile, seeing what he was getting at.

"Did you want to meet sooner-"

Before she could finish, Draco had pulled her towards him, crushing her in an embrace, his lips quickly latching onto hers.

She moaned without thinking, grabbing at his shoulders and pressed her tongue into his mouth.

They kissed passionately, their limbs scrabbling to hold each other tighter as the staircase descended. They only realised they were at their destination when the noisy sound of the stone gargoyle stepping aside for them startled them apart.

"I'd like sooner very much," Draco answered, a bit out of breath from the fervour of their kissing.

"Yes, yes me too," Hermione answered, equally breathless, "Maybe this Friday?"

"Hurry it along you two, you can make your lovers' plans on your own time, I can't stand here all day!" The gargoyle interjected sharply.

"Sorry!" Hermione apologized hastily, while Draco shot the statue a withering look.

The pair hurried off, leaving the gargoyle staring shrewdly after them.

"Friday, then," Draco repeated when they were a fair distance away. He looked around the empty hall and pulled Hermione in for one last quick kiss. Her heart was beating so hard from the excitement of kissing like this out in the open.

They waved each other off and Hermione couldn't help thinking how she'd never felt this giddy with neither Ron nor Viktor.

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"Where *were* you?"

"Class?" Hermione said innocently, when she arrived mid-lunch in the Great Hall. She tried not to look at the Slytherin table, but she couldn't help sneaking a glance all the same. Her stomach did a flop when she spotted the familiar white-blond head sitting next to Theodore Nott. Hermione snapped out of her reverie when she heard Ginny scoff dramatically.

"Don't play coy, you know what I mean! Were you gone all night?"

"Err..."

Hermione slid in next to Ginny and began to fix a plate. She was starving.

"I got back late from the library and fell asleep in the common room," Hermione tried to cover the fib by shovelling mashed potatoes into her mouth. Ginny was looking at her with an arched eyebrow.

"Are you sure? Not spending the night with a secret boyfriend, are you?"

Hermione almost spat out a mouthful of potato.

"Don't be silly," Hermione said, swallowing with difficulty, "I have no time for boyfriends."

"What's this about Hermione's secret boyfriend?" Dean interjected, swivelling around.

"Wha- *I don't have a secret boyfriend !*" Hermione exclaimed shrilly, causing a few more heads to turn her way.

"Good," Dean said easily, "Because I was hoping I could take you to the Halloween Ball."

Hermione gaped at him like a fish out of water. Ginny snorted.

"Smooth Dean. Asking out a war heroine between the cream corn and the brussel sprouts."

"Come on, Gin, don't take the mickey out of me when I'm asking a lady out. Besides, you had your shot at this," he gestured theatrically at himself, "and you missed your chance, so now I'm hoping Hermione'll let me sweep her off her feet. So what d'you say Granger?"

"Err...thanks Dean, but I'll have to decline. Sorry," she added apologetically.

Ginny pretended to be hit in the heart. Dean grinned though he seemed a little put out.

"No worries, a bloke's gotta try after all," Dean replied good-naturedly as Seamus roared, clapping him on the back.

"You're aiming too high mate, Granger is way out o' your league!"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I'd hardly put it *that* way."

Ginny gave Hermione a pitying glance.

"I'm afraid he's right in a way. You're a catch, Hermione, if not *the* catch."

"I'm not for anyone *to* catch!" Hermione retorted with a sniff.

Hermione knew there was one person whom she wanted to be caught by.

Your secret boyfriend .

Hermione shook her head. *Friends with benefits*, she reminded herself. As if she could feel his eyes in her, she flicked her gaze up again, catching Draco staring at her from across the room. Hermione held back a squeak of surprise and fixed her eyes back onto her plate.

Ginny leaned in and wiggled her brows, "Hermione, you were pivotal in saving the wizarding world. You're smart, brave and drop dead gorgeous. Not to mention extremely single. Plus you're not looking for a boyfriend which means every bloke in this school - and probably a fair number of girls, too - will want to take you out even *more* on challenge alone."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at Ginny's dramatics, while Dean nodded sagely.

"You can't be serious! You're exaggerating."

Ginny gave Hermione a pitying look.

"Oh Hermione, Hermione. Mark my words, the closer we get to the dance, the more people will be lining up for your hand. Better get ready. Take notes, because the pick of dance dates is most certainly yours. Just remember, the sooner you ask someone, the sooner everyone else will leave you alone."

Hermione nodded along, but doubted she would need Ginny's advice.

Of course she should have known better than to doubt Ginny.

Apparently the rumour of Dean Thomas' very public invitation to Hermione Granger for the Halloween Ball spread like wildfire and served as a catalyst for every single other interested party.

Hermione spent the better part of that week dodging various invitations. Some were from people she knew, others from people she sort of recognized and others from people she'd never met in her life.

One Ravenclaw wrote her a poem, which he tried to loudly recite between classes in a very busy corridor.

Another Hufflepuff brought a bunch of far too expensive flowers that were enchanted to change aromas every minute.

The worst was probably from a nervous-looking fifth year, who cornered her in the library and then proceeded to sob loudly at Hermione's gentle rejection.

She also noticed she was crossing Theodore Nott in the hallway more than usual. He always seemed to be studying her, calculating. Sometimes she thought he might say something, but then her attention would be caught elsewhere and when she looked back, he was gone. Curious.

When Hermione arrived in potions class, she could immediately tell Draco was in a sour mood. He didn't look up at her when she shot a hopeful glance his way, and he seemed to scowl more than usual. Nott, on the other hand, caught her gaze with his own. A small smirk seemed to crook the corner of his mouth.

Hermione felt a tad stung.

Why was Draco suddenly ignoring her? He had seemed so eager to see her again judging by the way he'd snogged her earlier that week in the Headmistress' stairwell. So what changed?

Did this have to do with her frequent suitors? It wasn't exactly a secret that Hermione Granger was being woo'ed left and right. In fact, the amount of gossip she overheard about herself lately had doubled in light of her newfound popularity as a date.

Her pulse sped up. Was Draco *jealous* ?

"Hello, Hermione," Luna greeted her, "You're looking in a much better mood than last week. Have the Gultroobles been good to you?"

"Wha-"

Slughorn clapped his hands and announced they would continue to practice Antidotes on Veritaserum.

Hermione took a cauldron with Luna, as per usual.

Hermione enjoyed working with Luna, despite their many philosophical differences. Luna was usually happy to let Hermione take the lead and Hermione appreciated how well Luna followed instructions. They had only made a less-than-perfect potion once and that was only because Luna insisted mixing gurdy root and lemon leaves was bad luck.

The only drawback was that Hermione often had to listen to Luna monologue about Crumple Horned Snorkacks and the like. Today she was teaching Hermione about Gultroobles.

"...big teeth and they leave a gaseous trail in their wake, often smelling of figs and bellybutton."

"I beg your pardon?"

Ernie Macmillian, who was working with Hannah on their own concoction, turned to Luna looking scandalized.

"I have never heard of such a thing in my life," Ernie interjected and Hermione smirked to herself.

Let Ernie make the same mistake she had made countless times with Luna. The more you contradicted Luna, the more she had an answer for everything.

Hermione continued to stir their antidote, amused at Ernie's bewilderment when Luna mistook his disbelief as interest and began to describe in minute detail a Gultrooble's diet.

As Hermione tuned out their voices, she began to overhear other conversations.

She sneaked a glance over at Micheal Corner, who was paired up with Padma. During their night together, she and Draco had briefly touched on how they would go about figuring out if he was behind the Amor Videri.

Draco had suggested using Veritaserum to question him and a quick Obliviate afterward. Hermione had shut down that idea. Not only was she not eager to meddle around in more memory wiping, but if Micheal turned out to be innocent, they'd have broken enough rules to get expelled.

The other option was to tail Micheal Corner day and night and see if he would brew another batch. But who had time or energy to do that? Hermione would need to look into some tracking charms, on top of her pile of homework and secret evenings with Draco.

Hermione glanced over, seeing that Draco was paired with Daphne Greengrass. Hermione felt something lurch slightly in her stomach at the sight of them together. Snippets of their conversation drifted over to her.

"...It's required of you to ask her, Draco. Do you know the kind of pressure our parents are putting on her?"

"I don't give a flobberworm about our parents. I'm done abiding by these arbitrary rules."

"You know she's been looking forward to this arrangement since you blew it with Pansy?"

"I'm not interested."

"I swear to Salazar, Draco, if you make Astoria go to that Ball alone, I will skin you alive."

Slughorn chose that moment to waltz in, blocking Draco and Daphne from view.

"How's it coming along, then?"

Hermione stared down into the deep green depths of the antidote.

Astoria Greengrass. Going to the Ball with Draco.

Hermione scowled.

Even Slughorn' high praise at their progress wasn't enough to lift Hermione's spirits.

"What's the matter, Hermione?" Luna asked softly, immediately sensing Hermione's mood change.

"Oh, nothing really, just a lot on my mind. Thank you for asking, though."

"Have you chosen who you're going to the Ball with? It must be flattering to have so many people who want to get to know you."

Hermione smiled tightly.

"I guess it is, yes," Hermione didn't want to sound ungrateful but she really did wish people would leave her alone. How *did* Harry deal with all of this when he was here? "What about you, Luna? Anyone you have your heart set on?"

"Yes, I think I will ask Tracey Davis, from our Ancient Runes class. I've always found her quite pretty."

Hermione blinked at the quick response but regained her composure.

"I wish you the best of luck. Erm...I hope you don't mind if I ask but...doesn't it bother you that her parents might have been Death Eaters or...or affiliated with their circles?"

Luna shook her head, her radishes swinging wildly.

"The only thing I care about is if her soul matches mine."

"Ah. Err, right. But what if she used to believe in enslaving muggles? How do you get past something like that?"

Luna looked at Hermione unblinkingly, her wide, blue eyes bulging a little. Hermione could see her own reflection on the shiny surface.

"A lot of people used to believe that, but I think many have changed their minds. It's a pity they haven't been given much of a chance after the war though. Most of them are rather nice."

Hermione nodded. She understood Luna more than she cared to admit. If only everyone could be as forgiving as Luna.

"Whoever you're thinking about, you should go to them, Hermione," Luna said dreamily, absently folding a page in her potions book into some sort of origami, "You know, you may enjoy the Ball more if you do the picking, instead of letting someone pick you."

Hermione smiled warmly at her friend.

"Thanks Luna, I hope it works out for you."

"It will. The Gacktooth Bongle is in season this year."

Hermione chortled with only a smidgen of exasperation.

She had a lot to think about. It's true that her and Draco had never really talked about whether they were exclusive. Friends with benefits implied they were not. Hermione racked her brain to recall if either of them had admitted to any deep feelings. She didn't think it went beyond both of them acknowledging they enjoyed their time together and thought about each other. There was also the fact that Draco had admitted to fancying her previously, though he didn't mention anything about the present. Did those feelings still ring true? Did she *want* them to?

Which begged the question; how *did* Hermione feel about Draco?

She definitely didn't like the idea of Draco and Astoria Greengrass attending the Halloween Ball together. In fact, the idea of any other woman on Draco's arm made Hermione mentally recoil.

You've turned down your fair share of men. Are you waiting around for Draco to ask you to the Ball?

Was she waiting for that? Dean Thomas had been a good candidate as a date. Why *had* she said no?

An image of herself dressed in a Victorian dress with a white curly wig piled high on her head, manifested in her mind. She was on the arm of Draco Malfoy, disguised as something pompous and ridiculous like a prince or a serpent king with a large ruff.

She shook her head. The figures in her mind dissipated, looking a little disappointed.

No, no, *no*. She was not going to pine for Draco Malfoy. That would mean that she liked him. And not in a simple friends with benefits way. If she developed sentiments of the love interest kind, what then?

Would they go on dates and be the scandal of the whole school? Would they continue this affair in secret?

Neither of those outcomes were ideal for what she had planned in a romantic partner, though the secrecy *was* kind of sexy.

Potions ended on a fairly positive note, with Luna and Hermione receiving full marks.

Maybe Hermione could snag Draco after class.

And find some excuse for him not to go to the Ball with Astoria Greengrass , she thought wildly.

As she grabbed her books, chaotically inventing scenarios in her mind that involved Astoria Greengrass and a medical condition that made her allergic to platinum blond hair, Ernie Macmilliam blocked her path.

"Ernie!" Hermione said far too loudly, "What is it?"

She thought she could see Draco bustling about behind Ernie. She had maybe a second or two to catch him before he left.

"Erm, hello Hermione. You're looking like a positive ray of sunshine on this fine day. Also congratulations, I did notice you received full marks on the Veritaserum Antidote, although I'd expect nothing less from someone as intelligent as you. Incidentally, I too, received full marks. Perhaps we could-"

"Ernie, that is very kind of you. I'm sorry, I'm in a bit of a rush right now."

A flash of blond hair by the door. She needed to catch him now. She noticed Daphne Greengrass was trailing tightly after him. Rats. Would she be able to ask him aside under the pretext of a potion question?

"Ah! Of course, terribly sorry. I'll be brief, then! I was wondering if you might like to accompany me to the upcoming Halloween affair? I think we would make a smashing pair, don't you?"

"I...oh, Ernie. That is very nice of you to ask. I'm sorry but I have to decline, though I'm very flattered you asked."

Draco was long gone but maybe she could still run and catch up to him down the hall?

"Have I...have I done anything to offend you? I am truly sorry if I have."

The hurt in his voice finally made Hermione cease to peer around Ernie surreptitiously and face him directly. He looked absolutely crestfallen. She felt bad. He was a good person, gathering his courage to ask her out, and she was hardly paying attention. She chastised herself silently.

"Not at all, Ernie. I think you're wonderful, really. I just don't see it going further than friends. I really am sorry, I know you'll still have a great time and I wish you all the best."

Ernie puffed his chest, still looking disappointed but understanding.

"Of course. Yes, thank you, and I wish the best to you as well. If you ever change your mind..."

"I should go Ernie. Take care."

Hermione headed off. Draco was long gone.

But perhaps that was for the best. What was she going to do, make a case for him not to accept dates from Astoria with Daphne standing right there? Preposterous. She'd clearly lost her mind.

Hermione had a vague memory of a petite, delicate-looking girl trailing after Daphne. There was no doubt that Draco and Astoria would make a good match. They both had immaculate hair, similar family backgrounds, a rich upbringing and a maddeningly haughty air.

He didn't seem all that interested in her, though, Hermione reminded herself.

She couldn't help feeling a little better at that.

And what of the backlash if Hermione were to hypothetically ask Draco to the Ball?

She snorted. It would be a complete brouhaha.

Everyone would be furious at her. Ginny most of all. After all the things Draco had said about Ginny and her family. After everything Lucius had done to Arthur. Fraternizing with Draco Malfoy seemed like the highest form of treason. Ron would never talk to her again, he'd given her the silent treatment before for lesser things than this. She could potentially be incurring the wrath of the whole Weasley family. And what about all her friends in Gryffindor? Neville, who had defended Hogwarts so loyally from people like Draco's father. Dean Thomas and Justin Finch-Fletchey who were muggle born.

Would Harry be angry as well?

Hermione thought about it. If Harry were here, what would he say?

Somehow, she knew Harry had left a lot of his old rivalries with Draco behind him after the war. Hermione suspected that since Draco had been pivotal in transferring the Elder Wand into Harry's control, Harry had used that as a way to make peace with any lingering hard feelings. Harry, most of all, had suffered at the hands of much worse than a high school bully. And, in the end, Harry had seen for himself more than anyone, how much Draco had been a victim to Voldemort as well.

Still, she couldn't entirely picture Harry giving her his blessing in pursuing Draco either.

Since when do you care so much about what other people think?

The voice in her head had a point.

Besides, maybe this was just a passing fancy. Maybe she would wake up in two days and suddenly not give a flying fig about Draco's perfect hair, and tantalizingly low voice, and the way he talked to her with ease in a wide berth of subjects ranging from academic to traumatic to fluffy.

The way he touched her. Like she was *his* .

Hermione shivered.

She decided it was too soon to form any rash decisions on her feelings. She would continue to assess the situation, take notes, experiment, analyse, and see where things led before drawing any firm conclusions.

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Pamphlets were starting to appear tacked to common room notice boards warning students about the dangers of poisoning and not to leave beverages unattended. Furthermore, if anyone were to find anything mislabelled or suspicious, they were to notify a teacher immediately. The consequences of being caught administering a potion to someone against their will would be grave.

Students buzzed with the news, wondering what could have caused this new bulletin.

Hermione spotted a couple of glum third years reading the notice.

"Does this include joke shop potions? I only just bought the Hilarious Hiccups dropper from the Weasleys."

"It doesn't say. Maybe save it for the holidays?"

Hermione scowled and tried very hard not to give a lecture. Since when was poisoning anyone, no matter how harmless, *funny* ? She had long since made peace with the fact that she hated pranks, but if people only knew what else was out there, maybe they wouldn't be so blasé about it all.

Hermione was in a dour mood, come Friday morning.

Not only did she have to listen to endless rumours about rampant poisons, but she was coming to a very foreboding realisation.

She definitely had some feelings for Draco, of the fluttery variety. She couldn't stop thinking about him.

Normally uncaring about her looks, she'd taken care to plait her hair today and wear her favourite dark blue undergarments.

She hated it. Hated how he interrupted her thoughts when she was memorising Runes. Hated how her notes were slightly less copious these days because she couldn't stop daydreaming about him in class.

It didn't help that Astoria Greengrass was cosying up to Malfoy at the Slytherin table during breakfast. His expression was unreadable as always. Hermione consoled herself with the thought that at least he didn't look pleased. Though he didn't not look pleased either.

She knew why Draco was suddenly a conundrum. They had sex with no potion and it had been...well... *better* .

She had shagged the real Draco Malfoy and liked it. Not some lovesick, addled version. Actually the *real Draco Malfoy* .

This meant she finally needed to admit to herself the sad truth: there was no doubt in her mind that she fancied Draco (a very minor fancy, but a fancy nonetheless) and she had no

clue how to handle this new development.

People had continued to pester her for a Halloween date and Hermione found her rejections were increasingly curt.

She was annoyed. Some of those people were attractive and friendly. Jimmy Peakes had grown into some Quidditch muscle and was surprisingly easy to talk to. Justin Finch-Fletchey had nice eyes and a calm appeal.

But she said no to all of them. She knew she had every right to accept who she wanted. Draco never gave her the impression that he wanted to bar any future love interests (quite the opposite in fact.)

But every time someone stood in front of her, she had flashes of Draco, naked, looking down at her as he thrust inside her. She would blush furiously and mutter apologies and decline offers and be annoyed with her feelings and that was that.

The only thing keeping her sane through all this was Ginny's jokes and gentle encouragement.

Hermione anticipated her meeting with Draco that night. Maybe they would be able to clear some of this up.

Or not.

As Hermione made her way to her afternoon class amongst the throng of students, she felt a hard shoulder collide with her.

She spun and Draco was suddenly whispering quickly into her ear

"Sorry, can't do tonight."

And he was gone. The interaction had barely lasted a second. To anyone watching, Draco Malfoy had innocently clipped Hermione Granger's shoulder.

Something seemed to drop in her stomach.

He had been deliberate. Catching her off guard. In a busy, public area where she wouldn't be able to demand an explanation and he could make a swift escape.

But *why* ?

Why cut things off so abruptly?

Her walking slowed. Students bustled her forward.

She still had ten minutes until Arithmancy started.

She made a split second decision. Spinning around, she tore in the opposite direction of her class, dodging the waves of students walking towards her.

Blast him. How dare he. How *dare* he cancel on her last minute like this, when she had been looking forward to seeing him all week. How dare he shrug her off like that, especially when she was wrestling with the idea of actually having some sort of *feelings* for him.

You know what? He wants to cancel? *Fine* .

He would at least do her the courtesy of giving her a reason. How *dare* he think he could just waltz by and blindside her like that!

People were staring at her as she rushed by. She knew she must look wild-eyed, flyaway hairs coming loose from her plait. Her cheeks were probably a little pink from the exertion.

She turned a corner.

The back of a familiar blond head was striding in front of her.

"Hey!" She shouted.

He turned. His eyes widened a fraction as he saw her.

A staircase up ahead rumbled, a sign that it was about to move to a different floor. Draco stepped on. The staircase detached from the floor, turning slowly. Draco gave her one last look (was there regret there?) before turning away.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

Hermione pointed her wand at her shoes and they blasted her into the air, before landing her on the staircase with a small stumble.

Draco spun around, stunned.

"Tell me why," Hermione demanded. She must look disheveled, but she didn't care. This was probably the last time she would talk to Malfoy anyway.

Malfoy regarded her like she had just sprouted wings and a beak. Finally he schooled his expression back to neutral. It was always so satisfying to catch him off guard.

"I figure it would be better this way. With the Halloween Ball coming up and all."

Hermione crossed her arms.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Malfoy scoffed.

"Please, Granger. Aren't you going with Macmillan?"

"I declined his offer."

Malfoy's posture seemed to relax slightly, before stiffening again.

"Don't you have another five dozen offers?"

He glanced up the staircase. It was still in motion, swirling upwards, taking them further and further away from their classes.

"For your information, I've said no to all of them! Besides, what do you care, haven't you been cosy up with Astoria Greengrass?"

Malfoy looked like he had just broken a tooth on a rock cake.

"I'm not interested in her."

"You seemed awfully interested at breakfast."

"I...it's complicated all right? Her parents have an arrangement with my mother. Unfortunately for them, I have no interest nor any obligation in upholding it."

"So you're... *betrothed*?"

Malfoy sighed and sagged against the railing.

"Not exactly. Pureblood families often demand pureblood marriages and arrangement is the most straightforward. There are exceptions however. Besides, I'm not really...partial to pureblood customs anymore."

"I see."

The staircase finally came to a stop, eight floors higher.

Neither Hermione nor Malfoy moved.

"So...just to be clear. You wanted to cancel because you thought I was going to the Ball with Ernie Macmillan??"

She could see Draco's jaw clench.

"I mean, it sounds incredibly presumptuous and ignorant of me when you say it like that but, in a nutshell, yes."

"I can't believe you! Why not just...I dunno, *ask* me instead of cancelling in a drive-by? Don't you think that was preposterously insensitive?"

"I thought I was ripping off the band aid! Listen, Granger, what we have it's...it's temporary. It's only a matter of time before someone comes along who you'll actually like, if it hasn't already happened amongst the dozens of people prostrating themselves at your feet. It's better for both of us that we stop things here."

"Is that what you really want?"

Malfoy evaded her question, "We're not on Amor Videri anymore, which means you're free to find yourself someone else, someone better. What we had was fun while it lasted, all right? But we're past that now. When we shagged without any potion, we basically confirmed it. So go off, find yourself a nice little date for the Ball and, as per our agreement, we'll pretend like none of this ever happened."

" *You* were the one who wanted to shag without the potion!"

"I know that! And good thing too, because now you don't need me, so we can go our separate ways before-"

Malfoy stuttered to a halt mid-sentence.

Hermione put her hands on her hips.

"Before what?" She demanded.

He glared at her.

"Before *what* , Malfoy?"

"Before- before we catch feelings."

Hermione's vision was blurring.

Please, don't cry over this . She did *not* want to cry over Draco bloody *Malfoy* .

"What if it's too late for that?" Hermione said quietly. Malfoy's face morphed from angry to confused. He seemed lost.

"You can't...you couldn't..."

"Oh, well pardon me! Let me just turn my feelings off, shall I?" Hermione answered shrilly, "You don't get to decide how I feel about you! I know it's all wrong to like you, I mean you're *you* ! No offence! But what I do know is that I feel good with you and I want to *keep* feeling good with you. Instead of trying to tell me what I want, maybe you should start thinking about what you want!"

She could see a muscle working in Malfoy's jaw.

"What do *you* want?" Hermione snapped.

He looked like he was thinking hard. His grey eyes roved over her face. Her patience was waning.

Hermione was about to repeat her question.

Then, he grabbed her wrist and yanked her up the stairs, into the shadow of a large column. Before she could protest, his mouth was on hers, his body crushing her against the pillar.

She whimpered and shoved her tongue into his mouth and the fires were lit. They kissed, fierce and messy. She was still angry at him, and it made her movements clumsy and rough. Her hands gripped his shirt and yanked him to her. He possessively wrapped his arms around her waist. She sunk her teeth into his lip and tugged hard, eliciting a loud groan from him. He

pulled her deeper into the shadows, away from prying eyes, though the corridors were blessedly empty.

"I want you," Draco panted against her mouth. She whimpered and yanked him in for another torrid round of wet kisses.

"Then stop pushing me away, you idiot," Hermione gasped, as Draco dipped down to kiss her neck.

"I know, I just-" Draco looked away from her, but not before she caught the pained look in his eyes. "You heard Zabini. My name is tarnished. I'll be atoning for everything I've done for...maybe the rest of my life. You deserve more than that. I wanted to end things now while I still could. I knew if we'd go on the way we were, it would only get harder to...to let you go."

Hermione wrapped her arms possessively around Draco's neck.

"I don't want you to let me go."

His lips hungered after hers. Words spilled from him frenetically, interrupted by new kisses bursting against her mouth.

"I must admit-" kiss "The idea of that dolt Macmillian-" kiss "Taking you out and trying things with you-" yet another kiss "Was making my blood boil."

"He's not a *dolt*," Hermione protested, though it lacked a bit of force given how breathless she was. "Every time someone asked me out all I could think of was how I wanted to- to be with you."

Draco looked down at her. He had a curious expression conflicted between pain and relief.

"Hermione...I don't want to make your life difficult. If you're seen with me, people won't be pleasant about it."

"Then let's keep this a secret. We barely really know each other after all. I want to see where this goes with you, whatever this is. I really think we ought to give it a chance. Maybe... maybe it'll fizzle out. But what if it doesn't?"

Draco was gripping her arms. She could feel him trembling a little. She was trembling too.

"Both of those prospects are terrifying, aren't they?" Draco asked, with a small smile. She smiled back, understanding completely.

Suddenly, Hermione let out a little scream that made Draco jump.

"Oh my goodness! *Class* ! I completely forgot! We are so *late* !"

"Skip with me."

Draco said it so casually that Hermione's indignation took a moment to seep in.

"Sk- *Are you insane* ? It's N.E.W.T year! Skipping one class can put you hours behind! Plus we were supposed to cover the magical properties of integral calculus today!"

She was even more annoyed at the amused look on Draco's face. Did he think this *funny* ?

"Hermione, we've already missed about half anyway. Besides, don't tell me you've never skipped before?"

"I- What- You mean on purpose? Of *course* not! Why would I? Have *you* ?"

"You do know most people our age have skipped at least once. Didn't you help engineer an entire army under Umbridge's nose? Yet you're telling me you haven't done the basics of rule-bending such as skiving off a mere lesson?"

"But...but what do you *do* ?"

Draco shrugged.

"Hang out in the commons mostly. Go for a fly out of bounds. Smoke herbs and throw rocks in the lake and scarper when anyone comes. It's all very thrilling and naughty."

Hermione was perturbed. It did sound sort of thrilling. And she *had* already missed half the class. On the other hand, there was still half a class left that she was itching to get to. Draco still had that maddening half-smile, like one you would favour an adorable child.

A soft meow interrupted her thoughts.

"Shit," Draco muttered.

Mrs. Norris skulked around a corner, beadily eyeing the pair of them.

"We need to go. We have about five minutes until Filch rears his ugly neck," Draco murmured, glaring at the cat.

Mrs. Norris meowed again, harsher this time.

Draco looked at Hermione. Her breath caught in her throat.

"What'll it be, Granger? Will you be a delinquent or a goody-two-shoes? You know, the Room isn't far from here. But if you want to go to class..."

They could hear the faint sound of footsteps.

Hermione grabbed Draco's hand and made the split-second decision to follow her heart.

She ran in the opposite direction of Mrs. Norris, careening down the hall with Draco at her heels.

They weren't exactly stealthy.

She skidded round a corner, almost losing her footing. Draco almost crashed into her.

She could hear Filch and Mrs. Norris having a quick discussion of words and meows. Then the pattering of feet.

"Don't stop running! Almost there!" Draco urged, picking up speed.

She pelted after him. Her braid was coming undone. She was sweating. He kept looking back to make sure she was close behind.

They bounded round a corner and clattered down a flight of stairs.

Filch was old and knobbly but Hermione could swear she could hear him tearing after them.

Finally, they clamoured past the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. He and the Trolls all jumped in surprise, one of the Trolls falling out of a plié.

Hermione picked the first room that came to mind, and hurriedly sprinted three times back and forth along the wall.

A plain door materialised, and Draco yanked it open, ushering Hermione in.

As Draco slammed the door shut behind them, Hermione could hear Filch cursing in the distance.

Hermione collapsed against Draco and they slid down the wall, both breathing hard.

"Good...gracious, that was...close!" Hermione gasped, clutching a stitch in her side.

"Not bad for someone who's never cut class," Draco smirked, his head resting against the door. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. For some reason, this detail made Hermione's skin heat up.

"I can't believe it...what a rush! We're...we're actually skipping class! Oh my god....oh my *god* !" Hermione let out a bubble of laughter.

"Fun isn't it? And we haven't even thrown rocks into the lake yet."

With the adrenaline still pulsing through her veins, and the sudden relief of being safe, she felt on top of the world. She looked at Draco. He was grinning. He had never looked more attractive. She was suddenly, incredibly turned on.

She straddled Draco on the floor and his hands magnetically wrapped her waist.

She kissed him, ground down on him. His erection pulsed. She coaxed it to life with her hips. Her knickers were dampening by the second. Their breaths were noisy.

"Can I just say you look...so good. With your hair like that. It's painfully attractive."

Hermione giggled, her lips roving over Draco's.

"Stop, you can't be serious, I must look a mess! I'm heaving like a water buffalo from all that running..."

"Sexiest water buffalo I've ever seen."

Hermione gasped and laughed as Draco thrust his hips upward, showing her the proof of his arousal. Her laugh turned to a moan.

"I need you *now* ," she whispered urgently against his mouth. He didn't need telling twice.

They clambered onto the single bed the Room had supplied and tore each other's clothes off in a clumsy frenzy.

Draco parted Hermione's thighs and slathered his tongue over her parts until she screamed his name.

When he sheathed himself inside her, she saw stars. Her orgasm felt particularly sweet today. Who knew rule breaking could be so erotic?

When he came inside her, she wrapped her legs tightly around him, hugging him to her body. He collapsed on top of her. They basked.

With a good shag out of their system, they could finally take in their surroundings.

"Where are we?" Draco asked, looking around curiously.

Hermione smiled a little sheepish.

"It was the first place I thought of on such short notice. It's erm...my bedroom at my parents place."

"Hermione Granger's bedroom," Draco said slowly, looking around. "That explains a lot," he added sardonically, sweeping his gaze over the many bookshelves crammed into the small space and the piles of forgotten parchment, littering almost every tabletop space. He finished his appraisal of her quarters by glaring at the mysterious device on her bedside table, which incidentally was her alarm clock radio. Hermione tried not to laugh.

It was rather absurd, having Draco Malfoy in her room.

"Would you like a tour?"

He looked at her with a funny expression on his face and then nodded.

They peeled themselves off each other and Hermione showed him around the small space.

"That's the closet with the laundry hamper. That's my clarinet from sixth grade - my parents insisted I learn it. This is my desk where I did homework and mostly wrote for the school newspaper when I was young. Funny thing, a newspaper written by nine-year-olds. I wrote a particularly astute piece on the drawbacks of velcro on sneakers. Oh sorry, velcro is like a sticky material to tie things. It's difficult to explain. And these are my books!"

"What on earth is *that* ?"

Draco pointed at the object, looking horrified.

"Ah, that would be a lamp. For light. See the cord here? You pull it and that little bulb lights up. It probably won't work here, since electronics don't work at Hogwarts. Ah yes, see it stays off."

Draco still eyed the lamp with mistrust. Hermione smiled with bewilderment. Draco Malfoy was naked in her room, asking questions about lamps.

"You know it's incredibly rare to use any kind of fire for light in the Muggle world. Torches are considered archaic. Everything is run by electricity."

Draco looked unconvinced.

"I don't recognize any of these titles," Draco remarked, now inspecting her thorough book collection.

"They're all Muggle books, so I would be surprised if you did," she tried to keep any judgement out of her voice but a little seeped in. She could tell he could sense it. *Of course he had never read any muggle books when he used to think they were scum* .

"I'm impressed. Organising these alphabetically must've taken hours."

"Thank you, it did," Hermione answered fondly. As if trying to prove his Muggle-hating days were behind him, Draco inspected the covers more carefully.

"What's this? *The Wizard of Oz* ? Muggles write about wizards?"

Draco pulled the book from the shelf. Hermione smiled.

"This is one of my favourites. Actually one of the reasons I was so giddy when I received my Hogwarts letter and realised I would be able to practise magic. It's about a Muggle girl named Dorothy who is trapped in another world. She needs to go to Oz to find this wizard so he can send her back home."

Draco flipped the book over and examined the back cover.

"Who is this old green woman? Is that Dorothy?"

Hermione snorted.

"No, that's the Wicked Witch of the West. She looks like what Muggles typically imagine witches to look like. Pointy hats, black robes, green skin and a broom. Also water is her one great weakness."

Draco quirked an eyebrow.

"Must've been a smelly old bat. So does this Wizard Floo Dorothy home?"

Hermione laughed.

"Not quite. It turns out he's a fraud and Dorothy had the power within her all along. It's a wonderful story. I'd lend it to you, but I don't know if the Room allows us to take possessions it creates outside."

"Maybe Dorothy is like you. Born to Muggles but has magic in her blood."

Hermione felt a wave of emotion wash over her.

"You know, I never thought of it that way. Perhaps you're right."

There was a moment where they looked at each other. Draco acknowledging the magic in her blood made her feel more than she thought it would. Obviously she had known he'd changed his beliefs regarding pureblood indoctrination. But there he was, standing there gloriously naked and holding her favourite book and talking about how magical she was. She barely recognized him from the person he used to be.

He placed the book back on the shelf. He asked about others. Hermione dove into lengthy explanations, happy to ignore the bubbling feelings for Draco. Feelings she feared were becoming far more than just 'liking' Draco.

She gave him summaries on Dickens, Shakespear and C.S. Lewis. She showed him classics like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Alice in Wonderland* and her compendium of Grimm Fairy Tales. She had a go at explaining science-fiction, which took awhile ("Listen, I know it sounds mad, but the protagonist wears a bathrobe and traverses interstellar space and- *would you stop guffawing, I'm serious!* ").

Draco drank it all in with genuine interest and asked thoughtful questions, which Hermione answered with increasing enthusiasm. He finally shook his head.

"I'll be honest, I'd always imagined Muggle literature to be rather drab. But there's definitely a fixation on the magical and fantastic. Odd, isn't it? They have no magical abilities yet they're capable of imagining so much, and a lot of it is surprisingly close to the real thing."

"Isn't that the point of art, though? Reimagining the boundaries and taking things to a place that real life couldn't? Muggles aren't daft, they're as intelligent as wizards. They've simply evolved differently. A lot of Muggle technology fulfils the same needs that magic does. In some ways, Muggles are more advanced. It's true!" Hermione exclaimed as Draco made a disbelieving sound.

"So many wizards act like Muggles are some sort of...of pet! Or zoo animals to be goggled at. Even wizards with the best of intentions! But until you walk around in the Muggle world, you can never truly begin to understand how similar we really are. There is so much that the wizarding world could learn from the Muggle one, if they'd just stop lording over it and actually take a closer look. One of these days, I'll take you to a Muggle Museum and mark

my words, you'll be blown away by the things that Muggles have invented and accomplished!"

Hermione was so busy venting that she didn't notice how intently he was watching her.

"I'd like that very much."

He said it so quietly. But she stilled at his words. She then saw it. His determination. His fervour. She realised the weight of what she'd proposed and what he'd agreed to. An outing, just the two of them, so that Draco could learn about her other world. Why was it suddenly so hard to breathe?

Draco cleared his throat, sparing them both from the awkwardness.

"What about this big thing?" He asked, pulling out a huge hardcover from the bottom shelf.

"Oh! Um...That's my family picture album. Vacation photos and...oh no!"

She gasped in horror as Draco opened the book to a photo of two-year-old Hermione in the bath, having a full-blown tantrum while her father grinned cheerfully at the camera holding a rubber duck.

Draco laughed.

"Cute."

"Godrick... You don't want to see those.

"Oh, I can assure you, I very much *do* ."

Draco gleefully sat on the bed with the album and patted the mattress next to him, grinning.

Hermione sighed, resigned, and slid next to him, scooching close. The heat of their bodies felt good.

They looked through the album, page by page, and Hermione narrated the events. Draco looked through the photos carefully, turning the pages with care.

"What in Salazar's name is *this* ?"

"That was taken at an amusement park. Those are roller coasters. They let you ride high up in the sky. Don't you have those?"

"Er no, we have *brooms* , Hermione. This looks mad. How does it work?"

"It's like a compartment you get into with ten other people and it whizzes you around, sometimes in loops. It's fun, I promise!"

"So it's basically a train with tracks in the air that takes you nowhere?"

"It's *fun* ," Hermione repeated emphatically. "Besides, you don't *just* do that. You get ice cream and cotton candy, and play carnival games to win giant teddies and there are bumper cars and shows and all sorts. It's a full day event."

Draco was silent for a moment, looking at a particular photo of Hermione and her mother, their faces painted with flowers and smiling with some person dressed as a giant cartoon gopher with a cap.

"You look like her."

Hermione smiled sadly. She missed her parents. Missed the old days.

"Yes, people have always said that. I have a lot of her facial features and complexion. You can't really tell since my dad is balding, but apparently I inherited his bushy hair and teeth."

Draco turned the page to a photo of her father eating an ice cream with a pair of outlandish park sunglasses that would no doubt make Luna envious.

"His teeth are quite...large, no?"

Hermione laughed.

"Yes, they are. I used to have teeth like that back in first year, but I shrunk them down because I was really self-conscious about them."

"I think I- yeah, I vaguely remember. I..."

Draco suddenly fell silent. Hermione could hazard a guess as to why.

"It's okay, I know a lot of people made fun of it. A lot of Slytherin girls in particular. But that was so long ago and we were so young."

"I'm...I'm sorry."

"I know," Hermione answered softly.

Draco closed the photo album.

"I wonder...if..."

She waited for him to compose his thoughts.

"Seeing this album," he began again, "And your room and- and everything. I wonder if I'd been open to knowing someone like you earlier, maybe I could've saved myself from so many mistakes. I look at these photos of you and it's clear you and your family are nothing at all like what I've been taught Muggles are supposed to be. Aside from the fact that the pictures don't move, this could be any wizarding photo album. You grow up, visit places, go to school, read books. I don't know how...How could we have believed Muggles were so beneath wizardkind for so long? It's..."

Draco clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white.

"I feel like I've been lied to. By my parents. Our society. The Dark Lord, everyone. It was never about Muggles. It was about power. How pathetic."

She hated seeing him in so much pain. At the same time, she knew this pain would make him a better person. This, if anything, made her realise she could forgive him. Not for everything, but for a little bit more. Slowly the gap between them was closing. She wondered what would happen if their two ends met.

She tossed the album on the floor and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She felt him relax against her. She pulled him down with her and they lay, intertwined. They talked and it was easy. Time flew by.

Before Hermione knew it, night had fallen and it was time to go.

Draco asked if she wanted to spend the night and, with great reluctance, Hermione declined. She was meeting Ginny the following day in Hogsmeade after all, and Ginny was already suspicious.

They said their goodbyes and kissed for longer than necessary.

She tried not to think about how important he was becoming to her. It was difficult.

Interrogation

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Wrecking Ball by Midnite String Quartet

"What's gotten you in such a good mood?"

"Hmm? Oh, just happy to be out with such nice weather."

Hermione and Ginny were sauntering through the streets of Hogsmeade on a chilly October afternoon. The trees were colorful, the skies were blue and Hermione was trying not to think about her night with Draco while with Ginny.

They admired store displays and Ginny shared the latest news with Hermione.

"So Neville and Hannah are going to the Ball together as an official couple, though they've pretty much been joined at the hip all week. Luna also told me that she's taking Tracey Davis! They honestly look sickeningly cute together and I'm a little upset I didn't see this one coming."

"Ooh, Luna told me she was going to ask her, so really glad it all worked out! Speaking of which, Luna gave me some sound advice the other day."

"Oh?" Ginny asked, turning away from a display of wizarding robes that were charmed to bang on the windows when people passed by.

"She told me I might be happier if I asked someone to the Ball instead of waiting around. So Ginny, would you do me the honor of going to the Halloween Ball with me?"

Ginny made a show of swooning dramatically, her hand on her forehead.

"Why Hermione, darling! I thought you'd never ask! I'd be *simply* delighted!"

Hermione grinned and looped her arm with Ginny's. She could think of no other person she'd rather go with. She was still discovering whatever she had with Draco, and until she knew where it was going, she had no desire to pursue anyone else. That said, she also enjoyed the privacy of their tryst and didn't fancy the idea of causing a scandal by publicly asking him as a date. She'd decided a friendship date was just the thing she needed.

"I must say, I'm a little surprised. With the amount of invites you received, I thought at least someone would tickle your fancy. I hope you didn't say no to Dean because I went out with him. Dean and I are ancient history and I think you'd both actually be cute together."

Hermione shook her head.

"Thanks Gin, but I think I just haven't felt any chemistry with anyone who's asked me. Besides, I'm looking forward to going with you and just having a relaxed time with no stress."

"I hope Ron didn't kill your romantic side. He's a bit of a dolt sometimes."

"No, no, don't worry. We truly did end things amicably. To be honest, I haven't thought of Ron much-"

You've been too busy shagging Draco.

"-Since the start of term. It's been a bit of an intense year."

Ginny smiled understandingly.

"I know what you mean. It's surreal to be back, isn't it? Just going about our daily lives as if the war didn't happen. Harry's been asking about you, you know. Sends me weekly owls to catch up. He misses you. They both do."

Hermione gave Ginny's arm an affectionate squeeze. Ginny grinned.

"You really do seem better lately. I was worried about you for a while, you were so absorbed by homework, like more than usual that is, and you always looked kind of down. But you seem to have your old cheer back and I'm glad to see it. Whatever you've been doing, keep doing it, because it's good to see you out and about looking happier."

I've been doing Draco Malfoy .

Hermione blushed at the intrusive thought. She was grateful her cheeks must've already been pink from the cold.

The two girls made the rounds of the stores, waving at other students as they passed.

Ginny found a costume shop in the heart of town and they browsed around.

Wizards didn't typically dress up for Halloween, but with so many Muggle-borns and Half Bloods discussing it in the halls, the trend seemed to catch on quick.

Ginny found a pair of flapping rabbit ears and decided to go as Babbity Rabbity, an old children's book favourite. Hermione didn't find anything that piqued her interest.

"Maybe I'll transfigure some branches onto a jumper and charm them to wave around to look like the Whomping Willow," she joked. Ginny snorted with laughter.

It was only at the end of their trip that Hermione saw them in the window of a clothing shop.

"Red shoes?" Ginny asked as Hermione paid for her purchase at the cash register. "I don't get it, are you going as some kind of femme fatale?"

"Not quite. It's a character from one of my favourite Muggle stories. You inspired me with Babbity."

They shared a Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks with Neville, Hannah and Hannah's Hufflepuff friends which included Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley.

She noticed Ernie seemed particularly animated. He kept interrupting Justin in order to rant about their latest potion assignment, though Hermione was happy to sip her drink and join in.

She felt a small pang as she glanced at Neville, cuddling up to Hannah. How wonderful it must be, to canoodle out in the open with the person you liked.

The evening came to an end too quickly. Happy and full from sweets and drink, Hermione strolled with Ginny back up to the castle. It had been an incredible day. Ginny was right. Hermione felt more content than she had in a long time.

"What're you up to this evening?" Ginny asked, trotting along while sucking on a Sugar Quill.

"Not too much. Some light reading. Ooh, and I have to go over some notes Susan Bones lent me for the Arithmancy class that I missed. I have so much to catch up on."

"Wait, you missed a class? *You* ? And isn't Arithmancy your favourite?"

Hermione froze. She hadn't meant to let that detail slip. But she felt so nice, the air was fresh and she was drowsy from the food and Butterbeer. She had let her guard down. She desperately grasped around for any excuse.

"I, er, wasn't feeling too well. Ate something strange I think."

She shrivelled under Ginny's accusing stare.

"You seemed fine to me that morning. And you seem more than fine today."

"I think I must've slept it off," Hermione answered in a small voice.

"Indeed," Ginny said hollowly, "So why were you missing from the dorms in the evening if you felt ill?"

"I...I needed some air. Went for a walk. Good for circulation."

Hermione laughed nervously and instantly regretted it. That, more than anything, seemed to tip Ginny off that something wasn't adding up.

Ginny sighed in frustration.

"Hermione, look I wasn't born yesterday. If you have secret things you need to take care of, fine. But please don't lie to me. I'm not an idiot. Or if you're going to lie, at least come up with something either convincing or entertaining. Because otherwise, I feel like you're just insulting my intelligence."

Hermione wrung her hands, immediately apologetic.

"I'm sorry Ginny, I really am. I wish I could tell you but I need to figure some things out first and-"

Ginny held up her hand.

"That's all I needed to hear. But until you tell me what it is, I *will* imagine the most salacious scenario and that scenario is that you're snogging someone controversial in secret. Is it Aberforth? Sir Cadogan? The Giant Squid? Only time will tell."

"Ginny that is *outlandish* !"

"Yes. Most entertainingly so. And *don't* think you're off the hook for lying to me."

Hermione nodded solemnly, thanking her lucky stars that Ginny hadn't named the most controversial of all.

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Everyone had really outdone themselves for the Halloween Ball.

The Great Hall was lit by the flickering of thousands of Jack-O-Lanterns floating above their heads. Enormous pumpkins decorated the corners of the Hall, no doubt provided by Hagrid. The House tables had all vanished save for one, which had been generously laden with all the sweets you could imagine. The rest of the space was for dancing.

The Weird Sisters were playing once more, regulars to Hogwarts at this point. They seemed right at home in the spooky ambiance. Students were gathering about, admiring each others' costumes and outfits.

Hermione was impressed. It was the first time she'd witnessed a true wizarding Halloween celebration.

A lot of people dressed as various wizarding celebrities from Chocolate frog cards. Others chose variations of their House animals. Hermione spotted a group of Badgers trading lollies.

Others simply wore their best dress robes in colors of black, orange, green and other fall colors.

Ginny looked both hilarious and splendid in a white leotard, sporting her waggling bunny ears and googly-eyed spectacles that blinked of their own accord.

It had taken Ginny most of the week to forgive Hermione for having a secret activity, but it seemed that the excitement of a party finally wore Ginny down. She greeted Hermione by barrelling into her and enthusiastically demanding Hermione show off her costume with a twirl.

Hermione had managed to transfigure one of her robes and charm the color to look like Dorothy's blue checkered dress. She'd also managed to find a glitter charm to add to the red shoes, giving them an otherworldly sparkle. Her hair was tamed into two braids.

As the girls swept through the crowd, they were soon joined by Dean, Neville, Hannah, Seamus, Padma and Cho.

"Good turnout, innit?" Seamus said conversationally. He looked impressive, wearing a steampunk top hat and vest. Dean had a similar ensemble, though he wore goggles instead.

Luna soon joined them, holding a shy-looking Tracey Davis by the hand. They both looked lovely, dressed as faerie-like creatures with fluttering butterflies in their hair and draped toga dresses. Hermione thought Luna looked more serene than usual.

"Let's go get drinks!" Ginny grasped Hermione by the arm and steered her to the food table. There were goblets of punch lined up on the far side. Hermione took one and another goblet appeared in the empty spot with a pop. The House Elves were working far too hard, Hermione thought bitterly.

There were so many people crowding around that it took them a good minute to rejoin their friends. Hermione felt a couple of people knock into her arm, almost spilling her drink.

When they returned, Luna and Tracey had taken to the dance floor, with many others. Dean and Seamus were asking Padma about Parvati, who had chosen to take a fashion internship in lieu of redoing her last Hogwarts year. Hermione couldn't blame Parvati for not wanting to come back. Her best friend had been killed here and that memory would haunt her forever. If Parvati found something that empasionned her, all the more reason not to return to Hogwarts and be constantly reminded of Lavender.

"How've you been, Hermione?" Cho asked, catching Hermione a little off guard. Cho had been rather frosty with her since fifth year.

"Oh, you know, trundling along. And you?"

"Oh, same. I heard you and Ron broke up this summer. I'm sorry to hear that."

Hermione was irritated. How was it that everyone seemed to know her business? The number of times people brought up her break up with Ron was fatiguing.

Ginny rolled her eyes, apparently also annoyed and not bothering to hide it. Cho didn't seem to notice.

"It's fine, we're still best friends. We just weren't right for each other." Hermione answered robotically, the same answer she gave everyone else.

"What about Harry? How has he been?"

"He's been good, I think. Busy."

"I heard he's working as an Auror now. That's awfully brave of him to start so young."

Before Hermione could answer, Ginny cut in.

"The youngest Auror ever recorded, in fact. I'm *quite* proud of him."

Cho stiffened.

"So you're still dating him. How...nice."

"Yes, things are going *swimmingly* ."

"Glad to hear it," Cho answered coolly, "I suppose the long-distance must be difficult."

"The long-distance is difficult, true, thanks for your concern. Harry and I *more* than make up for it over the holidays though," Ginny said, giving Cho a leer and a wink, "Hermione, I'm dying to dance, shall we?"

"I'd love to. Could you hold these Cho?"

Hermione and Ginny promptly shoved their goblets into Cho's hands and whisked off to the dance floor.

" ' *I suppose the long-distance must be difficult.* ' Can you *believe* her? She seems to know an awful lot about Harry for someone who hasn't spoken to two words to him since they dated. Nosy little gnat."

"She might be upset that she let the Chosen One slip through her fingers. I don't think she ever really took the time to get to know him properly. Although he didn't treat her all that well either. You're lucky you got Harry later in life. He's a perfect gentleman now and has way more tact."

Ginny grinned.

"That's my man!" She said fondly, and took Hermione's hand, giving her a spin.

Hermione caught a glance of a hooded figure skulking near the entrance of the Great Hall. She barely caught the flash of platinum blonde hair under the hood.

Her heart stopped.

Draco.

Hermione stumbled a little, coming out of the spin.

"Ooh, careful twinkle toes."

"Ginny, I need the bathroom. I'll catch up with you in a bit?"

"You got it!"

Ginny twirled off, and was quickly swallowed by a throng of rowdy Gryffindors who roared with glee at her appearance. Hermione shook her head fondly. She didn't think she knew anyone who was liked as fiercely as Ginny was by her housemates.

She headed toward Draco, who straightened a little when he saw her.

"And what are you supposed to be disguised as? Some kind of mysterious stranger? You look ready to sell me a counterfeit pocket watch."

"Good, I was going for broody and unapproachable. I didn't feel like socialising much but Nott convinced me to at least come get a look at the festivities. He's off raiding the dessert table. You make a really charming Dorothy."

Hermione blushed.

"Thank you. I'm impressed you remembered. You make an excellent crook of the shadows."

Draco inclined his head and she saw the hint of a smirk.

"I missed you," he said softly and her stomach fluttered.

"I'm glad you showed up tonight. I wasn't sure if you would," she answered shyly.

"It's very difficult not to kiss you right now."

Hermione felt like her face was on fire. Why did all the words he utter make her want to rip his clothes off?

"Then kiss me."

"Not here. Talking to you is already risky."

"Then take me somewhere and kiss me all you want."

Draco took a step towards Hermione. She could see a glint in his eye. He looked like a wolf about to pounce. She felt her whole body react. Her stomach clenched. Her womanhood throbbed, her head felt light.

"Draco, is that you? Pardon for interrupting, I..."

Hermione whirled around and was face to face with a timid-looking person with long, dark brown hair and bright blue eyes. Astoria looked entirely too splendid in a beaded ball gown with generously puffy skirts.

Astoria's brow furrowed.

"I...sorry, I would like to speak with Draco."

She side-stepped Hermione without another word to her.

"I was wondering if you'd like to dance with me, Draco?"

Astoria was clearly not as timid as she looked.

Draco frowned.

"I'm sorry, but no."

"Draco, please. It would mean so much to me, just one dance."

"My answer won't change. Let it go, Astoria."

"Why must you be so difficult about this?"

"I've said no plenty of times. You're making things difficult by persisting."

"It's just one dance!" Astoria stomped her foot in frustration, losing a bit of her composure.

"We both know that's not true. Do yourself a favour, Astoria, and pick someone that you want, not who your parents want."

"I very much would like to pick you. You haven't even given me a chance. I could make you so happy, if you'd just let me try."

Draco looked disgusted.

"You interrupted my discussion with Granger. Please, I am asking you politely to *leave* ."

Astoria turned, finally paying attention to Hermione. She looked at Hermione with the kind of disgust one would give to a giant bogey.

"And what possible business could you have with *her* ?"

"I was rudely insulting her garish shoes and she was casting snide remarks at my lack of costume."

"Draco, is this a joke to you? Do my affections mean so little to you that you'd rather talk to *her* ?"

Draco sighed. Hermione could see Astoria's eyes start to look dangerously shiny.

Hermione decided she'd heard enough and should exit before getting dragged into this discussion further (and before she made any petty remarks towards Astoria that she would

regret later).

As she tried to back away, she collided with something that yelled "Oi!"

She spun and there stood Theo Nott, his arms laden with pumpkin pasties.

"Well, well. What an unlikely bunch I've stumbled into. Greengrass. Granger."

Nott inclined his head to each, his gaze resting on Hermione with a small, crooked smile.

Astoria gave Theo one look, before glancing back at Draco and bursting into tears. She fled the Great Hall.

"Still breaking hearts, I see," Nott observed casually, watching as Astoria's skirts whipped out of sight. "Anyway, I think I've managed to find every last pasty. The punch is also disappointingly non-alcoholic. Shall we go back to the commons and gorge ourselves on my bounty? Unless you want to stay, that is..."

Nott's eyes settled back onto Hermione. She swallowed. Did Draco tell him about her? Draco looked a little tense but his face gave nothing away.

"Might as well stay a little longer, since we're here." Draco answered curtly.

Hermione's heart pitter-pattered away in her chest.

Nott gave Draco, then Hermione a knowing look and then smirked.

"Very well. I suppose I'll send these upstairs for later. Assuming you'll be returning to the dorms tonight."

Nott gave Draco a wink, drew his wand and vanished the pasties before slipping back into the throng of dancers.

Hermione finally found her voice and rounded on Draco.

" *What did you tell him ?* I thought we agreed not to speak about us to anyone!"

Draco held up his hands in defense.

"I didn't tell him anything! He's...been suspicious for a while now. I've been trying to dissuade him of anything but he's...he's been *guessing*."

"Guessing?? What does that mean?"

"Well, er...He's noticed that I've been- been out of it a lot lately. And he may have remarked a few times that I've been looking over at someone during mealtimes."

Hermione tried not to let that mollify her, though the thought of him secretly eyeing her did give her a pleasant jolt.

"I think when he saw you here with Astoria, he might've...jumped to conclusions," Draco finished sheepishly.

"Oh Godric...so what does this mean? Do you think he'll tell anyone?"

"I doubt it. He's not much of a gossip. Unless something's in it for him"

"Great, just great! We have blackmail by Theodore Nott to look forward to! Didn't you learn Occlumency? Aren't you supposed to be good at lying?"

"Listen, I didn't think I needed to hide from Nott," Draco hissed, looking around to make sure no one was in their vicinity. "He's surprisingly more perceptive than I thought. Probably pretends to be daft on purpose, the dunghole. Plus, I was absent from the common room most of the time in sixth year so I figured Nott wouldn't notice if I went missing one more time that night we spent together. Wait a second, how do you even know I studied Occlumency?"

"Er...Harry told me."

"How in the hell does *he*- "

A loud cry interrupted Draco.

Both turned to see a group of students milling about, forming a circle on the dance floor. Loud voices could be heard coming from the center.

Hermione glanced at Draco and headed over, curious about what could be causing such a commotion.

Hermione pushed through the crowd until she could make out a puzzling sight indeed.

Cho seemed to be wrestling the arm of a bewildered Neville, while Hannah looked at the pair of them in horror.

"Cho- what- has- gotten into you?" Neville grunted, trying to pull back his arm.

"Please, Neville. I love you! Be with me!"

"Cho, I can't be with you I-"

Despite Neville's efforts to pry Cho off, she hung on tight.

"Would you leave him alone?" Hannah wailed, finally throwing herself at Cho and trying to push her away. People began to egg them on. Hermione couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"I can't live without you, Neville! I'll die if you don't love me back! You're wonderful, so wonderful! No one will ever compare!" Cho screeched, easily batting Hannah's frail frame away.

Then, Hermione noticed it. The glassy look in Cho's eyes. The endless string of empty compliments. The flush in her cheeks.

Hermione recognized the sign of a strong love potion right away, having lived it enough times herself.

Hermione shoved her way through the crowd until she joined the group in the center.

Neville looked at her, wild eyed.

"Something's not right with her," he said and Hermione nodded briskly.

"I think it might be a love potion of sorts."

Neville's eyes widened like saucers.

"Cho," Hermione tried to yell over the other girl's love confessions. "Cho, CHO! Listen to me, you need to go straight away to the Hospital Wing."

"You just want to take him away from me! It happens all the time! First Cedric was taken away and then Harry! Well it won't happen with Neville! I love him too much!"

Tears were streaming down Cho's cheeks.

Hermione felt her heart break for Cho.

"Of course not, no one is taking you away from anyone. Neville will bring you to the Hospital Wing, won't you Neville?"

Neville seemed to catch on quickly.

"Yes, yes of course. You just need something to calm your nerves. We'll go there together, Cho, okay?"

"R-really? You m-mean it? You'll be with m-me?"

Neville shot Hannah an apologetic look though Hannah nodded firmly.

"Yes, I'll be right here with you."

Other voices started assembling.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Professor McGonagall had finally made her way over, followed closely by Professors Sprout and Flitwick. It seemed the comotion had finally attracted the whole Hall.

As students watched the scene unfold, Hermione spotted Micheal Corner near the entrance doors. He looked stricken.

She saw him just in time before he spun around and pelted out of the Hall.

Without a second thought, Hermione pelted after him.

She heard the sound of a spell whoosh towards her as she ran. Her footsteps suddenly stopped making noise on the flagstones.

She turned to see Draco running behind her, his footsteps equally silent. He quickly cast a Disillusionment charm on both of them, when they were out of sight of the Great Hall.

In the pandemonium, no one had seemed to notice them leave.

She could see a blurry outline pass beside her as Draco gained speed with his long legs.

They could hear voices up ahead. Hermione thought she recognized Michael Corner.

Draco slowed to a trot and she followed suit. The air was chilly. The hallway they were now in had large columns with high windows, where the full moon shone beyond. Its blue light was the only thing that lit the way forward.

She felt Draco lean his shoulder into her, to make sure she was close. His hand found hers and they snuck forward, toward the voice.

Soon enough, they could make out a silhouette that was clearly Corner's. He was talking to someone obscured by a column.

"-feel a certain responsibility for what happened? Do you realise the compromising position I've put myself in for you?"

"We're blameless in all this," a low whisper hissed back.

"How can you say that? Don't you see how we might've caused this? And for what? Why not just let it go?"

"I *can't* just let it go. My family-"

"Sod your family! They don't care about your happiness! *I* do! Why else would I brew such a despicable potion for you? And I'm not a complete idiot, you know! I know you were planning to use it on Draco Malfoy of all people-"

Hermione sucked in her breath. She felt Draco stiffen next to her.

"Oh *really* ? And what about you, all worked up over Cho? Why don't you go off and comfort her if you're so worried about her?"

"Cho and I are ancient history and you know that. And she was *poisoned* . Stop trying to change the subject. Look, I know you have feelings for me, that kiss-"

"Should've never happened! And you don't know what it's like to live with my family! I'll be disowned if I don't marry Draco!"

"So? You'll have me! I can take care of you, I promise. I come from a pureblood family as well, what makes mine so different from the Malfoys? If your family truly loves you they'll come round."

A loud sob echoed along the hall and Astoria Greengrass emerged from behind the column. Tears stained her face.

"You think this is about shacking me up with just any pureblood family?" Astoria laughed shrilly, bordering on hysteria.

"No, no, it's about old values. Keeping the old traditions pure, not just the bloodline. You think because You-Know-Who is gone, his ideals have vanished? They'll always be floating around, in the old families, the ones who were loyal, who never forget. They were so *proud* when Daphne and Blaise got together. Ever since they've been official, it's like my parents are determined to have the same for me. And sadly, there aren't many eligible bachelors left that share the same views. So, no, I cannot simply just run off into the sunset with you, because that would mean cutting ties with everyone else that I love, everything that I know!"

While Astoria ranted, Hermione felt Draco squeeze her hand and let go. The smallest whisper reached her ears.

"Stay here. Stay hidden."

With lightning speed, Draco shot two Incarcerous spells at the pair. Thick ropes materialized, winding their way around Astoria and Corner's limbs.

Astoria began to shriek. Hermione cast a quick *Silencio* from the shadows, still hidden under the Disillusionment.

The air rippled before her and Draco materialised, stepping out from the shadows.

Corner gasped loudly before yelling "You!"

"Yes, me," Draco drawled, twirling his wand in his hand and calmly walking towards them. Despite his relaxed demeanor, Hermione couldn't help but think there was something alarmingly menacing in his stance.

Tears were streaming down Astoria's cheeks.

"So what's this I hear about poisoning me? Anyone care to elaborate?"

Draco waved his wand and the Silencing spell was removed. Astoria's sobs echoed in the hall.

"Don't tell him anything!" Corner warned, "It's his word against ours!"

"Indeed," Draco mused, stepping forward until his nose was inches from Corner's. Corner flinched.

"I do think you have rather a *lot* more to lose than I do. I'm a disgraced Death Eater after all. But you, model student, big dreams to work in the Ministry, brave warrior for the Boy Who Lived during the Battle of Hogwarts. Even a whisper of a love potion scandal could take your reputation down quite a notch. Plus...didn't you and Cho go out? Very suspicious that she was the one to dump you and suddenly, you're accused of spiking her drink."

Corner's already fragile show of bravery was crumbling quickly.

"It wasn't me! I didn't poison her, I swear!"

"Well, then let's start from the beginning, shall we? Astoria used your little fancy for her to manipulate you into brewing a love potion for her-"

"It's not a little fancy! I...I *love* her!"

A silence followed this proclamation except for Astoria's crying. Corner looked over at her hopefully though his expression turned to dismay. Astoria continued to look at her feet, slumped in the net of ropes holding her up.

What a mess this all is , Hermione thought to herself. She felt sorry for the both of them.

"Fine. So you brewed...what was it, Amortencia?"

"No..." Corner answered sullenly, "Amor Videri. It's uh...a love potion that makes you fall for the first person you see."

"Ah. Interesting. Why this particular one?"

Corner looked like he wanted to tear Draco limb from limb.

"Because...because Amortencia makes you fall in love with the brewer. Astoria didn't have the skill required to make this potion. So I had to find her an alternative solution."

"Of course. Plus, unlike Amortencia, the brewer stays anonymous. You poison someone with this and make sure you're the first person they see. And once the spell wears off, if they accuse you, you can simply say it was a coincidence. There's no proof otherwise. Very conniving."

"I w-wasn't going to... u-use it Draco!"

Astoria finally spoke up through her sobs. She was looking imploringly at Draco.

"I p-promise, I know it was d-dumb but I...was desperate! I th-thought that maybe if you knew w-what it was like to l-love me, you would be more open to... to b-be with me. But I...

I couldn't do it!"

Draco was expressionless. Corner was looking at Draco with only the deepest disgust.

"So how did this potion get into Cho's goblet?"

"I d-don't know, I swear! I...I kept the potion in my bag and...and one day it was gone! I thought I'd l-lost it but...but..."

She broke into a fresh wave of sobs.

"You think it might've been stolen. And used on Cho tonight."

He looked to Corner. Corner nodded, looking eerily pale in the moonlight.

"Just splendid," Draco said, his voice emotionless. "How exactly did you plan on getting me to drink this potion? Were you going to stun me and shove it down my throat?"

Astoria looked horrified.

"N-no...I...No, I could never! I...I had noticed you look a bit p-peaky these days and I... I..."

She began to sob harder. Corner wrestled at the ropes, trying to get to her, but he was tied tight.

"I...I'm s-sorry Draco I'm so sorry! I charmed it to look like In-Invigoration Draught! I was going to o-offer it you and- and make sure you'd d-drink it in front of me! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

“How many?”

“Wha-W-What?”

Draco sneered impatiently.

“How many did you make?”

Astoria took a few deep gulps of air, trying to still her sobs enough to answer the question.

“...T-two...Corner made t-two...so I could be sure....you’d have one...”

“And they were both stolen.”

Astoria wailed, her head falling forward. Hermione winced and glanced around. She imagined most people were still at the Ball, but given what happened with Cho, no doubt it wouldn't be long before people started heading back to their dorms. Draco seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

He waved his wand and the ropes vanished. Corner immediately scrambled to Astoria's side, gathering her in his arms.

"So, what happens now?" Corner asked.

He didn't look angry anymore. He looked tired. And fearful.

"Nothing. I'm going to bed," Draco answered stiffly, turning.

"Aren't...Aren't you going to turn us in?"

Draco paused. His eyes roved over Astoria's trembling and weeping form, then over Micheal Corner, crumpled beside her, completely dejected.

"Quite frankly I've had enough of this whole circus for a lifetime. I plan to forget this ever happened. Don't either of you ever speak to me again. And tell your Ravenclaw dogs to stop following me around. Dodging their pitiful curses is getting old."

Micheal paled and had the grace to look guilty.

Draco began to stalk past them, not sparing them a second glance. Hermione followed quietly. She could hear Corner in the distance, offering soft reassurances as Astoria's sobs subsided.

Hermione followed Draco down a few more corridors in silence, further and further away from the Great Hall.

When Hermione felt they were a safe distance away, she rematerialised.

"So the potion that was planted in the lab belonged to Astoria," Hermione said slowly. "What are the odds? It was meant for you and you ended up taking it, even without Astoria's interference...Do you think the person who stole it knew it was for you? Or was Astoria lying?"

Hermione shivered. Everything felt a lot more ominous. She was frightened.

"I...I don't think she was lying. You can't fake that," Draco's voice was hoarse. He looked like he was going to be ill.

"It might just be random," Draco continued, each word seeming to cost him an effort, "Someone creating havoc for the sake of throwing everything into chaos. Why would they

poison Cho otherwise?"

"That means they must've had to make more of it."

"Or purchase it black market. Or force someone to brew it."

"So we're back to square one."

Hermione thought it over. Their steps echoed. She had no idea where they were headed nor did she care.

"Are you...sure you don't want to turn them in? She did almost poison you, after all," Hermione said softly.

Draco grimaced.

"I don't think either of them will do anything like that again. And Astoria hasn't been dealt an easy hand. I believe her when she says she wouldn't have used the potion. I've known the Greengrass sisters from before Hogwarts, and Astoria was always the kind one. I hope that she'll use this as a lesson and find happiness for herself one day."

Hermione nodded, not wanting to press the issue. Despite her crusade to bring the love potion criminals to justice, she had flashes of Astoria, prostrated on the stone floor, humiliated, sobbing for her life. Turning her in to face expulsion did seem like adding salt to the wound.

Draco turned to look at Hermione with anguish.

"So many pureblood families are fucked up, Hermione. Mine, Astoria's, Blaise's, Theo's... The list goes on. One of the reasons I felt at home in Slytherin is because there were so many of us that understood the pressure of being in these powerful families who followed the Dark

Lord fanatically. We bonded over it. Thought we were stronger because of it. But in the end, we're just all really messed up."

Hermione gripped Draco's arms. Draco gazed at her fiercely.

"What you just saw, that's the tip of the iceberg of what you'll have to deal with if you continue to see me. This is why I wanted to end things with you."

"That doesn't scare me Draco. You don't think I haven't seen things far worse? Bellatrix tortured me in your home and if that wasn't enough to keep me off you, then I highly doubt anything else will."

Draco looked far from reassured.

She took his face in her hands and stood on her tiptoes, showing him with a soft kiss what she failed to show him with words. He hesitated only briefly before kissing her back. Slow. Sensual. He grabbed her waist like someone who would never let go.

"It's late. You should get some sleep," he told her.

She realised he had walked her almost all the way back to the Gryffindor commons.

"Are you going to be okay? I can stay with you longer if you want."

"No, I think I need time alone to think. But let's make plans soon."

"How soon?"

"Tomorrow night?"

Hermione laughed.

"Yes, sounds good."

He backed her up until she was pressed against the stone wall and kissed her hard this time. She groaned, her arms wrapping around his neck. They devoured each other until they heard voices, no doubt Gryffindors coming back from the party.

She reluctantly let Draco go. He gave her a last, longing look before performing a Disillusionment charm and vanishing down the hallway.

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Emotion

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Sober Motel by DILLY DALLY

The next day, everyone was on edge.

Neville briefly recounted the events of last night at breakfast. They'd managed to calm Cho down enough to take her to the hospital wing. Madam Pomphrey administered a Calming Draught immediately and did a diagnostic of Cho's vitals. She was able to pinpoint the traces of Amor Videri quickly enough. Luckily Slughorn had an antidote on hand and Cho was set to rights.

Apparently she was disoriented from the Calming Draught and the multitude of emotions she'd just lived against her will. According to Slughorn, the dose she had taken had been brewed by a heavy hand, no doubt by someone who either was lacking in potion skill or who simply didn't care about the consequences of quick potionwork. Either way, people needed to keep an eye out.

McGonagall had returned to the Ball as soon as Cho was stabilised. She'd made a stern announcement, warning students about the dangers of love potions and instructed Prefects to return everyone to their dorms. Nobody felt much like partying afterwards anyway and the night fizzled out with sighs of disappointment and confusion.

New pamphlets appeared on the bulletin boards first thing in the morning. House parties were banned and there would be no further Balls unless the person who poisoned Cho was found. This included Quidditch after parties, to the dismay of most of the student body.

Hermione thought the measures put in place were adequate, especially in the aftermath of the war. People were more bonded but also more mistrustful of each other. Furthermore, this wasn't just a silly rule break. This person would be assuredly expelled, and perhaps even convicted of criminal charges. Hermione hoped they did the right thing by letting Astoria off the hook. It made Hermione even more determined to find out who this awful person was,

who seemed to care so little about people. More and more, Hermione worried they might be dealing with some sort of psychopath afterall.

"Padma is organising a group to go visit Cho this afternoon, before she's discharged. Hannah and I want her to be sure there are no hard feelings. If anyone wants to come show their support, I'm sure it would mean a lot," Neville was announcing to everyone.

Hermione nodded and volunteered. It might be good to check up on her. It was hard to erase the sight of her hanging onto Neville, pleading for him not to go. Cho had lived through a lot. They all had.

When they made their visit, Cho looked tired and subdued.

Hermione had to give Neville and Hannah credit. They had brought flowers and were extra kind. Cho was beaming by the end of it, though a darkness lingered in her eyes. She had been mentally violated and that darkness would be there to stay awhile. You didn't just bounce back from being forced into feeling things beyond your control.

Cho smiled at the room at large, though her smile faltered when she saw Hermione.

Hermione gave Cho her warmest demeanour and approached the bedside.

"Glad to see you're feeling better, Cho."

Cho looked uncertain.

"Thank you, Hermione. Is everyone else all right?"

Hermione assured her that everyone was fine and gave an update on the new rules and regulations.

"Well, that's good. I'm glad they didn't axe out Quidditch altogether. I really hope they find the awful person who did this," Cho answered.

Hermione vowed in her head that she would try her hardest to do just that.

"Hermione...there's something you should know."

Hermione moved in a bit closer. Everyone else had resumed chatting with each other. Only Hermione was listening to Cho.

"The goblet I drank out of," Cho continued, "It was one of the ones you and Ginny handed to me. I can't be sure which but..."

Cho took a deep, wavering breath. Hermione found herself appreciating for the first time what a strong person Cho was, and she felt bad for ever thinking anything negative of her.

"Be careful. And tell Ginny the same. Take care of yourselves."

Hermione nodded.

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Hermione's anxiousness increased throughout the day.

She had broken the news to Ginny on their way to class after lunch. Her friend had taken it rather well, though Ginny looked clearly rattled by what this could mean.

They briefly talked over their suspicions (which didn't amount to much) and left each other with similar reassuring nods, though the knot of worry in Hermione's stomach did not lessen. The only thing that kept Hermione's spirits up was the thought of seeing Draco later.

When Hermione arrived at the Room that evening, Draco was already there, with a basket in hand.

He smiled at her, in his subtle way. For any normal person, it wasn't much of a smile, but for Draco, who was always so guarded with his emotions, it equated to grinning like a Cheshire.

"What's all this?" Hermione gestured at the basket.

"You'll see."

Draco strode along the wall three times until an ornate, iron door appeared. It looked like something from an upper class greenhouse.

Draco opened it and held his arm out for Hermione to walk in.

The display before her took her breath away.

The night sky stretched out before her, stars twinkling brightly. She was standing on grass, with luscious gardens on either side of her. Little faerie lights dipped in and out of the flowers. There were trees in the distance, that wound their way to the sky in intricate loops, the impressively large leaves giving off a gentle glow.

The Room looked like it had been charmed much like Firenze's classroom; the walls and floor all gave the illusion of the outdoors. It was very convincing.

In the center of the garden, on a patch of grass, was a large picnic blanket. Draco closed the door, took Hermione's hand and guided her over to it.

"Where...where are we?" Hermione asked in wonderment.

"The Everthistle Gardens. It's a famous botanical paradise to the South of England. People travel from out of the country to see it. It's a lot vaster than this in real life, you could almost lose yourself inside. My parents used to take me here to stargaze. Astrology has always been part of our traditions, for generations of Malfoys. One of the nicer traditions, I'd say."

"It's beautiful! I'll have to see it in real life someday."

They settled onto the blanket which Hermione suspected was charmed to feel plump and soft, without the hard feel of grass and soil underneath.

Draco waved his wand and a bottle of wine levitated out of the basket along with a plate of cheeses, berries and apple tarts. A loaf of thick bread on a wood platter brought up the rear, before the basket shut.

Draco pointed his wand at a cutting knife which began to slice thick slabs of fluffy bread, while the plates rested themselves artfully between the two of them.

Hermione looked on, bemused.

"What's the occasion?"

"I was just thinking about what you said, about how we barely know each other. Ordinarily, I would take a lady on several dates like this before even thinking of bedding her and ... Well, in our case we never really got the chance to get to know each other before that. So I thought I'd prepare an evening for us to just...well, get to know each other."

"That's - That's very thoughtful, thank you. This is all very wonderful."

She was on a date with Draco Malfoy .

Hermione tried not to over analyse what this meant and, instead, helped herself to a tart. They were delicious.

"Aren't these your favourite? From your Amortentia odours?"

"They are. These ones are from Madam Pudifoot's, though they don't hold a candle to the ones my mother used to serve."

Hermione hooted.

" *You* went to Madam Pudifoot's to get these?"

She had a hard time imagining a sullen Draco, dressed in his usual black, skulking around the café which traditionally was decked in pink, lace, and cherubs who were probably throwing confetti into Draco's perfectly coiffed hair.

Draco shrugged.

"They have the best pastries in the area and it isn't too busy in the morning."

"You went all the way there just for these?"

Draco looked a little embarrassed.

"Er...well...I thought about raiding the kitchens but I know you have some sort of mad ideas about House-elves and didn't think you'd be too happy if I'd ordered them to make food for this occasion so I- are you alright? Did I do something wrong?"

Hermione looked stricken though only because she was having difficulty processing what Draco was saying. Draco had gone all the way down to Hogsmeade one morning so that House-elves wouldn't make their meal? Hogsmeade was probably about an hour away; did he skip class for this too? It seemed like an awful lot of trouble. Then again Draco did say that apple tarts were his favourite. Clearly she had underestimated by how much.

"They aren't *mad* ideas but I...appreciate the effort you went through to organise this. It really is lovely," Hermione finally managed, her mind still reeling a little.

" *Unconventional* ideas, then. And it's nothing."

Hermione knew he meant well, and she was very touched that he had prepared all this for them. All the same, she still bristled at his slightly patronising tone with the word 'unconventional'.

She'd had this conversation countless times, with Ron in particular, and it always frustrated her how little leeway she made with getting through to him, to anyone really.

"I frankly don't understand what is so hard to grasp! They're given zero free will and it's awful! Why shouldn't House-elves have fair wages and vacation time and their own homes? One of the bravest beings I knew was a free elf and he was able to do the most sophisticated magic, all while being cruelly enslaved!"

Draco's jaw clenched.

Of course Draco knew exactly which elf she was talking about. She'd forgotten that Dobby used to belong to the Malfoys before he was freed.

"I...Listen, I concede a lot of elves are mistreated. My family was certainly guilty of that...I-"
" Draco took a deep breath. "I was certainly guilty of it myself. But to *free* them. What would their purpose be? What would they do with themselves?"

"Probably live full and happy lives! The goblins seem to work just fine at Gringotts! Firenze is a centaur and an extremely competent teacher, as is Hagrid, a half-giant."

She could tell Draco was restraining himself from saying anything untoward by the way his lips pursed together in a half-smirk. It only maddened her further.

"Hagrid- well he isn't perfect- but he has a lot of hands-on experience even the most reputable magizoologists lack! You owe him some compassion after what you put him through!"

That seemed to put Draco in his place. His lips pursed tighter, though he seemed to lose his smirk. Hermione took a vindictive bite of cheese, swallowed aggressively and ranted on.

"Wizards are perfectly capable of living in cooperation with other magical beings, they just choose not to because they clearly have a superiority complex and don't want to lose the convenience of having their floors cleaned and their tea served!"

Draco stared. Hermione could feel herself getting increasingly frustrated.

"Think about how you used to think of Muggles," Hermione implored, "You used to think they should be enslaved as well. Well how is this any different? Do you seriously think elves enjoy banging their heads against saucers when they put out the wrong sheets? It's inhumane and cruel!"

Draco was still silent. Hermione was beginning to feel unnerved by it. She flung her hands out to either side of her.

"You wanted to get to know me, well, here I am! If you don't like it then...then...maybe we should just end things here because I won't change!"

"Calm down, Hermione, I don't want to end things. I think you have a point."

"Fine! That's what I expected y- Wait, *what*?" Hermione staggered her ire to a halt, not sure if she heard correctly. "You...you think I have a *point*?"

Draco sighed and popped a grape in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

"I've spent most of my life thinking poorly of almost everyone around me. Maybe it's time I open my mind a little."

Hermione stared suspiciously.

"Who are you and what have you done with Draco Malfoy?"

Draco grimaced.

"I buried him in the grave he dug for himself. Annoying little tit, he was."

Hermione couldn't help but smile a little. She took a sip of wine, mulling over how Draco continued to surprise her.

"Funny thing," Draco drawled, after a sip of his own, "I used to think that you should've been sorted into Ravenclaw. But the more I get to know you, the more I can't see you in anything *but* Gryffindor."

Hermione gave Draco an uncertain look, wondering if he was complimenting or insulting her.

"Your bravery plays such a large part in your intelligence. Your desire to make the world better for other people. Your ability to stand up for your beliefs despite ruffling feathers. It drives you to learn. Ravenclaw would've frustrated you. A bunch of duffers with their heads stuffed with knowledge with no desire to use it. You surround yourself with people who take action, despite how dull-witted they may be, because that's who you are. It's fascinating really."

"Harry and Ron aren't *dull-witted*," Hermione defended, reading between the lines, though she couldn't hide the flush of contentment she felt at Draco's compliments.

They argued over Harry and Ron's intelligence for a bit while sampling more wine, which Hermione was pleased to find had a full flavour that went down smoothly. Draco clearly had some expertise on the matter of choosing the right one.

"Is this going to be a problem?" Hermione finally asked, brushing thoughts of sumptuous wines aside to get back to the real issue.

"What is?"

"My friendship with Harry and Ron. They're my best friends and I know you despise each other, but I refuse to sit through you sniding them."

"Fine, I won't snide them out loud anymore, I'll snide them in my head."

"That's not any better!"

"Listen, you don't like my friends any more than I like yours. Can't we leave it at that? It's *you* I want to spend time with anyway."

"Yes but...but what if-"

She couldn't bring herself to say it.

What if this continues outside of Hogwarts?

She wasn't ready. She couldn't begin to think things like that, because if she wanted to see Draco outside of Hogwarts, what would that mean? Would they continue the friends with benefits situation, with him sneaking over to hers, spending the night and then keeping it secret from everyone? Surely not. She knew she would not be able to sustain something like that. While their arrangement suited her here in Hogwarts, she didn't think it could go on this way forever. She could admit that she wanted more. Something like Hannah and Neville. She wanted to introduce Draco to her friends without worrying that they'd be at each others' throats. She wanted to introduce him to her parents, without them realising that he was the same bully who she complained made her feel like nothing. She wanted to meet his family as his partner and not as the Mudblood who had almost been tortured to death on their Manor floor. She knew it was all wishful thinking; with Draco, she couldn't have any of that.

But did it matter? If it meant she could be with Draco, hold his hand in public, go on dates with him - did it matter if everything else was a bloody mess? If she was able to see how much he's changed, won't everyone else see it eventually too?

But did Draco even *want* any of that?

Speaking of which, Draco was looking at her expectantly.

She couldn't deal with this now. She had too many questions, too many variables to go over, too many angles to examine. She couldn't just jump in feet first, eyes closed.

"Nevermind, let's change the subject, shall we?"

They continued to chat, the wine loosening them up. The meal was delicious. Hermione was able to stifle all her worries and just enjoy talking to Draco about mundane things that always somehow seemed interesting with him. Eventually, when they had eaten their fill, Draco

waved his wand and all the plates returned to the basket. Hermione and Draco laid on their backs, looking up at the stars as conversation lulled.

Hermione couldn't remember the last time she'd just lied down and allowed her mind to live simply in the present. She was always thinking about the past, thinking about homework, thinking about her friends, thinking, *thinking*. No wonder she had trouble sleeping. She never turned things off. It was nice to just lie here, with Draco beside her.

"What was the elf like?" Draco asked after a moment. "After Potter set him free? You mentioned he was one of the bravest beings you'd ever met."

"Dobby certainly was," Hermione answered with conviction. "He was determined and kind and...quite zealous. And he *adored* Harry. Harry treated him like an equal and considered him one of his greatest friends."

Hermione turned her head and could see Draco squint in confusion, perhaps trying to recall the elf that once served him.

Hermione told of how Dobby first appeared in Harry's bedroom in second year, to Harry's shock. She talked about how Dobby was employed in the Hogwarts kitchens and had never seemed happier. She elaborated on how Dobby helped them during the Umbridge era. She described how Dobby was helpful, loyal and caring, not because he had to be but because he wanted to be.

She told Draco of how Dobby was pivotal in helping them escape the Manor and how he'd passed shortly after. Hermione's eyes began to dampen, remembering the elf's final aid to Harry, his friend.

"I'd always wondered how that chandelier had fallen," Draco said quietly. "It all happened so fast and no one seemed to want to discuss it much. I understand now. The Dark Lord, Bellatrix, none of them would want to admit they were outsmarted by a House-elf." He seemed far away, deep within his thoughts.

Hermione couldn't imagine what Voldemort's wrath had been like in the aftermath. She remembered, at the time, not giving it much thought. They had been too shocked over Dobby's loss, too busy tending to Luna and Ollivander.

But now, she shuddered inwardly imagining how much Draco had probably been tortured. He had a faraway look in his eyes, and she could tell he was burying his emotions with Occlumency more than usual.

"So the elf died to protect Potter from his old Masters," Draco said hollowly. "A rather poetic way to go."

"It was devastating. To Harry especially. He dug Dobby's- Dobby's grave himself."

Hermione felt her throat clench. She had come to terms that the pain of loss would never go away. But it was still hard.

"He *dug* it? By *hand*?"

"I think he felt he owed it to Dobby. He wanted to pay his respects in the best way he could. Dobby had...had died for Harry. To save him. To save all of us."

Hermione felt a tear trickle down her face. Draco turned on his side, leaned in, and softly cupped her cheek. He ran his thumb along the tear, wiping it away.

"It's good that he was given a chance to live the life he wanted."

"They should all get that chance."

Draco didn't answer, though he definitely looked conflicted.

"Do you mind if I ask...What is your stance on Muggles now?"

Draco frowned in thought. Hermione let him take his time. When he answered her, she could feel the weight in his words, his sorrow, as he let down his Occlumency barriers to let her in.

"Muggles were a concept I'd learned to hate, though I'd never even once talked to one. My whole life I had been told Muggles were trying to take from magical people. From witch burnings, to hangings, to eradicating any small sign of magic in order to push barbaric Muggle "gods". The Dark Lord's return, to us, felt like the tides were finally turning and Muggle-borns were simply getting their just desserts after centuries of persecuting us. During that summer at the Quidditch Cup, when my father was out terrorizing Muggles for sport, it was like we were finally free from hiding."

"In fifth year, everything changed. My father failed the Dark Lord. I saw him tortured right in front of me...My mother as well. I still see it in my nightmares sometimes, can *hear* them-"

Draco swallowed hard and continued.

"I was asked - well, ordered really - to take up the mantle. How could I say no? I would save my family and restore the Malfoy name all at once. Since my father had disgraced himself, the Dark Lord promised I would take his place amongst the Death Eater ranks. To replace my father- the man for whom, no matter what I did, it was never good enough - it was like a dream come true. I'd save my father and become him all in one swoop. All I had to do was take care of the modest task of snuffing out Dumbledore. He may have once been the greatest wizard of all time, but now he was just an old codger. 'He might even die of old age before you get to him,' I remember the Dark Lord saying."

"I knew no one thought I could do it. I saw the way other Death Eaters mocked me. The haunted look in my mother's eyes. Like I was already dead. I'd show them. I'd show them all. If the Dark Lord entrusted me with this mission, it was because he saw something in me. He saw my potential."

"I was such a fool."

"Of course, Dumbledore was evading all my stupid tactics to snuff him out and the Vanishing Cabinets weren't fixing nearly as quickly as I'd hoped. I was getting desperate and I didn't care who I put in danger. I pushed all my friends aside except those who were useful. I treated those who stayed even more poorly than before. The stakes were so high. I'd either be a hero, save my family and get the glory I thought I deserved. Or I would die along with everyone I loved. Failure wasn't an option."

"I'd read *Hogwarts: A History* cover to cover about a dozen times to try and find a weak link in the schools' defences. It only made me realise I was in a practically impenetrable fortress. It was only then I finally clued in that perhaps I was working for a madman. How could the Dark Lord possibly think that I, a sixteen-year-old teenager, could carry out something like this? What kind of person would send someone not even of age, on a long, cruel mission that could only certainly end badly, probably for pure sport?"

"And then, against all odds, I had Dumbledore right where I wanted him. I'd cornered him at the top of the tower. One whole year of fear, planning, lack of sleep, stress, alienating everyone I knew...but it was worth it. I had him trapped and all I had to do was say the word."

Draco's voice hitched in his throat. He took a deep, wavering breath and closed his eyes before continuing.

"I couldn't do it. I knew even if I tried, my Avada Kedavra would be useless. You need to mean the killing curse, and I knew very well that I didn't want to murder this old man.

He knew it before I did. He offered me mercy. And then Snape killed him and it was all over."

Draco's voice broke. Hermione could see his eyes were wet. She laid a hand on his arm but didn't say anything. Instead she held on, letting him know through the touch that she was here.

"I thought that would be it. Even though Dumbledore hadn't died by my hand, I had orchestrated it. The mission was a success and I had come out alive. Surely the Dark Lord would see this as a win? Surely now, my parents and I would be free to go? I didn't even care about the new world order at this point. I just wanted our life to return back to normal."

"He definitely was exultant over Dumbledore's death. But I could tell he was disappointed I was alive. I think I truly understood the extent of his madness then. He'd wanted to see my parents suffer over my death. He had anticipated it with excitement, even. That whole year he had no doubt lorded it over them. Took pleasure from the hollow look from my father and the bloodshot eyes of my mother. The Dark Lord never needed Cruciatus. He knew tortures worse than that. Right after, I was to discover that this monster would be using our Manor as Headquarters. It made sense. He could keep his prodigy, Bellatrix and his disappointment, Lucius, with him at all times, in the comfort of a familiar and lavish house. I realised that by taking the mark I had quite literally become a servant of the Dark Lord. It was nothing like I'd been told. There was no glory, no justice - only waking up in fear everyday, in my own damn house. I wished every night that I had died on that tower instead of Dumbledore. But if I had, what would've become of my mother?"

"I managed to stay sane through it all by taking care of her. She had constant panic attacks. And Snape helped. He stepped in and taught me more Occlumency and Potions and duelling on some evenings. The Dark Lord allowed it because he didn't see me as a threat and he liked that his minions were competent.

I think I was Snape's favourite when I was at Hogwarts. Of course he'd been my favourite teacher. I'd always assumed he'd taken that Unbreakable Vow with my mother to steal my glory. It seems so delusional to me now, that I ever even thought that. I realise now it was probably to...to spare me from it all. He filled a fatherly role that my own father never quite could. My father bought everything I needed to excel. I had tutors and books and brooms, anything I could need. But Snape taught me everything himself. For some reason he took my well-being to heart. I think he wanted me to be a better man. I'll...I'll forever be grateful to him for getting me through the darkest times of my life."

Draco kept a straight face, though tears were now slowly trickling from his eyes.

Hermione pulled him in and that seemed to allow Draco a moment of pure grief. He shuddered against her shoulder as she rubbed his back. She held him until he was ready. Tears slid down her own cheeks. Her heart broke for him. It broke for Snape. It broke for Dobby. It broke for all the pain and loss everyone had had to endure.

"Sorry..." Draco finally apologized, "I'm not used to talking about it. I don't think I ever have."

"Thank you for sharing this with me. I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like, living there."

They lay on the blanket together, his head tilted against her arm. She stroked his hair.

"The thing is, even after all that, I think part of me still thought that Muggles were gormless," Draco continued. He sounded like all the energy had left him. "I knew they weren't as pathetic as the Dark Lord would have us believe, but that still didn't change the fact that historically they've slaughtered our kind. That we're forced to live in secrecy *because* of them. And then...and then I met you."

Draco sighed.

" *Really* met you, I mean. And you let me into a small part of your life. And not only are you as smart as everyone says, but you're beautiful and witty and sexy. And your parents are Muggles. And you go to strange amusement parks with trains in the sky. And you have books on wizards even before you knew what they were. How could Muggles be so bad if you came from them? I think you're the reason I've changed my mind. You're the first bloody person I've bothered to get to know and only because I was forced to by a farce of a potion."

Hermione turned on her side to find Draco was gazing up at her intently. She wanted to cry. She wanted to laugh. She didn't know what to say. She felt like she would burst. She had too many feelings for him. She wanted to embrace it and shove it away all at the same time.

"I can't even fucking believe how lucky I am," Draco continued, "I've seen and heard of Love Potions doing horrible things. Look at Cho. Look at Astoria and that prat, Corner. Even Blaise, who's seen horrible, horrible things. Love poisoning can ruin lives and tear people apart. And yet, I get to be the happiest I've been in a long, long time because of one. How is that fair?"

"It's *not* fair. We *have* been lucky. It's strange to think something so...so unlikely between us happened because of something so awful."

Draco studied her face, looking lost.

"I don't think I would've ever come to appreciate you on my own and it pains me to admit it. I'm too..."

"Arrogant? Uptight? Egotistical?" Hermione supplied.

Draco gave her a wry smile.

"I still don't quite understand why you put up with me."

Hermione sighed and rested her head against his shoulder, contemplating the sky.

"To be honest, you're not much like that anymore. You're attentive and thoughtful. It's hard to believe you're the same person as you were before the war."

"Glad I've finally grown into some qualities."

"You've also got a rather nice cock."

She managed to say it with a straight enough face that he propped himself up to get a better look at her.

His incredulous look sent her off into a fit of small giggles.

"My, *my*. I had no idea that Hogwarts' model student was capable of such crass humour. I'm aghast and impressed."

"I have my moments. Though they don't happen often, so do consider yourself fortunate."

"I do," he said, and gently tucked one of her hairs behind her ear.

His touch on her cheek made her shiver. She sighed happily as they were both lost for a moment in each other's gaze.

"I don't want to be that arrogant berk that I used to be. I think back and while it was nice to feel powerful and strut around Slytherin like I owned the place, it shut me out to so many other things. I feel like if I can change and leave the horrible old Draco behind, maybe... maybe I can start fresh."

Draco looked haunted, but a flicker of hope flashed across his eyes. Hermione squeezed his hand. She believed him. With surprise, she realised she even forgave him. Completely. The war had upended their lives and some for the worst. She felt that through all that hardship, Draco had been born anew. She had wanted to believe he was different for so long and it was a relief to finally get there. The way he looked at her, with his emotions bared and his heart extended; she was filled to the brim of something that she knew was much deeper than the laughably meagre 'friends with benefits' label they had given each other.

"I think that's very brave of you," she whispered. Draco's chest seemed to swell at her praise.

They lay there, comfortably. Hermione thought about all the things Draco had just told her.

Something flickered in her mind.

"On the topic of love potions, I did get a bit of startling news today."

"Oh?"

"From Cho."

Draco frowned.

"What did she say?"

"Well...she mentioned the night of the Halloween Ball, she'd drunk out of both Ginny's and my cup. It unsettled me a little. Draco, are you all right?"

Draco's gaze seemed hard and far away, his jaw clenching like it always did when he was tense.

"I knew it. Someone's after you."

"We don't know that for sure."

"This bloody potion turns up in the lab you frequent the most and then ends up in a cup that was yours-"

"Allegedly, we don't know exactly which cup-"

"Don't be daft! This can't be a coincidence and even if it is, I don't plan on waiting around for someone to...to poison you! Just because you're denying it, doesn't make it any less real."

"I never said I was denying it!" Hermione retorted shrilly. "It...it terrifies me, okay? I don't know what I'm supposed to do and we have no new leads and I...I just have to keep an eye out until I figure something out."

She felt silent. She had tried to force down the worry she'd felt after talking to Cho but she felt it bubbling to the surface.

Someone could be trying to love poison her.

Draco looked furious.

"I'm going to find who's doing this and make them pay. No one is going to hurt you, *no one*."

"Draco..."

"I watched you suffer too many times without doing anything. I'm not letting that happen again."

"I'm not going to suffer," she said gently, lying back down and tugging his arm with her. Draco settled in next to her hesitantly.

"I just wish I had a lead of some sort. Anything really. Who would be close enough to Astoria to be able to swipe something from her bag? Her sister? Someone in her year?"

"I can't see Daphne doing something like this. She's underhanded but she wouldn't cause problems for the sake of it, especially not if this potion was so easily traced back to her sister. Is there anyone around you acting suspicious? Fixating on you more than usual? Who asked you to the Ball?"

"I...well..."

The truth was, there were so many people who had asked her to the Ball that it was hard to keep track. Some familiar faces floated to the surface but no one was particularly suspicious.

Draco sighed in frustration.

"Sweet Salazar, does the entire Wizarding World and their cousin want to take you out?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow.

"To be honest, I'm surprised it bothers you so much."

"Of course it bothers me! Why would I like a bunch of random wankers asking out my- my friend."

The way Draco stammered around the word 'friend' made Hermione's face heat up. There was a pregnant pause.

Does he take all his friends on romantic, starlit picnics? The voice in her head sneered. She hastily shoved the voice aside.

Draco continued on, forging past his lapse.

"It's probably that ponce Macmillan. He's been ogling you in potions for weeks now and he'd certainly have the skill to make Videri."

"...The skill to make Videri...?"

Something in Hermione's head clicked. She was so absorbed, she forgot to snap at Draco that Ernie wasn't a *ponce*.

"Of course. *Of course* ! How could we be such buffoons as to miss this! I can't believe how obvious it is!"

Hermione stood up abruptly, accidentally elbowing Draco in the ribs.

"Ow! *What* is so obvious?"

Draco gingerly got to his feet and watched as Hermione paced back and forth in excitement.

"To poison Cho, they would need to make a fresh batch and they would need a book to do it and I know for a fact, having scoured the library for information on Love Potions, that there is only one book they could've used to make it!"

She turned to look at him, her eyes shining from the discovery. He looked at her with amazement.

" *Love Potions And Their Many Uses!*" They both exclaimed, in unison.

"Obviously, they would need to check it out with Madam Pince so-"

"Their name would be written on the check-out card at the back of the book!" Hermione interrupted triumphantly.

Draco nodded slowly.

"It's definitely worth a look. Now that I think of it, unless you're extremely well-connected, buying something that dangerous off the black market and sneaking it into Hogwarts *while* at Hogwarts is very tricky. It makes more sense for this person to brew it on the spot."

"Is this personal experience talking?" Hermione asked, somewhat alarmed.

Draco shrugged.

"More or less."

"What could you have *possibly* - You know what, nevermind. We'll discuss that another day. D'you think the library is still open? What time is it anyway?"

Hermione frantically started looking around, forgetting they were in the Room for a moment, and searching for the castle.

Draco closed his eyes and there was a loud 'Pop!'.

A grandfather clock materialised a few feet away from them, on the grass. Not only was the library closed, but it was past curfew.

"Augh! Drat! It'll have to wait till tomorrow! How did time go by so fast?" Hermione griped, extremely disappointed.

Hermione quickly considered her options. Should they wake McGonagall? Sneak out and investigate themselves? She had a hunch that Ginny might have inherited the Marauders map from Harry, so perhaps she could borrow it for a midnight stint to the library? But how would she explain all this to Ginny?

At any rate, the love potion culprit was probably fast asleep. She would just have to make sure she was at the library first thing tomorrow morning.

"I guess we may as well settle in for the night," Draco stated, seemingly on the same train of thought as Hermione.

Draco closed his eyes again, visualising changes for the Room.

Hermione gasped as loud pops rang out all around her. Large tent walls appeared out of nowhere, encompassing them underneath a roof. The fabric was light and semi-transparent so

that they could still see the glow of the stars overhead. The picnic blanket began to rise until it was a good two feet off the ground. Hermione took a closer look to find it had sprouted legs and turned into a bed. A large blanket sprang into existence, hovered over the mattress and flopped down just as two fluffy pillows materialised.

Hermione sighed in resignation.

She conjured her pyjamas; a buttoned-up shirt with matching blue striped pants.

Draco smirked.

"Seems a bit overkill, considering I've slept with you naked."

He unabashedly striped off his clothes until he was in nothing but his black boxers. Hermione found it hard not to stare. Even though it was dark inside the tent, she could still make out the ripple of his muscles. She itched to run her hands over his bare chest.

"I like sleeping in pyjamas," she said weakly, still mesmerised by his practically nude form.

Hermione was acutely aware of Draco's eyes on her. She very pointedly turned her back to him before tossing her robes to the side and bundling up in her night clothes. He wasn't wrong: it was sort of silly to wear pyjamas when they'd slept together in the nude. At the same time, it gave her a strange comfort, getting ready for bed with him. Like they were a couple. She tried to not think about how easy it was to imagine herself doing this with Draco every night.

She crawled under the covers and his arms immediately encircled her. She hummed happily, curling against his body. His warmth was comforting.

They laid together for a while, and Hermione's mind wandered.

"Can I...ask you something? About The Battle of Hogwarts," Draco said softly.

Hermione nodded.

"My mother. She said she saw Potter rise from the dead. The Dark Lord killed him in front of her eyes but Potter survived, for the second time. How is that possible? How does he keep coming back from these killing curses?"

Hermione mulled his question over before answering.

"It's rather a long story and bits of it aren't really mine to tell. I know that's not a very satisfying answer."

Hermione paused, wondering how much was okay to divulge.

"Was it the Elder Wand? The one Potter said he was Master of because he took my wand," Draco prompted.

"In part, yes. But mostly I think it was Harry's mother. Because she died to save him when he was a baby, it gave him protective magic that backfired on Voldemort. Harry and Voldemort had a connection because of it and when Voldemort tried to kill Harry during the battle, he ended up severing their connection instead, which brought Harry back. That's the simplified version, anyway."

"So that's what Potter meant when he said everyone at Hogwarts was protected," Draco murmured, "He'd died to save them like his mother did for him."

Draco paused in thought and then his eyes widened.

"Did you say Potter had a *connection* to the Dark Lord?"

"I'm sure Harry would be open to discussing it with you one day. You did somewhat play a part in it. I think he may even still have your old wand."

Draco made a vague sound in his throat.

"Do you still hate him? Harry I mean."

Draco sighed and studied the tent wall, his face turned far away from Hermione's.

"I don't *hate* him. But he's irritating. He saved me from the Fiendfyre. Risked his life. But why? Because it was the right thing to do? Because it was the *noble* thing to do? Listen- good for Potter for taking down the Dark Lord and saving us all, I really do mean that. But we're fundamentally different on a lot of levels. He is very brave and very stupid. And while now I can tolerate him, I will never *understand* him."

"Harry isn't stupid and you're angry at him for saving your *life* ?"

Draco exhaled in frustration.

"No, I'm angry because- because it makes no bloody *sense* ! If I were him, I would've let me die! You protect your own, you don't risk everything to save everyone! You *can't* save everyone!"

"That's just who Harry is. I think he saw that you weren't as bad as you were forced to be. He wasn't going to watch you die in that awful fire. He wanted to give you that chance to start again."

"He could've died and for what? He's always been like that, risking everything to *save* people and somehow cheating himself out of the consequences. Not everyone is so lucky. He thinks he can do whatever he wants and-"

Hermione sat up in indignation.

"Harry has been through *hell* . I would know, I was there for a lot of it! Sometimes, fighting for a better future means making sacrifices! You could learn a thing or two from him, if your ego wasn't so bloody big!"

"His mad quest to get his grubby hands on the Elder Wand could've killed his closest friends. Could've killed *you* !"

"That's not what it was! And I knew very well what I was getting into, or did you forget I had to *erase* my parents memories?"

Draco fell silent. His angry expression softened.

"I'm sorry. You're right. But I still don't see eye to eye with Potter and I never will."

"Is this because...because he didn't want to be friends with you? In first year?"

Draco's eyes seemed to bug out of his head.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Draco scoffed.

Something in his eyes made Hermione think Draco knew exactly what she was talking about.

"You extended a hand of friendship to him, didn't you? On our first evening before the Sorting Feast. And he told you no. I can't imagine many people would have turned down an alliance extended from Draco Malfoy at the time, but Harry did. And in front of all those people too. Your pride must've not liked that too much."

Draco's eyes narrowed.

"Why are you even bringing this up?"

"Because don't you *see* ? You're both stubborn idiots! You've harbored this unhealthy rivalry for all this time, but for what? Because you were a bully and he didn't want to be friends with you! Don't you see how childish that is? That silly encounter has festered over the years to the point where Harry saved your life and you still resent him! Why not just bury the hatchet after all this time? Your pride isn't worth it!"

"Who CARES?" Draco shouted, "Why do you care so much about Potter? Do you *love* him? Am I some kind of pathetic distraction from the fact that Potter is shacking up with She-Weasel?"

Hermione clutched the covers in her balled hands, to keep from strangling Draco.

"Don't be ridiculous, of course I'm not *in love* with Harry, he's like family to me! I'm in love with *you* , you great pillock!"

Draco froze. Hermione froze.

There it was. Those slippery little words were said in a burst of frustration and there was no taking it back.

Draco looked like he couldn't believe his ears. His petulant expression melted off his face, to give way to pure startlement. Hermione was as surprised as he was. Yet as soon as she'd blurted the words out, she knew they were true.

"You- You're in love with me?" Draco said softly.

"I just meant- I mean- " Hermione sighed, "Yes. I am."

There was no use backpedalling now.

Draco had changed the way she felt about love. She always used to think love was built on a solid foundation of trust and collaboration, something that could take months if not years. Sure, people liked to throw the word around after a fortnight, but did they really mean it? She'd thought she'd been in love with Ron but it never felt right and she'd known him for *years* prior.

But it felt different with Draco.

She always wanted to be with him, talk to him. Even when they argued, she felt like he was *trying* to listen, *trying* to compromise . At any rate, she knew that, despite their differences, she always wanted to hear what he had to say. She wanted to work with him, find solutions together, as a team, much like how they had brewed a love potion together, companionably.

Love was finding someone worth compromising for, worth fighting for. Love was finding a person worth making sacrifices for and facing the world together. Draco was that person for her.

Love wasn't a house that was built over time; it was the foundation on which the house would be made.

They had so many obstacles ahead of them, but she would rather face them together, than risk losing him.

She was indeed, madly in love.

She looked at him determinedly, hoping, *praying* to all the powers that be that he felt the same way. If he rejected her....Well, that would be that wouldn't it? But she'd feel like more

of a fool keeping up a ridiculous pretence of friendship when clearly she was tumbling head over heels.

"I love you, Draco."

He was still looking positively poleaxed.

"Hermione...Are you...Are you quite sure? I...I'm-"

"I'm certain. I've shared so much with you and I appreciate all that you've shared with me. I feel safe with you. I can tell you anything. I can be myself. I love you."

Draco's eyes seemed to shine.

"You don't have to answer," she added quickly, feeling more anxious the longer Draco gaped at her, "I know I'm springing this on you all of a sud-"

"I love you too!" Draco suddenly erupted, "I mean, of course I do, you're brilliant and clever and beautiful and way out of my league and I must be dreaming. There's no way this is real. This can't be real,"

He laughed, uncertain but full. She laughed with him. It felt surreal to her as well.

Did Draco Malfoy just say he loved you too?

He was grinning from ear to ear, wide and unabashed. Hermione couldn't ever remember seeing him so happy. She realised she felt happy as well, tremendously happy. Almost high. Amor Videri couldn't even compare to the happiness she felt right now. She also felt a pang of pity. Pity for those who had to resort to love potions. Because real love was so much deeper, more intense, more challenging, more *exhilarating*. How could you ever even compare the two?

Draco loved her and she loved him and it was *real* .

Her arms flung around his neck and he didn't hesitate to scoop her in tightly for a kiss. A fervoured, passionate kiss.

They were glued to the lips for a good ten minutes before Hermione came up for air.

"We're in love!" Hermione gasped, her cheeks flushed, "Merlin, who could imagine you and I- It feels like we're in some weird...alternate universe or something. I'm in love with Draco Malfoy!"

Draco squeezed her tighter, beaming at the words.

"I could hear you say that over and over. I don't think I'd ever get tired of hearing it."

"I love you!"

"I love *you* !"

Draco pulled her in for another kiss, rolling on top of her.

"Gosh, we sound even more sappy off the potion!" Hermione laughed.

"It's way better, isn't it? I can't believe I ever thought that pink rubbish was love."

They kissed and laughed and continued to babble their love for each other.

Their kisses slowly became more heated.

Hermione's breath was heavier.

She was in *love* .

Draco's smile faded, to something more serious. With purpose.

One of his hands slid under her pyjama top and boldly squeezed her bare breast. She arched, gasping hard as his touch tingled her with warmth.

He kneaded her breast like she was his. He was looking right at her while he did it, seemingly enjoying her reactions with quiet satisfaction.

With one last pinch of her nipple, he slid the same hand down, down, below the waist of her pants. His fingers trailed over her mound and pressed between her wet pussy lips. She gasped with a little moan this time.

Her eyes fluttered. He refused to look away from her face. She ducked her chin, a little embarrassed at being observed with such laser focus, yet simultaneously thrilled by it.

"I want to watch you squirm for me," Draco breathed. As he said it, his fingers pressed into her entrance and she moaned hard.

As he slowly eased his digits inside her, her head tilted back, her mouth forming a perfect, wordless "O". His fingers curled and she whimpered with her eyes closed.

She couldn't look at him and at the same time she didn't want to look away.

Her eyes fluttered and a rush of pleasure swept over her as she saw the hunger in his eyes. He began to work her hole, his fingers rubbing at the perfect spot inside her walls. She began to squirm and pant harder, her hips making tiny motions towards his hand. He licked his lips and her body shivered.

He wanted a show? She would give him one.

She bit into her lower lip and slowly pulled up the hem of her shirt, to reveal both breasts. He exhaled a soft sigh of reverence as she bared herself to him.

"Fuck," he murmured, and pushed a third finger inside her. She keened.

She bucked her hips harder, now desperately chasing the orgasm her body began to crave. She was making soft whining sounds in her throat. Draco looked positively enraptured by her.

Just when she thought she was getting somewhere, Draco's fingers stopped moving inside her. He pulled them out and slowly licked and sucked her juices, causing Hermione to turn to jelly.

How was he so hot?

"Get undressed and get on all fours," he commanded. She quivered at how his order left no room for debate. Not that she wasn't already eagerly flinging her clothes off and scrambling onto her hands and knees on the bed.

She looked behind to see him discard his boxers, his cock erect and pointing at her. She licked her lips unconsciously.

His hands were on her hips. She felt the tip of his dick graze her nether regions. She shuddered.

She thought she could hear him reach for something. A soft buzzing sound.

"Draco, what in the world is tha- Oh! Ahhnn!"

The answer was clear; he had magicked his wand to vibrate and was now slipping the shaft between her pussy lips, moving it up and down, parting them.

She blushed furiously. She was going to make a mess of it!

But it felt so good. And also so... *personal* . A wand was an extension of the user, a powerful tool that became as much a part of a witch or wizard as their arm. A magic user's most precious possession that Draco was now sliding along Hermione's wet cunt. And sweet Merlin did it ever feel *good* .

Draco angled the wand so that the shaft was vibrating around her clit.

Hermione arched and whined in pleasure as jolts shot up her. Her pussy was aching. She *needed* him.

"Hold this here," Draco indicated firmly.

Hermione reached between her thighs and took the handle of the wand Draco was passing to her. She angled it in just the right spot, stimulating her clit.

With both his hands free, Draco placed them on her hips.

His tip squelched between her lips, prying into her hole. She moaned and backed into him.

She was already ready to cum. She could feel it bubbling.

He pushed inside her until his cock nudged the end of her tunnel.

His hands kneaded her ass. She could hear him breathing raggedly behind her.

She was about to ask what was taking him so long to fuck her when she felt his thumb graze over her asshole.

"Aaahhn!"

She yelped involuntarily as a huge shiver ripped through her body.

No, no, not there! That place is...too naughty!

But it gave her such a thrill.

"Do you like it when I do that?" Draco asked, his voice low. She wondered if he could make her cum with his voice alone.

"Yes," she found herself hissing. Despite her inner protests, her body was reacting almost violently to his touch and she found herself *needing* to know what being filled by Draco in both holes felt like.

His thumb began to earnestly massage around the rim of her asshole. With his cock already balls deep inside her, and the wand still vibrating away, Hermione felt ready to burst.

"Please..." she begged, unable to articulate anything more, " *Please* !"

Draco removed his thumb and for a split second, Hermione felt disappointed. But then, she felt him press it back between her cheeks, this time slick with saliva.

"Make sure you relax," he murmured, and slowly eased his thumb in.

Hermione's initial instinct was to clench in anticipation. It wasn't exactly pleasant. It even hurt a little.

Draco rubbed soothing circles on her lower back and she forced herself to relax.

"More?"

"Yes."

He eased in further, slowly and steadily. When his whole thumb nestled inside her, she found her walls were finally adjusting and the pain ebbed. Instead a newfound sense of satisfaction took over.

She was so *full* .

Her breathing came in rough pants. She began to rock her hips a little, grinding on Draco's cock while sliding her clit on his wand.

It was mind blowing.

He hadn't even started to thrust yet and she was on the brink of cumming.

"Fuck me, Draco, please, *fuck me* ," she moaned in a voice that was far too sultry and desperate to be her own.

He groaned. She felt his cock ease out of her slightly. And then he thrust powerfully back inside.

"Ahhhhh!! Good Godrick, bloody christ, yess! Oh god, oh god, ahhhhnn...ahhhhhh!"

She didn't know what she was saying. As Draco picked up the pace, his thumb in her arse and his hand holding her steady at the hip, she felt like she was being overwhelmed with sensations. His balls were slapping noisily against her cunt, adding another layer to this completely erotic experience.

"Fuck, that's...ughhhh you're so tight..." Draco gritted as both her holes clenched around him.

"I love you," he hissed, "I love you so goddamn much."

"Ahhhhn! I-I love...I love y- ahhhhnnnnn..."

Hermione couldn't get the words out fast enough. She came hard, harder than she could ever remember. It was impossible to hold herself up. She collapsed on the bed, her arms giving way as her toes curled and her body convulsed. Her face was pressed flat into the mattress.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked, sounding alarmed. She turned her head to the side, trying to reassure him with a contented look, though she could barely muster the energy for it.

"Yes. Yes. Goodness, yes. Please, don't- don't stop, I want you to come too..."

Draco let out a rattling breath.

As if to prove she was fine, she arched her back and began to rock back and forth, her hips gyrating, her lips gripping and stroking his cock.

She could hear him shudder and tighten his hold on her hips.

"Please..." she moaned, "Please...Come for me..."

He took over for her, thrusting deep inside her and she relaxed against the bed, enjoying herself as he had his way with her. She murmured soft encouragement and she felt him pick up the pace, chasing his climax.

"Ughh...oh god yess, just like that. That feels so good right there. I love you Draco, *I love you!* "

Draco let out a strangled grunt.

"C-coming..."

She felt him thrust one last time and his cock spewed everything it had. She sighed contentedly, pushing her ass flush against his hips and taking his load.

"Ughh...Hermione- You're...fuck..."

His monosyllables trailed off as he slumped forward, barely keeping himself from crushing her by propping himself up with an arm on either side of her.

"Yes...I agree..." she sighed happily, arching and rubbing her backside against his hips.

He groaned and leaned in to kiss her shoulder before gently plopping himself down on her, finishing his orgasm. The warmth of his chest felt so good on her back.

"I love you," he murmured softly.

"I love you," Hermione replied, barely above a whisper. It felt even more real somehow, post-coitus.

Their legs intertwined and Hermione enjoyed the feel of Draco's chest gently rising and falling against her as his breathing relaxed.

She reached down and found his wand somewhere lodged underneath her. It'd stopped vibrating awhile ago and she'd quite forgotten it until now.

"Oh no...I'm sorry, I think I've...I've made a bit of a mess of it."

Hermione hid her face behind a curtain of frizzy hair. Despite it having been Draco's idea, she was still quite embarrassed that his wand now smelt like... *her* .

"Don't worry about it," Draco murmured easily, taking it and tossing it on his pile of clothes, "If that wand is anything like me, it'll have enjoyed it immensely."

Hermione smiled into the pillows, her cheeks pink.

"I still can't believe it...We're really in love. Merlin's beard, where do we even *go* from here?"

"What do you mean?"

Draco peeled himself off her back to nestle in against her side, in a better listening position. She mourned the loss of his cock inside her.

"I mean you don't think this makes things more complicated? We're on...on completely opposite sides in everything! How are we even going to navigate this? When we were purely shagging everything was so simple. We show up here, we fool around, and that's that. But now..."

"What's changed, really?"

"Well, now I feel like I want to hold your hand, and walk with you to class, and take you to the Three Broomsticks, and study together and- and be a real couple."

Draco frowned.

"I would like that as well but...Do you think that's wise here? Don't get me wrong, once this year is over, I plan to take you to every place imaginable and spoil you silly. But people will give you a hard time here, if you're with me. I won't be responsible for ruining your last year at Hogwarts."

"You haven't *spoiled* anything! In fact, you're the one thing that's made me feel stable this year. I used to spend all my time with Harry and Ron and it's hard not to feel alone with them missing. Even Ginny - I love her to bits and I know she's trying - but activities with her almost always involve throngs of people- people who want to...to wring me dry with prying questions. You're the only one I've felt entirely myself with."

Draco pulled Hermione against his chest, but his brow remained lightly creased.

"You deserve to have someone who can give you everything you want, I'm the last person to deny that. But I've bullied a lot of people. More than a lot. I was cruel. I took pleasure out of

it, and now I'm reaping what I've sown. I can't drag you into that with me."

"You're not that same person anymore and I think, with time, people will see it too. I've been hated before by the whole school, you know. It's not new to me. Even Harry and Ron have ignored me at some point or another. I can handle whatever it is people'll say about me."

"But *I* can't. For Merlin's sake, can we just...just keep it a secret at least for now? We can work on a compromise but I can't - *can't* see you hated by everyone because of me. Please?"

Hermione sighed and relaxed into Draco's arms.

"Fine. I just wish...I wish everyone could see how different you are now. How nice you are."

She heard Draco hum contentedly behind her, as he softly stroked her arm.

"There's also one other matter we should probably discuss," Hermione murmured, reach for her wand on the floor.

She pointed it at her bag and out zoomed a glass jar filled a third of the way up with the remaining Amor Videri.

The jar floated over to them and plopped down on the bed.

"We never did put a clause in our agreement about what would happen to it if we fell in love," Hermione mused.

"It never even occurred to me. Not even in my wildest dreams could I imagine you ever loving me. It still feels like I could wake up at any second."

Hermione laughed and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Let's finally be rid of it, then," she declared, pointing her wand at the jar.

"Did you want to...to check if your odours changed? Not that I don't believe you when you say you love me, but..."

Hermione understood what he meant. He wasn't doubting her per se, but she knew how much he was struggling with himself. She knew he despised who he was, and therefore how could anyone really love him? She wanted him to know she had faith in him.

"I don't really need to. I know what I'm feeling for you is real," Hermione said confidently.

Her heart burned as Draco looked at her, a look that couldn't be anything other than adoration.

She vanished the jar, once and for all, and they settled into each other's arms.

Suspicion

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Kiss Me Until My Lips Fall Off by Lebanon Hanover

Hermione knew that Draco was, by no means, a late riser, but she had still managed to wash, dress and plait her hair by the time he roused at the ripe hour of six thirty in the morning.

The sun was rising, the birds were chirping and Hermione was pleased to take in the full beauty of the luscious garden colours in the daylight - though she couldn't dawdle. She was a woman on a mission. As she returned inside the tent, she saw Draco turn over in bed, his eyes peeling open as the sun filtered in through the open flap.

"Rise and shine! I'm off to the library soon, I want to be there at eight sharp when it opens, to investigate the book before class!" Hermione notified him brightly as she swept inside. "I made a tub appear over there if you want to wash, and there are still some grapes and cheese left. I noticed the cooling charm you put on the basket, very clever I must say."

Draco mumbled something unintelligible as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Wuh...Where are we?"

"The Room, of course!" Hermione trilled, double-checking she packed all her books for class that day.

Draco rolled over and peered, bleary-eyed, as Hermione gave her bag a satisfied pat and buckled it closed.

"So it wasn't all a dream then? Us declaring our undying love and eternal affection for one another," he drawled.

Hermione's cheeks pinkened. She felt her body heat at the mention of love. It felt so new, so fresh. But it also somehow felt right.

She sat on the bed next to him. He looked awfully charming with his hair mussed and his eyes still half open in a relaxed sort of way.

"No, it's all very real," she murmured, and kissed him.

It was hard not to get carried away kissing Draco. His lips were soft and clung to hers in a way that made her quiver.

Before she knew it, her hand was sliding down his torso and over the sheets that barely covered his hips. All thoughts of her morning plans walked right out the door as Draco took her hand and placed it firmly over the second tent he had managed to pitch in less than twelve hours. They both groaned.

This was nonsense. She had to *be* somewhere. The love poisoner was out there somewhere and they-

Draco's hand wrapped around hers, forcing her to squeeze his morning wood over the sheets. He groaned louder. She revelled in the sounds he made at her touch. She couldn't resist stroking him once just to watch how his body tensed. She could feel a wet spot on the fabric from his precum. Her lips were slightly parted as she watched him react each time she stroked him.

Merlin , he was hot.

She kissed him harder, stroking him faster. He was groaning into her mouth. His tongue searched for hers frenetically. Her hand slipped under the sheets and she felt the warm veins

of his cock press into her palm. She stroked him once more, spreading his precum up and down his length.

Wanting Draco was like eating at a buffet but never feeling satiated. She always wanted *more*.

Finally, she managed to wrench herself away from his lips.

"We shouldn't- I have to be at the library and-"

Draco was looking at her with a mix of despair and incredulousness.

"Hermione, have mercy. You wouldn't leave a poor man like this,"

He gestured to his weeping, rock-hard cock that was now free of the sheets, pointing sky-high.

Hermione bit her lip. Her pussy clenched. She wanted him badly.

"W-we...we don't have *time* -"

"Let's make it quick then."

His voice was low, raspy. His eyes bored into hers, silently communicating his want for her, as if his throbbing cock wasn't enough of an indication.

It's true that it *would* be a shame to waste such a perfectly good erection. A pity really.

"I...Oh all right, go on then!" She conceded breathily, and her pussy seemed to constrict in triumph. Her knickers were soaked.

His hands grasped under her arse and he toppled her onto her back. The sheets fell down and his bare cock surged forward eagerly. Hermione gasped in pleasant surprise. It felt naughty to have him manhandle her, even more so given the fact that she was fully clothed and he was stark naked.

She started fumbling at the waistband of her skirt, searching for the zipper. In her haste, she was clumsy and she made sounds of frustration as she failed to find it. Her wand was too far to simply vanish her clothes.

"Too slow," Draco murmured. She had a split second to take note of the mischievous gleam in his eyes before his hands grasped the fabric around her inner thighs and yanked.

Rip .

She squeaked and her pussy throbbed painfully. He looked like he was ready to eat her up. Literally. A moan escaped her.

Draco wasted no time. Her panties were roughly yanked aside and his mouth was on her. The sound she made was feral as his tongue swiped at her. By the wet sounds his mouth made on her cunt, she could tell she was ready for him.

"Fuck me, fuck me, quick!" She moaned, her thighs shaking with need. It was no longer about making haste to get to the library at this point. Her whole body ached for him to be inside her and she *needed* him.

"Not until you cum," Draco said firmly. His mouth was wet from her juices. She threw her head back and squealed as he dove back between her thighs. The flat of his tongue pressed into her clit and she instinctively rocked against it.

He devoured her hungrily, fucking her with his fingers and tongue until her eyes rolled and her toes curled.

Her orgasm had barely abated when Draco was already pushing his cock past her pussy lips. He slid in so fast, she barely had time to register what was happening. She wrapped her limbs around him and pulled him close, bucking her hips until they smashed into his. She kissed him and moaned into his mouth. He tasted like her and it made her pussy clench hard around his girth.

"Fuck...oh fuck..." he groaned as his hips slapped against her.

He came promptly after.

Hermione was breathing hard, in shock at how fast things had escalated. Wasn't she practically on her way out the door two seconds ago? When did their libidos even have time to ramp? Drace always seemed to manage to get her riled up in two shakes of a Crup's tail.

Speaking of which, he was grinning down at her in a boyishly charming way. He had a way of making her forget everything else that was happening around her and, even more surprising, she didn't mind one bit.

"Well, that was...was unexpectedly delightful," she panted, regaining her breath.

"Mmmm...too short for my taste, though ripping through your panty hose definitely does... *things* to me," Draco growled, nipping her ear playfully before slowly pulling out of her.

She beamed coquettishly.

After a few *Scourgifys* and a *Reparo* on her tights, she was ready to go. Their little adventure had taken all of ten minutes and everything was still on schedule.

The one thing that almost made them late was Draco painstakingly styling his hair. It mollified Hermione a little to know that his strands didn't just spring naturally into a perfect arrangement. All the same, he probably spent more time on coiffing alone than it had taken him to scrub, change and eat a quick breakfast and vanish the remains.

As they departed from the gardens and back into the castle, Hermione felt like she was rudely snapped back to reality. It was like they had been on a camping vacation. Now, as the stony walls of Hogwarts surrounded them and the Room's door vanished, a part of her mourned the happy bubble they were leaving behind.

They both reflexively took a step apart from each other. No kisses out here. No hand holding. No sweet words. Hermione wanted to dash back into the Room, dragging Draco with her and stay for at least a fortnight.

She sighed dejectedly.

They took separate routes to the library.

Hermione arrived first, nodding nervously to Madam Pince. Her heart was thumping away in her chest. She tried to keep her walk slow, casual, even though all she wanted to do was make a wild dash to the shelves.

She made her way to the Restricted Section and the new wards put in place by McGonagall let her through as a seventh year.

She immediately began searching through the stacks, her eyes whizzing back and forth as she combed sections, titles and authors.

She had the time to survey a good chunk before she heard Draco arrive behind her.

"Sorry I'm late," he murmured, "Had to sneak my way round here so Pince wouldn't see me in the Restricted Section. Which shelves have you checked?"

Indeed, as a former Death Eater, a whole section reserved for the Dark Arts was probably the last place Draco wanted to be seen.

Hermione was crouched down, sifting through alphabeticals on the bottom row when she heard Draco make a small sound of triumph.

"Got it," he murmured, pulling a familiar tome from the highest shelf above Hermione's head.

She scrambled to her feet as Draco flipped the pages over, going straight to the library card at the back.

"What does it say? Let me see!" She urged.

She watched impatiently, bouncing on the balls of her feet, as Draco stared at the page.

"There's no name," he said stonily and shut the book, the pages loudly clapping together.

The blank look on his face made Hermione uneasy.

Something was wrong.

"Let me see, Draco," Hermione repeated quietly.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing there."

Hermione bit her lip. Why didn't he want her to see the card? Who was he protecting?

"Draco...give me the book. I won't jump to any conclusions. We'll talk about this. But you know I need to see the name."

Draco looked impassible for a moment and then a small crack appeared in his facade.

He looked... *scared* ?

"Fine. But before you look, you need to know I had nothing to do with this."

Something felt cold inside her.

"Draco, give me the book."

He gave it to her reluctantly and she immediately flipped to the back. There was the checkout card, stuck on the back cover as expected.

There weren't many names on it.

At the top was Micheal Corner. Even though Hermione knew he had probably needed this book to brew the potion for Astoria, it still made her stomach lurch to see the proof in writing. To think that all the time they had spent brewing Amor Videri, his name had been here all along, in her hands, and she'd never thought to look.

Underneath that, was her name, printed in her small, neat script.

And under that, scrawled in rough letters, was a name that she had a feeling would be there, but she was still shocked to see.

She read it once. Twice. Three times to be sure.

There was no mistaking it. It was a name she had grown to be far too familiar with, after all.

Draco Malfoy.

It said *Draco Malfoy* .

"Hermione," Draco whispered hoarsely. She flinched and took a small step away from him. She felt like she had been dunked in a bucket of ice.

How was this possible?

Draco held his hands up to her, like she was a scared animal he was trying to calm. She must look scared of him. All she could feel was numbness.

"Hermione, I swear, I *swear* this isn't me who wrote this."

He kept his voice low, but there was an edge to it. A desperation? She looked back down at the name, hoping it would magically change to someone else's, but 'Draco Malfoy' seemed to mock her in its clarity.

"Please, you have to believe me, I would *never* - I have no reason to want to poison you or Cho!"

His hands reached for her. Looking for her comfort, her reassurance.

She backed away from him.

She felt like her brain was close to short circuiting.

All the old doubts about him she'd thought she'd long overcome came flooding back.

She hadn't really known him that long after all. They'd been seeing each other for what, a month and a half?

But why? *Why* ? Why would he check out the book?

Who could he be possibly trying to poison?

Why come here to the library with her?

Unless he was pretending to be framed?

He would have to be a phenomenal actor.

But what if he *was* a phenomenal actor?

Hermione could feel her doubt and panic rising. Her breathing was shallow.

She had admitted to being in *love* with him!

She had felt *safe* with him!

She could hear him pleading to her but it seemed like a faraway echo. Her vision was blurring. She felt like her windpipe was closing, cutting off her air supply.

"Hermione, please, I'm begging you! I know how this looks but I love you- you have to know that's true! I wouldn't...wouldn't do something like this!"

Was he lying? Trying desperately to cover for himself? She didn't know anymore. Old and new Draco were warring in her mind. She was trying to fight the ugly serpent that she knew wasn't him anymore, but it was sinking its teeth in her, poisoning her...

He tried to grab her shoulders but she stumbled away, almost falling over.

"Stop! Stop, okay? I need to think!"

She was far too loud. She felt frantic and confused and needed to get her thoughts in order and it was making her forget where they were. They both glanced over and could see Madam Pince through the shelves. Was she squinting in their direction?

Hermione and Draco both fell silent, holding their breaths. After a time, Madam Pince's head lowered back to her papers.

Hermione closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. She could feel herself relaxing.

Don't panic. Be rational here.

She opened her eyes and looked back down at the book. Draco's name came into focus.

It was scrawled so aggressively. Messy. Evil. Taunting.

The answer was there, and it was obvious.

She had just needed a moment to calm down and realise it.

She exhaled in relief and staggered forward into Draco's surprised embrace.

"I'm so sorry Draco, I believe you. It was just a- a shock," she finally managed, her head stuffed in Draco's shoulder.

"You...you do?" He asked weakly. His voice was small. His arms wrapped around her uncertainly.

She looked up at him. He looked pale and unconvinced, like she was about to wrench away from him at any second.

"This isn't like your handwriting at all. Nor Corner's, nor anyone in our potions class for that matter. Besides, I don't think you would do this to me. To anyone. It wouldn't make sense. I trust you. I *do*."

That last part she said for herself as much as for him. Seeing his name in the book had reminded her that the old Malfoy still had the ability to haunt her, planting seeds of doubt in the new Draco. But she didn't want to doubt him. She loved him and trusted him. She would work on reminding herself of those things.

Draco let out a shaky exhale.

"I don't blame you for doubting me. I would doubt me, too. For a moment I thought...I thought..." he trailed off, looking lost.

"I love you," she reassured.

"I...I can't lose you, Hermione," he whispered back. She realised he had been holding up his Occlumency shields until now. Where before he had looked unsettlingly calm, now she could see how afraid and distressed he really was. She could cry.

She hugged him tightly and awkwardly, with the heavy book tucked in the crook of her arm.

"You won't lose me. You *won't*," she said fiercely and he squeezed her to him in response.

When their breathing eased, she let him go and began to riffle through the pages, trying to see if there were any annotations, anything else that might give her a clue. She tried tapping the name with her wand, casting *Finite Incantatem*, but nothing happened.

"So the love poisoner is trying to frame me," Draco said, his face hardening in stoicism. His Occlumency shields were never down for long.

Hermione frowned at the book and tapped the checkout card with her wand once more. She conjured a duplicate that she stuffed in her robes' pocket before shelving the book. It couldn't hurt to have a sample of their writing in case.

"How did they get your name in here? Madam Pince is usually so careful about who takes out what," Hermione wondered, her brow creased in worry.

"A quick Confundus would do the trick and wouldn't be difficult for someone who's decently practised. It wouldn't take a strong spell either, to stall her for the time to write a name down."

"Why *you*, though? Because you're an easy target to put the blame on as a known ex-Death Eater? Or because..."

Her blood ran cold.

"Because they're after you and they know about us," Draco finished for her.

Hermione felt dead inside.

"That's...but why?"

"Because they're infatuated with you and they're unhinged."

Draco's mask flickered for an instant, but it was enough for Hemrione to glimpse his mutinous expression. Hermione didn't want to believe it, but she'd have to be blind not to notice how much the public interest in her had increased exponentially this year.

"So you're saying the person who planted the so-called Invigoration Draught, planted it for me. Maybe they planted two to make sure I would take at least one. But you ended up drinking the other one and I imagine that wasn't part of the plan. Somehow, they know this and they're covering their tracks by putting your name in this book instead of theirs. That means...oh god... *oh god*..."

Hermione staggered against the bookshelf, and would have toppled it over if not for Draco pulling her back into his arms.

"They...t-they might've...might've *seen* us in that lab! Oh Draco..."

"You don't know that, they might've left in a hurry so they wouldn't get caught," Draco whispered soothingly.

Hermione was mortified. To think someone might have witnessed such a humiliating ordeal... She was embarrassed and distressed. And *furious*.

"If they haven't told anyone by now, I don't they will. They wouldn't risk implicating themselves as a potential suspect," Draco murmured.

"But this means they're after you too! What if they try to hurt you?"

"I can handle myself. I'm more worried about you."

"I'll be fine," Hermione said firmly, "Just...be careful, all right? I have a bad feeling about this person. I think they might be more dangerous than they seem. I wish I could just...go everywhere with you and- and watch out for you..."

Draco looked calm, but his eyes seemed strained.

"I know what you mean," he said, so low she almost missed it.

The bell made both of them jump. It was already time for class.

"Go," Draco told her, "I'll leave shortly after you. Go on, or you'll be late."

Hermione didn't want to leave him. She didn't want things to end here on such a worrisome note. But he was ushering her down the aisle and she realised they didn't have much choice.

"Take care of yourself, stay safe and I'll see you in the Room-" she babbled hastily as he gave her a soft push towards the door.

"Tonight."

Her breath caught in her throat. She loved him so much.

"Tonight," she smiled, and ran to Charms as fast as her legs would take her.

//

The week dragged on.

Hermione was jumpy and irritated for almost all of it.

She had considered going to McGonagall but to what end? They had no new evidence other than the fact that this mysterious enemy seemed on to them. If anything, it might make McGonagall suspect Draco even more, and Hermione couldn't have that.

She thought about telling Ginny everything. She came close a couple of times but something always stopped her. There was never a right time. Ginny always had places to go or was surrounded by groups of people. Hermione knew if she asked Ginny for a private word, Ginny would be there for her in an instant.

But how would Ginny react to her and Draco?

Draco, whose father was responsible for Ginny being possessed by Tom Riddle. Draco, who had done innumerable things to her brothers and her boyfriend. Draco, who had let Death Eaters into Hogwarts. How understanding would she be? Would she tell anyone?

Hermione found herself cloistering herself away from people even more, out of sheer paranoia.

Only her evenings with Draco brought her happiness and even those were tinted with worry.

Neither was happy in their current situation but neither could think of a solution other than to catch the love poisoner as quickly as possible.

She couldn't even muster the excitement to tackle their newest assignment in potions, one she had long anticipated and their most complex brew yet; the Wolfsbane potion.

"You know the drill," Slughorn cheerily instructed, "Off into pairs with you and let's see if you can complete the first page of instructions by the end of class. I don't think I need to stress that this potion, whilst one of the most technically difficult ones, is also one of the most important to concoct correctly. If it isn't exactly right, the consequences could be catastrophic, resulting in permanent severe injury or sometimes death. While I don't expect any of you to get it right the first time, I encourage you to try, as the ingredients are very expensive and rare. If you find yourself in need of brewing this in the real world, you won't be as generously provided for by the Hogwarts ingredient cabinet."

Hermione straightened up. She couldn't allow herself to be distracted. She was determined to rise to Slughorn's challenge and brew this potion as perfectly as possible.

She turned to Luna, but as she did, a shadow fell onto the table between them. Luna wasn't looking at Hermione at all, but at the person who loomed in front of their cauldrons.

The room had gone eerily silent.

"Pair with me, Granger."

Hermione whipped her head around to see Draco right in front of her desk, staring coldly down at her. She recognized his Occlumency mask immediately.

"I...I beg your pardon?"

No one was even pretending to ignore them. The whole class, Slughorn included, was gaping at Draco. Everyone, except Luna that is. She had the same listless smile on her face.

"Pair with me," Draco repeated, "This is one of the most difficult potions and you're the smartest witch here. I also happen to have the second highest grade in this class, so it'll be an easy O between the two of us."

Hermione glanced around.

No one could be buying this?

Draco Malfoy wanting to pair with Hermione Granger for the best grade?

But then, why not? He needed top grades probably more than anyone, since he had the most to redeem himself from. If he wanted to pair with her, a Muggleborn, he must look desperate enough to everyone else.

Indeed she heard a few titters. She was pretty sure she saw Ernie scoff loudly. Nott was eyeing them with the widest smirk she'd ever seen on someone. Hannah looked cartoonishly incredulous and Daphne looked like she was sucking on something sour.

"Ooh goody, are we swapping partners? You don't mind, Hermione? I've been meaning to talk to Theodore Nott about a good surprise gift for Tracey as I think they're quite close," Luna chimed in.

Hermione almost guffawed at how fast Nott's smirk vanished from his face.

"I...Well...No, no go ahead Luna. I'll team up with Malfoy."

Hermione did not expect the deluge of outrage following that statement.

Hannah gasped, her hands covering her mouth. Daphne let out a loud disgusted sound. Padma cried out in outrage. Ernie rose to his feet, his cheeks pink.

"I object! Hermione, do not feel like you need to be paired with this fiend! You can join Hannah and I-"

"It's *fine* , Ernie, it's just a potion," Hermione answered, trying not to sound too irritated.

"What's *wrong* with you?" Padma shot out, standing up and addressing Malfoy, "Haven't you caused enough grief? You shouldn't even *be* back at Hogwarts!"

Micheal Corner looked like he wanted to say something, but instead, shrunk down into his seat, looking everywhere except at Draco.

Draco's eyes narrowed slightly but he looked mostly unaffected which seemed to incense Padma more.

Daphne rose as well, glaring daggers at Draco.

"Come Draco, join us instead. We'll brew this in a pinch, the three of us," she gestured to Blaise but there was a menacing way about the way she offered a seat with them. As if saying *take it or else* . Blaise looked rather amused.

Slughorn's eyes were darting around in a panicky way, apparently unsure of how to handle the situation.

Draco ignored Daphne, his eyes only for Hermione.

She could almost hear what he was thinking by his stare alone.

Do you see now? If being potion partners is this controversial, imagine what'll happen if what we actually are, goes public. Are you sure this is what you still want?

Hermione stared stubbornly back at him. She could almost see the shadow of his smirk.

People were exclaiming in a mess of voices around her.

"Hermione, you can't possibly be serious- after what he's *done* -"

"You have no right, *no right* -"

"The audacity of it all, asking Hermione Granger of all people-!"

"That's enough! I said, enough!"

Slughorn finally regained his authority, though he still looked uncertain.

"Miss Granger," he beckoned to her, though Hermione noticed he stayed a good distance away from Draco, "Perhaps we could brew this one together and Mr. Malfoy here can join Miss Greengrass and Mr. Zabini?"

He was giving her an out. It infuriated her.

She knew how much Draco was detested. None of this was that much of a surprise.

But she knew he was trying. And it made her angry that only she could see it. It was just a bloody *potion* .

"Thank you Professor, that is very kind. But it's fine, I'll pair with you," she directed the last at Draco who cocked his eyebrow infinitesimally.

The only sound in the room was Luna humming as she collected her things to sit next to Theo.

"Good luck, Hermione," Luna said with a dreamy smile before floating over to the horrified Theo.

Draco sat.

Still no one spoke.

"Err...Well! All right then, that's settled! Get to it then, we've already wasted enough precious time! Remember, I want to see the first page completed by the end of class!"

Slughorn practically fled to his desk, casting fearful glances in Draco's direction as he did. Hermione's eyes' strained from trying not to roll them.

"I'll prepare the first ingredients if you organise what we need next," Draco said curtly.

"On it."

Hermione and Draco began their potion and, slowly, the other classmates did the same.

The first fifteen minutes were tense. Everyone seemed to be politely trying to go about their business but Hermione could feel their eyes on her.

Let them oggle , she thought angrily, *they'll realise there's nothing to see here except two people cordially making a potion together.* Maybe if Hermione Granger was seen making this small peace offering to Draco Malfoy, things would get better for him. People would see he wasn't the arrogant bully he used to be. This hopeful thought calmed her.

When the sounds of classroom discussion finally returned to a normal cadence, Hermione cast a subtle Muffliato around them.

"That was awfully bold of you. A heads up would've been nice."

"I needed you to look realistically surprised. I'm the villainous Malfoy cornering the brave Granger into not backing down from a challenge, nothing more."

Hermione snorted.

"But you're *not* villainous," she protested, as she scanned the list to double check everything. They were already making good time at the rate they were going. She felt confident they would finish ahead of schedule.

Draco continued to work in silence though she noticed he gave her the tiniest of half-smiles.

"What made you decide to do it?" She asked.

Draco's eyes darted around the room before answering. Even with Muffliato, he was cautious.

"I still don't think it's a good idea to be seen publicly as a couple-"

Hermione's heart did a leap. They were a *couple* .

"-but it gnaws at me that I can't keep a better watch on you with some poisoner traipsing about. This seemed like a good compromise. This way we have an excuse to talk, maybe even study together" he added. A hopeful lilt tinted his usual drawl.

"So protective. Is this your roundabout way of asking me on a study date?" She teased, trying to keep the smile off her face since people were probably still watching them.

Draco's lip twitched.

"You caught me. Pass me that pestle, would you?"

"Maybe...if people get used to seeing us together...If hypothetically we were to come out as a couple, it might go down better. After that, we'll need to slice these,"

"It could go the opposite way too. You saw how everyone reacted when I approached you. Are you prepared to deal with that constantly? This is only the tip of the iceberg. I'll get on the slicing. How are the flames looking?"

"Good, the temperature is almost ready. People will surely get used to it-"

She thought of Ginny with a twinge. Ginny would be able to forgive her, right? And Ron and Harry?

"-and besides, we're not doing anything wrong. You're allowed to change and we're allowed to be in love. Things aren't set in stone. *People* aren't set in stone. If anything, doesn't this show that the war is behind us? That mending bridges and rebuilding is possible to the fullest extent? We can toss those in the cauldron, quickly now, it's time sensitive."

"Here, I'll scrape them in. I could be using you, you know. Cosying up to Hermione Granger, superstar of the revolution, to get my good name and influence back."

"Seven...eight...nine...ten..." Hermione muttered in concentration, stirring the dry ingredients exactly fourteen times before answering.

"I know that's not true, and so do you and everyone that matters will see it as well," she replied firmly. She had to believe it was true.

"I don't want us to not work because of what everyone thinks," Hermione continued, handing Draco silver pellets to weigh and be melted down, "If it doesn't work out, it has to be because we're not compatible, or you get tired of me, or you meet someone new or-"

He interrupted her before she could go down that road.

"I can't imagine getting tired of you, and I definitely don't think I'll meet someone new, strictly statistically speaking. What do you think my odds are of meeting another cleverest witch of her age who saved the wizarding world, who miraculously can forgive all my wrongdoings and, on top of that, has an incredible rack?"

"Good Godric, must you say that *here*?" Hermione hissed, trying and failing at looking unbothered and unflattered as her cheeks flushed red.

He smirked and passed her the measured silver. She sighed in exasperation and rolled her eyes, but she knew he knew she was secretly pleased.

"Now, stop being silly, I need to concentrate. This is the part where things get a little tricky."

They worked well together, but of course Hermione already knew that.

Draco was more efficient than Luna and quicker to fill in the gaps Hermione left open. Luna, while extremely competent, never seemed in any hurry, taking her time with each step. Draco communicated just enough to always be busy, but never stepped on Hermione's toes. He barely glanced at the recipe and she wondered if he had already learnt it by heart.

It was even more apparent to Hermione that Draco had been trained not just by a master potioneer, but a master strategist. Snape hadn't cut a single corner with Draco and Hermione would have expected nothing less.

Nearing the end of class, Slughorn made his rounds, giving comments and corrections.

He stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes bugging, when he arrived at their station.

"My, my, *my* ! What have we here?" He asked with interest.

He leaned in, observing their progress. They had managed to reach the stewing stage, which was a whole half page further than what Slughorn had assigned them. This meant their potion could steep for the week and they could pick up where they left off next week, putting them miles ahead of the rest of the class. Everyone else had to start over.

"This is... *most* impressive. Yes, the hue and texture...just right! Even, dare I say, better than some professional brews I've seen. Well done *indeed* . You two certainly make a good team. Unexpected. Very unexpected. Twenty points to Gryffindor and Slytherin apiece."

The whole class was staring at them in silence. Hermione had never seen a more anticlimactic reaction to a forty House point increase.

Hermione wanted to turn to them and yell *See? Draco Malfoy and I are perfectly fine and you can all mind your sodding business!* She chose the more diplomatic route of beaming at Slughorn's praise.

Slughorn positively beamed back. And then, to Hermione's surprise, he gave Draco a tentative nod. He hurried off right after, shaking his head, as if he couldn't quite believe it.

Draco looked stony.

Everyone packed up their bags in silence.

"Hermione, well done indeed. Your potion looks impeccable, though I can't say I'm surprised."

Ernie was hovering behind her. Hermione noticed Padma and Hannah waiting at the exit.

Hermione frowned.

They wanted gossip.

They wanted her to join them, and tell them how awful Draco was, and how she regretted pairing with him. She could see the unasked questions and accusations on their faces.

They think she paired with Draco because she wouldn't back down from him.

That she was *brave* to face him.

Draco was right; to everyone, he was the villain and she was the heroine.

Sod them all.

"I couldn't have done it without Malfoy. He's a very talented potioneer," she retorted a bit too brusquely. She noticed Ernie flinch but she was too angry to care.

"I'm sure, I'm sure," Ernie said, sounding entirely unconvinced, "But I know you're undoubtedly the driving force. You would've done excellent with *anyone*."

Hermione bristled.

He obviously meant with him and Hannah. He was trying to *rescue* her, for pete's sake.

"Thank you, Ernie," she replied stiffly. She saw him open his mouth again but she didn't want to hear it. She had had enough of their concern for a fortnight.

"If you'll excuse us, we're off to the library to get a head start on that Wolfsbane essay," she slung her bag over her shoulder.

"You...you mean the one that was *just* assigned to us? And who is 'we'?"

"Malfoy, of course. We're potion partners now."

It was worth it to see both Ernie and Draco gobsmacked.

Ernie's jaw came unhinged. His eyes popped. His brows flew up high and his lower lip trembled in outrage.

Draco was much more subdued. His eyes widened almost imperceptibly, but Hermione was growing accustomed to his microscopic reactions.

"Coming?" She tossed at Draco, pushing past Ernie before he could protest, marching right by Hannah and Padma who looked equally confused.

After a beat, she could hear Draco catching up to her in the hallway, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

"A *heads up* would've been nice, though I can't say this impromptu kidnapping isn't exciting," he said in a low drawl. People were already turning around to watch the pair of them walking down the hallway. Hermione marched at a brisk pace, ignoring them all.

"Bugger all of them! I give the news until suppertime tonight to spread. People will gossip about it for the next couple of weeks and then hopefully we'll be left in peace. It's just a *potion* ."

Draco smirked.

"It's not just a potion and you know it. It's the savior of Muggles and poor things, tolerating one of the biggest traitors of Hogwarts. We'll be lucky if this blows over in a couple of *months* ."

Hermione pouted. Draco didn't seem to mind.

"You were right," she conceded, turning a corner far too fast and startling a gaggle of second years, "Coming out as a couple would've been...would've been a lot for people, wouldn't it? A lot for both of us to handle as well."

"Pardon me? Did you just say I was right?"

"You're right all the time!"

"I know. But it's rare you acknowledge it. You much prefer reminding me when I'm *wrong* ."

"Well, if you stopped being wrong, I wouldn't have to!"

Draco chuckled and hid it quickly as they passed more goggling students.

"So..." Draco picked up, when the loiterers were out of earshot, "Are you taking me on a study date to the library? Out in the open? How positively daring."

"I could use your help finding books for this essay. If you don't mind?"

"A little precocious, aren't you? This essay is due in four weeks. Maybe our time would be better spent... *elsewhere*."

His eyes glittered as he said it. Hermione felt her cheeks warm up.

"I usually always start my essays this early. That way, I have more time to start my other essays early. It's called getting things done efficiently."

Draco heaved a large, dramatic sigh.

"Fine. *Fine*. To the library. Though if my hands wander under the table, you can hardly blame me."

Hermione squeaked and looked around quickly to make sure no one was in eavesdropping distance.

" *Draco* !"

"It's Malfoy in public. You can save 'Draco' for when my fingers find the sweetness between your thighs."

Hermione gasped audibly and clamped her mouth shut.

Why did Draco have to be so *distracting*?

There were still a couple of hours before supper and Hermione was determined to make the most of it. She found the time between the last class and the last meal of the day was perfect to get things done, since everything was fresh in her mind and it left her time in the evenings to read leisurely.

She usually went to the library on her own. Most students were decompressing at this hour.

It was nice to have a willing partner for once. Certainly, Draco had made it clear a few more times that he'd drag her into the nearest broom closet and shag her silly if she wanted, but ultimately he followed her all the way to her favourite library desk at the back.

Even so, it had taken all of her self restraint to reject the broom closet offer.

Once they settled in with their books, Hermione found that studying with Draco was...nice.

They pooled their research together and worked mostly in silence. Every now and then he'd give her knee a secret squeeze under the table, but otherwise he behaved. Hermione suspected he was careful since a group of Hufflepuffs across the room kept glancing their way, whispering to each other.

It was odd but...it felt for the first time like the old days with Harry and Ron. Solving a mystery, working on schoolwork - only in some ways (and Hermione felt a little guilty admitting this to herself) better.

Since Draco had acted like such a knob before, it had been easy to miss any of his qualities. But he was extremely intelligent.

It was different working with someone who seemed to take his essays seriously. Ron had never liked doing any homework and Harry, while much more studious, never liked potions for obvious reasons.

It was nice having a potions partner. An excellent potions partner.

Hermione found herself glancing at Draco as he poured over a Chapter on the first recorded uses of Wolfsbane. He had a look of deep concentration, his eyes whizzing across the page.

She felt something stir inside.

There was something about the way the corner of his mouth twitched when he read something he disagreed with. Or maybe it was the way he carefully turned pages with a slight reverence. Or moreso the way his Adam's apple bobbed almost carelessly when he swallowed.

She was extremely aroused.

Reaching under the table, she slid a hand up his thigh.

He barely reacted. He only raised his head slightly, to turn and look at her. His gaze smouldered. She returned it with a sly smile and placed her hand between his legs, squeezing his crotch.

She was rewarded by making his lips part slightly.

"Hermione...I thought we were going to play nice here," he warned, though the look he gave her begged for the opposite.

"We are. I plan to play *very* nice with you, in fact."

She could feel his cock stiffen under his pants and she smiled ingratiatingly.

"Hermione..." Draco said distrustfully as he watched her look around and duck under the table.

"What's gotten into you? We can't do this here, there's too many...too many...ohhh..."

Normally she wouldn't be so brazen. But they were at a table at the back of the library, with shelves obscuring the view. Of course, anyone could walk by. But at this time of day, people would be filtering to the Great Hall for supper.

And so, Hermione felt perfectly at ease unzipping Draco's pants and fishing his cock out, interrupting him mid-sentence.

She wished she could see the look on his face when she popped the tip of his cock inside her mouth to suckle at his precum. The loud gasp he made was definitely satisfying though.

"Hermione...I can't- can't keep quiet if you...if you..."

She ignored him, pushing him slowly into her mouth until his tip nudged the back of her throat. He hissed. She could hear his ragged breathing, see his legs open for her. For all his protests, he clearly wanted more.

Her tongue rubbed the underside of his shaft.

She kept him there, savouring the weight of him in her mouth, before pushing him out and gasping for air.

Her knickers were soaked. Sucking him while in a public library was far more arousing than she had intended it to be.

She took one of his heavy balls in her mouth, lathing him with her tongue. His breathing was getting louder, more ragged. She moved to the other ball, sucking gently.

When they were thoroughly wetted, she took them both in her hand, massaging them. She proceeded to take Draco's weeping cock back into her mouth, pumping him slowly. He tasted delicious.

"Unnghh..." She heard him moan softly.

It was music to her ears.

She wrapped her other hand around the base of his cock and pulled the skin up and down while her tongue dragged over his wet head. She could see him shifting in his chair, his hips slowly inching towards her, pushing his cock against her lips.

She obliged, taking him in her mouth once more and pumping him.

"Ahh...Fuck...Hermione, stop, stop, it's too good, I can't-"

A louder, garbled moan ripped from his throat and she heard noise on the table. It sounded like he'd leaned forward, propped up a book to hide his face and maybe stuffed a fist in his mouth. His moans were now muffled but more frequent as she deepthroated him.

"This is so bad. You're so bad. We...we... *fuck* ..."

She felt his hand wind into her hair. She made a delighted sound with her mouth full. She slammed her face between his legs, jamming his head into her throat. She wanted to show him he could use her. She *wanted* him to .

Catching on, Draco began to push her head onto him, his hips beginning to buck.

"Shit...you're unbelievable..." He hissed as he began to fuck her face.

Hermione clenched her eyes shut as his wet shaft slid roughly in and out of her lips. Drool was dribbling from the corners of her mouth and down her chin. Her eyes watered from the force of his thrusts. Her own eagerness to take him in as much as possible outweighed any discomfort, by far. In fact, she found she liked being at his mercy. She was his good girl. *His* .

"I'm cumming!"

He pushed her face hard onto his cock and she made a sound of delight as she felt his hot sperm gush down her throat. She swallowed and swallowed, loving the taste because it was *him*. Her pussy was throbbing.

"Fuck...Hermione..."

He moaned her name in a muffled voice as he pulsed between her lips and she drank every last drop.

When he finally finished, he backed up his chair and bent down. She saw his face appear, looking down at her intensely.

She was on her knees with her thighs parted, lips and chin wet, hair dishevelled, eyes watery. Her pussy felt ready to explode.

"Please..." was all she managed to whimper.

"Get behind those shelves. Now."

Draco rewarded her by pushing her against a bookcase and fingering her until she came. She could see the heads of a couple of students through the shelves but no one looked their way, though Hermione was too far gone caring. Draco kept his other hand clamped over her mouth

so that the noises she made were hushed. Good thing too, because Hermione was far less skilled at being quiet than Draco was.

She unravelled in his arms in one of her favourite places in the world.

Reaction

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - 17 Crimes by AFI

Hermione couldn't say she wasn't expecting it, but at the same time, she was taken aback by what she considered was a dramatic exaggeration.

Ginny, Seamus, Dean and Neville converged on her at supper, while onlookers peered over, not even hiding their eavesdroppage.

"What's this about you working with Malfoy in potions? I can't believe Slughorn would even allow it!" Ginny stormed, throwing her hands up in anger.

Hermione pushed her peas around her plate.

"It's fine, really-"

"It's not fine, you're the smartest witch there and to put you with the Death Eater-"

"He's not a Death Eater anymore," Hermione insisted, "I don't think he's the same after the war. And maybe it's best we put all this behind us."

Dean looked like she'd just slapped him.

"Um, hello, Hermione? Are you feeling alright? You do remember Malfoy, right? Shoddy rich git who wanted us all dead and enslaved?"

"Yes, thank you Dean, I vaguely recall being tortured in his Manor," Hermione snapped.

That shut them all up for a second.

Ginny leaned in, her voice softer.

"I'm sure you could appeal to Slughorn to change partners. It's not fair, you shouldn't have to be reminded of all that trauma just for a good grade. It's cruel even."

Hermione gave Ginny a reassuring smile. She was grateful to her friends, especially Ginny, for looking out for her. It was hard to understand how different Draco was, unless you had direct conversations with him- and even then, Draco kept his cards hidden only too often these days. Hermione was the only one who could vouch for him to the Gryffindors.

"Don't worry, Gin. Slughorn did offer but I refused-"

Ginny opened her mouth angrily but Hermione steamrolled over.

"I don't want to live in fear anymore. The war is over. I want to put it behind me and focus on the future. If that means ending my issues with Draco Malfoy then I'll do it. He was thrown into everything like all of us. He was just on the wrong side. You didn't see how terrified he was. I did."

"That doesn't change anything! We all had a choice and we chose to fight! He let himself be branded and almost killed some of us in sixth year!"

"They were going to kill his parents! What would you have done? If it was Molly or Arthur or-"

Ginny stood up angrily, upending her cutlery with a clatter.

"Don't you talk about them like that! Some of my family did die, in case you forgot! We knew the risks but we fought against You-Know-Who anyway!"

Ginny leaned in, her eyes narrowed. Her fiery hair seemed to embellish her anger.

"Did you know Ron started seeing Katie Bell? But how would you? When was the last time you even talked to Ron or Harry? And in case you need a reminder, Malfoy tried to kill all three of them! And you want to- to just forgive him-"

"I never said that! I just...It's just a potion, Ginny!"

"No it's not, and you very well know it. You're defending him, like you're on his side or something! I dunno if he's Imperiused you or what, but the Hermione I know wouldn't stand for following rules if it meant going back on what she believed in."

"I'm not going back on what I believe in, I'm-"

"You're giving a pass to MALFOY!" Ginny roared, "You know what, I can't be doing this right now, I need some air!"

Ginny stomped off leaving an awkward silence in their wake. The commotion had drawn attention from some of the other tables as well.

Hermione pushed her plate away and got up.

She silently left the Great Hall, not daring to look at Draco. Did he hear any of that?

Her feet wandered, taking her who knows where.

How could she have been so blind? Of course her friends would react this way. Everything Ginny said had been true after all.

Ron and Katie...Hermione was pleasantly surprised to find she wasn't even a bit jealous. In fact, she was happy for them. Naturally they had Quidditch in common and Katie came from a family of two brothers, so she had siblings in common with Ron as well. They were actually quite perfect for each other.

She should've written to Ron and Harry, should've gotten news.

Why didn't she?

She'd been preoccupied with N.E.W.T. studies certainly, along with this Love Potion mystery. Draco had obviously taken up a large chunk of her time as well.

It was the secrecy of it all. The biggest change in her life had been being drugged and then slowly falling in love with her old bully. But how could she put any of that in writing to Harry or Ron?

She couldn't really. So instead, she'd put off answering their letters.

Draco made her feel so happy, but it weighed on her to not be able to tell anyone.

At the same time, if this is how people would act when she was merely his potions partner, how would they react if she came out as his actual partner? She didn't think she ever had a blow out that big with Ginny.

She found herself outside the wall of the Room of Requirement. She was early. She didn't even know if she wanted to see Draco right now. Maybe she needed a break. Maybe she had

been neglecting the rest of her life to spend time with him.

It really did feel like she was splitting her life in two. Her regular life; school, meals, seeing her friends. And Draco. The secret nights spent together. The trysts in the castle. The little looks they gave each other from across the room.

She felt so alive with Draco. But he was so separate from everything else that she loved.

A plain door with a round window materialised and she entered.

She found herself in the living room of a quaint, cobblestone cottage. The windows on the far wall were fairly large, giving a decent view of forest, lake and mountains. It was her family's cottage in Bibury. She'd always felt at peace here.

She sat on the living room couch, facing the window and taking a moment to clear her head.

"Rather picturesque. Another one of your Muggle locations?"

Hermione turned to see Draco walk in and close the door.

She smiled at him though her heart felt heavy. He sloped into the couch, his body touching hers. It was comforting.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"You heard everything? In the Great Hall?"

"It was hard not to, with Weasley yowling like a Banshee."

Hermione sighed.

"I knew it would be difficult but it still doesn't make things easy."

"We can stop being potions partners. I'm sure Nott wouldn't mind being rescued from Loony."

"It's Luna, and no. I don't want to go backwards. I believe in us and this is the only way to give it a fighting chance. Besides, I like brewing potions with you."

Draco smirked, picking up a lock of Hermione's hair and twirling it around his face.

"My brave little lion, with your little mane. I like brewing potions with you as well. Maybe I'll finally be able to surpass you in something, who knows?"

Hermione scowled.

"Don't tell me that's part of the reason you wanted to partner with me?"

"Maybe a smidgen. The main reason was to get a better look at your b-"

"Draco!"

She scowled at him.

"So who's cottage is this?" Draco asked suddenly.

"What? Oh! It belongs to my family. I always liked coming here when I was young."

Hermione couldn't help wishing if only they really were at her family's cottage, the real one. She could teach Draco to fish and ride in a motorboat and they could lounge on the beach and roast sausages on the fire, and she could show him all the little spots in the forest she'd run away to as a child to pretend to be a faerie, long before she knew they were real.

They could be away from the stress and the dramatics and the secrets.

Would Draco like any of that?

"Can I ask you something a little prodding?" Hermione asked, after a beat.

"You can ask me anything."

"Why did Hogwarts accept you back? Sorry if that sounds a little blunt- I mean I know it's none of my business but- but it's been brought up a few times and I was...was curious," Hermione finished in a small voice.

"I can understand it's probably a conundrum for most. I tried to murder the old Headmaster after all."

Draco said it so casually, but Hermione caught the underlinings of disgust. Disgust in himself. She winced. It was always jarring to be reminded of what he used to be.

"McGonagall showed up on our doorstep with a readmission letter for seventh year, after our Wizengamot trial."

Hermione's eyes bulged.

"She *did* ? Just like that?"

Draco nodded.

"I got the feeling she didn't want to. Which I can't blame her for. But she had a letter, written by Dumbledore before he died. Supposedly it was addressed to her in his will with express instructions to only open after the war was over and if your side won."

Hermione gasped.

"What did it say?"

"Apparently it said a lot of things, instructions on who would succeed him, indications of running Hogwarts and probably lots more. But there was one clause in particular that stated if Draco Malfoy was to be cleared of all charges, he should return to Hogwarts if he wanted to. This courtesy was also extended to anyone else who had been at Hogwarts before the war, but my name had been specifically indicated. It was like the crazy old codger *knew* ...but how could he have...?"

Hermione smiled sadly.

"Dumbledore was like that. He was always three steps ahead of everyone."

Draco fell silent.

Hermione watched him think, wondering what memories he was revisiting. Draco answered her thoughts, after some mulling.

"He promised me mercy once...and...and I think if I had the chance, I would've taken it."

Hermione's chest swelled with emotion.

This vulnerable side to him- this was what she loved most. She knew how hard it must be for him to say things like that, and she always felt a twinge of gratitude whenever he shared whatever difficult things were on his mind.

That being said, there were other things she needed to know. *Had* to know, if they were going to continue this, if she was going to continue to defend him. She hated to prod him further, but if she didn't do it now, dragging it out would only hurt more later.

"And how- If it's okay for me to ask- How did you get cleared in the Ministry trial? After what happened at Hogwarts in sixth year and everything after that?"

Malfoy's jaw tightened but he obliged her.

"After the war, our Manor was confiscated by the Ministry since it was obviously a crime scene. My whole family was tried before the Wizengamot, myself included. My mother and I weren't sent to Azkaban thankfully, but we did serve a minor sentence in the Wizengamot dungeons. My father he- he-"

Draco inhaled through his nostrils.

"He took the blame for everything. Said mother and I were threatened and blackmailed. Even insisted we had been Imperiused at times. He claimed we never wanted to fight for Voldemort, that we were forced to. He gave them names of other Death Eaters that were still at large, as bargaining chips. He even somehow had managed to find a few witnesses to corroborate everything he said. We had the gold to fight the case and we were let go. My father will be serving a lifetime sentence in Azkaban."

Draco's voice wavered. He paused, regaining his composure.

"I know he deserves it. He put my mother in danger. He put his only son in danger. He killed and tortured dozens if not hundreds. I know he also let the Basilisk loose in second year- it could have killed... god, we were *children* . I thought it was funny back then but now..."

Draco's mouth twisted in a grimace.

"I've grown to loathe him. But...He's my father. He's also the reason I've never had to want for anything. I had a very privileged childhood, had everything I could ever dream of, all thanks to him. It's strange to wake up one day and realise the person you've always idolised is...terrible."

"He never expressed his feelings much. Sometimes I could sense his approval in small ways. A nod or a lingering look. But otherwise, I felt like I was always chasing his acknowledgement. He bought me everything I needed, and now, in hindsight, I can see that was probably his way of showing he cared. But at the time, I thought all the wealth was a way to show everyone who the Malfoys were. Powerful, rich, influential. Because all his gifts came with a price."

"He bought me the best broom and a seat on the Quidditch team, but if I lost a game, he didn't hesitate to make his disappointment known. He hired tutors and purchased all the best school supplies, but if I wasn't top in everything, I had failed him."

"I just...I just wanted him to be proud of me. I know it sounds stupid..."

Hermione brushed her fingertips along Draco's knuckles.

"It doesn't sound stupid at all," she said quietly. Draco swallowed.

"If he expected the world of me, it was because he was so accomplished, himself. He always had an answer, always knew what to do. I never once questioned his devotion to the Dark Lord. I hoped to follow in his footsteps, to finally one day be the person he expected me to be."

"But he was wrong. He was wrong about purebloods, he was wrong about the Dark Lord and he was wrong about protecting us. I think saving us from prison was his last gift to us...His way of telling us that he failed us in the end and that he was sorry."

"We didn't even get to say goodbye. He was carted off to Azkaban right after the trial. I had always wanted to be like him and now, I didn't know who I was anymore. I didn't even get any closure from him, didn't get to tell him that...tell him...I don't know."

Draco shrugged and looked at the ceiling, apparently studying the woodwork.

"I'm so sorry, Draco."

"Don't be. They let us off easy. There's nothing to be sorry about."

Hermione took his hands in hers. She traced his long fingers.

"You have other things to ask me," he said.

"I do, but if it's too much-"

"It's not. Best to get it all out now."

Hermione nodded and took a deep breath.

"Did you have to torture a lot? Or...or..."

Draco frowned.

"I never killed anyone. Not because I'm a good person, or because suddenly I turned noble. No, in fact it was because I was simply a failure at it."

He chuckled darkly.

So he had tried. Had they punished him for not succeeding? Hermione couldn't imagine they wouldn't, and Draco's haunted look seemed to confirm her suspicions.

"But tortured, yes."

Hermione ground her teeth together.

"A lot of captives were brought to the Manor. Mostly high profile cases, people of interest to the Dark Lord. But every now and then, Aunt Bella got bored and brought back a Muggle or two for sport. She insisted I torture them to prove myself. To make sure I was still well-oiled. She said once we had the mark, it was our duty to uphold the purification of our bloodline. But I could tell she knew how much it repulsed me. She liked to torment me. I remember thinking their screams-"

Draco inhaled sharply, closing his eyes tight.

"Their screams sounded just like everyone else's. Pureblood or not, everyone shrieked the same, everyone writhed the same-"

He clenched his jaw and wrinkled his nose. Hermione could almost feel the self-loathing radiating off of him.

"I remember this one time, my...my mother asked her to leave me alone. Begged her to stop turning me into a monster. Aunt Bella slapped her across the face as if it were nothing. And she laughed. And she said: 'Draco is privileged to receive this education at such a young age. If you would stand in the way of his service, you are no better than Mudblood filth.' She tortured my mother, almost to death. I tried to stop her, but I was blasted aside like a sack and

then Lestrage -or was it Rookwood?- took my wand and forced me to watch. It took my mother a week to recover from the tremors. After that day, I told myself I would do whatever they asked. What was hurting a few faceless Muggles if it meant my mother would be spared? I know it maddened her to see what I was doing, but it was better than having her bedridden on the brink of death."

The reality of everything hit Hermione.

Draco had done horrible things. He had tortured people. He had aided and abetted murder. It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd gotten off with barely any prison time. He definitely could be considered a criminal.

But there was a reason Hermione had erased her parents' memories and carted them off. What else would she have done to protect them? To what lengths would she have gone if Voldemort had them wrapped around his finger? If Voldemort had taken Harry and Ron?

Being tortured by Bellatrix was nothing compared to having to watch those she loved suffer the same fate. She had a newfound appreciation for what it must've been like for Harry and Ron, hearing her screams and being powerless to do anything. It was the one thing Ron never seemed to want to talk about with her.

"Not everyone will forgive what I've done. I still don't know how you managed to. I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself," Draco said.

"What you did was unthinkable. But you weren't even of age when you were forced to work for Voldemort. You were in a room full of adults who should have all known better."

Draco turned to her angrily.

"Don't defend it! What I did was inexcusable! Do you want to know more? How I dangled Muggles upside-down so Aunt Bella could *Crucio* them? How they made me drag them to the dungeons and shoot sparks at their feet? What else do you need to know so you can finally rid yourself of me?"

"Stop it! I know what you're doing! And how many times did they Crucio *you* ? Your parents? Voldemort does this, he weakens his followers so they have no choice! He was a master manipulator!"

Draco pulled his hand out of hers but didn't say anything. She took the opportunity to fill his silence.

"You wanted to protect your mother. You wanted to *live* ."

"I only wanted to live because I was too much of a coward to off myself."

"Don't say that!"

Hermione took Draco's head in her hands. She forced him to look at her, willing him to understand.

"I love you, Draco. It snuck up on us. I don't know how or why it happened, but it did and it wouldn't've happened if you weren't better! I know you're capable of so much good, Dumbledore knew it, heck even Harry - yes, Harry Potter- knew it to some subconscious extent, or he wouldn't've dragged you out of the Fiendfyre! I want to be there with you, I want to help you be the person you want to be! Not your father, not a Death Eater, but you!"

"And what if your friends don't see it the same way? What if you lose people you love because of us? What if it affects your reputation? You could miss out on job opportunities, on advancements-"

"What are you *saying* ? Draco Malfoy, if you dare break up with me on the premise of what ifs, I will be furious!"

"But it's true! These are all very possible realities! You've got such a perfect future ahead of you and it'd kill me if you had to give some of that up because of m-"

Hermione angrily shoved him against the cushions and then climbed on top of him, straddling him while glaring down at him.

"It's not your choice to make for me! I get to decide my future, and I want you in it! And I'll be so damn good at everything I do, no one will be able to refuse me in any job!"

"And what if She-Weasel stops talking to you? What about your precious Potter and Weasel King? You would give them up for me? For such a smart person, you would be making the daftest decision of your life-"

"Again, all *what ifs* ! I'm not planning on giving up anyone I care about! They can make their decisions just as I plan on making *my* own!"

Something nudged Hermione's bottom and she immediately recognized it as Draco's bulge.

She smirked down at him.

"It's not- Look, with you straddling me like this, how can I not be hard!" Draco protested furiously, "We're not done with this discussion!"

"You would want to give this up, Draco? For all your 'what if' scenarios?"

Hermione rocked her hips against him.

"Hermione...now is not the time..."

"It is a perfectly valid argument!"

"Stop it! You're not taking this seriously-"

"I'm taking this very seriously!"

She pushed herself off him. She was angry at him for not understanding.

"Of *course* I'm taking this seriously! The lengths I'm going to defend you should prove that! You think this is some game to me, that I'm playing around for a laugh? When have I *ever* done that? As many like to remind me over and over, I have no sense of humour, I hate dilly dallying and I take everything very, *very* seriously! You most of all, Draco Malfoy! I'm not here for a handshake and a shag anymore- I want you, I've committed and don't you dare insult my intelligence in questioning what's right for me, because you *know* I'm smarter than you, so there!"

He stared at her, much like he had stared at her that time she'd slapped him.

And then, he was grabbing her face and kissing her like their lives depended on it.

It all tumbled out of control from there.

Two seconds later, their clothes were discarded and they were desecrating the very spot where Hermione's gran used to get along with her knitting.

"You're an impossible woman..." he groaned as she lowered herself onto him.

"And you're too stubborn for your...Ahn! Your own good..."

She practically whined the last part.

"I love...ahhn...I love studying with you...and...and talking to you..."

She began to buck her hips, propping herself up with her hands flared on his chest.

"I love how you touch me and...ughhn...make me feel...ahn! Feel good..."

It was getting difficult not to pound her pussy against him. But she wanted him to know how much he meant to her. Needed him to know.

"I love when you make love to me..." she keened, pressing him as deep as he would go inside her. His eyes never left her face, his hands anchored on her hips. "I feel like the luckiest...luckiest person with you...ahhh god..."

She lost her grip on reality as she rolled her hips and her clit rubbed against Draco's abdomen. She couldn't take much more...She needed to ride him *hard*.

Before she could do anything however, she was suddenly thrown off balance as Draco sat up.

He pulled her close, burying his face between her breasts. His mouth found one nipple while his hand pinched the other.

Hermione moaned and cried out as he sucked and kneaded her with more force than usual. His teeth bit down hard and she cried out in delight.

She began to bounce and grind in his lap, feeling his cock pummel her from underneath. Her hands clutched his head, his hair, pulling, yanking. Her thighs squeezed his abdomen. She pushed his face into her chest and revelled as he let out a muffled groan from between her breasts.

She was so close to cumming, but this angle was hard on her stamina. Her bouncing grew weaker and she finally let gravity pull her down until Draco was balls deep inside her. Her nose was pressed to his, their breathing ghosting each other's mouths. Their lips smashed into each other and he devoured her like a starving man.

He moaned and reached under her ass, firmly cupping both cheeks and lifting.

She made a startled sound as he pushed her against the couch cushions and took her hard and fast.

"I love you," he growled roughly, palming her clit. She wailed in pleasure.

"Draco, I'm going to- oh god, don't stop!"

"Me...me too..."

It was like their bodies had synchronised. Her orgasm hit and her walls clenched hard, just as his seed shot out. They moaned and clutched at each other. She arched into him and he gathered her close like he was saving her while also holding on for dear life. They kept their eyes open, watching as they both hit their peaks. It felt electric. Did magic happen when two magical people made love? At that moment, Hermione could believe it. She had never felt closer to anyone. It was like for a split second in time, their bodies were united in complete harmony as sparks erupted around them.

They toppled into a heap. Hermione was so sore, but it was worth it.

"You stubborn, stubborn witch. Fine. You win. I'm never letting you go," Draco muttered, his head buried in her neck. She hummed in triumph.

They cuddled, taking a moment to relax from all the emotions.

"How often did you visit this place?" Draco finally asked.

Hermione was taken aback by how normal his question was.

She told him about summers spent here with her family. Picking flowers and singing songs with her grandmother. Building campfires with her grandfather. Recounting the memories warmed her and Draco seemed to listen so attentively. His eyes roved over her face as she talked and every now and then he would play with her hair, tucking it behind her ear or brushing it off her cheek.

"I hope this all doesn't sound too dull," Hermione finished sheepishly, after she'd talked non-stop for a good minute.

"Not at all, I like hearing about your life. It's fascinating to see all the places you grew up in."

Hermione smiled brightly and kissed him gently before sinking deeper in his arms. Her eyelids fluttered with fatigue.

"I could do this every night with you," she mumbled, feeling drowsy.

Draco was silent for a moment. Hermione wondered if he had fallen asleep.

And suddenly he spoke, his voice soft.

"I would like that very much."

She smiled, eyes already closed.

Something felt different. More intimate between them. It felt like any and all doubts had dissipated and what was left was a bond, stronger than ever.

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The following weeks felt busy. Maybe it was because Hermione finally hunkered down and wrote back to Harry and Ron. Her letters were shorter than usual and rather boring, but she gave them news of all their friends, Hagrid included.

She paid the gamekeeper a visit earlier that week. While his cooking hadn't improved much, the visit was overall lovely, and she chastised herself for not going sooner. Hagrid boomed his goodbyes and well wishes on her way out, no doubt bolstered by the gift of Firewhiskey she'd brought him.

She also promised herself not to skip meals in the Great Hall anymore. She was done fleeing from people. She had been avoiding their curious, prodding and imposing stares all year and all it did was make her feel lonely. She knew the more time she spent with Draco, the more people would gossip anyway. But she was damned if she was going to let them traipse all over her life.

While general talk of her heroism had died down, she could still feel eyes on her. She wondered if any of those eyes belonged to the love poisoner. She tried to shake those thoughts from her mind.

She did not evade death last year only to fall victim to some anonymous ninny with a horrible crush. She would *not* let them get the best of her.

She also found Ginny after Quidditch practice, an apology at the ready.

"Ginny, can we talk? I'm sorry about everything and I hate that you're angry with me."

Ginny sighed tiredly, her breath frosting in the late November air.

"I'm not chuffed about it either. You *do* get where I'm coming from, don't you?"

They started walking back up to the castle, their boots crunching on the thin layer of the first snowfall.

"Of course," Hermione nodded quickly, the bauble on her hand knitted hat dancing around. "I understand, I really do. But...but please can you understand my point of view, too? I'm not making excuses for Malfoy at all. I just...I feel like it's helping me cope."

"Cope? He's using you for a good grade and a reputation boost! You, who he used to think was scum."

"Maybe I'm using him for a good grade too. You didn't see him that night at the Manor, Ginny. He...he looked t-terrified. Malfoy will always have been an insufferable toe rag but...it's comforting to know he's less of a toerag now,' Hermione answered tentatively.

Ginny huffed in frustration but Hermione could see she was starting to get through to her.

"So what, are you like, *friends* now? I heard you've been studying with him, too."

"I...wouldn't call it that..." Hermione evaded, "All I know is that since I've been...been working with him, I haven't had any nightmares."

Ginny's eyes softened a bit. She sighed.

"I don't know what to make of all this. He almost killed people and now he's helping you boil toads like nothing happened."

Hermione stayed silent, carefully watching Ginny mull it over.

"Well...I supposed I can't stay mad at you if we're having you round for the holidays. Mum is due to send you an invite any day now,"

Hermione's eyes lit up.

"For the holidays? Christmas?"

"For as long as you want. I know your home situation is complicated, so you're welcome to stay for the whole thing."

"Thank you, Ginny. That means a lot. So much more than you know."

Ginny smiled sadly.

"Absolutely. Though good luck explaining to Harry and Ron how you're buddying up to the biggest prat on earth."

Hermione's shoulders drooped.

"Do I have to?"

"It's going to reach them sooner or later. You need to be the one to explain it, or it'll look like a betrayal."

Hermione stared at the snow guiltily.

Should she tell Ginny the whole truth now? She'd only just mended things, however. Did she want to break them all over again?

"All right, I'll handle it. Gin?"

"Hmn?"

"Thanks for listening to me, and being there for me."

Ginny grinned and pulled Hermione in for a roguish hug.

Hermione spent some time knitting scarves for presents with Crookshanks by the fire. She studied, she socialised more, she spent a couple of nights a week with Draco. She felt invigorated. She was getting back to her old self.

Their time spent together was a new exciting experience each time. Draco was opening doors into his life, as was she. They shared Rooms from their travels, Rooms from their favourite books and, in Hermione's case, films. Rooms to their favourite outdoor haunts, Rooms to their favourite places, Rooms to even places they'd like to visit but never have. Hermione was getting to know Draco a little bit more through each Room of his that they visited, and she gave a bit of herself each time too.

In contrast to the intimacy in the Room of Requirement, their time studying together was still strained by onlookers.

Potions was awkward. She noticed Ernie, Padma and Hannah talked to her much less, though they would still glance her way. Their expressions weren't scared anymore though; they looked at her almost accusingly. Only Luna continued as if nothing had changed.

At least her and Draco would have a bit of peace in the library.

Or so Hermione thought.

She hurried off after class, with Draco in tow, shooting him mischievous looks.

Considering the last time they had been to the library she'd sucked him off and he had fingered her till she came, Hermione felt giddy returning there with him now. Judging by the lustful way he surveyed her body, he was thinking along the same lines.

"We have to be good this time, *only* studying," she murmured, though her pussy throbbed in protest.

"I make no promises. You know I've been thinking about tearing your clothes off all class?"

Hermione gasped.

"Draco, I meant it, we should really finish our essays and-"

"Did you say essays? I was just about to get started on mine. Are we going to the library?"

Hermione jumped and turned to find Theodore Nott smirking behind them.

Her blood ran cold. How much did he hear?

Draco looked extremely disgruntled.

"Since when do *you* ever go to the library?"

"No time like the present to start! Come now, can't a man read and write about werewolves with his best mate, in a facility designed for reading and writing?"

He grinned, glancing between Draco and Hermione. Hermione was taken aback by how familiar Nott seemed around her. He didn't seem mad that Draco and her had paired up. If anything, he seemed...gleeful?

It was a nice change of pace if she was being honest. She was sick of people looking like she'd sprouted another head every time she was in Draco's company. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have Nott around.

"No," Draco said curtly at the same time Hermione said, "He can join us."

Draco looked scandalised. Hermione couldn't help but smile slightly.

Theo grinned, showing all his teeth.

"Your potions partner is far more accomodating, Draco. Perhaps I'll compare notes with Granger instead."

Draco made a sound in his throat that could only be described as a possessive growl. Theo's smile widened. A smile that was far too knowing.

He knows. Hermione thought. He knows and he hasn't said anything to anyone, or it would've gotten out by now. Why, though? And how did he figure it out?

The three of them headed off, Hermione and Draco tensely silent, Theo loping behind them.

Hermione didn't know what she expected would happen. She was both suspicious and curious about Theo's intentions.

So it was a little anticlimactic when they settled into their usual table and...well, studied.

Hermione had long finished her Wolfsbane essay and was now working on Transfiguration when Theo poked her.

"Oi, Granger," he whispered.

She felt her whole body tense, waiting. Was this it? She would find out the real reason he'd followed them here?

Draco looked up from his paper, eyeing Theo warily. Hermione remembered what Draco had said in the past about his friend.

He's not much of a gossip. Unless something's in it for him.

"Look over my essay, would you?"

Hermione glared. This was his angle? He was going to make her his personal homework slave? Clearly he didn't know her well enough, because Hermione Granger did not bend to petty blackmail.

"And *why* would I do that? You're perfectly capable of looking over your own things." She shot back, a little nastily.

"Certainly, but when my mate's potions partner is Queen swotty herself, a bloke's gotta take advantage," Theo answered, still with that overly charming grin of his. His canines were extra pointy, giving him an even more mischievous air.

She eyed him suspiciously.

"Leave it, Theo. Granger's not your personal editor," Draco said, shooting Theo a scowl.

"Of course not, I'd certainly not ask if I didn't have something to give in return."

Hermione frowned. Here it was. He was going to threaten her, offer his silence in exchange for her help. She couldn't wait to tell him off.

"I'll look over yours," Theo said casually, sliding his essay towards Hermione.

Hermione did a double take. Her eyes widened in shock.

Look over hers ?

"Excuse me? You'll look at *my* essay?"

"Well, sure, it only seems fair. I scratch your back, you scratch mine."

Hermione bristled with indignation. Never had anyone *ever* looked over her essays. *She* was usually the one who looked over essays. Not only did she consistently get the highest possible mark on everything she wrote, but she usually finished writing so fast, by the time everyone else started, she had been long finished. She never had any reason to get her essays checked by her classmates, nor did anyone ever offer.

"Is it fair? I've already double and triple checked my own, I doubt you can bring anything else that I haven't already looked over."

Theo chuckled.

"Dear me, I didn't realise you were so all-knowing and all-seeing. Are you that above us mere mortals that a second opinion isn't even worth your trouble? Or maybe you're afraid I'll find something you missed?"

His smile was thoroughly starting to irritate her.

He would find something *she* missed? Who was he kidding? From what she knew of Theo, he was intelligent but careless. He had much more to gain from this than she did. He was just trying to goad her into doing the work for him.

And it was working.

Fine. She'll look over his blasted essay. But when he couldn't find a single thing wrong with hers, not only would he have to admit point-blank that she was smarter than him, but he would also have to admit it was a waste of her time to go over his work.

All this was well worth it.

She smiled coldly and took Theo's essay, sliding hers over to him.

"Go right ahead. Try and find any mistakes you can, though I guarantee you'll find none."

"We'll see, won't we? Cheers, Granger!"

Draco observed the entire exchange though Hermione noticed his shoulders had relaxed a little. He even looked intrigued.

As she revised his work, she confirmed that Theo was indeed smart. He brought up interesting points that were backed with strong arguments. Infact, his essay was rather interesting, she begrudgingly admitted. He'd brought a spin on it that she hadn't considered in her own essay. That being said, he was sloppy. He made simple grammatical errors and got a

few dates wrong. She even looked them up to be extra sure, even if she already knew them by heart.

She made all the necessary corrections, and, while she was at it, she scratched out and rephrased a few clonky sentences. Not only was she determined to prove she didn't need his help, but she would gift him with the best damn essay he ever wrote to further prove her point.

She smirked to herself and passed his essay back when she was finished, unsurprised to see he had already finished with hers.

"There you are, fixed your mistakes and wrote my suggestions in the margins. You're welcome."

"Ahh, excellent, you're the best Granger! I can see why Draco chose to be with you."

She blushed, catching his double meaning. He was a sly one, that Theodore Nott.

"So, anything to report on mine?"

She looked at him smugly, noticing he hadn't written a single note for her.

"Yes, actually,"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. What could he possibly have found? Was he bluffing?

"It's way beyond the word count. Much too verbose."

Hermione rolled her eyes, her smug look returning.

"Is that all? My essays are always longer, but that's never stopped me from achieving high marks. Why not just admit you couldn't find anything wrong?"

Theo shrugged, looking unconcerned.

"I mean, if you can't stick to the word count, there *is* something wrong. It means you're incapable of making your point in a concise way."

Hermione pursed her lips. He was really going to die on this hill?

"I certainly can make my point!" Her voice was growing shriller, a clear sign that Hermione Granger was worked up. She saw Draco hide a smile behind his hand and it made her more frustrated. Wasn't he supposed to be defending her??

"I *can* make my point," she reiterated in a lower voice, trying to calm herself, "but I *prefer* to do it this way. That way my arguments are incontestable and my research is thorough."

"There's nothing wrong with thorough research. By all means, read up on the topic as much as you want. I disagree with the rest though."

" *Do* you?" Hermione answered venomously.

"If your arguments are bogged down by fifty examples, you're diluting your point. You're also losing your audience. Sure, a teacher will give you full marks because you went above and beyond, but in the real world, less people will listen to what you have to say. I can also guarantee you that most teachers would rather be doing something else than reading Hermione Granger's extra foot of text."

Hermione opened her mouth in affront, but found she had nothing to rebut.

"Furthermore," Nott continued, examining his nails, "It's inefficient work. All that extra verbiage could've been used on advancing another essay. On spending time reading further on the topic. On taking a walk, having a pasty."

He leaned forward, looking directly at her and pushing her essay towards her.

"Brevity. Concision."

He leaned back in his chair, picking up his corrected essay and glancing over her corrections.

"But take it or leave it. After all, what do I know? I'm a mere mortal. A speck in this vast universe, compared to the Great Granger."

He looked at her over the top of his parchment and grinned.

Hermione's lower lip jutted out and she sulked.

She lowered her eyes to her parchment, missing Draco's gaze of sympathy and amusement.

Harry and Ron had always joked that her essays were too long, but Theo was the first to actually make decent points.

Could her arguments be formulated just as strong in shorter words? Was she being over zealous?

She frowned and began to pick apart her sentences, finding ways to say the same things but shorter. She was so absorbed, she even forgot to be annoyed at Nott for proving her wrong.

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Intermission

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Sonne (Klavier) by Rammstein

Hermione stood outside her parents' front door, nervously carrying a bottle of wine and a cake she'd baked at the Weasleys' with Molly's help.

Hermione had written to her parents right before the holidays. She'd told them the Weasleys had invited her to stay for a portion of it. They didn't contest it, nor did they invite Hermione over for longer than a Christmas Eve dinner. Hermione tried not to feel too disappointed. Part of her had hoped they would extend the invitation for the whole two weeks, but all the same, she didn't blame them for wanting to reacquaint slowly.

She understood that this dinner was something like a test. To see if they could have an evening together as a family, to see how they felt around each other. Had enough time passed that they could forgive her?

Hermione felt anxious just thinking about it.

She missed Draco. She wondered how he was doing, if he was thinking of her.

They had seen each other briefly before departing for the Holidays.

"I hope you have a good two weeks," she wished him, as they took a stroll just inside the Forbidden Forest. They skirted behind thick fir trees in order to stay hidden from eyes in the castle.

"It'll be hard without you there," Draco answered.

Hermione's cheeks reddened pleasantly.

"Do you have any particular plans?"

"Not really. Though...Mother and I will be visiting Azkaban."

Hermione gasped.

"Will you be okay?"

"No, but it has to be done. It'll be the first time they let us see him since..."

Hermione didn't need him to finish. Since Lucius had been sentenced last summer. Hermione shivered and it had nothing to do with the cold.

"How are you feeling about it all? Do you know what you'll say to him?"

Draco looked up through the trees. Snow was falling but they were sheltered from most of it.

"I...I don't know, really. I feel empty thinking about it. And sad. I think it'll be especially hard on Mother. I feel like I want to say so many things to him but at the same time, nothing at all."

Draco closed his eyes briefly before looking back down at Hermione.

"Enough about my dreary holidays. What about your plans?"

Hermione smiled sadly.

"Well, I'll be staying with the Weasleys, which is always nice."

Draco wrinkled his nose.

"In that pigsty? Isn't that house already bursting at the seams with squatters?"

Hermione stopped, glared and disengaged her arm from his.

"Don't talk about them like that. I consider them family. They don't have to take me in but they've always welcomed me, especially recently since my parents are barely talking to me."

Draco sighed.

"I just don't like the idea of you being there, is all."

He extended his arm for her to take, but Hermione kept both of hers stubbornly crossed.

"Why? They're perfectly lovely and your prejudice against them is unfounded and rude!"

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? Old habits die hard, but I'll try to be more amenable to their species."

Hermione rolled her eyes, scoffing loudly.

Draco glowered.

"He's your ex. I'm not exactly jumping for joy that you'll be cloistered with him for two weeks. I wouldn't put it past him to try and get his grubby paws back on you. I'd much rather kidnap you and take you to my flat."

"Yes, I'm sure your mother would just *love* that," Hermione sighed, but her crossness was assuaged slightly by his apparent jealousy.

She took his arm back and they resumed their walk, though Hermione was stiff-backed and tight-lipped.

"They were like a second family to me way before Ron and I briefly dated. Besides, he's with Katie now and by the sound of it, things are going really well. I really doubt Ron would try anything with me, that ship sailed a long time ago."

They walked for a little bit more before Draco looked down at her.

"I always thought you'd end up with him. A lot of people did. He clearly fancied you and it irritated me."

"It *did* ?"

"He's irritating enough as is, but knowing he wanted you made it worse. He's far too dumb for you."

"Ron isn't *dumb* ."

Despite her remonstrations, Hermione felt a little light-headed from the rush of pleasure that swept over her. Draco's jealousy shouldn't make her this happy, but it definitely did.

"Do you mind if I ask why it didn't work out?" Draco asked.

"We were just so different. Our main common interest for so long had been keeping Harry alive. When the dust settled, well, quite frankly I found him boring and ...a bit boorish," Hermione answered, feeling a little sheepish at her brutal honesty.

"Don't laugh! I wasn't right for him either!" Hermione added quickly, trying to quell Draco's hearty sniggers. "I'm far too uptight and I don't always get his sense of humour. The joke shop tests were driving me mad, even if the whole business is rather genius. It's just not for me."

"He was a complete blighter for not seeing how brilliant you are."

"Then perhaps you owe him a thank you. If he charmed the shoes off me, I would've never ended up with you!"

She tweaked Draco's nose playfully. He looked stonily back at her and she had to keep back a laugh. She could tell he was currently straining himself, trying to counter this new logic of being thankful to Ron. He decided to change the subject instead.

"Any other plans in mind?"

"I'll also be having a Christmas Eve dinner with my parents..." Hermione added glumly.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"It is, I just..." Hermione tucked her arm tighter around Draco's, "I just miss how it used to be. We were so close. And now...well, we just need to slowly rebuild trust is all. I think if this dinner goes well, maybe it'll be the start of things going back to normal."

Draco nodded, squeezing her hand in his.

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She had said those words so confidently.

But now, gathering her courage to ring the doorbell, she felt nervous.

Her dad, Richard Granger, greeted her at the door. His smile was stiff, but she appreciated him trying. She smiled back, probably equally as stiff. He looked a little balder and thinner since she last saw him almost seven months ago.

"Hermione! Come on in, you're right on time. Jean is just stirring the gravy for the roast."

If it wasn't for the distance between them (her dad had always greeted her with a hug in the past) Hermione could almost believe things were normal.

She gave him the wine and brought the cake to refrigerate, passing her mother on the way.

"Hi, Mum," Hermione greeted tentatively.

"Hello, darling, just bringing the parsnips in and we'll be all set."

Jean bustled by, holding a steaming platter, without looking at her daughter. Hermione felt a twinge in her heart. Her mother also looked wan, with bags under her eyes.

With the cake in the fridge, the platters brought out and the wine opened, they all settled in around the dining table as Jean pointed at all the dishes, explaining their functions as she did.

"There's the gravy, goes on the potatoes and the roast. Then carrots, parsnips, don't forget a good helping. And that's cranberry sauce, just a dollop."

Her voice was a little high and she still didn't quite meet Hermione's eyes.

"This all looks delicious Mum," Hermione said gently, helping herself just as Jean instructed.

The first few moments passed in silence, as everyone chewed.

"How're things at the office?" Hermione finally asked, trying to make light conversation.

"Oh the usual, Wilfred is up to his whinging again about not enough floss..."

Richard vented on and on about work while Jean nodded and made sounds every now and again.

Hermione remembered her dad's ongoing anguishes with his coworkers from past dinners and it felt familiar. Like home.

Her parents gave her news on the dental business and it felt like things had fallen back into place. Her dad went on long tirades about details. Her mum interrupted every now and again, like she was wont to do. Hermione agreed and disagreed, told her dad off for being persnickety. They all had a good laugh. Just like old times. Hermione could feel her body relax.

"And how have you been? How's...er... school?"

As soon as Richard asked the question, the mood seemed to shift. Jean looked away, pushing half eaten potatoes around on her plate. Richard immediately seemed to regret having asked.

It used to be such a harmless, regular question. One most parents probably asked their children as a reflex. Hermione had loved to see their faces light up and their eyes fill with wonder as she told them about even the simplest spells she could do. Everything amazed them. They were so proud of her.

But of course now, things were different. Magic had betrayed them. *She* had betrayed them.

As Jean's fork scraped across the porcelain, Hermione tried to find an answer that sounded ordinary.

She didn't want to mention anything she was studying. Would that make them more mistrustful? Knowing she knew potions for truth-telling, how to transfigure the human body without uttering a word and how to throw hexes at lightning speed?

No, she did not fancy telling them about school.

And telling them she had been poisoned was naturally out of the question as well.

Hermione perked up, landing on an idea.

"I've met someone!"

"Have you?" Jean asked, finally looking up curiously at her daughter, "That friend of yours you were always talking about? Ron?"

Hermione laughed uneasily. It's true her parents had never known about her brief stint with Ron. She'd spent that summer at the Weasleys after feeling unwanted in her own home.

"No, no, not Ron. Someone else."

"That's a shame, funny one, that Ron," her dad chimed in, spearing a parsnip.

"Oh Richard, don't be silly. I've always thought she'd end up with Harry. It is Harry, isn't it?"

"No, Mum! It isn't Harry! He's dating Ron's sister as a matter a fact-"

"Oh my, now that there is a tricky bold move of him. Dating your mate's sister is right daunting," Richard chortled, taking a bite of meat.

"So it isn't Harry? Then who is this mystery man? Do we know him?" Jean inquired.

"Er, no, but...but hopefully one day. It's not official or anything but...but he makes me happy."

"Oh, darling, that's lovely," her mother cooed.

Hermione vaguely remembered badmouthing Malfoy many times at home. Maybe it was best to keep his identity anonymous for now.

She was sweating lightly. Talking about her life to her parents was becoming a walking-on-eggshells act. She terribly missed being able to tell them everything.

"Speaking of which, you know your cousin Dale? Well he's getting married this summer!"

"To the sweetest gal, Hermione, you'll have to meet her."

Her parents picked up on the topic of familial news and began a long spiel of who was marrying who, who was having children with whom and who was working where.

Hermione sighed inwardly with relief, happy to be off subject of her life and content to listen to her parents' gossip.

"Yes, of course and Gordon just got his diploma in finance and he'll be moving in with his girlfriend, what was her name again?"

Jean screwed her face up, trying to recall.

"I don't think he mentioned her name, we'd only talked quickly in passing," Richard answered thoughtfully.

"It's on the tip of my tongue, I swear..."

"It doesn't matter, love, we'll ask him next we see him-"

"No, Richard, I should know this, really..."

"It's unimportant dear, I don't think Hermione cares who-"

"I know it! Just give me a second and I'll have it!" Jean answered shrilly, her fists suddenly colliding with the table.

Hermione froze. Her dad looked worriedly at her mum, who's eyes were still tightly shut.

"I c-can't remember...I *know* I know it...I know I've...I've..."

Jean was trembling.

"It's okay, dear," Richard said gently, laying a hand on Jean's arm. Jean wrenched her arm off the table.

"No, it isn't! It's not okay! I c-can't remember...I can't..."

Jean's eyes started welling with tears. Hermione watched, horrified.

Richard's hand was still on the table, balled into a fist. Jean shot Hermione a fearful glance. Hermione wanted to cry.

"I'm sorry...I can't do this..."

Covering her mouth, Jean let out a muffled sob and fled to the bedroom, shutting the door with a slam.

Silence followed her outburst.

"You'll have to excuse your mother, she..."

Richard trailed off, gazing at the door.

"There...there shouldn't be any side effects," Hermione said in a small voice. "The memory spell I used, I made sure it was one hundred percent safe. If Mum is having trouble remembering, it's not because of...because of the spell."

"How can you know for sure?"

Hermione gulped at her father's accusing stare.

"I...I'm certain. I promise, I wouldn't do anything if it meant damaging your m-memories."

She stuttered on the last line because she knew it wasn't entirely true. Their memories of her had been damaged but not from the spell's side effects.

Richard sighed, and pulled off his glasses, rubbing both eyes with his forefinger and thumb.

"We're both getting older and our memories aren't what they used to be. But you know, it's... it's hard sometimes. I've accidentally called her Monica a few times and every now and then I wonder..."

"Wonder what, Dad?" Hermione asked, her voice watery.

"Am I still living a lie? Are we real? Are you real? What if all of this is made up, just like our life in Australia was? It felt so *real*, Hermione."

A tear slid down Hermione's cheek.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm *so* sorry. People were tortured and killed. I didn't know how else to keep you safe."

"And who was supposed to keep *you* safe? Our little girl! What if...What if we'd lost you and we wouldn't've even *known* !"

Richard rarely ever raised his voice. That, more than anything, made Hermione flinch. Richard had a voice for laughing, for joking around, for friendly tales. He did not have a voice for yelling. Richard Granger did not yell.

But he was yelling now.

Hermione had never felt so guilty. So ashamed. Maybe she shouldn't've sent her parents off. She had taken their choice away to fight. But how were they supposed to have fought a wizarding war when they barely even understood the very basics of magic?

"I'm sorry," was all she could manage.

They sat in silence for a while longer, Richard staring at the bedroom door.

"Maybe it's best you go," Richard finally said softly.

Hermione wrung her hands and stood.

"Please tell Mum... Tell her I'm sorry and I l-love you both."

Tears were leaking from her eyes. She grabbed her bag and coat and fled.

She couldn't wait for an answer from her dad, couldn't see the hurt and disappointment in his eyes.

She ran out the door, down the steps and off into the night, her trainers slipping on the snow-covered sidewalk.

She thought she could hear her name called on the wind, but she ignored it, running, running, running until her lungs were burning.

She finally slowed when she couldn't run anymore and collapsed onto a snowbank, breathing hard. The wet snow seeped into her jeans and her sweater but she didn't care. Her coat lay beside her, forgotten. She let the cold bite her as she sobbed long and hard.

When her lungs were raw, her body was shivering and she started to hiccup, she knew it was time to Apparate back to the Weasleys, but she couldn't bring herself to do it in this state.

She wished she could find Draco, fall into his arms and let him comfort her. But Draco was who knows where. She had no way to reach him, except by owl and even then, she couldn't be sure it wouldn't be intercepted by Narcissa.

She pummelled the snow with her fists in frustration, until they burned with cold.

She felt furious that their relationship had to be a secret. If they had been a normal couple, they could have spent the holidays together and visited some of their favourite places in real life, not just the Room versions. She could have been there to support him for his visit to his father. He could be here for her, after this disastrous dinner with her parents. They could've talked and gone shopping and held hands and gone to restaurants.

She was not going to stand for this. She would figure out a way to make their situation better. She *owed* it to herself.

Besides, focusing on solving a problem felt better than wallowing in self pity.

Hermione stood up, made sure she was alone, and cast a quick drying charm on her clothes. She whipped her coat on, scrubbed her face with snow and, with a deep breath, Apparated back to the Burrow.

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Christmas at the Burrow was utter pandemonium.

Hermione was almost certain Molly had used enlargement charms in the living room and kitchen to accommodate all the Weasleys plus their guests.

Ginny, Ron, George, Percy, Charlie and Bill were all present this year. Since it was the first Christmas after the war and the first Christmas without Fred, it was no surprise the family had wanted to be together.

Angelina was there and she rarely left George's side. Hermione didn't doubt the two must've bonded over Fred's loss and they seemed to have developed a deep friendship.

Katie was also there. Hermione had never talked to her much, but she gave Hermione a friendly nod that Hermione returned. She couldn't deny Katie and Ron looked adorable together, roughhousing on the couch and arguing over who could stuff the most Every Flavoured Beans into their mouth. Katie really was a better fit. Hermione could admit that Katie had a better sense of humour and was much more easy going. How Hermione had ever fathomed being a match for Ron seemed ludicrous to her now.

Harry and Ginny were also cosying up to one another on a loveseat, in deep discussion with Bill and Fleur.

Arthur and Charlie were discussing Charlie's return to Romania.

Which meant Percy was the last eligible bachelor of Molly's children. All night, she kept calling Hermione and Percy over, to help with something or other and then promptly leaving them alone. Molly's attempts were more and more obvious the more wine she'd had, to the point where it was becoming a running gag amongst the Weasleys.

It didn't bother Hermione too much, though.

"Are you going to tell them?" Hermione asked Percy, as they sat on a couple of chairs against the far wall, watching Ginny and George chase each other round the room while pelting each other with satsumas.

Percy swirled his wine before taking a deliberate sip.

"Not yet. I don't think I'm quite ready. I hope you don't mind being foisted on me in the meantime, nor being my confidante."

Hermione smiled warmly.

"Not at all! I always enjoy your company."

"It's nice to talk to someone who knows. I don't feel like I need to hide who I am. It feels... like a relief."

"No one is going to think any differently of you, you know. Everyone here loves you, no matter who *you* love."

"I know, but still. I just want to take my time. I know it sounds silly, but my family can be a bit... *much* ."

"It doesn't sound silly at all," Hermione answered quietly, "Take as much time as you need, your truth is yours to tell, and no one else's."

"Thank you, Hermione, for listening. For everything," Percy inclined his head, raising his glass slightly in her direction. She did the same in return.

"Speaking of which, Ginny's been alluding to the fact that you have a secret boyfriend. Are we going to meet him sometime soon?"

Hermione reddened, taking a long sip of wine.

"I...erm...to be honest, Percy, I'm not sure. Things are...complicated."

"Saying it out loud makes it so much more real, doesn't it?"

"I- yes. But also, I think we still have a ways to go just figuring out who we are. Bringing everyone else in seems like another complication and I just want to deal with one thing at a time."

"I think I quite understand where you're coming from."

Hermione smiled warmly while Percy took a moment to adjust his spectacles.

"They treat you well, though, don't they? This mystery person of yours?"

"Yes, of course! When we're together everything feels easy. We just want to take things slow."

"Do you love them?"

"Yes."

Percy looked surprised for a moment, but then nodded in satisfaction at her swift response.

"Good. You deserve someone who appreciates you to the fullest. I'll admit, I was quite looking forward to having you as a sister in law, but I'm very glad you're here with us now."

Please know any person who makes you happy is welcome under our roof, and I look forward to meeting them."

"That's sweet of you to say, Percy. I'll always be here, I love you all very much."

Percy was wonderful for being so open. He and her were alike in so many ways, and it had been unexpectedly agreeable, getting to know him more over the summer and winter holidays. But she had a hard time believing he would simply accept Draco Malfoy into his home with open arms. Nor was she entirely convinced that Draco would be able to behave himself here.

"Heya Perce, Hermione. Mind if I butt in?" Harry asked, appearing before them with his face a little red from the warmth of the party.

"Certainly, I actually fancy a refill, Hermione can I top you off as well?"

"I'm fine, thank you" Hermione answered, her wine glass still half-filled.

Harry took Percy's seat while the latter walked off, getting accosted by Arthur and Charlie on the way.

"It feels like ages we haven't talked, just us. How're things? You never did tell us how dinner went with your parents."

Hermione's eyes began to well with tears. She didn't want to cry here, but she felt like she had been holding everything back for so long.

Harry looked startled at her sudden shift in mood.

"Hey there! What's the matter? Err...Did I say something wrong?"

"Oh, Harry, it...It was going so well at first but it...b-but it..."

Her shoulders started to shake with quiet sobs and Harry quickly took her in his arms.

She cried into his shoulder, cried until she emptied all her sorrow. He held her close, awkwardly patting her head every now and then. She was grateful they were at the back of the room, away from all the noise. She didn't want anyone else seeing her like this.

When she was done, she conjured a handkerchief, wiping her eyes and nose. She'd left a wet spot on the shoulder of Harry's jumper but he didn't seem to mind.

"It was...a disaster actually..." she said with a hiccup, and proceeded to recount the events of the night before.

"I'm sorry...They'll come around, Hermione. Maybe I could talk to them? I don't think they understand exactly how lucky they are. Muggle parents of Hogwarts students were the easiest targets and your parents' would've been the first place the Death Eaters would've visited. Do they know there was a ransom on your head? Do they know they were hunted all over Britain?"

"N-no... Well, sort of...I d-didn't have the heart to tell them all of it...But they're right, though, Harry. If I'd've died, they would've never known. I violated their minds. Forced them to abandon their l-lives..."

"They would've died," Harry said firmly. "There isn't any question about that. By the time the Order would've gotten to them, it would've been too late. You're a hero, and I hope they know that one day."

Hermione gave Harry a watery smile.

"That's not everything though," she said glumly, before blowing her nose loudly into the handkerchief.

Harry's eyes widened with alarm.

"Is everyone else at Hogwarts okay?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. There's a...a person poisoning p-people with love potion."

Harry nodded solemnly, his eyes darkening.

"Yeah, Ginny mentioned it. Said Cho got the bad end of it, but it could've been you or her."

"It wasn't just Cho who was poisoned. I was too, at the beginning of the year. I took an Invigoration Draught in a potions cabinet and it was actually Amor Videri in disguise."

"Amor- what?"

"A love potion that makes you infatuated with the first person you see."

Harry sucked in his breath in shock.

"Were you okay? Did someone hurt you? If anyone touched you, I'll find them and we'll-"

"No! No, I was fine in the end, really. In fact, I think the poisoner left me alone that day because someone else was there, t-too. They took some and were p-poisoned as well."

Harry blanched.

"So you...you were infatuated with each other?"

"Yes, but it wasn't for very long. W-we held hands and talked..." Hermione said evasively, giving Harry the abridged version.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt. Who else drank it?"

Hermione hesitated. She'd wanted to empty her heart to someone and Harry was probably the closest friend she had. He was like a brother to her in fact. All the same, she was scared. Scared of his reaction.

"Draco Malfoy."

She watched his face freeze.

"No," he said, his eyes frozen on a spot at her shoulder.

"Yes, but Harry! He was actually really, surprisingly sorry about it all. He apologised and- and I didn't feel...I never felt like he would use it against me."

"Are you sure he really drank it? What if *he's* -"

"I'm certain it's not him," Hermione interrupted firmly, "I saw him drink it, he had the same after effects as me, he...he fought harder against it than I did. He tried to get me out of there, get me to the Hospital Wing before it- it took control of him. I was already too far gone."

Harry seemed rattled.

"Are you okay? That must've...must've been difficult all the same. Of all the people to be there with you..."

"I'm okay," Hermione said, laying a hand on Harry's arm.

"Who else knows?"

"Only McGonagall. I couldn't tell anyone, I felt...embarrassed, I suppose. I mean, it was *Malfoy*. I didn't want anyone to know that I'd- that I'd-"

"Hey, it's okay. You were poisoned. I'm sure anyone would understand that something like this wouldn't've happened if it weren't for that."

"No, it wouldn't've," Hermione echoed hollowly.

"That slimy git...I'll curse the pants off him..." Harry grumbled, his hands curling into fists.

"Don't, Harry. Malfoy and I have talked about it actually. He wants to find the person who did it. And so do I."

Harry looked even more shocked than when she'd revealed what happened in the potions lab.

"You *do* ? Hermione, that's dangerous! Especially if you're looking with *him* -"

"He's very different, you know. We've teamed up in potions class, but we're also trying to figure out who the culprit is. Cho was violated, Harry, and so were we, and the teachers can only see so much."

"Hermione, don't you remember what he's done? He...He's almost killed some of us!"

"The war has changed us, Harry, all of us! You should know better than anyone that Malfoy is capable of that! You saw him on top of that tower and in the mansion! You rescued him from the fire-"

"Yeah, well, even Malfoy doesn't deserve that! Doesn't mean I'd buddy up to him in potions!"

"Please, Harry! Please try to understand!"

Hermione took his hands in hers. He looked at her with doubt.

"Voldemort wasn't just going to kill his parents, you know that as much as I do. He would have tortured them in front of Malfoy. It would have been worse than dying. Lucius is in Azkaban now and...and I think Malfoy...I think he wants to be a better person, I really do."

Harry hesitated a moment, frowning.

"That doesn't change all the stuff before. He convicted Buckbeak to death. He said vile things, awful things to you and Ron. In second year, he wanted you dead, Hermione! He was twelve!"

"Yes, we were all young and stupid! You used Sectumsempra on him-"

"Are you really throwing that in my face now?" Harry asked in a low voice.

"I- No, I'm sorry Harry, I'm really not, but what I mean to say is we were all different back then! We were young and naive! But war and death has a way of showing us what is really important! I think Malfoy is on his way to discovering that!"

Harry's pupils shifted back and forth. She could tell he was processing.

"I don't like this. I don't have a good feeling at all. He has some nasty plan up his sleeve or he's trying to gain something insidious out of this."

His hand rubbed his scar. She knew it was an old reflex, something Harry did when he was feeling out of sorts.

"I know how it sounds, Harry. I *know* . If someone came and told me all of this, I wouldn't believe it either. I would never have believed that Malfoy was capable of being an acceptable human being if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

Harry looked at her with a strange expression.

"Well, I suppose it's good that at least some things never change."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry smiled in bewilderment.

"You're still as stubborn as always. When you get attached to ideas, I don't think anyone can convince you out of them. At least you're rarely wrong, though."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, mussing it up even more than it already was.

"Is it stubborn to be passionate about what one believes in?" Hermione retorted.

Harry chuckled but then his face became serious.

"If he does anything to you- calls you a wrong name *once* , even looks at you in a patronising way- he'll have me to answer to. Be careful and don't forget what he's capable of."

Hermione beamed. She wanted to give Harry a big hug, but felt it might be suspiciously overkill.

Harry was *okay* with all this. He wasn't angry with her, he wasn't going to shun her, he accepted her "truce" with Draco even if he didn't like it. It gave her hope. Perhaps people *could* be convinced, with time. Her relationship with Draco wasn't doomed to fail.

"Don't worry, Harry, I've got it all under control. Besides, Ginny, Luna and everyone else is looking out for me as well. D'you...D'you think you could do me a favour, though?"

Harry sighed.

"What now? Any other dangerous alliances I need to be wary about?"

Hermione chuckled nervously, wringing her hands.

"No, no, nothing like that but um...If you could keep what happened in the potions lab to yourself, I'd appreciate it. I haven't even told Ginny..."

Harry nodded quickly.

"Of course, Hermione, I wouldn't even think of it. I'm...er... glad you trusted me, actually. You know you can come to me and Ron if you need anything, right? I know we don't see each other much anymore but that doesn't mean we're not a Floo connection away."

Hermione smiled and hugged Harry tightly.

"Thank you, Harry. I know I've been distant lately, I've just been dealing with...with a lot. I promise I'll keep in touch and don't hesitate if you need anything from me either!"

A loud bang suddenly interrupted them.

"Come outside! Quickly!" Someone shouted.

Hermione and Harry joined Ginny, Ron and Katie on the snowy front lawn.

"Not bad, eh? Our latest firework tests for the Wheezes!" Ron said proudly,

They watched as fiery loops, sparkles, lions, dragons and a few rude hand gestures - which caused Molly to clutch at her heart in disapproval - danced and lit up the night sky.

"I reckon Fred would've liked these," George said quietly. His arm was around Angelina.

"I reckon so," Ron agreed soberly.

"They're really wonderful, you both did a great job," Hermione added.

"Well done, mate," Harry added and Ron gave him a friendly punch.

Being reunited here with Harry and Ron felt nostalgic but different at the same time. Harry and Ron were coupled off and going in different directions. Hermione herself was on her own path, separate from either of theirs. Hermione wondered if maybe one day, she could bring Draco here and live as herself, to the fullest extent.

She, too, wanted to celebrate with her two best friends and the person she loved.

Maybe one day.

Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was the prospect of a New Year, maybe it was the high of being surrounded by so many friends that she considered family.

Hermione felt happy and hopeful, ready to take on the New Year with all the challenges up ahead.

//

The festivities continued well into the early hours of the morning.

Feeling much too fed, very drunk and exhausted, Hermione trudged up the stairs to the room she shared with Ginny, while most partyers continued to celebrate downstairs. She could barely keep her own eyes open and opted to be one of the earliest to retire.

As she opened the door, she saw a package on her bed.

At a closer look, it was a handsomely wrapped gift in green, red, silver and gold with a large red bow. Christmas colours, but also...Gryffindor and Slytherin colours, Hermione couldn't help but muse.

She quickly checked she was alone before carefully unwrapping the rectangular gift.

She gasped.

She held a hardcover version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum.

She opened it and a small piece of parchment materialised, floating out. Gold ink began to appear, snaking itself into words that were unmistakably in Draco's handwriting.

Thank you for the recommendation. I hope you enjoy my thoughts on it.

Happy Christmas.

Ps: I hope this note reminds you of your Amortentia Odours.

It wasn't signed but it didn't need to be.

The words disappeared after Hermione had time to read through them thrice, drinking in Draco's presence.

She smelt the note and, indeed, the parchment did have an enjoyably ripe freshness to it. She could almost smell a gentle waft of Draco's cologne. It was an odd detail to add in the note, but she appreciated how amused he seemed to be by the smells that she loved.

Hermione held the book to her chest, hugging it, missing Draco. She'd managed to send her present off to him early this morning, before anyone had awoken. She hoped he'd received it all right and that Narcissa hadn't asked too many questions about why someone sent him an anonymous, black and green, hand knitted scarf.

She opened the book again, admiring the lining and pages. It was in mint condition but it looked *old*. She checked the publication date and almost fainted.

It was a first edition, autographed copy.

How ?

This must've cost a fortune, assuming he got it by legal means.

He'd better have , she thought indignantly.

She thought about his note.

I hope you enjoy my thoughts on it.

What did that mean?

She flipped through the pages, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Ah, but of *course* . He wouldn't want to visibly ruin a first edition with notes.

She cast a *Revelio* spell but nothing happened.

She frowned. Surely there was a secret password or maybe she was missing something?

Then it dawned on her.

It had to be a secret only few people would know.

I hope this note reminds you of your Amortentia Odours

Smiling excitedly, she tapped the pages and whispered "Fresh parchment."

Suddenly, small annotations began to appear within the margins of the pages. All little notes Draco had written secretly just for her.

At first glance she could see commentary on the story, analysis of certain paragraphs, annoyances over phrasing and silly thoughts that had nothing to do with anything.

Sometimes he wrote random notes of love to her. He missed her. He wanted to see her. He couldn't wait to hold her tight.

Hermione laughed, but also found her chest swell with warmth. It felt so good to hear from him, to read his words, to feel connected in such a special way.

She tapped the book and whispered the secret words again and Draco's writing faded, the book returning to its original state.

Hermione was impressed. She didn't think Draco knew about the Marauder's Map, but it was the same type of charmwork used in this book. No easy feat.

It was also similar to the type of spells used on...

Hermione could feel an idea forming in her mind. However, she was so tired, it was getting harder and harder to think.

She hid the book at the bottom of her Hogwarts trunk and collapsed onto her bed, still clothed, thinking about what a nice Christmas she had, how lucky she was to be surrounded by so many wonderful people and how she couldn't wait to see Draco again.

Envision

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Acid Rain by Lorn

The Hogwarts Express felt calmer, quieter, on the way back to school. Perhaps because there were less people aboard since some stayed at Hogwarts for the holidays. Perhaps the general mood was simply more subdued. Either way, there was a lull to the chatter and people weren't flitting about and yelling in excitement as much compared to September.

Hermione shared her compartment with Ginny, Luna, Neville and Hannah. It was rather tranquil, even with Ginny's enthusiastic recounting of their vacation and Luna's eccentric quips.

Hermione had noticed Hannah had been much quieter in her presence ever since she'd paired with Draco in potions. She wondered if she and Neville had talked about it together. It shouldn't bother her that her friends were potentially gossiping about her weird alliance with Draco, though she couldn't help feeling mildly irritated. She fantasised about a day when her business would finally be no one's but her own.

"I'm just going to stretch my legs," Hermione stated after the first couple of hours.

She wandered down the train compartments, glancing about to see if she could catch a glimpse of light blonde hair.

Even if she did come across Draco, he would no doubt be with a group of Slytherins. How would it look, for her to just waltz in and sit with him? She knew Theo probably wouldn't care, but it would no doubt stir up a fuss with the others.

It might be worth it, just to see the look of horror on Daphne's face.

As Hermione contemplated this plan, a hand flew out of the nearest compartment and grabbed her arm.

She tried to shriek, but another hand covered her mouth. She was yanked into the compartment. The blinds were closed and a spell shot out from behind her, locking the door.

She tried to struggle but her captive held her tightly against their chest, their arm wrapped around her and their hand clamped over her mouth.

"Shhh, it's just me,"

Hearing Draco's voice after over two weeks of missing him was instant ecstasy.

Hermione immediately moaned at the sound without even thinking. Her back arched and she shoved her bum right into his crotch. His surprised hiss was incredibly satisfying.

"I missed you," Draco chuckled hotly in her ear. She felt her whole body heat up.

A visceral need for him took over her body. She struggled again in his grip, but this time because she wanted to touch him, see him, fling herself on top of him and tear his clothes off.

Draco had his own plans, however.

"Promise me you'll be quiet," he whispered and she nodded.

He released his hand from over her mouth and immediately started hiking her skirt up, finding her heat.

As his fingers pressed against her panties she immediately broke her promise and let out a loud keen.

His fingers stilled.

"Not very obedient, for someone who's top of their class. You'll need to do better than that," he chided.

"I'm sorry, Draco but please, it's been so long, *please* - ahh!"

His fingers roughly pulled her knickers aside and dove into her depths.

For all his talk of wanting her to be quiet, he seemed to relish in her loss of control.

He usually warmed her up more, but this time felt different. He pushed inside mercilessly and curled his fingers, immediately rubbing hard on her G spot. It was all she could do to keep her mouth clamped shut and her moans in. His other arm crushed her tightly against his chest, keeping her standing as he fingered her hard. She squirmed, panting, squeezing his hand between her thighs.

"You look so perfect when you squirm for me like that," Draco murmured on her neck.

Hermione bit her lip hard to keep from crying out. His thumb circled her clit and her hips bucked to meet his touches.

She could feel his clothed erection rub against her. He was now panting against her neck. She rubbed herself against him. It was heaven.

She could feel her orgasm rising.

"You're mine, my good little slut," Draco said roughly and bit into her neck, tugging hard at the skin with his teeth.

He had never called her a slut before, but something about the possessive way he said it, something in the way he held her like he owned her, something in the pain of his teeth sinking into her- she came hard, her eyes closing tight, crying out.

"Ahhh! Draaaacoo-"

Draco managed to get a hand over her mouth mid-scream.

"What did I say about being quiet?" He said harshly, directing her chin towards him. His eyes were dark. She was breathing hard, her pussy still twitching, her limbs trembling. She could smell herself on his hand. He was holding her up more than she was standing at this point.

"I-I'm sorry, Draco.. Please...let me make it up to you-"

His mouth smashed into hers and she whimpered. His tongue demanded entry and she eagerly let him in. He licked and wrestled her tongue with his own, using this kiss to show her he was in charge.

When he was done with her mouth, he pulled a black handkerchief out from who knows where.

"Open wide."

A thrill went up Hermione's spine as she obeyed. Something about following his orders made her crumble for him.

He stuffed it into her mouth, smirking.

"Now bend over the seat. I'm going to pound you silly. Would you like that?"

Hermione's eyes fluttered at his words and she nodded fast. She bent over the bench, her ass in the air and wiggled her hips for him. She turned back to watch him as he undid his belt, pulling out his cock. His eyes never left hers.

He wound a hand in her hair and pulled, forcing her head back. She arched. His other hand caressed her thigh, her backside, her hip. She felt his tip nudge her entrance with a squelch. She was sopping with her own juice and cum.

She whimpered with longing, wanting him to slide in. She wiggled her hips faster. Still, he held her in place. What was he *waiting* for?

Then, without a word of warning, Draco slammed into her hard, bottoming out.

Thank Godric for the handkerchief, or Hermione would've alerted the whole train with her yelp of surprise.

He fucked her hard, slapping his hips against her cheeks. She made sounds of pleasure in her throat each time he collided with her. His fingers dug into her skin.

He pounded her so hard that she was pushed forward with each thrust. One of her legs hiked up onto the seat, giving him better access to her cunt. She splayed a hand against the wall, keeping herself somewhat upright.

"Fuck- I've missed you-" Draco grunted as he fucked her.

Hermione's walls clenched.

Suddenly, her blood ran cold. She hadn't taken any pregnancy potion over the holidays.

She spat the handkerchief out.

"Poppycock! Poppycock!" she gasped.

Draco immediately froze.

"Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

His voice was different. Softer, less commanding. Worried.

"I'm fine, I'm fine Draco, but I haven't taken birth control yet!"

She eased off his length and scrambled up to look at him.

He looked both relieved and uncertain.

"Oh! Sorry... I thought that maybe I'd pushed too hard or been too rough-"

He looked like he was coming to his senses of sorts. He ran a hand through his hair, looking flustered.

She threw her arms around him, kissing him firmly. This time her tongue reached to meet his and she sighed happily against him.

"You're fine. In fact, I quite like it when you take me urgently like this. Here, let me show you."

Draco's eyes widened as Hermione kneeled down between his legs.

"This will keep me from making too much noise..." she said, smiling up at him.

Eyes wide and innocent, she leaned forward, pouting her lips and pushing them over Draco's head.

He sucked his breath in as her tongue swiped over his tip, her lips making sweet, smacking sounds as she hollowed her cheeks.

He tasted amazing. Like her. He was hers.

She licked up and down his shaft before taking him in halfway, sucking hard and popping him out.

"Use my mouth, Draco. I want to be your little cock toy."

She saw his eyes widen and then something predatory glinted in them.

Draco grabbed the back of her head, guided her mouth back on his cock and eased her the rest of the way down. He shuddered as his hips nudged her lips.

"Do you know how good you look with my cock in your mouth? You're going to make me cum so hard..."

Hermione made a sound of pleasure in her throat and began to bob her head. She went slow at first, but then gained a faster rhythm.

Before long, she was pumping and sucking, fisting him with both hands. She pushed his tip down her throat and kept him there, squeezing.

Draco let out a loud grunt and began to buck his hips. She moaned as he gripped her hair tighter and began to fuck her face, tentatively at first. When he saw how well she kept him down, he proceeded with gusto, slamming his cock down her gullet.

"Sweet Salazar, Hermione... You're such a good girl... So fucking good... Unghhn!"

She was drooling heavily. His shaft was slick with saliva. He slid quickly in and out between her lips. She clung to his thighs as he jackhammered her mouth. She knew he was getting close and she couldn't wait. Not because her jaw was aching, nor because tears pooled in her eyes from the force of his thrusts- she wanted his cum, wanted to swallow her reward of a job well done.

Through her tears, she managed to look up at him, blinking as innocently as she could. He let out a ragged breath as he looked back down at her. A millisecond later, he was ready to give her what she wanted.

"I'm cumming... Fuck, I'm cumming Hermione!"

He slammed deep inside her one last time and she felt his shaft pulse on her tongue. She was ready for him. She swallowed the warm liquid greedily, pushing her face to his hips, gulping and gulping. She heard him shudder. She kept him in her mouth until she felt his cock slowly beginning to soften. She pulled him out and gave a soft kiss on his wet tip, her red lips puckering softly around the head.

"Was I a good little slut?" she asked, smiling sweetly.

Draco groaned.

"Merlin, the naughty things your sweet little mouth manages to say... I missed you. Everyday was an eternity."

He pulled her up and kissed her, long and slow.

"Mmmm...I missed you too. I like it when you're rough with me,"

Draco smiled though there was a tightness to it. Something felt off.

"I was worried maybe it was too much. All I know is I saw you coming down the corridor and...I *needed* you."

She beamed.

"We really do need a better safe word. How about 'apples'? I know you like those and 'apple tart' is a little too long..."

"It's perfect."

She smiled, though something still seemed off with him. Now that she was up close, she could see fresh bags under his eyes, and his cheeks looked slightly more sunken.

He smiled at her with warmth however, that full, special smile she'd only seen him give her. She was with him. She loved him. Would it be too much to ask to bask in this forever?

"You should go. Your friends will be wondering where you are," he said finally.

"You're right. Can we see each other soon? At the usual place?"

"Tonight."

It wasn't a question. She bit her lip, loving his orders. It surprised her a little, since she was the one used to bossing people around. Maybe Draco had unlocked something new in her.

She turned to go but something stopped her.

"Draco? Are you okay?"

He gave her a searching look.

Something flickered on his features but it was too quick for her to catch what it was.

"I am now," was all he answered.

She squeezed his hand, gave him one last, longing look and left the compartment after making sure the way was clear. She wondered how long it took for Draco to drop his mask after she had left, if he even dropped it at all.

//

When they finally made their way back to the castle, it was already suppertime.

Everyone hurried off to find their friends and gather in the Great Hall. Hermione felt a rush of happiness as she saw Draco descend from the train further down, wearing the scarf she'd

knit.

Supper passed in a joyful blur with everyone catching up with each other. Hermione excused herself, claiming exhaustion and an early night.

Infact, there were a few things she wanted to do before joining Draco in the Room.

By a stroke of luck, Madam Pomphrey was in the Hospital Wing, having just tended to a student with large pustules on their face.

"People are barely here and Peeves is already up to his old tricks- Yes, dear, what can I do for you?"

Once Hermione had a good stock of contraceptive potions, she headed back to her dorm, guzzling one down on the way.

She shut the curtain around her bed, praying her dorm mates would assume she was already sleeping.

She then summoned a small package wrapped in crepe paper from her bag, made sure she had everything she needed for class the next day in her bag, and headed out.

Draco was leaning nonchalantly against the wall and she wondered how he managed to always look so attractively unconcerned.

She noticed he also seemed more relaxed.

He arched an eyebrow as she walked up next to him.

"What's this?" he asked, eyeing the parcel she held against her chest. "I thought I'd already received your Christmas present? Unless the expertly woven anonymous scarf was from someone else?"

"No, no, that was from me. Thank you for your Christmas present as well. It was nice to read your thoughts and what you wrote was really sweet. Though I thought your comments about the lion were a little harsh and exaggerated. How on earth did you manage to get your hands on that book?"

Draco shrugged.

"I'm rich. And I stand by my opinion that the lion's a twat."

Hermione rolled her eyes, her lips twitching.

Draco smirked and walked the length of the wall three times. A handsome mahogany door appeared.

"Where are you taking us today?" Hermione asked.

"Why do you always ask me that? You're literally three steps away from seeing yourself."

"I like to be prepared!"

Draco kissed her nose.

"You'll see, love."

She inhaled. His scent overpowered her like it always did. Wood. Bark. A foresty smell that filled her.

The door opened to a large room with high windows. There was a king size bed, as there usually was in all their fantasy rooms. There was also a connecting bathroom with what Hermione glimpsed was a clawfoot tub.

Bookshelves spanned the walls. A fireplace crackled away, with comfortable armchairs and a coffee table of the same mahogany as the door. A handsome tea tray decorated the centre of the table.

The carpets, curtains and bedspread were neutral creams, reddish browns and rich dark blues. Hermione noticed on one of the nightstands there was a familiar looking lamp and clock radio.

"Is that-" Hermione burst into laughter.

"Draco, did you put my lamp in here? And my clock from my bedroom? Where *are* we?"

Draco's shrug was noncommittal.

"Just a place for us. Do you like it?"

"I...I love it! So many *books* !"

"They're copies of real ones. They're part of the Malfoy estate's collection. All my favourites."

Hermione ran around excitedly, checking the titles.

She suddenly froze, feeling her throat constrict.

"Draco...Are we...we..."

Suddenly, he was behind her, holding her in his arms.

"No. We're not at the Manor. This room is purely imaginary, though it does have a few things from my bedroom."

Her body sagged with relief. It was silly. The room they were in looked nothing like the Manor. But the thought of being back at that place...even a false copy of it, was disturbing.

"Is this...somewhere you could imagine yourself living?" she asked slowly.

"Yes."

"With me?"

He was silent for a beat. She could feel his chest on her back, pressing into her as he took a deep breath.

"If you wanted to, yes," he said softly.

She could feel her heart beat faster.

She spun around to look at him.

"Draco, are you asking me to move in with you?"

"Well, not...not here exactly. But after Hogwarts, if you were looking to move somewhere with someone, at some point in time..."

She gaped at him like a fish out of water. He shifted from one foot to the other, clearly out of sorts.

"Listen, I don't mean *right*, right after. Obviously you can think about it and see what's best for you. Who knows where you'll be after school. But when I think about living with you, I imagine a place like this. I just like the idea of us sharing a...a space. Someday."

She was looking up at him, her eyes shining.

She hadn't dared to let herself hope that one day, they would live a cosy life together. It felt like such an impossible thing to want, especially since they'd only just come out as acquaintances to everyone.

But Draco had thought about it and it made the possibility so real.

She stood up on tiptoes and pressed her lips softly, lovingly, to his.

He gripped her shoulders and she hummed as he deepened the kiss, pushing past her lips with his tongue.

They sucked on each others' mouths for what felt like ages until finally breaking apart, panting.

"Wait, wait! Before we do anything, I need to tell you something."

"Oh?"

"I...er...I might've told Harry about us taking a love potion-"

"You WHAT?"

"I didn't tell him everything! Only that we were poisoned and that we're trying to figure out who did it and that we're potions partners! I didn't tell him anything about...about us."

Draco was breathing hard, eyes wide, like a blustery dragon about to torch a house.

"What ever happened to discussing who we'd tell beforehand?" Draco accused.

"Well, you told Nott!"

"I did no such thing!"

"You as good as told him with your conspicuous body language! So now one of your friends knows and one of mine does! We're even!"

"But why *Potter* of all people? Couldn't you have confided in... *anyone* else, really?"

"He's my best friend and I was sad, all right? And you weren't there and I...and I...I just needed to tell someone. I know I should've talked to you first, but it was in the moment and I hadn't seen you in so long and- Oh, Draco! Harry was so nice, he took it much better than I thought! You don't have to worry about him telling anyone, I made him promise he wouldn't-"

"Oh, well if precious *Potter* says he'll keep it a secret, than I suppose I'll just blindly trust he won't crash into my dorm and hex my bollocks off-

"He's less likely to tell than Nott is! And I highly doubt he wants anything to do with your bollocks!"

Hermione stubbornly jutted out her lower lip. Draco was still clutching her by the shoulders. He seemed to be thinking hard. He finally made a gurgling sound of surrender.

"Fine! Fine. We're even. You're madenning sometimes. Are you going to finally tell me what's in that package you've been clutching to your chest?"

"No."

Hermione flung it on the bed.

"I want you to fuck me."

He blinked at her, as if struck.

She barely had time to smirk before he was on her like a rabid animal.

All of a sudden, her blouse was ripped off and her panties were yanked down.

Hermione tried to gasp, but the breath was knocked out of her as Draco picked her up and tossed her onto the bed as if she was a sack of wheat.

"Safeword is Apples. Don't forget it," he growled.

His wand was in his hand. When did he even have time to take it out?

With a yelp, Draco magicked her hands above her head. She felt ropes snake around her wrists, pinning them to the headboard.

" *Accio* " Draco commanded.

Hermione gasped as she felt her panties, still caught around her thighs, whip off her legs and shoot straight into Draco's hand. He caught them without a blink.

She watched, her chest rising and falling with deep breaths, as he rubbed the material between finger and thumb. She saw a heavy ring sparkle on his forefinger. She didn't remember seeing it before.

She didn't have long to think before Draco's low voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Already so wet. Tell me, Hermione, do you like it when I manhandle you?"

"Yes!" She gasped, without even thinking. Her body arched immediately.

He didn't smile, didn't blink. His pupils were dilated and he looked at her like he was eyeing a large piece of delicious meat and deciding where to start first.

She didn't know what had gotten into him. He was usually much more gentle, sweet. At the same time, she could feel her wetness leak as she rubbed her thighs together. She was *dripping* .

She squeaked as he slashed his wand without warning. Her bra strings snapped and the apparatus was blown aside, instantly revealing her pert nipples.

She was now naked save for her skirt, trembling and whimpering with her hands still tied. Her pussy was pounding.

He walked forward, sliding a hand under her skirt and up her thigh. She turned her hips, helpfully guiding him between her legs. His thumb stopped short of her right labia.

"What do you want, Hermione? Use your words."

Hermione whined, loud and long. She could feel his thumb massaging circles, ghosting over her heat. It drove her wild.

"In me! Please! I need...need you in me..."

He climbed onto the bed and slung one of her legs over his shoulder. She felt put on the spot by the way he hungrily examined her quivering pussy.

"Keep still. I'll give you what you want, but you need to be good for me first. Do you want to be a good girl, Hermione?"

She gasped, nodded quickly and stilled her undulating hips.

"Mmm...excellent."

As Draco's fingers swam over her clit, Hermione immediately bucked. His hand was gone as soon as it arrived and she let out a bratty whine.

"What did I *just* say?" Draco growled.

"How am I supposed to stay *still* when you're...you're..." Hermione protested.

She felt him spread her lips, waiting for her to stop moving. She let out a frustrated cry. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to stop bucking around.

"I know you can do it," Draco purred, "You're already doing so well. Have I ever told you what a pretty pussy you have? I could finger fuck it all day."

She let out a hungry moan.

His hand was back, circling, rubbing her lips, her clit, spreading her wetness all over her mound. Her thighs trembled but otherwise stayed still.

"So wet. I'd give you an O for obedience, love," Draco murmured. Hermione could feel her pussy clench at his praise. She was panting like a dog. *His* dog. She shivered at how much that turned her on.

His forefinger sunk in.

"Oh please, please can I- I need to...t-to..."

She was almost delirious with arousal. Not being able to buck against his hand...It was too much. She was wild. Starving. She needed-

He began to rub her walls nice and slow. She almost wanted to cry.

"I think you've earned this," Draco whispered, the only warning she got before he slammed his digit all the way in. Hard.

She screamed in surprise and ecstasy clutching the ropes above her head and arching her back into a perfect bridge.

She didn't know when the second finger was added. All she knew was Draco was filling her and rubbing her G spot with aggressive purpose. His mouth was covering her clit, his tongue pressing down and swimming around her nub. He was groaning. She bucked her hips to meet him and he let her. Encouraged her. Praised her. She was chanting his name fervently, like a prayer.

"Ohhh Dracoooo...Ohhh!! Yes, Draco, yes, yes yes I'm- ahhn!!"

She came, clenching his fingers in her cunt. He licked, sucked and savoured her juices as she came.

"Gods..." Draco exhaled, his voice a rasp, his mouth shining from her fluids, "Watching you cum is the most erotic thing I've ever seen."

"I want...fuck...my tits...please..."

Draco's eyes went wide.

"You- what?"

Hermione smiled like a Cheshire cat.

"I'm tied up, ready for you to use. So use me, please. Use my breasts and mouth. I want to watch you cum too..."

He looked at her in awe. Hermione arched.

"Please. *Please* . I *need* to see you cum..."

Draco bit his lip as he traced the curve of her breasts with his pupils.

Draco grabbed his wand, vanishing his clothes with a flick of his wrist.

Hermione couldn't help making a low, feral sound in her throat at his sudden nudity. He was glorious, with his taut muscle and weeping erection pointed right at her. He walked around the bed, tugging at her until her head was hanging slightly off the edge and his cock was a firm mast, towering over her.

She opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue, her meaning clear.

As soon as he rested his gland on her tongue she wrapped her lips around it, suckling at his precum.

He groaned, running a hand through her hair and pushing her face up gently. She obediently slid him down deeper, letting him guide her.

She moaned, closing her eyes and enjoying his taste. It felt exciting, having him in her mouth at this angle.

"That never stops feeling amazing..." Draco moaned.

She smiled as much as she could with her mouth full. She hummed and ran the flat of her tongue on the side of his shaft. She felt him grip her hair and shudder.

She arched a little, craning her neck and taking the rest, her lips kissing his hips. She pushed his gland down her throat and shook her head lightly, rubbing his tip against the back of her mouth.

"F-fuck...That's...ahhn!"

Draco gasped as her throat closed around him. Hermione tapped his thigh and he immediately pulled out of her. She gasped for air, strings of drool clinging to her teeth and tongue.

He let go of her hair to cup her chin. He kissed her upside down, long and slow.

His cock, now covered in spit, nestled between her breasts. Draco took one in each hand, squeezing his shaft between them with a squishing sound. Hermione noticed with regret that her tits weren't quite big enough to wrap the entirety of his girth.

Draco didn't seem to care, however. He moaned, a low rumble, as he began to thrust on her chest. She mewled happily, sticking her tongue out to lap at his heavy balls.

Draco hissed.

"You're getting me so close, love. Keep doing that, yesss..."

He started to fuck her tits hard. The look of ecstasy on his face made Hermione keen in pleasure. She painted his balls with sloppy licks each time he pumped towards her. Drool dribbled down her chin, pooling on her collarbone and further lubing her chest.

Draco was grunting, gasping.

Hermione knew he was ready even before he gasped out an "I'm cumming!"

Her wrists magically came unbound as Draco shot his load, strings painting her stomach and chest. Hermione craned her neck, taking Draco's pulsing member in her mouth to suck away the last dregs. Draco fell forward, a hand on either side of her as she slurped greedily away.

"You're....You're....I don't have any words for how incredible you are..." Draco managed through heavy breaths.

"Mmmm, so happy to be able to serve you," Hermione answered huskily, smacking her lips.

She watched Draco's body shudder.

"I've made quite the mess on you."

"Indeed, you have. Don't you want to cuddle now?" she teased, reaching for him.

He didn't hesitate to climb on top of her, kissing her hard, crushing her to him despite the puddles of his semen that stuck to the both of them.

"Draco, I was only kidding!" Hermione squealed, struggling and, laughing. He peppered her brow and neck with quick nips, his chuckles a low rumble in his throat. She loved his happy sounds. She felt like she could never hear enough of them.

One last quick kiss and Draco leaned over to take his wand from the night table. He *Scourgify* 'd his cum off the both of them and they settled more comfortably on the bed together. He ran his fingers through her hair, giving her goosebumps. There was something careful in his look.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked, trailing a finger up and down his chest.

"I missed you. A lot. I didn't think it was possible to miss someone so much, but those two weeks away from you-"

Draco paused, looking away.

"Are you okay, Draco? You've seemed a bit...on edge since you've been back."

"I'm fine."

His answer was curt. When he spoke again, his voice was softer than usual, like he had noticed and was trying to make up for it.

"I've just been thinking about what things would look like after we graduate. How we would fit in each others' lives. I don't want to lose you, Hermione."

She hugged him tighter.

"We've talked this over before, haven't we? You won't lose me, Draco. I want us to work long term as much as you do."

He still looked uncertain.

"Where do you see yourself after Hogwarts?" She asked.

It occurred to her she had no idea what Malfoy wanted for his future. He continued to run his fingers thoughtfully through her hair, speaking carefully.

"I need to get the Malfoy estate sorted. Currently our money is placed in various different stock markets and funding a plethora of businesses. Businesses that my father- that is to say, businesses that don't have morals I support anymore. I need to figure it all out. I want the Malfoy name to finally bring some good into the world. I want our legacy to be one that's

helping. I want our money to go in the right places and I want to do it myself, so that I *know* it's going somewhere productive."

"That's very noble of you," Hermione said.

"It's not. It's the decent thing to do and should have been done generations ago."

"Still, I think it's a very nice thing that *you're* doing it."

Draco shrugged.

"What about you, love? I imagine the entire world is open to you, considering you annoyingly excel at anything you touch."

Hermione snorted.

"I want to study Arithmancy in college and afterwards," her tone became more business-like as she straightened, reciting her life plan, "Afterwards, I'd like to take six months to travel. I want to see how wizards live in other countries, I want to learn about the world, see how differently people do things elsewhere. And then, I was thinking I'd -and I know this probably sounds daft to you- I'd like to study journalism at a Muggle University. It's something I've dreamed about as a little girl, long before I got my Hogwarts letter and my- my parents were so happy about it and I'd still like to live that dream."

She waited, expecting Draco to question it. Expecting him to roll his eyes and ask her if her childhood dream was worth relinquishing a University that would no doubt propel her magical skill to unimaginable levels. She expected him to question it because she had asked herself the question multiple times.

But she *wanted* to embrace the part of her that was Muggle. She truly didn't believe one education was less valuable than the other, even if she knew wizards wouldn't see it the same way.

"Why journalism?" Draco asked.

Hermione blinked.

"I...err..."

She was taken aback by his question. She had been bracing herself for 'Why Muggle?' She composed herself quickly.

"I want to make a difference. I thought about working in government, but do I really want to spend my life jumping through bureaucratic hoops for a Ministry that's still half corrupted with archaic laws and old wizards who uphold them? And then I thought about being a lawyer. I could defend magical beings who need it, who are unfairly prosecuted. But again, I would be dealing with arguing against and upholding those same laws that I find distasteful."

"No, I think I'd like to start a paper. Not like the Daily Prophet, which is wrapped around the Ministry's finger. A reliable paper, with modern pieces. I could travel, meet people with points of view, write, and educate my community on positive change. I want to print something that people can count on, something that is stalwart in its truth. After all the misinformation I've seen throughout the war- throughout my whole *life* in the wizarding world even- I think this would be a constructive way to give back, to contribute to rebuilding a society that cares about one another."

"I can't say I'd expect anything less of you."

"I'm surprised you're not trying to talk me out of it."

"Of what?"

"Of going to a Muggle University."

Draco frowned and ran his fingers through his mussed hair.

"Why would I? I doubt anything I could say would convince you otherwise and besides, you're smarter than me. I know you'll pick the right school for what you want to accomplish in life."

"But does it bother you? Please be honest,"

"I..."

Hermione held her breath as Draco paused.

"Does a part of me think you're wasting your magical potential going there? Yes. Do I also think you're an adult who is perfectly capable of making decisions about your future that are best for you? Also, yes."

Hermione jutted her lower lip out defiantly.

"You think I'm wasting my magical potential?"

"It's a fact. Going to Muggle University means giving up years where you could be honing your magic. But you're already a more than competent witch anyway and I know you'll find a way to keep up with probably a dozen night classes or extracurriculars. In fact, I'll make it my sworn duty to assure you don't burn out, though you're so stubborn, I wonder if I'll be much help."

Hermione huffed.

"I won't burn out. I've already tried taking too many classes once, and that failed spectacularly. So what you're saying is you support me going to a Muggle University but you think I should go to a Magic one."

"I haven't a clue what benefits a Muggle University could possibly give you, so of course I can't certainly say I think you're making the right choice. You'll just have to prove me wrong- and if your track record has anything to do with it, I'm confident you'll have no trouble doing just that."

Hermione nodded firmly and tapped his nose.

"Don't think I won't!"

Draco smirked lazily, twirling a strand of her hair around a finger.

"You mentioned six months of voyage. Hypothetically, who exactly would be accompanying you on your international travels?"

"Well, I had one person in mind. Dashing handsome though he can be terribly stuck up. I don't know if he'd be able to rough it in hostels with me, though."

"Does he also happen to be stinking rich? Because I highly doubt he would let you, ah, 'rough it' as you say."

"I think it would rather be a good experience for him, to live a little more modestly. Good for character building."

Draco sighed.

"You know I would follow you to the ends of the earth if you'd let me. But at the very least, do me the courtesy of stopping in places with decent washrooms."

"The idea of you squatting over a hole in the ground makes me very happy for some reason."

"You're sadistic, if it does. I refuse."

"Just once?"

Draco let out a disgruntled grumble.

"I'm capable of compromise. In exchange, you let me take you to the *real* Morgen Stern Hotel."

Hermione snorted.

"One night there probably costs more than the home I grew up in!"

"Excellent, so it's a date."

"Draco!"

"Hermione."

He gave her that mischievous boyish grin of his she found impossible to resist.

He took advantage of her hesitation to grab her hand and give her knuckles a kiss. A ring glimmered on his index, the unfamiliar one she'd spotted before. She hadn't seen him wear any rings at all this year, so it was a surprise to see the large emerald perched on an ornate-looking silver band.

"This is new," she remarked.

He immediately yanked his hand away. His face switched from relaxed to blank.

Hermione stared. She could almost hear the clunk of his Occlumency setting in place.

"What's wrong, Draco?"

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing! You've been dealing with something since I saw you on the train."

Draco ran a hand over his face.

"I haven't been dealing with anything, I'm just tired."

Hermione frowned. If she didn't know him any better, she'd maybe have been convinced. Draco Malfoy was a convincing liar. But she knew him, knew how he was with her. He seemed off, more determined to be in control. Like he *needed* to be in control.

"Draco...I'm worried about you. Talk to me? Please?"

Draco rolled onto his back, looking up at the ceiling. He fidgeted with the ring, twisting it on his finger. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"My father's dead."

Hermione gasped.

"Died before we got there," Draco continued, still concentrating on the ceiling, his voice robotic. "Apparently there was a skirmish amongst the prisoners and he didn't make it."

"Oh...Draco...I'm so sorry..."

"No you're not. No one is. My father was a piece of shit. Even the other prisoners knew it. Only my mother is brainwashed enough to think he's worth crying over. He made my life hell and he didn't even have the decency to- to let me-"

Draco clamped his mouth shut.

"You're right," Hermione said quietly, laying a careful hand on Draco's arm, "I do think he was a terrible person. But I'm sorry that you're going through this. He was still a part of your life and this is so sudden. It must've been a shock."

Draco disengaged his arm from Hermione and sat up, his back to her. She waited. When he spoke, he sounded tired.

"My father has always been well-connected in life. It was how he got ahead. He stepped on people to shake hands with those at the top. I used to think he was so clever, the way he could manipulate people to get what he wanted. That his strength was in his cunning. He was always so sure of everything, so confident."

Draco's shoulders rose as he took a breath.

"I spent so much time trying to become him, to make him proud. And in the end I succeeded. I became a bully, a torturer, a manipulator, a coward..."

Draco was shaking. Hermione sat up and placed her hands on his shoulders, leaning her head against him.

"You're *not* your father."

After a moment, his shaking subsided.

"This wasn't a coincidence," Draco's voice was hoarse, strained. "Him dying in a fight the day before we were meant to visit him? Since when did my father ever fistfight anyone? He paid people to do his dirty work. I know he has connections in prison, people he can promise Galleons in exchange for protection. It's not like it's a secret he's rich."

"No, he didn't want to face us. Didn't want to face his mistakes. He would rather die. Bastard."

Draco practically spat the last words.

"What would you have wanted to say to him?" Hermione asked gently.

Draco dropped a heavy sigh.

"I spent the whole holiday thinking about it and I still... don't know. That I'm angry at him? Disappointed? That he ruined us? Nothing he doesn't already know. And who am I to accuse him, anyway? Have I not done my best to emulate him?"

Draco set his hand atop Hermione's, on his shoulder. The emerald on his finger looked heavy though it barely sparkled.

"Maybe I could've told him that I...that I know he did his best. That I know he was just trying to protect us in the only way he knew how. That I know he- he loved us."

Draco's voice was small. Hermione thought he sounded almost child-like. She glimpsed a boy who spent years not knowing if his father loved him, not knowing how to express his own love either.

"I would've told him that I would take care of Mother and the estate. That I would salvage our legacy. Maybe...maybe then he might've been proud of me. Maybe..."

Hermione felt Draco's hand tremble. She scooted closer, wrapping her other hand around his waist.

"I think he was very proud of you, Draco, even if he couldn't say it. Perhaps he never learned how to."

"Is it wrong of me to miss him, even now? Now that I know without a doubt how devastatingly flawed he was? He was bigoted and blinded by his traditions. Corrupt and a criminal. He rarely showed me an ounce of warmth. But he was still my father..."

"Love, emotions, they're complicated and rarely black or white. People are complicated. You can be disappointed in your father, but still grieve for him. You can admire his qualities while still choosing not to side with him."

Draco turned towards Hermione. His eyes had a haunted, sleepless look.

"Mother gave me this after the burial. She said it was an ancient heirloom passed down from generations of Malfoys, owned by the head of the Malfoy house. It was my father's."

Draco clenched the fist with the ring til his knuckles turned white. Hermione gently stroked his wrist.

"How is your mother holding up?"

"Not well, but she'll get through it. I think a part of her is relieved he won't have to rot away in that place. My parents had issues aplenty but one thing I will say is that they loved each other more than anything. They met at Hogwarts and married right after. I think that's why she stayed on the Dark Lord's side for as long as she did. Not because she thought it was right, but because Father was in it and she trusted him. In the end, I think she could see our family was careening down the wrong path way before my father ever did. She confided in me that part of the reason she saved Potter was because she knew it was her only chance to fight back. She believed if Potter could survive two killing curses, he must've been destined to end this war. Her intuition was always much better than ours."

"Do you think she would want to meet me? Your mother?"

Draco looked at Hermione and his lips crooked upward in a wry smile.

"Introducing Hermione Granger to my mother. There's something I never thought I'd say."

Draco hesitated.

"You're both the most important people in my life so, selfishly, yes I would very much like for you two to meet one day. But is that something you would be comfortable with?"

"I won't pretend it'll be easy, but she's your mother, Draco. If we're discussing our life after Hogwarts then I think it's only right to meet her. Would she want to see me? Would she...be okay with us?"

"She would have no choice and I'll make sure she knows that."

Hermione smiled and kissed him softly, drawing him back into bed.

"Will I get to meet your parents?"

Hermione stiffened.

How she would like that. But she still didn't know what footing she was on with them. Would inviting a wizard over trigger them even more?

"I- I don't know. Things aren't looking good between us."

She told him about the supper over the holidays. He listened and stroked her arm as she did. His touches alone were a comfort. His body next to hers made her feel safe. It felt so good to finally be able to tell him everything she had wanted to tell him all holiday long.

Speaking of which.

"I made something for us."

She rummaged around on the floor and found her package discarded near the bed.

She picked it up, handing it to Draco.

He looked at her quizzically.

"Go on," she urged.

He pulled the flap up and emptied two Galleons into his palm.

"Granger, you do remember the part of me being filthy, stinking, obnoxiously rich, right? Two Galleons is like adding two drops to the Squid's lake."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She didn't miss his patronising use of her last name.

"They're not real Galleons, silly. In fact, you might remember I used something similar for Dumbledore's Army. They're charmed to act like telephones except they're TeleGalleons. You place the tip of your wand on the surface of the coin to activate it and let the other person know you want to talk. Your voice goes into one Galleon and comes out the other. Here, let me show you-"

She picked up a coin and tapped it with her wand. The Galleons burned hot. Hermione tapped the other one with her wand.

"See? Now you can hear my voice coming out of it. I got the idea from your gift actually. When you wrote to me in secret through the book."

Hermione's voice was ringing out in double. Draco lifted the Galleon to his ear, eyebrows raised.

"I wanted a way to communicate with you, when we aren't together. At first I thought of notebooks but erm...I like hearing your voice. I thought maybe on nights we don't spend together if we wanted to chat or- or if hypothetically we can't reach our meeting spot on time for some reason or even if one of us is in trouble and needs help, we could use this..."

Draco was looking at her with an expression that was as unreadable as ever.

"I mean, we don't have to use them! They're there if ever...f-for emergencies or...or...or..."

She trailed off lamely, wishing he would say something.

Finally, Draco tapped his wand to his Galleon and his voice rang out in an echo as well.

"You're fucking brilliant, Hermione Granger. Of course, we'll use them. Do you even know how complicated magic like this is? You've basically almost created a miniature Floo connection."

"I...er...well, yes, it did take some research but luckily my wizarding book collection has grown quite extensive. So you like it?"

He tapped his coin again severing the connection.

"I love it. And I love you. My amazing, intelligent witch."

She beamed at his praise, her face flushed red. It made her all warm inside to hear him extoll her, when he so rarely offered the slightest compliment to anyone else. She felt special to him

They snuggled together in their dream home and Hermione knew without a doubt that she wanted to live like this, with him, for a long, long time. Maybe even the rest of her life.

Division

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Know Yourself by DILLY DALLY

The first week back was refreshing.

Hermione easily stepped back into the routine of classes and homework. She liked keeping busy and, being at school, she felt a sense of purpose that she'd missed over the holidays. She liked having a set schedule.

The days filtered by in a blur of studying, socialising, meals, and activities. She ended each day with a TeleGalleon chat. Her nighttime ritual formed quickly with a goodnight to the girls, a *Silencio* on her four poster hangings, and a call to Draco where they could talk about their day. It felt like such a normal, couple thing to do that it made Hermione less ornery over the fact that Draco still insisted on keeping their relationship a secret.

She also apparently had a study group now.

After potions that week, Hermione and Draco were surprised to find that not only did Theo follow them to the library, but Luna and Tracey did as well.

"Oi," Theo whispered harshly as Luna drifted over to their usual library table, holding Tracey's hand. Tracey now sported a pair of radish earrings, which Hermione thought suited her rather well.

"What're you lot doing here? This is an *exclusive* study group."

"I'm your potions partner, and Tracey is working on Runes with me," Luna answered, unruffled.

"How are we supposed to concentrate while you chitter away about rocks? Canoodle at another table, why don't you?"

"Ignore him, you can both stay," Hermione countered brusquely in a voice that was slightly above a whisper.

Theo gaped at her.

"You're just going to let anyone barge into our group?"

"Like how you barged in, you mean?" Hermione shot back, "Here, look over my Charms essay, would you? Yes, yes and I'll take a peek at yours."

Hermione had to grudgingly admit Theo's advice had been sound when Slughorn returned her essay that afternoon with an O+.

"I don't think there's such a thing m'dear, but you've earned it! Edifying as always, of course, but I was amazed you stayed within the parchment length! Short and sweet as they say! Still, your points are as astute as ever Miss Granger, so an O+ it is as you've earned it! The first ever student to be awarded with such a high mark, well deserved, well deserved. You shall go far, mark my words!"

And of course she'd seen Theo smirking away in his corner while Draco looked at her with far too much amusement, but she had been too pleased by Slughorn's high praise to be completely bothered.

She was snapped out of her reverie by Theo turning on Draco.

"You're awfully quiet. And you're okay with this? With Looney and Miss-Not-Even-In-Potions just parking their arses next to us?"

Draco didn't even look up from his book.

"Don't care," he stated with disinterest.

Theo narrowed his eyes.

"Aren't you the mellow one. What's changed? You used to be so easy to rile up."

"We all have to grow up one day. Even you, Theo," Draco drawled, turning a page.

Theo pouted.

"Rude."

Theo opened his books with a dramatic flourish, pulling Hermione's essay closer to him.

"Fine, fine, I can see when I'm outnumbered. I suppose Granger is the ringleader of our little group then, eh?" He mimicked the sound of a cracking whip, miming the movement.

Hermione glared at him.

"Would you pipe down? This is a library, we're not supposed to be jabbering on!"

" *I'm* using the decibels of a perfectly respectable whisper. You're the one raising your voice with every syllable."

"I'm not-!"

"Glad to see both of you are getting along," Luna whispered cheerily and Tracey giggled.

Hermione grumbled and pulled Theo's essay towards her, vowing to be extra harsh with her criticism.

January bled along and their little study group was garnering more public attention than Hermione thought was necessary.

At this point, Hermione was so used to hearing people talk about her, that it was easy to blot out, though every now and then she caught snippets that made her teeth grind and her hair crackle.

"Hermione Granger is cosying up to the Slytherins and Looney-"

"What does she think she's doing? First she partners with Malfoy and now this?"

"D'you think she's infiltrating? Looking for leftover Death Eaters?"

"D'you reckon there's *more* ? Apart from Malfoy?"

"Maybe they're *all* Death Eaters-"

"Maybe she's Imperiused-"

"Maybe she's lost her mind on a count of the war-"

The rumours were getting out of hand. Though it had been all fairly manageable.

Until Ginny caught wind of it.

She marched up to Hermione on a Thursday afternoon, with purpose.

"I'm coming."

"Where?"

"To the library."

" *What?*"

Hermione knew her friend must be very concerned about her to take such measures. She had tried to coax Ginny to the library more times than she could count at the beginning of the year, but Ginny wasn't having it. Truth be told, despite Nott's snark, Hermione rather enjoyed studying with a group of people who did not need to be dragged there and forced to be interested in things. In fact, she found she was being challenged in new, academic ways that she hadn't really been with Ron and Harry.

She had always been the brains of the trio. But now, she was surrounded by people who didn't give her blank stares when she referenced things like the industrialisation of potion-making in 1803 and it was a welcome change of pace.

"You're studying with three Slytherins and Luna. You're outnumbered two to one. It won't hurt for you to have backup in case things go south."

" *Backup* ? Ginny, they aren't attacking me! In fact, we don't talk much, we just review each other's work. For Godric's sake Tracey is Luna's *girlfriend* and she hardly says more than two words."

Something in Hermione's tone made Ginny's eyes narrow.

"You're hiding something. Are they blackmailing you? What are you trying to prove by studying with two of the worst Slytherins in school?"

Hermione scoffed.

"You know what, fine! Come along and you'll see for yourself that it's just harmless, boring studying!"

When Ginny headed over to their table that evening, the mood shifted. Hermione felt tense, though she didn't know why.

She saw Draco square his shoulders a little, but he continued to read *Numerology and Gramatica II* without looking up.

Luna waved, Tracey smiled shyly and Theo looked up with interest.

"Dear me, what an honor to be hosting the Queen of Gryffindor on this fine day! Clearly we have been blessed by the Gods themselves," Theo drawled as Ginny inserted herself in the seat between Hermione and Luna.

Ginny shot him a look of disdain.

"No need to be so sarcastic, I'm just here to study."

" *Me ? Sarcastic? Why, I never .* "

Ginny looked at Hermione.

"Is he always like this?"

"Yes," Hermione answered in unison with Luna and Tracey. Draco coughed behind his book.

"So what could Gryffindor's Quidditch Star possibly need to review at the little ol' library? I thought you didn't need brains to be on the Gryffindor Quidditch team?" Theo prodded with a small grin.

Ginny shrugged.

"I thought you needed skill to be on the Slytherin Quidditch team, but I suppose life's full of surprises."

Theo snorted so hard he almost choked.

"So she has banter! Keep reading those books, Weasley, they're serving you well."

"And you, mind your own business why don't you?"

Theo grinned and gave Ginny a mock bow and a wink. "Such a shame," he lamented, picking up a book, "The feisty ones are always taken."

He shot Hermione a look that made her more than uncomfortable. Both Ginny and Draco were now glaring at Theo.

"She Weasel's right- Mind your business. Some of us are trying to concentrate," Draco grumbled.

Theo shrugged good-naturedly, licked his thumb and turned a page with zeal. "Touched a nerve, have I?" he said softly with a small smile, though only Hermione seemed to hear.

"You, shut it."

Ginny was now glaring at Draco. Draco arched an eyebrow.

Ah, here we go.

Hermione was waiting for this.

She knew it would have been too much to ask that everyone have a nice little study session and get along. But she knew Ginny had been dying to dig into Draco ever since they'd been potion partners. It wouldn't've surprised Hermione if Ginny thought Draco was threatening Hermione or even bribing her to study with him.

"In case you're too thick to notice, I was agreeing with you," Draco sneered.

"I don't need *you* to agree with me on anything. Don't talk to me, don't so much as look at me, or I'll hex you so hard your mummy won't even want to kiss you goodnight, we clear?"

"Keep my mother out of your mouth. And trust me Weaslette, there are many other things I'd much rather do than consort with you. Swallowing a bucket of pixie dung for one."

Theo snickered but Hermione paled.

She knew how protective Draco was of his mother and she could tell Ginny was getting under his skin, despite the show of apathy he was putting on. His hands tightened on his book and his tone was low and dangerous.

"Would you both cut it out? We're supposed to be doing homework! Ginny," Hermione gave her friend a pleading look, " *Please* ."

"Hermione's right, Madam Pince is looking at us. Neither of you are very good at whispering," Luna whispered matter-of-factly.

They all turned to look and, sure enough, they could see Madam Pince from across the hall, looking like she was about to dash over and paddle them.

They all fell into a tense silence.

The minutes ticked away.

Hermione was having trouble concentrating.

Maybe she could find an excuse to leave early. It probably wouldn't be too hard to convince Ginny to leave with her. The bright side of all this was that maybe Ginny would now leave her alone about studying with the Slytherins. She had to see it was fairly harmless?

"Here's your essay back," Theo said.

Hermione jumped. She had been consumed with her thoughts, forgetting she was supposed to correct Theo's charm work.

"Sorry, I'm almost done with yours. Anything to report?"

"Well, you're still outside the parchment limit, but you're getting better. Also you don't need to use so many four syllable adjectives. It makes you sound pompous."

"Excuse me? *Pompous* ?"

"I don't think there was any need to use deciduous *and* dedicated to describe the caster. Better yet, 'direct' would've done just as well and only two syllables, that."

" *They don't all mean the same things !*"

"I know, Granger, I *know*, but the exercise is about mellowing out your swottiness. Back me up here, Ginger, am I right, or am I right?"

Hermione half expected Ginny to respond belligerently but, to Hermione's dismay, Ginny looked up from her parchment a little sheepish.

"You *do* go on a lot," Ginny conceded with an apologetic grin.

Hermione exhaled loudly and pulled her essay back, grumbling under her breath.

Of *course* Ginny had to be at the Slytherins' throats for everything except when Hermione needed her on her side.

"Do you want to tackle our game plan for the next class when you're done doing that? We'll be wrapping up the Wolfsbane," Draco murmured, setting his book down and looking at Hermione with his perfect, grey eyes.

It took every muscle in her body to keep from swooning. She schooled her expression to look as neutral as possible, as she always did when Draco addressed her. She got the feeling she wasn't as good at controlling her emotions as Draco - Theo once asked her if she was constipated - but it was better than the looks of adoration she craved to shower her secret boyfriend with.

"Yes, that's a good idea. Give me ten minutes to finish with this and I'm all yours."

The corner of Draco's lip quirked slightly upwards at her final words. She flushed and busied herself with the parchment in front of her.

"So why *exactly* did you want to partner up with Hermione in potions?"

Hermione felt her blood run cold at Ginny's curt question.

"Isn't it obvious?" Draco drawled, "She has the best grades out of everyone."

Ginny rolled her eyes.

"Let me rephrase then- why do you think you *deserve* to be partnered with the smartest witch at Hogwarts after everything you put her through?"

"I don't."

Ginny glared at him. Hermione could tell Ginny was waiting for him to say more, but Draco returned to his book, clearly done with the conversation.

"You called her a Mudblood more times than I can count!"

"Ginny, that's enough!" Hermione shot back, "You don't have to do this!"

"Someone has to stand up for you! You're just going to let this poor excuse for a Death Eater use you to scrape up his N.E.W.Ts?"

"Keep your voice down! Madam Pince keeps looking up at us!"

"I don't care!" Ginny snapped, "He doesn't deserve to be here and he can't be trusted, not after everything he's done! You think you're getting a good grade out of this, but it's only a matter of time before he takes credit for your work or belittles you or-or-"

"You think you know me, *Weasley*?"

Draco's cold voice cut through Ginny's tirade. His sneer on her last name made Hermione's stomach lurch. The way he was narrowing his eyes at Ginny, with easy haughtiness- it was like Hermione was looking at Malfoy from before the war again and she didn't like it. Not one bit.

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" Draco sneered, "You're just like your obtuse boyfriend. You think you can walk around like you own the school but you don't know *shit*."

"Don't you *dare* talk about Harry! He saved your ungrateful ass while you almost got Ron and Katie killed and probably loads of others. Who else, Malfoy? How many more countless Half-Bloods and Muggles did you torment in that fucked-up house of yours?"

"Shut your mouth, you stupid witch!" Draco snarled, slamming his book down, making a few Ravensclaws at a nearby table jump.

"That's enough, both of you!" Hermione hissed. She tried to put a hand on Ginny's arm, but her friend shook it off. Luna and Theo watched the argument unfold like an interesting program while Tracey looked like she was about to burst into tears.

"You would have fed Hermione to the Basilisk if you had the chance! And yet here you are, slinking up to her like nothing happened!"

Draco opened his mouth angrily, but nothing came out. Ginny took advantage of his split second hesitation.

"You're pathetic! And you can't even crawl back to *father* anymore!" Ginny sneered, her face twisting in a grimace.

Hermione gasped. It was no secret that Lucius Malfoy had passed away in Azkaban, it had been all over the papers.

Draco bared his teeth.

"Shame Ronald Weasley didn't die, he could've kept your other dead brother company. Your family breeds like pests so I doubt anyone would miss them."

Before anyone could say anything, there was a loud bang.

Ginny had stood up with lightning speed and shot a curse right at Draco's head.

Draco had dove out of the way just in time. A bookshelf exploded, showering heavy tomes down around them.

A piercing shriek shook their eardrums.

"Out! Out! OUT! ALL OF YOU OUT NOW!"

There was another loud bang and Ginny and Draco rose in the air.

Madam Pince was breathing hard, her glasses askew and her wand pointed at them. With a swipe of her arm, she directed her wand to the exit, promptly throwing Draco and Ginny through the doors.

"MY BOOKS! MY POOR BOOKS! FIFTY POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR! FIFTY POINTS FROM SLYTHERIN! YOU WRETCHED CREATURES, ALL OF YOU!"

At that moment, Hermione was pretty sure she had faced monsters less scary than Madam Pince.

"OUT! OUT! OUT AND NEVER COME BACK!" Madam Pince shrieked, banishing their bookbags, parchements, anything she could point her wand at.

Hermione, Luna, Tracey and Theo ran out of the library as fast as they could, haphazardly carrying their things.

The three of them dodged Madam Pince who rushed out right behind them, still shrieking her lungs raw, pelting towards both Draco and Ginny who were still trapped in mid-air. The pair looked like odd ghosts, floating lamely by Pince as she stormed off with them down the hallway and out of sight, yelling something about a visit to the Headmistress.

"That went well. Haven't had that much fun studying since, well, ever."

If Hermione could shoot daggers with a look, she would.

Nott couldn't possibly be *joking* at a time like this? It had been a complete disaster, though Hermione didn't know how she could have expected otherwise.

"I think I need a bath after all that mayhem. Ta. And Granger..."

Hermione tensed her shoulders. If he said one more silly quip, she'd box him across the ears.

"Chin up."

Grinning broadly, he sauntered down the hall, leaving her feeling utterly deflated.

"Um...H-Hermione?"

Hermione blinked. She didn't think she'd ever heard Tracey speak directly to her before.

"I'm s-sorry that happened to you," Tracey continued, wringing her hands, "My parents are P-Pureblood and Muggleborn so...So I know what it's like t-to be between two worlds..."

Luna held Tracey's hand. Tracey looked distraught.

"Tracey's father was a Muggleborn wizard," Luna supplied.

Tracey nodded, squeezing Luna's hand.

"Yes, there were lots of r-rows between the families and w-we had to put father into h-hiding last year. M-my pureblood grandparents wanted him d-d-dead."

"I'm so sorry. So sorry you had to live that," Hermione said gently.

Tracey shrugged.

"It's f-fine. We've all g-gone through hard times. I just wanted you to know s-some of us are on your side. Draco seems a lot h-happier lately and I know it's because of you."

Hermione flushed.

"Don't be silly, I haven't done anything other than a few potions with him."

Tracey looked confused.

"But aren't the t-two of you-"

"Tracey, the moon is supposed to be full tonight. Shall we nip up to the astronomy tower?"
Luna piped up.

Tracey's face lit up.

"Oh, yes, that sounds like a wonderful idea. I have some tea with me we can share."

Hermione noticed Tracey didn't stutter when she talked to Luna.

"Have a good night, Hermione," Luna called in singsong, and the two girls headed off, still hand in hand.

Hermione shook her head.

At this rate, the whole school was going to know Draco and Hermione were together.

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Hermione tried to contact Draco no fewer than six times that night, through the TeleGalleon. Either he'd forgotten his coin in his pocket somewhere or he didn't want to talk to her.

She heard Ginny enter the girls' dorm. When Hermione opened her bed curtains, the red-head made a beeline for her own bunk, snapping her curtains shut.

The next morning, Ginny was frosty to her at the breakfast table. Dean, Seamus and Neville were also more cold than usual.

"Ginny, can we talk later?" Hermione whispered as she reached for the jam.

"There's nothing to say. If you want to consort with that lot, you go right ahead. But if I *ever* have to talk to Malfoy ever again, I'll hex him crosseyed."

"You're the one who wanted to come! And you shouldn't have mentioned his father. That was a low blow."

Ginny's mouth tightened.

"You mean the sod who gave me Voldemort's soul in a bloody book? The man who almost murdered us all in the Department of Mysteries? Can't say I'm not chuffed he's a goner."

"That's not the *point* -"

"Hermione, I can't sit here and listen to you defend that bastard's son. Drop it, okay? We'll agree to disagree."

Something in the finality of Ginny's tone made Hermione's stomach churn. She dropped her piece of toast back on her plate, her appetite gone.

Her friendship with Ginny was becoming strained and Hermione didn't know how to fix it.

She couldn't blame Ginny for not getting along with Malfoy.

But she wasn't going to let anyone dictate who she could be around either.

The reality was that if she continued to spend time with Malfoy, she would lose Ginny and probably a lot of her other friends, too.

Hermione sighed, pushed her plate away, and headed off to class early, by herself.

//

Hermione finally managed to corner Draco in a hallway, as he was emerging from Transfiguration.

His jaw clenched when he saw her.

She dragged him into a vacant classroom, shutting the door with more force than necessary.

"You've been ignoring my calls!"

"I've been busy."

Hermione clucked her tongue.

"Rubbish! We both know you're avoiding talking about your behaviour from yesterday!"
Hermione crossed her arms sternly.

"Your *friend* needs to learn when to keep her opinions to herself," Draco retorted.

"I'll admit Ginny was out of line, but you didn't help either! You were both unnecessary and we've all got suspensions because of you both!"

Hermione's voice wavered. She'd always been able to hide away in the library- it was her safe haven when things got rocky at school. But she'd found out from McGonagall that morning that their group had been banned from the premises for a week, due to the damage Ginny's spell had caused.

"I've told you before, I have no interest in your entourage. It's *you* I want," Draco insisted, though his tone softened a bit.

"I love my friends and I'd appreciate it if you didn't insult the people I love!"

"So what? I'm supposed to just lie down and take it when they charge at me?"

Hermione huffed in frustration.

"I'm just asking that if they bite you, don't bite back harder! I will defend you, I promise, but I can't do that when you're giving them more reasons to dislike you!"

Draco eyed her sullenly. Hermione sighed.

"I don't care what anyone thinks of us and I'd gladly be your girlfriend in public if you weren't so bloody stubborn about it. I'm on your side. But you need to meet me halfway on this. If I'm going to fight for you, you need to fight for me. If you can't do that... Well, that's a dealbreaker for me. I'm not asking you to be perfect, I'm just asking you to *try* not to fly off the handle."

Draco looked like he wanted to argue more. After a moment, he sighed raggedly, his shoulders slumping.

"I'll try."

He held his hands out and she walked into his arms.

"I'm sorry. I know you're giving up a lot to be with me," he murmured into her hair.

"Sometimes I just think it would be easier if everyone knew. Then they could be angry at me all they want, or accept us. I feel guilty lying about it."

Draco stiffened.

"You don't know what you're asking."

"Draco, we've been over this before, I don't care-"

"People want me dead, Hermione. Look, I'll be respectful to your irritating friends, all right? But please, just give me until graduation, and we can be as public as you want after that."

"But *why* ? You can't keep not talking to me about things! It's driving me mad!"

"I've told you why and Weaslette is a clear example. People are cruel when they think they have the moral high ground and they'll be cruel to you if they know what we are to each other. Things are already bad enough."

They held each other in silence. Graduation seemed like an eternity away. Hermione wished she could love Draco without all the exterior complications. Why was it so hard for two people who wanted to be together, to simply be together?

"Room, tonight?" Draco asked.

"I'm feeling rather tired today, maybe another time?"

"We don't have to...do anything. We can just sleep."

Hermione looked up. Draco's eyes were pleading. Her Gryffindor four poster did feel harshly empty compared to the warmth of sharing the Room of Requirement bed with Draco.

"Okay, just sleeping then."

He grinned.

"I've missed you."

"Yes, well, who's fault is that?" She retorted but she allowed him to kiss her softly.

They had a smooth evening together. They talked in the pretend-flat Draco had imagined for both of them- it had sort of become their default decor now.

That night, they did exactly what Hermione had asked. They slept together without any naughty business and it felt nice. Draco was becoming a permanent fixture in her life, someone she felt truly at home with. She could be with him in silence, think out loud with him, brush her teeth next to him. Little things that cemented him into her routine.

Naturally, the next morning she sucked him awake and they tumbled around in the sheets, playfully nipping at each other until they were good and riled up. He then fucked her into oblivion.

Life was good.

No, they weren't a public couple. But they spent an awful lot of time studying together. They had people who accepted them, including people who Hermione never thought she'd call friends. Theo, Tracey.

Things weren't perfect, but they were good, considering.

Of course Hermione should have known that things were never this good for very long.

She had spent three nights in a row in the Room with Draco and she knew she was pushing her luck.

On the fourth night, after much kissing and a few rounds of 'Hide Draco's Cock', Hermione insisted she head back to Gryffindor to at least remind herself she had a dormitory bed there.

Draco made a show of being dramatically upset, but he finally, woefully let her go. He could be rather clingy but she never grew tired of him.

She made it back ten minutes past curfew.

Humming happily to herself, she saw most people had already gone up to bed. Hermione wasn't surprised as sixth years and onwards had curfew the latest of the students. She was, however, surprised to find Ginny was still downstairs, sitting by herself.

Ginny was settled in an armchair, facing the fire.

"Ginny?"

Ginny's head turned slowly towards Hermione, her gaze burning. Her expression was hard and foreboding as the flames danced on her face.

Hermione felt like she had been caught sneaking out.

And suddenly, it hit her.

Ginny had found out. It didn't take an Occlumens to read Ginny's mind- the disappointment on Ginny's features was giveaway enough.

"Ginny, I can explain-"

"You know, I thought it was Nott," Ginny interrupted, her voice stone cold. Ginny's voice was supposed to be enthusiastic, passionate, energetic. The deadness in her tone was jarring.

"I knew you were probably sneaking off with a Slytherin. I've suspected it since our trip to Hogsmeade. Why else would you hide all your late-night excursions from me," Ginny continued, staring back into the fire, her gaze distant.

"I figured I'd give you the benefit of the doubt. Surely, if you thought this person worth your time, then they couldn't be so bad. I imagined you'd come round to telling me when you were ready."

"When you partnered with Malfoy, at first I found it bizarre. It just didn't add up. Since when were grades more important than your principles? But then, I realised it was probably to get closer to Nott because that was the only sane bloody explanation as to why you would choose to pair up with someone who had bullied you relentlessly. And Nott, well, he wasn't so bad after all, I thought. A bit snarky, but overall harmless."

Ginny reached into her pocket and pulled out something that made Hermione's heart drop.

The Marauder's Map.

"Imagine my surprise when I see you sneaking out of the Room of Requirement with Draco Malfoy."

"You were *spying* on me?"

"You were gone three nights and you wouldn't tell me where! I was worried! Though clearly you don't give a damn about me or any of your friends because you've been fucking Draco Malfoy!"

"It's not what you think! I'd been pois-"

"Oh spare me. It doesn't matter how it happened, only that it did! And it's been going on for ages, hasn't it? How *could* you? You do realise he thinks you're beneath him, Hermione? He thinks we all are!"

"You don't know him! I know it sounds ridiculous and cliché but I promise he's different! He's trying to be better, he really is Ginny, and I wish you could see how much he's changed his views since the war. I wouldn't be with him if he was the same person as back then."

"Good Godric, you're actually falling hard for him, aren't you? Aren't you supposed to be *smart* ?"

"That's not fair! If you could just talk to him, really talk and give him a chance-"

"You're one of my dearest friends, but that person is despicable. His family has treated mine like dirt. He's almost killed people I love. You might be able to forgive all that, but I can't."

"I didn't forgive him overnight and I'm not asking you to forgive him at all! I'm sorry I worried you and that I didn't tell you, I just...I didn't know *how* ! It all happened so fast and...and I was confused!"

Ginny looked at Hermione with pity.

"He's not a charity case you can fix. He's not some House Elf that needs saving. He deserves every bit of hate he's getting now."

Ginny pocketed the map and stood up.

"I love you like a sister, but I can't- I can't keep hanging around you, knowing you're with *him* . I look at his stupid face and all I can think about is how he made our lives hell. Have your weird thing with Malfoy and when he breaks your heart- which he will, because he's Malfoy- I'll be here when you come to your senses. But I can't be here for you right now. It just makes me too angry."

Ginny stood up.

Tears were streaming down Hermione's cheeks. Ginny's eyes were watery.

"Ginny...Please... *Please* , let me just tell you the whole story..."

Ginny paused. She seemed to be considering it.

Then, resolutely, she turned on her heel and stomped up the stairs to the dormitory, without a glance back.

The only sound left was Hermione's sobs.

Reparation

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - There Must Be So Much More by Pink Turns Blue

Much like at the beginning of the year, Hermione started distancing herself from the other students.

She ate quick meals alone in the Great Hall. She woke early, did extra studying before classes and during breaks, went to bed early, rinse and repeat.

She waited anxiously, wondering if Ginny would tell anyone. Her friend- rather, ex-friend now- ignored her completely.

Hermione imagined people might have questioned Ginny about why she suddenly wasn't hanging out with Hermione Granger anymore though whatever answer Ginny gave, she didn't divulge anything about Hermione's secret relationship. Perhaps because, despite Ginny's disapproval, she didn't think it was right to air out someone else's business. Perhaps it was a last, merciful gesture to the friendship they once shared.

Either way, Hermione did not hear a single peep suggesting her and Draco were an item.

No, if people avoided her, it was because she was still studying with a group of Slytherins, which had now expanded to include Blaise and a very grumpy Daphne.

"I don't see why we need to study with *them* , we were doing perfectly fine on our own," Daphne scowled, eyeing Luna and Hermione distastefully.

Hermione opened her mouth to retort but Blaise beat her to it.

"Weren't you just griping about getting an A on your Wolfsbane essay? You need the help more than I do and, frankly, I'm growing tired of you pestering me to correct your work."

Theo sniggered while Daphne pursed her lips in disdain and haughtily tossed her blond hair over her shoulder.

Their suspension from the library had finally lifted though Draco and Ginny remained banned until the end of the month. This meant Hermione found herself surrounded by Slytherins and Luna, with no Draco.

It was...an *interesting* dynamic to say the least.

Theo was by far the most talkative, though Daphne came in close second. They complained together or bickered mostly. Tracey tittered every now and then, but didn't say much else. Blaise was always somewhere between bored and amused, though his amusement seemed to happen more in his head than by anything anyone said.

Every now and then, Luna would say something entirely out of left field that would make Tracey smile and everyone else stare.

Interesting was definitely the word for it.

They didn't address Hermione much, though she didn't feel left out either. No one asked her any questions about the war, nor made any unwelcome comments on her blood status, which was a huge relief. Topics gravitated around homework, school life and a bit of Slytherin gossip.

"I can't believe Draco had to go and get himself suspended from the library. He's been dodging me constantly and I was counting on cornering him here today," Daphne whispered to no one in particular.

Theo snorted.

"Give it a rest, Daph. He's not interested and, by the looks of it, Astoria's lost interest as well. Not following him around like a pathetic puppy anymore from what I've gathered."

"He can't just wiggle out of a betrothal- his mother will have a fit. Our parents are putting enough pressure on Astoria as is, and his parents were always worse than ours when it came to following traditions."

"Parent, you mean. He's only got one, now," Blaise murmured.

"Well, with Lucius gone, I expect Narcissa will be even more adamant that Draco find a nice, society lady to continue the Malfoy line and Astoria is the most eligible one on the market right now."

"I didn't realise we were still living in the eighteen hundreds," Hermione grumbled, scratching out a botched sentence with her quill with more force than needed.

Daphne turned imperiously to Hermione for the first time since they'd all sat down.

"Well, of course *you* wouldn't understand. Pureblood customs are ancient and unless you grow up with them, there's a lot you just won't get. Even Tracey misses the mark sometimes, and she's half in."

Tracey blushed bright red, though Hermione saw Luna's arm shift. No doubt patting her reassuringly under the table. Hermione turned back to Daphne.

"Well, *enlighten* me, then. Is there a reason you need to pawn your women off like livestock?"

Daphne laughed lightly, studying her nails.

"For someone who's supposed to be smart, you certainly are *clueless* . Luckily for you, I'm feeling indulgent so I'll instruct you. Magic runs in our system, much like genetics. For instance, anyone can learn to run fast with practice, but if you're born with long legs, you'll have an edge. Strains of magic work in a similar way, passed down through generations. The further back you can trace wizards in your genealogy, the more chances you'll breed offspring with powerful, natural magic ability. This is why Squibs are seen as...disappointing. Imagine putting all your energy into finding a perfect match only to birth someone magically useless."

Daphne laughed prettily. Hermione scowled.

"There is nothing wrong with being a Squib and that doesn't justify forcing a love match. Besides, statistically speaking, there is a steady increase of notable Half-Blood and Muggle Born witches and wizards in the last century. Voldemort himself, for instance."

Everyone at the table flinched.

"Aren't you *bold* ," Daphne said, composing herself. "Certainly yes, the more Muggleborns wizards there are, the more potential there is for strong magic to come out of it. But when you have an assured magical bloodline already, its tradition to marry into another equally strong one-"

"Wait, the Dark Lord was half-blood? Says who?" Theo interjected.

"Well it still sounds awfully outdated to me," Hermione snapped, ignoring Theo. "Shouldn't you want your sister to end up with someone who loves her for who she is, not how magic her blood supposedly is?"

" *Love* is overrated and misconstrued for passion. Once passion fades, if you haven't carefully selected your partner, you're left with nothing. Arranged marriages are planned carefully, taking both parties into consideration. Values, goals and families are aligned before the marriage itself is even discussed- unlike love matches where you find out these incompatibilities far too late. You learn to work with someone first and over time you'll gain the luxury of love. Finding a good partner is quintessential, especially when one comes from

a wealthy family with high society responsibilities, and an expected heir. You can't just leave all that responsibility up to how you *feel* for someone."

"Sometimes, you can get lucky, like Blaise and I," Daphne batted her eyelashes at him, "and be immediately attracted to one another. Narcissa and Lucius were much like that. My parents however, and most pureblood couples, find love afterwards. Astoria will marry Draco and secure our magical bloodline, just like Blaise and I. I wouldn't be foisting her with Draco if I didn't think they wouldn't get along splendidly."

Hermione was grinding her teeth.

"And if love never blossoms? Nothing guarantees everlasting love, but I'd much rather choose my partner than be *foisted* and have it end badly based on what others have chosen for me. *I* want to decide who can make me happy."

Daphne shook her head.

"I trust my family to make smart decisions for me- they know me better than anyone. And anyways, the bride and groom always get the last word. My sister and Draco won't be forced together in a Petrificus Totalus marriage, but it is their duty to their lineage to marry suitably. They'll come around, I'm sure. They both risk their inheritance, their families and their reputation if they don't."

"Well, you'll be disappointed," Theo piped up, while Hermione spluttered with indignation, "Pretty sure Draco has his eye on someone else."

Five heads whipped around to Theo.

"Oh? This is news to me. Though Draco *does* keep to himself quite a lot these days," Blaise said slowly.

"Nonsense," Daphne retorted waspishly, "Who else could he possibly be after? Apart from us, he hardly spends time with anyone else. Unless..."

Hermione was clenching her quill so hard it snapped.

She felt every muscle in her body quiver with electricity. If Daphne put two and two together...It was all over. Everyone would know.

She'd always envisioned going public with Draco on their terms, though of course that was profoundly naive. Especially when more and more people were finding out about them.

She could feel herself start to panic. She sat on her hands so no one would see how sweaty they were. Was this how the secret was going to come out? Surrounded by Slytherins with the exception of the one Slytherin she needed the most? She was so wound up she barely caught the end of Daphne's sentence.

"-Not thinking about getting back with Pansy?"

Hermione almost collapsed with relief.

"He does talk about her a lot. All the time actually," Hermione supplied quickly, her voice higher than she'd like.

Daphne arched an eyebrow, taking the bait.

"Well, he'd better move fast. She's currently having talks with some rich bloke from Bulgaria I've heard."

Daphne prattled on about Pansy as Hermione quietly rose from her chair, muttering about getting a book.

She barely had a moment to calm her jitters in one of the aisles when Theo sauntered up next to her.

"Needed a break too. She's a bit much, isn't she?" Theo grinned, nodding in Daphne's direction.

Hermione clenched her fists, cast a hasty Muffliato, and rounded on him.

"Look, I know you know, all right? Tell the whole school if you want, I don't care, but I would much rather do without your little passive comments alluding to- to- well we both know what!"

Theo was smiling a sly smile, eyebrow quirked.

"Whatever are you talking about Granger? I have absolutely no clue."

She wanted to scream in frustration. He really was going to make her say it, the bastard.

"Draco and I!" she hissed.

"Yes?"

Hermione took a deep, steadying breath, reminding herself that murder was probably grounds for expulsion.

"We're dating."

"Well thank Salazar's arse, someone finally said it! D'you know how long I've been trying to nettle it out of the lad? He's been mooning over you in potions, in the Great Hall, everywhere. May as well had a great big sign that said 'I want to shag Hermione Granger' hovering over his big ol' head. I'm supposed to be his best mate and *you* end up spilling the beans instead of him. Can you believe it? Some friend he is."

"Shhh! Would you keep your voice down?"

"Don't fret, they can't hear. Muffliato, remember?"

He smirked. She fumed.

"You're not going to talk him out of it?"

Theo looked genuinely confused.

"Why would I do that?"

"I'm your natural enemy. Gryffindor. Muggleborn. Friend of Harry Potter. Both of your fathers tried to kill me."

"Yes, well, perhaps all those reasons are exactly why watching Draco squirm over you has been so *dreadfully* entertaining. As for my father...may he rot in Azkaban."

Before Hermione could question Nott further, he deftly manoeuvred the conversation back to her.

"So you and Draco, huh?" Theo prompted, as if discussing weather, "I'll be honest, he's always had a bit of a soft spot for you. Constantly bringing your name up. 'Mudblood' this and 'Mudblood' that. Er- sorry, no offence. We were kids, you know. Quite fucked up ones I might add. Probably still are, to varying degrees."

He chuckled fondly.

"So is that why you wanted to study with us? To torment us?" Hermione snapped.

"Yep," Theo said cheerily, popping the 'p'. "Though I did want your help with my essays also. Two birds, one spell as they say."

Hermione sighed, resigned.

"Maybe I should just stand on a pillar and announce it to the world, Draco be damned. I'm so sick of walking around on eggshells, when people are guessing we're together all the same."

Theo snorted.

"Certainly, if you have a death wish, by all means, go right ahead."

"A death wish? Don't be dramatic."

Theo blinked.

"I'm being very serious. If I were Draco, I wouldn't want my saviour wizarding girlfriend to have an enemy target on her back either."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"You *do* know what Draco has been dealing with, haven't you?"

"You mean being bullied? I've gone through much worse, I'm sure. I've been bullied by the whole school several times."

"Great Merlin, you have no idea what it's like, do you? He hasn't told you a thing. Classic Draco."

"Told me *what* ?"

"This isn't normal bullying, Granger. It's covert warfare. There are students who've had family members *die* in Malfoy Manor. It's very personal. I get challenged to duels regularly and my father was a mere lackey. A high-ranked lackey, but a lackey all the same. Lucius Malfoy was the *ring-leader* for a while. People hate me but they *loathe* Draco. They challenge me to my face but they curse Draco in the back. And not silly little Jelly-Legs jinxes. *Impedimenta*. *Stupefy* . Spells for battle. He's been dodging them all year and it's a wonder he hasn't ended up in the Hospital Wing. Clearly he didn't spend last year with his finger up his nose. He's become quite the duelist, himself."

Hermione's jaw was almost unhinged.

" *What* ?"

"Nah, 'course he wouldn't tell you. Wouldn't want to worry you. But if there's a reason he would want to keep things secret between you both, that'd be it. You're too high profile, everyone knows your name and you can be sure if word gets out that you're tumbling around in the hay with a Death Eater, they'll be after you next and your hero status won't be enough to protect you. If anything, it'll make you look worse."

Hermione sagged against the shelves.

He'd been dodging conflict all year and she had no clue. But how on earth was she supposed to guess if he wouldn't tell her? He was always keeping his problems to himself. Him and his damn Occlumency!

She felt a wave of incredible sadness wash over her. It felt like they were slugging along against the tide.

He couldn't have a public relationship because of *her* . Because they were on opposite sides. And *her* side was the bully.

"Am I going to make him happy?" Hermione suddenly asked.

Theo looked taken aback.

"Er... What makes you say that?"

"Daphne."

Theo rolled his eyes.

"Don't let her get to you. She wants the best for her sister and her parents are...zealous. Draco and I used to visit as children and we saw firsthand how strict it was. We were some of the only friends the Greengrass sisters had since their parents were extremely picky with who could enter their home. They're the kind of parents that wouldn't hesitate to kick their daughters out if they put a toe out of line. They've both grown up with a lot of pressure and Daph seems to be projecting some of that. She means well, though. I think the idea of being parted from Astoria is unimaginable to her."

"Maybe... Would it be easier if Draco was with Astoria? They could be public without a problem. Daphne mentioned the responsibilities of high society and I can certainly guess what that means. Fancy parties and balls and cocktails and garden parties and hosting events. I...I'm not built for any of that. But I know how important reinstating the Malfoy name is to Draco. What if that's what he needs? A woman like Astoria, who's been raised to fulfil exactly those demands? I...I don't even know if I want children!"

Hermione buried her face in her hands, the reality of everything crashing down on her.

Her parents hated magic.

His mum probably hated her.

She and Draco were both ambitious but their goals were vastly different. And while his values had come a long way to meeting hers, there were still some things that might never connect.

Had they been blinded by love? So blinded, they couldn't see that, logistically, their union made no sense?

"Hey...Hey now, let's not get carried away..."

Theo patted her awkwardly on the back. It reminded Hermione so forcefully of when Harry comforted her that she couldn't help but smile a little.

"Draco is a stubborn pig and not only does he not want Astoria, but he wants you. You getting out of the way won't change that. I've known Draco for a long time and I've never seen him this relaxed. He sits there with you, and he looks like there's nowhere else he'd rather be. And, don't tell Daphne this or she'll have my hide, but I much prefer your opinions on love than hers. If you're both happy, don't overthink it. Just be."

Theo winked.

"I just wish it wasn't so *hard* !"

"No epic, star-crossed lovers' tale is easy or that'd be boring," Theo teased. "Besides," his face grew sombre, "You have someone. Cherish that."

He looked away. She noticed his gaze linger on Daphne. Hermione understood.

"You... You like her."

Theo shrugged.

"Not anymore. She's betrothed to Blaise."

"But- You're Pureblood as well!"

"Doesn't matter. They signed the contract between families. It's been set in stone for ages. The Zabinis have more wealth, better political standing not to mention he's a head taller than me. He'll take good care of her."

"But what if she wants you? Have you tried telling her how you feel?"

"You heard her. It's her duty to find someone respectable. They'll no doubt grow to love each other one day. She'll have the life she wants."

Theo's expression looked pained. It felt wrong to see him without his usual crooked grin. It dawned on Hermione that not only did he have to see Daphne regularly, but all the members in their study group were coupled off. Nott must feel lonely.

"But what if... What if she only *thinks* she wants that? People can change their minds!"

Theo gave Hermione a pitying smile.

"Loving someone means letting them go sometimes."

Theo picked out a book right over Hermione's head.

"Think I'll go read this in the commons for a bit. 'Ta, Granger, see you 'round."

He sauntered out of the library, his step a little less jaunty than usual. Hermione could've sworn she saw Daphne's eyes flick towards him as he left.

//

Hermione started spending more and more time with her study group, particularly Draco and Theo.

Neither of them were keen on spending time with other people and not many people wanted to spend time with them either. To avoid unwanted stares, they would nick food from the tables during mealtimes and eat in vacant classrooms.

It was sort of like being with Harry and Ron again, but different.

Hermione would watch Theo and Draco and sometimes Blaise zoom around the Quidditch pitch, pelting each other with snowballs while she practised her Charms and kept their cocoa hot. Luna and Tracey kept her company oftentimes more than not.

On weekends they would wander the grounds, play cards and debate various topics. Only Daphne and Blaise enjoyed wizards' chess ("The turns take too bloody long," Theo complained), but on occasion they would crowd around and either egg them on, place bets or distract them.

When February arrived, Draco's library ban was lifted.

They hung out more frequently in the library, increasing their study sessions to almost daily. Whenever someone wanted to read in the evenings, they would go to the library and, chances were, someone else from their group would be there.

They were all excelling in potions and Slughorn proclaimed that he had never taught a more gifted N.E.W.T. class, making Hermione's spirits soar.

One warm Saturday, Hermione decided it was a good day to test Draco's promise of being kinder to her friends.

"We're going to visit Hagrid today."

Draco spat out his pumpkin juice, narrowly missing Theo.

It was shortly after breakfast and, for once, they were seated in the Great Hall, while most other students were out enjoying their day off.

"Excuse me? *We* ?"

"Yes, we. You got off on the wrong foot with him and I think it's time you face him so we can all move on. Hagrid is one of my oldest Hogwarts friends and I'd like for you to try to get along with him."

"Does he know you've invited me?" Draco glowered.

"Er, yes. I've warned him we're on speaking terms and he said he's willing to move on as well."

This wasn't entirely true. When Hermione had visited him last week and updated the groundskeeper on her new friends, he was unsurprisingly far from pleased.

"Yeh can' be serious, Hermione! An' yeh bringin' tha' spoiled, good fer nothin' prat 'ERE? HAVE YEH GONE MAD?"

Draco was eyeing her suspiciously.

Hermione hurried on before he could read too far into her lie.

"I have some balms to bring him anyway, so we'll head over this afternoon, knock on his door, you'll apologise and then we'll have tea and-"

"Wait a second. Draco? *Apologising* ? Oh please, may I join as well? May I? May I?" Theo asked gleefully.

Draco looked like he'd just eaten a Bogey-flavoured bean.

Hermione laughed.

"I asked about you, too, and Hagrid says it's fine."

She avoided looking Draco directly in the eyes.

Round one in the afternoon, the three of them trundled down the stone path to Hagrid's hut- Draco walking like a man to the Gallows and Theo skipping along.

Hermione rapped on the door and hid a smile as Draco jumped at the sound of Fang's barking.

"Get outta me way, yeh great dummy! How many times I got ter- Ah! Hermione! And... *you* ."

Hagrid's bushy eyebrows sunk low on his face as he scowled impressively from behind the door, holding it open just enough to see all three of them. They could still hear Fang scraping about and whining behind him.

"Yes, hello Hagrid! I've brought some...some friends- you remember, I mentioned them? This is Theo Nott, say hello. And...well...you obviously know Malfoy?"

Hagrid snorted so loud it seemed to resonate in his throat.

"Course I do, hard ter forget."

Hermione had to hand it to Draco- it was not an easy thing to stand before a half-giant that very visibly loathed you. But Draco, shoulders squared, did not flinch, though she did notice his arms were uncharacteristically rigid at his sides.

"Well? Go on, tell him what we said," she whispered loudly, nudging Draco's shoulder.

Draco spared her a quick glare before clearing his throat.

"Hello, sir. I wish to offer you my most sincere apologies for all my previous actions. My betrayal to the school was horrendous and I deeply regret it. I would take it back in a heartbeat if I could. I would also like to apologise for my appalling behaviour in your classes, as well as my intolerance towards Buckbeak the Hippogriff. I was young and stupid, though that is no excuse. I was blinded by pride and arrogance and I acted in an extremely cruel and disrespectful way. I do not expect your forgiveness but I offer you my deepest apologies all the same, as they are owed after everything I've done."

Draco bowed his head. Hagrid looked flabbergasted. Theo had stuffed both his knuckles in his mouth to keep from laughing.

" *And ?*" Hermione insisted, prodding Draco in the back. She saw him bite his lip to keep from sighing in exasperation.

" *And* , I also apologise for snooping about your home in first year. Your dragon was none of my business and I now understand my actions were purely self-serving and egotistical."

"Wait, you have a *dragon ? Here ?*" Theo gaped in astonishment.

"Yeh...I had one alrigh'..." Hagrid grumbled.

"How about we come inside and we can tell Theo about it? Also I brought you the balms you were asking about, right here!" Hermione said quickly.

She held up a box with a generous amount of jars, filled with a magical balm to ease cuts and bruises that she'd brewed herself. They always came in handy, given Hagrid's penchant for training dangerous creatures.

Hagrid seemed torn.

"I dunno Hermione...Them two...Especially *him* ...Would o' never thought... *Here* of all places..."

"Oh, please Hagrid, it's cold out! Just a quick cup of tea! I even brought tea leaves here..."

"A cuppa...Yeh, alrigh'. One cup o' tea. But I hear any word outta line an' out they go. Migh' be yer friends now, but they got a lot ter make up for, s'far as I know..."

Theo and Draco exchanged uncertain looks.

"One cup it is!" Hermione said in an overly cheerful voice, shoving Draco through the door.

Hermione set the balms on a nearby stool. Draco looked positively scandalised as Fang tried to jump on him and lick his face, getting dirt all over Draco's clean, black robes. Hermione stifled a laugh.

"Tha's enough, Fang!" Hagrid growled, though he didn't do much else to hold Fang back. Instead, he clanked about in his kitchen area, finding mugs and muttering to himself.

They finally all settled in around a plate of Hagrid's famous rock biscuits (it seemed he had done away with the cakes and was trying something new) each with a steaming mug of wildberry tea.

"Yeh aren' gonna have a biscuit?" Hagrid offered Draco a little aggressively.

Draco hastily took one. Hermione blew on her tea instead, an evasive tactic. She knew better than to try sinking her teeth into one of those, although it was extremely entertaining watching Draco nibbling on the edge of his biscuit like a squirrel, shaving off a thin layer of burnt rock.

Theo glanced at Draco before opting to place a biscuit politely on his plate which he proceeded to ignore for the rest of their visit.

"Mmm...tasty," Draco said tightly, looking far from delighted. Hermione hid her face in her cup, holding back a snort.

"So, how have you been, Hagrid?" Hermione asked, hoping to divert Hagrid's attention enough so that he'd forget to scowl at Draco.

"Been alrigh'. Doin' this n' that."

"Well, that's...nice..."

An awkward silence followed. Draco attempted another bite of his biscuit. The room was so quiet, Hermione could hear Draco's teeth collide with the hard surface as he tried to gnaw through it valiantly. Hagrid was clenching his spoon. Theo was warily watching Fang trot around the table.

"Er, so...So, Theo! You wanted to hear about Norbert? Hagrid's dragon?"

Theo's head whipped up, his eyes glittering with interest.

"Would I! Did you keep it here?"

Theo looked doubtfully around the small cabin.

Hagrid, still scanning Draco out of the corner of his eye, cleared his throat.

"Yeh, well, din' have it fer long, did I? Hatched on this very table. Funny, wee thing."

Hagrid's eyes began to mist over, as he remembered fondly.

"Feisty little Norwegian Ridgeback. Harry, Ron and Hermione 'ere all saw 'im hatch. An' *this* one did too-"

He glared back at Draco, who had the grace to look a little guilty.

Hagrid sighed.

"Prob'ly fer the best, Norbert couldn'a been 'ere long at any rate. He's all grown now, Charlie sends me photos every year."

Hagrid nodded at a frame over the mantelpiece depicting a dragon in the distance that looked very grown and very ferocious.

Theo gaped.

"But how on earth did you find a dragon egg? Aren't they extremely rare, especially in Britain?"

"Ah well, won it over cards in a pub, din' I?"

"In a *pub* ?"

"Well, yeh, I mean, it was secretly You-Know-Who wantin' to know abou' Fluffy and er... Well, the rest's history."

"Wait, you got a dragon from You-Know-Who?? And what's a Fluffy?"

"He's a giant, three-headed guard dog that Hagrid owned and-" Hermione began though Hagrid cut her off.

"Hey now, who's tellin' the story 'ere?"

Hagrid was clearly forgetting his hatred for Draco in light of an avid audience.

Theo's eyes were wide as saucers. Even Draco looked mildly intrigued, which was a large display of emotion for him.

"Let's see... So, yeh, Fluffy. I had him as a puppy. Wild, tha' one, but jus' play a bit o' music an' he goes righ' off ter sleep. Dumbledore'd asked me ter lend him ter protect a stone from You-Know-Who an'..."

The afternoon seemed to fly by as Hagrid and Hermione recounted the adventures of first year, talking over each other half the time.

Theo was an excellent audience. Much like everyone else, he had heard rumours and snippets of what had happened, but nothing near the full picture. He spent much of the story gasping and letting out loud cries of "No!". Draco didn't say much, but Hermione noticed his shoulders relaxing as the hours went by; a good sign.

Three cups of tea later, Hagrid was in a good enough mood to bring out a bottle of mead, which they all gingerly sampled and were relieved to find it was leagues better than his biscuits.

The sun had almost set and they were all tipsy, recounting their favourite bits- Theo's being when Draco was forced to do his detention in the Forbidden Forest with Harry, Neville and Hermione.

"Gah! I remember you griping about that detention, too! You were so sour about it! Complained for *ages* ." Theo chortled, teetering in his chair.

Draco grumbled at the memory, gulping down the last of his mead.

"HA! I remember tha' one! Righ' skittish, yeh were! Jumped at ev'ry sound! Squirrels could'a chased yeh off, the way yeh balked 'round each corner!"

Hagrid chuckled, taking a hefty swig himself while Theo roared with laughter.

"I was twelve years old!" Draco protested, swaying a little.

"It is rather frightening when you- *hic!* - think of all the other things that were in there that we found out about later. Giant spiders and angry centaurs and- *hic!* - such," Hermione mused, her cheeks pink.

"Aragog was alrigh' back then!"

"Don't tell me you're friends with giant spiders *too* ?" Theo exclaimed.

Hagrid chuckled.

"Yeh know, Snape was supposed ter oversee tha' detention but Dumbledore decided it was ter be me. I think he knew I'd gotten yeh all involved and t'was his way o' dealin' things. Brilliant' man, Dumbledore. Always knew everythin'."

Hagrid filled his mug again and raised it, taking a generous gulp. Hermione raised hers in acknowledgement.

The room had gone quiet, everyone lost in their own thoughts for a moment. Draco shifted uncomfortably.

Hagrid broke the silence after a while.

"He always saw the good in everyone, Dumbledore did. Understood people. I think he'd be glad ter see us all 'ere."

Hagrid looked pointedly at Draco before taking another swig.

Hermione smiled and placed a hand on Draco's arm.

They looked at each other. His brow was furrowed. He stared at her with an intensity that startled her and made her flush.

"I think so, too. It's getting quite late, shall we head out? Thank you for having us Hagrid, this was lovely."

They said their goodbyes and Draco surprised Hermione when he gave a few curt pats on Fang's head.

Hagrid waved them off as they walked back up the hill, going on about how they should all come back and visit soon.

"Even you! Ain' so bad. Bit stiff, but yeh'r alrigh', Malfoy!"

When they were out of earshot, Theo gave a low whistle.

"Wow, what an event! You know, I feel sort of bad for not giving him more credit. Bit hard to understand him at first, but he's tamed a lot of rather impressive creatures, hasn't he?"

"I think it was a good idea to have him teach Care of Magical Creatures to the N.E.W.T students. Professor Grubbly-Plank has a more delicate approach, which suits earlier years much better but Hagrid really is a treasure trove of knowledge when it comes to dangerous beasts. What about you, did you have fun?" Hermione asked, wrapping her arm around Draco's without thinking. The alcohol made her feel much more aloof.

"Yes, surprisingly so. Though next time, perhaps I can bring the biscuits," Draco added daintily.

Hermione admired how well he held his liquor. Both Hermione and Theo were wobbling on their legs while, apart from a pink tinge around his ears, Draco seemed perfectly sober.

They made their way to the front entrance, talking and laughing.

Hermione was just about to ask if they wanted to nip into the Great Hall and grab some food before supper wrapped up when she felt Draco yank his arm out of hers.

In a split second, he spun round and shot a nonverbal *Protego* from his wand.

A curse ricocheted off his shield, exploding against a column.

A burly-looking Gryffindor had his wand up, pointed at them. A couple other Gryffindors had his back. Hermione vaguely recognized Demelza Robbins, from the Quidditch team.

"Not too bright, throwing a curse in the Great Hall. If you're going to ambush us like milksops, do it in a secluded hallway at least," Draco drawled.

"This isn't an ambush. Theodore Nott, I challenge you to a duel!"

"And you are?" Theo asked calmly, straightening his collar and looking completely unfussed at being attacked only seconds ago.

"Geoffrey Hooper!"

"And which family member of yours did my father torture?"

"My- my cousin!" Hooper answered roughly.

"Alrighty then. Tomorrow, 10 p.m., dungeons," Nott responded easily, as if setting a bank appointment.

Geoffrey narrowed his little eyes with uncertainty, clearly not expecting Nott to be so blasé about it all.

"Good... Yes... Demelza will be my second."

"Malfoy's mine."

"I'm coming too!" Hermione said loudly.

"No, you won't!"

Draco glared down at her.

"It's a duel, Granger. You'll only be in the way."

"I won't get in the way and I'm coming! Nott is my friend!"

Draco gripped her arm and yanked her close, whispering harshly in her ear.

"It'll be dangerous and duels are illegal. I'm not risking you!"

She wrenched her arm from Draco's hand.

“ *You* can't order me around! I'm top of the class in charms and potions! If it's as dangerous as you say then you'll need someone there who can do at least rudimentary healing and I'm the best there is!”

“It's settled then, 10 p.m. tomorrow,” Hooper snarled impatiently. Demelza was looking at Hermione with mistrust.

The group of Gryffindors marched off.

Draco barely noticed their departure, his eyes fixed on Hermione's.

“This isn't a game, these duels can get nasty very fast. The more people who show up, the more chances someone will get hurt!”

"Oh and how would you know that? I vaguely recall you doing not much more than ferreting about!"

It was a bit of a low blow, but Hermione was frustrated. She'd spent a year planning the demise of the most notoriously powerful wizard of all time, she wasn't about to be shoo'd off like a defenceless child for a silly school duel.

Draco looked furious.

"You're not coming and that's final! If I have to tie you to a chair, so be it!" He hissed.

"It's more dangerous for you! You could be expelled over this! I won't sit by, waiting and worrying!"

"Oh, let her have her fun," Theo interrupted lazily, "She's more stubborn than you and 'sides, Bones does a good job overseeing things and making sure people keep quiet about it. Granger just has to keep her head down and she'll be fine."

"Bones? *Susan* Bones?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Yeah, she's the mediator. Makes sure things go by the rules and does a right job of it, too. Probably gets it from her aunt."

Hermione had difficulty imagining the calm, friendly Hufflepuff sternly overseeing illegal dungeon fights.

"I'll leave you to your lovers' quarrel. See you tomorrow, Draco. *Hermione* ."

With a last, cheeky grin, Theo sauntered away.

Hermione's head was spinning and she didn't want to deal with having an argument with Draco right now. It was a testament to how good the Hogwarts food was, that no one in the Dining Hall had seemed to notice a brawl almost breaking out next door.

"I'm tired, I'm off to bed."

"We're not finished here-"

"As far as I'm concerned, we *are* ," Hermione countered. "This isn't up for debate. You're not my caretaker."

"Would that be so bad? Why not let someone take care of you for once? Weasel and Potter have done their fair share of endangering you but I *refuse* to indulge you in the same way."

Hermione pursed her lips into an upside down 'U' and grabbed Draco's arm, dragging him off to a secluded hallway. Dinner would be wrapping up soon and she would not be caught in the middle of a row by half the school.

"How *dare* you- Harry and Ron haven't endangered me at all, I *chose* to get myself into dangerous situations because I knew I could be of help! Why can't you afford me the same trust?"

"It's not about trust! I love you and I forbid you from needlessly risking your neck for what doesn't concern you!"

Draco loomed over her until she was up against the wall. She angrily bared her teeth at him.

" *Forbid* me! Ha! How very archaic of you. Is this another pureblood thing? The women mope about while the men run off doing Godric knows what!"

"What in the blithering hell are you talking about?"

"Your customs! Your traditions! Clearly you've grown up in an environment where women sit around, waiting to be sold off to suitors and then sit pretty! I'm not like that Draco and I never will be! I'm going to the duel tomorrow and that's final. You can't talk me out of it. I'm going to bed."

"No."

His arms were on either side of her head. She tried to duck under but he slid a knee between her legs and pinned her to the wall with his hips.

"I'm not letting you leave angry when we have things to settle," he growled at her.

"Draco let me go! People will see us!"

"No they won't. The dorms are in the opposite direction."

She struggled but he held her tight. His face was so close to hers she was going cross eyed looking at him.

"I mean it, Draco, I'll scream!"

"What have my traditions got to do with any of this and who told you pureblood women sit around doing nothing?"

Hermione bit her lip.

"Well...Not...Not *nothing* per se...What does it even matter? Let me go to bed."

"You're always telling me I need to stop avoiding you when I'm in a mood. I want you to do the same for me. Talk to me."

Hermione sighed, slumping against the stone.

"It's just... Things are done a certain way in your world, aren't they? You're supposed to marry a girl who'll simper and curtsy and live in that great big home of yours. I won't ever be that person and I don't *want* to be that person."

Hermione took a deep breath and went on.

"I know you want to restore Malfoy Manor but I don't know if I could ever... *live* there and you'll need someone by your side to help you and have manners and say all the right things and what if I never want children? Our parents might not ever meet and what if we still have important values that don't align and we'll never know until it's too late because we rushed in to all of this!"

"Ah. You've been talking to Daphne."

"So what if I have!" Hermione retorted hotly, "Is she wrong? Is this not what your mother will expect of you? A respectable society wife?"

"Yes, well-"

"I can't change who I am. I *wont* change who I am."

Draco gave her a hard stare.

"Listen to me. If I wanted someone like that, I wouldn't be in love with *you* . You won't have to live in the Manor. You won't have to do any ridiculous simpering."

"And your heir?"

Draco's pale skin blanched.

"I am not in a position to want any at the moment. I need to get everything sorted first before thinking of bringing an innocent child into my mess of a family."

"But you would want one? One day?"

"It's required of me but I haven't exactly been following the rules anymore. The estate will pass to the next in line and no doubt my aunts and uncles will squabble over which cousin that will be."

"That doesn't bother you?"

Draco sighed heavily.

"That's ages from now, Hermione. I would be a complete dunce to drop someone like you for a tainted inheritance that I don't even want anymore."

"But you *do* want it. You want to dedicate your years after Hogwarts to restore it!"

"I want to restore my name, my honor. I want my mother to not receive Howlers from strangers anymore, calling her every slur under the sun. The Manor, the gold, all of it is besides the point. I want her to have it, so that she may continue to live the lavish lifestyle she is accustomed to. But to me, none of it is important. *You're* important."

"Do you want children?"

"I've told you, it's required but not absolute-"

"I don't mean is it required or not, I mean do you *want* them?"

Draco paused, studying her face.

"I can imagine myself living a happy life without children. I cannot imagine a happy life without you."

He took her chin in his hand. His eyes bored into her.

"I don't want you to change and I especially never want you to change for me. You're perfect."

Why was her heart beating so fast? Why did her face feel like a furnace? His mouth was inches from hers and he was *looking* at her in a way that made her want to cling to him and never let go.

"Then it's settled. I'll be at the duel tomorrow."

Draco let out a ragged breath. He looked like he wanted to say something scathing but instead, he pressed his forehead against hers.

" *Fine* . I'll allow you to- I mean...I won't stop you from going. But if even a hair on that bushy head of yours is harmed, there'll be hell to pay."

" *Bushy?* That's ru-"

Her protest was swallowed as his mouth pressed into hers.

She whimpered instinctively, her hands latching onto his collar and pulling him close.

She squirmed against him, fighting to push her body as close to him as she could. He crushed her harder against the wall and she felt his bulge press into her hip. She gasped in his mouth and he used the opportunity to sneak his tongue inside.

She circled her tongue with his three times until finally wrenching her lips off his mouth.

"We can't- Not here! We'll get caught-" She panted, though a low moan escaped her as he sucked on her neck.

He made a noise of frustration and took her hand. He pulled her along at a jog and skidded to a halt at the first door they approached.

Wrenching it open, Draco tugged them into what looked like an abandoned classroom, slamming and magically locking the door behind them. There were desks piled together haphazardly, no windows and a notably musty smell in the air.

Neither of them cared.

Hermione knew that right now, Draco was frustrated with her and was also feeling a certain loss of control.

This meant he was probably dead set on taking her hard and fast and woe to whatever would stand in his way.

Her pussy was throbbing painfully with anticipation.

Draco shot an aggressive Scourgify at the nearest desk.

"Bend over," he ordered.

Hermione squeaked and did as he said, arching her back so that her bottom was pointed up at him.

She felt him hike her skirt up and yank her panties down. Cool air brushed her lips. She shivered.

His index swiped across her labia and even this small action sounded wet. She moaned and deepened her arch.

"Dracooo..."

She heard him mutter a quick Silencio ward followed by a clatter that indicated he'd tossed his wand aside.

She felt his breath on her mound, giving her a split second warning of what he was about to do.

She gasped and then shouted as his tongue burrowed deep inside her. His hands clasped her hips and he shoved his face against her.

Her eyelashes fluttered and she made small keening sounds as he lapped at her, adding a finger and presently another when she was ready.

He ate her out and fingerfucked her with a familiar ease. He wasn't gentle, but then, he knew she liked it that way.

She could feel her orgasm approaching. So *close* -

"Oopsy Daisy! Students getting handsy!"

Draco yelped, standing up and thrusting Hermione's skirt down.

She made an angry yowl.

Peeves swooped through the wall and around the classroom, bringing up the dust.

"Thought you'd come for a wee snog? Tut tut tut, naughty, naughty! Frolocking is strictly forbidden!"

Hermione scrambled up, her face red.

How humiliating! Of all the people to get caught by!

Draco snatched Hermione's hand, dodging as Peeves sneezed in their direction, sending a cascade of dust their way. Hermione managed to fish Draco's wand off the floor before they bolted for the exit, winding around the stacks of desks.

They ran out of the classroom, Draco dragging Hermione out of Peeve's throwing range. They could hear a ruckus behind them, desks being toppled and chairs being tossed- no doubt a call for Filch to show up, angry.

After a mad sprint down the hall and round the bend, Draco and Hermione stopped to catch their breath.

"I'd forgotten- *blasted ghosts* !" Hermione wheezed, clutching a stitch in her side.

She had become so used to the privacy of their Room- not to mention their overall luck- that she'd underestimated just how many prying eyes the castle really had.

Draco straightened, scowling. Sod him, he barely looked out of breath!

"Are you..."

"No," Hermione snapped, smoothing her hair down which had sprung up during their dash, "I'm most certainly not okay! That was stupid of us to-"

Voices down the hall made them both jump.

A hoard of Slytherins were heading their way from the Great Hall.

Hermione's libido had definitely gone dry.

Sneaking around had been funny and all, for a while.

But they were lucky in a way that it had just been Peeves who'd interrupted them. Peeves was a scoundrel, but his mayhem was very first degree. He liked to smash things and shout obscenities and create a ruckus. He wasn't really the sneaky type- the type likely to get a kick out of gossiping to the whole school regarding Hermione and Draco's scandalous love affair.

But what if someone else had walked in? Nearly Headless Nick was quite the huge gossip himself, and surprisingly knowing of the students goings-on. What if it was a teacher or another pair of students looking for a snog? Someone they knew?

Hermione hated the growing paranoia that festered inside her brain and she hated that they hadn't been clever enough to foresee this disaster.

She detested how she wanted to reach for Draco's hand sometimes and had to stop herself. How sometimes his arm brushed against hers and she couldn't just take it in case people saw.

The Slytherins were almost upon them.

"I should go," Hermione whispered, "Have a good night, Draco."

Draco looked a little put out.

"Are we okay?" He asked, his brow creased in concern.

The evening had been a fiasco. Hermione knew he was probably also still thinking of their earlier argument. She wanted to reassure him, hold him- but they were still in a corridor with

a group of impending students about to catch them alone together, looking guilty and a little dishevelled. She smiled and quickly squeezed his hand, wanting to reassure him.

"Yes, more than okay. See you at breakfast tomorrow."

He still looked a little uncertain.

"I'll call you later," Hermione promised, skittering away just in time. She dove down a side passage just as a wave of Slytherins swept by.

She knew he'd perhaps wanted to swoop her off to the Room, but she'd suddenly felt very tired.

The secrecy and the lies were taking a toll on her and she could use a quiet night alone to just recenter herself.

She had to take the little victories, she reminded herself.

The visit to Hagrid's had gone very well.

She could now be seen in public with Draco.

So things weren't perfect- but they were getting better.

She needed to remind herself that Rome wasn't built in a day and neither were relationships.

Retribution

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Eternal Blue by Spiritbox

Hermione never knew exactly how deep the dungeons of Hogwarts were. The answer was now obvious: *deep* .

While the main dungeon floor had been converted for potions, there was a heavy, iron door, almost hidden in an alcove, that led to a long flight of steps.

The torches on the walls had long gone out, forcing Hermione, Draco and Theo to whip out *Lumos* in order to see the steps.

Down they went.

The staircase opened to a dank, stone cavern with old barrels and rows of metal bars spanning ceiling to floor. Hermione thought she caught a glimpse of chains on the wall, no doubt the very same Filch had once threatened them with.

The cavern went on. The halls began to branch, some leading down other stairways, some into other cells that looked suspiciously like old torture chambers. It was little consolation that none had seemed used for centuries.

Every so often, Hermione caught a skittering sound. A rat perhaps, or something more sinister.

"Bleak, isn't it?" Theo piped up, "Easy to forget Hogwarts was once a mediaeval castle."

"They touch on the dungeons in *Hogwarts: A History* but I had no idea they were so *vast* ."

"Yes well, *Hogwarts: A History* tends to gloss over the nastier parts."

"You've read it too?"

Theo tutted.

"Granger, anyone with half a brain's read it."

Hermione fought down a snort.

"So how far down do these tunnels go? How many floors?"

"Endless. They say not to wander too far or you'll get lost and never find your way back. Some swear there are ghosts still wandering in the deepest depths. Most people just come here to snog, though."

"And how much further til the duel?"

"One more down and that'll be it."

They descended another staircase, took a turn and ended up at the far end of a hallway in front of a large, iron door.

"Theodore Nott here with Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger," Theo announced clearly to the door.

A heavy lock clunked and the door grated open, scraping noisily along the floor.

Hermione could feel the tingling of wards as she entered behind Draco and Theo. Wards for sound-proofing, for alarms and protection spells, and maybe cushioning charms as well. The air was heavy with them and Hermione could tell they were done by skilled hands.

The cell was spacious enough. Blue candles floated, giving an eerie, otherworldly glow. The four House banners hung on the far wall.

A concrete platform had been raised in the centre of the room. On the other side stood Susan Bones, Padma Patil, Blaise Zabini and, to Hermione's surprise, Neville.

To the left, Demelza and the other Gryffindor Hermione didn't recognize stood off to the side. Geoffrey Hooper held a power stance on the concrete stage, his wand clutched in his fist.

Draco nodded towards the right and Hermione followed him while Theo took his position on the platform, in front of Geoffrey.

The iron door shut with a sonorous clang and then silence.

Susan spoke, her voice magnified so that it filled the chamber.

"On this date, at 10 pm, the eleventh of February, Geoffrey Hooper has challenged Theodore Nott to a duel. You are Geoffrey Hooper?"

Geoffrey grunted a hasty 'yes'.

"You are Theodore Nott?"

"Naturally."

Susan narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Duelists, declare your seconds."

Geoffrey declared Demelza Robbins and Theo did the same for Draco Malfoy.

"We, the four Houses, bear witness to this duel and shall decide the verdict with fairness and justice," Susan continued, "Wands only. Unforgivable spells are banned. The first to lose their wand, be physically incapacitated or to say 'I surrender' will be proclaimed the defeated."

Geoffrey stood tense. Theo seemed unbothered.

"To those present to witness, there are protection spells set up along the sides of the duelling area. All the same, keep your wands close with defence spells at the ready. We will not take any responsibility for injuries sustained here. Anyone who wishes to leave, do so now."

Why was Susan looking at her?

Hermione clenched her wand but other than that, didn't move an inch.

"Duellists, draw your wands and assume the position."

Geoffrey and Theo stood back to back, their wands held up.

They walked three paces and stalled, waiting for Susan's go ahead.

Geoffrey looked to be visibly shaking with contained rage.

"Duel!" Susan boomed, her wand shooting off sparks with a bang.

Both men whirled, Geoffrey's wand arm coming down in an arc while Theo jabbed his upwards like a rattlesnake.

Hermione could have guessed the outcome from the start.

Geoffrey was too angry, too impatient. Theo was calm, composed, calculated. He moved like someone who had done this in his sleep a thousand times.

It was mesmerising how he dipped, dodged and swerved gracefully at each curse Geoffrey shot his way. Despite aiming for head and heart, Geoffrey was sloppy. His curses exploded along the walls, which stayed impressively intact for the most part.

Hermione was so busy analysing the fight, she was caught off guard when a Stupify shot right at her. Her hands flew uselessly up to cover her head. A Protego materialised before her eyes.

Draco needn't have bothered; the ward around the arena kept things contained, and the spell fizzled out even before it reached his shield.

Still, he stepped protectively in front of her. Embarrassed, Hermione allowed him to, though she stubbornly held her head high.

She had never been the quickest at fighting and it still bothered her to this day. She gripped her wand tighter, determined not to be surprised a second time.

More spells were shot at quick intervals, lighting up the room each time. The sounds of magic rang out in an orchestra. Hermione could tell some places in the wards were straining

from constant bombardment. Neville and Demelza each had to throw up a Protegro when a few Stupefys finally managed to break through.

Theo finished the fight before any more damage could be done.

Geoffrey was too slow to react and Theo hit him with a swift Petrificus Totalus that snuck right under Geoffreys raised arm.

Geoffrey's limbs slapped to his sides and he keeled over with a wounded howl, slamming hard into the floor.

"No!" The Gryffindor Hermione didn't recognize cried out in anguish.

"The duel is over," Sudan declared, "Theodore Nott is the wi-"

Out of nowhere, a streak of red speared Theo in the chest.

"Theo!" Hermione screamed.

Pandemonium ensued. People were yelling. A few spells went flying randomly across the room. Hermione was ready this time and managed to get a shield up as something nasty ricocheted off.

Draco leapt onto the platform in front of Hermione and began shooting off spells, heading towards Theo.

"Stop it Will, it's over!" Demelza shouted.

Will, clearly some sort of relation to Geoffrey judging by their similar features, was already on the platform, his eyes wild, his features distorted in anguish.

He tried to curse Theo's inanimate body but Draco got there just in time.

Three spells hit Will simultaneously, Draco's getting him right in the chest.

Will crumpled to the floor as Demelza rushed to catch him.

Hermione immediately jumped up, hurrying to Theo.

He was wheezing, his eyes wide, blood gurgling from his mouth.

A deep, bloodied gash slashed his side. Hermione recognized the signs of dark magic.

She cast a few stabilising charms to stop the bleeding though she didn't dare do more in case it made things worse.

"Hospital Wing! Quickly!" She screeched.

Blaise, Padma and Draco were already casting levitation spells on Theo's body.

"Are you-"

"I'll be fine, go, go!" Hermione cut Draco off. He gave her one last look before turning and hurrying after Blaise and Padma.

It seemed that despite being hit with multiple spells, Will was awake again and cursing loudly from a lying position on the ground. Demelza was holding him down firmly.

"-Isn't justice! His father tortured my cousin Johnny and he probably tortured him too! Why does he get to walk around fine when Johnny spent months in St-Mungo's and almost died! He shouldn't be allowed to roam free, they should lock him up and-"

"That's enough!" Susan yelled. Her voice was back to normal, though she still made for an imposing figure.

"The duel decision is final! This isn't a place to torture people, though it may seem like it! It's to settle things once and for all! Geoffrey lost and that's that! You know just as well as he did that he risked losing to get his retribution. If he wasn't strong enough when he issued a challenge, that's on him."

"I'll challenge Nott! I'll make that bastard pay for what he-"

"You're a disgrace. A sneak attack from the sidelines is unsportsmanly, weak and dishonourable. You'll get no glory from challenging him now and you're banned from this arena."

Will looked up at Susan, his eyes bloodshot and full of fury.

"You call yourself a judge! You're just a bitch who's clearly fucking Nott or you wouldn't-"

"Shut *up*, Will! It's over, all right? You're just making things worse!"

Demelza grabbed Will by the collar and hauled him up, keeping his arms pinned away from Susan.

"For the record, the reason there is a representative from each House is to assure fair judging. I don't singlehandedly decide the outcome. And I'm fucking Terry Boot actually," Susan responded icily.

Will's bottom lip quivered, but he didn't say another word. Angry tears stained his red cheeks.

Demelza finally succeeded in hauling him off.

Hermione looked down at her hands and noticed they were shaking. She clenched her fists, trying not to let the image of a pale, clammy and bloodied Nott fill her mind.

It had snuck up on her, but she realised in a small amount of time Nott had become a dear friend to her.

Seeing her friend hurt like that... Well, it brought far too many other dark memories back to the surface.

Neville had sidled up to her.

"Don't worry Hermione, Nott should be fine. We've seen worse, to be honest. I feel bad for that Will bloke. Cheating in a duel is the lowest of low and he won't live that down for a long time. Even if the duels here are supposed to stay secret, word always seems to get around anyways."

"You feel bad for *him* ? Nott was bleeding out! I'm sorry, but that Will person is horrible! He should've just accepted the verdict and hauled Geoffrey out of this place!"

"Err...yeah, well... People can do stupid things for those they love, sometimes. Especially when those they love have suffered."

Hermione and Neville stood quietly in a moment of reflection.

"Are you going to tell me off for being here?" She finally asked.

"I'm not surprised you're here actually."

"You're not?"

Neville smiled uncertainly.

"You're only ever seen with Nott and Malfoy these days."

He paused, shuffling his feet awkwardly.

"We miss you, you know. Even Ginny, even if she won't admit it. What even happened between the both of you and why won't you eat with us anymore?"

Hermione sighed.

"I'm sorry Neville. But I'm afraid I don't get judged for who I hang around when I'm with the Slytherins. I still see Luna a fair bit, but everyone else looks at me like I'm a...a traitor."

"It just takes getting used to. You left without any explanation. It was sort of hard to empathise when you didn't even tell us why."

"I...It all just sort of happened. I partnered with Malfoy in potions and it turns out he isn't so bad now. If you could've seen how Padma and Ernie and Hannah looked at me. It's like I committed the ultimate sin. And naturally they're ready to welcome me back but Nott and Malfoy-"

"Can you blame them? Malfoy let Death Eaters into the school! People could have died! People *did* die!"

"And you don't think it's an entire burden for him to live with his actions? How are we supposed to progress onward from the war if we harbour the same enmities and that's for both sides! Unity shouldn't just be preached at wartime, it should be all the time! I'm not saying forgive everyone, but what of those who are actually *trying* ? I don't want to argue about this anymore, Neville. I'm sick of hearing people say bad things about me. I *like* hanging around the Slytherins! I didn't defend this school's freedom to then be told who I can and can't socialise with! You and Hannah are welcome to join us for studying in the library, but I don't feel welcome with Gryffindors anymore."

Neville looked down, kicking a non-existent pebble.

"Maybe....Though as for Hannah...err...We aren't exactly in a good place right now."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"No! Things seemed to be going so well! What happened?"

"The truth is I'm not exactly sure. She's missed our last date and she's been a bit distant. I've tried talking to her but..."

He trailed off, looking lost.

Hermione put a reassuring hand on Neville's arm.

"She'll come around. How long has she been distant?"

"I think...since we came back on the Hogwarts Express. When we shared that compartment."

Hermione felt her unease increase. She'd remembered Hannah being a little off. Was Hannah putting distance between Neville because he was friends with her and Luna, fellow Slytherin defectors?

"If you haven't done anything wrong then maybe she just needs time to process things on her own," Hermione finally concluded reassuringly, keeping her suppositions to herself.

Neville shrugged and offered a half-smile that seemed more sad than happy. Hermione felt guilty. Hadn't she done the same thing to her friends? Distanced herself from them without an explanation?

"I'm sorry for disappearing on all of you. You're right, I should've at least invited you or told you where I was going. That was very unfair and selfish of me. I just...It's been hard without Harry and Ron. They're my best friends and they're not here and... Well, Dra- er... Malfoy and Nott have really helped me get by, as unreal as that seems. I really do think they've both changed a lot, for the better. If you could just talk to them, Neville, you'd see it!"

"Maybe..." Neville conceded somewhat reluctantly.

They were the last two in the duelling room.

Neville murmured some protection spells as he shut the heavy iron door behind them and off they went.

"This setup is all very impressive. Who's idea was it?"

"Susan's," Neville answered, as they began the trek back upstairs.

"The start of the year was rough, people attacking each other left and right. Students were fresh out of the war, more of them than not having suffered losses in their families and friend

groups. Teachers were handing out detentions but it just made everyone more angry. Susan decided a duelling arena, a credible one, would be a good way to settle things once and for all. An efficient, just and respectful way to not only demand retribution but to get your frustrations out. It's been very cathartic for everyone and since she's set this up, it feels like things have calmed down a little."

"Wouldn't it increase animosity? Now that students have an outlet for it?"

"I don't think it does. If anything, I think it gives them closure. A way to look your enemy in the eye one last time and let skill and fate decide the outcome. It's...oddly therapeutic."

"Who designed these wards? They're quite elaborate."

"That'd be Padma and Blaise. Blaise also found us the location in the dungeons. Apparently it's a regular haunt for the Slytherins but they tend to keep to the higher levels so as not to get lost. Initially I suggested doing it in the Room of Requirement but these days I can't seem to access it at all. It's bizarre, though I suppose because of last year, a good chunk of people know of its existence now so it'd make sense that it'd be occupied all the time..."

"Yes, makes sense," Hermione squeaked, her voice unnaturally high. Of course she couldn't tell Neville that she and Draco were single handedly responsible for that. She was so used to Draco catching her in all her little white lies but luckily, Neville wasn't a seasoned Occlumens nor was he paying much attention to her face. His eyes and his Lumos were chained to the ground, so as not to trip on anything suspect.

"Susan knows duelling law inside and out and she isn't a bad duellist either. She asked me in, as the Gryffindor representative, to help keep people in check in case stuff happens like it did tonight..."

Hermione tried not to take it too personally, though there was a part of her, perhaps a larger part than she liked to admit, that wondered why Susan hadn't come to her. Hadn't Hermione proven herself enough in both academics and bravery? Not to mention there were a few ways she thought the wards could be strengthened, even if they were well-constructed overall. Was it arrogant of her to assume she was the best pick? Was her personality that off-putting?

"I think you were initially supposed to be part of this," Neville said gently, as if reading Hermione's mind, "But given how you'd been keeping to yourself a lot at the beginning of the year, I think Susan just assumed you wanted to be left alone. A lot of us did."

"I think I did want to be left alone for a while. I just needed time to myself. Suddenly everyone wanted to talk to me about painful memories and it...It was just a lot."

"I understand. It felt strange being back for me too. No one cared about me for the longest time- I was just that clumsy, doddering lad with a toad. But ever since the battle, it feels like I've been getting so much attention. Everyone wants to talk about the sword and the snake... which hasn't been all bad. But it *is* overwhelming. I think I finally sort of understand a small part of what Harry went through all these years."

"Is it wrong that I wish they wouldn't? I appreciate that people respect what I've done but all I want is to move on and get my N.E.W.T.s."

"It's not wrong at all," Neville answered reassuringly.

He had always been such a good friend, even in first year, when he had tried to stop them from sneaking off to the Philosopher's Stone. She realised that she'd missed his company.

"I feel like a normal student when I'm with Nott and Malfoy," Hermione explained, "They treat me like Harry and Ron treated me when they were at school. Like equals. I really would love for you to come join us for study, even just once."

Neville smiled, his face illuminating as they finally exited the dungeons, into a torch lit hallway.

"I'll think about it. Take care, Hermione."

Hermione tugged Neville in for a tight hug, feeling grateful for their conversation. It felt good to connect with an old friend of Gryffindor again. She wished she had given some of

her friends more of a chance.

They parted ways, Neville back to Gryffindor tower and Hermione to the Hospital Wing.

//

Theo was stable.

True to Hermione's suspicions, Will Hooper had used some kind of dark curse which kept Theo's wound from closing.

He had to be kept in the Hospital Wing for at least a week, though apparently it could've been longer if it hadn't been for Hermione's quick healing.

"Will should be expelled for using horrible spells like that! Especially after the war!" Hermione complained in a whisper while she and Draco studied in the library.

"Did Potter get expelled for slashing my abdomen open?" Draco asked wryly, arching an eyebrow.

Hermione pursed her lips, cowed, and continued to peruse the heavy tome on wards she'd scavenged up.

"The duels need to be kept secret above all else, or they'll be terminated. Patil isn't much of a duellist but I think she was chosen by Bones primarily because Bones can trust her discretion, on top of her smarts."

"Still, some students could really cause each other harm down there!"

"Blaise, Longbottom and Bones have got it covered. Besides, Theo's been served worse than this, trust me. He'll recover."

Hermione winced.

"Then why does he keep accepting duels?"

"I didn't mean in the duels."

Hermione fell silent.

Theo duelled with an ease that clearly showed practice beyond what Hogwarts taught. Had he been raised by his father to be a ruthless Death Eater? Hermione shivered.

"Why don't you ever accept duels?" Hermione asked.

"Because I'd much rather spend my evenings shagging you then duelling some ape with a bowl cut."

Hermione stifled a cackle. It wasn't an entirely inaccurate description of Geoffrey.

They went to visit Theo as much as they could.

Hermione was forcibly reminded of her countless visits to Ron and Harry under very similar circumstances.

One time they went to see Theo, a very harried-looking Padma had rushed past them as they were passing through the doors.

Padma had just enough time to throw Hermione a glare of utmost loathing before striding out of the ward.

"I didn't realise you and Patil had gotten into it," Draco commented, having noticed as well.

"I didn't either," Hermione answered, a little taken aback, "She might just still be mad that I'm with you lot now. Though we were never all that close, so it seems a bit overkill."

"Oi," Theo called, with a smidgen less of his usual dry gusto.

He looked tired but it was a relief to see some colour back in his cheeks.

"Here's your homework and I've left a copy of my notes from the classes we share. Was Padma visiting you?" Hermione inquired, leaving a stack of parchment next to a large, hairy flowerpot that seemed to be from Hagrid, along with a few other sweets brought by Blaise and Daphne.

"Yes, she wanted to check in to make sure I didn't blab about the duelling arena to any teachers. As if I would ever squeal. I've probably been there the most out of everyone."

They spent lunch hour with Theo and then off to classes.

Before Hermione departed, Draco grabbed her arm.

"Can you spare a night off studying? Meet me in the East Tower before suppertime."

"Not the Room? What in the world do you want to do with me there?"

"There are many things I want to do to you. You'll just have to see which ones in particular tonight."

He smirked.

"Oh? Is there a special occasion?"

Draco leaned in and, before Hermione could check to see if anyone was around, brushed his lips against her cheek.

"It's Valentine's, obviously," he breathed in her ear.

"Oh, and don't wear your Hogwarts uniform," he added slyly.

With a swift smile, he ducked off, leaving her flustered.

Valentine's indeed! How could she forget it was tomorrow? So much was happening and it wasn't generally a holiday she looked forward to. She felt guilty. Draco had seemed positively smug to catch her off guard though, so at least she had comfort in that his feelings weren't hurt.

Blushing at the idea of their first Valentine's date ahead, Hermione rushed off to Herbology.

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"Draco, what's going on and what have you done to your *hair* ?"

He was grinning and for some reason, he'd dyed his hair black.

She'd never realised how signature his platinum colour had been until now. The black suited him, but it had taken her a moment to recognize him. His face seemed even more pale now, in contrast.

Hermione crossed her arms as she took in the rest of Draco, bundled in a cloak and the scarf she'd knit him. His broom leaned against the stone wall and he had an extra cloak which she could guess was for whom.

They were atop the East tower. A bright orange line spanned the horizon, the last bit of sun before nightfall. The air was cool since the tower sported a large, high arched window that almost touched floor to ceiling.

Draco strode over, pulling the cloak around her in one swoop and fastening it under her chin. He tugged on the lapels dragging her in for a small kiss.

"Ready?"

" *Ready ?* For *what ?* Draco, you're not planning on dragging me off on that thing? I'm no good at brooms."

"Luckily for you, I'm extremely so. All you need to do is hold on. Here,"

He held his hand out and the broom obediently lept into it. Hermione eek'd.

"Where are we even going? If we leave castle grounds at this hour, we'll set off the wards and we'll be in trouble!"

"Wrong!"

Draco seemed to say the word with such relish, probably because Hermione didn't often give him much reason to.

"We're technically past seventh year and that means we're old enough to come and go as we please. The wards only cover Hogwarts students and technically we've gone beyond that. They've cast them that way so the teachers don't get alerted each time one of them needs to nip out."

"Are you *quite* sure?"

"You're not the only one who knows how to do research. Coming?"

He placed a foot on either side of the broom and gestured at the spot in front of him.

"Ugh, I don't like this..."

She stepped in front of him. Draco held the handle for her to grasp but she hesitated.

"Haven't you flown on worse things before? Dragons, if I recall correctly?"

"It was *a* dragon, and just because I did it doesn't mean I liked it! I only ever seem to fly in life or death situations."

"Hermione, I would never let anything happen to you. You know that, right?"

His hand tilted her chin back so he could look at her. She leaned back against his chest.

He looked dashing as always, but something about his proximity always made her heart beat faster.

"I trust you," she breathed and their lips met. Soft. Comforting.

He took her hands in one of his. She marvelled at how small hers were in comparison.

He showed her where exactly to grip the handle, enclosing his hand around hers. There was a lascivious glint in his eye that made her blush. She could feel calluses on his palm from all the Quidditch matches with Theo and Blaise. She bit her lip.

Couldn't he just shag her against the wall and they could forget all this broom rubbish?

Before she could propose her plan, Draco tensed behind her.

"Hang on!" He whooped and kicked off hard. They shot out the window like an arrow.

She yelped. The wind gusted into her face, blowing her hair back. She shut her eyes tight. Her hands were already aching from clenching the broom even though they'd been flying less than a minute. She heard Draco chuckle behind her.

"Hermione, we're barely going ten miles an hour," Draco called over the wind.

"I am certifiably sure that is not true!"

"You're missing the moon, it's giant tonight."

His arm tightened around her while the other steered the broom. Hermione's eyes opened a sliver.

"If you're feeling scared, blur your vision. It'll help with dizziness and vertigo."

She did as he instructed and found it did help. Trees were whizzing by under them, though they now looked like abstract green masses.

When she was ready, she gathered her courage and looked up.

The sight took her breath away.

The immense globe hovered above them, imposing itself on the night's sky. It was indeed abnormally large- or was it because they were in the air that it looked so immense? Either way, she couldn't remember ever seeing a moon so beautiful.

Draco's arm felt secure and warm. She relaxed, even if it was only a little.

The twinkling lights of Hogsmeade approached them.

They landed a little outside of the village. Draco helped Hermione dismount and shrunk his broom down so he could pocket it.

He looked at her and grinned, taking her hand.

"Are you laughing at my hair? It's probably a big bush thanks to all that wind."

"Your hair is beautiful. You're beautiful. I'm laughing because... Well, I suppose because I'm happy."

His cheeks were pink from the cold. He looked impossibly handsome when he was happy

He led her down the path, past the gates to a quaint little french restaurant, *Les Bobards* .

"I thought it might be nice to go on a date to a real place this time," Draco said while squeezing her hand.

"Oh, how lovely! I don't remember ever seeing this place before!"

"It's new. Hogsmeade underwent quite a few changes during the war. A lot of places closed down and others sprung up in the aftermath."

"Businesses that were Muggleborn-owned got chased off, you mean."

"Yes," Draco answered slowly, "Though Madame Bobard is half-blood."

Hermione raised her brows.

"You looked into it?"

"I look into most establishments that I plan to frequent."

"Are any of the new places here run by Muggleborns?" Hermione asked.

"Some, yes. Muggleborn and half-blood businesses have taken a hit but they've also been the first to be subsidised by the Ministry for rebuilding since the dust has settled."

"It's the least the Ministry can do, though I'm glad Kingsley is proactive about it."

They walked up to the front doors. The restaurant was elegant yet cosy. Strings of lights waltzed along the walls and white roses decorated the olive green table cloths.

Hermione had been worried that she might be underdressed in her grey sweater and jeans, but it seemed the atmosphere was chic in a laid-back sort of way.

"Reservation for two under Nicholas," Draco addressed the hostess.

Hermione blinked at the false name but otherwise, gave nothing away. That explained the black hair. No doubt the white-blond colour was signature Malfoy lineage and perhaps Malfoys weren't exactly welcome in half-blood establishments.

"Bonjour, yes, I 'ave a table for ze lovely couple- Goodness! Is that- *Hermione Granger* ?"

The hostess shed her false french accent in her shock.

Having spent a hunk of her time that summer holed up at the Burrow, Hermione had managed to evade the bulk of her newfound fame.

It had been disconcerting enough to be accosted by people at Hogwarts, but out in the real world even moreso.

Hermione didn't quite know what to say, so she offered a cautious smile.

"It *is* you! Hermione Granger, the very same, in my establishment! Well isn't that something!"

The woman grasped Hermione's hands in hers. Hermione was startled to see tears in her eyes.

"You can't begin to know what you've done for me, my family, for *all* of us. You've *saved* us! From the bottom of my heart, I thank you, for everything! If there is anything I can do for you, anything at all, it is yours, dear!"

"I...I'm just glad I could help, that's all," Hermione replied. She tried to keep her voice steady but the earnest way the woman peered up at her made her feel emotional.

It was easy to remember all the lives they'd lost, to fall into the darkest memories of wartime.

But here, in the flesh, was a reminder of how it had all been more than worth it.

"We've heard wonderful things about this restaurant and wished to have a quiet evening to enjoy its atmosphere," Draco said softly, filling in the lingering awkwardness.

"Yes, yes of course! Have what you want, naturally it is all on the house!"

"What? No, we couldn't possibly-"

"Thank you for your generosity Madam Bobard, but it would be my deepest honour to spoil this beautiful lady tonight, while contributing to such a fine establishment."

Draco swept forward taking Madam's hand in his and brushed his lips briefly against her knuckles.

"Oh my," Madam Bobard giggled, her cheeks rosy, "I can't quite deny a gentleman such a request. Pleez follow me, *Monsieur* Nicholas, *Mademoiselle* Granger. Your table eez right over 'ere," she concluded, winking at Hermione and resuming her horrid accent.

They settled in and ordered with a speedy service, Draco hardly needing a moment to select a complimentary wine with their food.

It was perfect. They were finally on a date, a real one.

Seeing Draco fold his napkin on his lap, converse politely to the waiter and carefully select his cutlery when their plates arrived was all new to Hermione. She knew many sides to him; Malfoy the bully, Draco the academic, *her* Draco, the one who listened to her, who made love to her.

But well-mannered, high-society Draco was novel. And yet it must be such a large part of him. He must have spent years and years honing these skills at the Malfoy diner table, must have addressed all of his extended family and entourage with utmost elegance and propriety.

"Is something wrong with the salmon?"

Hermione realised she had been lost in thought.

"Not at all! Everything is...well, perfect. I can't believe you went through all this trouble. I was just thinking about how much and yet how little I really know about you. We spend so much time together but I'm always discovering you in new ways."

"I could say the same about you."

"Oh really? How much of your perception of me has changed since we've met this year?"

"Aside from the obvious of not harbouring any unhealthy views on your blood anymore, quite a lot. I'd always thought you very attention-seeking, bossy, a little blustery and a complete Know-It-All. Turns out I was only right about the last one."

"You don't think I'm bossy? I think I've lost count of the number of times I've heard that one."

"You can be, but I wouldn't qualify it as core to your personality. You're a lot more mellow than I thought. More thoughtful."

Hermione paused to introspect.

"I suppose the war has changed that in me. I may not be as outspoken as I was when I was twelve but I still won't hesitate to voice my disagreement."

"The difference is when you were twelve, you jumped to answer every single question. I've noticed now, you only bother when it's a difficult one. You've learnt to channel your energy into what's important. It makes me even more pleased that you choose to spend your time with me."

"But you are important! To me at least!"

Draco curled his lip and took a sip of white wine. Hermione mirrored him and marvelled at how sweet it tasted in the aftermath of the fish.

"I hope this doesn't sound too arrogant, but now that I've had a hand in defeating Voldemort, I no longer feel like I need to prove myself to everyone. I've done enough and now I just want to focus on things I want. On people I want."

She took his hand from across the table. His emerald ring sparkled under the dancing, overhead lights.

"D'you know you're the first person to ever call me mellow?" She smiled wistfully.

"I'd like to say it's because I know the present you more than anybody else, though that would be terribly presumptuous of me."

"Presumptuous maybe. But not wrong."

He smiled then, a full smile. Gods, he was gorgeous when he smiled for her.

"Can I ask a terribly intrusive question?"

"You can ask me anything."

"Why did things end with you and Pansy?"

Even Draco, the master of masking, couldn't hide his apparent displeasure.

"Why are you asking me *this* ?"

"You said I could ask you anything!"

"Yes, well, I didn't exactly anticipate talking about my ex on Valentine's."

"Well..." Hermione spoke slowly, mulling her words over this delicate subject, "I know you were close and, erm...Daphne wondered if you might still have feelings for Pansy. I know we're together and it's silly to worry, but it's been nagging me since, and I think it would put my mind at ease to know at least a little of what happened."

"Jealous are we?" Draco drawled, a little unkindly.

"I've told you about how things ended with Ron, it's only fair I get the same consideration. It isn't like she's some ex-girlfriend I've never known- I've seen you both together, thick as thieves! She used to treat me awfully!"

"I know, all right?"

Draco pulled his hand out of hers, looking away.

"There's no need to sulk. We don't have to talk about it now, but eventually it would be nice," Hermione said stiffly, setting her own fork down, her appetite abating.

"I'm not sulking, I'm...brooding."

Draco exhaled harshly. He ran a hand through his hair, muffing it up in a windswept way that still seemed to look model-esque.

Hermione waited patiently.

"Better to get it out now, rather than later I suppose," Draco finally conceded and his expression sagged. He stared glumly at an asparagus on his plate.

"I didn't treat her right. By all means, she was far from a saint herself, but I could have handled things very differently. I never hurt her physically-" Draco added quickly, "But I was rude, distant and...and..."

He sighed and suddenly he looked very tired.

"My family luckily never foisted any marriage contracts on me. My mother always wanted me to find love, much like she had with my father. Naturally, she still had her standards, but she trusted me to make a suitable choice. Pansy was probably the most suitable choice of all, and she knew it, too. Pureblood, family with good social standing, popular among Slytherins, commanding. She was the Queen of Slytherin and she wanted a King. I think she enjoyed the dream of us together as a power couple more than she actually enjoyed our relationship. I'm fairly certain that's why she stayed for as long as she did."

"In all honesty, things were fine up until sixth year. I had my mission and it was the easiest thing to just toss her aside. I should've known then, that what we had wasn't real. But, to her, Voldemort was on the rise, and it was more important than ever to secure her spot alongside someone who was right in his inner circle. Someone who not only had the Dark Mark, but who was probably the youngest Death Eater to ever have one. To Pansy, I was the one who would raise her to glory within the new world order."

"She wanted to spend more time together, wanted to talk marriage but I couldn't care less. The most maddening to her was that I couldn't even tell her why. We'd fight, she'd come back, we'd make up, over and over. She was like a horrible boomerang I couldn't bring myself to get rid of. Each time, I treated her worse and worse. One day she didn't return, and I didn't even notice. We haven't talked since."

Hermione listened, feeling cold inside. It didn't surprise her an ounce that old Malfoy had been a terrible boyfriend. But the Draco she knew now was far from it. Yet she had to keep reminding herself that they were one and the same. Malfoy the bully *was* Draco, the man she was in love with.

Somehow this was the hardest thing to digest. He'd tortured people and she'd managed to forgive that somehow.

But he had done that against his will. To keep his family safe, to stay alive.

But keeping Pansy around was his choice.

"You kept her around to get a quick fuck when you needed one. You were using her," Hermione said blankly. She watched Draco's face crumble.

"I was horrible and I regret it deeply. I have almost nothing but regrets, " he said quietly.

"I...I appreciate your honesty. Truly I do. But I do need to process this."

"I understand."

Silence fell between them. Hermione suddenly wanted to be alone. She wasn't hungry and she couldn't look Draco in the eye.

"This is why I didn't want to talk about all this."

"So that I wouldn't know what a prick you were?"

"Because your disappointment in me is gut-wrenching, if not undeserved."

"Hmph."

"Hermione..." Draco clasped his hands, looking so lost that Hermione almost reached for him. Almost.

"If I could've known...If any ounce of me could have known where I would be today...I would have done things differently. *Everything* differently. I promise you, I..."

He sighed.

She didn't answer.

Draco gestured to the waiter for the bill.

They nodded to Madam Bobard as they left, who waved and bowed profusely.

"I don't know zis man, but 'e iz a keeper. You are both welcome back any time," she whispered to Hermione with a wink. Hermione forced a smile.

The outdoor cold was welcome and Hermione filled her lungs.

She felt Draco's hand on her back and turned.

"I have so many things to make amends for. But I want you to know, no matter what happens, I want you to be happy. I love you, and you deserve the world."

He kissed her gently on her forehead.

It didn't fix everything- far from it- but it made the broom ride back to the castle a little more bearable.

When they disembarked, Hermione faced him.

"I know this isn't exactly how you wanted the evening to go."

"It went the way it needed to go. I don't want to hide my past from you. You deserve to know everything about me. Even if it means-"

He stopped.

He took her hand and squeezed.

Even if it means losing you.

He couldn't say it but it was there plain as day. Draco would prioritise honesty, always. In any other person, it would be commendable. But she almost wished that with him, she could stomach living in blissful ignorance.

She could feel tears welling in her eyes. She couldn't lose him. Yet how many more skeletons in his closet could she handle?

She squeezed his hand back.

"It's late. I'm going to head to bed now. We'll talk tomorrow. Have a good night."

Wrenching herself away from his hurt gaze was devastating.

But she needed some space. Needed to think.

//

Hermione was shaking, barely registering the cold stone of the Malfoy Manor floor.

She was too busy screaming, screaming, screaming as her body was forced to feel the worst pain of her life. Her cheeks were wet from crying.

"Where did you find it, girl? Tell me where you got the sword!" Bellatrix screeched, her voice echoing in the hall.

Hermione was sobbing so hard she could barely talk.

"We f-found it...we f-found it, I s-swear..."

She could smell blood and bad breath. Bellatrix was so close that Hermione could see curly black hairs dangling in front of her bleary vision. Hermione shut her eyes.

She'd been here before. She always knew what came next.

Sure enough, Bellatrix's cold hand yanked on Hermione's wrist, twisting her arm upwards in an unnatural angle.

Hermione screamed, knowing she was doomed to relive her branding for the rest of her life. She could already anticipate the pain of the wand slicing the first letter 'M' in her flesh.

But this time, it never came.

Hermione hardly dared to look up when Bellatrix dropped her arm on the ground and walked away.

Hermione was wheezing shrilly. Surely there wasn't anything worse that could happen. Surely they'd finally leave her alone.

"Perhaps this might jog your memory. Pull her up so she can see."

At Bellatrix's sharp command, Hermione felt nails scrape her skull as someone yanked on her hair. Her face was pulled up from the floor.

Draco was floating in the air, ropes wrapped tightly around him.

He was looking straight ahead, his face an emotionless mask.

Hermione felt something break inside her.

" *No* ! No! Please, please, I'll tell you everything you need to know, just please, *please* don't hurt him!"

Her throat was raw from screaming. But it didn't matter. They needed to leave Draco alone, they needed to-

"Oh how *pwecious* ," Bellatrix cooed in a sickening baby voice, "The Mudblood would sell her fwiends away for a Pureblood. Fitting isn't it? Even she understands she is nothing but filth compared to us! Tell me everything, and don't you dare lie, or I'll torture Draco until his bones break!"

"You c-can't, he's your n-nephew! He's your b-blood-"

Hermione twisted around and felt some hairs rip out of her head. Narcissa was the one holding Hermione up.

"Please, he's your *son* ! Your only son! You c-can't let them- Don't let them-"

Narcissa looked coldly at Hermione.

"No son of mine would entertain a whore like you."

Hermione sobbed loudly.

" *Where did you get the sword?*" Bella shrieked. The noise pierced Hermione's eardrums.

It was over. They had her. She would have died to save everyone. But she couldn't let them kill Draco.

"G-Gringotts..." Hermione heard her treacherous voice tumble from her, "We b-broke into your v-vault...Now please, please just let him go!"

Bellatrix threw her head back and screamed in rage. For a moment, Hermione could've sworn she'd turned into a Banshee. Her black hair was wild, her eyes seemed even more bloodshot against the dark circles under her eyes. Her rotted teeth dripped with spittle.

She spun and jabbed her wand into Draco's throat.

His whole body shook, as if trying to dislodge his limbs. Great slashes opened on his chest, blood pouring out from his mouth and eyes. Bellatrix screamed on and on. Or was it Hermione who was screaming?

Hermione finally woke up.

She was sweating and sobbing hard.

She scrambled to find her wand and cast Silencio on her drapes before tossing it in front of her and crying, crying, crying.

That had been the worst nightmare she'd ever had.

She held her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth until finally, she was able to take deep, rattling breaths.

Was she going mad?

Would she give up everything for this man who had done so many things wrong?

Was this what love was? Forsaking all that mattered because what kind of life would be worth living without his smile? Without his hand in hers? Without him reading a book within earshot?

She snatched her wand up and summoned her TeleGalleon from her robe pocket.

She tapped it.

It barely burned hot before Draco answered.

"Hermione?"

His voice was too much for her. He was alive and well. She burst into more tears.

"Hermione! What's wrong? Tell me where you are!"

"It's f-fine I'm just...Just being silly is all. Had a n-nightmare."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"N-No, not really..."

Hermione heaved a deep breath, trying to gather her wits.

"I'm so cross with you!"

"I know."

"Why is this all so *complicated* ? Why did you have to be such an *arse* ? I'm not supposed to end up with someone who hated me and who treated everyone like dung! Why is it that now, all of a sudden, you have every good quality under the sun? You're kind and thoughtful and loving and stupidly handsome! Where do you get off on being the absolute perfect person when you were the complete opposite before! I just want to be normal, have a normal relationship without having to find out some new, horrible thing about you. And I know, I *know* I should've seen this coming, anyone would be the first to say "I've told you so" when I started going steady with Draco Malfoy of all people! Perhaps I should have listened to you and baulked when I had the chance but now I love you and I hate it!"

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it! And don't you dare break up with me! I'm just...Augh! I'm just so frustrated and conflicted. It's so hard to move past all this sometimes!"

"I would never treat you the way I treated Pansy. I would never treat anyone like that ever again. It was a fucked up year, and I was at my lowest point in life, but that's still no excuse. I understand it's hard to forgive. If it's any consolation, I have the same conflicts with myself, daily."

Hermione sighed, frowning at the roof of her four poster.

"What was your nightmare about?" Draco asked quietly.

"Bellatrix..."

Hermione barely whispered it.

"Ah... Yes, she visits quite a few of mine as well."

"This was the first one I've had since we'd started seeing each other."

"I only sleep well when I'm with you."

She heard warmth creep into his voice. It relaxed her.

"I miss you," she said softly, clutching the Galleon by her mouth. She knew she'd needed space, but now she wanted nothing more than to sneak off to the Slytherin dorms and climb into bed with Draco.

"I... You don't know how good it is to hear you say that."

"I love you."

She heard his intake of breath.

"I love you, too. More than anything."

She sighed. His words seemed to instantly calm her whole body. She felt her muscles relax when she didn't even realise they were tensed up.

"Is there anything else I should know?" She asked, dreading the answer but knowing she needed it, for her own peace of mind.

Silence.

"Draco?"

"I've tortured Muggles. Two women and four men. I never knew their names. I watched people get tortured and did nothing. I've lost count on how many. I almost killed Katie Bell and Weasley through pure reckless stupidity, though you already know that. I..."

He hesitated. She could hear him clear his throat.

"I as good as killed Crabbe. He wouldn't have turned so bad if I hadn't egged him on. I needed his help to guard the cabinet and I told him it would earn him a Mark and a coveted place with the Dark Lord. I brainwashed him. Both he and Goyle could have turned out all right, but I dragged them into something they never needed to be in. I tried to turn them into monsters like me and for Crabbe, it worked."

"And Goyle?"

"He moved out of the country like many others. America I think."

"You could have, too."

"I could have."

"But you didn't."

"No."

They were silent for a beat.

"Crabbe's father was a Death Eater. You weren't the only one brainwashing him. You can't blame yourself for his death."

"He died at Hogwarts! With me! He would never have known about the Room if it hadn't been for me! I didn't strike him down but his death is on my hands. He was rough around the edges but his father was...hard on him. Crabbe probably had it the worst out of all of us. He was a loyal friend, even if he was a horrible person."

It had never dawned on Hermione to ask Draco about Crabbe, nor Goyle. In retrospect, it seemed odd; the three of them had been inseparable after all. Practically as inseparable as she, Harry and Ron.

It was the first time that Hermione considered that Crabbe and Goyle had been more like brothers to Draco, even though, from her perspective, they'd always looked more like henchmen.

Draco's influence had led them to destruction.

Much like how Lucius had led his family to the very same.

Draco's emotional baggage seemed heavier by the day.

"Have you ever tried talking to someone about all this? Someone professional? Maybe...it could help give you some clarity. There's no shame in it after all."

"No. There's just too much there, some of it unthinkable. I'll just...deal with it on my own."

She couldn't stomach the idea of Draco falling into a pit of self-loathing and it made her lose patience.

"You'll make amends in a productive way and I'll personally see to it myself that you do! You'll clean up the Manor's finances like you've said you would, you'll donate to Muggleborn charities and you'll be respectful to every single being you meet, even if they spit on your toes! No boyfriend of mine will be wallowing away in pity, that's for certain."

She heard Draco chuckle.

"Perhaps you *are* bossy, after all."

She could hear the softness in his voice. He meant it endearingly.

"There you have it. All my dark secrets are yours."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. No more surprises then. I look forward to starting fresh with you, tomorrow."

"I would very much like that," he murmured in a way that made her blush a little.

"I'm really glad we had this talk," Hermione whispered, settling into her pillows, the Galleon resting next to her mouth.

"I want to kiss you."

His words instantly made her face heat up. She regretted the lack of kissing they'd had on their Valentine's date and now it was too late to remedy. Hermione sighed.

"I wish I could kiss you, too,"

"I meant tomorrow. In public."

Hermione took a moment to digest what she'd just heard.

"You mean...in front of people??"

"Being with me will never be easy or normal. But perhaps I can try to make it as normal as I can. Will you be my Valentine, Hermione?"

"But...I thought...What about what people will think?"

"It won't be easy, but I think you know that. At least, if we're publicly together, I'll be in a better position to protect you from any threats. Nott, Luna and Tracey will back you as well. I know hiding it has been stressful for you. If you still want to be with me, even after everything I've told you, then I'm all in."

Hermione wanted to laugh.

It was almost too surreal to believe.

They were really going to do it. They were going to be a real couple!

Oh, people would be angry certainly, but Hermione wouldn't let that stop her. She'd made up her mind on that long ago.

"I want to hug you right now! Why does tomorrow have to be so far!" Hermione whined though she was grinning from ear to ear.

Finally. No more secrets.

"I know, love. I want to hold you and never let go."

"What else would you do to me, if I was there?"

She wished she could see the expression on his face.

After a moment, he spoke. His voice was low.

"Kiss you. Your mouth. Your neck."

"And?"

She faintly heard the sound of him inhaling slowly.

"Touch you," he finally murmured, through his exhale.

She shivered. She very much wanted that.

"How would you touch me?" She whispered. She was starting to feel hot.

"Mmm. Are you wearing those dark blue pyjamas?"

"Yes."

"I'd slide my hand under the hem of your shirt. Run it up your stomach. Between your breasts."

Hermione sucked in her breath.

"What else?"

"I'd touch your nipples till they harden. Kiss you until my tongue slips in your mouth."

Hermione couldn't help a small moan. She heard Draco make a hum of satisfaction.

"Hermione," Draco murmured. He sounded raspy.

"Are you hard?" She blurted out.

"Very."

"Ohh..."

Picturing the tent in his boxers was almost too much for her. Her pussy was now throbbing painfully, demanding her attention. She wanted to be with him so badly.

"Will you be a good girl and do what I tell you?"

Hermione gasped.

" Yes. "

She heard him groan softly.

"Slide a hand down, between your legs."

"Okay."

She did as he bid her, resting her palm right on her mound.

"Play with your clit and tell me exactly how you like it."

"I'm...ohh..."

Hermione pushed down slowly with three fingers around the area. She was breathing harder.

"I'm rubbing circles, pressing down on it and...ohhh...Draco it feels....so *good*. Ahhn...I wish you were here..."

"Good. Just listen to my voice. Tell me how fast you're going."

"Slow... *no* , fast. I don't know!"

She had been going slow at first, but the more she heard his voice, the faster and harder she touched. She could feel her orgasm starting to build.

"Are you...ahhnn...t-touching yourself too?"

"Yes," she heard him hiss.

She made a breathy whining noise.

"Describe it to me," she managed, through breaths.

"I'm stroking myself at the thought of how wet you are. Push a finger in your cunt and tell me."

" *So wet* ," she gasped.

Indeed, as soon as he commanded, she'd eagerly shoved her forefinger inside her and was unsurprised and pleased by the squelch it made.

"I'm...ahnn...touching myself and...spreading it over my clit...I'm so wet, Draco. *Soaking wet* ."

He groaned.

"I can hear it," he sounded almost reverent.

She heard him panting a little.

"Put two fingers in and rub your sweet spot just how you like it."

" *Yess... .Yesssss!*"

Hermione cried out in relief as he gave her permission to start earnestly masturbating.

"Roll your clit on your palm."

"Oh god, oh god, yes, Draco!"

"You sound amazing. Keep touching yourself. Just like that. Such a good girl."

"I'm touching my....touching my- ahhnn..."

Relaying every action was beginning to be a challenge. She could feel her impending orgasm gaining momentum.

"Add another finger if you can. Touch yourself and imagine it's me pushing my fingers inside your cunt until you make those delicious little noises you always make."

She was indeed making a myriad of noises. She moaned and keened and bucked, rocking her hips against her fingers and pressing her clit down hard on her palm. She was close, oh *so* close. She shut her eyes tight and pictured Draco, naked, his cock erect and gleaming. She could imagine his hands on her. *In* her. She cried out.

"Fuck, that sounds good. I wish I could lick you clean. Push my face right between your thighs and devour you..."

" *Ahhnn* ! Yes, yes! What else?"

"Push my cock inside you and pound you. Fuck you nice and hard until you-"

" *Draco* !"

She didn't think she'd ever come that hard before, by her own hand. She arched her back as her orgasm finally liberated her.

"Draco, oh god, *I'm coming* !" She panted, riding the wave. She could hear his breath speed up. Just as her orgasm started to settle down, she heard a loud grunt and gasp. Then heavy panting.

"Did you just come?" She asked, still reeling.

"Merlin... *yes* . The noises you make- they drive me mad. I wanted you to climax first but I felt ready to burst. It was a close call."

He sounded as exhausted as she felt. She smiled, stretching like a cat and feeling immensely satisfied.

"I can't wait to see you. I want your fingers in me for real now."

"Such an insatiable minx."

She grinned.

"Hermione?"

"Mmn?"

"I love you."

Hermione made a sleepy sound of contentment.

"I love you, too. Draco..."

"Ask me anything and it's yours."

She smiled into her pillow.

"Could we...sleep with the TeleGalleons on? I like hearing you, even if you're quiet. It makes me feel like we could be sleeping next to each other. Is that odd?"

"No, it isn't odd at all. I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere. Sweet dreams, love."

Hermione drifted off to the sound of Draco's steady breathing and, being the obedient girl that she was, had nothing but the sweetest of dreams.

Penetration

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - War of Hearts (Acoustic Version) by Ruelle

It turns out the first day Hermione spent as Draco's public girlfriend was rather anticlimactic.

She did something that morning which she never usually did, which was sleep in.

She had slept so deeply after her call with Draco the previous night that she hadn't heard any of the other girls waking to leave for breakfast. By the time Hermione roused, she barely had enough time to throw on her uniform and dash out to Herbology.

Another thing she hadn't quite counted on was the bombardment of correspondence that she received throughout the day.

Love potions were, of course, strictly banned. Given it was Valentine's, even more notices had been tacked to the boards during the night, reminding students of immediate expulsion even with simple possession.

In absence of that, the new craze was sending paper aeroplanes that carried love letters. Hermione recalled a similar messenger system being used in the Ministry of magic to send memos.

These love letters seemed to be rather more aggressive in their purpose, however.

Throughout the day, planes zoomed in and out of classes, knocking into students' heads and getting caught in their robes.

The teachers for the most part seemed to accept this. Some, like Flitwick, thought it was sweet. Others gave the planes an irritated glare each time one swooped in, interrupting class and landing on a desk.

Hermione had received no less than twelve planes by lunchtime.

The spell seemed to be able to track the recipient- no matter where she rushed off to, they followed her, dive bombing into her bushy hair.

She'd assumed her popularity had died down ever since she'd started befriending ex-Voldemort-supporting Slytherins, but clearly she still had a healthy following of admirers.

She had no desire to open any of them.

She left piles of aeroplanes on her desk and chair as she went from class to class but still more came.

She asked her usual questions to Professor Vector after class, but it took twice as long since she kept being interrupted by letters. This made her miss most of lunch and she barely had time to gobble down a sandwich before Transfiguration.

She finally managed to nip a few pasties from the Great Hall and join Draco for Theo's last evening in the Hospital Wing.

"Bring me anything? Pomphrey is a bit stingy on the pudding. Salazar I can't wait to be free of this place, none of my letters from my myriad of admirers seem to be able to find me here. Share some of yours?" Theo asked wryly as three more aeroplanes whizzed through the door and started rapping Hermione impatiently on the shoulder.

"Ugh, here," Hermione shoved a pasty and a fresh pile of class notes she'd taken into Theo's lap and began shooing the planes away with her heavy Arithmancy book.

Draco scowled.

"Must you keep them all here?"

"Don't look at me like that! I've tried Vanishing, Incendio, Leviosa and Diffindo but they just keep dodging everything!"

Theo placed a hand over his heart.

"Is that how you treat your admirers? You'll be breaking some hearts, especially-"

He snatched the nearest plane and unfolded it-

"Poor Gunther..."

"I haven't a clue who that is! Besides, I'm happily taken and it's about time everyone knew it!"

She saw Draco's lip quirk from behind his book on carnivorous plants.

Hermione spent the evening reviewing her Arithmancy homework while ignoring the occasional plane that flitted around their heads. To her annoyance, Theo seemed to take deep pleasure in opening her letters and reading his favourites.

"Ooh look it, this bloke sounds really serious. He pledges his life to you and offers to take you to his family's Niffler farm in Surrey."

Draco snorted.

"You shouldn't be laughing. Nifflings are downright adorable. You've got stiff competition."

That wiped the derision from Draco's face.

"Ahh this one fancies himself a poet! *Hem hem.*

'Dearest Hermione darling,

Your eyes are positively startling.

Your large nest of hair,

Your freckles fair,

Have driven me completely barmy ."

Theo almost choked out a lung from laughing so hard.

"Positively charming."

"Who sent that one?" Draco asked in a bored voice.

"Some twit named Ivan. You can add him to your list of people to murder."

Hermione was a little disconcerted to see Draco nod and look entirely serious about it.

"You've got an awful lot of anonymous admirers too. Cowards the lot of 'em! If I seduce a woman I'll for damn sure make certain she knows it's me, or she'll start imagining me as some beefed-out Gilderoy Lockheart look alike."

"Perhaps they're just shy."

"Shy? Some are downright cryptic. This one didn't even bother writing about himself, only left a dramatic quote about heaven and hell."

Hermione's head jerked up. Why did that sound terribly familiar?

"Give me that!" Hermione snapped and yanked the letter from Theo's grasp.

A chill ran down her spine as she read the words on the parchment.

I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell.

To die upon the hand I love so well.

"What's wrong?"

Draco's voice was urgent but seemed far away in her mind. She was trying to put things together.

The writing looked awfully familiar to her.

Trembling, she pulled out her beaded bag from her pocket and summoned a piece of paper from inside.

"You wouldn't know Shakespeare, Theo. He was a Muggle poet. Only one book has a Shakespeare quote in the Hogwarts library that I know of.

She compared the duplicate of the library card from the book *Love Potions and Their Many Uses* that she'd conjured ages ago.

The name 'Draco Malfoy' was etched on the card in an aggressive and recognizable script. It was the same writing as the anonymous love letter.

"It's from them. The love poisoner," Draco said monotonously.

Hermione nodded slowly.

"They took the quote directly from *Love Potions and Their Many Uses* . I remember reading it in the foreword."

Theo scrunched his nose.

"Wait, *the* Love poisoner? The one who got Cho at Halloween? Why're they after you?"

"They're clearly some unhinged fanatic," Draco growled. His knuckles were white from clenching his fists.

"This...this is a message of some kind," Hermione said slowly, thinking out loud, "they must've seen my name in the book, so they knew I'd checked it out. They know I'm onto them. They might suspect you're in on it too, since they wrote your name on the library card instead of theirs."

"Can someone please tell me what in the Blibbering Humdinger is going on? Got that one from Luna," Theo added.

Hermione and Draco shared a look. Theo knew practically everything anyway, and so they told him the whole story (though Hermione left out the copious amounts of Room sex she and Draco had partook in.)

"Salazar's left tit, this certainly explains a lot. I'd wondered how you two had come about. Potions partnering seemed far too easy. That also explains why Astoria stopped trailing after you. Daphne is going to raise hell if she finds out her sister embarrassed herself so thoroughly,"

"Daphne doesn't have to know, nor Blaise," Draco answered curtly.

Theo nodded grimly.

"So, some nutter is out to get Hermione and has been making love potions to do it. Why not just go to McGonagall about it all?"

"We did at first. But Draco's name is written in the book and Madam Pince keeps records of those cards, so even if we destroyed it, it would be of no use. Draco can't be implicated in this or he could be expelled."

"I hardly give a fuck about that when some sick bastard is trying to harm you."

Hermione shrunk back a bit in her chair. Draco was looking murderous. He wasn't even Occluding and that, more than anything, is what set off alarm bells in her head. If Draco was mad enough that he'd forgotten to put his shields up, she was worried what else he would do.

"We have no proof. We still only know that they took out a book, we have nothing else!"

"Then I'll Veritaserum every last sorry student in this damn school! You're *mine*, Hermione, I'm not letting anyone else get their hands on you!"

She couldn't help but quiver at his emphasis on 'mine'.

"Hermione's right, ol' chap. No teachers and no causing a ruckus. A lot of good you'll do if you get chucked out. We'll have to catch the bloody fiend ourselves, but we'll have to be smart about it, won't we?"

"And how exactly do you propose we do that?" Hermione asked, already feeling like she knew the answer.

"We set a trap and bait it."

"I suppose I'd be the bait?"

"No!"

Draco stood up, his face paler than usual.

"You're out of your mind if you think I'm going to let her-"

"Calm down mate, we'll both be there. We could probably even wrangle Luna and Tracey as backup. I'm one of the best duellists in this school and you're by far the best. Hermione will be fine."

Hermione's eyes widened as she studied Draco clenching and unclenching his jaw.

"Since when are you a top tier duellist?"

Theo smirked.

"Draco's never been one to downplay his strengths, though clearly he's learned a thing or two in humility. He could out-duel me with his eyes closed, if he wanted to. I suppose regular lessons with the most notorious Death Eaters does wonders."

Hermione remembered how Theo had ducked and dodged curses like it was second nature. Apparently Draco was leagues ahead of that, yet she had only ever seen him cast a few Protegos and a Stupefy. Perhaps duelling brought back a lot of bad memories for him.

"So what exactly is your plan, Theo?" Hermione asked, ignoring Draco's sound of discontentment.

"I assume you know how the paper aeroplanes work?"

"They're charmed to find the recipient, but can also be answered."

"Exactly. You jot down a meeting place and a time and send that little plane on its way. We provide backup and ambush the poisoner once they show their face."

"And why not just write down a random answer, mark the plane and follow it back to its owner instead of putting Hermione in danger?" Draco questioned, his arms crossed.

"You can't write anything on the outside. The paper's charmed for confidentiality. Plus have you seen the number of planes flying about? Good luck trying to keep your eye on that one. Seeker or no, you'd need superhuman eyesight to keep up, at the speed they're whizzing about. The spells also fizzle out at midnight, when Valentine's is officially over, or the teachers would go barmy."

"So that means we have about five hours to write a reply, or the trail's gone cold," Hermione muttered, "furthermore, we would need to be sure it's really them, the poisoner. I'd need to get some sort of confession out of them first, before any ambushing gets done."

"We could shove Veritaserum down their throat-"

"No Draco! Would you stop it with the Veritaserum? If they turn out to be innocent you will definitely be expelled for assaulting and forcing a Ministry-restricted potion down someone's throat! Especially after McGonagall put up all those notices on poisoning people! No, we'll have to get a confession the diplomatic way."

"How do we know they'll even show up? If they think we're on their trail, wouldn't they want to stay hidden?" Draco asked a little too hopefully.

"You're forgetting an important detail; they're a complete nutter," Nott countered sagely, "would they pass on a chance to meet Hermione one-on-one? Perhaps. But if they *do* show up- which I'm willing to bet they would- you could put an end to all of this once and for all."

Hermione set her mouth in a determined line.

"I'm in."

"Why must you always insist on running towards trouble?" Draco rounded on her angrily.

"Because if not me, then who! This could be our only chance to catch this person!"

"A golden opportunity, served on a platter," Theo agreed, reclining on his pillows.

"Would you stop encouraging her? I know you're bored and looking to shake things up, but must you goad Hermione into jumping face first into reckless nonsense?"

Hermione took Draco's hand.

"This evil person is out there *taunting* me, Draco. I don't want to be passive. I don't want to always be looking over my shoulder nor watching my cup for signs of tampering. And I don't want anyone else hurt, especially if I'm the one they're after. I want to be proactive. We need to go on the offensive for once."

"Though if we're going to pull this off, it might be wise to lay low for a bit," Theo added thoughtfully, "the poisoner might suspect an ambush, so best you don't look too chummy with anyone, including Draco and I. This love criminal needs to think he - or she, I suppose - has a chance with you, even if it's slim. You hanging around other blokes might turn him - or her - off."

"But... We were supposed to start being public..."

Hermione squeezed Draco's hand, trying not to feel too disappointed. Draco squeezed back.

Theo did a double take.

"You're kidding! You...er...think that's wise? I don't know if you're fully prepared for the backlash."

"Well, I figured you would both teach me how to duel."

Both Theo and Draco looked perplexed.

"You want us to teach you how to *duel* ?" Draco repeated.

"It would be best, yes. I'll be better off knowing how to properly defend myself plus it'll help with my Defence training. You know, in my O.W.L.s, Defence Against the Dark Arts was the only class I couldn't manage an Outstanding. I really want all my N.E.W.T.s so I think if I can train my reflexes, it'll help."

"Figured you'd have some swotty reason above all else to want to learn how to keep yourself safe," Draco rolled his eyes but a small smile crept across his lips.

Theo cleared his throat.

"That's all well and good that you want to alert the press, but there's a good chance the poisoner won't bother meeting you if you're coupled off, Hermione. They're going to want to see you on the delusion that you might have feelings for them, and that delusion breaks if you're declaring romance with another chap."

Draco barked a harsh laugh.

"So basically, if no one knows about us, some lunatic will keep causing Hermione problems- and if everyone knows about us, then everyone *except* that lunatic will cause her problems."

Hermione nodded sadly.

"We can't seem to catch a break, can we?" She said softly.

He ran a thumb over her hand but didn't answer. His brow was creased in thought.

"This might be our only chance," Hermione insisted, "we can't mess it up. If we do, the poisoner will know for certain that we're after them and we'll lose them forever. We'll have to keep 'us' a secret until we set the trap."

Hermione slumped down in her chair. She had been so close. So close to finally being free of this lie. Yet, the Amor Videri culprit always seemed to find a way to upset everything.

She pursed her lips, resolute. They would catch this maniac, force a confession out of them and take them straight to McGonagall. Her peace of mind at this school depended on it.

"If we're going to do this, we need a full-proof plan. If this person gets within five feet of you, I want them knocked out," Draco said calmly, though his expression burned with anger.

They spent the next two hours forming their strategy.

Hermione tried her best to keep her hand from shaking as she dipped her quill in ink.

Everyone seemed to hold their breath as she jotted down a time and place set for the upcoming Saturday.

The ink gleamed as it dried.

"Here goes nothing," she murmured, folding up the plane along the same lines and shooting it off into the air.

The plane dipped once over their heads and careened out the door, joining a flock that was passing by overhead.

"It might come to nothing. They might not even show up," Hermione said, patting Draco's arm reassuringly.

"If they have any wish to keep all their limbs attached, they'd better not," Draco said darkly.

//

When they left that evening, the air felt sombre around them.

"Is it terrible that, despite everything that's happened, this has been one of the best Valentine's I've ever had?" Hermione said after taking care to wait until they were out of anyone's earshot.

Draco smiled slightly and she noticed his hand twitched towards hers.

She badly wanted to take it, but even walking alone with him was a risky idea, at this point.

She tried to keep a respectable distance from him, one of a cordial acquaintance, but inside she was yearning to just wrap her arms around his waist.

"I'm glad. I plan on spending many more with you," Draco answered smoothly.

Hermione schooled her smile into a neutral line as more students passed by them.

Were any of them the poisoner? Had their enemy received her letter?

She couldn't shake the thought that everyone they encountered was looking at her. Because she was Hermione Granger? Because she was walking with Draco Malfoy? Or because they wanted to poison her?

Or all of the above?

"Hey," Draco murmured, cutting through her spiralling paranoia, "I won't let anything happen to you. We have a few days to get your duelling skills warmed up and, like we planned, you know I won't be far if you need me. As soon as you say the word, I'll come running."

Hermione couldn't help a small smile.

"I know. I just want it all to be over. If we can get rid of this prat once and for all, I can focus on my studies and time with you and our friends. Maybe I can even start reconciling with Ginny..."

"What ever happened to Weaslette anyway? Not that I mind her absence. You just used to talk about her more."

Hermione froze.

She realised she'd never told Draco about her falling out with Ginny, nor why it came about.

"Erm..."

Draco's expression fell blank.

"Hermione...What aren't you telling me?"

Blast him and his mind-reading powers. She bit her lip.

"You can't be mad at me."

Draco scowled.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything! I- well..."

"Great, bleeding Merlin, you told her, didn't you? How much?"

"I didn't tell her anything! Well- I mean I sort of did-"

"How *much* ?"

"She knows we're dating," Hermione squeaked.

Draco was stone-faced, though a muscle twitched on his forehead.

He inhaled.

"And why exactly did you feel the need to share this with She-Weasel after she tried to Bat Bogey my brains out?"

"I didn't tell her!"

"Then how did she find out?"

"I...er...can't tell you."

"Hermione Jean Granger, you will drive me absolutely up the wall one of these days. *What do you mean you can't tell me?* "

Something about him saying her full name in such an authoritative manner made her tremble a little.

"It's not my secret to tell!"

"I think I have every right-"

"Shhhh! Keep your voice down would you? We're supposed to be polite acquaintances!"

Draco sneered but clamped his mouth shut.

"I'm sorry, all right?" Hermione hissed, nodding to Draco to follow her at a casual walk, "Ginny just...knows how to find things out is all. We'll have to leave it at that, because I won't divulge anything more!"

"How many more people have you told without asking me? Word must've gotten around to her somehow."

"I haven't told anyone else and word didn't get around! Maybe she just followed us, have you ever thought of that?"

Draco laughed drily.

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Because I can tell you're lying. I always check if we're being followed, too."

"You do?"

"Hermione, you've decided to spend time with the most hated person at this school and some lunatic is after you. Of course I check!"

"I never noticed! You never told me!"

"Well, it's not rocket science. I keep my eyes and ears open and cast a couple of non-verbal Revelios and such when you're daydreaming in that big, beautiful brain of yours."

"You do this systematically?"

"Certainly. For instance, there's a broody blonde fellow with some girl with a mop for a head walking about fifteen paces behind us, out of earshot. Beyond that was Sprout in discussion with a gaggle of Herbology swots. In front, three first years turned the corner about a minute ago. We'll probably see them right about...now."

They turned the corner and, indeed, there were the backs of three first years skipping along ahead.

Hermione glanced behind her and confirmed that the girl did, indeed, have quite a mop of hair.

"That's...really impressive, Draco!"

Draco shrugged.

"I just keep an eye out,"

He puffed his chest a little as he said it, ruining any effect of humility. He was proud as a peacock.

Hermione smiled to herself, making a note that if she ever needed to diffuse Draco from being cross with her, she would just find a way to flatter him.

"Would you like to go to the Room tonight? It's still Valentine's after all and I...may have something special in mind."

"Oh?"

She'd definitely piqued his interest. Hermione could feel that familiar bubbling in her stomach when she was beginning to feel turned on. He was looking at her with open curiosity but something lay under the surface. A dark longing. She could lose herself in it.

"Let's go," she breathed.

They took separate routes to the Room, though Hermione hurried at a quick pace, wanting to get there before Draco.

As soon as she saw him appear at the end of the hallway, she paced back and forth until a familiar door that felt almost like home materialised.

They'd been coming to this "home" for so long now that Hermione had to actively remind herself at times that it was a figment of their imagination and not their actual flat.

When she opened the door, the room seemed to glow.

Magical candles that gave off a tad more light than regular ones were flickering on the tea table and dresser. Rose petals were strewn about the floor and on the bed. A cliché, perhaps, but one Hermione had always dreamed about experiencing.

Draco closed the door behind them and wordlessly looked around.

"Do you like it?" She asked shyly.

"I love it."

He made to take her in his arms, but she took a step back.

"Wait. Stay there. I want to show you something."

She shed her robe and unfastened her tie, tossing it somewhere behind her.

She began to slowly undo her blouse, carefully easing out each button from its buttonhole, prolonging the suspense.

When her shirt finally hung open, she slid it off her shoulders, revealing a red lace, push-up bra. She saw Draco visibly swallow.

She turned around so that her back was to him and unclasped her skirt, slowly pushing it off her hips. A matching, cheeky pair of red lace underwear was revealed. She made sure to bend over when she dropped her skirt, giving Draco an eyeful.

When she turned to face him, she almost moaned at the look on his face.

He looked like he wanted to devour her.

She walked towards him, slightly accentuating the sway of her hips and praying it didn't look silly. Draco seemed far from laughing.

Her hands moved up his chest and then down, unbuttoning his shirt.

He moved to help but she tutted.

"Let me."

His chest rose and fell as he took deep, steadying breaths. She leaned in and kissed him on the centre of his collar bone, making sure to add plenty of tongue. His groan was exquisite.

"I want to touch you."

"Patience," she schooled, smiling wickedly.

She kissed him down his chest, unbuttoning the last of his buttons as she did. She dragged her tongue along his abdomen until her chin nudged the erection that strained at his trousers.

She unbuckled his belt and let out a soft sigh as she fished his cock out of his boxers.

She admired the veins, the gleaming tip, the way it arched upwards. She swirled her tongue around the head and was rewarded with a heavy gasp.

"Mmmm, go sit on the bed, please."

He did as she asked, though his eyes never left her. He drank her in.

She straddled him, slowly gyrating so that the lace rubbed against his shaft.

He took her hips and she let him press her down on his lap. They both moaned.

She kissed him, pulling her panties aside so that he was now poking between her labia. She ground down, coating his length with her juices.

Their kissing heated up. Tongues danced sloppily as she rocked back and forth. Their moans were noisier. His hands slid under her panties and were now cupping her bare ass. She whimpered as he squeezed.

She angled her hips so that the tip of his cock pushed in her entrance. She sank down.

"Fuuuckk..." Draco rasped, his head lolling back. His neck now prostrated in front of her, she took the liberty of sucking on it. Hard. She felt the vibrations in his throat as he groaned.

She didn't ride him. She pushed him in deep and kept him there, using her kegels to torment him.

His hips gently bucked upwards.

She gasped as he bobbed against her cervix.

She wanted to fuck him so bad. So, *so* bad. But she wanted something else even more.

With all the willpower she could muster, she lifted her hips and Draco's member slid out with a wet pop.

He looked up at her with an adorable amount of betrayal.

"Please," he begged and Hermione almost slammed him back inside her.

"I was hoping that perhaps you could...could take me from behind," she whispered hotly against his mouth.

He smiled and leaned in, tugging on her lower lip with his teeth.

"I do find you utterly irresistible on all fours," he crooned.

"I m-meant...erm..."

She could feel the warmth of her blush on her cheeks. She'd practised asking him this in her head a million times- why did words have to fail her *now*?

"I didn't mean...I thought perhaps we c-could try it...er...in the other- other place..."

She ducked her head with embarrassment.

"Other place...?"

Draco's voice trailed off, then she heard a sharp intake of breath as he caught her meaning.

" *Ah* ."

"We don't have to- maybe I shouldn't've- it's all right if you don't-"

"I absolutely do," he said forcefully, cutting off her babble.

She finally had the courage to look at him and what she saw almost made her come then and there.

He was looking up at her with an intensity that thrilled her. His pupils were dilated practically up to the irises. It felt- *feral* . The tension was electric. His hands were still on her ass, but his fingers now dug possessively into her skin.

" *Oh* ," was all she could muster.

Their mouths smashed together. Their kiss was messy, heated, with tongues diving in and out, lips being sucked on, breaths ragged and noisy.

Nothing was gentle. Romance was gone. There was only pure want.

She rubbed her pussy down and across his length while he half unclasped, half ripped her bra off.

His hands kneaded her breasts and pinched her nipples not in a sweet, seductive way, but in a way that made her sore and throbbing and begging for more.

One of his hands moved up her throat, his thumb trailing her jawline and then her lower lip.

She took it in her mouth, sucking, running her tongue along the underside.

He let her have her fun and then slid that hand under her panties. His thumb, now wet with her spit, began to tease and massage her back entrance.

Her eyes rolled.

"You want me to fuck you here?" he whispered softly.

"Yes, yes, oh god!" Hermione whined, rocking her pussy in his lap.

He slowly, carefully eased his thumb in. She moaned hard.

She was growing delirious with desire.

Suddenly nothing mattered more than chasing her release.

She angled her hips and tried to fill her cunt with his cock.

They both made sounds of ecstasy as she sat down flush in his lap.

Slowly, he made circles with his thumb along her walls, stretching her, relaxing her as he delved further inside her behind.

His other arm wrapped around her waist, holding her tightly against his chest. She could feel her eyes well with tears from wanting to come so bad.

She began to rock back and forth in his lap, her clit dragging against him. Jolts of pleasure shot up from her groin. His thumb and cock were now both fully inside her.

She cried out wantonly, desperately chasing her orgasm. She loved having both her holes filled with him. She bucked and bounced in his lap, her spine arched and bent like a branch in the wind. She threw her head back as finally, finally her body released her.

Draco's teeth sunk into her shoulder and she cried out and came as he sucked on her.

She was panting hard. She collapsed against his chest, her head lolling over his shoulder. He was still hard inside her. She could feel him twitch. Feel him still testing her walls with his thumb.

"Fuck me...I want...Fuck me in my ass...please..."

She felt his cock twitch harder as he groaned.

"But please go slow...I've never...had it there before. I want you to be the first..."

His hand wound in her hair, pulling her face up from his shoulder. She had a brief moment where he locked eyes with her, and then his mouth was on her, kissing her ravenously.

He lifted her, placing her on her back. He shed the rest of his clothes and she shimmied out of her panties.

She took a moment to admire his naked form as he stalked towards her. His cock looked almost painfully engorged. She swallowed hard.

She turned on her stomach and got on all fours.

"Are you ready?" He practically purred. He was holding his wand.

"Y-yes..." she whispered.

"Are you nervous?"

She thought about lying. But he would know if she did.

"Yes..."

"I'll go slow. Tell me to stop at any time and I will. I love you. You're so incredibly sexy."

She arched appreciatively, swaying her hips so that he knew she was ready.

She cried out as something wet and cold trickled down her back.

She turned to see Draco casting Aguamenti from his wand. The water poured down her spine and between her bum cheeks. Slowly, the water thickened as he transfigured it into a lube.

With a flick, he set his wand to vibrate.

"Touch this to your clit. It'll help you relax into it," he advised, handing it to her.

She did as he bade and immediately felt her senses heat up as the vibrations shook her privates.

She moaned as both his hands started to massage the lube into her ass cheeks and around her back entrance.

She heard more slick sounds. She turned to see the glorious sight of Draco stroking lube onto his hard cock. It gleamed tantalisingly and Hermione licked her lips without thinking.

"You're *sexy* ," she gasped without thinking and he grinned.

She watched him rub his cock between her cheeks. It was *so* slick. The wet sounds were deafening. Her ass and back shimmered from the smears of lube. Draco seemed enraptured by it all. His lips were slightly parted as he admired her.

"Ready?" he asked.

" *Yes* ," she hissed. She was *so* ready. She wanted him in there, in a place no one else had been but him.

His gland nudged against her opening. Draco had been more than generous with the lube, so much so that she felt his tip sink into her hole with a fair amount of ease.

She sucked in her breath.

"How is it?"

"I'm...I'm fine. It doesn't hurt. It just feels...strange. Keep going, please. I need all of you,"

"Fuck. Do you have any idea how hot that sounds?"

She couldn't answer. She was too busy gritting her teeth, anticipating pain and adjusting to the feeling of being filled in such a new area.

He had her tightly by the hips. He eased in further, at a snail's pace.

After a few moments, she started to feel herself stretch in a way that caused discomfort. She let out a small whimper.

"Do you want me to pull out?" Draco asked, not missing a beat.

"N-no I...maybe just stay like that a bit...I just need to adjust..."

It hurt but it was also starting to feel.... *good* .

The stimuli on her clit kept her fear at bay and her arousal at hand.

This wasn't too bad. Sure it had stung but she could already feel the pain ebb away, making more room for her libido.

She glanced back and what she saw was too much for her.

Draco, looking naked and handsome as ever, with his cock halfway in her gleaming asshole. His hair was tousled from their earlier kissing and he had a look of deep focus.

Something snapped inside her. She moaned low and hard. Her core pulsed. She needed, needed, *needed* him!

She backed up and he hissed, tilting his head back in surprise.

Pain seared up her backside. Too soon, too much. She halted, gasping. She wanted him all the way in so badly. The intense desire to come was starting to pound her senses.

" *Hermione* !" Draco admonished through gritted teeth, "Don't do that! I don't want to hurt you and you- you doing that makes it difficult not to...ughn..."

He grunted, unable to finish as she squeezed a little around him.

It finally dawned on her how much of an effort it was taking Draco to go in slow. At this point, he was used to slamming into her pussy and pounding her. Now, he had to take his time. It must be taking quite a bit of self-restraint on his part if he wanted her anywhere near as much as she wanted him right now.

"Please, Draco, *please* , I need you to fuck me!"

"We need to go slow or you'll be walking bow-legged to class tomorrow. I won't hurt you," he said the last in almost a whisper. It only made her want him more.

She made sounds of frustration as he eased in at his previous measured pace.

She knew he was right. Of course she knew it would hurt if they took it too fast. But her primal instinct to be entirely his was overpowering any sense of logic. She whined, pleaded, moaned and goaded him.

Despite her efforts, Draco continued to carefully penetrate her.

His cock had never felt so big to her. She kept thinking he was in, yet more and more of his length filled her as the minutes trickled by.

Finally, after what felt like ages, she felt his fingers on her pussy lips.

"Ahhnn! Oh god, Draco are you- are you-"

" *Yes* ," he hissed and she cried out.

" *Merlin* , Hermione- you're so tight..."

"Is it good?"

"It's...I can't even describe how good."

"Fuck me!"

He chuckled though it sounded strained.

"So bossy. Let me test the waters a bit first. How's this?"

A finger eased between her folds and into her pussy. She gasped and cried out, her hands grappling to hold onto the covers.

"So good, so good, so good!" She chanted and began to rock her hips up and down. She heard Draco grunt. She wriggled back and felt his hips flush against her ass.

He started to bob against her, small thrusts at first. Stretching her more, making sure she was ready. He took her by the waist, giving a bit more strength.

"Yes, yesss, harder, please! Oh god, *yes just like that!*"

Finally, *finally* .

He fucked her harder, slapping into her bum. She could feel his heavy balls swing against her pussy.

Hermione had never felt anything like this.

It felt dirty, taboo, new, surreal.

She didn't expect it to feel as amazing as it did.

Her clit was on fire. Her blood boiled. Everything seemed numb and hypersensitive at the same time.

She came almost violently. Her ass squeezed Draco in a vice grip. Her vision went white and her arms trembled, fighting to hold herself up.

Draco slammed into her one more time, gasping.

"Fucking hell, I'm coming, I'm-"

"Yes, yes, yes, *yes* !"

The feeling of his cock pulsing in her ass was pure ecstasy. She felt triumphant. They'd done it. He'd taken her the way she'd wanted and it had been glorious. She felt delirious from happiness and exhaustion.

Hermione collapsed on her stomach, Draco falling down with her.

She could feel his hips thrust against her a few more times as he emptied himself in her.

He finally slowed to a languid pace, and then rested on top of her, gathering her in his arms.

"I love you...More than anything. I love you," he gasped, catching his breath.

"Mmn, I love you, too. Thank you for taking such good care of me," Hermione murmured through a haze of exhaustion.

"I'll always take care of you," he murmured back.

Hermione shivered.

That was very close to a forever promise.

Would she and Draco be together for the rest of their lives?

Of course, no one could predict such a thing.

But in that moment, Hermione decided it brought her great comfort to choose to believe that they would.

//

They took a bath together and talked until they were wrinkly from being too long under water.

Hermione was aghast at all the nail scratches and love bites she'd left on Draco's back and arms. Draco didn't seem to mind. In fact, he seemed rather pleased.

Her backside was starting to feel a bit sore, but she was still in good enough shape to let him take her again in her pussy.

She slept like a log.

She didn't think it was possible to love Draco more than she already did, but this new sexual adventure seemed to shift her feelings.

They'd shared something new and intimate and extremely vulnerable for her and it had been wonderful.

He knew her in ways no one else did.

It thrilled her. She truly felt like she was his and he was hers.

The only drawback was that Hermione woke up definitely feeling sore the next morning.

Despite all Draco's efforts, Hermione still had a bit of a hobble to her walk, though it was nothing a dab of Murtlap Essence couldn't fix. Draco eyed her guiltily as they dressed and she had to assure him more than several times that she was fine and it had been more than worth it.

In fact, she'd had such a good Valentine's that it made avoiding Draco all the more bitter.

True to their plan, Hermione spent the entire day going to class alone. She avoided speaking to anyone, reviewed her notes, answered more questions than usual in class to stay occupied.

It increased her anxiety tenfold.

She knew the love poisoner was watching her.

Saturday was right around the corner and she had to make a show of being lonely and single if she wanted to increase her chances of meeting them.

And so, she ate alone in the Great Hall, trying not to shoot Draco or Theo any pitiful looks.

She allowed herself one indulgence and that was their evening study group.

When she arrived, as per usual she was greeted by Luna, Tracey, Blaise, Daphne, Theo and - her heart skipped with longing at finally being able to see him - Draco.

As she sat between Draco and Luna, yet another person walked up to join them.

" *Neville* ?"

"Hullo. I have a lot of work to do for Transfiguration and Charms. Mind if I join?"

They scooted around so that Neville could squeeze in next to Luna.

Everyone around the table seemed to eye him with varying degrees of curiosity and suspicion.

"Good to see you back, Nott,"

Theo raised an eyebrow, looking both amused and calculating.

"Nothing keeps me down for long, Longbottom," he answered cheerily enough.

"It's getting awfully crowded here," Daphne sniffed, turning a page of her book with her perfectly manicured pinky in the air.

"The more the merrier, I say. Besides, it's a funny thing seeing a Gryffindor up close. Like walking up to a rhinoceros at the Magizoo."

Neville looked scandalised until Luna placed a reassuring hand on his arm.

"He's only joking, you know. He likes to joke a lot, Theo does."

Theo grinned and Neville relaxed a little.

"So how was your last evening in the infirmary? Did they manage to fix the screws loose in your head as well?" Blaise asked nonchalantly.

"Ha. Ha. It was quite pleasant actually. Padma stopped by to make sure Hooper didn't come to finish the job. I also had a strange dream where Binns came to visit me and started doing a jig on my knees. Otherwise, it was fairly boring and I'm pleased to be rid of the place."

The study session went surprisingly well.

Hermione brought up the subject of wards at one point and Blaise, Theo and Neville all had interesting things to add. According to Hermione's research, she'd found a few books with suggestions that might shield people on both sides of the barrier, to prevent another mishap like Will Hooper's.

Blaise suggested Hermione discuss things with Padma, who incidentally was the expert and Hermione agreed that she would.

Daphne asked Luna for a spare quill when hers snapped and Luna happily obliged.

Everyone was getting on better than could be expected.

Hermione felt very smug about it all.

See? It's possible to mend things after all. People only need to try!

The evening seemed to pass awfully fast and soon enough, everyone gave each other cordial goodbyes and headed to their respective common rooms. Hermione caught Draco giving her a long, lingering look, before trailing after the Slytherins.

Hermione and Neville turned to make their way back to Gryffindor.

"I'm really glad you stopped by, Neville," Hermione stated.

"Me too. It was actually really nice. I wasn't expecting it to be so..."

"Normal?"

Neville chuckled.

"I suppose so, yes. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"What does?"

"That if we'd taken the time to get to know one another earlier- that if we hadn't been divided up into quarters- perhaps all of this could have been avoided. The war, the prejudices, everything."

"It isn't too late and every little bit helps. Something as simple as borrowing a quill from someone you once hated can be the foundation of bigger things. I think we're on our way to healing."

"Yeah...I think you're right."

"Hannah didn't want to join?"

Neville's face crisped up and Hermione instantly regretted asking the question.

"No...Hannah and I...well, she broke up with me yesterday."

"Oh no! Neville, I'm so sorry!"

"Thanks, Hermione. It'll be okay. She...er...didn't like that I was coming here today, if I'm being quite honest. I think it was... too much for her..."

"So she just broke up with you?"

"It caught me off guard to be honest. I didn't realise it mattered this much to her. I told her if it bothered her so much, then I wouldn't go but she'd made up her mind. Said she couldn't be with someone who would even consider hanging around people who used to support You-Know-Who. I know she had a rough time during the war. A couple of her uncles died fighting Death Eaters. But I didn't think..."

He covered his eyes with his hand.

"Oh, Neville...It sounds like she's got quite a bit on her plate. You did nothing wrong."

Neville took a steadying breath.

"I think... Well, it just seemed so out of character for her. She's been off for a while now but this has been our only big issue. I've tried to get her to open up more about it, but she insists this is the main issue. So, there it is. Done, just like that."

They walked in silence for a while, Hermione trying to find the right thing to say, but coming up empty.

"You know you're always welcome to come study with us. We eat lunch in a classroom off to the left of the Great Hall as well. Any time you want to talk or take your mind off things, I'm here."

"Thanks, Hermione. I think I'll take you up on that offer. 'Fig Newton'."

At the password, the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione trudged up to her dorm.

She spent the night trying not to think about Saturday and failing miserably.

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Revelation

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Black Balloon by The Kills

They'd timed the meetup during the Hogsmeade trip to minimise the chances of being interrupted.

Hermione had chosen the potions lab. It seemed fitting. It was in the dungeons, where the least amount of people tended to loiter. On top of that, most people were hunkered away in the library, sweating over essays at the moment. Slughorn had assigned a particularly tricky one on seasonal ingredients.

Luna and Tracey had both agreed to stand on lookout, after being informed the bare bones of what was happening. Luna always seemed content to tag along even with minimal information and Tracey seemed keen to be with Luna, so it all was sorted out.

The four of them couldn't be seen standing about in the hallway, or it might look suspicious. Instead, they were stationed one door over, in a storage room, about ten metres away. Draco had the TeleGalleon on hand.

Hermione had activated the second one and kept it in her pocket. That way, her friends would be privy to everything that was said.

They'd agreed they would rush in only when Hermione gave them the go. They needed to make sure they got incriminating info out of the poisoner before attacking him. Luna and Tracey would block the exits while Draco and Theo would go on the offensive.

It felt strange being back here.

It was here where it had all started for her and Draco.

If it hadn't been for Draco, who knows what could have happened to Hermione, in this very room.

She repressed a shudder.

Waiting was painful.

She sat at the table furthest from the door, watching it warily.

The torchlight cast long shadows on the walls that flickered and made her feel on edge.

She didn't dare talk to her friends. What if her nefarious visitor walked in while she was speaking into the Galleon in her pocket?

There was nothing for it. She had to just sit and wait in silence.

She wondered what the others were thinking.

Fifteen minutes past the agreed time and still no sign.

They'd agreed on waiting an hour over the assigned time. It seemed endless.

Hermione jumped violently as the heavy, brass door knob creaked.

Her whole body tensed. Her heart was racing. She knew her friends were nearby but she still felt scared. Most of all though, she felt angry.

This was it. She would come face to face with her stalker.

The doorknob turned and the door creaked open.

Hermione braced herself. Her hand was poised, ready to fly into her pocket and whip out her wand if she needed to. She ran through the duel briefing Draco had given her last night.

Deep breaths. Clear your mind. Stay calm.

Someone stepped inside the lab.

Hermione almost sighed with relief.

It was only Theo.

"Is everything all right?" Hermione asked, her whole body relaxing. She realised her shoulders were a little sore from sitting tensely for over forty-five minutes.

"Everything is fine."

Theo walked towards her with a measured step. He was observing her carefully.

Some instinct caused Hermione to slowly rise from her seat and take a step back.

Something was wrong.

Theo was acting strange. No swagger, no mischievous smirk, no kindness in his eyes.

He was staring straight at her, surveying her. Analysing her. It made her extremely uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here?" She asked, cursing her voice for trembling.

"This is the time you indicated on your invitation, is it not?"

Her blood ran cold, her worst fears confirmed.

Theo .

But how could it be?

This was *his* plan! She trusted him!

It didn't make any sense!

" *Why* ?"

"'Why' what?"

"Why did you steal Astoria's love potions and sneak them in the lab? Why did you poison Cho? Why write me some cryptic letter with a Shakespeare quote from a book on love

potions?" She burst out all at once.

Theo laughed. It wasn't his usual, snarky laugh. It was quiet. Ominous.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Hermione-" the casual way he used her first name made her skin crawl- "I can only attest to the last thing. Yes, I sent you a love letter. Because, yes, I am in love with you."

"You don't even know me!"

"Of course, I do. We've been studying together in the library for ages, have we not?"

"What was the last essay of mine that you corrected?"

Theo paused, tapping his chin as he pretended to think.

"I can't recall."

"Liar! You're not Theo, you're-"

Hermione trailed off as a thought formed in her mind.

"It was you...Theo dreamt someone came to visit him last night, but it wasn't Binns doing a jig, it was you! You took some of his hair and you've Polyjuiced into him to hide your identity!"

Theo smiled, tilting his head to the side.

"That is quite contrived. And you can hardly prove it, even if it was true."

Hermione was about to lose her temper.

Was this the poisoner's game? Show up disguised as someone she cared about and deny everything and just taunt her? She needed to get some sort of criminal confession- but how could she, when this person clearly came here prepared and guarded. And even if they did confess to anything, it would be Theo confessing, not the poisoner.

Her only option was to keep him talking and maybe she could get something useful out of it.

She prayed the others wouldn't barge in without her giving the order. She knew Draco was probably beside himself with anger and that thought alone forced Hermione to focus enough to stall a while more.

"Why this quote?"

"I thought it fitting to send a quote from the greatest Muggle poet to the greatest Muggleborn I'd ever met."

"How did you know he was a Muggle?"

"The quote itself is tremendous, isn't it?" False Theo continued, ignoring her, ' *I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell. To die upon the hand I love so well.*' Why do you suppose the author of *Love Potions and their Many Uses* put such a quote in this book?"

"As a warning," Hermione answered curtly, "Forcing someone to fall in love with you could be making a heaven out of hell, but ultimately, you would die upon that hand. That is to say, it would also destroy any chance you would have with that person to begin with."

"Interesting. And what of 'it is better to have loved and lost, then to never have loved at all?' Perhaps, knowing what it would feel like, even if it means never seeing that person again, could be better than not knowing at all. If this is what it means to die, I would die a happy man. I feel like this was how the author intended it."

"Why did you come here, if you're going to keep up this charade of innocence?" Hermione snapped.

Polyjuice Theo looked at her in contemplation, his finger tracing the edge of the table that separated them. It was uncanny to see this mystery person puppeteering her friend's body.

"Do you believe in love at first sight, Hermione?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"No."

"I didn't think I did either. But some people swear by it. Imagine this. You see someone from across the hall. You're drawn to them. You ask them out and they say yes. Fast forward ten years. You're married, with children and you love each other more than ever. Wouldn't that, then, qualify as love at first sight?"

Hermione didn't know what he was getting at, but she needed to play along if she wanted to wring any useful information out of him.

"Of course not. You can't love someone without knowing them."

"But how do you *know* ? Love is a feeling. It can't be proven nor quantified. The definition varies from person to person. It's a personal experience. And, dare I say, a spiritual experience. We can be drawn to people who are wrong for us. But what of when we're drawn to the right person? Who's to say there isn't any instinctual attraction, an intuitive connection,

or preternatural magnetism? Unless you can prove it doesn't exist, nothing prevents it from existing."

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it. She very much wanted to disagree. Yet it was sort of like arguing with Luna. You couldn't really get on the same page with someone if you weren't even in the same book.

"I truly believe that the first time I saw you, I fell in love."

Hermione repressed a shudder. Luckily, her interlocutor didn't seem to notice.

"I've known for a while now, perhaps since the beginning, that I never had a chance with you. You are the smartest, most beautiful, most brilliant and courageous witch our age, if not in the last half century. How could I, an average wizard, ever compare?"

"You were always with Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. And, while I loathed to admit it, they were extremely talented individuals themselves. I always assumed you would end up with one of them. How could I even dare approach you, when two superior suitors surrounded you and knew you better than I ever could."

"Then, the Yule ball came along, and to my surprise, you didn't go with Harry Potter, nor Ron Weasley. Instead, you chose an international Quidditch star. Once again, I was reminded how very, very far out of reach you were."

"I saw it all. Your loneliness. The way people underappreciated you. You were so much smarter, brighter than all of us. I wanted so badly for you to know that I, humble being that I was, thought the world of you. But I was a coward and could only admire you from afar."

"Then, the war was upon us. It taught me that life is short. Precious. We must act now, or we would have lived a life of emptiness. But you weren't at Hogwarts. Many weren't. It was a year of chaos and little opportunity. Death was banging on our doors and the fate of the Wizarding World was fragile. There was no time to hunt people down to confess silly feelings of love."

"When I found out you had returned to Hogwarts for your final year, I can't begin to describe to you how happy I was. Finally, I could tell you how I felt. After so many years of waiting, cowering, pining."

"Imagine how dismayed I was. How devastated I was. You were back from the war, a heroine, a goddess, idolised, venerated. You were further away from me than ever. But still, I decided I would talk to you. I promised myself I wouldn't live in the shadows any longer. I wouldn't shy away from my feelings being known."

"I finally decided to approach you. I had planned it for weeks- no, *years*, really. I picked a day when you had your favourite classes - Arithmancy and Charms. I wanted everything to be in my favour. I found you in the Hall. You were already accosted by a group of admirers. You looked so beautiful, smiling and accepting their adoration with such modesty. I waited patiently for them to leave. It took awhile, but finally, *finally*, they were on their way. I approached you, I remember my heart was beating so fast. This was the moment I had been waiting for. I would finally talk to you. You would know I exist."

"And you...brushed me away. Like I was no one. But, of course you did. Because I *was* no one. How many more people had accosted you that week? Probably dozens if not hundreds. I was an ordinary, invisible person. Nothing spectacular about my looks, no achievements of note, no extraordinary charisma. My best talent was my downfall - *staying hidden*."

"Still, I didn't want to give up. I had waited so long for this moment. I gathered my courage. I asked you to the Halloween Ball. Once again, you shut me down. You didn't even really look at me. I felt like I'd been dismissed before even being acknowledged."

"I'd picked up a book on love potions perhaps for wishful thinking. I'd *never* brew one of course," he said the latter very carefully. "Lo and behold, there was your name on the card. Was it destiny? A coincidence? I was compelled to write to you. I thought perhaps our common interest in literature might sway you."

"And it *did*. You wrote to me. A meeting place. It was more than anything I could ever hope for. A chance to tell you all the things I've carried with me for years."

"And so you see, Hermione, I came here today, to finally tell you. My feelings are strong and real. I've watched you, for a long, long time. I know things about you maybe you even don't. Like how you scrunch your nose when you read, or the way you roll your eyes when you're irritated. When you beam because a teacher praises you. I know all of it. And it will never be mine, because I am no one to you. Even now, I know that. But I suppose I would rather die upon the hand that I know so well, rather than live in emptiness. That is why I came here today."

Hermione was numb with horror.

"You're mad. Completely mad," was all she could think to answer.

"They do call it 'madly in love' for a reason, I believe."

She racked her brains trying to remember every person who had asked her out, but of course it was impossible and Polyjuice Theo knew it, or he wouldn't have told her anything.

The fact that she'd seen him, but still had no idea who he was made her want to throw up. He had always been there, hidden in plain sight.

"Why did you sign it as Draco Malfoy?"

"Ahh. I'm quite embarrassed to say I didn't want my name discovered in such a book. Pride, I suppose. I wrote in the name of someone I didn't care much for. He is the most hated student in the school, after all."

Hermione paused.

Had they been wrong? Was the love poisoner and this fanatic two separate people? It was possible...

Something in Hermione's gut said otherwise. He was too composed. Too careful in the way he spoke.

He had written Draco's name in that book because he knew Draco had foiled his plan. The problem was how to prove it.

How long had they been talking? There couldn't be much time left until the Polyjuice wore off. If she could just see his real face-

"I think I should be off now. For what it's worth, I'm sorry Hermione. I'm sorry I had to tell you in this way. I just selfishly needed you to know."

"You won't get away with this!" Hermione cried out impulsively.

He looked at her with an infuriating amount of pity.

"I really think it's best that I do. Would you risk your little friend getting in trouble? I must say, your credibility has taken quite a hit since you've thrown in with Malfoy. How would it look if he were implicated in attacking a poor, innocent, lovesick student? Because that is what I am and it's all I've claimed to be. Pining isn't a crime, Hermione. However, torturing and murdering Muggles is. If he gets caught in any bad business, he isn't simply facing expulsion, is he? His criminal case will be reopened. I wonder, do you think they would let Malfoy off a second time? I hear there are quite a few members of the Wizengamot who wanted both of them in Azkaban..."

"Who says he would get in trouble? *I'm* the one who will bring you down!" Hermione shouted.

Theo chuckled.

"Nice try, Hermione. We both know he's hidden in a broom cupboard, waiting to pounce. You really think I wouldn't be apprehensive of you meeting me, and not have at least spied on you

to make sure you were alone?"

Hermione was shaking.

He had been careful with his words. He knew he had been walking into an ambush and he'd come prepared.

She had been so close to catching him. *So* close.

But he knew her. Knew she wouldn't risk Draco.

"This is goodbye, Hermione. I truly wish the best for you. Thank you for taking the time to hear me out. Perhaps one day we will all find our heaven."

He walked towards the door at an easy pace.

He'd played them all like a fiddle and would disappear back into the shadows.

His hand was on the doorknob.

"I think you're right!" Hermione burst out.

He turned slightly. She stared at him, squaring her shoulders. She would not show him any weakness.

"I always thought love potions were rubbish. That they should be illegal," she continued, "but perhaps you're right that they can be useful."

He faced her. She saw something flicker in his eyes. Hope?

"I don't think I would have ever given two thoughts to Draco Malfoy. But thanks to that love potion in the potions lab, I got to know him enough to fall in love with him. So maybe they do work sometimes after all."

If Hermione had any lingering doubts about False Theo's guilt, the expression on his face resolved all of them.

His mouth turned downward in a grimace. His brow wrinkled while his eyes widened in disbelief.

"You love..."

"I'm in love with Draco Malfoy."

It was immensely satisfying to watch False Theo fall apart. She savoured this small victory.

"No!"

He'd seen her date other people. Made peace with the thought that she didn't love him. That she would never love him.

But knowing he'd orchestrated her falling in love with someone else- and not just anyone else; the most hated person at Hogwarts- well, it would be an unbearable notion for anyone.

Perhaps he thought it could've been him in Draco's place.

Let him think that , Hermione thought nastily.

She hoped he would suffer long and hard over it.

She took his moment of shock to get the upper hand on him.

Her Stupify whizzed out, exploding above False Theo's head and splintering the door frame.

With a sob, he disappeared.

She rushed out into the hallway just in time to see Draco sprint past.

Something exploded in the hallway, causing a windshaft of dust to pelt Hermione's way.

She flung herself to the side, getting a shield spell up just in time, as bricks burst against it.

Hermione hastily waved her arm, dispelling the dust as she pelted through it.

She could hear yelling and the sounds of multiple feet stomping ground.

Luna and Tracey must have gone the other way to try and cut off any other exits like they had planned.

Hermione swerved a corner into a wide, torchlit hall.

She spotted the back of Draco's blond head in the distance, gaining on a figure whose cloak was flapping about.

There was another explosion and a fresh wave of debris showered her.

Then, suddenly, a jet of green light shot through the smoke.

"No!" Someone shouted.

She felt a hand on her arm tug her out of the way as the green light sailed over her head.

It was Theo.

She screamed in surprise and wrenched her arm away.

"Granger, it's me this time! The real Theo! I swear!"

"What-was-the-last-essay-you-corrected?" Hermione shot out so rapidly that it could have all been one word.

"Draught of Living Death Antidote!"

Hermione exhaled loudly.

She could have cried in relief.

"What a sodding piece of trash!" Theo raged "He took my hair that b-"

"Hermione!"

Draco burst through a cloud of dust. His hands were gripping her shoulders.

"Are you hurt? Did he get you?"

"I'm fine, Draco, really! Theo got me out of the way just in time!"

Draco shot Theo a scathing look that made Theo raise both hands.

"It's him, the real him, don't worry," Hermione said quickly, "but what about- did you catch them? Did Luna and Tracey..."

Hermione trailed off at Draco's sour look.

No. False Theo had managed to get away. Five on one and they'd all somehow failed.

"Don't blame you mate. That was an Unforgivable if I've ever seen one. I would've come back too."

Theo was referring to the jet of green light that had narrowly missed Hermione.

Draco had abandoned the chase to make sure Hermione was okay.

"Fuck!" Draco cursed and let go of Hermione's shoulders.

"Maybe we can still catch him! He was just ahead."

"He's gone," Draco said roughly, "I was barely on his tail, but he'll have had his choice of five different corridors to choose from and by the time we do catch up, his Polyjuice will have worn off and he'll have blended in with the student body. We had one opportunity and we let it go."

Draco made a sound of frustration and spun around, kicking a brick as he did.

"We'll get him next time," Hermione said firmly, "We know a bit more now and if we put our heads together maybe we can-"

"We *had* him! We had the bastard and we-"

"We didn't know he would be using Unforgivables! Who would even think it would go this far? Where could he have learned it?"

"Or she," Theo added, "and I don't know if you recall exactly, but those spells were on the curriculum last year. Most students probably know them by now."

"So you think it's someone who was at school last year?"

"Unforgivables just need to be meant, but any twit can pick up a book and figure it out if they're minded enough," Draco growled, "During war times, anything goes if it means survival. Anyone desperate enough could have practiced them, especially if they were in a tight spot with Death Eaters."

"So it could be a returning student or a Voldemort defector or someone ruthless who really needed to protect themselves during the war-"

"So pretty much anyone," Theo finished.

"Brilliant," Draco said flatly, "And I just let him trot off-"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist. They used a dodgy spell on purpose. They wanted to manipulate you. They knew you'd turn back for Granger."

"If it'd hit her..."

"But it didn't," Hermione replied, "It was probably even a feint, an Imperio. Just bad enough to make you backtrack but not to the point where it would do serious damage- eek!"

Hermione was yanked against Draco's chest, the air knocked out of her. He held her tightly, his fingers digging into her back. Uncomfortable though it was, Hermione couldn't help feeling grateful to have him close.

"It's okay, Draco-"

"There you are," a dreamy voice piped up.

Luna and Tracey jogged up to them.

"Are you okay? We heard noises so we came to see what happened!"

Tracey had tears in her eyes.

Hermione's voice came out muffled since Draco was still crushing her to her chest.

"Did you see me run by? That is to say, not *me* , me, but the other me?" Theo asked.

Tracey shook her head.

"No, he must've taken another route. Oh but- but- how *awful* , Hermione! We heard everything through the Galleon! Should we tell McGonagall?"

"How sweet. The two of you really make a lovely couple," Luna piped up, while Tracey wiped her eyes.

Hermione disengaged herself from Draco's grip. He reluctantly let her go. He looked tense.

"We were *so* close...that nutter took my *hair* ," Theo grumbled again, feeling around the back of his head.

It was such a relief to see Theo acting like himself again.

"We're sorry, Hermione, we didn't catch them," Luna said, petting a still distraught Tracey on the head.

"Don't be sorry!" Hermione replied vehemently, "We did the best we could. We'll get them another way. We lured them out once and we can do it again!"

Hermione felt her chest swell.

She'd felt so lost without Harry and Ron at the beginning.

But she'd done all right in the end.

She had friends who would stick up for her. A group of people who accepted her for who she was and who she was *with* .

They all knew she loved Draco and they were all still here for her.

So they didn't catch the love poisoner this time.

Hermione wouldn't give up just yet.

She wasn't alone, afterall.

//

Hermione was still reeling from coming face to face with her stalker.

She spent the night thinking things over, revisiting everything the poisoner had said, in her mind.

She tried again and again to remember anyone suspicious who might've come up to her. But try as she might, so many faces were a blur, and she was certain she'd forgotten a good third of them, if not more.

What had she learned?

The poisoner had mentioned the Yule Ball, so it was someone who had been at least in first year when she had been in fourth. Though they had alluded to knowing her before then. Were they three years younger? Two? In her year?

She shuddered at the thought that it might be someone she knew, maybe even someone close to her.

The poisoner was also apparently obsessed with Shakespeare. Did that make them Muggleborn? Potentially but not necessarily.

She wracked her brains but only came up with even more questions and less answers.

There was one thing that she could surmise though.

She didn't think the poisoner was Slytherin.

It was just a hunch afterall, but it was something fake Theo had said.

Death was banging on our doors and the fate of the Wizarding World was fragile.

That didn't sound like something a Voldemort enthusiast would say and Slytherin had been riddled- pun most certainly not intended- with Voldemort enthusiasts.

Death was banging on our doors- Death? Or Death Eaters?

Obviously there was no proof, but Hermione couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't up against the usual suspects this time.

On a lighter note, Hermione also considered her current social situation with her peers and how she was going to move forward with her now semi-official boyfriend.

She'd made a compromise in her head about her public relationship with Draco.

She knew he was doing it for her. He wasn't comfortable with it, but he understood that keeping it a secret weighed on her.

That being said, everyone in her close inner circle now knew about it. Technically even Ginny knew. Now that the secret was out amongst her friends, did she really need to shout it from the towers?

She wouldn't hide her love for Draco, but for his sake, she wouldn't flaunt it either.

She'd decided instead that needed a project to keep her mind off all the stress and confusion of recent events. Her homework was all finished, so that wouldn't do.

Tackling the duel wards with Padma seemed like the best, productive passtime.

Blaise, Theo, Draco and Neville had all been very open to her suggestions and improvements to the barriers. She'd done enough research that she felt confident in her proposals. The only person left to convince was Padma Patil.

Hermione hoped to catch Padma before Transfiguration for a quick word, though in the end, she spotted her in a corridor by the courtyard, talking with Susan. She'd brought all her notes, since it was easier than explaining everything and she figured they could look over them together.

As she approached she caught the end of one of their sentences.

"-I'd heard but honestly, I don't really care what she wants."

"Blaise mentioned it could be good for the duelling arena."

"Of *course* , but does she always need to butt in with a better solution? Does she think she's smarter than everyone?"

"Granger does come across that way, doesn't she?"

Hermione backed up behind a column. They were gossiping about *her* !

Naturally she eavesdropped.

"She almost can't help herself! I bet saving the world has gone to her head some. Did you hear her, Ron and Harry each got an Order of Merlin First Class hand-delivered by Shackbolt? She's probably an even more unbearable Know-It-All now."

"Well, you don't have to take her advice if you don't want to. I suppose just let her say her piece and that's that."

"Those are *my* wards. Where does she get off on suddenly wanting to change them? Plus, she went behind my back and talked to all the lads about it first, so now I look like a right tosser if I don't go along with it."

"You *won't* look like a tosser."

"She's only doing this for her precious Nott, she doesn't give a damn about the duels themselves. The gall! She came to *one* duel with her Death Eater pals, and all of a sudden she thinks she knows how to run everything."

"Don't let it get to you, Pads. She's not worth getting all out of sorts over."

"Did you see the way she follows Nott everywhere? D'you think Potter and Weasley know? I'd bet they'd be fuming to know she turned on them so fast, with the very people they fought against. She's a filthy hypocrite if you ask me."

"No one was asking you," Hermiome fumed, stomping out from behind the column. She'd heard more than enough.

Padma whipped around in shock and had the grace to look mildly sheepish. Hermione couldn't care less.

"Here, read them or chuck them in the bin for all I care."

She shoved her notes into Padma's arms.

"And for your information," Hermione added, unable to stop herself, "I do care about the duels. Neville told me all about them and he convinced me it's a wonderful idea. But by all means, ignore my expertise to suit your bloody ego! I don't care!"

"Oh *please* , who're you trying to talk to about ego?" Padma retorted loudly. "You have the biggest ego of the lot! Prancing about with people who tried to kill us a year ago! The same people who killed Lavender!"

"They're not at all the same and you know it!"

"Spare me, traitor! Go toddle after Nott, like you seem so eager to do!"

They were both on the cusp of shouting. Some students paused in their tracks to watch, sniggering.

Hermione sneered at Padma.

"At least I'm not blinded by my principles! Don't pretend you haven't been following Nott around either!"

" *I beg your pardon ?*"

"He told us you visited him in the Hospital Wing. Several times actually! Awfully generous of you, considering he's so supposedly evil!"

"I-"

Padma scrunched Hermione's papers in her fists.

"I was there on duel business!"

Padma turned to Susan. Susan pretended to observe the brick path, clearly not wanting to be involved, but still curious about the drama.

Padma huffed and turned back to Hermione.

"I'm not like you! I won't betray my friends and family! You can have Nott!"

"Oh for Pete's sake, I'm not interested in Nott like that!"

"Oh, of course! You just happen to show up at his duel and freak out when he gets attacked!"

"I'm not-"

"She isn't with Nott," a cold voice said behind Hermione.

Hermione knew that voice. The only voice that could make her heart stop. She didn't dare look to see who it was because it couldn't be. It couldn't-

"She's with me."

Hermione felt light-headed. Was this actually happening? Was she dreaming?

A few onlookers gasped. Padma looked like she'd just seen a Basilisk. Susan's mouth was open. Neither girl said a word.

Hermione felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked down. An emerald ring glimmered up at her.

She slowly raised her gaze.

Draco's eyes captured hers.

His face was far too close. Padma and Susan were still gaping like fish out of water.

He tilted her chin up.

His face was getting closer. Everyone was watching.

He softly kissed her, there, in the corridor, for all eyes to see.

Her knees buckled.

Of course he caught her. He was always there to catch her.

"Shall we head off?" He asked quietly, as if it were only the two of them.

All she could do was nod. He pulled her up and offered her his arm. She took it mechanically and followed, in a daze. Her face felt like it was burning.

She didn't even offer one last glance to Padma and Susan. A couple of people backed away from them bewilderedly, letting Draco and Hermione pass.

"What's your next class? I'll walk you," Draco suggested.

It felt so good to hold onto him. Hermione didn't even notice the dozens of students gaping as they walked down the hall.

She's with me.

Hermione replayed the words in her mind, feeling both giddy and uncomprehending.

It took Hermione a beat to come down from her shock.

"What was that about? I thought you wanted us to stay secret?" Hermione burst out.

"I agreed to let it out in the open, didn't I?" he drawled awfully casually, considering he just revealed their union to the whole school.

"Yes, well, I didn't expect it to happen so suddenly!"

Draco slightly pursed his lips.

"I don't fancy people gossiping about you and other blokes. They may as well gossip about the truth."

"You came to my defence because you were *jealous* ?"

Draco looked down at her, his gaze on fire.

"You're *mine* , Hermione."

Her knees wobbled and he had to clutch her arm firmly so she didn't collapse a second time.

"You're not taking me to class," she said softly.

"Oh?"

"You're going to take me to the nearest empty room to fuck me silly,"

His expression immediately darkened.

Incidentally, the nearest empty room turned out to be an old, abandoned pantry.

Draco sat Hermione up on a barrel and fucked her silly, just like she'd asked.

It was exhilarating and worth being late to Transfigurations.

It took until supper for word to properly spread.

When she, Draco and Theo went to the Great Hall to nick some roast, everyone was pointing and muttering.

They quickly escaped to their usual abandoned classroom, followed by Luna and Tracey, where they all ate and chatted and laughed at the look on some faces.

It stopped being funny the following day.

A second year she'd never met came up to her crying, yelling about how she'd wanted to be just like Hermione and had looked up to her, and how *could* Hermione throw her future away for someone like Malfoy? Didn't she know what he'd *done* ?

A couple of Ravenclaws roughly shoved her as she was exiting a class.

A group of Hufflepuffs openly pointed at her, making lewd gestures.

Gryffindors ignored her, as if they'd all sealed some sort of pact to pretend she didn't exist.

Everyone had whispered about her before, but now, they didn't even bother to lower their voices. She heard them call her all the names under the sun, Malfoy's slag being one of the tamer options.

Hermione knew this was the path she'd chosen. She knew it was going to be hard.

And it was.

How quickly they were willing to turn on her. She'd been a heroine to them at the start of term. Now, they elicited such pleasure in tearing her down.

They thought they knew her, because she was in the public eye. But no one truly knew her. No one except her friends, the people whom she trusted, who still studied and ate and walked with her.

And none of them judged her. In fact, all of them were happy for her.

Well, almost all of them.

"Granger!"

Hermione jumped, on her way to supper.

She fished her wand out, pointing it straight at Daphne Greengrass.

Daphne didn't seem to notice.

"You think you're so smart, don't you? You find him interesting? A new, fun little project? Is converting Malfoy into a House Elf-loving, soft weakling *amusing* to you?"

"Don't come closer or I'll stun you!"

"Ha! As if I'd want to get near your filth! He's with Astoria! The contracts are going to be signed and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"He doesn't believe in that anymore!"

"I see. So you're going to brainwash him against his family, his friends and his values! You want him all to yourself! Does it get your knickers wet, imagining flouncing about in his big, rich Mansion? You're nothing but a *leech* !"

Hermione could feel tears of anger welling in her eyes, but she choked them back. She'd be damned if Daphne Greengrass was going to see her cry.

"I don't care what you think! Draco can decide what he wants for himself!"

"Draco is vulnerable! He's been through hell! He needs someone from his circle! He needs to be looked after, and know that his estate is in good hands. Someone he can trust! You-!"

Daphne took a menacing step towards Hermione. Hermione jerked her wand up, but Daphne didn't need physical violence. She was set on using her words to cut.

"You will never make him happy! You're just an ugly Mudblood who happened to be there when he was at his lowest! He'll come to his senses and throw you out like the trash you are! Mark my words, you will not take Astoria away from him!"

She stormed off, leaving Hermione alone with her wand still up.

The word 'Mudblood' seemed to strike her physically. She hadn't heard it since the war. She could almost feel the letters on her scar tingle and Hermione had to make a conscious effort to push all her bad memories at bay.

//

That evening, Draco, Theo, Luna and Tracey met in the dungeons and trained for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

It was the first time Hermione got to see Draco in action.

He was glorious. He beat everyone easily and only Theo managed to get him to break a sweat.

She was able to forget about her shite day as she focused on getting her Expelliarmus out as quickly as possible.

They turned it into a game, sneaking and running around the dungeon rooms, trying to catch each other off guard.

It felt so good to laugh.

She didn't mention Daphne to anyone.

She knew Draco didn't want to see her upset over this. She knew how much pain it brought him, when she suffered because of their relationship.

She focused on being present with them all, on appreciating that, despite everything, she had them to cheer her up.

//

The next day, the Howlers started coming in.

Hermione didn't spend too much time in the Great Hall anymore, so her post was usually delivered to her dormitory bed.

She spent the morning listening to some witch named Cornetta screech about how Hermione was horrible for joining the Death Eaters while the other girls in the dorm snickered at her. Ginny left without a word.

Joining the Death Eaters? What on earth?

It was at breakfast in their classroom haunt that Theo showed her the copy of Witch Weekly. An old photo of hers was headlining the cover along with a ragged-looking picture of Draco at his trial.

Hermione Granger : Dating a Death Eater?

Naturally it was written by Rita Skeeter and the article was as scathing and exaggerated as Hermione had ever known Rita to be. No doubt Rita still relished knocking Hermione down a peg.

"How is this... *news* ? How did she even find out so soon?"

"People talk, write home to their folks, word gets around fast," Theo answered lightly.

Draco barely touched his bacon. He was expressionless but Hermione knew he probably wasn't taking this too well.

"It's pathetic that they have nothing better to talk about. It'll all die down soon enough anyway," Hermione said confidently.

Theo nodded approvingly though Draco remained silent.

Throughout the day, more copies of Witch Weekly were spotted circulating around.

Unease was rising.

The only consolation that day was when Neville joined them for another study session. Blaise was also present, though Daphne predictably was not.

"So you don't think I've gone off my rocker?" Hermione whispered to Neville as he sat next to her.

Neville gave Draco a glance.

"No. I know you, Hermione. You wouldn't waste your time with anyone who doesn't value you."

She made a note to buy Neville the biggest basket of plants at their next Hogsmeade visit.

Neville reported a record amount of duels scheduled in the upcoming weeks. Theo was going to be in two.

"Is that safe?" Tracey asked nervously.

Theo shrugged.

The following day, Hermione started receiving letters from familiar names.

Molly's letter was probably the most heartbreaking.

It asked if she was all right, if she needed any help. It suggested many other Weasley relatives and family friends who had sons about Hermione's age. It implored her to think of her future, her well-being.

Hermione tossed the letter in the fire.

She hadn't heard from either Harry, nor Ron.

//

Hermione moved around the hallways less and less by herself.

She noticed people hulking around corners, leering at her, twirling their wands menacingly in their hands.

She tried not to pay them any mind.

Her paranoia was growing.

Her friends could sense it, too. Draco accompanied her as much as he could, usually with a combination of Theo, Luna, Tracey and Neville.

As much as she appreciated her friends' protection it was only a matter of time before she'd be caught alone.

The time came in the girl's washroom.

As she was rinsing her hands, a group of girls burst through the doors and stopped short when they saw her.

"Well, well, well, look who it is. Death Eater-fucker herself."

Hermione could feel her hands shake as she turned off the faucet and began to reach for her wand.

"Hold her down!"

They were four to one. Hermione didn't have a chance.

Three of them pinned her against the sink while another tossed her wand under a bathroom stall.

"Stop! Stop it! I haven't done anything to y-"

" *Silencio* !"

Hermione's screams and pleads fell silent. Her pupils twitched as she glanced around at each of her attackers.

One of the girls, a mean-looking brown haired one, stepped forward.

"We thought you were so brave and brilliant, taking on You-Know-Who. But all it took was one Death Eater cock to convince you otherwise. You're one of them now. No, you're *worse* . Because people actually believed in you. Hold her down."

Hermione tried to yell, scream for help. Tears were silently trickling down her cheeks.

The girl slashed her wand down and Hermione felt like someone had just punched her in the gut. She sagged while the other girls laughed.

Two more blows landed, another to the stomach and one across her face. She shut her eyes. She didn't want to know when they were coming. She just wanted it to be over.

Suddenly she was silently laughing. Laughing as a hundred little fingers roved over her body.

A tickling jinx!

It was pure torment, being forced to laugh as they struck her with magic. She writhed, her body collapsing to the floor. She took her knees in her arms, silently sobbing and laughing, wishing it would stop. She could almost hear Bellatrix cackling in her head, the smell of singed flesh, silently screaming, screaming-

"What is going on?" Someone yelled.

The horrible tickling finally stopped. Hermione was wheezing. She could barely catch her breath. Her voice sounded broken and far too loud.

"McGonagall is coming. You lot were making so much noise, someone alerted her."

"Whatever. We're done here."

Hermione barely registered what was happening. The sounds of footsteps. A door closing.

Then, careful hands were on her. Rubbing her back.

"Shhhhh, shh, it's fine, they're gone,"

Hermione sobbed until there was nothing left. Then, she just lay there.

After another moment, the hands grasped her shoulders, bringing her to a sitting position.

"Here."

A glass of water was conjured and offered to her.

Hermione took it, though her hand shook hard. She went to raise it to her lips but something stopped her.

"No!"

She threw it across the room and it shattered. She broke into a fresh wave of sobs.

"C-can't drink it...C-can't drink anything...P-poison..."

"Oh please. We have our differences, certainly, but I wouldn't *poison* you."

Hermione took deep, gasping breaths until she had control over herself.

Padma offered her a tissue and her wand back.

"Is McGonagall r-really coming?"

"No. I only said that so they'd scarper."

"Th-thanks."

Hermione blew her nose loudly.

"I'm f-fine now. You don't have to stay here."

Padma sighed.

"No one deserves what just happened. Those girls are clearly looking for blood and you're just an easy target. I will say that I told you so, though. This is what happens when you hang around Death Eater scum."

"D-Draco isn't the problem. It's everyone else!"

"It's a problem because no one wants to see the people they love and admire throw in with anyone who's hurt them. It just so happens Malfoy has hurt this entire school and everyone knows the both of you. You really know how to pick them. You had to go for the one bloke here who's got the brand and who betrayed Hogwarts."

"He makes me happy. Since I've been back, he's made everything better. I thought if we were public, maybe...Maybe everyone could eventually see that too."

"You're lying to yourself. The cuts run too deep. Do yourself a favour and dump him. You'll get all your friends and admirers back. How would you feel if you found out your best friend started dating someone who used to hang around crazies who tortured people you loved? Who killed people you loved?"

Hermione inhaled through her nose, trying to regain her sense of self.

"You're wrong. If this has taught me anything, it's that people who matter will be willing to listen and see for themselves. Anyone who's ever said a bad thing about Draco hasn't taken

the time to get to know who he is now. It's all people on the outside looking in, judging, wanting reasons to get out their anger, their hurt. I used to be angry and hurt and scared. I still am. But Draco makes it better. I'm not giving him up. He's important to me."

Padma was quiet, tugging at a loose thread on her skirt.

"You know," Hermione began tentatively, "Nott is a good person. He's become one of my closest friends here. Like a brother almost. I think you'd both get along."

"Why does he do it?" Padma suddenly asked.

"Do what?"

Padma looked up. She looked stricken.

"I've been part of the duelling arena since the beginning. He's duelled the most out of anyone by far. Thirty-six times to be exact and won all of them. Why? He's never gloated. Never asked for anything. He never seems to take pleasure out of any of it. He doesn't have to accept them; most people don't. So why does he do it?"

"Well..."

Hermione thought for a moment.

"He's never told me specifically, so you'd have to ask him yourself to get his point of view, but I've speculated about it. I have a feeling it's the only way he knows how to atone for his father."

"Atone?"

"Nott hates his father. Wants him to rot in Azkaban actually - his words. He knows the pain his father has caused. Nott can't offer apologies - they would only seem empty and disingenuous. I think the only way he can make up for any of it, is to give people the chance to vent their frustrations on him. That's what the arena is all about, isn't it?"

"But he...he never loses..."

"Why would he? Letting people win would be an insult to their pain and an insult to duelling. He offers people the chance to get their anger out. If they can't beat him, at least they've done something. Fighting is better than sitting around feeling powerless. Let me ask you this: has Nott ever been challenged by the same person twice?"

"No..."

"People get closure. They may still hate him, but they also respect him. They learn to accept that, in life, there are some things you cannot change. All you can do is try your best."

"I didn't want to respect him. When he showed up the first time, I wanted him to lose. And the second, and third time. But he kept coming back and the more he won, the less I hated him. There was something about him...some kind of quiet acceptance. He never seemed like he really chose to duel, even if he agreed to every challenge. He had an obligation to. He was fulfilling some sort of duty. One day I realised I... admired him. Maybe more than that."

Padma sniffled, taking a moment before continuing.

"My sister is everything to me. When she's happy, I'm happy. When she's sad, I'm sad. When Lavender died- no, was murdered - Parvati was devastated. She was out of sorts for so long and so was I. Nott and Malfoy- they were on the side that did that. They allowed people like Lavender to be killed. How could I even consider someone who- that is to say, it would reopen old wounds all over again. Parvati would be so angry with me if she knew- knew what I was feeling..."

A tear streaked down Padma's face.

"I'm sorry I said those things about you. The reality is, I envy you. It's very resilient of you, to stand by Malfoy despite how hard it's been. I just- I can't do that. I can't risk losing my sister. Whatever these feelings I'm having for Nott need to be squashed, because there's no way I could handle hurting Parvati."

Hermione rested her hand on Padma's arm.

"Nott didn't kill Lavender," Hermione said softly, "Greyback did. He was a real monster. Nott is as much a victim as we were. He was forced into something he hated and trapped in the thick of it. As for your sister, I'm sure above all else, she wants you to be happy, just like how you want her to be happy."

Padma hastily swiped away at another tear.

"I read the notes on the wards you gave me. I think they're solid ideas. I'm going to work on integrating them as soon as possible. I'd like you to help me, if you still want to."

Hermione beamed. Padma smiled back.

"Of course I still want to! Thank you, Padma. For helping me and for...for talking to me. It really means a lot."

"Let me heal that bruise on your face. I'm going to report those girls. I don't know their names but I can give my memory to McGonagall for her Pensieve and she'll probably have no trouble catching them."

That evening, Hermione joined Draco in their Room home.

He looked tired. She knew she did as well.

They lay on the bed and held each other while he stroked her hair.

"I know it's been hard for you," he murmured. He sounded neutral, but she knew his Occlumency tricks only too well now. She knew it was eating him up inside.

"It has, I'm not going to lie. But there's been some...surprisingly nice outcomes. I feel closer than ever to the people who've stuck by me. I feel fortunate to have such good friends. I would've never met Nott, nor Blaise if it wasn't for you. I've also realised that what we have- how I feel about you- it's strong isn't it?"

"I recall you did mention we were soulmates,"

Draco teased, but she sensed his contentment.

"I said that mostly to make the poisoner angry. But if I were to believe in soulmates, I feel certain you would be mine. We made it through. Every challenge, every hurdle, we communicated and figured things out and I love you more now than I ever did."

"I didn't dare hope I would ever find someone like you. I didn't think I could ever be happy again nor deserved to be. And then you came along and, despite how much I hated myself, I wanted you. I wanted you more than I wanted to punish myself. You made me want to wake up each day. You made me want to be the best person I could be. I want you forever, Hermione. I love you more than anything."

Hermione felt her eyes well with tears.

Their lives hadn't even really begun, yet she couldn't wait to spend hers with Draco.

She kissed him and he kissed her and magic seemed to crackle in the air.

Poison

When Hermione returned to her dorm to grab a few books, she'd noticed the owls had delivered her post.

There were her usual howlers from some nosy people she'd never met.

There were also two letters.

The first was from *Harry* .

She ripped it open. Her eyes sped across the page. By the time she was done, tears were welling in her eyes.

Hermione,

I hope you're doing okay. I'm doing all right on my end. Training is going well. I've been assigned to Proudfoot on my first few cases recently. The work is hard, but very rewarding.

I heard the news. It was a bit of a shock, but I suppose I'm not entirely surprised after what we discussed at Christmas. I won't pretend I understand it, but I hope he treats you well. I still have his old wand if he wants it back.

Ron is Ron. Had a bit of a tantrum, but I think he'll come around eventually. He just needs time. Same for Ginny.

I think it's just hard for people to accept. Everyone is still healing.

I trust you. I'm always here if you need anything. Keep your head up. If anyone can get through this, it's you.

Cheers,

Harry

PS: Crookshanks is doing well. Molly said he caught a gnome the other day. I think he misses you too, though.

Oh, Harry.

Hermione laughed as she re-read his letter two more times.

He didn't hate her!

His words of encouragement seemed to reach deep within her. He didn't hate her and he wanted things to work out.

Ron's displeasure was to be expected. She didn't know how things would be if Draco met Harry and Ron. There was so much history there. Harry mentioned Draco's old wand though- which meant Harry was open to it! That exceeded the best possible scenario she could hope for.

She'd been worried about leaving Crookshanks at the Burrow but, ultimately, frolicking in the Weasley's enormous garden seemed like a better option than being stuck in the castle dorms.

She couldn't wait to see him. She couldn't wait to see them all.

She immediately recognized the writing on the second envelope and her heart stopped.

It was from her parents. Her father, to be precise.

This one she opened tentatively, afraid of what she might see. Were they officially disowning her? Her hands trembled as she read.

Dear Hermione,

I hope school is going well and that you're flourishing there, as you always have.

Your mother and I have talked and we both agree we miss you very much. We would love for you to come home for the summer holidays, if that is something you would like to do.

We received a visit yesterday, from your friend, Harry Potter. He was very kind. He talked about you very highly.

He told us about the war, about what you'd done. He said he hoped it would help us understand a little bit more. He even brought a few newspaper clippings. We didn't know the Minister of Magic had given you an award!

We want to tell you how very proud we are of you. You've accomplished so much and saved many, many lives from what we could tell. Harry told us that he wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for you. We hope you can tell us more of what happened to you last year, when you feel more comfortable sharing.

We are terribly sorry for taking so long to come to terms with what happened. We understand why you did it. We were just frightened. But we should have taken more time to hear you out. To understand why you did what needed to be done.

Life is too short and we almost lost you. We don't want to lose you again. We love you very, very much, with all our hearts.

We hope to hear from you soon,

Lots of love,

Dad and Mum

She barely managed to read the end as tears were heavily blurring her vision.

Harry had gone to them and told them probably much of what she could never bring herself to talk about. He knew she would probably need all the support she could get right now. Her heart was ready to burst for him. He truly was and will always be a brother to her.

Hermione felt like she could combust with happiness.

Her parents loved her and they wanted her back! Everything felt too good to be true.

It was going to be okay.

She felt more like herself than she did in ages. Like Hermione before the war.

She wanted to learn, to be with Draco, to visit her friends. She wanted to travel, to try new things, to read and read and read until she'd read every book in the world!

Before, she wanted to hide, to be left alone. Now, she wanted to take a bite out of life, savour every little thing!

She sat on her bed and called Draco on her TeleGalleon, bouncing excitedly, crying tears of happiness.

She told him everything and he was ecstatic for her (though he went a little quiet when Hermione mentioned Harry and the wand). They made plans to celebrate later.

She hung up, feeling on top of the world.

She summoned a quill and parchment and began writing her replies straight away, buzzing with joy.

//

Things started looking up for Hermione in the following weeks.

She received more hate mail, but amongst that were a few gems.

Percy wrote to her, to tell her to stay strong and that he and Harry were vouching for her. Percy knew a thing or two of how one could end up on the wrong side of things. He also knew how much second chances could mean to someone and he'd be a hypocrite not to give anyone the opportunity to redeem themselves.

He also mentioned that he and Stewart Marchbanks, one of his Ministry co-workers that he had met at a work function, were now officially together. He'd brought Stewart round to meet the family and the reception had been delightful. He wrote that the outpouring of support had made him rather emotional and thanked Hermione for being his confidante in the early stages of his identity discovery. Without her support, he might not have had the courage to take the plunge.

Homework was beginning to pile on faster with the upcoming N.E.W.T. exams.

Their study group was expanding.

To everyone's astonishment, Padma showed up one day, with Ernie, Susan and Terry Boot in tow. Their group had now taken over two large tables in the library.

Daphne had also decided to finally rejoin, though she shot Hermione a healthy amount of glares from across the table.

"Her grades were falling, so she had no choice but to come back. Though I think she missed it as well," Blaise whispered to Hermione, with a wink.

They practised Defence in the duelling arena down in the dungeons.

Hermione noticed Theo giving Padma some pointers and adjusting her wand arm with his hand. It was impossible to miss Padma's bright blush, even from across the room.

She watched as Daphne and Ernie argued over the proper duel etiquette.

She spotted Susan, Blaise and Neville practising their forms and learning from each other.

It was truly a wonderful thing, to see how they'd all come together. It reminded her warmly of when they had built Dumbledore's Army, but this time without a mad old toad threatening to end them.

Suddenly, a spell hit her thigh and her legs began to dance, dragging her around in circles.

"Draco!"

"Tarantallegra is an easy dodge, Hermione. You weren't paying attention. Your reflexes are still slow."

He waved his wand and her legs stopped flailing, crumpling underneath her.

She huffed in frustration, rubbing her bottom where she'd fallen.

"I wasn't ready!"

"Most of the time, no one ever is when it comes to defence. The trick is staying alert."

Draco extended a hand and helped Hermione to her feet. She brushed off her robes, trying not to look too sullen.

"I don't understand why it's so hard!"

The truth was, she was frustrated at how slow her progress was. She was used to excelling at everything she did. Studying and wandwork and creative problem-solving were things she naturally liked, things she was good at. She enjoyed following instructions, following a method. Taking her time.

Moving and jabbing with her wand at lightning speed while dodging jinxes was *not* something she enjoyed. Even though she'd had plenty of practice in the past, she still had a lot of difficulty aiming anything true at Draco.

"You'll get it with time. You've made great progress actually."

"Progress? I haven't been able to hit you once!"

"Yes, well, that's because I'm the best."

She glared at his swagger.

Draco smirked.

"Hermione, it's normal you can't hit me yet, I've practised for much longer than you. You only become the best by training with the best. You're better than you think."

She sighed and reluctantly resumed her duel stance.

"Excellent," Draco grinned, mirroring her.

He proceeded to out-duel her another six times.

//

Life sorted itself into a routine.

She'd go to classes, study in the library, practise Defence and often fall asleep exhausted.

Her sleepovers with Draco lessened a little due to the large amounts of homework they were receiving. They still managed at least two Room nights a week and she called him at the end of every day to say goodnight.

The hate mail had dwindled down to a trickle. People still shunned her, but it was dying down considerably, especially given her friend group had expanded and all of them stuck up for her. Draco's glares singularly seemed to cow enough of the younger years at least.

After a particularly loud skirmish that involved Padma cursing a few sixth years with giant webbed feet, and Theo's quip of "Don't you think you'd be better off worrying about that great big puck of a nose of yours instead of Hermione Granger?", bullying in general died down.

The new duelling wards had been erected and Padma jubilantly relayed that they worked better than ever.

Hermione was happy. It felt like everything was finally falling into place.

One afternoon, Draco caught up with her as she was leaving Runes.

"Room, tonight?"

"I dunno Draco, I've got so many symbols to study. I don't think I'll be much fun."

"I can help you study."

He said it in a lascivious way that implied the opposite.

"I'm serious Draco, I have eighteen new words that I need to memorise and a new page to decipher!"

Draco held a hand over his heart.

"I promise. We'll study and do nothing else."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. He flashed her a sanctimonious smile.

" *Nothing* else," she wagged a finger at him.

She would have been disappointed that he'd kept to his word if she didn't actually really have quite a lot of work to do. Was it necessary to study the origins and etymology as in depth as she did? Perhaps not. But she found a better comprehension of a subject made for stronger memorisation.

She muttered the words under her breath, almost like a strange chant, trying to commit them to memory.

She glanced aside and was almost jealous to see Draco splayed out on the bed, immersed in her copy of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. He seemed awfully relaxed. Too much so.

"Don't you have work to do?" She asked waspishly from her spot at the writing desk.

"Certainly. But they've only just turned the missiles into a sperm whale and a bowl of petunias and I'm dying to know what happens next."

Hermione rolled her eyes and returned to her mumbling.

"Might go faster if I help."

She jumped so hard, her chair scraped along the floor.

Draco had snuck up on her and was now looming right behind her chair.

Before she could answer he snatched the paper up from her hand, examining her notes.

"Wha-"

"What does 'Raidho' mean"?

Hermione forgot to feel indignation in her eagerness to answer a direct question about her studies.

"'Raidho' means journey. Used for travel and dispelling obstacles. The earliest Portkeys were derived from magic generated by this Rune."

"That is correct."

She suddenly felt his fingers trail along the side of her neck. Hermione inhaled sharply.

"Draco..."

"What about 'Kenaz'?"

"'Kenaz' is- is light and conjuring. It...erm-"

It was hard to focus when Draco's hand was now undoing the front buttons of her blouse.

"We said studying!" She protested, though she gasped as he palmed her breast over her bra.

"We *are* studying. You'll be under pressure when you sit your N.E.W.T.s. So we're practising studying under *pressure* -"

He squeezed her firmly and she sucked in her breath.

"You were saying about 'Kenaz'?" He said in a low voice, his hand sneaking under her bra.

"It's used f-for light and- and illuminating torches and such. The ancestor to ...ahn! To Lumos!"

He'd pinched her nipple, causing her to squeak.

"Very good."

His mouth was near her ear. His breath was hot. She moaned softly, squirming a little in her seat.

"Tell me more about 'Isa'."

He deftly undid the rest of her shirt buttons with one hand. She looked down and could see the rise and fall of her bosom as she took deep breaths.

"Isa..."

He pulled up the hem of her skirt, bunching it until her black panties were showing.

"Focus, Hermione," he urged, though the flat of his hand travelled down her abdomen, sending shivers up her spine.

"Isa is- is ice. Being frozen. It was cast upon barriers, doors, buildings to k-keep people from going in. Anti-Muggle spells draw similar strains of magic. And also- also- ahnn! Wards!"

His fingers found the spot between her thighs. She closed them around his hand but it only increased the pressure. Her head fell back and she found she was looking right up into his face. He looked at her intently, his eyes dark. She bit her lip.

" *Please* , Draco..."

"We're not done here. You only get a reward if you can name all of these by heart."

He pulled aside her damp underwear, her pussy now exposed. She whimpered.

"'Inguz'," he prompted.

"Inguz- oh! Oh gods!"

His finger slipped inside her. She tried to rock against it. His hand stopped and she let out a cry of frustration.

"Tell me about 'Inguz' and I'll give you more."

"'Inguz' symbolises fertility! Sexuality! Intensity!" Hermione was panting, her hips wiggling with desire. Draco pushed his finger all the way inside her.

She felt something hard and metal twist against her hole. She looked down and was taken aback. He used the finger with his family heirloom ring. The shiny emerald had a sheen of her wetness. Something about that almost made something snap in Hermione's brain. She let out a sharp cry.

Draco put down the paper with her notes.

She felt him slink a hand around her throat, holding her firmly against him as he fingered her with his other hand.

In and out. In and out. She could feel the metal of the ring slide a little inside her. It felt taboo. Wrong.

Exciting .

" Yes , yes, please don't stop-"

"Tell me what 'Nauthiz' is and I won't," he murmured.

"I- It's- ahn!"

It was so hard to think. She wanted to cum so bad but she could feel Draco's finger start to slow down.

"Need!" She cried out, her hands scrabbling to cling to his arms. "Want! Yearning! Struggle! Please, Draco, please, *please, please* -"

He pressed his palm on top of her clit, while his finger immediately resumed rubbing her sweet spot. She immediately bucked upwards.

"Oh god, oh god!"

She felt him gripping her neck. He pushed another finger inside her with no trouble at all. She arched and ran her hands clumsily over her breasts, pulling the cups of her bra down and

pinching her nipples. She heard him let out a ragged exhale.

"Fuck-!"

At his expletive, she unravelled, coming hard as she furiously rubbed herself on his hand.

It took a moment for her orgasm to abate. And then:

"Get up."

Hermione had never obeyed anyone so quickly in her life.

He easily picked her up and sat her hard on the desk, her notes scattering. Hermione could hardly care. She'd just proven that she knew them all by heart, anyway.

When his cock entered her, she cried out in relief.

He fucked her so hard, the desk rattled against the wall, creating a ruckus. Hermione was too busy making a ruckus of her own to notice as she cried out wantonly with each thrust.

Her nails scratched against his back, pulling on his robes. His breath was on her neck. She squeezed him with both her legs and walls.

Draco finished inside her with a loud, satisfied groan, while she was still propped on a pile of her homework.

"You know, I still have some memorising to do for History of Magic..." Hermione said with a smile, burying her face in Draco's shoulder.

"You're the only person who's ever managed to make that prospect exciting," Draco murmured, pulling Hermione in for a kiss.

They studied late into the night.

//

The weeks seemed to weave into one another as the snow melted and the days lengthened.

The warm weather improved Hermione's mood considerably along with the fact that she finally managed to disarm Draco in their last training session.

Every day was a mix of class, studying, walks around the grounds and idle chatter with her friends.

She and Draco continued to monopolise the Room of Requirement twice a week if not more.

The only downside of being outside the common room so often was that Hermione was more prone to missing the password changes.

One evening in particular, she returned and found herself locked out.

"Sorry dear, it was switched this morning before breakfast," the Fat Lady chided.

"I've been attending this school for seven years! You must recognize me by now?"

"No password, no entry," the Fat Lady trilled, fanning her wig.

Hermione pursed her lips and sat on her haunches, hoping it wouldn't be too long before some Gryffindor came along to let her in.

She was considering her other options when she heard some talking down the hallway.

Hermione stood just as Ginny and Demelza rounded the corner.

Hermione froze.

Ginny still wasn't speaking to her. It felt like every single Gryffindor, save Neville, had taken her relationship with Draco as a personal affront. Whenever Hermione slept in her dorm, she could feel the cold shoulders of the other girls. Whenever she sat by the common room fire, she was avoided like the plague.

Hermione had hoped that Ginny would come round before the school year's end. She'd thought maybe Neville and Harry might have talked to her, convinced her somehow to give Hermione a chance to explain.

But Ginny, like most of her brothers, had inherited one of the most prominent Weasley traits: pig-headedness.

All the same, as Hermione stood awkwardly by the portrait, she thought she could see a glimmer of regret in her ex-friend's eyes.

"I don't have the password," Hermione mumbled.

Ginny opened her mouth, but before she said anything, Demelza leaned in and whispered something. Ginny's expression hardened.

"We actually weren't going in, only passing by. Sorry, Granger," Demelza said, looking not sorry at all.

She walked off, her arm looped tightly with Ginny's.

For a moment, Ginny glanced back at Hermione, but with another tug from Demelza, she shook her head and walked away without a word.

Hermione slumped dejectedly back down on the ground and rummaged around in her bag for her revision notes. She might be here awhile.

//

Hermione was starting to feel the pressure more and more as the final exam dates sped towards her.

She vibrated with nerves.

Her last exams at Hogwarts.

It was hard to believe they were finally here.

She wanted all her N.E.W.T.s terribly. It felt like the final challenge, the final hurdle to an almost perfect record in all her Hogwarts' studies.

She was able to parry and attack Draco more and more during their duels. To her surprise, she'd even managed to beat Nott a couple of times.

Her revision checklist was looking more and more complete. She spent almost every waking hour muttering under her breath and snapping at people who interrupted her train of thought.

Everyday she was grateful for her beaded back, which held every single book she could possibly need for revision.

None of her teachers seemed worried about her, which only stressed Hermione out more. Slughorn beamed with pride as all his students each turned in an impeccable Wolfsbane potion. He stated he had never had the pleasure of teaching such a gifted class, nor had he ever seen so many of his students get along.

She and Draco sniped a bit more at each other from the stress but he was also the best study partner she'd ever had. She knew he wanted a perfect report card as well, to make up for his reputation as much as possible. Every little thing helped.

The night before Charms and Transfiguration, Hermione huddled on the bed in the Room Home with Draco. They quizzed each other and practised spells to see who could do them better and wagered salacious favours.

When Draco lost to the bulk of Hermione's spellwork, he knelt between her legs and ate her out until she tugged on his hair and cried out his name and begged for him to fuck her - which, of course, he obliged.

They lay in a comfortably naked heap and Hermione snuggled into the blankets, concentrating on getting as much sleep as she could, but of course she always had trouble sleeping before exams. The more she told herself she needed sleep, the harder it was to drift.

Draco, sensing her agitation, pushed her on her side and traced his long fingers along her back.

His touch slowly calmed her. The sound of his breathing was like a lullaby. Her own breathing eased, goosebumps and shivers travelled up and down her spine and her eyes drooped shut.

"I love you," she managed to mumble before sleep took her. Right before she drifted off, she heard his soft answer:

"I love you, too."

//

Hermione tried not to tremble as she entered the Great Hall for her exam. The room was eerily silent, since all spells had to be performed non-verbally. There was only subtle murmuring and the occasional shout and grunt.

You can do this .

She steeled herself, before sitting at her assigned table.

Hermione recognized her Charms examiner from her O.W.L.s whom incidentally, Hermione realised was also a relation to Percy's new boyfriend.

Griselda Marchbanks had a few more wrinkles, but otherwise seemed unchanged with her sharp gaze and smart robes.

Professor Marchbanks gave Hermione a curt nod.

"Now then, right to it,"

With a wand wave, three boxes appeared before Hermione, one of wood, one of steel and one of gold.

"Let's see if you can unlock these magically sealed boxes," Professor Marchbanks instructed.

Hermione nervously gripped her wand.

//

The first day passed by surprisingly well.

The Transfiguration exam had been mildly chaotic, what with all the tortoises being transformed into trumpets.

Hermione had been pleased with her result considering the tortoise she'd been assigned had been rather large and baleful looking, but her shiny trumpet had made a jolly toot.

There was hardly any time to celebrate however. As soon as the exams were done, everyone escaped to the library to cram as many dates, symbols and numbers into their heads as possible for History of Magic, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy the following day.

Hermione's hair was a frizzy ball of stress. She was one of the few of her friends who had all three and she barely spent a minute away from her books.

She only took one small break when Draco offered her a cup of tea and a sandwich that night in their Room.

The next day seemed to pass in a second. It was a whirlwind of last-minute revision, sweating through the exam, feverishly writing in as much as Hermione could possibly cram into the parchment and breathing a small sigh of relief before she dashed off to do the whole process again for the next exam.

Hermione thought she'd gotten everything right. She'd written more on every single question just to be safe. But how could she really know for sure? One mispronunciation, one

miscalculation, one letter that could have been hastily written wrongly. Who could know?

She was itching to pick up her books and look up all the answers but there was no time because she needed to revise for Potions.

Potions was, by far, their hardest exam yet.

There were so many little steps and details to remember, in very specific orders.

Hermione had taken a leaf out of Draco's book and had memorised as much as she could, but even so, she felt herself sweating profusely as she carefully chopped up her Valerian roots so that they were all exactly the right thinness.

She only started breathing normally again when her Draught of the Living Death finally turned a pale lilac.

When she stepped out of the exam room, Draco, Theo and Padma were already waiting.

They had a blessedly free afternoon since none of them had taken Muggle Studies nor Divination.

Hermione had never cared much for Parvati but she was quickly learning that her twin was completely opposite. Parvati had been nosy, obnoxious and, according to Hermione, a little vapid.

Padma was quieter, more cerebral and, while she could be rather direct, Hermione appreciated Padma's honesty. She also had a subtle and sarcastic wit, which Theo especially seemed to get a kick out of.

They strolled along the lake and watched Hagrid setting up for the Care of Magical Creatures exams which would be held outdoors.

The sun dragged down as the afternoon waned. When Hermione felt they'd faffed around enough, she excused herself and Draco followed.

"I give it a week before they start snogging awkwardly in front of us," Draco commented easily, once out of earshot.

"You think? It's a bit more complicated than that. I know Padma had a lot of reservations about Theo. Don't stare, nosy!"

Hermione yanked on Draco's arm as he was peering back at Padma and Theo, who seemed deep in discussion.

"Oh come off it, I know you're dying to spy too!"

As much as Hermione did, in fact, want to spy, they had Defence Against the Dark Arts exams tomorrow afternoon and this was Hermione's last chance to practise for the O she so desired.

She and Draco duelled fairly casually in the Room. Hermione could hit him two times out of three and he swore he wasn't letting her.

When they were both sufficiently out of breath from the exercise, they took a bath together, kissed and gossiped about whether Theo and Padma had planned their first date yet.

//

There wasn't much revision Hermione could do for Defence the morning of. They would be testing her reflexes above all. She just had to pray that everything she'd practised would kick in and that her nerves wouldn't get the best of her.

In order for all the odds to be in her favour, Hermione nipped off to the loo before the exams.

She walked in and headed for a stall when she heard a curious sound. Sniffing.

Was someone crying?

She peeked in each stall.

It wasn't abnormal for people to have breakdowns during exams. Perhaps a quick pep talk was all the person needed.

Hermione found Hannah sitting on the floor in the last stall, her head buried in her arms.

" *Hannah?* What's wrong?"

Hannah looked up. Her eyes were blotchy and her nose was running. She looked like she'd been having a good cry for a while now.

"G-go away!" Hannah hiccuped, pulling her legs tighter to her chest.

Hermione hesitated.

The exam was in fifteen minutes or so. Did she have time?

She took a moment to glance at Hannah's general appearance.

Hannah looked awful.

There were dark circles under her eyes. She looked thinner than the last time Hermione had seen her. Her hair, usually in a neat braid, was messy.

"Cheer up, Hannah, it's going to be okay. Exams are almost done! Just one more round and then it'll be over."

Hannah laughed. The sound was harsh and pathetic.

"Who c-cares about exams? Do exams m-matter if you're g-going crazy?"

Hannah laughed again, almost hysterically. Then she choked and buried her head in her arms again.

Time was running out. Hermione needed to be on her way. They *both* did. But Hannah looked like she was on the brink of some kind of meltdown. Hermione sat down next to Hannah.

"Is this...about Neville? Did something happen?"

Hermione winced as Hannah wailed.

"Of c-course not! Neville is...Neville is..."

She took a shuddering breath, more tears leaking from her bloodshot eyes.

"He's p-perfect. Too good for me. I couldn't- could never..."

"You know he misses you a lot?" Hermione supplied gently.

"I m-miss him...B-but I can't- I..."

Hannah looked around the washroom in a panic.

"I think I'm going mad," she finally whispered.

Hermione felt a chilliness inside her. This clearly wasn't exam stress. Something was very, very wrong and Hermione couldn't explain it, but she had a terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Why do you think you're going mad?"

Hannah looked at Hermione mistrustfully.

Hermione sighed.

"I know you disapprove of who I'm friends with, and that's fine. But I promise I just want to help."

"I...It doesn't matter. Nothing m-matters really."

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"But isn't that why you broke it off with Neville? Because he was hanging out with us?"

Hannah looked at the floor.

"I...Sort of."

More tears streaked her cheeks.

"Hermione...Have you ever...lost memories? Woken up in a-a strange place? Like a closet or-or...in a train compartment not knowing how you got there?"

"No...Is that what's happened to you? Have you gone to Madam Pomphrey?"

"I c-can't go to Madam Pomphrey!" Hannah shrieked, clutching her face, "I can't because- because it isn't just that! There are other things wrong- *so* many things wrong-"

"What's wrong, Hannah?"

The sound of her name seemed to drag her out of her hysteria. Her eyes looked more lucid but she was whimpering and trembling violently. Hermione put a hand on Hannah's shoulder. Hannah flinched but didn't move.

"Promise you won't tell anyone, please Hermione," Hannah whispered.

"I promise," Hermione said hesitantly.

Hannah took another deep shuddering breath. She kept her eyes clenched shut.

"I haven't just been f-forgetting things. When I wake up...I...I feel wrong. It hurts. Down there. The f-first time I woke up it hurt a lot and I thought...I thought m-maybe it was my t-time of the month. I was on the Hogwarts Express with you and Neville and I got up to use

the washroom and...and suddenly I'm in another compartment and I have n-no idea how I got there and I'm s-sore. And I...I have these b-bruises on my ribs and hips but I d-don't know why-"

Hannah hiccuped.

"The s-second time was before Valentine's and...and this time I woke up in a b-broom closet. I felt sore again and..." Hannah sobbed, "I checked myself and...I think- I think- I think-"

She was shivering so hard her teeth clattered. Hermione cast a quick warmth spell and brought Hannah in her arms. Hannah let her without any resistance.

"I think I had s-s-sex! But I...I don't remember any of it! And I know Neville would n-never do anything like that!"

Hannah heaved, but now that she'd started talking, she didn't seem able to stop.

"I had to b-break up with Neville. I thought I might be ch-cheating on him! I thought p-perhaps I was ruined inside and he w-wouldn't want me if he knew! I needed...needed to think...I broke up with Neville for some...stupid reason...And then it happened again, yesterday I woke up in the dungeons and I checked again and...and...there was definitely something wet *in* me! I think it might've been someone's- someone's- But I can't remember any of it and with all the stress of exams I'm having t-trouble just managing and *how is this happening to me ?*"

Hermione felt like her entire body was ice.

It was him.

The stalker.

The poisoner.

He was doing this.

He was making Hannah fall in love with him and then Obliviating her.

And they had *had* him. They had *had* him and they just let him flee.

Hermione was shaking with rage.

Something wet fell on her wrist. She felt her face and realised she was crying.

"I'm so sorry Hannah. I'm so sorry."

Hermione held Hannah tightly, rocking her as Hannah cried her throat raw. Hermione wept quietly with her.

Hermione would end him. Whoever he was. She wanted him to hurt. Wanted him to burn. He should feel the pain of a thousand Fiendfyres for ever thinking he could just take love from people.

Love potions were horrible. They shouldn't even be called that. This was not love, not in the slightest.

Love was pure, selfless.

This was greed. This was selfish. You took the person you desired and made their life hell by making yours heaven.

Calling it a 'love' potion was making a mockery out of what love truly was.

The cruel reality was that it was a rape potion.

This was worse than Cruciatus.

Hermione felt sick.

"We'll catch him, Hannah. We'll catch him and make him pay."

Hannah sniffled, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"Y-you promised you wouldn't tell anyone."

"Yes, but Hannah, we need to get you to Madam Pomphrey. You need a contraceptive potion *right now* and maybe McGonagall might help-"

" *You promised!*"

"Hannah, other people could get hurt!"

"I d-don't care! I can't have everyone know, it's too much! It's humiliating and scary and- and I just can't! I shouldn't've said anything at all!"

Hermione realised this was way above her expertise. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Her impatient pragmatism was clearly not what Hannah needed right now. Hannah needed to feel *safe* and Hermione had no idea how to do that.

"Don't you have an exam? You sh-should go...You'll be late..."

Hannah was right, yet the exam was the furthest thing from Hermione's mind right now.

"At least let me walk you back to your common room..."

"No! No thank you...I think I...I just need to be alone. Need to think. Thank you but please...please leave..."

"Hannah-"

"Go! Get out!"

"I'm not leaving you like this!"

Hannah grit her teeth.

"Hermione...you're making things worse. You don't always need to tell people what to do, you know! I know you're smart, but I need to deal with this on my own right now. P-please... please go..."

The last was a pathetic whimper that made Hermione's heart break.

"I can't leave you alone. I'll get someone- Susan or-or someone else from Hufflepuff..."

Hannah shrugged dejectedly, slumping down, her head falling back into her arms. Hermione couldn't get another word out of her.

She departed from the bathroom, feeling harried.

Finding another Hufflepuff who was friends with Hannah seemed like the safest bet. Hannah needed someone she could feel comfortable with and clearly Hermione was the wrong person for that. But of course most of them would be taking the Defence exam and Hermione had no idea where the Hufflepuff common room was.

Could she just barge into the exam room and ask a teacher for a private word? She knew she'd promised Hannah not to say anything, but maybe she could evade the whole truth. All she needed to tell them was that she found Hannah in the girls' washroom and that she looked out of sorts. One thing she knew for sure was that Hannah shouldn't be alone right now.

A part of her that she hated desperately wanted to find someone fast, so that she'd be able to dash to her exam and hopefully have enough time left to finish. Why did this all have to happen *now* ?

Hermione finally decided on Madam Pomphrey as the best bet on such short notice.

As she was on the brink of bursting into a sprint, something wet suddenly shot up her nostrils.

"Arrgh!"

Hermione doubled over, coughing, pinching her nose as it stung horribly. She could feel something trickle down her throat and windpipe.

What in Godric's name was that?

She righted herself, her eyes burning, her cheeks red.

"Draco? What in the name of Merlin's pants are you d-"

She looked around.

She was alone in the hall.

Why had she immediately thought of Draco?

Then, she smelled it.

It was his smell. A sweet and musky wood smell. It filled her nasal cavity.

He must be around somewhere.

She took a step and her vision blurred. She felt dizzy. Her hand flew out to steady herself on the wall.

And then her heart sank.

That wasn't just Draco she was smelling.

She hadn't noticed at first because Draco's odour was overpowering, but it was there.

New parchment.

Freshly mown grass.

"No..." she moaned, her eyes shutting, "no, no, nooo..."

She had to get out of there.

She needed to run.

She took a step, but her movements felt sluggish. She stumbled, fell.

She thought she could hear cautious footsteps.

She clenched her eyes shut. She couldn't look at anyone or it was game over.

Quickly. *Quickly* .

She rummaged in her pocket and whipped out her wand and the TeleGalleon.

She tapped it and it burned.

And then a spell hit her and she lost consciousness.

Intoxication

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Puppe by Rammstein

The Defence Against the Dark Arts exams had overall been brutal.

The examiners had lined up a bunch of life-sized puppets along the wall and every now and then, one would raise a wooden arm and shoot a spell at random. The students had to use an array of advanced-level spells to parry, attack and protect themselves.

Luckily, thanks to Quidditch, Ginny had amazing reflexes and she felt confident she did well. It was probably the only exam she felt confident about- and thankfully, it was her last N.E.W.T. exam of the year.

She was huddled on the couches in the Gryffindor common room with Demelza, Jack Sloper, Jimmy Peakes and a few of her other Quidditch mates. Jimmy had some spiked Butterbeer that he'd smuggled in and they celebrated raucously. They had a lot to celebrate this year, considering they'd won the Quidditch tournament and Gryffindor was in the lead for the House Cup to boot.

It had been a good year.

Well, almost.

Ginny took a sip of her drink, contemplating everything that had happened.

It was hard to believe she would be graduating soon.

Madam Hooch apparently knew the coach from the Holyhead Harpies and promised to put in a good word for Ginny.

The future seemed bright.

Perhaps, with Hogwarts coming to an end, this would be a good time to bury the hatchet.

She thought about her last, late-night Floo chat with Harry.

"Hermione's been having a rough time. Maybe you should just talk to her? I know she misses you."

Ginny scoffed.

"How can you forgive her so easily? Forgive him so easily? You of all people should be the most upset by this!"

"She says he's changed and...I believe that. You didn't see him in the astronomy tower. I think he's been different for a long time now. War makes people grow up fast."

Ginny sighed.

"I know that...I just...It's his face. He looks just like his stupid, bastard father. It keeps bringing me back there. Back when I had the diary and..."

"I know, it's okay,"

"Why did she have to pick him? Out of all the snakes here, she had to go for the one that personally tried to kill and hurt half the people I love!"

"Maybe you should ask her. It's Hermione. She might not have an answer you'll like, but she'll have a good one. With bullet points, footnotes and probably a bibliography."

Ginny snorted.

"Maybe you're right. Let me just survive the exam apocalypse and we'll see about it after."

"Ginny?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you. Miss you and can't wait for you to come back."

Ginny grinned.

"Love you too, you big softie."

Ginny felt something tug at the sleeve of her robe, snapping her out of her flashback.

A nervous-looking second year shifted in front of her.

"Ginny Weasley? Erm...someone is outside for you. D-Draco Malfoy."

Ginny's face hardened. The second-year looked like they were about to wet themselves.

"And pray tell, what does *he* want?" Ginny asked, finding it hard to keep the scorn out of her voice.

"He said it's urgent."

"Urgent, my arse. Ignore him, Ginny. He's probably looking to brainwash you like he did Granger and Longbottom," Demelza advised, taking a gulp from her mug.

Ginny looked down into the brown liquid of her own mug, contemplating.

War makes people grow up fast .

"I'm going. But this better be quick," she grumbled, getting up.

Her friends made "oooh" sounds, laughing as Ginny stomped to the portrait.

"What?" She barked, staring down at Draco bloody Malfoy.

He looked up at her stonily. He always had that stupid, calm look on his face. Ginny felt like she almost could have given him a chance if he was easier to ruffle. His cool exterior just made him look haughty and so punchable.

"I need a word. In private."

Ginny glanced behind her. The whole Quidditch team was peeking over, clearly all very invested in why Draco sodding Malfoy needed to show his face in their territory.

"Fine. But no funny business. You get one minute."

She climbed out of the portrait, shut it tight and stood in front of Malfoy with her arms crossed.

"Is Hermione here?"

Ginny's eyes widened for a moment before she laughed harshly.

"Lost her, did you? Ever consider she finally came to her senses?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"So she's not in the common room?"

Ginny rolled her eyes.

"If she was, I wouldn't tell *you* ."

"I think she's in trouble. She missed her Defence exam."

Ginny did pause at that.

That was... definitely odd.

"Maybe she's..." Ginny began slowly, trying to think of a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why Hermione would miss one of the most important exams of her life, but nothing came up.

"She tried to contact me."

"How?"

To Ginny's amazement, Malfoy pulled out a Galleon and began to explain to her how Hermione had a similar one and how they've been communicating all year.

Not for the first time Ginny was impressed by Hermione's ingenuity.

"I felt it burn in my pocket but I was in the middle of fighting those examination puppets. After the exam I waited for her, tried contacting her, but she never showed up. I checked the library, the Hospital Wing, the Room of Requirement. Nothing. I need to know she's safe."

"And why would I know where she is? I haven't talked to Hermione in months."

Malfoy sneered at her.

"I know you know how to find her. You did it once...spied on her somehow. It's how you figured out she was seeing me, wasn't it?"

Ginny could tell he was losing patience.

It just so happened that so was she.

"Your minute's almost up and I'm still not convinced she wants *you* to know where she is."

"I'm worried *He* might have her!" Malfoy finally snapped, "Look I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important. You really think I want to be asking *you* for help? Just- just find her and see for yourself if you want to tell me where she is or not! I just want to know that she's okay!"

Ginny's skin crawled.

"Who's 'He'?" She asked, though she felt like she could guess.

"Do I need to spell everything out? The nutter who poisoned Cho! Who else?"

Ginny's heart sank.

It couldn't be that, could it?

Wasn't that just a stupid prank that went far too wrong?

Still...It couldn't hurt to just check.

"Give me one second."

Ginny slammed the portrait shut in Malfoy's face and dashed up the stairs to her dorm, ignoring the calls of her friends asking what happened.

She lunged at her bed, summoning the map from her bag.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good!"

Ginny scanned the map lines as they materialised.

"C'mon, Hermione. Be somewhere normal. The loo, the kitchens, anywhere..." Ginny muttered out loud.

She scanned and scanned but there was no sign of Hermione anywhere.

Did he take her? If so, where ?

Could he have taken her out of bounds?

Malfoy said she called during Defence which was about an hour ago. The poisoner wouldn't've had time to get her out of the grounds unless he hauled her off on a broom.

Ginny scanned the potion labs, then the dungeons. She noticed the dungeons faded off into the bottom of the page. Even the Marauders didn't have the courage to see how deep they went, though that wasn't from a lack of trying.

It was a veritable maze to scry through.

Ginny gasped.

There she was.

Hermione's name was almost faded at the bottom of the page, but she was there, at least seven floors below ground, if not more.

And someone was with her.

Ginny stared at the name.

It took her a moment to digest.

What in the bloody hell?

Ginny stuffed the map in her robes and ran as fast as she could, down the stairs, ignoring her friends once more as she careened out the portrait and skidded to a halt in front of Malfoy.

"She's in the dungeons! With Justin Finch-Fletchley!"

"Who the fuck is that?"

"Hufflepuff bloke. Curly hair. Sort of pasty. Hangs 'round Macmillan and Bones. He'd asked Hermione out a couple of times but I didn't think...Dammit!"

Ginny was angry she didn't see it. At the same time, who would have suspected? Justin had always seemed fairly good-natured, albeit he could be a bit of an idiot.

But to poison and lure girls away? It seemed extreme.

Yet the map didn't lie.

"Whoever he is, he's finished. Tell me exactly where they are!" Draco growl-shouted.

"I'll lead the way!" Ginny shot back, waving the map around.

"You need to go get help! Teachers! This isn't some prank- he could be...could be..."

Malfoy trailed off. For a split second, his expression of annoyed haughtiness fell. Ginny saw a flicker of anguish twist his features.

It was so sudden and then it was gone, and annoying, haughty Malfoy was back.

What was that about?

As if on cue, Neville rounded the corner.

"Ginny? *Malfoy*?" He asked, flabbergasted at seeing them together.

"Neville! Go find McGonagall! Tell her the poisoner has Hermione, dungeons, seven floors down."

Ginny whipped out her map from her pocket and briefly showed Neville where.

"Wait what? *Who* has Hermione?"

"No time to explain! Just get McGonagall!" Malfoy yelled, "We need to go there *now* !"

"Then keep up!" Ginny yelled, breaking into a run, whipping her wand out. Malfoy immediately sprinted after her as they crashed down the hall at breakneck speed.

It was hard to dash while checking the map. Twice Malfoy had to yank Ginny's arm to keep her from pelting into a column or wall.

They were out of breath when they reached the dungeons but they still had seven floors to descend.

The dungeons had so many twists and turns, even with the map, Ginny had to stop at several intervals to make sure they were taking the right path.

It got darker and darker the lower they went. Even with two Lumos' combined, it was hard to see in front of them and they had to slow their pace considerably.

The smell was putrid. The stone floor made damp sounds as they hurried along. Centuries worth of mould, grime and Godric knew what else.

Eventually, they reached the seventh floor underground.

Malfoy paused.

"Turn your light out," he whispered.

"Are you crazy?"

"It's a straight line ahead and we want the element of surprise. If he knows we're coming he might do something drastic."

Ginny hated that he was right.

They turned their lights off and silenced their steps. It was pitch black.

They had to creep forward, without the map as a guide.

Ginny kept her hand on a row of bars, letting her fingers trail quietly against the metal to keep her environment grounded in the dark. Malfoy's breathing was almost imperceptible. She could hear the shifting of Malfoy's robes, the only sign that he was following near her.

It was eerie to think someone brought Hermione here, in this frightening place.

Finally, a warm light flickered at the end of the hall.

Ginny and Draco carefully approached.

They slowly peered around the corner.

There was an open space, a large chamber of some kind.

In the middle, there was a wooden table with an ornate candlestick that held three, long, flickering candles.

A red table cloth draped over it, accompanied by two wooden chairs. There were also flowers. Baskets and baskets of roses collected all around. It contrasted strangely against the grimy stone walls and steel doors. There were even a couple of misshapen skeletons of varying sizes, propped against the walls and hanging from chains. One in particular stood out in the candlelight. It looked like it was grinning at them.

They were in an ancient torture chamber.

There was no one there.

Ginny went to unfold the map but Malfoy caught her wrist.

He was right.

It was still far too dark to read and it might make noise.

She slackened her arm and instead, held up her wand, pointing it in the direction of the hall.

Malfoy gave her a nod.

As soon as they stepped into the chamber, spells shot out at them from either side.

Even Ginny's quick reflexes couldn't protect her from a prepared sneak attack.

Her shield spell was shot up a moment too late, as she felt her limbs slow.

The Impedimenta gave her attacker just enough time to disarm and blast Ginny against the wall.

Chains wrapped around her arms and torso and she was lifted, dangling from the ceiling like some kind of metal cocoon.

She yelled and opened her eyes.

Hermione was standing in the middle of the chamber, her wand pointed at Malfoy as he struggled against his own Impedimenta.

Chains materialised, winding up his forearms and around his torso.

The sleeve of his shirt was pulled up and Ginny saw a glimpse of his Dark Mark for the first time.

Hermione kept her wand directed at Malfoy's heart as he struggled against his binds to no avail.

"I suppose all that duelling training came in handy after all," she mused and floated him over so that he hung next to Ginny.

Ginny stared.

Hermione wasn't Hermione at all.

Her eyes were glazed, her cheeks were flushed and her voice was breathy and slow, so unlike her usual brusqueness.

It was uncanny to see.

"Hermione! Hermione, snap out of it!"

The chains rattled as Ginny tried in vain to loosen the painfully tight links.

"I don't quite know why I dated you," Hermione mused, ignoring Ginny and vaguely studying Malfoy, "you're just a-" she glanced at his arm where the Dark Mark was visible, "-a traitor, aren't you? Funny how I didn't see it before."

Malfoy looked unfazed by Hermione's jab, his face relaxed in a blank expression.

"Hermione, you've been fed Amor Videri. This isn't you," he said calmly.

Hermione scoffed.

"As if you knew me at all. You don't understand me like he does. Justin *knows* me."

Her eyes shone. Ginny would have almost felt sorry for Malfoy if he didn't still have that stupid blank look on his face. Did he ever feel anything, in that thick, cold, skull of his?

Ginny was going to get Hermione out of here and far away from all these deranged boys at Hogwarts.

"Hermione, it's me, Ginny! Your friend! Let me down and let's just talk, okay? You don't have to string me up like meat."

"Oh? Since when are you my friend? You wanted to split me off from Draco and now you've come to do the same with Justin. Why can't you just be happy for me, Ginny? After all, I've never been happier..."

"Who the *fuck* is Justin?" Malfoy finally snapped icily.

A figure walked up to them, with his wand up.

How had Ginny missed him, standing right there?

At the same time, once Ginny looked him over, she realised he was rather easy to miss.

He was the most unremarkable person Ginny had ever laid eyes on.

Brownish hair in small, greasy curls, bland eyes, a regular-sized nose, thin-ish lips. Not too tall, not too short. Not skinny but not fat either.

She could be describing anyone, really. He was a background character, with no notable features, feats or personality traits. No wonder his insanity had flown so low under the radar.

Justin Finch-Fletchley smiled coldly.

"You've done wonderful, dearest. Come."

Even his voice was dull.

To Ginny's disgust, Hermione immediately swept over to him and planted a kiss on his nose.

Malfoy observed the scene looking bored.

Ginny couldn't stand to watch.

"Let her go, you piece of shite!"

"Don't talk to Justin like that! *You're* the ones interrupting our date!" Hermione defended shrilly, glaring at Ginny with enough venom to poison a large animal.

"Teachers are on their way!" Ginny yelled at Justin, "You'll be sent to prison and you'll rot there for the rest of-"

"Oh shut *up* . Kitten, will you do the honours?"

Hermione gave Justin a full smile and waved her wand. Ginny's voice disappeared. She continued to shout swears and curses but nothing came out.

"Much better."

Hermione smiled with pride and nuzzled her cheek against Justin's shoulder.

Ginny wanted to barf.

" *You* , on the other hand," Justin continued, looking at Malfoy while his hand moved to absently stroke Hermione's cheek, "I'm absolutely dying to know what you have to say. You, who took Hermione from me. How does it feel, to see the woman you love on the arm of another man?"

Justin's fingers dug slightly into Hermione's cheek but she didn't seem to mind. He pulled Hermione's chin towards him and he softly brushed his lips along her jawline.

It was frustrating how indifferent Malfoy looked.

Ginny couldn't figure him out. Didn't he care that Hermione was getting mauled by some nutcake? Why drag Ginny down to the dungeons if he was just going to stand by and do nothing? Ginny was beside herself with rage but she could do no more than rattle her chains. If it was Harry who had been kidnapped, she would be screaming and kicking up as much a fuss as possible, not hanging there like a stuffed puppet.

"This feels so much better than I imagined," Justin murmured into Hermione's ear. Hermione sighed, enraptured.

"How did you know we were here?" Malfoy asked, sounding like he couldn't really care less.

"Hermione's wards of course. It was all her idea. She knew people came to the dungeons for duels and such, so she suggested it as a necessary precaution. I was so certain we wouldn't be found here but I knew better than to contradict Hermione's instincts. She truly is the smartest witch of our age. I must say, I didn't know she was such a good duellist though. Such a talented girl. Is there anything you can't do?"

Hermione giggled.

"I suppose we must make the most of our time here, sweetling," Justin murmured, taking Hermione in his arms and tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

Ginny shook her chains some more while Malfoy observed quietly.

"Isn't this lovely?" Justin crooned, taking Hermione's hands in his and swaying with her to some imaginary music only he could hear.

"I'll follow thee and make a heaven out of hell." Two lovers who finally meet against all odds. It's almost as if I am Lysander and you are Hermia and we've been brought together by Puck's flower. I grew up reading Shakespeare, you know. He was a Muggle, afterall. It was quite comforting to find a quote of his, tucked away in a wizarding book about love. It felt serendipitous, even. Like I was destined to read it."

"I love listening to you talk about poetry," Hermione murmured, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Enjoy our time, darling. They'll be here soon enough, though it'll take them a while to find us. I'll have to Obliviate you, my sweet," Justin said regretfully.

Hermione hung on to his every word with admiration, her eyes shining.

"I'll Obliviate Weasley, too. As for Malfoy... We could blame this whole thing on him. He'll be locked away forever. Then you'd be free of him and then maybe we could finally have a real chance. Does that suit you, dearest?"

Hermione nodded quickly.

"Yes, get rid of him. I just want to be with you."

As Justin and Hermione talked, Malfoy turned to look at Ginny.

He gave her a very pointed stare, then looked down at his leg.

Ginny saw it.

Trapped in the chains somewhere along Malfoy's thigh was the tip of his wand sticking out. When he had been hit with Impedimenta, he had probably tried to stash it away, knowing they would chain him up like Ginny and it had gotten caught there.

It wasn't completely out of reach. If she could just wiggle her hand free, perhaps she could swing to the side and grab it. But she needed to do it when Justin and Hermione were distracted or they'd chuck it away before Ginny could snag it.

Ginny wiggled her hand. It was a tight squeeze, but she might be able to twist it free from the chains so she could grab Malfoy's wand.

"You were all set to leave Hermione alone on Valentine's. What changed?" Draco demanded.

Understanding suddenly dawned on Ginny.

Malfoy was being a cold git on purpose.

He was buying them *time* .

He was staying calm and asking questions so he could keep Justin's attention until Ginny got her hand free. Didn't Harry once mention that Malfoy knew Occlumency? He was probably Occlumencying or whatever it was you were supposed to do to keep your wits about you.

She had to grudgingly respect his ability to craft a plan under pressure.

Ginny twisted her arm, feeling the chains slide painfully over her hand.

Justin's attention was completely on Malfoy.

" *You* changed everything," Justin hissed.

He chewed his bottom lip for a bit and went on:

"You know, I never thought Hermione would be mine, but then I overheard Micheal Corner talking about making a love potion for Astoria Greengrass. Not just any love potion- love at first sight! I knew it was a sign. Destiny was smiling down on me, gracing me with my deepest wish! It was the easiest thing to just reach over and nip them from Astoria's bag."

"Oh, how careful I'd been. I knew I had to plant the potion somewhere Hermione would find and drink it, except she had to be alone. I followed her for a fortnight and found that her morning potion practice in the lab was the only time she was truly by herself without her dozens of sycophants trailing after her."

"But then *you* showed up. I spied from the outside the lab as you entered the classroom. I saw you get your grubby hands on the second vial. I cursed myself for planting both, but I'd

assumed it would increase my chances of Hermione taking one. I never expected anyone else to turn up, let alone *you* ."

"And just like that, weeks of careful planning, leading up to the moment where I would be finally united with my true love- foiled by Draco Malfoy."

Ginny couldn't believe her ears.

Why hadn't Hermione said anything to her?

Oh, but she *had* . Ginny had just been too angry to listen.

Before Ginny could feel the entire weight of her guilt, Justin spoke again.

"Love is a dangerous thing. It traps you. You can't sleep. Can't eat. You can only think of your *person* . You can't escape."

He sighed.

"All I had wanted was one hour. One measly hour to finally know what it would be like to have Hermione Granger love me back. But I couldn't even have that. Perhaps I wasn't meant to have Hermione. Perhaps I was simply chasing a fruitless desire that was never meant to be mine."

Justin roughly grabbed Hermione's wrists, yanking her closer to him. He seemed to have quite forgotten about Draco.

"I was ready to let you go but then I found out you had gone and fallen *in love* with him. How despicable! And then, I had to watch you flounce around with Malfoy for half the year. Draco Malfoy. The traitor. The coward. The person who'd betrayed Hogwarts, who'd wanted Muggleborns *dead* . And it was *my* doing that you were with him. You would never have

been with him if it hadn't been for me! I'd tossed you into his vile arms and he'd somehow manipulated you into staying. The world was far too cruel."

He roughly shook Hermione's wrists. She only blinked and smiled.

"What could you possibly see in him?" Justin asked harshly, "Am I so undesirable? You would rather be with a Death Eater, than me?"

Hermione shook her head.

"No, my love. It's only you that I want. You are the cleverest, handsomest, most brilliant person I've ever met."

Justin's eyes seemed to shine. There was a manic air about him.

"Do you...you really think so?"

"I think it was so wise how you tested your last batch of potion on Hannah to make sure it was safe for me. You thought of everything for us to be together."

Ginny froze.

What did Hannah have to do with any of this?

Justin smiled. A wide smile that revealed his insanity.

"Of course, dearest. Recreating Amor Videri was probably one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I drove so many rats and toads insane with my first round of test batches. My first passable potion took me months to achieve. It was lucky Cho drank it instead of you. It

wasn't my best. Too heavy-handed. But with Hannah, I was able to perfect my memory charms and the Amor Videri formula. She had other uses for me as well."

Justin laughed his little dry laugh.

Ginny was clenching her teeth together so tightly that her jaw threatened to snap.

He was a monster.

He deserved pain.

Ginny yanked and felt her hand finally twist free. She quickly hid it behind her back as Justin turned back to them.

"And so you see, Malfoy- all this? This is your fault. You're the one who put your greedy hands on her. You're the one who decided to pit Hermione against her friends, against the whole school. It's because of *you* that she suffered all year! It's because of *you* that I had to bring her here against her will! I would have taken care of her! *I* would have treated her well! She wouldn't have been bullied or tormented or attacked if I had been with her! But no! You had to come along and turn her life upside down! Well, not anymore. She's mine now!"

"She's not. She'll never be yours. You're living a sad little delusion and if you truly loved her, you'd release her," Malfoy answered icily.

"Shut up! You don't know anything about love! Death Eaters only know killing! Pain! You've brought nothing but suffering to Hermione and I'm the one *saving* her!"

"You're not," Malfoy retorted quietly. His low tone seemed to drip with pure loathing, "Do you even know Hermione at all?"

"Of course I know her! I've loved her since the beginning!"

"Then you would know that she's independent, strong-willed, passionate and driven. Do you truly think someone like that would want to be *saved* from her own choices? Forced into something against her will?"

Justin paused, his pupils zipping back and forth.

Ginny watched, her mouth slightly open. Had Malfoy actually gotten through to him?

Then, slowly, Justin's face morphed. His lips curled up in a grimace, his eyebrows arched in a devilish frown, his eyes widened til they threatened to pop. He looked positively deranged.

"I don't believe anything you say, *Death Eater* . You're just jealous Hermione belongs to me now."

Justin's hand travelled down Hermione's chest. He squeezed her breast.

Something seemed to snap in Malfoy.

His cold expression vanished.

Instead his face twisted into a snarl, his teeth bared in white hot rage.

"No! Don't touch her!"

"For the time I have left, I will touch her how I wish and you shall watch. It *is* fine that I touch you, isn't it Hermione?"

"Yes, yes of course," Hermione said breathily.

Ginny watched, frozen in horror.

They were powerless. They had to just hang there and watch as Justin dangled Hermione in front of them.

"Don't listen to him! Hermione! HERMIONE!"

Malfoy was yelling. For the first time, he looked angry.

No, not just angry. *Murderous* .

The abrupt change in Malfoy was enough to give Ginny whiplash. He'd apparently been keeping his anger under control but it was all flowing out of him now, all at once.

"I swear I'll tear you limb from limb if you touch her again! Don't you fucking- GET AWAY FROM HER!"

Malfoy was straining, the chains rattling and digging into his neck and arms, leaving red welts. He shouted until his voice was raw, desperate to reach her.

Justin smiled widely. He knew he had cracked Malfoy's shell and was clearly taking enormous satisfaction from it.

"Shall we continue our date, my dear? Show Malfoy exactly who it is you've chosen?" Justin said smugly.

"Of course, anything you want."

" *Anything* I want?"

"NO! I'll kill you, I'll- GET OFF HER YOU SICK FUCK! HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

Something flickered in Hermione's eyes. For a moment, she looked dazedly up at Malfoy.

Justin yanked Hermione to him and kissed her sloppily in full view. The moment of hesitation was gone and Hermione moaned loudly, clinging to Justin's shoulders.

The room echoed with Malfoy's shouts.

Ginny had never really been scared of Malfoy. Did she think he was a knob? Certainly she'd thought that. He was a well-manicured, rich brat and she'd always figured one punch to his stupid face would probably do him in.

In that moment, as she watched him yell and struggle- his face lit with pure, unbridled rage, a vein pulsing in his neck- she honestly did not know if she'd be able to take him. It would be a fair fight, to say the least.

Justin was now busy undoing Hermione's top. Ginny badly wanted to retch, but now wasn't the time.

Justin and Hermione were clearly very distracted. Ginny had to act now.

She'd managed to free her hand up to her elbow. With a mighty heave, she thrust her body forward, trying to swing towards Malfoy's wand. Her chains rattled noisily, though neither Justin, nor Hermione looked up.

Her arm darted out at an awkward angle, her fingers grazing the wand handle. She swung back, empty handed.

Ginny tried not to be distracted by Justin who seemed to suction his mouth grotesquely to Hermione's neck. She had to focus.

Malfoy looked around at Ginny and seemed to get the gist of what she was trying to do.

His eyes were wild. He was breathing hard from all the shouting. He looked like a chained, rabid animal.

Ginny swung with all the momentum her body could muster. He tilted so that his thigh was as close to her as he could strain it.

The tips of her fingers touched the handle.

For a second she was worried she was going to drop it.

She pinched her forefinger and thumb together so tight she felt the patterns on the wand dig into her skin.

Justin now had Hermione up against the table. The candles wobbled precariously.

It took Ginny three tries before Malfoy's wand worked for her.

She shot a counter spell at her bonds and crashed to the ground, barely managing to fall into a roll.

"What the-"

Before anyone could react, Ginny pointed her wand up at Malfoy.

The wand wouldn't work for her.

She jabbed it over and over, willing it to bend to her orders.

She could hear Justin scrabbling around for his own wand.

Finally, a weak jet of light shot from the tip, releasing Malfoy.

He landed, agile as a cat.

"Catch!" Ginny shouted.

He caught his wand easily and shot a Stunner at Justin.

Justin barely had time to dive out of the way, knocking over a chair.

Ginny could hear Hermione shrieking but there was no time to look. She needed to find her own wand.

Ducking low, Ginny ran off in zigzags. Spells ricocheted loudly against the wall behind her, but she was too quick.

A skeleton exploded, sending bones and debris flying everywhere.

Rose petals littered the floor and floated in the air. Some of the baskets had caught fire.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE! I LOVE HIM!" Hermione was crying out.

Ginny scanned the ground, taking only a split-second to make sure the others were occupied.

Hermione and Justin were both duelling Malfoy. He whipped his wand around at lightning speed, sending up protection spells and counterspells within milliseconds of each other.

If he could just hold them off just a bit longer- it *had* to be here somewhere.

Gotcha!

Ginny dove just as something nasty whizzed over her head.

She slid across the floor, wand in hand.

Without missing a beat, she pointed it at Justin.

She got him right in the back.

Her Stunner violently slammed into him and he crashed into the table, upending the candles.

Flames licked his robes as he lay in the debris, unmoving.

"No! NO! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!"

Abandoning the fight, Hermione flew to Justin's side, extinguishing the flames and pulling him into her arms.

"No, no, no, Justin, please be okay, please! I love you! I love you!"

Tears were trailing down her cheeks.

Malfoy was approaching her slowly. He held out a hand to her, as if she was a lost puppy.

"It's okay...It's okay, Hermione. I'm here. He tricked you. But I'm here."

"Get away from me!" Hermione shrieked, pulling Justin tighter to her. "We just wanted to be together! We just wanted one little date! Why can't we just be together? Why did you have to come and ruin everything like you always do!"

She started to cry earnestly.

How long did this bloody potion last?

Ginny could see Draco's hand waver. He looked like he was suffering the worst pain imaginable.

"Please..." he said softly, "I love you, Hermione, just come back to me, please..."

Hermione flinched at his words.

"I hate you! I *hate* you! I should've *never* trusted you! You're evil and all you do is hurt those around you!"

"Please...Don't make me do this...Hermione...I love you so goddamn much..."

Malfoy's voice broke. Ginny could see his hand shaking as he reached for her.

"Don't touch me! You never loved me! You *used* me! I'm just a Mudblood to you!"

She reached for her wand.

Malfoy was quicker.

His Stunning spell caught her on the shoulder.

She toppled over on top of Justin.

Malfoy immediately rushed over, trying to pull her off her captor.

As if shaken from a reverie, Ginny ran to them, helping Malfoy extricate Hermione from Justin's limbs and the rest of the broken table.

As Malfoy pulled Hermione onto his lap, Ginny cast a quick Incarcerous, wrapping Justin's unconscious body in ropes. Then, after a short pause, kicked his nose in for good measure.

As blood dribbled from both Justin's nostrils and onto his robes, Ginny found she felt a bit better, but not much. He deserved far, far worse.

"I know that was difficult, but you did the right thing," Ginny assured Malfoy quietly, indicating Hermione's Stunned body, "She doesn't have to suffer this way and she can wait out the effects of the potion."

Malfoy sat on the ground and held Hermione in his arms, cradling her carefully. He didn't look up.

"The others should be here soon. They'll probably use Homenum Revelio to find us and then we can take Hermione to the Hospital Wing," Ginny added.

Malfoy didn't answer. Instead, he carefully buttoned up Hermione's blouse and smoothed the hair off her forehead.

It had taken Ginny long enough, but she finally saw it.

He *was* different. She couldn't explain how. But he was.

And he loved Hermione.

Ginny shook her head at the absurdity of it all. It was so hard to wrap her head around, yet the sight of Malfoy carefully pushing Hermione's hair off her face was all the proof she needed.

Godric, she had been a right pighead, hadn't she?

"She's lucky you had the sense to come look for her. It would have been far worse if not for you," Ginny said softly.

Malfoy still didn't say anything.

He just kept holding Hermione to his chest, running a thumb over her cheek to wipe the tear tracks away.

"I told myself I would never watch her suffer again. Not after what happened in the Manor. I failed her."

His voice was raw and filled with sadness.

Ginny could feel a twinge in her heart.

She wasn't one for tears though. Instead, she sat beside Malfoy.

"Don't be stupid. You *saved* her, you twat."

They sat in silence for a beat.

"I was never able to do it," he finally mumbled. His voice was so low, Ginny was under the impression that he might be talking to himself.

"Do what?" She asked.

"Kill people. They tried and tried to teach me. Bellatrix insisted on it. 'You have to *mean* it,' they kept telling me. But I just couldn't-"

He took a deep breath.

"I think I finally understand it now," he said tightly, "If someone handed a wand to me and told me to kill him, it would be the easiest thing. I truly think he deserves to die. The only reason I can't is because I know she wouldn't want me to become a killer for her."

He nodded down at Hermione, stroking her cheek with his thumb.

Ginny didn't know what to say to that.

So Malfoy had been trained to kill.

Did they torture him for failing? Probably.

She remembered what it had been like, last year at Hogwarts, with the Amicus siblings. Ginny had felt trapped, forced to practise magic she hated, sometimes on other students, and if she refused, she was punished mercilessly. It had been a veritable nightmare.

But she'd had Neville. And Seamus, and Parvati, and Demelza, and Luna for a bit, and so many others.

They were able to fight back a little. Keep each other afloat.

Who did Malfoy have when he was trapped in the Manor, forced to do much worse?

He had no one.

Perhaps Malfoy wasn't so different from the rest of them after all. Perhaps, in a way, he'd even drawn the shortest straw.

Ginny cleared her throat.

"I suppose you know that if you hurt Hermione in any way, you'll have me to answer to."

"I surmised," Draco answered stiffly.

"I hope you're prepared to hear that speech at least five more times because I guarantee the whole Weasley family will want to drill you at supper."

"...Supper?"

Malfoy looked at her incredulously.

Ginny smirked.

"You didn't think you could date Hermione Granger without going to Weasley suppers, did you? She's family to us."

Malfoy's expression of dumbfoundedness was priceless.

"I will be... negotiating the terms for these supper visits," Malfoy said tightly.

Ginny chortled.

It was such an absurd thing to imagine Draco Malfoy squeezed in at their rowdy table, giving off his airs and sniffing at the pudding.

Ron was going to have an absolute fit and George would no doubt hide Bertie Bott's dung flavoured beans in Malfoy's dragonhide shoes. Mum would probably cope by force-feeding Malfoy seconds and thirds.

Perhaps Hermione dating Malfoy wasn't so bad after all, she thought.

Graduation

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack - Carry You by Ruelle, Fleurie

Thoughts were swirling.

Distorted faces and yelling.

Fire and roses and loud bangs.

A woman was laughing so loudly, it sounded more like a scream.

Hermione!

She couldn't recognize the voice. A male voice?

Was that Ron? Harry?

She needed to protect them.

She needed to protect them or Bellatrix would get to them.

Voldemort will get them.

There was shrieking in her ears. Hermione wanted it to stop, make it stop, make it all just *stop* -

Her eyes shot open.

She recognized the stone ceiling and cream curtains of the Hospital Wing immediately.

Something didn't feel right.

"Hermione?"

She turned her head, blinking repeatedly. Her vision was cloudy.

Her body felt stiff. Her neck was sore. She had a splitting headache and everything swam around her.

"Good to have you back, dear. You've been through quite the ordeal."

Madam Pomfrey's face floated into view.

Hermione groggily sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"There's water on the table for you. Normal to feel disoriented after everything that happened. I've only just given you the Mandrake Draught. Give the Petrification a moment to wear off, and you'll be good as new. I need to attend to the others, but I'll be right back with you."

"What? No, I need...Harry and Ron, are they-"

“Don’t worry, they’re fine dear. Scraped up and bruised but they’re both miraculously in one piece.”

Madam Pomfrey gave her a small pat on the arm and bustled off.

Petrification? Mandrake Draught? What was happening?

Hermione spotted a glass of water on the bedside table and had a strange feeling of recoil. For some reason, she didn't fancy ingesting anything even though she was parched.

"Alright there, Granger?"

She noticed Justin Finch-Fletchley sitting on a Hospital bed next to her.

"How are you feeling? I feel a bit tired myself. I imagine it's the aftermath of being Petrified," Justin said tentatively.

That's right.

It was all coming back to her now. She was in Second Year and they had been Petrified because of the Basilisk.

Because they were Muggleborn.

Everything still seemed so muddled.

She rubbed her head, mussing her hair up to new levels of frizzy.

"I still can't believe it. Harry killed a Basilisk with a *sword* ," Justin said, his voice a bit more confident.

"Is- Harry and Ron- Where are they?"

"They're with Dumbledore and McGonagall. Pomfrey said there's going to be a feast. Apparently they found the Basilisk and killed it."

Somehow, Hermione already knew this.

She heard herself say:

"Oh thank goodness! So they solved it after all!"

"Bonkers, isn't it? Glad everyone turned out alright. You're a genius for figuring it out, you know. With that mirror trick and everything. Pomfrey told me."

"It didn't do much in the end, did it? I still ended up here."

"It helped them put the pieces together. You're incredible, Hermione!"

Justin was peering at her earnestly. All she could do was shrug and blush at the compliment.

"Blimey, I can't believe I almost went to Eton," Justin chattered on, "To think I'd have missed all this. But you know, sometimes I wonder if maybe things would have been easier there. No giant Muggleborn-eating snakes, I reckon."

Hermione snorted.

"No, I don't think there are. I had plans for Cambridge, but there you go."

Justin chuckled.

"Well, it's not too late. I'll be honest, all this business was pretty scary. It's sort of mad that one of the school's founders hid a giant snake in here to kill students. Students like *us*."

Hermione crossed her arms, hugging her body.

He was right. There was a lot more prejudice here than she had anticipated. She'd suffered from light bullying for plenty of things and her blood status had simply been another one of those things- but with the Basilisk, her life had been on the line. It was unnerving. She was certain Justin had sensed it too.

"We have every right to be here. As much as *they* do," she said firmly, wanting to believe it with all her heart, "we'll just have to work harder to prove it. It isn't fair, but it's all we've got and, I don't know about you, but I have no plans on being steamrolled over by a group of puffed-up bigots any time soon."

Justin seemed to take heart at her words by the way he grinned. She noticed two of his teeth were slightly crooked, in a friendly sort of way.

"Folk like us should stick together," Justin added with a bit more cheer, "It's nice to be able to talk about Muggle things to someone who understands."

He beamed at her.

Justin wasn't such a bad sort after all, Hermione thought to herself. It was a shame they didn't get the chance to talk to people from other Houses more often.

"All right then! Let's watch each other's backs!"

His face blurred.

"Justin? Are you...?"

He was leaning in.

Was he trying to kiss her?

No, no this was all wrong. This wasn't what had happened.

"Stop it! What're you doing?"

The room seemed to melt.

Justin was moving toward her. Floating.

The walls of the Hospital Wing dissipated into the cold, dark stone of the dungeon walls.

She wanted to run, run, run far away from him. Why couldn't she move?

" *I love you, Hermione* ," Justin hissed.

His mouth opened and a snake tongue shot out of it.

She screamed.

She was losing control over her memory.

Or was it a nightmare?

She needed to...needed to find...

The fog grew thicker until her vision was gone and then her consciousness winked out.

//

The first thing Hermione noticed was that she was lying on something soft.

Light seemed to beat at her closed eyelids but she felt too heavy to open them.

She didn't want to wake up.

But she needed to. There were things she needed to sort though she couldn't quite remember what.

She forced her lids open.

Light blinded her.

She slowly blinked everything into focus.

"Wha- Where am I?"

"Morning! About time you joined us. You're in the Hospital Wing."

Hermione felt a strange sense of déjà vu. It took Hermione a moment to place the chirpy voice.

" *Ginny?* "

A mass of red hair appeared and her friend grinned down at her.

"Good to see you back," Ginny answered warmly.

The red hair obscured her vision as Ginny gave Hermione a fierce hug.

"What's going on? Why am I here?"

Images were flashing in her mind. It all started swarming back, a chaotic puzzle where the pieces tried to smash together until they fit.

Hermione suddenly tried to frantically sit up in Ginny's grasp.

"Hannah! Where's Hannah? She was in the girl's washroom and she needed help and-!"

"Hannah's fine," Ginny interrupted soothingly, releasing Hermione from the hug, "We got to her as soon as we brought you back. Madam Pomfrey looked her over and gave her a large dose of Calming Draught. Neville's been with her since."

"And the poisoner? Did you get him?"

"We did."

It wasn't Ginny who answered the time, but a familiar voice in the distance.

Another face swam into view.

" *Harry!* "

He looked tired, his hair messier than usual. But he was smiling at her in a very Harry-ish way. She noticed he was wearing official Auror robes.

"All right, Hermione?"

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be fulfilling your Auror internship!"

"I am," Harry answered a little awkwardly, taking a seat next to Ginny. "As soon as McGonagall caught wind that someone potentially criminal was in the dungeons, she sent us her Patronus. The Auror office didn't think a student skirmish would be too challenging so they sent me and Proudfoot. Turns out they were right. Finch-Fletchley was already neatly tied up and all we had to do was lug him off for questioning."

That's right. Hermione remembered now.

She'd been drugged by Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Hermione shut her eyes tight.

He'd brought her to the dungeons and...and...

She suddenly felt a weight on her chest. It was so hard to breathe. She wanted to go back to sleep, wanted to not think, she *couldn't* think, it was too awful.

Something warm tentatively covered her hand. Her breath caught. She opened her eyes slowly, and there he was, sitting to her left.

Draco looked tired. He had dark circles under his eyes and his shoulders sagged as if they'd been carrying a heavy burden all night.

Warmth flooded her at the sight of him.

Despite his fatigue, he looked as handsome as ever and he peered at her with a mix of concern, relief and...and...

She'd missed him so much. She felt like she hadn't seen him in weeks. In her drugged state, she'd been mentally so very far away and-

She froze.

She had said horrible things to him. Horrible things she didn't mean. She remembered his look of shock as she yelled at him that she hated him.

She could feel tears well in her eyes.

"Finch-Fletchley confessed," Harry's gentle voice broke through Hermione's spiral. "We didn't even have to administer Veritaserum. He confessed to everything all on his own. That, along with Ginny, Neville, Malfoy and McGonagall's testimonies have pretty much sealed his fate. He'll be going to Azkaban for twenty years."

"But why? Justin never seemed like much of the deranged scumbag type," Ginny questioned.

Harry shifted uncomfortably on his seat.

"The Hufflepuffs filled me in on some of the story, and we got quite a lot out of his confession. He er..."

Harry looked at Hermione.

Hermione took a deep breath. Now wasn't the time to fall to pieces. She needed answers.

"I want to know what he told you."

"Are you sure? You've only just woken up. Maybe I could come back later when you've had time to-"

" *No* . Harry, I've been dealing with this nightmare all year and I- I just want to finally put it behind me but I can't do that with all these questions hanging in the air. I need to know, *now* , why all this happened."

Her breathing was shallow. She could feel herself getting worked up again. She needed to know what happened for closure's sake but at the same time it was all so horrible.

Draco ran his thumb along her knuckles. She looked up and something burned inside her as she took in the tiredness on his face. His hand on hers, the quiet way he held it.

Hermione shuddered and closed her eyes.

She forced herself to focus on his touch, his thumb travelling over each knuckle. Her breathing slowed. She finally found a semblance of calm. It was fragile, but better than nothing.

Hermione opened her eyes and found both Harry and Ginny were staring worriedly at her.

"Okay. It's okay, I'm ready," Hermione said as steadily as she could, "What happened?"

Harry cleared his throat.

"Err...right then. Well, the obvious is that Finch-Fletchley was obsessed with you, Hermione. Apparently he started to fancy you since the first year at Hogwarts."

"What?" Ginny squawked, "That long? How the hell did we not notice?"

But of course no one had noticed.

Justin had barely said a handful of words to any of them. He'd always sort of been flitting about in the background, but when had he ever had a proper time to show any of his personality?

But little things were coming back to Hermione.

All the times he'd been studying in the library with Ernie Macmillan and Susan Bones, always at a table not far from hers.

When they'd all been in Dumbledore's Army, hadn't she caught him looking at her from time to time? She'd hardly given it any thought since so much had been happening all at once.

And of course Justin had asked her to the Halloween ball and she'd dismissed him a little abruptly.

She vaguely recalled sitting with him in the Three Broomsticks with more of her friends.

The more she thought about it, the more she remembered him propping up in the background every so often.

Crossing her on the way to class.

Peering at her from the Hufflepuff table in the Great Hall.

Brushing past her in Herbology.

He'd been hidden in plain sight this whole time. He'd just never had the spotlight.

"I don't think he was unhinged back then," Harry continued, "Some of the Hufflepuffs described him as naive and not particularly interesting, though he seemed like a rather cheerful sort. He knew everyone a decent amount, but had no stand-out qualities that people could recall. He blended in, wasn't particularly talkative, nor did he seem to excel at anything. Susan and Ernie said when he started school, he was quiet but chipper."

"Apparently he changed after the Quidditch Cup. I'm sure you all remember the Muggles who were strung up by Death Eaters? Well, apparently they weren't any old Muggles. It was

Justin's family. That's why they had been so easy to get a hold of- they were camping there right along with the rest of us."

Hermione gasped and covered her mouth.

"Justin had been visiting the tents of some of his friends from Hogwarts, so he didn't get targeted. Unfortunately, that meant he witnessed his family being paraded in the sky and, if it wasn't for Ernie and Susan dragging him to safety, Justin might've gotten himself killed trying to save them."

"His mother, father, and both sisters had to have their memories wiped when they were finally rescued by the Ministry. It's unclear as to why, but it's suspected the Finch-Fletchleys threatened to leak the whole ordeal to the Muggle press. Justin was forced to make an Unbreakable Vow stating that he would never breathe a word about it to them, nor attempt to return their memories."

"During the war, Justin knew he had to go into hiding with his family. He knew what the Death Eaters were capable of. Unfortunately, Justin's birthday was in November, which meant he still had the Trace on him. He had to flee their family home without the aid of any magic. He couldn't even contact the Order. He was able to drag his family out of the city by train, all the way to a secluded cabin near their summer cottage."

"Living away from their home was taxing. He got into fights with his parents. They couldn't understand why they couldn't just go to the police. They threatened to do so, but Justin managed to calm them down each time. If they could only wait two more months he'd be able to use all the concealment spells he'd been learning."

"His mother had it the worst. Talk of Death Eaters and Voldemort was apparently making her increasingly paranoid. Justin recalled she would wake up at night, screaming about fire. He wondered if some of her memories were being triggered back somehow."

"One night, she had a full-blown panic attack. His sisters were crying. His father finally put his foot down, and insisted they find help. Justin tried to stop them. He had an uncontrolled burst of magic while trying to stop them from leaving."

Harry took a deep breath.

"The Death Eaters didn't bother capturing them. His family was murdered on the spot. Justin barely managed to escape."

The room was dead quiet.

Draco looked like he was far away, his pupils barely moving.

"Justin, er...also mentioned a bit more about his- his fascination with Hermione."

Harry hesitated.

Hermione swallowed.

"What did he say?"

"He said you were everything he aspired to be. A star Muggleborn. You came from a non-magical family but you were quickly proving to be one of the most intelligent and skilled witches in the whole school. You were unashamed of your heritage yet embraced everything magical about who you were and weren't afraid to flaunt it. You never hid. You were never afraid."

Harry took another deep breath. Every word seemed difficult.

"I think he understands now that he made you suffer. I think that will haunt him for the next twenty years, if not the rest of his life. He'll be trapped in a cell, with nothing else but his thoughts. Guilt can be one of the worst forms of torture. Before we carted him off, he was saying that he finally understood what it meant 'to die by the hand that you love so well'. He said once you use a love potion, your only choice left is to die afterwards, because the

alternative of living, knowing you caused immeasurable pain to the one you loved, is leagues worse than death."

There was a silence after Harry's speech.

Harry cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"That's about the gist of what he said, anyway."

"Thanks for telling me all this, Harry," Hermione said faintly.

She felt hollow.

It was horrible. How had no one known?

But Justin was far from the only one who had been broken by the war. How many other Muggleborns had suffered devastating losses?

So many of Hermione's friends had perished during the Battle of Hogwarts, but that barely scraped the surface of casualties.

How many others, like Justin, had resurfaced from the wreckage, a different person?

Draco had, Hermione thought suddenly.

Draco had changed completely.

The opposition between the two was so tempting to compare.

Justin, who had been a Muggleborn, good-natured and polite, warped into a deranged sociopath from having everyone he loved tortured and taken from him before his eyes.

Draco, vile, spoiled, prejudiced, also had to witness his family's torture and the lifelong imprisonment of his father.

But Draco had emerged a better person. A good man.

It was nothing short of a miracle, really.

"Pomfrey should be back soon. She said it was normal to feel disoriented and tired after what you've been through. McGonagall also mentioned she would come visit today to schedule a time for you to do your Defence exam, when you're up for it," Ginny said, patting Hermione's leg.

Hermione felt a wave of gratitude for her friend.

"Ginny, I-"

"Don't. You were right, Hermione. I was a complete arse to you. I should've listened, and I didn't and I hope you can forgive me because not being friends with you has been miserable and I know it's all my fault and I'm so terribly, terribly sorry."

"Oh Ginny, of course I forgive you, it's been miserable without you as well!"

They hugged tightly and it felt so good to have Ginny back on her side again.

"But...But how did you find me?"

Ginny gave Hermione a crooked grin.

"Your boyfriend over there. He came to find me- said something fishy was up. As soon as I saw your name on the map, I knew Malfoy was right to be worried and the rest is history."

To Hermione's utter amazement, Ginny shot Draco a complicit grin, which Draco returned with a frown.

Harry awkwardly scratched his head, leaving a chunk of hair standing upright.

"You saved her, Malfoy. I can't thank you enough-"

"You don't have to thank me, Potter," Draco interrupted stiffly, "I didn't do it for you. I barely did anything. Weasley's the one who found Hermione and stunned the bastard."

Ginny scoffed.

"Oh please, modesty doesn't suit you, Malfoy. I preferred you as an arrogant plonker. You saved her and probably loads of other future women too and don't you dare tell yourself otherwise. Harry, I fancy a walk, my legs are getting a little stiff. Come with me?"

Ginny cast a pointed glance at Hermione and Draco that took Harry a moment to register.

"Oh! Er, right! Yeah, a walk would be nice."

Ginny winked at Hermione, took Harry's hand and beamed at him as they departed the Hospital Wing. It made Hermione feel better to see the pair of them reunited. She knew how

much Ginny must have missed Harry.

Hermione took one look at Draco and it seemed like the weight of everything came crashing down on her. Tears began to leak from her eyes without her permission.

"Draco...I'm so sorry...Everything I said to you, of course you know I didn't mean it?"

Draco's expression shifted. He'd kept a semblance of stony calm all the while Ginny and Harry had been in their presence. That all dissipated now.

She could see how truly tired he was. See the pain in his eyes.

She had caused that. She'd hurt him.

Draco shook his head, as if he could tell what she was thinking.

"Don't fucking apologize. You have nothing to be sorry for, you hear me? *Nothing*. I didn't get to you fast enough- I *knew* something like this would happen- I should've never let you out of my sight-"

"Draco, stop it!"

The utter anguish that twisted his features was disconcerting.

"You did everything you could!" Hermione insisted, "If anything, I should've pieced it together sooner. All of this could have been avoided and Hannah wouldn't've...oh goodness..."

Draco tugged at her arm and she gladly let him envelop her.

It felt so good to be held by him, to have him close. She could feel his fingers gripping her, like he was afraid she would run off again at a moment's notice.

"You're the least to be blamed in all of this," Draco said in a low voice.

"You can't be blamed either!"

"I promised you I'd..."

Draco trailed off. Hermione pulled away from their embrace to look at him.

"Promised what?"

He didn't seem to want to answer. The pain on his face vanished as his neutral mask swept back into place.

"You can't fool me with that," Hermione admonished, "I know you too well by now. What do you mean you promised?"

"I promised to protect you! But since we've been together, you're constantly in trouble because of me! And no matter what I do, I'm never able to get there in time!"

She took his face in her hands and watched as his mask began to crack.

"Draco..." she whispered, "are you talking about what Justin said down in the dungeons? About how he went after me because of you? Justin was *wrong*. It's not your fault he attacked me, no matter what he says. He attacked me because he's unstable. He just wanted to hurt you, blame you so he wouldn't have to feel guilt-"

"He would've left you alone if I hadn't pursued you-"

"He would have raped me in the potions lab!"

Draco fell silent.

Hermione firmly held his gaze.

Draco looked away.

"My family turned Finch-Fletchley into a monster. The Death Eaters took everything from him and- and my father-"

He choked on his words.

"You shouldn't carry the weight of your father's actions. The Death Eaters are in prison. And whatever's left will be hunted until the day they die. Voldemort is dead. The war is over. It's *over*, Draco."

She took his wrists until his fists slowly unclenched. She could see fingernail marks on his palms.

"Draco," she began, more gently, "because of you, I was spared the atrocity that Hannah was forced to go through. Because of you, I've learned so much about myself, my wants and needs. I've lived some of the happiest days of my life with you, this year. You've listened to me, learned with me, loved me- and yes, *protected* me, during a time when I thought I was alone. It *is* enough. You're *more* than enough and you must start believing it, because you're the only one that doesn't. You've even gotten Ginny convinced, which is nothing short of a miracle!"

She gave him a watery smile. She could have almost sworn that he almost gave her one back.

"How are you feeling?"

Her smile faltered.

"Not...good. I wasn't scared at the time obviously, but now...it feels like my mind has been broken into. I'm not hurt physically, but I feel so tired, like my head has been working overtime. I have these horrible memories that don't feel like mine, since I didn't have control over my body, but- but they *are* mine and I just...just have to deal with it somehow. And I'm...I'm *angry*. I never truly got to confront Justin and yell at him properly. He took that from me on top of everything else he tried to take."

Yes, she was furious. Furious at Justin but also furious at the Wizarding World, for allowing their youth to dabble in such dark potions.

Her ire gave her the strength she needed to make a plan going forward, like it so often did.

"I'm going to write about a million letters," Hermione said firmly, sitting back against her pillows, "I'll write them to the Aurors office, to the Department of Law and Regulation, to the Daily Prophet, and to Minister Shacklebolt himself! These potions should be higher up on the list of dangerous magical items and the consequences should be stricter. I'll especially write to Ron and George and have them take out any love potions, no matter how trivial, from their Wheezes catalogue. It is *not* okay! Love should never be forced. I owe it to Hannah to make sure nothing like this ever happens again!"

To that, Draco did smile.

"I missed you so goddamn much."

He stayed with her all day.

Madam Pomphrey returned to take Hermione's vitals and request that she stay a bit more just to confirm that everything was stable. Hermione took a Calming Draught and settled in.

She had visitors throughout the day. While it was unclear why Hermione Granger had ended up in the Hospital Wing, word seemed to have spread quickly enough.

Theo, Padma, Neville, Luna and Tracey all popped in at different intervals. Tracey had brought a large basket of tea and Luna hung some sort of round coconut with feathers on Hermione's bedpost, insisting it would help.

Ginny returned with Harry for an evening chat before he had to head back. He wished Hermione well and said he couldn't wait to see her when Hogwarts was done. Hermione's heart swelled and she thanked him for everything, including reaching out to her parents, causing him to look awkward and insist it was nothing.

Harry departed soon after, but Ginny stayed.

To Hermione's immense relief, Ginny and Draco seemed to get along better than expected. Granted, Draco didn't talk much, and when he did answer Ginny's digs, it was with curt sarcasm. But Ginny didn't seem to take offence. If anything, she seemed to have discovered a newfound enjoyment in poking fun at him.

Two days later, Hermione passed her Defense exam and she felt good about her performance.

The rest of the final week seemed to sweep by. A whirlwind of sweets and chats and visits to Hagrid's. For the latter, Draco was good on his word and brought a basket of Madam Pudifoot's biscuits, to everyone's relief.

While the details of the Amor Videri debacle remained vague, the whole school somehow seemed to be aware of two things- one: a Hufflepuff had been responsible for poisoning Cho Chang and Hermione Granger, and two: Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley had apprehended the culprit and saved Hermione.

Whispers followed Hermione and Draco everywhere, though they'd lost any hostility. At this point, Hermione was practically immune to staring eyes and pointing fingers. She was simply relieved that, for the most part, people left her alone and were content to simply gossip behind her back.

Hermione wrote her letters to the Ministry, and even had Theo look them over for her to make sure she didn't miss a single point. To her surprise, Blaise also asked to see them and, after he'd read over them carefully, gave her an approving nod. He didn't say much, but he did mention it was perhaps time he wrote a few similar letters to the Ministry of his own.

Hermione found Hannah in the greenhouse and the two of them sat and talked while Neville pruned some Tentaculas. Hermione told Hannah about the letters and asked if it was alright that she sent them and offered for Hannah to read them. Hannah declined, but thanked Hermione for everything she had done and encouraged the letters to be sent.

"I think it's very noble of you, but on my end, I...I just want to move on."

Hannah opened up a little about how she was talking through everything with Neville and Susan, but that she didn't want any further involvement in anything that would bring up bad memories.

"I just want to focus on myself and keep occupied. Neville and I have plans for a garden this summer, and we're collecting as many seeds that Sprout will allow us. I think that will help me... cope. It's very soothing labour. You're welcome to visit any time, Hermione. Both you and Draco."

Hermione said she would like that very much.

It didn't feel real.

Hogwarts was finally ending.

While their study group had officially disbanded, that didn't stop them from meeting by the lake for one last picnic.

Draco, Blaise and Theo tossed rocks into the water. Hannah, Neville, Luna and Tracey traded soup recipes. Daphne and Ernie, Terry and Susan argued politics good naturedly. Ginny and Padma talked about their plans post-graduation while Hermione chimed in.

The sun blanketed them. The rays shone off Draco's white blond hair in an almost shocking way. He looked up from the lake and caught Hermione staring. He threw her a grin and she smiled back at him, a smile that bespoke of how happy she was.

"Come on over you lot, let's take a picture! The last study session ever at Hogwarts!"

They crowded in and Terry volunteered his camera to memorialise their last week.

But he needn't have had to.

Hermione knew this moment would be engraved in her memory forever.

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They wore the hats.

The pointy witch hats, like the one the Wicked Witch of the West wore. The Great Hall was a veritable sea of them as the seventh and eighth year students stood in a line, waiting.

It reminded Hermione of the Sorting, but in reverse. The Headmistress called their names and, one by one, they walked up onto the stage and accepted their diploma. The other teachers stood in a row behind McGonagall, nodding and beaming with pride. Slughorn

dabbed at his eyes with his handkerchief and Flitwick kept bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet.

When Hermione's name was called, she held her head high and went to meet McGonagall.

McGonagall shook her hand firmly. With a wave of a wand, a piece of parchment materialised in the air and floated towards Hermione. Fancy, curling writing appeared, snaking and scattering across the page. A gold and red ribbon adorned the corner. No parchment had ever smelt fresher.

Congratulations to Miss Hermione Granger for completing her studies at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with unparalleled distinction.

Signed by Headmistress McGonagall

Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus.

Hermione felt like she was about to burst with emotion.

She could hear clapping and cheering and the booming sound of Hagrid in the background.

"Yeh did it, Hermione! Blimey, look at yeh, all grown up!"

McGonagall gave her a thin smile, probably the biggest smile Hermione had ever seen on the Headmistress.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger. This marks the beginning of what I know to be an extraordinary journey for you."

It took everything for Hermione to keep from crying.

Hermione returned to her spot in line and watched and cheered as all her friends were called up as well. A tear did finally slide down her cheek as she saw Draco accept his diploma. He'd done it, just like all the rest of them. The odds had been against him, but he'd made it through. They'd all made it through.

Not just this year, but all the others too.

Three-headed dogs and a Basilisk and angry centaurs and Giant spiders and rescuing Sirius and the Triwizard tournament and evil Umbridge and Voldemort at least six times and a *war* .

It was nothing short of a miracle that Hermione now held this little piece of parchment that proved she'd survived through everything her Hogwarts' years had thrown at her.

Draco leaned in as the Headmistress murmured something in his ear. Whatever it was, it made Draco's ears go pink and he nodded to McGonagall once before stiffly returning to the line of students. Hermione didn't need to hear what was said- the pride in McGonagall's gaze told Hermione everything she needed to know.

When the ceremony ended, the teachers shot sparks into the air in a rainbow of House colors and the Hall was filled with cheers. Hermione caught a glimpse of Theo and Padma kissing fiercely.

There was time after to do a round of handshakes with their Professors.

Both Professors Slughorn and Vector offered Hermione a summer internship. Flitwick secretly told Hermione that he'd never taught such a gifted student.

When all was said and done, Hermione took Draco's hand and they proudly exited through the front doors. Not a single glare was shot their way, nor a single scathing look. Everyone

was too happy, too euphoric. People were clapping each other on the back, chanting, hugging. All enmity was forgotten in this moment of pure, unbridled joy.

The boats were waiting for them.

Hermione shared hers with Draco and Ginny.

They sailed across the water, Hagrid in the lead. The sticking charms on their hats proved to work marvellously.

So much had changed in eight years, but the smell of the water, the wind in her hair, and the rush of the boat spurring forward was exactly the same as when she had first embarked on this wonderful adventure at eleven years old.

Then, she had been a bundle of nerves, a small little girl eager to prove herself and unaware of all the danger that lay ahead.

Now, she was a young woman, who knew her self-worth. She'd fought and cried and built unbreakable bonds and fell in love. She was confident and felt more ready than ever to face the future.

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"More sausage, dear?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

Hermione still couldn't get over the visual of Draco Malfoy, in a tailored suit that was far too overdressed, sandwiched between George and Ginny, at the Weasley's supper table, accepting a plate of sausage from Molly Weasley.

Hermione didn't know how the seating arrangement had happened, but she had a niggling feeling it wasn't a coincidence.

Ron kept shooting Malfoy looks of loathing from across the table, but, overall, had behaved rather well. Hermione did not doubt one bit that Ginny and Harry had given Ron a pre-supper talking-to.

Hermione didn't know what to expect coming to this supper. Naturally the whole Weasley family knew she and Draco were together. Not only had it been in the papers, but Ginny had most certainly spread the word.

It was, in fact, Ginny who had extended the unexpected invitation over coffee one afternoon.

Judging by the way Ginny hedged around the details, not many were thrilled by the prospect of welcoming in Draco Malfoy. But it seemed they were unanimously willing to give it a go for Hermione's sake and for that, Hermione was entirely grateful.

Draco apologised thoroughly and humbly and while Arthur had accepted it solemnly, Molly had burst into tears and gone on and on about how it was all water under the bridge. Hermione suspected Draco's good looks probably helped the matter along quite a bit, that and his impeccable manners.

"Toadying git," Ron was heard muttering right before Ginny trod on his foot.

"So Shacklebolt offered you a *job* ?" Harry asked Hermione when they'd all squeezed round the table.

"Yes, he was rather impressed by my letter. He said my proposal for love potion law adjustments was very detailed and convincing. He forwarded it to all the concerned departments. Obviously laws don't change overnight, but Kingsley said this was something the general public would have no trouble getting behind and assured me the necessary steps were being taken to put it under review. He mentioned that since the Prophet had run a brief

article on the matter, other people have been writing in with similar sentiments. He then said my research was impressive and he'd heard I'd gotten perfect scores on my N.E.W.T.s so he... he offered me a job."

"That's great Hermione!"

"Is it Junior Assistant to the Minister of Magic? Wasn't that Percy's job?"

"It was. It's one of the most prestigious positions you can receive if you're looking to climb the ladder," Percy said, taking a bite of carrot and looking a little put out.

"So when do you start?" Ron piped up, helping himself to seconds.

"She's not taking it, of course," Draco answered stiffly.

Ron glared at him.

"Well, of course she is. Do you even know what this means for her? She'd be on the fast track for Minister of Magic if she wanted to!"

"Er...Actually Draco's right, Ron. I refused."

A bit of asparagus fell out of Ron's mouth.

" *Why* ? What the hell did you tell her?" Ron said aggressively, rounding on Draco.

"I didn't tell her anything, Weas- *Ron*, " Draco snapped, looking like he had to force Ron's name out with a stick. Draco'd clearly realised his usual jabs of 'Weasel' and 'Weaselby' had

to be unlearned, especially in present company of nothing *but* Weasleys. Hermione had to stifle a snort.

"I'm also finding out about this now. But clearly Hermione has other plans in mind or she'd be bouncing off the walls with nerves by now," Draco finished with a bit more finesse.

"I do *not* bounce off the walls with nerves," Hermione countered and was more than a little miffed that no one seemed convinced.

"I think Kingsley is more than a capable Minister and the Ministry is in good hands with him. That said, I think change takes time and is rarely born within a government. It's the people who decide what they want and the media is what puts it out there. More than ever I think a paper is the right way to go. I've decided to take Professor Vector up on her offer and intern with some of her associates for a year and then after that, Draco and I will schedule International Portkeys to visit a few places in East Asia. I've heard of a lot of ancient monasteries that practise the most fascinating magic. Then, I'll study journalism and hopefully complete a research-based Master's degree in effective investigative journalism using Arithmantic principles. Then, I will be able to give a sufficient voice to beings who most need to be heard and-

"Tell me, Hermione, is there anywhere in all this that you've scheduled breathing? It might come in handy down the line," George interrupted her monologue, cutting his sausage and accidentally-on-purpose knocking his elbow repeatedly into Draco's.

"But *Minister of Magic* , Hermione," Ron moaned, as if he'd heard not a single word she'd just said.

Arthur leaned in, wiping his mouth on a napkin.

"Well, I think that sounds splendid, Hermione. You will tell me all about that Muggle University of yours, won't you? I've heard they've started using these fascinating rectangular boxes to communicate-

"Don't pester her about that already, dear, she's barely out of Hogwarts. More potatoes, Draco?"

"Please. Everything is delicious, Mrs. Weasley."

" *Everything is delicious, Mrs. Weasley* ," Ron imitated rudely under his breath, causing Harry to choke into his glass of water.

Hermione frowned.

"And how is the business, George?" She asked primly, specifically not addressing Ron.

"Doing good! Ron's secured us a spot in Hogsmeade so we're all set to expand over the summer. We've just finished binning the last of our love potion trinkets and we'll be chasing them out with our new *Mayhem Memos* products. Flying paper planes that cause all sorts of explosions when you open them. It'll be brilliant."

Hermione suddenly had another reason to be grateful that she wouldn't be returning to Hogwarts ever again.

The meal progressed. They discussed Ginny's meeting with the recruiter for the Holyhead Harpies reserve team. Ginny said it went well and was waiting for a response for when she would take the flying test.

There seemed to be nothing but good news all around.

When everyone had eaten their fill, Hermione escaped to the living room where she collapsed on the sofa in a meal-induced coma.

Soon after, Ron came to join her.

"How is Katie?"

"She's doing all right. I invited her to supper but she wasn't feeling well."

Ron shot a dark look over at Draco.

"I...I know it's probably not easy to have Malfoy here. But he really did save me, Ron. And I know if he could take everything back from sixth year, he would have."

"Yeah, Harry and Ginny have already drilled it into me, thanks. D'you know, having him here- I sort of feel like I've gone mad? Blimey, you've any idea the amount of time we spent despising this prat? And all of a sudden, he's saved your life and mum's serving him potatoes and we're all acting like

none of it happened and he didn't try to get us expelled more times than there are Tuesdays."

"I know, Ron, I *know* . Believe me when I say I've thought those same things hundreds of times."

"He really makes you happy? This isn't some sort of hallucination I'm having?"

She watched Draco, sitting at a table across the room, talking with Harry. Harry was leaning forward, saying something, his hands palm up as if insisting on something. Draco sat, stiff-backed, though Hermione could tell he was listening intently. Draco answered something and Harry actually broke out into a grin.

Hermione smiled before she could help it.

"He does. He really does. I don't know how it happened, but he just *fits* ."

Ron's lips tightened as if he was holding something back and deciding on what to say instead. He finally cleared his throat.

"Well, he hasn't said one bad thing since he's been here tonight, so I suppose that counts for something."

"He knows how important you all are to me. Like family."

Ron seemed to soften a little at that.

"He needs to apologise to Katie. And I can't promise she'll forgive him either, not that she has any obligation to."

"I promise, it'll be the first thing he does if he meets her. And if Katie is still uncomfortable, I...I won't bring him round anymore, simple as that. I know him being here brings back some of the...the worst memories," Hermione said gravely.

Ron was always easy to read. He was an open book with his emotions. She knew what it was taking for him to accept Draco into his family home.

Hermione found Ron surprising her, however.

Right now, he looked at her with a willingness to adapt.

"You know, you've changed a lot as well," she mused.

"Have I?" Ron asked, looking skeptical.

"Yes. I don't know if old Ron would've considered giving Draco Malfoy a chance. I think old Ron would've given me the silent treatment all night and wouldn't've had the maturity to come have a conversation with me."

"I dunno, I did sort of did give you the silent treatment, didn't I? I didn't answer your letters."

"No, I suppose you didn't. Though, I can't say I entirely blame you."

Ron sighed.

"Look, I won't promise to be best mates with him, he still rubs me the wrong way with all of his smarmy airs. But I'll tolerate him if you really feel that strongly about him. You've never steered yourself wrong before, and I don't think you're about to start any time soon. I'll be keeping an eye out though."

Hermione smiled and she felt her heart warm for Ron.

"You know, I rather think your emotional range has increased to a tablespoon."

"Oh, bugger off," Ron grumbled, tossing a pillow at her shoulder, but he threw her a lopsided smile.

They all pitched in with the washing up and when it was time to depart, Hermione felt light, despite all the food she'd eaten.

As she shrugged into her coat, a yell made her jump.

"Argh! What in the-"

A hearty squelch came from Draco's shoes as some sort of green goo oozed out of the top. A putrid smell arose that had Hermione gagging. Draco looked mortified.

Ginny was laughing so hard, she'd fallen to the ground.

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Despite George's unsightly prank, Draco deemed the evening at the Weasley's as 'noisy but reasonably tolerable'.

Hermione was proud of Draco.

It was a joy to see him mending things, rebuilding bridges and fixing what needed to be fixed, little by little.

Speaking of fixing, Hermione had moved back into her old bedroom and she could feel her relationship with her parents slowly returning to how it was.

The whole Amor Videri ordeal had given her more perspective on what it must have felt for her mum and dad to wake up one day and find they'd lived a lie and that their minds had been tampered with.

Hermione had sat down with them and finally told them, at length, all of what happened the year she'd been Horcrux hunting.

Her mother had cried and her father looked devastated. They'd hugged for long moments and Hermione could feel at long last, the true healing had begun.

Being free from school felt odd.

It almost hadn't really sunk in yet that she wouldn't be returning to Hogwarts.

Draco came to visit her, often.

While her parents had known she'd been bullied by Draco when they were young, Hermione had never gone much into the specifics of it, past third year (at thirteen, she didn't think her parents would appreciate much that she'd punched a boy at school, no matter how deserving of it he'd been, and since then, she'd refrained from ailing too much over Draco's poor behaviour.)

Jean and Richard chalked it up to playground love and welcomed Draco in with open arms, insisting he stay for dinner on the afternoons he popped in.

They would walk about the town and Hermione would show Draco all the places she'd grown up around- the local library, the shopping centre, the market.

While the Muggle world didn't have all the bells and whistles that the Wizarding World had, it was quieter. Draco didn't have to worry about being yelled at in the streets and Hermione didn't have to stop every few feet by strangers who wanted to shake her hand.

After dinner with her parents, Draco would make a show of saying goodbye and then, later, when everyone was asleep, Hermione would silence her bedroom, activate her TeleGalleon and Draco would Apparate next to her, snogging her right into her mattress.

It was surreal, shagging Draco in her magically enlarged bed. He did it with an easy familiarity, considering he'd already had a practice run at it back in their Room of Requirement days.

It was also charming to watch him try and figure out how all her electronic devices worked without magic. He spent a good minute turning her lamp on and off and she caught him later eyeing all her plugs suspiciously.

She never went to Draco's home and he never invited her.

She knew during part of their last school year, the Manor had undergone a thorough investigation.

Due to the many who had been murdered and tortured there, the Auror Department had scoured the place for evidence to build further cases against Death Eaters in custody as well as search for clues to the whereabouts of anyone on the long list of missing persons that had vanished during the war. During Voldemort's stay, Lucius had completely lost control of his home and, while the Malfoys had fessed up to as much as they could, they'd also had to admit to not being necessarily privy to every single thing that could have happened on the premises.

The Mansion was enormous, the grounds were vast and there were easily between five to fifteen Death Eaters skulking about at a time. Who knows what could have gone on behind closed doors throughout Voldemort's siege.

Much of the Manor's possessions had been confiscated, though nothing, according to Draco, that mattered. Lucius' rare dark artefact collection had been almost entirely swept away due to the illegal nature of most of the items. Quite a few cursed family heirlooms had to be removed as well.

All this meant that, for Draco, moving out of his temporary flat and back in to the Manor this summer had been difficult. Furthermore, true to Draco's stoic fashion, he loathed talking about it.

Hermione had no desire to revisit that place, but she couldn't imagine what it must feel like for Draco to return to it. She tried to see where his head was at, but whenever Hermione mentioned the Manor, he clammed up or changed the subject.

Despite Draco's unwillingness to involve her in any sort of way regarding his family home, Hermione knew, somehow, this wasn't a subject that could simply be shelved.

A letter arrived the following week that further confirmed this sentiment.

Dear Miss Granger,

Please join me for afternoon tea, this Saturday, one o'clock at Malfoy Manor.

Sincerely,

Narcissa Malfoy

The invitation was concise enough, but Hermione still read through it five times to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

She gave Draco a call immediately after.

"I told her to leave it be!" She could hear Draco's angry voice raging from the TeleGalleon.

"How long has she known? You *did* tell her about us, didn't you?" Hermione questioned sternly.

"Of course I did. I didn't have much choice when the Prophet caught wind of it back in March, did I? But I specifically told her she'd be meeting you on our terms. Leave it to Mother to ambush you with a letter behind my back."

"Well, eventually I have to meet her at some point, so now is as good a time as any."

"You don't *have* to meet her. Not like this. I'll set a later date, I'll make a reservation for us at some restaurant, you won't have to come to the Manor-"

"Draco, I don't mind going to the Manor. I'm not...happy about it, but it's still a part of who you are and if you have to be there every day, even though I know you hate it, then I can very well suck it up for one afternoon tea party."

Draco made a noise of frustration.

"That's not the point, Hermione! She remembers what happened to you there, she isn't daft. She's testing you with one of her manipulative games because this is what my mother does! She says one thing to your face but is already setting twelve different little plans in motion, without you even knowing or being able to put a stop to it!"

"What plans could she possibly have? I'm not afraid of her."

Draco sighed.

"It's... complicated. You know er...Pureblood families tend to- to marry quite young..."

Hermione sucked in her breath.

"Draco...are you asking me to marry you?"

"No! I mean...I wouldn't- that's not- What I mean to say is the Malfoy estate has a lot tied to it and my mother... Well, she'd want to know it was taken care of. Part of that means making sure I find a wife. It's why she signed me away to Astoria without even consulting me."

Hermione pursed her lips.

"I see. She was looking forward to having Astoria as a daughter in law and instead she's got...me."

"That's- Listen Hermione, I don't give a fuck what my mother wants when it comes to whom I choose to be with. I just think she'll be difficult and it irks me that she's sneaking about trying to lure you into...whatever it is her game is."

"Well, I'll just have to keep my guard up. There's nothing she could possibly say to make me want to break up with you, and I doubt she'll come at me with a cudgel so why worry? Will you be there?"

"No, and neither will you. I refuse to let you walk right into something I know for a fact is a trap."

"For goodness' sake Draco, you can't put this off forever! I *will* go to this tea party and meet Mrs. Malfoy and there's nothing you can say that will stop me!"

She could almost hear him grinding his teeth.

"Why must you be so bloody stubborn! I'm not saying you'll never meet her, only that I'll arrange things when you're ready and not taken by surprise!"

"I *am* ready, Draco. I've been ready to meet Narcissa Malfoy since I fell in love with you! I think it's rather *you* who isn't ready!"

"You're infuriating!"

"You're delaying the inevitable!"

"I won't stand to subject you to any more of my family's prejudices!"

"I know you hate it there!" Hermione burst out, "In that Manor! I know you don't want to talk about it, but I need to be let into your life if we're going to stay together. You've fit into mine wonderfully. My parents adore you, the Weasleys have welcomed you, even Crookshanks has

stopped hissing everytime you're over which, for him, is a grand improvement. You're slotting into my world, Draco, and I'm so pleased and proud. But you can't lock me out of yours. I won't stand by while you face it on your own. I want to be with you, through the good and the bad and the awkward and the uncomfortable and if that means accepting tea with your mother, then so be it!"

Hermione was huffing from her speech that had very little pause in it.

Silence on the other end.

"Draco? Are you there?" She called in annoyance, pushing her mouth as close to the Galleon as it would go. If he had hung up on her she would absolutely put her foot up his-

"You're right. I do hate it here. The nightmares are back. I know the Dark Lord is dead but... it's like I can still picture him *here*. Sitting at *our* table. Standing at the head of *our* stairs. Stalking down *our* halls like they were his. I hate the foyer because that's where my mother was tortured by her sister. I hate the dining room because it was where the Dark Lord killed his small prey and forced us to watch. I hate the Drawing Room because *you* were almost killed there. Every nook and cranny has been tainted and I feel constantly reminded of how I just...sat by and watched it all happen."

"I don't want you near any of that," Draco persisted, "this house feels...wrong now. I'd burn it to the ground but mother insists that it would be a waste of ancestral history. As if that history is even worth preserving."

Draco made a disparaging sound.

"Draco..." Hermione began, much gentler this time, "remember our little room together? The one you made to look like a potential home?"

"Of course," he sounded drained, "I think about it all the time."

"Well, I want that for us one day. Maybe one day soon. I love my parents, and I'm so grateful and happy to be welcomed back by them. But I really would like my own space. There are certain magical conveniences their space just doesn't supply. I'd like more room for a fireplace, for instance, and it would be nice to Apparate without having to conceal myself from the neighbours all the time. I've some money saved up but perhaps when I've started my internship in August, we could start looking around for something we might like? Perhaps near to both our areas of work?"

It sounded like Draco had just flopped onto his bed.

"I would love that," he said in a soft voice.

She felt a quiver of excitement travel up her spine.

"Actually," Draco began slowly, "I meant to tell you earlier before I got distracted by talks of my mother. I've been hired to work alongside one of my father's accountants. I'll learn all I need to know so that I'll be able to balance the Manor's books properly and perhaps start my own firm thereafter. I've...been walking around the area where the office is and there are a few vacants apartments. Some of which are quite nice..."

Hermione gaped.

"You visited them??"

"Only two. But one of them had high windows, much like the ones we had in the Room of Requirement. It made me think of you. And how much I want to share a space with you."

"I can't believe you're already looking! Why didn't you tell me? I would have come with you!"

"I rather thought it might be a bit sudden and I didn't want you to feel pressured. Besides, you seemed very happy to live again with your parents so I didn't want to...to interfere."

Hermione laughed.

"Oh, Draco! Of course I would love to live with you! Goodness...It does feel sudden, doesn't it? But I already feel like we've lived together in a way. It feels strange to sleep without you now and I miss waking up with you so much."

"I miss it too, little lion."

She grinned and was certain she could hear a smile in his voice as well.

"In due time, I feel confident we can make it happen," Hermione said briskly, coming down from her daydream, "first thing's first though: I must meet your mother because there is no way I'm wrenching her son away from her house without at least giving her the courtesy of a talk first."

Draco groaned but finally reluctantly conceded.

Conclusion

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack- Swing Life Away by Rise Against

The only nice robes Hermione owned were her dress robes for the Yule Ball - highly inappropriate for tea.

In a kerfuffle of nerves, she'd invited Ginny over to help her decide what was the most suitable to wear from her closet.

They'd opted on a simple yellow sundress which Ginny deemed was plain but passable.

"You are quite sure you want to do this? I personally think I'd rather eat four slugs than sit at a table with Narcissa Malfoy. I can help you fake your own death and move you out of the country instead, if you'd prefer."

"Ginny, don't be silly, I have to do this. He met my family, it's only right I return the favour."

"Even *he* doesn't want you to go. Say what you want about Malfoy, but his sense of preservation is sound."

"It's the right thing to do," Hermione insisted firmly, "if I have a horrible time, I just won't go back."

"Assuming you make it out in one piece," Ginny muttered.

Hermione scowled.

When Ginny departed later on, she shot Hermione a sympathetic grin that could only be interpreted as 'better you than me'. Hermione hardly felt reassured.

On Saturday, Draco came to fetch Hermione at the gates of the Manor.

He looked tense but very debonair in his usual pressed black trousers, black chemise and grey cardigan.

He eyed her up and down and suddenly she worried her sundress was far too casual. Hermione had also barely managed to tame her hair into a bun.

"You look beautiful," he murmured and offered his arm. She blushed at his compliment and let out a small breath of relief. She could do this.

"It's not too late to back out, you know. I'll tell mother you caught the flu," he drawled.

"I'm here now. May as well get it done. Besides, I'm sure your mother is very charming."

"I did warn her to behave."

Draco looked straight ahead, his jaw clenching. Hermione recognized this particular blank expression as nerves.

"I'll be fine, Draco. Don't worry."

He gave her a curt nod and led her up to the Manor.

Hermione's last memory of Narcissa Malfoy was at the Battle of Hogwarts. She'd sat next to Draco and Lucius in the aftermath. She'd fought tooth and nail to get her son back. Had defied Voldemort, defied her husband, defied her whole entourage and risked her life to bring Harry back in order to find Draco. Her son and her legacy had been more important to her than everything else.

Yet as Narcissa had sat at one of the tables, hugging her son, she hadn't been crying, nor falling to pieces. She'd remained poised, composed and in control.

Hermione could see where Draco had got it from.

Now that Hermione wasn't pleading for her life or being tortured, she could fully appreciate the ostentatious elegance of the Manor.

Rich carpets, ornate tapestries, black marble columns, artwork and statues and vases filled with long-stemmed cream and burgundy coloured flowers- the Manor supplied everything you could think of when it came to Victorian finery.

The lights were dim and the subdued color palette left the halls feeling somewhat cold. Indubitably done on purpose.

This home was designed to impress but also to intimidate.

As Draco and Hermione turned the corner, Hermione was met with a sight that took her breath away.

The tea room was in a solar nook. Grandiose, leafy plants that looked imported from warmer countries stood proudly, catching the rays of sunlight that filtered through the ceiling panes. Some pulsed on their own, as if breathing.

An ornamented iron garden table rested in the middle of all the foliage. The table was laden with a white lace tablecloth and one of the most impressive tea settings Hermione had ever

seen. The tea pot and cups looked fashionably vintage. There was milk, sugar, cream, honey, plates of biscuits, bowls of nuts, and small cupcakes. Everything edible looked bitesize.

Narcissa sat on one of the chairs with impeccable posture. One of her ankles was tucked under the other, the perfect picture of a lady.

She was absolutely stunning. Her silver-blond hair shone under the sun with a streak of grey that made the Malfoy matriarch look even more statuesque and foreboding. She wore black and white robes that were unmistakably designer, with their trim, smart edges that fit Narcissa's delicate forms perfectly. The overall look was feminine and very modern, although it was unsurprising that Narcissa Malfoy would be up to date with the latest styles.

Narcissa did not smile. She looked Hermione up and down and Hermione had the faint impression that her sundress had probably failed Narcissa's dress code standards.

Finally, Narcissa imperiously inclined her head for Hermione and Draco to sit.

Draco pulled Hermione's chair out for her before seating himself to her left. Hermione could see him eyeing his mother suspiciously.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation, Miss Granger. I do hope your journey here has been smooth?"

"Y-yes, very much so. Thank you for having me, Mrs. Malfoy."

It was impossible not to be nervous. Narcissa's tone was commanding in a soft way.

"Ooh! I almost forgot, I brought this to thank you," Hermione exclaimed.

Hermione opened her beaded bag and began rummaging around. The sounds of clanking and clattering as she pushed items aside were embarrassingly deafening, even more so since no

one was speaking. Hermione flushed, finally remembering to pull out her wand and summon the basket of crumpets she'd bought from the Muggle bakery near her house.

Hermione set the basket on the table next to the cupcakes with a nervous smile that Narcissa did not return.

"They're from a nice little bakery round the corner of where I live. Husband and wife owned I believe. They make wonderful breads and cakes and cheeses as well. I've taken Draco a few times and it's been...er...very nice..."

Hermione trailed off, becoming aware she was babbling.

"How lovely," Narcissa answered in a way that made Hermione think Narcissa didn't think it lovely at all.

"It was *quite* lovely indeed. Perhaps we could take you someday," Draco drawled casually, dropping a crumpet on his plate and proceeding to serve Hermione some tea. He cast a petulant look at his mother.

Narcissa pursed her lips.

Of course Narcissa would have caught on that it was a Muggle bakery, judging by the sour look on her face.

"Perhaps," Narcissa said simply, reaching forward, daintily picking up a crumpet and taking a small bite, before setting it on her plate, pinky in the air.

"So, tell me, Miss Granger-"

"Oh, please, call me Hermione!"

In her eagerness, Hermione had momentarily forgotten that interrupting Narcissa was probably the epitome of rudeness. She had become so used to the Weasley household when everyone talked over each other. She could feel her cheeks heating up with embarrassment.

Narcissa paused for a moment.

Why on earth were Malfoys so hard to read?

Did the whole damn family know Occlumency?

"Of course. Tell me, Hermione, how did you and Draco start seeing each other?"

"I asked her to be my potions partner," Draco replied stiffly, "we were the top two in class, so it made sense."

"Do you always speak on Hermione's behalf?" Narcissa asked pointedly.

Draco clenched his jaw but sat back, letting Hermione take the floor. Hermione swallowed.

"Y-yes, Draco asked me to partner with him and through that, I got to know him. He's brilliant and very studious."

"Quite a fortuitous turn of events, especially considering your *history* ."

"Our- our history?"

Narcissa's keen eyes were piercing and Hermione felt like she was being x-rayed.

"You both certainly were at odds with each other for most of your schooling, were you not? I remember seeing it for myself once at Madam Malkins. You may not recall, it was quite some time ago."

Hermione's lips tightened together. She did indeed remember that encounter the summer before sixth year. It was quite hard to forget as Narcissa had called her 'scum'.

Why would Narcissa bring this up now unless she was trying to get a rise out of Hermione? Scare her away most likely. But Hermione was not one to back down.

"Draco has changed a lot and so have I. I think many people re-evaluated their beliefs after the war," Hermione replied, trying to keep her rising temper in check by taking a gulp of tea.

"How exceptionally mature of both of you," Narcissa returned slowly. Narcissa's manners were refined to the point where Hermione couldn't tell if this was sarcastic or not.

"It is so good to finally chat," Narcissa continued, not giving Hermione time to analyse any hidden meanings, "Did you know I had to find out about your relationship in the papers? Imagine my surprise. My only son couldn't even deign to let me know he'd found a little girlfriend."

Maybe it's because you're a prejudiced bigot who's brainwashed your son to believe a bunch of pureblood hogwash.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hermione answered shortly.

Draco rolled his eyes.

"Oh please, mother, spare us your dramatics. We kept it quiet from everyone in the beginning, not just you."

Narcissa's eyes snapped to Draco.

"Yes, well, I still would have appreciated a warning. Letters and Floo calls were piling in asking the most ridiculous questions. If I had known about this scandal in advance, I would have taken steps to be better prepared against the onslaught."

Hermione did feel guilty at that. At the time, she had been so busy feeling bombarded by unwanted attention that she hadn't realised how her and Draco's relation would have affected others around them.

"I am terribly sorry," Hermione repeated, with more sincerity this time, "my friends found out about it that way too and it's not how I would have wanted it to happen."

"Hermione, you would do well to remember you are in the spotlight now. The Malfoy name is also well-known and it would not do to comport yourself in a way that would project a less favourable image to the press."

"Mother, that's enough. I did not bring Hermione here to be lectured by you, nor to dredge up unpleasant memories," Draco interjected.

"I'm merely warning her, dear. She hasn't grown up in high society like you have. She doesn't necessarily understand the weight of the press."

"She understands it better than you think."

Of course Draco was referring to when Hermione trapped Rita Skeeter in a jar. Hermione knew it was one of his favourite stories of hers. She couldn't help smirking a little to herself. Draco gave Hermione the tiniest of smirks back.

Narcissa narrowed her eyes slightly and then shivered.

"It's colder in here than I anticipated. Draco, would you mind fetching my shawl from the sitting room?"

Draco arched an eyebrow.

"Why not ask Franz to get it for you?"

"Is it too much to ask my son to take care of me?"

Draco scowled.

Hermione laid a hand on his arm.

"It's okay, Draco," she said softly. He gave her a hesitant look before scraping his chair back and reluctantly leaving the two women alone.

Hermione had a hunch Narcissa would have found an excuse to get her alone sooner or later anyways. It was better they got it over with as soon as possible and besides, Hermione was curious to get a glimpse into Narcissa's real intentions.

Narcissa's already impossibly cold gaze seemed to turn to ice when Draco left the room. She steepled her fingers in front of her.

"Now then, let us speak plainly, shall we? What is it you want from my son?"

Hermione blinked.

"Pardon?"

"You are fraternising with Draco. Why?"

"I... Well, like I said, he is brilliant and attentive and-"

"I know my son has many qualities. I raised him. But what I can't seem to understand, Hermione, is why one such as yourself would go through such pains to discover them, considering what you have dealt with regarding my family."

"I know it's hard to believe. But I can assure you, I... I love Draco very much. He was there for me, during a time where my two best friends were absent, and I don't think I would be here today if it wasn't for him."

A loud pop startled Hermione so hard she jumped in her seat, almost upending a tray of tarts.

A House Elf in a little bow tie and waistcoat appeared, holding a fresh pot of tea. He bowed, presenting the tray.

"Would the Madams like more tea?"

"Yes, thank you, Franz."

The Elf poured more of the steaming herbal blend into both their cups before setting the new teapot on the table and taking the old one away.

He gave both Narcissa and Hermione a short bow before disappearing with another loud pop.

Narcissa blew on her cup and took a sip while Hermione stared at the space where the Elf had disappeared.

"So you have come to appreciate Draco's many qualities, that still doesn't-"

"Your Elf..."

Narcissa, for the first time, showed faint signs of emotion. Impatience. She raised an eyebrow that was extremely reminiscent of when Draco did it.

"Yes? What about him?"

"He has a bow tie."

"Very astute," Narcissa replied drily.

"No, I meant-" Hermione turned to face Narcissa, her eyes wide, "you've given him clothes. He's a free Elf?"

Narcissa set her tea cup on its saucer before dabbing at her lips with a napkin.

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Because when my late husband was foolish enough to be tricked into freeing our last Elf with a sock, I decided I wouldn't let that happen again. From my experience, gold will buy the best loyalty. Even House Elf customs are not as fail-safe as a sack of Galleons. Gold, Hermione. Gold and Magic. The two pillars of power."

Hermione didn't know what to think about that. Inadvertently, she and Narcissa had the same views on Elfs, though they'd apparently arrived with different intentions. It was...puzzling and more than a little unsettling.

"Speaking of which," Narcissa continued. She pulled her wand out from a concealed pocket of her dress robes.

Hermione tensed.

But Narcissa merely waved it lazily, conjuring a sack that clanked loudly when it dropped next to the butter.

"There are one thousand Galleons in this bag. Sufficient enough to fund any near future endeavours or any activist projects you may want to tackle."

Hermione almost choked on her sip of tea.

Narcissa leaned in, her eyes glittering.

"I trust this is enough for you to walk out of Draco's life for good?"

Hermione felt her blood boil.

This was why Narcissa had invited her over? To blackmail her away? Hermione fumed and set her teacup down on its saucer with a clatter that indicated more force than necessary.

"Is this some kind of a sick joke?"

"I do not *joke* , Hermione."

"You think you can just- just bargain away my feelings? I know I'm not the woman you would choose for your son. I'm not pureblood and I'm not wealthy and I haven't been raised by your customs. But I love him and he loves me and no money will ever change that!"

Hermione stood up in a rage, her chair scraping noisily on the tiles. Narcissa only surveyed her with her icy stare. Her grey eyes were the same as Draco's albeit with none of his indulgence.

"Don't be ridiculous," Narcissa answered slowly, as if addressing a child, "Do you really think this is about blood purity? You are now considered a heroine in the Wizarding World. You have important social status and plenty of opportunities if you would have the ambition to pursue them. People will be bending over backwards to give you what you want. You are top of your class so you are far from stupid. You are pretty enough that it won't take much more to make you shine. More suitable attire and light makeup should be enough. It would do Draco very well to eventually be married to someone that is regarded so highly by Wizarding society, especially given how his father has fallen from grace. In theory, I could ignore your blood status, because otherwise, you are an excellent match for my son."

Hermione was left speechless, unsure if she was being complimented or insulted.

"Well...well then...What in heaven's name is the problem?"

Narcissa stood slowly with an uncanny smoothness to meet Hermione's eyes.

"The *problem* ," she enunciated, taking a glided step towards Hermione, "is that I witnessed with my own eyes as my sister tortured you and branded you in this very house. My *problem* is that you have a reputation, Hermione. Muggle champion, Harry Potter's good friend- you're right in the thick of blood traitors and Muggleborns."

"So it *is* because of my blood-"

"No, *Hermione* . It is not because of that," Narcissa hissed and Hermione could finally see signs of anger paint Narcissa's features, "it is because I can't fathom how, given all of those aforementioned points, someone like you would come to love someone like my son. Why would someone who's flesh has been cut open in *this very house* , would want to build ties to the boy who resides here and whose Aunt did the cutting? Whose mother was prepared to hand her and her little savior friends over to the Dark Lord? Whose father had attempted to murder her several times? It simply makes no sense. Which leads me to conclude that you are using him and I did not risk everything to save his life so that he could then fall prey to someone who would take advantage of him. So name your price. Whatever it is, I will gladly pay it. You will get your gold, and we shall have our peace."

Hermione spluttered.

"You...you think I did all this for *gold* ? I would *never* - If you even bothered to get to know me, you would know that I would never use Draco that way!"

"Then are you with him out of guilt? Out of revenge? Is this some ploy to break him even more? Regardless, I will have none of it. I have seen him suffer enough! You will take this money and I never want to see you near him ever again!"

"You can't make that decision for us!"

"I can and I will. I don't know what trickery or love potion you used but Draco is clearly besotted with you. I do not trust him to make the proper decisions. He is clearly blinded by love in a way that I've never seen before and is beyond any counselling. So I am left with no choice but to chase you off myself."

Hermione almost laughed at the irony.

And then, realisation hit her.

"You- you've been writing to him to convince him to break up with me! That's why he didn't want me to meet you!"

"If you don't want gold, then what is it? Jewels? Connections? Name a Ministry Department and I will pull the necessary strings to ensure your placement."

"What are you- *No* ! Are you mad? You think you're the first person to stand there and tell me I can't be with him? We've come this far and that's because what we have is real and I'm not willing to toss it away for gold, for jobs for anything! I want us to build a life together and grow together! I want to make more happy memories with him and share my life with him! Draco has so much to offer the world and I've seen it firsthand! He scraped his way back from one of the worst possible situations and now he is thriving and my family actually likes him and seeing him make amends has been such a powerful thing and I am so, so proud of him! Proud that he's won people over and proud of who he has become! He's worked so hard and keeps working hard to restore his name for his sake *and* yours! He strives to be the best person he can be! He pushes me to succeed and it makes me want to do the same for him! I admire him and respect him so very much and I'll be damned if I miss out on living each day with someone like that because his *mother* says so!"

Hermione was breathing hard. Tears of frustration were prickling her eyes. She could feel strands of her hair tickling her neck and cheeks from where her bun had loosened during her impassioned speech. She'd clearly lost it.

Narcissa was just staring at her.

What now?

She should leave. She'd just yelled at Narcissa Malfoy in Narcissa Malfoy's home. There was no coming back from that. There was no redeeming herself.

Hermione bent to pick up her beaded bag and mutter a quick goodbye when she heard footsteps echo on the marble floor.

"I had to look for your blasted shawl everywhere, mother, it was *not* in the sitting room like you'd said though I'm hardly surprised- is everything alright?"

Draco walked in, a silk shawl draped over his arm.

His eyes narrowed as he took in the sight of both women standing, looking a little red in the cheeks.

"Yes, dear, I had just finished showing Hermione the Brazilian hyacinths. Hermione, thank you very much for joining me today."

To Hermione's utter bafflement, Narcissa took her hand in both of hers.

"You'll do," Narcissa said in a low voice only Hermione could hear.

Narcissa gave Hermione's hand one last pat before gliding over to Draco, taking her shawl and pecking him on the cheek.

"I'm quite tuckered out. I think I'll retire for a nap. Draco, do show Hermione the library, I think she will like it. Hermione, I hope to see you again, very soon. You are welcome back any time."

Narcissa smiled almost imperceptibly before sweeping away, out the door.

Hermione just stood there, at a complete loss for words.

"That seemed to go...well?" Draco asked, walking forward and taking Hermione in his arms.

"I...er...think I passed the test?"

Draco gave her an apologetic kiss on the head.

"I hope she wasn't rude to you. Did she say anything untoward?"

"I...can tell she loves you very much. It's comforting to know your mum cares so much about you."

Draco's expression softened.

"Thank you for doing this. I know my mother isn't the easiest person to get along with. She does seem to like you, though. She usually doesn't converse much to those she thinks are beneath her."

"I mean I think I ...sort of like her? I *think* ?"

Draco laughed and took her hand.

"Come on, I'll show you the Manor's extensive collection of Rune encyclopaedias. That'll cheer you up."

Hermione's eyes widened in delight as she followed Draco out.

The sack of a thousand Galleons remained on the table, completely forgotten.

//

"Are we sure this is safe?"

"I don't think it is,"

"How's it all held together if there's no magic? It looks like it'll tumble apart at any time."

"Does it hurt? Those people look like they're grimacing in pain."

"I *really* don't think this is safe."

Hermione was quickly realising that bringing six wizards to a Muggle amusement park was probably not the best idea. She was growing tired of having to reassure them all that they weren't about to fall to their deaths and Harry was little help as the Dursleys had unsurprisingly never taken him to an amusement park either.

It was awkward in the beginning and Hermione wasn't sure if Katie was even going to show.

To Katie's credit however, not only did she show up early with Ron, but she took Draco aside and they had a chat.

Draco apologised profusely and Katie told him she was open to putting it behind them and that, given the extreme circumstances of the situation, she understood many might've done the same thing he had.

Once again, Hermione marvelled at how well Katie meshed with Ron. Katie shared much of Ron's jokey nature, but she was much more patient and calm. Some of it had apparently rubbed off on Ron as well, because Hermione noticed Ron had grown into those qualities a bit himself.

They were joined shortly after by Theo and Padma, followed by Harry and Ginny.

They spent a time walking around, ogling the various rides and deciding what to try first.

It was Ginny that made the executive decision that they should start with the largest and most terrifying roller coaster of the park.

And here they stood, waiting in line as Ron, Katie, Draco, Theo and Padma fretted over the structural integrity of the rickety tracks.

They fretted so much, Hermione had to cast a Muffliato to keep the Muggles from overhearing any Wizarding jargon.

"You're quite sure there isn't a secret sticking charm on the seats? Or you're telling me that that thin piece of fabric is the only thing keeping people from falling out when it goes upside down?"

"There isn't *just* a seatbelt," Hermione told Theo for the third time, "there's the bar that comes down in front, too."

"Ugh. I think I'll be sick. Just looking at it makes me want to puke."

"Ron! You fly on brooms! This is ten times less worse than that Wonky flop you do or whatever it's-"

" *Wronski Feint* ," five voices chimed in from Harry, Ginny, Ron, Katie and Draco.

"Whatever!" Hermione said exasperatedly, throwing her hands up and slightly regretting she'd made friends with so many Quidditch fanatics. "I just meant compared to a broom, this is far more secure! Plus we can go all eight of us at once and they take a picture you can purchase at the end."

When it was their turn, they clambered into their seats noisily and buckled in. Only Draco was quiet, even more so than usual. Hermione noticed he was subtly clenching his jaw.

"Are you nervous?" She said softly, leaning closer to him. "Don't be, I promise I wouldn't bring you on here if it wasn't safe. Muggles do all sorts of tests on these things before making them available to the general public."

"I'm *not* nervous," Draco said gruffly, his face tinged a little green.

Hermione grinned.

"Try not to close your eyes and if you yell, it makes it a little easier and if you're feeling extra brave, you can lift your arms when it goes down and- ooh!"

The cart jerked and began to move forward.

Hermione could hear their friends behind them, muttering and shouting excitedly.

When the cart made it to the top of the steep hill, Hermione gave Draco a quick pat on the hand. He looked like he was concentrating hard on not being terrified.

The cart tipped forward and the rest was a blur of shouting and screaming.

They all dismounted fifty seconds later, very windswept and laughing breathlessly.

Ron let out a huge whoop.

"Would you look at that! Malfoy looks like he's trying not to piss himself!"

They could see the picture up on the monitor.

Hermione, Ginny and Harry all had their hands up. Padma had her eyes shut tight. Theo's teeth were clenched and Ron's eyes were wide as saucers. Only Draco sat there, face stoic, with the same look of deep concentration he had when he was reading a book. It was entirely jarring and completely hilarious.

Hermione bought a copy.

They tried a few more rides before heading off to the games.

Hermione and Padma went to get cotton candy while the others tried to win prizes at darts.

"Things seem to be going well with you and Theo," Hermione nudged Padma.

Padma blushed and popped a bit of cotton in her mouth.

"I'd say so, yes. You know, I never would have given it a go if it wasn't for you. Parvati was far more understanding than I thought and...well everything worked out in the end. I think forgiveness is a hard thing to do, but when you really care about someone, it becomes a lot easier."

They caught up to the others and watched as Theo and Draco tried to aim their darts at the balloons while the others yelled words of encouragement.

"I'm really happy to hear that and I'm so glad we're friends. Theo seems so much more happier now. By the way, I have some books to lend you! Theo might get a kick out of them as well, and then we can go on double dates and discuss them! Draco and I have some differing opinions and I would love to get other perspectives."

Padma laughed and then nodded in a direction past Hermione's line of sight.

"Speaking of which!"

Draco and Theo sauntered over to them, Draco carrying the largest blue Unicorn Hermione had ever seen under his arm.

"I won this for you," Draco drawled, puffing his chest out a little and holding the Unicorn out. It was half Hermione's height. Hermione couldn't help but smile at his proud grin.

"Yes, very nice. But I can't accept this."

Draco's smirk faded.

"Of course you can, I won it for *you* ."

"I saw you, you know! You Confunded the clerk and then Wingardium'd the darts into the balloons when you thought no one was looking! Do you know how much trouble you'd be in if you were caught?"

Draco rolled his eyes.

"I was careful!"

"This is a Unicorn that was won with underhanded methods and I will not encourage this behaviour!"

"Oh come on, Hermione, this clerk started it! He's rigged the whole thing! Those balloons are made out of thicker material and the darts just bounce off them! It's impossible to win unless you *do* cheat!"

"It doesn't matter, it's the principle of it all!"

"I paid that man for a fair dart game, and if he doesn't want to play fair, then I'm in my full right to take his Unicorn!"

"That stuffed animal is tainted with unsportsmanlike play!"

"Hermione, what am I supposed to do with a giant Unicorn?"

"You should have thought about that before you cheated at darts."

"I won you a keychain," Theo said, sidling up to Padma.

Padma gave an exaggerated gasp and took it carefully like it was the crown jewels

"Oh my, I am the luckiest girl," she laughed, "Did you have to Confund the dart man as well?"

"No, I just nicked it."

"Augh! I am surrounded by crooks!" Hermione shouted and stalked off, Draco trailing morosely behind her.

The rest of the day passed in a flurry of rides, junk food and laughter.

Everyone took turns carrying the Unicorn except Hermione. They even gave it a seat of honour when they sat around a picnic table eating pizza.

When the sun set, the park filled with bright lights that gave off a festive glow. The group made their way to the Ferris Wheel, to take in the nighttime view.

The boxes were small and so each couple had one to themselves.

Hermione cosied up to Draco. The Unicorn, now looking a bit tattered from its adventures, had a bench all to its own.

"So, what do you think? Would you come back here with me?"

"It's terribly fun. I especially enjoyed those little things that you ram into one another."

"Bumper cars?"

"Yes. *Bumper* cars."

He said it with such innocent delight that Hermione grinned. His arm wrapped around her shoulders and she leaned against him as their box rose up in the air.

"If I went back in time and told my eleven-year old self that one of the best days of my life would be in a Muggle amusement park- well, I think I'd've thought myself mad."

"Today was the best day of your life?"

"Not quite. But it's up there."

"Which one is the best then?"

Hermione looked up at him curiously.

"I could say it was the day you told me you loved me, during our moonlit picnic, but that's almost too easy an answer. So instead I'll say it was the day you sucked me off in the library."

"Draco!"

Hermione playfully slapped him on the arm and he laughed, a full laugh that she hadn't heard in awhile. It made her feel warm and fuzzy.

"What's your best?" He asked.

"Hmmm," Hermione thought, linking her arm in Draco's and resting her head on his shoulder.

"I think...I think the first time we had sex, without Amor Videri. I remember being afraid you wouldn't like me as much or that it wouldn't feel right. But I realise now that a part of me knew right then that I was feeling something profound for you. Having sex with you under a love potion and then having sex without one- I could really compare the two experiences.

I worried that I would never feel anything close to how Amor Videri made me feel. Light and carefree and completely infatuated with someone. The original Amor Videri brewer probably spent years and years of their life manufacturing and perfecting the recipe. Many more potions masters probably had a hand in tweaking it thereafter. A potion that was not only a replica of love, but that didn't have any of the downsides. How could real love ever compete with something that was specifically manufactured to be better than the real thing?

And then, we had sex and it wasn't perfect. It was stressful and raw and *grounded*. But when you...when I felt you inside me for the first time, it felt more real. And then it was over and I immediately wanted more. But not just sex, I wanted more time with *you*. Because it truly felt that through this connection, we'd grown and become something other than what we were before. Amor Videri was like taking a vacation from my life. But having real sex with you was...was a *part* of my life. And because of that, I came out of it as a slightly different person than I was before. A person who could genuinely see myself falling for you."

"My views on love have changed so much. I used to think it was about longevity. Of two people accepting each other and living together for a long time. Then, I thought it was about sacrifice. About feeling so strongly about someone, that you would go through difficult challenges because you cared about them. But in reality, it's all of that and none of it at the same time."

"Love is about finding someone who evolves with you, and not against you. You communicate with them, you sacrifice for them, you can be yourself with them, but at the same time, you're always changing. You change little by little because they encourage you, support you, lean on you, and entertain you. Love is a house you build with someone. And sometimes it isn't fun and sometimes it is. And sometimes you build quickly and sometimes it's one brick at a time. Each day, you're a little more patient, a little more caring, a little more knowledgeable, a little more open-minded, a little more forgiving. You build and build on yourselves, making this home the best it can be until, one day, you wake up next to your partner and you're old and grey and you- you realise you've built a castle together!"

Hermione was looking up at Draco with shining eyes. He returned her gaze with a quiet intensity that made her heart beat faster by the minute.

She'd never felt so connected to someone, so sure that she wanted nothing more than to give herself completely to them.

Draco cupped her cheek and she felt his thumb trace the line of her chin.

"I love you. I want nothing more than to live in that castle with you one day," he said softly, and then he kissed her.

She sighed, opening her mouth to his, her hands finding his waist and pulling herself to him.

His tongue was hot and wet and she moaned in delight as it slowly explored her. She climbed awkwardly into his lap and they snogged like their lives depended on it.

A loud bang startled the pair of them.

They both looked up as fireworks erupted in the sky over their heads.

They could hear whoops of delight from their friends who were in the boxes above and below them.

They were almost at the top of the ferris wheel. The whole amusement park spread beneath them. Colourful, twinkling lights splayed out across the ground. Sizzles and pops and bangs went off as more fireworks were shot amongst the stars.

How very fitting it all felt.

Hermione felt triumphant.

She had it all.

Her friends that she cherished. Her graduation from Hogwarts. The prospect of a career that she was passionate about.

She and Draco had fought so hard to be together and now, here they finally were, with nothing standing in their way.

The only thing left to do was to keep building, brick by brick and see where it would go.

While Hermione had always been poor at Divination, even she could predict that the future looked brighter than it had been in a long time.

She settled happily into Draco's arms, making herself comfortable.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Chapter Soundtrack- Eyes on Fire by Blue Foundation

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione stepped out of the Floo and into the small living room.

She brushed the soot from her blazer and set her briefcase down on the nearby armchair.

"Hellooo!" She called, heading immediately to Draco's office.

He was already rising from his chair, looking tired but content.

"You're back early. How did it go, love?"

She hugged him tightly and told him, the words pouring out in a flood.

"It was wonderful! Okay, yes, it was a small convention overall but I didn't expect it to be packed either. I mean, I know the British Wizarding Summit on Communication and Muggle Technology isn't the most popular of events. But you should have seen Arthur, he was absolutely thrilled I took him along. The research is actually really impressive as well. Good thing I remembered to magically enlarge my briefcase or all my notes wouldn't have fit! Muggle communication really is surpassing that of the Wizarding World's, especially now that the internet is readily accessible. I can't believe with all of our magic, we don't have an equivalent! But it was fascinating to hear all the magical advancements that independent companies are exploring to bring the best Muggle Gadgets into the Wizarding world without them going haywire. I know it won't be for awhile yet, but I think in the future, people will be fighting to patent televisions and computers that have been magically altered. It astounds me

that so many wizards are in the dark about all of this! I can't wait to draft my article for the paper, and by the way, I've written out briefs for the most interesting companies in case you wanted to look into it for investment purposes and I added tabs for easier perusing-"

"I look forward to taking a look. Shall we talk more over supper? There's still quite a bit of stew leftover."

Their flat, while not as lavish as the one Draco had imagined during their Hogwarts years, was cosy and had just enough space for the both of them.

Part of the reason they weren't living in luxury was because Hermione had insisted on paying for half of the rent. While she couldn't afford anything too extravagant, she had conceded in letting Draco purchase the furniture and hire an interior designer.

Hermione had been reluctant to give in, but Draco finally put his foot down, insisting his mother would never let them hear the end of it if they invited her over and forced her to sit on cotton cushions.

"You'll never guess who I ran into!" Hermione called, tossing her blazer on the couch and feeling a happy, bubbly feeling as she watched Draco set two warm bowls out on their dining table.

She'd only been gone two days, but she'd missed him. She always missed him when either she or he left on business trips. After six years of being together, five in the same flat, it felt strange to be apart from him for too long.

She sat down in front of him, picking up her spoon and digging in. It had been arduous teaching Draco how to cook. He still wasn't quite up to the standard she'd like, given he had been cooked for his entire life, but he at least now had three solid recipes he could cycle through when he wasn't constantly getting food delivered or taking her out. Stew was his favourite.

"Who did you run into?" Draco asked, giving her a crooked grin. He knew she would never have the patience to let him guess.

"I ran into Professor Weathersby, a reputable Muggle engineer and his wife- Astoria Weathersby!"

Draco's jaw dropped in a way that was most satisfying to Hermione.

"You're joking."

"Nope! Turns out they met a while back, and they married shortly after! Apparently there's quite a bit of paperwork to get through when a magical person ties the knot with a Muggle, but there you go! He said the whole Wizarding world fascinates him and he's joined up with another wizard scientist to try and find ways to convert Muggle technology into magical products."

"Blaise'd told me there was some scandal where she'd run off with someone, though he conveniently left out it was a Muggle. Wow. Good for her."

"I thought so, too," Hermione beamed, eating a spoonful of stew. "She looked very happy. How was your weekend? Anything exciting happen?"

Hermione scowled as Crookshanks leapt up on the table. She'd been trying to teach him not to do that, but Draco always indulged the cat's worst behaviour when Hermione left for longer periods of time. Crookshanks settled in at Draco's elbow, looking gloatingly at Hermione.

"My weekend was rather drab. Finishing up my latest financial report," Draco replied flatly, scratching Crookshanks under the chin, "I swear to Salazar and all of bloody his descendants, if my client asks me to rewrite Annexe B one more time, I may make him eat it the whole blasted report," Draco grumbled, taking a sip of stew as if to hammer home his point.

Draco had become quite the businessman and economist. He'd studied with his father's accountant for three years before he was confident enough to open his own financial counselling firm.

Not only had he rearranged the family's finances into more ethical outlets, but he had also found ways to turn a higher profit. Not difficult- according to Draco- since shady pureblood businesses were on the decline and were no doubt going to continue on that way, the more Muggleborns were brought into Wizarding society. Unless another Voldemort came along, it was very unlikely the pureblood market would ever see much growth.

Draco also donated a chunk of Malfoy money to various charities as well as to Hogwarts, for students that needed a leg up. The Daily Prophet had even published a double page spread on Draco's charitable work after he had donated a very large, public sum to the Ministry Department of Non-Magical Integration, a fairly new department that was incidentally founded by Dean Thomas. Hermione had been one of the first people to find out about it and she immediately notified Draco of its potential to properly educate and initiate Muggles into the Wizarding world. Draco hadn't hesitated to pour money into it after that.

Draco now specialised in arranging finances for other rich purebloods. He researched, advised and made financial plans for families that were looking to allocate their money to the modern cause.

And he hated every second of it.

Hermione had brought it up several times about how unhappy he seemed. He already had plenty of wealth, nothing obliged him to keep banging his head against his wall of stubborn clients.

But Draco had insisted it was right. Hermione knew, despite the wide berth he'd created from his old self, that he still harboured some guilt. She understood this was the best way he knew how to make proper amends. By helping those who also wanted to make positive changes.

Unfortunately, a lot of these people were pompous old businesspeople who often insisted they knew Draco's job better than he did.

It made Hermione sad to watch him slog away, rewriting reports for the nth time, cursing under his breath late into the night.

She learned that nagging at him to find another job made him even more irritable. And of course it would- it wasn't always a simple thing to suddenly change professions, especially when you were good at what you did.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hermione replied sympathetically, patting Draco's arm, "I can give you a nice back rub tonight if you want?"

Draco smiled and took her hand.

"Er...actually, something did happen. I don't know if it would qualify as good, but it's... interesting."

"Oh?"

"Potter Floo called today. He said Proudfoot is retiring and they're looking to hire in a new batch. Offered me a position."

Hermione's eyes grew big.

"As an Auror?"

"Yes."

Hermione squinted.

"You know...I could really see you doing that! You've kept your duelling up with Theo and Blaise, and you're exceedingly clever *and* you would still be doing good work for the community!"

"I'd be working with Potter."

Hermione snorted.

"Would that be so terrible?"

Draco's lips thinned.

"He would be my superior."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Oh come now, don't act like you're not friends! I see the both of you arguing over Quidditch all the time! And Harry is quite fond of you, you know. I think he rather enjoys how you still pretend not to like anyone even though you clearly do!"

Draco seemed to swallow his stew with difficulty.

"I'll think about it."

Hermione scoffed and took both their empty bowls away, giving Draco a peck on the head as she passed. He grabbed her wrist.

"I missed you," he said softly and pulled her in to kiss her lips. Their first kiss since she'd been back.

"You've got a busy weekend ahead of you?"

"I'm meeting Harry and Ron for brunch tomorrow and then visiting your mother in the afternoon. She wanted to show me the final renovations. You're sure you don't want to come?"

"She didn't invite me, actually. Perhaps she fancied some girl time, though, knowing her, she might try to trick you into helping her with something or other. We're still on for dinner on Sunday, though, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

She smiled and kissed him again, a deeper kiss this time, that promised more once they'd finished the washing up.

//

It was on a bright morning that Hermione sat down for brunch at the Leaky Cauldron with Ron and Harry, to catch up.

Harry's beard had grown out and was mercifully much neater than his hair. Ron was trying out a moustache which Hermione was sure Molly was bound to attempt to vanish at the next opportunity she got.

"How're Rose and Hugo?" Hermione asked, as their order of eggs, bacon, toast, sausage and orange juice arrived.

"Bonkers. Hugo does nothing but cry and Rose won't stop crashing her toy broom into the furniture. I haven't slept a wink in what feels like three days and I'm pretty sure I've lost sensation in my thumb from the number of times Hugo's bitten it, but otherwise, things are peachy."

"I think you've got a bit of spit-up on your shirt just there," Hermione pointed, wrinkling her nose.

Ron dabbed his finger in it.

"Ah yes, that'd be the marmalade. You've got loads to look forward to, Harry. Shirt goo, and runny noses and three coffees a day if you can wrangle it."

Harry winced.

"Ginny told me to say that she says 'Hello' and she's sorry she couldn't make it today but that her feet are killing her and that she feels like she's about ready to burst like a Watermelon hit with a Diffindo." Harry said the last with a slight grimace.

"That she is, her belly's gotten huge! Are you excited Harry? The baby must be due any day now?"

"They're saying a couple of weeks or so."

"Your first baby, Harry! How lovely!"

"Enjoy these last two weeks of freedom, mate. They'll be gone before you know it, and then you'll be neck deep in Scourgifying diapers and escaping to the loo for a precious two minutes of peace."

"Don't say that, Ron! Don't listen to him, Harry, I'm sure there are lots of wonderful things that fatherhood has in store."

Harry was too busy nervously shovelling eggs in his mouth to answer. He swallowed and quickly changed the subject.

"How's the paper going, Hermione? I saw Gibbly published her first article?"

Hermione beamed.

Hermione's paper *Plumes and Pens* had taken off as well as any new publication could. The celebrity of her name had helped give it a good head start and word of mouth proved to be one of her biggest marketing strengths.

Theo Nott had been the first person she'd approached to run it with her and, to her delight, he'd readily agreed. Together, they'd pooled their areas of interest and expertise to bring together a first edition that reached a niche but loyal audience.

They'd reached out to scientists, activists, ecologists, magizoologists, potion masters, healers, alchemists- all new researchers who were pushing the boundaries of knowledge. Their paper grew to have a reputation for academic, well-documented and sometimes controversial articles that created discourse.

Hermione's report on House Elves was particularly contentious. She'd brought up multiple new studies that proved Elf intelligence was equal to that of a human being and that their magic was, in some ways, superior to wizards.

She'd received quite a few dozen Howlers for that one.

A week later, Gibbly knocked on her door, asking for a job.

Gibbly's mistress was an old, kindly woman on her deathbed who, at the Elf's bequest, had set her free instead of forcing her to pass to the next owner of the house. The old woman had loved Gibbly like a family member and had even taught the Elf to read and write which was extremely uncommon.

Hermione hired Gibbly on the spot.

"Yes, she's making quite a splash! Obviously there's the usual duffers who are offended, but for the most part, her article created a lot of interest! Her perspective is fascinating, and it's about time we hear more opinions from magical beings who aren't wizards!"

"Good for Gibbly! Which reminds me, Rose is outgrowing all her clothes and shoes. If Gibbly is interested, she can swing by and pick out whatever she wants. Rose has surprisingly sophisticated tastes for a five-year-old so Gibbly won't look childish. Though she might be a tad smaller than Rose..."

"I'll let her know," Hermione answered cheerily.

"You know," Ron continued thoughtfully, "I reckon it's been awhile since it's just been the three of us."

"Hmmm, you're right," Hermione said pensively, tapping her chin with her fork, "I can't remember the last time only the three of us hung out. Life seems so full now, doesn't it?"

"It's...nice. It feels sort of nostalgic, don't you think?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded.

"We've come a long way, haven't we? Can you believe near seven years ago we were huddled in a tent and planning to murder one of the most evil wizards of all time? It almost sounds like a joke now."

"It feels like a lifetime ago. We really did go through a lot together, didn't we?"

"Can I just say," Ron cleared his throat, his ears going red, "I'm bloody happy we made it out alive and are still here today. Nothing keeps friends together like almost dying about eight

times."

"Remember when we won the House Cup that first year? Remember how surprised everyone was when Dumbledore added a last-minute hundred and seventy points? And Neville and his ten points that saved the day?"

Ron guffawed loudly.

"Hard to forget. The look on Malfoy's face especially! I do hope you rub it in his face every evening at suppertime."

"I ended up telling him all about it actually! That time I took him to apologise to Hagrid in my eighth year."

Both Harry and Ron hooted.

"Malfoy apologised to Hagrid? *Merlin* , what I would have given to see that!"

"Don't be rude! It was a very nice apology. Hagrid was actually one of my first friends to accept him."

"Blimey, we've all changed, but he's changed most of all, hasn't he?" Ron said, looking bewildered.

Harry nodded sagely, chewing on his bacon.

Hermione looked around at her friends and felt a warmth in her heart.

"I'm so glad I got to see you both today. I'm really, really happy we're all here, and I couldn't ask for two better best friends."

"Come off it, Hermione, no need to get sentimental," Ron said gruffly, though he looked pleased.

Harry smiled and Hermione could tell he was appreciating them both in that quiet way he did sometimes.

They didn't need words to express what all three of them were thinking.

They would have died for each other.

That bond was eternal.

Yes, they had all changed. But some things never would.

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Hermione departed brunch soon after to meet with Narcissa.

As Hermione Apparated at the Manor gates, she could already notice subtle changes in the architecture's silhouette.

She knew Narcissa had taken it upon herself to make a few tweaks, though Hermione hadn't quite realised the scale of it until now.

Draco had been very vocal about the fact that he thought it a waste of gold.

"If you're not in your villa in Italy, you're in your Château in France! What is the *point* of refurbishing an empty home?" He'd fumed during an afternoon when they'd been over for tea.

He was still set on selling the place but Narcissa stubbornly held on, insisting that, at the very least, the Manor needed an update if it was to make a decent market profit with inflation.

Hermione could sort of understand Narcissa's reluctance to sell.

This home had belonged to the Malfoys as far back as their family tree. Generations of history had been poured into this Wizarding house and you'd be hard-pressed to find another like it in all of Britain.

That being said, much of that history was surely tainted, without even going into what happened the year Draco had been trapped here.

The Malfoys had been affluent purebloods through and through, which meant Muggle blood had stained the floors long before Voldemort came along.

Draco wanted to push himself as far away as he could from it all.

"Hello, Hermione. How good of you to come visit."

Narcissa greeted Hermione at the door, Franz giving a little bow at her side.

While Hermione couldn't say she was necessarily close with Draco's mother, their relationship had improved much since their first encounter.

Despite Narcissa's cold demeanour and Muggle slights that seemed to escape every now and again seemingly on accident, Hermione had come to respect Mrs. Malfoy to a degree.

Narcissa was a strong woman who let not a single person step on her toes. She commanded any room she was in and moved with a grace that was easily enviable.

Narcissa led Hermione into the Hall.

"Would you like any refreshments?"

"A glass of water would be very kind, thank you. How have you been, Narcissa? Is your family in Italy doing well?"

Narcissa inclined her head as Franz waltzed over holding a tray with a tall glass of water, ice and cucumber slivers. Hermione thanked him and he bowed.

"Very well, thank you. Cranky as usual, which can only mean they are in good health," Narcissa said airily, taking Hermione's arm.

"Come. I am quite eager to show off the work that has been done to someone who will *appreciate* it."

Hermione fought not to roll her eyes at the slight jab at Draco. Malfoys could be so petty.

Naturally, Narcissa had impeccable taste.

It was impossible for Hermione not to gape at times.

The Manor, in some places, was entirely unrecognisable.

The black marble floors had been somehow removed, replaced by polished, purple wood flooring. Many of the long columns had been demolished, leaving more space for sunlight.

Much of the dark furniture had been swapped for friendlier tones in the olives and warm blues.

Overall, the atmosphere seemed warmer, less intimidating, but still just as lavish.

It was the first time Hermione had visited the Manor's kitchen but, according to Narcissa, it had been entirely updated.

It was immense. High cupboards and an island in the centre and all the appliances a top chef could ask for. The kitchen was so large it had two sinks, one on either end.

Exotic plants hung from the rafters and the windows were large, framed by light olive green drapes.

"Oh my, how wonderful!" Hermione exclaimed.

Narcissa smiled.

She led Hermione to the dining room, which had been completely altered to fit the palette of the rest of the home. The table was large enough to easily fit a dozen.

Finally, Narcissa brought Hermione to a set of double doors.

She opened one and held her arm out for Hermione to enter first.

The sunlight blinded Hermione. Floor-to-ceiling windows spanned the wall to their left, revealing a sprawling view of the gardens. Live swans floated in ponds and Hermione had never seen so many rose bushes.

A fire in a stone fireplace crackled merrily away in front of several comfortable sofas. There was a tea table, shelves of books and a thick, fringed carpet that encircled it all.

"Look up."

Hermione bade as Narcissa instructed and she gasped.

A large, modern light sculpture hung from the ceiling. It sparkled with jade and emerald and bulbs of warm light bounced off the jewels in a kaleidoscope of colours.

"Gorgeous, isn't it? The artist is Italian and a dear friend of mine. I brought this back with me and had it installed immediately."

Hermione looked around and, for the first time, was hit with a feeling of déjà vu. She had been here before.

And then it hit her.

They were in the drawing room.

This was where it happened.

Where she'd been tortured.

Hermione stopped breathing.

She had to squint hard, but she was sure she found the spot where she'd writhed on the floor as Bellatrix had Crucio'd her, right there where a sofa now stood.

Hermione looked up at the elaborate light fixture that hung where the old Chandelier had been. The one Dobby had unscrewed.

Even though the place had been completely altered to the point where it was barely recognizable, it felt incredibly uncanny to be back.

"Let me show you something," Narcissa said softly.

Hermione mutely followed her around the sofa.

On the wall next to the fireplace, there were small notches carved into the stone.

Hermione flinched. Is this where the Malfoys had thrown daggers at their Muggle prey? Had Death Eaters pinned innocent people to the wall and forced them to suffer?

Narcissa knelt down and pointed at the first notch.

"We made this when Draco was two."

Hermione's wild thoughts of death and pain simmered down and curiosity replaced it.

She leaned in closer and saw a tiny number '2' etched into the stone wall, right next to the first notch.

And sure enough, each notch had a number. The age at which they'd recorded Draco's height.

Her chest grew warm.

Narcissa ran her hand over each notch with care. Hermione could tell she was remembering. And sure enough, Narcissa shared.

"This was when he was five. He was such a bright, quiet boy, always reading. And this was when he was seven. He started getting a smart mouth around that age, probably learned it from his father. We recorded his height all the way up to eleven. This last one was done right before he left for Hogwarts."

Narcissa stood and led Hermione over to the windows.

"I used to stand by these windows and watch Draco and Lucius play outside for hours. Draco would fly around on his little broom, or chase after the peacocks and Lucius would chase after him. Draco left the birds alone once one of them finally managed to take a chunk out of his ear. It had cost us a pretty Galleon to get that fixed without any scarring."

"Draco chased peacocks?" Hermione asked incredulously.

Hermione had a sudden vision of Draco as a child, crying in his mother's arms while his father scolded him.

"Would you like to see pictures?"

Hermione's face broke into a bright smile.

"Please!"

Narcissa summoned a book from a shelf and she and Hermione sat on one of the comfortable sofas.

And then, Hermione learned more about Draco's life than she'd ever had in one go.

Narcissa showed her photos of baby Draco wearing smart little baby robes, toddler Draco taking his first steps in the kitchen, child Draco running about the halls, a sullen, teenager Draco, reading by one of the windows. Hermione's heart leapt as she recognized *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2*.

There were photos of the family as well. Photos as everyone sat at the dining table for Christmas, photos of picnics and tea. Hermione recognized some familiar faces with a jolt.

Bellatrix Lestrange looked so different. Younger, certainly, but her hair was also neater, her eyes weren't bloodshot, nor were her teeth rotten. She was laughing, but not in a cruel, twisted way. In a full, joyous way. It made Hermione deeply sad to think of how very much Narcissa's sister had been corrupted by dark magic and how much Narcissa must have suffered to see the change slowly happen over such a long period of time.

And Hermione finally fully understood what this house meant to Narcissa.

It had sad times, certainly, but it had happier times still. Some of the happiest memories were right here, when there had been no wars, when the family hadn't been divided. When they could simply live in harmony together. This is what Narcissa held onto so dearly.

"I know Draco doesn't have much love for this place anymore," Narcissa said gently, looking out the window serenely, "but to me, this is the only true home I know. I shared this home with my love. I raised my son. I had priceless memories with my family. I rather hoped that...that perhaps one day Draco could come to build happy memories of his own here. Perhaps even raise a child if he wanted."

Hermione wondered if Narcissa had known. Known in that forest, so long ago, as Harry lay alive on the ground. Known that she'd lost Andromeda to their clashing beliefs, lost Bellatrix

to Voldemort, lost Lucius to the darkness. Draco was the only one left who could surely be saved, who could come back from it all.

And he had. Through sheer strength of will, he'd come out of it all, survived and thrived.

He was the only close family Narcissa had left.

Narcissa turned to look at Hermione and Hermione saw a single tear clinging to the woman's cheek before finally sliding down along her delicate jawline.

Hermione never thought she would ever see Narcissa Malfoy cry. To Hermione, Narcissa had never looked stronger.

"This Manor is only as powerful, as sturdy, as good as the people who live it. I cannot force Draco to reside here. If, after all this, he still doesn't want it, I will sell it. But please, please do me the favour of considering it. It would mean the world to me. I would so love to visit my future grandchild here."

Hermione looked away uncertainly.

The Manor was definitely a dream home and a half. She'd noticed Narcissa had even taken the time to choose colours and patterns that suited both Draco and Hermione's tastes.

It was far too extravagant a gift and yet how could they refuse when so much time and care had gone into reinventing it with them specifically in mind?

And then there was the matter of grandchildren. Hermione still didn't even know if she wanted any. How was she supposed to tell Narcissa that, when Narcissa had just stopped short of begging for them? After Narcissa had spent years of her life remodelling away all the bad memories for the sole purpose of giving her son and his future family a place to live that was still unquestionably Malfoy in its core?

Narcissa was clearly a master manipulator, and yet the tears in her eyes were very real.

This was Narcissa's last ditch effort to finally convince Draco to come home.

"I'll talk to him," was all Hermione could promise, but it was enough.

Narcissa beamed, and gave Hermione's hand a pat.

The two of them rose and, as Hermione headed for the doors, she noticed Narcissa pause in front of a framed photo on the mantelpiece.

It was of her and Lucius on their wedding day, taken in the Manor gardens, surrounded by roses.

If Narcissa shed more tears, Hermione was none the wiser, as she'd quietly departed the room to let the lady of Malfoy Manor have a moment alone with her thoughts.

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"Where are you taking me?"

"Hermione, the whole point of a surprise is that you're only supposed to know at the last second."

Draco and Hermione were both dressed to the nines, Hermione in a fitted, dark blue evening dress and Draco in his smartest black suit.

A dirty tire sat on their dining table.

Draco held up a blindfold, smirking.

"Ugh! Fine, but you know how much I hate not knowing things!"

She allowed him to tie the blindfold around her eyes.

"Are you taking me to *Les Bobards* ? Or is it the new place you tried with Theo and Blaise that you were raving about the other night?"

Draco laughed.

"It's a *surprise* , Hermione."

"Ugh!"

Hermione felt him take her hand and pulled her in.

"Hold on tight. Very tight."

She could hear the anticipation in his voice. It made her even more nervous.

"What do you mean, 'very tight'? How far are we going?"

"It's an International Portkey."

"Draco! Wha-"

She felt the familiar jerk around her navel as Draco touched the tire and the Portkey swept them off to Godric knew where.

When their feet slammed into the ground, Hermione teetered, but Draco held on firmly.

She could hear a smattering of voices. The place smelt like clean carpet and some sort of perfume.

"Draco-"

"Shush and keep that blindfold on or you'll get a spanking," Draco said in a low voice.

She clamped her mouth shut, feeling suddenly warm.

"Hello, I have a reservation under 'Malfoy'."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Malfoy, good of you to come. And this is...er-"

"My partner. I've taken her here as a surprise."

By the conspiratorial way Draco said it, she could almost imagine him winking at whatever host he was talking to. She detected a faint accent, but the English sounded international enough that Hermione couldn't quite tell where it was from.

"I...see. Well, Mr. Malfoy, please come right this way."

"Right what way? Draco, this is getting ridiculous, can I take it off now?"

"Not quite yet," Draco answered far too cheerily and Hermione huffed in frustration. She would box his ears the first chance she got.

He led her into what she guessed was an elevator by the sound of it. She could hear a few passerbys muttering about her. What if she pretended she was getting kidnapped? That'd teach Draco to surprise her.

Hermione tapped her foot impatiently on the elevator carpet. She knew he was smirking. He was always smirking when he was in control and she was not.

The elevator dinged after an eternity and Draco led Hermione out. There was a jingling of keys. Odd. Weren't they going to a restaurant?

Draco walked her a few more steps and then let her go. She felt the blindfold fall from her eyes.

She gasped audibly.

Before her was a gigantic room with a gigantic bed and a stunning view of a city. A table was laid out by the windows, with what looked like a veritable feast for two.

She knew this room. Of course she did.

Because Draco had taken her here once before.

She spun around.

"Germany? You took us to *Germany* ? Draco, I have work tomorrow!"

"Relax, Hermione. I promised you once that I would treat you to a night at the Morgen Stern Hotel and I just so happened to fancy a visit tonight!"

"Visiting another *country* for an evening is pure folly! This will cost a fortune!"

Draco sighed dramatically.

"Hermione, how many times do I have to tell you? I'm stinking rich. Can't you just let me shower you with it every now and then? We're in Germany with the best view the city of Berlin can offer. Let's enjoy it."

He gave her no room to argue. As she protested, he gently pushed her towards the table.

There was roasted duck, green beans, gravy, cherry tomatoes, baked potatoes dripping in butter, turnips, cranberry sauce, jellies and much more. It was the delicious smell that finally made Hermione sigh in resignation and sit in the chair Draco had pulled out for her.

He sat across from her, smiling from ear to ear.

"Surprise."

She couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, Draco. You're far too much, but this...This really is beautiful. Thank you so much for planning all this. It's far too much but it's...it's..."

She looked to the left and the view struck her. She swayed with vertigo but couldn't look away. They must be at least a hundred floors high. She could see her reflection in the glass as well as Draco's. He was looking at her.

"I live to make you speechless. It really feels satisfying to astound the woman who knows it all."

She snorted.

"What is the occasion? Why've you suddenly got the urge to sweep me off my feet in one of the most lavish hotels in Europe?"

She felt her heart beat a little faster.

"Do I need an excuse to treat the woman I love to an extravagant night out?"

Hermione smiled and raised an eyebrow.

Draco chuckled.

"You're too clever for your own good."

The smile on his face faded and he suddenly looked solemn. He took Hermione's hand. She held her breath. She could already feel tears prickling her eyes.

"I know you've already gotten it figured out. You're always one step ahead of me and it's one of the things I love the most about you. I love how you always plan everything eight steps in advance. I love how, when something interests you, you have to read at least eight books about it. I love it when you come to me right after and tell me about those eight books you've read. Your face always lights up in the most beautiful way when you learn something new."

She was definitely tearing up now. Draco was looking at her, with earnest intensity. The way he often looked at her when he was speaking from the heart.

"This room, the room where it all started- I'll forever be grateful for it. I never imagined I would meet someone as inspiring, independent, driven, passionate and so, so fucking beautiful as you. Not only did you forgive me for my many past wrongs, but you gave me the hope and strength I needed to climb out of the ditch I'd dug for myself, and start rebuilding the life I'd lost. You've taught me how to be humble, open-minded and a better man. You saved me, Hermione, and I am infinitely grateful that you've done me the honour, for all these years, of being a part of your life."

Draco stood up and got down on one knee in front of her. Hermione's lips trembled as tears leaked from her eyes.

"I love you, so damned much. So much it hurts. So much that all I want to do is give you the world, every single day, for the rest of our lives, if you'll let me. Hermione Jean Granger, will you marry me?"

He pulled a box out of his jacket pocket.

The ring was a simple gold band. There was a red and gold diamond set in the middle. Understated and practical. Draco knew her enough to know she would have never worn a huge rock.

She loved it.

"Oh, Draco, of course I'll marry you!" She said and the smile he gave her made her melt. She pulled him up and he kissed her and it felt like time had stopped just for the two of them. He slipped the ring on her finger and it was perfect. Everything was perfect. Everything except-

"Oh! But wait!"

Draco paused, worry suddenly creasing his features.

"Before- before I fully agree, there's er- something you should probably know first..."

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes... Well, sort of. I..."

Hermione took a deep breath.

"I'm pregnant."

Draco gaped at her.

"I- yes, I know it's a bit of a shock," Hermione continued, "Something your mother said yesterday about grandkids reminded me I hadn't gotten my period in awhile and well, I thought I'd check for good measure and er- well good thing I did because it was positive and I wanted to tell you! But then you had all this surprise planned and- and- I mean we obviously don't have to keep it if you don't want to. I know you might be switching jobs soon and it might be a lot and-"

"I want to keep it."

"I- Sorry, you *do* ?"

"That is- if you want to."

"I...I do! Oh Merlin, yes, I want to keep it too!"

"You *do* ?"

They both looked at each other, in shock.

"Yes!" Hermione finally exclaimed, "That is to say, I've given it a lot of thought and I...I've accomplished everything I've wanted to and I'm- I'm ready. I want us to have a little child and you'll be such a good father, Draco!"

Draco stared at her and his eyes looked wet for a moment. And then, he blinked and suddenly his face split into a wide grin.

"We're...getting married! And having a *baby* !"

Draco threw his head back and laughed. The sound was joyous, triumphant and completely contagious. Hermione wanted to burst with happiness. She laughed too as he wrapped his arms around her and swung her round.

He finally put her down. They were both breathing hard. His hair was a little mussed and his cheeks were flushed. He looked gorgeous.

"You're going to be my wife. And carry our baby," he whispered close to her face with quiet reverence, as if he still couldn't believe it. The honest feeling in his voice reverberated in Hermione's core.

And very suddenly, she *needed* him.

She flung her arms around him and jumped up. He caught her and her dress tore at the side as she wrapped her legs around him, but who cared? The only thing that mattered was kissing him and pressing her body to him and touching him as much as possible.

He proceeded to rip the rest of her dress off while she grappled at his vest buttons. They feverishly tore their remaining clothes off, kissing whenever they could.

When Hermione finally flung away her knickers, she pushed Draco down on the bed and climbed on top of him.

She touched herself between her legs with three fingers, making sure he could see the ring while she did.

He groaned, gripping her hips.

Foreplay did not last long. Her pussy was throbbing too painfully at this point.

She sank down on his cock and rode him hard and fast, her breasts bouncing to the rhythm.

She was going to be his *wife*.

Her orgasm almost made her black out.

She collapsed on top of him as he hammered his own orgasm upwards into her cervix, groaning her name.

They cuddled and kissed some more and ordered dessert and made love a couple more times.

It was oddly nostalgic. So completely reminiscent of a time when they had been two students, experimenting in a hidden, magical Room in a castle far away.

Little had they known that those first encounters would be the foundations of something everlasting, something enduring, something so powerful, so unyielding and so bonding that they would be forever changed by it.

A true love that stood the test of time.

“Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,

And therefore is wing’d Cupid painted blind.”

-William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you. To those kind enough to follow me on this journey, Chapter by Chapter. For taking the time to leave a Kudos. For all the kind words of encouragement, constructive feedback and predictions that, ultimately, shaped the story more than you could know. I am so humbled and grateful to receive your thoughts and it

was truly the driving force of this little fanfic. Happy New Year to all, and I wish you nothing but the most wondrous of things.



Desperation

Chapter Summary

Chapter 20.5

This is a rewrite of Chapter 20 from Draco's point of view.

I would like to thank the lovely podcasters over at Dramione FanFic Fanatics, particularly Cariann, for inspiring this Chapter. Please go give their podcast a listen; they are funny, entertaining and give very well-thought out and respectful opinions, critiques and analyses. I had such a good time listening to their episode on LPATMU, I'm truly humbled and grateful that they took the time to read and leave such in-depth commentary!

[Dramione FanFic Fanatics Podcast](#)

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When Draco arrived at the time set for his Defense exam, there was already a large group of students milling about.

The exams were done in alphabetical order in small groups, so Hermione was probably in the Great Hall already. He had no doubt she would do amazingly. A bubble of pride swelled in his chest as he remembered how far she'd come since the beginning.

She'd already been good, but she was so hard on herself that she'd pushed on to become exceptional. Her drive was her greatest weakness because it often burned her out but also her greatest strength, since, well, obviously she was remarkable.

It was surreal to think he was about to finish his N.E.W.T.S. and then graduate, and then step into the world with Hermione Granger.

Draco made a conscious effort everyday not to think about his past.

Hermione had been instrumental in helping him move on from who he used to be, and he would forever be indebted to her for that. Yet it was impossible to push everything away, all the time. Memories would always sneak in, here and there, along with fresh waves of guilt.

How was it that a simple six years ago, he was bragging to his friends about how he hoped she would be Petrified by a Basilisk?

A mere five years ago, he was sneering *Mudblood* at her and she was punching him in the face, awakening a whole onslaught of new, confusing feelings that would take years to unpack.

Four years ago, he was watching her run away with Potter and Weasley, while fires burned and people shrieked at the Quidditch World Cup. *When the Dark Lord rises, people like her will die*, he'd thought at the time. He couldn't understand then why this thought didn't bring him the satisfaction that it should.

Three years ago, he watched as she cried in Umbridge's office, stammering about a Weapon in the Forbidden Forest, while Millicent Bulstrode had her pinned down. *Granger made a Weapon for Dumbledore? It must be brilliant and incredibly powerful*, he'd thought and wanted to get his greedy little hands on it. He'd only realized later, to his surprise and disgust, that he'd finally acknowledged to himself in the heat of the moment, something he'd been denying for years- Hermione Granger was a brilliant and powerful witch.

Two years ago, he'd been consumed by an evil so dark, it blocked out any ray of hope and shoved away every helping hand. *I'm not going to live. I'm going to die. My whole family will die.*

A year ago, he was watching Hermione Granger writhe on the floor of his home, as his aunt tortured her over and over again. *No, no, no, no, please, make it stop, make it stop, please-*

“Ready to blast some holes in some walls?” Theo piped up, snapping Draco out of his spiral.

Luckily, Theo seemed to suspect none of Draco’s inner turmoil. Draco thanked the stars once again for his Occlumency training.

As if answering Theo’s question, a gong sounded and the Great Hall doors opened, students filling out looking nervous, relieved and a few of them somewhat greenish.

Draco kept his eyes peeled.

With the eight years added to the cohort, this N.E.W.T. batch was particularly crowded. Draco frowned as he scanned the masses, failing to see the one bushy head he was looking for.

He always looked for her, especially when dark thoughts consumed him. She was the only thing who could distract him, make it all go away. She was his light, his hope.

“Will the next students please enter the Hall!” Flitwick squeaked, his high voice sailing over the ruckus as he read from a parchment.

Draco’s name was called and he entered through the doors, still glancing about.

The Hall was divided into long rows by walls of stone that had been magically erected.

At the end of each row was a haphazard scarecrow with a large patched grin, holding up a gnarled piece of wood. Draco wondered if they’d purposely made the dummies look slightly terrifying to heighten the feeling of unease.

A short, bald examiner who looked old enough that death should be a mercy, shuffled up to Draco.

“Draco Malfoy, is it?” He said the name nervously. Draco was used to it by now.

He nodded once.

“I’ll be your examiner, Professor Clearwater. Now, when the gong sounds, the Scarecrow will aim spells at you. You must block as many as you can, and send spells back until it surrenders. You must use at least three different types of offensive spells. Got it?”

Draco nodded once more.

The scarecrow gave him a thumbs up.

The exam was easy.

After dueling with humans who have the ability to adapt and surprise, fighting this simulation was easy as pie.

Draco sent Stunners and Hexes with ease, while almost lazily putting up blockers when the scarecrow retaliated.

A particularly nasty spell shot towards Draco just as something vibrated in his pocket.

Hermione?

Draco barely got his shield up in time.

What was she doing, calling him? She would know he’s in the middle of his exam.

Maybe she was just excited to compare results?

No.

Hermione wouldn't call him in the middle of a N.E.W.T.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

He needed to get out of here, needed to find her.

No, no. no, please, make it stop, please, no more-

He sent a spell shooting out of his wand, and it hit the scarecrow square between the eyes. It shrieked and disintegrated into ash.

Professor Clearwater was staring at Draco with wide eyes.

“Erm, impressive!” He squeaked, “I don't quite think- You're not supposed to be *quite* so lethal, it's more of a timed challenge, see-”

“I've shot enough spells at your scarecrow to be *more* than sufficient,” Draco snapped and immediately sprinted to the door, leaving Clearwater staring after him, agape.

Once in the Hall, he tapped his Galleon.

It vibrated and vibrated but no answer.

He tapped it again and again for good measure, but he knew if she didn't answer the first time, she wouldn't answer at all.

He could feel his anger rising.

He slammed his Occlusion into place.

Draco swung his head around, inspecting the Hall.

Daphne was sitting with Blaise, waiting with him until his turn came for the Defense Exam.

Daphne *Greengrass* .

Draco sprinted towards them so fast, they both jumped.

“Draco wh-”

“Daphne, was Hermione there for her exam?”

“I- I dunno, there are loads of us this year, it's hard to keep track, though I don't remember seeing her-”

How could anyone miss her? Hermione Granger, practicing last minute wand movements, muttering a tirade of spells under her breath, pacing nervously, her bushy hair even bushier from the stress of exams. She would be sniping at people for talking too loud, she would be the first person waiting at the door, she would be a ball of nerves. If she had been here, Daphne would've seen her, Draco was certain.

He made another conscious effort to keep his anger at bay.

“What’s wrong-” Blaise began, but Draco was already off at a run.

He didn’t think she would be in the Room, but he needed to check anyway, just in case, to give himself time to think.

There was still a possibility that she fell asleep from study exhaustion, that she hurt herself somehow, that she had a family emergency or something else.

He did the rounds as fast as he could while moving up the floors. She wasn’t in the Hospital Wing, the library, the loo...

With each failure, Draco became more agitated.

Where else could she be?

No- he needed to start thinking more realistically.

Where would *he* have taken her?

It was impossible to know.

What Draco knew of the castle would take days to investigate, not to mention all the secret rooms he didn’t know of.

He skidded on the seventh floor and sprinted back and forth until the door materialized to their “home”.

It was empty and Draco cursed loudly.

The table was still stacked high with exam books.

A painful emotion spiked Draco's temples as he remembered the hours Hermione had spent studying.

He would have to go straight to McGonagall and start a search. Would McGonagall take him seriously? He would have to tell her everything and how long would that take?

Draco slammed the door behind him as he broke into another run and then an idea hit him. One that made his lip curl in aversion.

There *was* one person who seemed to have suspiciously known Hermione's whereabouts.

It crippled his pride to have to ask Weasel Queen for anything, but desperate times called for desperate visits to Gryffindor tower- assuming Weasel Queen was even there.

He waited at the portrait door for what seemed like hours, even if it was only a couple of minutes.

It was becoming harder and harder to keep his anger in check.

He just managed to iron out any wrinkles in his Occlumency when the second most annoying Weasel made an appearance in the portrait hole.

"I need a word, in private," he drawled.

"Fine. But no funny business. You get one minute."

"Is Hermione here?"

Weasel's eyes widened for a moment before she laughed harshly.

"Lost her, did you? Ever consider she finally came to her senses?"

Draco was far too chivalrous to ever punch a girl, but he was rethinking this sentiment right now.

"So she's not in the common room?" He pushed.

Weasel rolled her eyes.

"If she was, I wouldn't tell *you* ."

"I think she's in trouble. She missed her Defense exam."

If She-Weasel knew Hermione at *all* , she would understand the gravity of this.

Luckily, Weasel's shoulders sagged, as she considered this piece of information. This was a good sign.

"Maybe she's..."

"She tried to contact me," Draco interrupted.

“How?”

He launched into a concise explanation about the Galleons. They were wasting so much time. He needed to know if Weasel could track Hermione *now*, or he would need to run to the teachers as fast as possible.

“I need to know she's safe,” Draco finished and had to fight to keep the desperation out of his voice. He would not fall to pieces in front of anyone, *especially* not Weasel. Whenever he showed emotion, people abused it.

"And why would I know where she is? I haven't talked to Hermione in months."

Draco sneered.

Were Weasleys born stupid or did they all just become that way out of sheer laziness?

"I know you know how to find her," Draco drawled, unable to keep the derision out of his voice, "You did it once...spied on her somehow. It's how you figured out she was seeing me, wasn't it?"

That was a mistake. He could immediately sense her hackles rise at his tone.

"Your minute's almost up and I'm still not convinced she wants *you* to know where she is."

"I'm worried *He* might have her!" Draco snapped. Could Weasel really not see how urgent this was??

"Look," he continued, trying to calm down, "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important. You really think I want to be asking *you* for help? Just- just find her and see for yourself if you

want to tell me where she is or not! I just want to know that she's okay!"

"Who's 'He'?" she asked and Draco almost pelted off to McGonagall then and there.

"Do I need to spell everything out? The nutter who poisoned Cho! Who else?"

He impatiently watched Weasel's pupils zip back and forth and then, *finally* -

"Give me one second."

Waiting was impossible. Draco paced back and forth, his thoughts wandering.

So Weasel *did* have a way to track people.

If he wasn't so worried about Hermione, he would've been extremely curious to know what it was and if he could get his hands on such an item. It was always beneficial to have strong magical items.

But right now, Weasel could have a million rare magical items for all Draco cared, as long as she could find Hermione-

"She's in the dungeons! With Justin Finch-Fletchley!" Weasel gasped, bursting through the door.

"Who the fuck is that?"

What a stupid name.

"Hufflepuff bloke. Curly hair. Sort of pasty. Hangs 'round Macmillan and Bones. He'd asked Hermione out a couple of times but I didn't think...Dammit!"

"Whoever he is, he's finished. Tell me exactly where they are!" Draco growl-shouted.

His anger was rising again, banging at his Occlumency walls.

"I'll lead the way!" Weasel shot back, waving an old piece of parchment around.

What the hell was that?

Also, there was no way he was taking Weasel with him. It was bad enough he'd needed her help to get this far but she would only get in the way. Draco was the best duelist in this damn school and he would eat a million Flobberworms before being bested by a bloody *Hufflepuff*.

"You need to go get help! Teachers!" He yelled at her, "This isn't some prank- he could be... could be..."

His blood ran cold.

Finch-Fuckley, or whatever his name was, was probably, right this second, doing horrible, horrible things to-

Draco's Occlumency walls came crashing down and anger flooded his head. He immediately scrambled to push them back up, chastising himself for losing control. He hadn't lost control in so long...

Weasel was staring at him, like she'd never seen him before.

"Ginny? *Malfoy?*"

Longbottom had appeared round the corner, and was gaping at them like a dimwitted fish.

"Neville! Go find McGonagall! Tell her the poisoner has Hermione, dungeons, seven floors down."

Finally, Weasel was actually being useful. She showed something to Neville on that ratty parchment of hers, and Draco glimpsed what looked like a map.

"Wait what? *Who* has Hermione?"

"No time to explain! Just get McGonagall!" Draco yelled, "We need to go there *now* !"

He was sick and tired of listening to people blather and he now knew where Hermione was being kept.

Dungeons, seven floors down. That fucking bastard.

"Then keep up!" Weasel yelled, breaking into a run, whipping her wand out. Draco immediately sprinted after her as they crashed down the hall at breakneck speed.

Weasel was fast.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad having backup.

They were out of breath when they reached the dungeons but they still had seven floors to descend.

The dungeons had so many twists and turns. Weasel kept stopping to check her parchment and Draco confirmed that she was reading a map of Hogwarts. How had she gotten her hands on something so cleverly made?

Potter.

Suddenly, so much made sense.

Familiar loathing filled Draco.

He shoved it away.

Now was not the time to dwell on old grudges.

It got darker and darker the lower they went. Even with two Lumos' combined, it was hard to see in front of them and they had to slow their pace considerably.

Eventually, they reached the seventh floor underground.

By the way Weasel kept nervously checking ahead, Draco guessed they were close.

"Turn your light out," he whispered.

"Are you crazy?" Weasel whined and Draco hoped she could see his eyes roll from the light of her wand.

"It's a straight line ahead and we want the element of surprise. If he knows we're coming he might do something drastic," he said slowly.

Their wands extinguished leaving them in pitch black.

Draco moved forward, Weasel close behind.

When he would get his hands on the poisoner, he would ring the coward's skinny neck. He wanted to see the light fade from his eyes, wanted to watch him slowly suffer.

Is this what Aunt Bella meant by meaning it?

A warm light flickered at the end of the hall.

Draco peered around the corner.

His eyes carefully roved over the wooden table with the red cloth, the flickering candlestick, the two chairs, the roses strewn everywhere, the bones scattered on the floor.

Probably where Filch gets off with Mrs. Norris , Draco thought viciously.

There was no one there.

Weasel went to unfold the map but Draco caught her wrist.

What a nuisance. Did she really think she could read it in the dark?

Weasel seemed to catch on quick enough and quietly stashed it away.

She pointed to the room with her wand and Draco nodded.

Of course all their strategy had been pointless.

Hermione was now an expert dueler, an expert wardsmith and had evaded the Dark Lord for a year.

It was stupid of Draco to think Weasel and he could just sneak up on Hermione without further precautions, even as addled by potion as she was. She had known someone might come and had acted accordingly.

Draco pulled his wand out to block Hermione's Impedimenta, but he was a smidge too slow. His wand dropped from his hand as chains rose from the ground and clasped his body in a tight cocoon. Miraculously he felt his wand get wrapped in near his thigh as the chains started to raise him into the air.

Weasel was screeching like a madwoman, but Draco could barely hear her over the shock that numbed him to everything else besides-

There was Hermione.

Her bright smile was replaced by a cold, listless one.

Her eyes weren't sparkling with curiosity- they were blank.

Normally her cheeks were flushed with excitement, but now, her skin had a pallid tone.

Had she always looked like this under Amor Videri?

Now that Draco knew the real Hermione, he never wanted to see her under the influence of a Love Potion ever again. She was barely a shell of herself.

He reinforced his Occlumency, building up wall after wall to lock all his emotions away.

"I don't quite know why I dated you," Hermione mused. Her voice wasn't warm. It was robotic, devoid of any of her usual passion. "You're just a-" she glanced at his arm where the Dark Mark was visible, "- a traitor, aren't you? Funny how I didn't see it before."

More walls. Draco needed more walls.

He needed a clear head to form an escape plan.

"Hermione, you've been fed Amor Videri. This isn't you," Draco said calmly. He could hear a faint, muffled screaming coming from somewhere.

Hermione scoffed.

"As if you knew me at all. You don't understand me like he does. Justin *knows* me."

"Hermione, it's me, Weasel! Your friend! Let me down and let's just talk, okay? You don't have to string me up like meat."

"Oh? Since when are you my friend? You wanted to split me off from Draco and now you've come to do the same with Justin. Why can't you just be happy for me, Weasel? After all, I've never been happier..."

"Who the *fuck* is Justin?" Draco finally snapped icily.

He inhaled from his nostrils, forcing himself to keep his cool.

A figure walked up to them, with his wand up.

Draco had never seen anyone so pathetic.

The young man was a lump of pasty skin and lifeless brown hair. He had a doleful expression and a slumped posture. He looked like if his IQ dropped one more point, he would simply collapse into a pile of moron. He wasn't worthy to even be in the same room as Hermione, let alone-

The screaming was louder.

Draco realized it was coming from behind his Occlumency walls.

It was in his head.

Walls. More walls.

Finch-Fuckley smiled coldly.

"You've done wonderful, dearest. Come."

Hermione immediately swept over to him and planted a kiss on his nose.

Screaming. Make it stop. Please.

"Let her go, you piece of shite!" Weasel screeched.

"Don't talk to Justin like that! *You're* the ones interrupting our date!" Hermione defended shrilly.

"Teachers are on their way!" Weasel continued, "You'll be sent to prison and you'll rot there for the rest of-"

That's right. Longbottom.

They needed to buy time for Longbottom.

"Oh shut *up* . Kitten, will you do the honours?" Fuckley whined.

Hermione cast an easy Silencio and Weasel's yelling vanished.

"Much better."

Hermione smiled with pride and nuzzled her cheek against Fuckley's shoulder.

" *You* , on the other hand," her captor continued, looking at Draco while his hand moved to absently stroke Hermione's cheek, "I'm absolutely dying to know what you have to say. You, who took Hermione from me. How does it feel, to see the woman you love on the arm of another man?"

Draco tested his Occlumency and then relaxed his face into the most bored, petulant expression he could muster.

"This feels so much better than I imagined," Fuckley murmured into Hermione's ear. Hermione sighed, enraptured.

Get off of her you shoddy piece of sh-

"How did you know we were here?" Draco drawled, sounding like he couldn't really care less.

He couldn't give into his anger. Draco could guess Fuckley's end game from a mile away.

Fuckley wanted to get Draco riled up then dangle Hermione in front of him like a carrot. The longer Draco stayed calm, the longer Fuckley would try to goad him and the more chances Draco would have of getting Hermione out of this shitshow.

"Hermione's wards of course. It was all her idea. She knew people came to the dungeons for duels and such, so she suggested it as a necessary precaution. I was so certain we wouldn't be found here but I knew better than to contradict Hermione's instincts. She truly is the smartest witch of our age. I must say, I didn't know she was such a good duellist though. Such a talented girl. Is there anything you can't do?"

Draco was grateful that, in the end, Fuckley was just a typical villain who enjoyed hearing the sound of his own voice too much. It would be easy to buy time if he could just keep Fuckley monologuing.

Hermione giggled.

"I suppose we must make the most of our time here, sweetling," Fuckley murmured, taking Hermione in his arms and tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

Draco watched Fuckley take Hermione's arms and dance with her, babbling on about Muggle poetry in a sickeningly cringe way.

It was now or never.

Draco turned as much as he could towards Weasel and looked pointedly at his wand, lodged in his thigh.

He'd already assessed the distances between them. It wouldn't be unfeasible for Weasel to be able to wrench a hand out and pluck the wand, given how her chains weren't wrapped as thoroughly around her hands the way Draco's were.

Judging by the way her eyes widened, she understood the plan immediately.

Ten points to Weasley.

He needed to give her time to wiggle her hand out.

"You were all set to leave Hermione alone on Valentine's. What changed?" Draco demanded.

If Fuckley was looking at Draco, he wasn't looking at Weasel.

" *You* changed everything," Fuckley hissed.

Draco kept a blank face as he listened to Fuckley launch into a long tirade that got increasingly more unhinged and psychopathic. The man had carefully planned for *ages* that he was going to drug Hermione.

Draco's anger was boiling to the surface. His Occlumency wrestled with his desire to tear the bastard limb from limb. The screaming in his head was getting louder and louder.

Fuckley roughly grabbed Hermione's wrists and shook them.

Draco almost lost control but then Fuckley stopped.

"What could you possibly see in him?" Fuckley asked harshly, "Am I so undesirable? You would rather be with a Death Eater, than me?"

Hermione shook her head.

"No, my love. It's only you that I want. You are the cleverest, handsomest, most brilliant person I've ever met."

Fuckley's eyes widened, his red veins popping. He'd looked deranged before, but now he looked positively dangerous.

"Do you...you really think so?"

"I think it was so wise how you tested your last batch of potion on Hannah to make sure it was safe for me. You thought of everything for us to be together."

Despicable.

Draco felt sweat trickle down the back of his neck.

He inhaled imperceptibly. He had to get his rage under control.

"And so you see, Malfoy- all this? This is your fault. You're the one who put your greedy hands on her. You're the one who decided to pit Hermione against her friends, against the whole school. It's because of *you* that she suffered all year! It's because of *you* that I had to bring her here against her will! I would have taken care of her! *I* would have treated her well! She wouldn't have been bullied or tormented or attacked if I had been with her! But no! You had to come along and turn her life upside down! Well, not anymore. She's mine now!"

"She's not. She'll never be yours. You're living a sad little delusion and if you truly loved her, you'd release her," Draco answered icily.

That's right. Focus your insanity on me. Go on. Keep talking until Weasel gets the wand and Longbottom arrives.

"Shut up! You don't know anything about love! Death Eaters only know killing! Pain! You've brought nothing but suffering to Hermione and I'm the one *saving* her!"

"You're not," Draco retorted quietly. "Do you even know Hermione at all?"

"Of course I know her! I've loved her since the beginning!"

"Then you would know that she's independent, strong-willed, passionate and driven. Do you truly think someone like that would want to be *saved* from her own choices? Forced into something against her will?"

Fuckley paused.

Draco watched his beady little eyes widen.

Could it be? Was he actually willing to be convinced?

Then, slowly, Fuckley's face morphed. His lips curled up in a grimace, his eyebrows arched in a devilish frown, his eyes widened til they threatened to pop. He looked positively deranged.

Nope. This one was bonkers beyond repair.

"I don't believe anything you say, *Death Eater* . You're just jealous Hermione belongs to me now."

Fuckley's hand traveled down Hermione's chest. He squeezed her breast.

It was all so sudden.

Draco wasn't prepared.

The screaming in Draco's head amplified tenfold, making his ears ring.

His Occlumency shields shattered.

Red, hot rage poured through, filling his senses.

This pervert had no right, NO RIGHT TO--

"DON'T TOUCH HER!" Draco bellowed.

"For the time I have left, I will touch her how I wish and you shall watch. It *is* fine that I touch you, isn't it Hermione?"

"Yes, yes of course," Hermione said breathily.

Draco would kill him. *Kill* him. He wouldn't look nearly so smarmy or self-satisfied when he was dead and ripped apart in a million pieces-

"Don't listen to him! Hermione! HERMIONE!"

He had to get through to her.

Just one second of clarity was all she needed to blast a Stunner right in Fuckley's face.

But Hermione wasn't listening. She was unraptured by Fuckley's disgusting crooning.

The screaming was coming from Draco's mouth. An insane yowl that must've sounded as crazy as Fuckley was.

"I swear I'll tear you limb from limb if you touch her again! Don't you fucking- GET AWAY FROM HER!"

Draco's chains rattled as he tried to get out. He wasn't thinking clearly. He was trying to burst out through sheer, mad force of will, every fiber of his being straining to get to Hermione.

"Shall we continue our date, my dear? Show Malfoy exactly who it is you've chosen?" Fuckley said smugly.

Draco didn't even hear Hermione's response over his own yelling.

"NO! I'll kill you, I'll- GET OFF HER YOU SICK FUCK! HERMIONE! HERMIONE!"

Something flickered in Hermione's eyes. For a moment, she looked dazedly up at Draco.

Draco stared back desperately, willing for her to return.

“Please Hermione. Please. You know me, I know you do!”

Hermione blinked.

And then Fuckley was kissing her and unbuttoning her top and Draco lost it.

MAKE IT STOP, MAKE IT STOP-

“I’LL KILL YOU! I’LL KILL YOU I SWEAR I’LL-”

He felt something nudge his thigh and his neck snapped around.

Weasel was swinging towards him, her outstretched arm inches from his wand.

It gave him just enough clarity to finally, blessedly slam his Occlumency back up.

He realized he was breathing hard, as if he’d run a marathon and his temples throbbed painfully.

Weasel swung again, and this time she had it.

Fletchley was still snogging Hermione, oblivious to Weasel furiously tapping the wand against her chains.

Finally, the chains vanished and Weasel crashed to the ground.

Her second vanishing spell barely had enough juice in it, but it was enough to free Draco.

He landed nimbly and caught his wand.

He immediately turned and blasted a Stupefy at Fuckley, but of course Hermione had a Protego up in an instant.

Draco flinched and it gave Hermione the split second advantage as her Stupefy almost had him.

He rolled out of the way just in time, sending another spell at Fuckley, which was blocked again by Hermione.

Both Fuckley and Hermione had their wands ready and Draco was pushed to defense, blasting up protection shields one after the other as curses ricocheted off them.

If he hadn't been so set on saving Hermione, he would have been so proud of how far her dueling had come.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE! I LOVE HIM!" Hermione yelled, sending something powerful right at Draco's chest.

Draco parried, sending back a slew of nonlethal attacks.

“Hermione! Listen to me, you don’t love him! He tricked you! Just try and remember-”

Draco dodged another blast.

A skeleton blew up behind him.

Rose petals were fluttering around them.

Draco would have to Stun her. He had no other choice. She wasn’t going to come back to him in this state, the potion was just too powerful. Stupefy could cause some damages however. He hated that he’d have to risk it. He hated that he might have to hurt her.

He’d promised to protect her, damnit.

Suddenly, a red streak flew past Draco and hit Fuckley right in between his shoulder blades, blasting him into the table, where the candle fell on top of him.

"No! NO! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!"

Flames licked his robes and Hermione recklessly flung herself into the heap, sobbing.

"No, no, no, Justin, please be okay, please! I love you! I love you!"

Something inside Draco seemed to break.

She was going to hurt herself in this state.

But maybe he could just...reach out to her. Maybe he could coax her out of it. He'd almost gotten through to her once, hadn't he?

He held out a hand to her, as if she was a lost puppy.

"It's okay...It's okay, Hermione. I'm here. He tricked you. But I'm here."

"Get away from me!" Hermione shrieked, pulling Fuckler tighter to her. "We just wanted to be together! We just wanted one little date! Why can't we just be together? Why did you have to come and ruin everything like you always do!"

She started to cry earnestly.

Draco was piling up his Occlumency walls as fast as he could, but they were crumbling quicker than he could raise them.

It was killing him to see her like this.

Was he doomed to forever bring her pain and suffering?

She was down here because of him. Because he was too weak to stop bad things from happening to her over and over again.

You stupid, useless fucking coward.

"Please..." he said softly, "I love you, Hermione, just come back to me, please..."

She recoiled as if he'd slapped her.

"I hate you! I *hate* you! I should've *never* trusted you! You're evil and all you do is hurt those around you!"

Draco's heart shattered.

"Please...Don't make me do this...Hermione...I love you so goddamn much..."

His voice broke. He would lose her forever. How could she ever forgive him after this?

His hand shook as he reached for her.

If he could just- just touch her. One last time-

"Don't touch me! You never loved me! You *used* me! I'm just a Mudblood to you!"

She reached for her wand.

Draco Stunned her in her shoulder, avoiding any vital organs.

She toppled over on top of Fucker. Draco immediately scrambled to drag her out of the flaming wreckage.

He pulled her into his lap.

Her eyes were blotchy from crying and tears streaked her cheeks. Her hair was a tangled bush.

Her arm was flopped on her waist and the words *Mudblood* screamed up at Draco.

"I know that was difficult, but you did the right thing," a voice said quietly, "She doesn't have to suffer this way and she can wait out the effects of the potion."

Weasel's reassurance sounded far away, as if she was in another world.

Draco buttoned up Hermione's blouse and smoothed the hair off her face. He traced the tears away with his thumb and stroked her cheek.

A drop of something wet fell onto Hermione's collar.

Draco inwardly cursed.

Was it not enough that he couldn't protect the one person that mattered the most, but on top of it he had to blubber like an idiot?

"I told myself I would never watch her suffer again. Not after what happened in the Manor. I failed her."

He felt Weasel sit next to him.

"Don't be stupid. You *saved* her, you twat."

Draco almost laughed in disbelief, but opted to say nothing instead.

"I was never able to do it," he finally mumbled.

"Do what?"

"Kill people. They tried and tried to teach me. Bellatrix insisted on it. 'You have to *mean* it,' they kept telling me. But I just couldn't-"

He didn't know why he was telling Weasel this. She didn't seem to mind.

He took a deep breath.

"I think I finally understand it now," he said tightly, "If someone handed a wand to me and told me to kill him, it would be the easiest thing. I truly think he deserves to die. The only reason I can't is because I know she wouldn't want me to become a killer for her."

They sat in silence.

Hermione Granger was such an easy person to love and Draco has been a complete fool to ignore it for so long.

If he had been less of a prejudiced wanker in his younger years, maybe he would've understood that he'd always felt something for her.

From her first punch, to the way she jumped out of her seat to answer questions to the way she beat everyone at every test, to the way she defied people, to the way her face flushed with joy when she cheered her friends on at Quidditch. His gaze had always seemed to find her.

It was why, during that first time that he and Hermione had brewed Amor Videri, hiding out in the ridiculous Valentines potion lab supplied by the Room of Requirement, Draco had finally felt at peace.

He'd finally opened himself up enough to just *be* with Hermione Granger without any animosity and it'd been so *easy* .

It was why he'd been addicted to her from the very first time he'd had her, when they'd both been poisoned.

Those feelings had always been in there, somewhere, waiting to be released.

If he had opened himself up to those feelings sooner, he would have saved her from so much suffering.

He wasn't all that different from Finch-Fuckley in the end.

Weasel cleared her throat.

"I suppose you know that if you hurt Hermione in any way, you'll have me to answer to."

"I surmised," Draco answered stiffly.

Who was Weasel kidding? Draco had already hurt Hermione enough.

"I hope you're prepared to hear that speech at least five more times because I guarantee the whole Weasley family will want to drill you at supper," Weasel added.

"...Supper?"

"You didn't think you could date Hermione Granger without going to Weasley suppers, did you? She's family to us."

Draco stared.

Weasel was off her goddamned rocker if she truly thought Draco would abase himself to such peasantry.

Perhaps it was best not to say that, however. He could almost imagine the scowl Hermione would give him if he did.

"I will be... negotiating the terms for these supper visits," he conceded reluctantly.

Weasel chortled.

It was an odd thing, to sit there next to Weasel in a peaceful silence.

Perhaps the future wasn't as bleak as Draco felt in this moment.

He brushed another strand of hair off of Hermione's face and did something he still wasn't quite practiced at, but that he was steadily improving at.

He hoped.

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