

Not With A Bang...

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Not With A Bang...

by [megalle](#)

Summary

Draco Malfoy has just 9 months left on a 7 year house arrest sentence when the Ministry announces a new Marriage and Repopulation Act. Draco assumes it will not affect him as he is still under house arrest. He assumes wrongly.

No matter, the Ministry, in their infinite wisdom, has paired him with one Hermione Granger. The witch has never met an injustice she hasn't fought against and so Draco assumes she'll fight this one to the death before tying herself to him. Again, he assumes wrongly.

So now he has a wife who more resembles a ghost haunting his manor than the girl he once knew, a meddling elf, a rapidly approaching release date and no idea what life outside the Manor walls looks like or for the first time in his life, someone trying to tell him what to do with it.

Authors Note: The fic was almost called "Hermione Granger Doesn't Give a F-"

Notes

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

The Newspaper and the Cousin

Newspapers took on new meaning when the world being reported on wasn't one you were expected to interact with. They became like a strange form of entertainment. A fictional world, populated with names, faces, places and events that you were somewhat familiar with. But then again, given the passing of time, they were also completely new. The stories were strangely theoretical. Each law or crime or protest debated on its merit no matter the outcome. The result did not change one's life. It was politics at arm's length.

Draco used to feel more connected to this newspaper world. He remembered the paper that arrived on the first anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts, six months into his sentence. Seeing the little moving images of past classmates, namely *The Git that Lived* and his sidekicks, standing solemnly at a Hogwarts memorial, irritated him. Of course, Potter was still able to lord it over him while he was locked up at the Manor. Potter the hero. The paper had declared it seventeen different times. Draco was able to substitute his own name in the space of the villain. Even though the Malfoy name wasn't mentioned anywhere in that paper, not even in a rundown of the punishments doled out to the family that hosted the Dark Lord (Lucius: life in Azkaban; Draco: seven years of house arrest' Narcissa; acquitted but with a long list of people she was never allowed to associate with again including her own son). Their omission infuriated him.

However, sustaining his anger wasn't something Draco found possible past his second year. Around the time Harry Potter's engagement was splashed on the front page, he realized that the newspaper had come to mean little more than entertainment. He watched characters from his old life live their new lives, he read about governance that would in no way affect him and he read about crimes that felt light and fluffy compared to the horror perpetrated in the halls of his home that had been mostly a jail since the end of his fifth year.

So when the first stories about the "Marriage and Repopulation Act" were printed, he read them with interest, but more a 'this is a plot twist I didn't see coming' type of interest, rather than a "oh my gosh, my life is going to be over" type of interest. One positive of being the Malfoy heir left forgotten in Wiltshire, was that there was no chance he would be looped into the scheme. Assuming the act even passed. He hadn't seen the righteous Golden Trio in the headlines recently, but he couldn't imagine that they would allow such servitude.

"It passed."

There was the thunk of a rolled paper on his shoulder and the voice of Nymphadora Tonks, cousin and reluctant parole officer, startled him from the potions text that had him so absorbed he hadn't heard the whoosh of the Floo announcing her arrival.

"Cousin, I wasn't expecting you today. Don't we have our delightful re-warding and interrogation over my lax morals on a Tuesday?" he said, accepting the paper and sitting up more appropriately on the settee he'd been lounging across.

"It is Tuesday," she snarled back. Clearly not in the mood to play. Usually referring to her as 'cousin' was a good way to get a rise out of her, and honestly some snarky banter with Tonks was the best stimulation he got all week.

"Is it really? I wonder what happened to Monday?"

"We can figure it out when we get around to the interrogation of your lax morals. I don't suppose you have tea? Biscuits? Firewhiskey?" Tonks slouched into an armchair across from him. Today her usual pink hair was the colour of dishwater, falling lank around her shoulders.

"Drinking on the job," Draco sighed, "And they say I have lax morals. Bobsy!"

With a crack, Draco's house elf appeared, dressed in what he thought must be a three-piece suit made for a child. He looked first at Draco, face nonplussed before turning his gaze upon Tonks and straightening happily.

"Oh Miss Nymphadora. Would you like tea? Lunch?" he said, bowing low. Bobsy, while agreeing to stay with Draco even after he'd been freed, liked to make a point of how far down the social ladder the Malfoy heir had fallen by ensuring anyone else who entered his house was treated with more kindness, respect and enthusiasm than he ever was. Draco suspected Bobsy lived for his House Arrest Inspections, purely to ensure he was humbled regularly. As if the inspections weren't designed to do that all by themselves.

"Tea and biscuits please Bobsy. Better make them chocolate ones."

"Yes Miss, of course. I'm happy to serve one of our brave Aurors, so noble, so deserving," replied Bobsy, bowing low but Draco was sure he could see him glancing out of the corner of his eye to make sure the implication was received, before apparating out. Minutes later a full-service tea tray was in front of them, complete with a variety of chocolate biscuits.

"So, who pissed in your cheerios this week then?" Draco asked, fixing Tonk's tea the way he knew she liked it while she helped herself to biscuits, then pushed it to her side of the coffee table.

She nodded to the paper, now partly unrolled beside him.

"It passed. The Marriage and Repopulation Act. It goes into effect next month."

"So, you have a child and a husband. I don't see how that could possibly affect you?"

"Well Draco," she adopted a tone Draco was sure she usually reserved for little Teddy, slow and patient, "aside from the fact I have beloved friends who will absolutely be affected by this act and I hurt for them, I also have a dead husband. Widows are not exempt, not even war ones. And as for the child, all that proves is that I'm fertile. Rather a plus according to the ministry."

Draco said nothing. In his mind, he made a comment about how maybe this time she could get a husband that was more appropriate to her in age, maybe not quite so hairy but he sensed it wouldn't go over well.

"Right," he said instead, "I suppose you could always go out and swear your allegiance to a murderous dictator and get put under house arrest. It's dreadfully dull but there is no imposition of marriage."

Tonks scoffed into her tea, "If they are conscripting war widows what makes you think war criminals won't be next?"

"And subject an innocent to all of this?" he gestured vaguely around him, unsure if he meant the manor or himself, "I think I am safe. It's a shame we're related really, we could wed during one of these clandestine meetings and spare you from all of this."

"Yes, well and please only take a medium amount of offence, but I would rather suck rotten eggs than fulfil that particular Black family tradition."

"You wound me, Nymphadora," sighed Draco. Fixing and leaving his own cup of tea in the middle of the table, ready whenever Tonks decided to start their usual routine.

He assumed she'd want to get started immediately, so she could leave quickly, her mood being what it was. But instead, she ignored his tea and glumly bit into another biscuit.

"I assume there has been resistance? Can't imagine people are happy," Draco started cautiously.

Tonks shrugs, "Do you know how many births have been registered this year?"

"It's March," Draco waved the statement away.

"Three, just three. And one of those was born so prematurely we're not sure if he'll live. Minerva won't let anyone look at the Hogwarts registry but it's speculated that if this continues in a decade there will be less than ten graduates from Hogwarts each year. So yes, there has been some dissent, but dissent too loudly and you'll be accused of plotting the end of wizards in Britain."

Draco rolled his eyes; he could think of at least one witch and one wizard who couldn't care less about being accused of plotting the end of the wizarding world but he kept that thought to himself. He and Tonks had worked their way to a cordial relationship during his weekly check-ins. It had taken years, but long gone were the days of insults and animosity. As she was his sole visitor most weeks, being able to sit and have a cup of tea with someone was a distinct pleasure. One he knew was only afforded if they didn't bring up any of the particulars of his past. She occasionally shared news about Teddy and Andromeda, but other shared acquaintances were unnamed and undiscussed.

"When do you learn the name of your intended?" Draco asked politely instead.

Tonks scowled, "In the next week or two. There was some speculation they would roll out the "matches" in phases but I think the ministry has decided bollocks to that, gives people too much time to figure out a way out of it or flee. So they are going to announce all the matches by April 1 and everyone must be wed by August 31."

“April 1, are you sure it’s not all a rather elaborate April Fools?”

“I think the only people who’d be able to pull off a prank this elaborate are the Weasley Twins, and even they would think this is in bad taste.”

Just like that the memory of a dead friend shattered their truce. Fred Weasley may not have been slain by Draco’s hand but most of the time it felt like it was close enough.

“Well,” said Draco gesturing to his rapidly cooling tea, avoiding Tonk’s eyes, “shall we get on with this little song and dance then?”

A rustle of robes and her hand appeared in his view, holding a vial of veritaserum, and tipped a couple of drops into the cup. Draco picked it up and drank it silently, waiting for the potion to grip him, easing his mind into a dream-like state.

“Are you Draco Malfoy?” Tonks asked brusquely, all familiarity from earlier gone.

“Yes,” he replied, letting the answer spill from his lips without thinking. Enjoying the oblivion.

“Have you had any contact or correspondence with anyone in the past week?”

“Yes, I saw you today.”

“But no one else? No letters? No Floo calls?”

“No one else. No letters. No Floo calls.”

“Have you practised any magic this week?”

“No, I have no wand. I am reading a particularly good book on potions, but I cannot put what I read into practice.”

“Any wandless magic? Unintentional Magical Outbursts?”

“Not this week.”

“Have you attempted or succeeded to leave the grounds of Malfoy Manor?”

“No.”

Tonks nodded and stood, “That’s all this week. I’ll just recharge the wards and be off.”

Draco nodded in acknowledgment, the veritaserum still loosening his tongue, making him feel a little lightheaded and before he knew it, he spoke again.

“I hope your new fiance is palatable, cousin… at the very least.”

Tonks startled at his admission but did not respond. She had never allowed herself any questions or even interacted with him after he’d imbibed the truth potion; a line she would not cross. For a moment, Draco thought she might say something, but Tonks just shook her

head with a tight smile and left the room. Twenty minutes later he heard the Floo roar to life just as the veritaserum wore off.

The Minister and the Reprieve

Chapter Notes

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

For the following week, Draco was fastidious in sticking to his routine and marking the days off on his calendar, lest he lose another Monday. He learnt early on in his house arrest that routine was the key to staying sane. He ran around the estate for at least an hour in the mornings, worked in the greenhouses, trying his best to keep his mother's prized garden in some respectable state, ate lunch, read and then wrote letters.

Letters he was unable to send, of course; correspondence was strictly forbidden in the terms of his house arrest, but he wrote them anyway. He wrote to his mother about the garden, what was looking well, what he was struggling with, what he would rather be doing with his time than arguing with her damn roses. He wrote to Pansy, Theo and Blaise, usually nonsense, reliving old memories of them together or off-coloured jokes. Occasionally, he'd share something he'd read that he wished he could debate with someone. He wrote to Tonks, surprisingly, given she was the one person he saw with any regularity. It started as quips he wished he'd said, but either hadn't thought of until after she left or he simply wasn't brave enough, but they'd evolved to include questions and thoughts about the family she represented that was also his but wasn't. He wrote angry letters to the ministry, to his father, to Potter, raging against the shitstorm of circumstance that had put him in his mess. Those letters were more frequent during the first years of his arrest.

The finished letters were shoved in a drawer that one could reasonably assume had some sort of extension modification, given how many letters he had in there. He wasn't sure why he didn't just burn them. Maybe after being so effectively removed from the world, he just wanted to leave something tangible. Maybe a part of him could still hope for the 'after' of his life, a moment when he could send them. Well, all except the ones to Narcissa. Probably not the ones full of rage, either. There was no point in getting locked up immediately after his release, after all.

He finished his afternoon discovering and rearranging parts of the manor. Figuring out new shelving systems in the library, trying to take inventory of every quill or potion vial stored in the manor. Sorting the mountains of clothing both his mother and father had left behind; his father because they weren't needed in prison, his mother because the memories associated with them weren't welcomed in France. The advantage of living in a manor with 218 rooms was even 6 years into a 7-year sentence, he hadn't finished rearranging and organising all of them. That, and he suspected that Bobsy went back and undid his new systems, probably muttering about Draco's failures as he did. Finally, dinner and bed, and if he had filled his day with enough, his body would hopefully succumb to sleep easily and peacefully.

Except on the nights when it didn't. Those nights, where a slideshow of his life either flashed before his eyes as he tried to sleep or ripped him from his dreams with a gasp and sodden sheets, those were the nights he visited the music room and poured everything left of himself into his piano.

Because of his fastidious time taking, when Tonks was scheduled for her next visit, Draco was waiting for her, sitting in the floo parlour. As soon as she stepped out, dusting still green embers off her cloak, Draco stood from the charcoal grey wingback chair and inclined his head.

“Cousin,” he greeted her. Maybe a little too eagerly?

“Mr Malfoy,” she replied, and the reason for her out-of-character formality became clear as she stepped to one side and the floo roared to life a second time. This time, the Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, stepped from the hearth, looking around the room and cataloguing threats and exits before fixing his gaze on Draco.

“Mr Malfoy,” he said, nodding.

Draco said nothing. It had been years since anyone but Tonks had come for his weekly “check-ins”. He mentally slapped himself, and the years of etiquette classes took over.

“Minister, welcome. Are you here for our weekly inspection or do you have other business in the manor to attend to?”

Shacklebolt cocked his head to the side, maybe surprised by Draco’s manner, before letting out a deep sigh, “A little from column A, a little from column B. Perhaps there’s another room we can speak in?”

“Certainly,” said Draco, thinking of the tea service that should already be set out in the smaller sitting room, his favourite place to sit with guests. He was used to having Tonks in there, but if Shacklebolt was here for another, less pleasant reason, he’d prefer not to have another room in the house tainted with awful memories.

“Vim?” he called out and with a pop, a kind elf in a child’s party dress appeared before him, looking confused.

Vim had been his personal elf when he was a boy, and as Bobsy’s partner, he suspected the only reason both elves remained at the estate. Unlike Bobsy, she was still kind to Draco. Unlike Bobsy, she preferred to stay away from people, unable to overcome what she’d seen of them in the war. It was unfair, maybe even a little cruel, to call her, but Draco didn’t think he could stand to let Bobsy treat him with disrespect in front of Shacklebolt. His pride, while battered, was still existent.

“Yes, Master Draco,” Vim refused to look at him or their guests.

“Would you please lay out a tea service for three in the drawing room?” he asked softly.

Vim’s eyes grew rounder at the mention of the drawing room but nodded quickly and disappeared with a soft pop.

“Please,” Draco gestured toward the door and started the long walk to the drawing room. It felt like he was walking to the gallows.

The trio were silent down the long hall. Draco could feel Tonks' gaze on his back; he'd never taken her into the drawing room, and although he suspected she knew its history and must be bursting with questions, she said nothing. Opening the door, he invited his guests inside, seeing the tea service already laid out. One calming breath, and he entered behind them.

It didn't look exactly the same as when Voldemort had lived here. He'd removed the drapes, trying to invite as much light into the space as possible. He'd removed the portraits, half of whom were too horrified to ever speak again after what they witnessed during the war and the other half were displeased that Draco had stopped fighting for blood purity and was keen to let him know it. The furniture was different, a new pale blue set moved out of storage, replacing the Slytherin Green. But the wallpaper was the same as was the parquet flooring and even though he knew the floor was clean, he always thought he could see a shadow of the blood spilled there.

Tonks immediately set about preparing tea for herself and Shacklebolt. The big man, who was as imposing in tailored robes as he was in his battle kit, was leaning back, examining Draco as he walked to his seat.

"You look well, Draco," said Shacklebolt as Draco sat.

Draco was unsure how to respond to that; was 'thank you' appropriate? Or maybe 'it appears house arrest agrees with me, maybe I should try it again'? Instead, keeping his face purposely blank, he just nodded in acknowledgement.

"And how much longer do you have on your sentence?" Shacklebolt asked, taking the tea from Tonks without looking at her.

"Just under 9 months," he replied, unease settling upon him.

Draco was scrambling to think of reasons why the Minister for Magic was enquiring after his sentence, especially given he must have refamiliarised himself with the details before he came. None of the reasons he could come up with were good. Shacklebolt just nodded, sipping his tea.

"Well, it might make the first few months of your marriage a little complicated, but if you both consider it an extended honeymoon, I suppose it would be fine."

Draco froze. The words didn't make sense. What marriage? He looked to Tonks for some insight but she was looking angrily at her feet, her hair turning a deeper shade of red.

"While, ideally, we'd hope for weddings to begin as soon as the matches are announced, given your circumstances, you would be welcome to choose a date in late August, as close to that release date as possible. As long as your bride agrees, of course."

Draco blinked, still unsure what in the flying fuck was going on.

"I'm sorry Minister, I'm going to require some more context here," his impeccable manners helped him find the words when his mind could not.

“The Marriage and Repopulation Act,” said Shacklebolt, somewhat confused, “Nymphadora assured me you’ve kept yourself abreast of the news.”

“Yes, Minister, however, given I am currently serving a sentence for Dark Magic and Crimes against the Wizarding Community, I assumed a bride wasn’t part of the visitation schedule. And given the circumstances, I think she might disagree with more than just the wedding date.”

Oh Draco tried to keep his sarcasm from his tone, he didn’t want to have the Minister for Magic offside but he couldn’t help it. They couldn’t actually expect someone to marry him, while he was still under house arrest. It was by far the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard come out of the ministry.

“Yes, well, the housing situation isn’t ideal, but your sentence is almost done. And your crimes... well, you were a boy.”

Draco wasn’t sure how to respond to that. The rage that he’d long let go of started to boil again under the surface; if what he’d done had been so minor, why was he still here? Either he was a child during the war and following that logic, possibly shouldn’t have been locked alone in a house that held all his most recent traumas, or he was a man who deserved his punishment and if that was the case, should not be legally thrust upon some doe-eyed witch. Instead, he swallowed the feelings down and took a steady breath.

“So you’re telling me that I will be matched under the new Act?” he asked calmly.

He didn’t draw upon his occlumency yet. Given it was a type of wandless magic, every time he did it brought him under greater scrutiny during his ‘check-ins’.

“Yes, congratulations,” replied Shacklebolt, “The Ministry has decided that being so close to the end of your sentence and reformed, you are ready to reenter society.”

Draco choked back the question in his head demanding he distinguish the difference between being a boy and being reformed and instead probed for more clarity, because weak definitions of culpability aside, there was still no explanation of how he was meant to bring a wife into his life.

“I’m sorry, but I still don’t understand. My sentence is not finished until January next year?”

“Yes,” confirmed Shacklebolt.

“But I am to be married in August. How does that fit with this exactly?” he gestured around to the manor, to Tonks who was still looking at her feet, “I’m currently allowed one visitor, once a month, no correspondence, no floo connections except with the DMLE, no wand. Will my wife have the same conditions?”

Kingsley shifted uncomfortably, “She will be asked to refrain from having visitors or using the floo but she will have her wand and access to correspondence of course. We will figure out how she will leave the manor if she desires. That’s why I am here, to see what modifications we might have to make to ensure the new Mrs Malfoy is comfortable.”

"Right, isn't that somewhat of a security risk? Having a wand and owls all of a sudden in my reach?"

Draco was grasping but he couldn't believe that Shacklebolt was actually considering this. He was so close to the end of his sentence and they were going to give him another one. A longer one. A lifetime one. No witch would relish the idea of being chained to him. No witch would ever be able to overlook his past. With a reluctant wife bound to him, he would never be able to forget it either.

Shacklebolt just smiled knowingly into his tea, "I don't believe your wife to be a risk, no."

"No? What if I manipulated her, overpowered her, tricked her?"

At that Tonks snorted, "Not bloody likely."

Kingsley ignored her unprofessional outburst, "We don't see her as a risk. And frankly, we don't see you as a risk Mr Malfoy. Auror Tonks has had nothing but positive reports. The time and distance for reflection have done you well. Now, I would like to take a look around the manor and see what adjustments we need to make?"

He phrased it as a question, but it wasn't really. It was his way of telling Draco that the conversation was finished and whatever reservations he had would have to be discussed with well... Tonks or the House Elves he supposed. The Minister stood decisively and took a moment to look around the drawing room, studying it as if it was suddenly more significant, but he said nothing about it.

"Auror Tonks will give you your match letter before your weekly debrief," Shacklebolt said from the doorway, "I'll see myself out after my inspection."

Draco listened as his footsteps disappeared down the hall and turned back to Tonks, who was still sitting, but now digging into the finger sandwiches that were arranged on the delicate silver platter. The formality of her posture gone.

"See, told you, war widows and war criminals," she said smugly, offering him a thin letter with a ministry seal.

"Indeed," Draco took the letter and slumped onto his seat again, "have you got your match yet? Are you sure you don't want to try out Black family incest instead?"

"Oh yes, quite sure," she said, "I'm matched with Lysander Prewett. He was the year above me at school. More interested in magical inventions than anything else which might be how he got a 35-year-old bachelor. Maybe that or he prefers wizards to witches. I don't really care. He's a bit eccentric, but not ghastly. I suspect he wants nothing more than a wife who won't pull him out of his shed. We will make do."

"You don't seem as put out this week," Draco mused, still not ready to open the letter.

"Yes, well, knowing I'm not about to married off to some pureblood prat who will at best dislike my son for his werewolf father and at worst actively try and hurt him, has taken the

edge off my panic. But don't mistake my delightful pragmatism for happy.”

Draco nodded absently, turning his letter over in his hands. He tried to think of who his worst-case match would be. Maybe the living Patil twin. Have to stare at raw grief every day for the rest of his life. Thank Merlin the Weasley girl was married.

“Do you know whose name is written here?” Draco asked Tonks.

“Oh yes,” said Tonks, smiling.

“Are you going to tell me?” he asked. Somehow feeling like if he heard it from her, instead of reading it, it wouldn’t feel so final.

“Oh no, the only thing that has bought me any sort of joy this whole bloody week, has been the anticipation of seeing your face when you open that letter.”

Tonks grinned, waiting expectantly.

Draco felt dread settle over him and called upon all his courage to open the envelope. Reading the name he felt his heart stutter for a moment before the implications became clear and then he burst out laughing. Relief flooded through him. Tonks leaned forward, her face screwed up in disappointment and confusion.

“We can all relax it seems,” said Draco smugly, “Because there is no way in hell that Hermione Granger will ever consent to marrying me. This wedding is never going to happen.”

Chapter End Notes

So I don't have any sort of update schedule planned. I imagine eventually I will settle into one as I am a fan of routine. However, for now, as it's ready I'll post it.

I will warn you all this is a slow burn and at this stage it will be solely Draco's POV.

The Visiting Day and the Italian

Chapter Notes

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

It was finally the second Saturday of the month, also known as Draco's favorite day of the month, visiting day. There was some debate during his sentencing about whether Draco should be allowed any visitors at all. Eventually, an old wizard on the Wizengamot put his foot down, reminding the others that even prisoners in Azkaban were allowed visitors. Draco was too locked inside his own head to take note of the wizard's name. He wished he had. He owed that man a gift basket once he was finally released and back in charge of his own finances. Thanks to the hunched old wizard, once a month, one person was allowed to come and visit him. It went without saying that no former Death Eaters were allowed on that list, but thankfully, the children of Death Eaters were fine. The blessing of being unmarked, the children of Death Eaters were allowed to live fairly normal lives after the war, and that worked in his favor as his three oldest and best friends were all in that category: Blaise Zabini, Pansy Parkinson, and Theo Nott. Every month, one of them would be escorted through the Floo by a Ministry professional (not Tonks, Draco supposed she was too high up in the machinations of the DMLE to warrant visitor supervision), and they would sit in the Floo parlor and catch up. No Elves were permitted in the room while his guest was there, meaning no refreshments and naturally nothing could be bought with his guest. They had to leave their wand at the DMLE for the duration of their visit. It was detached and clinical, and while Draco longed for the day that all four would be able to lounge together, as they did in the Slytherin Common Room all those years ago, seeing one friend a month was enough to give him hope that those days would come again. This month, he knew it was Pansy's turn to visit, and he waited for her eagerly. However, it was Blaise who walked out of the hearth.

"Blaise!" Draco rushed forward to greet him. In the early days of his imprisonment, Draco attempted to maintain his veneer of cool indifference in his visits. It made the first 20 minutes unbearably awkward as he battled with himself to hold back the tidal wave of questions and conversation he was dying for. Eventually, Pansy called him on his bullshit and informed him that his 'Lord of the Manor' act was actually piss poor, and they promised they would never tell a living soul that he, Draco Malfoy, enjoyed conversing with friends after a month of solitude, so long as he would actually talk to them like a human being, their friend.

"Draco!" Blaise reached for his hand and pulled him into a one-armed hug, glancing uneasily at the fresh-faced Ministry stooge who was supervising today. They had learned early on that not all of the 'visitor escorts' were fans of physical touch. This one bristled and watched intently but said nothing.

"Where's Pansy? I thought she had this visit?" Draco asked.

"You make it sound like we have you on a custody schedule," Blaise replied, and Draco gave him a pointed look. They did have him on a schedule. Any idiot could work that out. Blaise just rolled his eyes, an uncharacteristically flippant expression. Blaise was usually solemn, quietly sophisticated.

"Pansy is on her honeymoon, I suppose," Blaise finally said.

"Oh, her honeymoon? But Pansy doesn't like—"

"—people?" Blaise cut in, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, yes. I can't exactly imagine her sharing a space with anyone. Who was she matched with then?"

Blaise pressed his lips together in a smile, one that on anyone else would look forced, but Draco knew Blaise only smiled like that when he was truly happy. So used to having to hide any happiness from his stepfather, the more joy something brought him, the more he hid it away.

"Now, what about our darling Parks makes you think she married the person the Ministry told her to? She wasn't about to get out from under her Daddy's thumb only to get under Shacklebolt's. She married our dear friend Theo. Eloped before their matches arrived."

"Theo? But Theo..."

"would think a relationship with just one woman until the end of his life would be a fate worse than hell. Yes, that Theo. Thankfully, his new wife thinks a relationship with anyone at all would be a fate worse than hell. So, in some weird way, they are a match made in heaven."

Draco didn't quite know how to respond. He supposed it was similar to the joking suggestion he made to Tonks, marry a known devil rather than an unfamiliar one, but it was hard to imagine his two friends... married. That said, it was hard to imagine Theo Nott as anything other than an unruly 17-year-old trying to charm his way under various witches skirts.

"But if the point of the law is to increase the birthrate..." Draco started, wondering if there were any ramifications his friends hadn't considered.

"Thankfully, the Ministry is drawing the line before they enter people's bedrooms. They will be able to ignore each other in different wings of Nott Manor, or even different Nott/Parkinson family properties if they wish, and the Ministry will leave them alone. Besides, any child of theirs will be a new branch on the tree of the Sacred 28, so I am guessing the Ministry isn't too keen for that bush to be fertilized... so to speak."

Draco broke into a smile at Blaise's innuendo. This is what he missed. He missed it so much that if he thought about it too hard it hurt. The irreverence, the scathing commentary, Draco could close his eyes and remember the way it was at the end of fifth year, before his entire life went to shit. He just needed to hold on for another 9 months, and that life would be his again. Nine more visits and then he could have his whole family back around him again. Well, almost his whole family.

"Have you heard from my mother?" Draco asked. Blaise nodded and again looked discreetly at the Auror. It was a loophole to Draco's sentence. Technically, Draco and his mother weren't meant to be in contact. Something about removing any corrupting influences and

ensuring Voldemort's networks died with him. However, his unmarked friends were allowed to contact his mother and she, them, and there was nothing that said they couldn't pass on tidbits. But Draco suspected that technicality would disappear if it became too obvious.

"I heard she's well. She likes France, still. Possibly will come back to English during the summer to review some of her dower properties. And I am sure she'll be petitioning for an invite to your wedding whenever it is."

Draco laughed, hearing his mother was going to be in the country made him feel warm and safer, and he was sure, if there was a wedding, she would be banging on every door and calling in every favor just to attend it.

"Blaise, I'm not getting married."

"Are you not? I was told by a contact that you were included in the pool of names to be matched."

Draco was not surprised to hear that Blaise knew someone who was keeping him abreast of the situation.

"Well, I was matched, but I can assure you, no wedding will take place."

"No? I haven't heard of anyone who's managed to negotiate their way out of a match yet, and trust me, given the number of our old housemates who have been matched with someone they deem 'deeply unsuitable', there has been no lack of trying."

"I am matched with Granger, Blaise, Hermione Granger. The only member of the golden trio with breasts. And when it comes to 'deeply unsuitable', I think you will find yours truly to be the dictionary definition according to her. Others may have tried, but no one will attack it with the vigor of the swot to outswot all swots."

Blaise raised an eyebrow but said nothing, looking unconvinced, so Draco continued.

"You know Granger, Blaise. They want her to live here. In this house. Surely you remember what happened the last time she was in this house. You were at the trial after all."

"Was that the last time you saw her then? The trial?" Blaise asked, still not agreeing with Draco's premise.

"No, we meet up at the Three Broomsticks for a pint every Thursday," Draco said sarcastically, "yes, that was the last time that I saw her. But you can't tell me that she is still going to be satisfied getting married because she was told to, and she definitely won't be satisfied getting married to me, no matter how much time has passed."

Blaise looked thoughtful before rubbing his neck, "no, I suppose not. I don't know her now but from what I've heard..." Blaise trailed off, looking off in the distance until after a minute he started speaking, "What about you Draco, could you be satisfied married to her?"

Draco thought back on his memories of the witch, skipping over the last times he saw her; nothing good would come of him thinking of her sooty from the battle at Hogwarts or bloody

from his deranged aunt. He also didn't think of her at the Yule Ball, elegant and beautiful on the arm of Victor Krum. He had no idea what type of magic she'd indulged in to make her look as beautiful as any other pureblood witch there, but it was... impressive. Instead, he thought of her as he'd known her best, hunched under the weight of books, always looking for something to protest against or some way to insert herself, glaring at him from across a classroom if he caught her attention. He groaned.

"It's not going to come to that, I assure you. That witch will fight until she gets what she wants, and there is no way in this world or the next that she wants this."

Blaise nodded, seemingly willing to let the subject drop before another errant thought caught in his mind.

"You know, if you object to her blood status so close to the end of your se-"

Draco immediately cut him off, "Bloody Hell Blaise, I am not an idiot."

"So your objections aren't down to her muggle parents?"

Draco looked at his friend, trying to gauge where his questions were coming from. It was true, in all the years at Hogwarts, Draco hadn't ever heard him utter the word Mudblood, nor really engage any debate around them. If asked he'd just shrug and say 'I'm half Italian and black', as if that explained everything. As for Draco, being tormented by the most extreme of blood purists as a teen followed by 6 and a half years in isolation had left him rather cold on the idea of blood purity. Did he think there were intricate and powerful ways of magic that Muggle-borns like Hermione Granger had no possible way of comprehending? Well, yes. Did he think they had stolen their magic like some character from a children's tale? Of course not.

"When it comes to her parents, Blaise, I couldn't care less. And again, whatever my objections, hers are going to be far greater and hold far more weight. So I repeat, this wedding will never, ever happen."

Blaise nodded at that, finally happy to let the topic rest.

"Well, do you want to hear about what happened at our last Old Boys Quidditch game?" he asked, a restrained smile gracing his face, ready to regale Draco with the game he longed to play and the friends he longed to see.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, thank you so much for everyone reading, commenting and bookmarking! It's definitely inspiring me to write more frequently than I would otherwise. The whole story is outlined, and I have some key scenes from later in the story written (they were the imaginings that inspired this whole thing), but I am writing and uploading as I go for the most part. No Beta or editor, so be warned re: typos.

Secondly, I am having so much fun with this Draco. He's 25 in years, but he's been in isolation, under house arrest since he was 18 years old (factoring 6 months in Azkaban while they sorted out trials and what not), so how much can one grow and mature if you're secluded from the world? I will admit I've been listening to "Right Where you Left Me" by Tay Tay a bit while writing these first chapters.

Thirdly, our girl Hermione will enter the chat eventually, but I will admit the chapters are longer than expected as I write them. I considered making this dual POV but as I've been writing, I feel like Draco's story and Hermione's story are actually quite different. I know exactly what Hermione is doing and feeling in this timeline though, so in my wildest dreams there will be a separate fic with her POV.

Anyway, thank you if you are reading, and commenting. I am having so much fun writing these. Writing isn't something I am unfamiliar with but writing fanfic, is a completely different type of freedom and fun.

Radish Earrings and The Headline

Chapter Notes

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

It wasn't until a week after Blaise's visit that Draco realised he'd never asked if Blaise had been matched. It drove him crazy that he'd have to wait another 3 weeks before he could find out this vital piece of information about his friend. He tried asking Tonks during their weekly check-ins but she didn't know and didn't particularly like talking about the marriage act in general. Every time he brought it up, she got all surly and bristly. So he had to wait. Luckily, if he had gotten good at anything in the past 6 years it was waiting. So April fell away to May, and Pansy Parkinson was the one to visit him on his favourite day.

After the obligatory gushing over the enormous diamond ring on her finger (*"If I am going to have to be married to a man and a philanderer at that, I wanted something spectacular from the Nott Vaults"*), *Draco was able to finally ask the question that had been plaguing him. Pansy, sitting primly on the edge of the sofa, her sharp black bob resting against her cheekbones, her crease-free, grey silk dress falling perfectly around her, tilted her head.*

“Luna Lovegood,” she finally offered. Draco’s mind immediately conjured an image of the wisp-like blonde, crumpled and battered on the floor of the Manor dungeon, and he forcefully replaced it with an image of a younger Luna, wandering the castle with radishes in her ears.

“Oh god, poor Blaise,” he finally sputtered. Pansy glared at him and his assessment but didn’t refute it.

“Is he going to have to banish Nargles from his home before she consents to move in?”

Again Pansy ignored the question and got the gleam in her eye of a cat honing in on prey.

“You know, he was worried about telling you.”

“Well, yeah, I can imagine he’s nervous to tell anyone,” Draco felt his shoulder shake with a little laugh. Pansy was not laughing.

“He seemed to think that the mention of her might make you uncomfortable. Bring back memories of her in the manor.”

Immediately school-based Luna was pushed from Draco’s head by an injured Luna on the floor, shaking uncontrollably at the cold and the fact that no one thought to offer her a blanket. Draco certainly hadn’t. Not when it would raise too many questions about who’d provided it. Again, he sought an image of Luna at school, maybe talking to herself on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, that would do it, an image that could push the other out of his mind again. It wasn’t quite Occlumency but it was close.

“I didn’t lock her in the dungeon, Pansy.”

“You didn’t let her out either.”

“And you tried to deliver Harry Potter to the Dark Lord. It was a war.”

Pansy rolled her eyes, an infinitely better reaction than a glare would have indicated and Draco was grateful. He wasn’t happy about this conversation. It was chewing into his time with his friend. His only time with a friend and they were devolving into a conversation like this.

“I’m not going to have to sit across from Potter during a family dinner.”

So she wasn’t done then; as Pansy liked to do, she was ready to poke a bit more.

“Gods, I’m not going to have to sit across from Luna at a family dinner!”

“No? Is Blaise not family?”

“Blaise is, but Lovegood-”

“Luna will be his wife, Draco,” Pansy cut him off. Her voice was still gentle but she was looking at him in a piercing type of way. As if she could peel back layers of him just with her eyes.

“Just like you’re Theo’s?” Draco sneered back at her, his own voice forcing a wave a déjà vu or was it an echo of a memory.

“Yes, like I am Theo’s. I may not be sleeping with him or caring if he sleeps with someone else, but he’s mine now and I’m his. We’ll take care of each other no matter what comes. We’re bound together, we’ve chosen that. Til death and then after. You’re a Malfoy for God’s sake. If you know anything, you know how sacred that bond is. I thought you Malfoy men were meant to guard it above all else.”

Draco swallowed and looked down to where his shiny black shoes were pressing into the rug, Slytherin green of course. He’d dressed up for this he realised. He was so excited he’d ignored the comfy Quidditch jersey and joggers he tended to wear day to day and opted for one of his father’s old suits; he’d long grown too broad and tall for his own suits from before the war. The memory of his father in a suit just like this hit him, gazing across at his mother where she sat writing correspondence in the library, his gaze possessive and heated. It was enough that Draco excused himself from the room before he was asked to give them a moment. And while it had made him as uncomfortable as any teenager realising his parent’s relationship was more than just parenting him, it also made him content, for he knew as a Malfoy he one day would have that too. But that was before.

“I don’t know why we’re talking about this Pansy,” Draco finally said.

“You asked,” she retorted.

“Not for all of that,” he muttered.

"I suppose not," she conceded, "anyway, I believe they've settled on a June wedding. They have the option of a ministry ceremony like all the matches, but I think they've opted for a garden ceremony somewhere in Devon."

A memory trampled Draco again, of course it would be in Devon. That's where Lovegood was from, he remembered from the horrid mission he'd gone on where he had to deliver a lock of her hair to her snivelling father. Draco was trying desperately to find a memory to eclipse that one but nothing seemed to work. He felt his hands grow tingly, and wondered whether it was worth the hassle to use Occlumency just to avoid a panic attack in front of his friend. He couldn't go storming off to his piano, which was his other failsafe way of avoidance. Pansy cleared her throat, watching him carefully.

"Do you want to hear about the redesign project I've started at Nott Abbey? Cantankerous Nott will be rolling in his grave," she asked him, and Draco wondered if she knew she was offering him a life raft. Probably. Pansy had always been good at pushing and just as good at realising when it had gone too far.

"Yes, do tell," he croaked, his voice tight as if it hadn't been used in a while. It was all she needed and she launched into descriptions of the design atrocities that had awaited her, and the feminine touches she was planning on springing on her new husband. He nodded and laughed in the right places and by the time the escort cleared his voice to announce visiting time was over, he found he had returned to calm. To hope, able to imagine a future where he let Pansy loose on the manor.

Pansy must have told Theo not to bring up Luna or the Marriage Act because for his June visit, Theo prattled on about everything but. He gave updates on the renovation, told tales of nights out with Blaise, walked through every English Quidditch World Cup team from 1990 onward debating the strengths and weaknesses of each team. It was good, normal. Draco didn't ask whether the Garden Wedding in Devon had gone ahead, although there was a little itch at the edge of his brain that reminded him that given they were half way through June it could have happened. His best friend could be married right now and he wouldn't know. Once he thought he would have stood as Blaise's best man (or at least duelled Theo for the honour) and now he didn't even know if there had been a wedding. But not knowing was preferable to the alternative.

Not talking about the Marriage Act was also a policy he'd adopted with Tonk during their weekly check-ins. He had noticed a second thin gold band on the ring finger of her left hand, but didn't ask about it and she didn't offer. All in all it had become rather easy to forget about it. The notice he'd expected, saying that his match with Hermione Granger had been dissolved, hadn't come , but nor had any correspondence indicating a wedding of any sort was forthcoming. Surely, she would have contacted him if she believed they were going to be married. No, the notice was still coming, he was sure of it.

Then came the headline, "*War hero, Ron Weasley, Weds War Heroine in Intimate Ceremony*", *Draco smiled unreservedly, until he saw the photo. There was the red headed Weasel, dressed in atrociously fitted dress robes, gazing down at a witch. However, this witch, far from being the frizzy haired brunette he had expected, was slightly taller with pin straight, jet black hair.*

Cho Chang? He finished his breakfast and puzzled at the meaning of it. He went into the garden and revisited memories of Granger and Weasel together at Hogwarts, looking at each other with frankly pathetic longing. He even allowed himself to remember the two of them post Hogwart battle, Weasel arm around her, Granger leaning into him. They had been together, right? Or they were about to be together? A woman doesn't look that content in a man's arms unless she plans on doing something about it, and even Weasley wasn't stupid enough to let a witch like Granger go if she was content to have him. So why weren't they the couple on the cover of the Prophet?

He chewed over the question while he ate his lunch and realised there was a much more serious one. Why weren't they the couple of the cover long before now. Potter and Weaselette hadn't waited too long to make it official. Why didn't the other two follow suit? And if not before the Marriage and Repopulation Act, why hadn't that red headed, freckly prat raced her to the altar the moment it was announced? They could have done what Pansy and Theo had. Why didn't they? And it all pointed to one very obvious conclusion; Weasley had been stupid enough to let a witch like Granger slip through his finger. The absolute cock-waffle. Draco tried to imagine Granger reading the paper, just as he done. Was she... and this hurt to think as he tried not to put himself in the emotional shoes of Granger... heartbroken? He recalled the way she looked in 6th year, not that he had noticed much that year, but he had flashes of her looking hurt, usually whenever Lavender Brown had let out some shrill nonsense. At the time it had given him a little shimmer of happiness. Someone else as miserable as he was. Damn it, a heart broken Granger was not what he needed. Not when she was meant to be fighting to get out of her match. So when he sat down to write his letters for the first time ever he pulled out a piece of parchment and wrote to Granger.

Granger,

I saw the Prophet today. Just know that Weasley is an idiot and I am sure he'll regret not dragging you to some pathetic chapel in Scotland the moment he had a chance (you seem the type who would enjoy getting married is some sort of ghastly damp but historically significant church in Scotland).

I am sure that you are neck deep in appeals and legal letters, because rest assured if you marry me, there won't be an option of a stone chapel in Scotland either. No walking down the aisle on the arm of your muggle father (I don't know if our wards would allow someone without any magic in their blood to set foot on the manor grounds, even after the ministry's best curse breakers worked on them), or whatever other nonsense you've got in your fantasies. I write this, because as lost as the situation seems right now (given the love of your life has just married someone else and all), it will get a lot worse if you and I were actually forced to marry. So keep at it, Granger.

If it's any comfort, I give the red headed prat one month before he realises he's made a terrible mistake and comes crawling back to you. Maybe two. He never was particularly bright.

Draco Malfoy.

Draco finished, folded the letter carefully, and promptly shoved it in the drawer with all the other letters he would never send.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know... if I was reading this fic I would be starting to get impatient for Granger to appear. And I promise she is coming at most three chapters... maybe less!

The Ring and The Saviour of the Wizarding World

Chapter Notes

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

It was hot in the manor in July. In the past, Draco and his parents would use cooling charms to make sure the rooms were kept at a pleasant temperature but without his magic the manor was hot, sticky and oppressive. He kept waiting for word that his match had been dissolved but nothing ever came. He'd raised it with Tonks and she'd just raised her eyebrow at him and moved the conversation on. Was that a secret nod? Was it an indication that she thought his question childish? Draco had no fucking clue but the waiting was going to kill him.

Eventually it was visiting day, and while Draco was excited (as he always fucking was, because who the hell wouldn't be?), there was a kernel of worry that the Blaise who was due to step out of his floo was also married Blaise. Married Blaise who apparently was going to treat his wife like well... a wife. And the wife in question had been kept prisoner by Draco and his parents not that long ago. But before Blaise stepped out of the Floo, two ministry Aurors stepped through. Not fresh faced new recruits either, two older, slightly graying men, one with a savage scar across his cheek. They didn't speak to him; one went to the door, the other stood by the fireplace, arms crossed against their chests. Draco too got his feet, all the hairs on his arms stood on end, the way they did before a battle. The floo flashed green again, and out of the flame stepped his mother. Goosebumps broke out across his arms for a different reason now. Draco didn't wait for her to step to him, instead closed their gap in two strides and allowing himself to be pulled into her arms.

The scarred Auror by the door cleared his throat, "no touching!"

"Oh bugger off Collins, a boy getting a hug from his mum is hardly going to summon Mouldy Voldy from the dead," Tonks snapped from behind Narcissa. Draco had been so consumed by his mother he hadn't even noticed her enter the room.

"Robards said no touching," Collins grunted back, not exactly arguing with Tonks but in a tone that said he didn't want to be held responsible if anything went wrong.

"It's okay, I'll let go," said Narcissa, releasing Draco, and Draco could see moisture in the corners of her eyes. He wanted to take her arm and walk her to her chair, the way he'd been taught to, by her, many many years ago, but he didn't want her taken away from him and instead he just gestured to a chair.

"How? Why?" he stuttered, unable to form enough of a thought to begin a conversation.

Narcissa smiled weakly.

"Well, I had been lobbying to secure an invite for the wedding, but the Ministry in their infinite wisdom thought that would be too much of a "risk", but allowed me to see you now instead," she said, fingers rolling the hem of her blazer. She wasn't wearing robes, but a chic

pastel green suit and Draco knew she must have been forced to enter the ministry through the muggle entrance. There was no way she would appear dressed in muggle clothes otherwise.

“Risk,” scoffed Draco, trying to image the delicate blonde woman in front of him as a threat to anything. She wasn’t as thin as she was during the war, her cheeks had more colour, but even so she reminded him of a sparrow delicately sitting in her chair. Narcissa Malfoy had been a threat only once in her life, and it was the moment she looked Voldemort dead in the eyes and swore that Potter was dead.

“But, we’ll talk about that later my love, let me look at you,” she made a hesitant motion as if she might reach across and grab his hands, but stopped herself, glancing discreetly at Collins, “You’re taller. And wearing one of your father’s suits?”

Draco coughed and felt a blush crawling across his cheeks; he felt as if he had been caught playing dress up. At the same time he was deeply grateful he’d put on a suit. Merlin knows Narcissa Malfoy would be mortified to learn her only son wore joggers in company.

“Yes, I grew too big for my own,” he said “and a tailor is not part of my arrest amenities.”

Narcissa’s smile faltered for a minute and then returned.

“You don’t look like him in it,” she said eventually, “You remind me more of my father.”

Draco knew it to be a lie. As much as he loathed to admit it, he knew he was the spitting image of his father. Just as he knew it was too painful for his Mother to admit that. He was unsure if the forcible separation between her and Lucius was a blessing or a curse for Narcissa. For him the separation was a blessing; he’d had to accept during the war that he would never be enough for Lucius, just as he had to admit that at his heart, Lucius Malfoy was a weak man. His words were verbose but the actions underneath them timid and scared. But Lucius had never looked at Draco with the same affection or possession as he’d looked at Narcissa either. And to be on the end of that type of devotion was powerful.

“And you’re well, Mother? Why are you in England?” Draco changed the topic completely.

“Oh very well. Your French cousins have been delightful company and I find France to be more *refined* in their governance. However, there are still holdings in England I am allowed to access. Anything from the Black line of course and when I heard of your wedding I realized there was something vital I needed to do.”

She motioned to Tonks, “Auror Tonks, if you please?”

Tonks stepped forward, rolling her eyes at Draco as she did. It was strange, seeing his mother talk to the woman he’d grown to accept as ‘cousin’ as she would a shopkeeper or maitre’d at a restaurant. From her robes, Tonk pulled a wooden box, about the size of a chocolate box, and handed it to Narcissa.

“Right, these are all rings, suitable for a betrothal, from the Black family estate. I tried to access the Malfoy ones, as they are your right as heir,” she shot a glare at Tonks out of the

corner of her eye, “unfortunately, they are unable to be accessed until the end of your... sabbatical”

She unclasped the box and held it out to him. Nestled in forest green velvet were all manner of rings, some large and jeweled, other’s fine and intricately engraved.

“You’ll need to choose one, dearest. For your wedding.”

Draco’s eyes broke away from the box, “Mother, there is not going to be a wedding.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that is your opinion on the matter. Just as your father assured me ‘Cissy, there is not going to be a war’; forgive me if I plan for other circumstances.”

“Has anyone told you with whom I am matched, Mother,” Draco asked, gently.

Narcissa pressed her lips together so tightly all blood left them and they turned white.

“Yes,” she finally hissed out, “I am aware of the unsuitability of your match given our station and her *lineage*. I should have been prepared for-” she cut herself off, again glancing around the room at the three aurors who had all stood to attention as they heard Narcissa’s words. She froze, unsure how to continue.

“I have no objection to her lineage, Mother, that’s not- aside from the fact I do not wish to marry, my objections to the marriage are nonconsequential. However, I can’t see that Hermione Granger is going to want to marry me.”

“Why wouldn’t she? It would give her a name, something that no amount of career climbing or cleverness can get her. A name would offer legitimacy in our world, if not for her than for any of her half-blood offspring.”

Tonks shuffled her feet drawing Draco’s attention. Draco could feel her, wanting to say something or probably more likely yell something at his mother.

“Mother,” Draco cautioned. He was acutely aware of the dangerous line his mother was now dancing along.

“Regardless, it is what the ministry wants in regards to you, and as we have both learnt over the last 6 years, what the ministry wants, the ministry gets. It’s why I haven’t been able to see my child. If I had known they would take you from me, even after I delivered them a victory...” Narcissa sniffed, “you need to choose a ring, Draco. You are to have a wife and it is only right that a Malfoy wife has a ring. So here, pick one!”

She thrust the box into his hands, her hands shaking although Draco could not decide if it was with grief or anger.

He opened the box again to look at the rings. A ring with a pale purple stone caught his eye, not too large, tear dropped and nestled in yellow gold that had been crafted to look like vines, tiny diamond sparkling from the leaves. He thought that the wildness of the vines mirrored the wildness of Granger’s hair but he looked away from it. There was no way he was going to be marrying Granger. Granger did not need a wedding ring from the Black Family Vaults

because she would rather throw herself into a pit of Hungarian Horntails than wear something that anyone from that family had touched.

“She won’t need one, mother. There is not going to be a wedding. She’ll stop it.”

“But-”

Draco cut her off, “You choose one, if you are convinced I need one. I trust your judgment.”

Narcissa smiled and looked over the ring selection again. Her fingers danced over a couple, though Draco noticed, going nowhere near the purple and vine ring that had caught his eye. Eventually she settled on a gold ring with a triangular black enamel face with a dozen tiny brown diamond set in it.

“This one will do, it was a 17th birthday gift for Bella, so no one will want it back. And the brown stones will match Ms Granger’s... *hair*” she said the last word pointedly and no one in the room believed Narcissa Malfoy was referring to hair. However, no one in the room could report that Narcissa had used a slur. There was a line and Narcissa was artfully dancing on it.

She reached her hand out to Tonks who dutifully took out a single ring box, again in dark green velvet and handed it to Narcissa but her eyes stayed trained on him.

“Are you sure about that ring, Cousin?” she asked. Draco swallowed and looked back at his shoes.

“There will be no wedding, so I need no ring,” was all he replied, determined not to see Tonk’s disappointment or think too hard on the fact that this was the first time she had ever called him cousin. A sharp cough draw Draco’s gaze back to his mother’s and she held out the little velvet box to him.

“Right, with that unpleasantness over, what’s say you tell me about my garden. I’ve been informed that a tour is completely out of the question for some reason, but I am assuming it’s safe for wizarding kind if you tell me about the roses.”

Following his Mother’s visit, Draco felt a weight on his shoulder he hadn’t felt since the summer before sixth year. Immediately after she left he called for Bobsy and asked for the ring to be taken to the family safe in the dungeons, hoping once the weight of it was gone from his pocket, the other weight would lift too. But it didn’t, much like the heat, it draped over him as a constant companion.

He switched his morning runs for swims in the brook at the edge of the property and decided to take over reorganising the silverware, a task that took place entirely in the cellars where it was cooler. While the heat abated in those moments, the weight remained.

Tonks had been colder towards him since his mother’s visit. She stopped casually mentioning Teddy and Draco found that he missed the tales of the 7 year old who was (and Draco would never admit this to anyone else) by all accounts equally adorable and hilarious. He was

sleeping less and playing piano more. He'd stopped writing letters he could never send to his mother. It was too painful with their last farewell fresh in his mind. Something was going to have to break. The notification was going to have to come through soon.

It didn't, instead one random Tuesday, Harry Potter came through the floo with Tonks and Draco just about fell backwards over his chair.

"Malfoy," nodded Potter, stuffing his hands into his pocket. The first thing Draco noticed was how much older he looked. He hadn't gotten much taller but was broader, his cheeks had lost some roundness and his scar which had always shone brilliantly on his forehead had finally faded. Draco unconsciously rubbed at his mark, which had done the same.

"What are you doing here Potter?" Draco couldn't help but slip into the same tone he'd used many years before in the halls of Hogwarts.

"I know, I know, just wait until your father hears about this. Can we skip over this bit please? I have a finicky 3 year old at home and a cranky pregnant wife. I want to be here about as much as you want me here. So I'll pretend you said something cutting, you can imagine me saying something biting and then we can go and have some of those chocolate biscuits that Tonks says are actually quite good. Right? Great. This way?"

Potter pointed to the door and started wandering towards it. Draco shot a panicked look at Tonks who just shrugged.

"You're marrying his best mate, what did you expect?" she said finally, before taking control and leading Potter towards the small sitting room where, yes, there was already a tea service with Tonks favourite biscuits laid out, but they were for Tonks. Because Draco wanted her to tell him stories about Teddy, not for Potter and his ridiculous bloody hair.

His guests were already seated when he got there; Tonks must have felt comfortable enough to call Bobsy as there was a third cup already. Or perhaps Bobsy sensed the great Harry Potter was in the house and fell all over himself to help him. Draco perched on the powder blue chair across from Potter.

"Well?" he asked finally, after Potter had made it clear that he wasn't about to open the conversation.

"You know, Tonks says you're not a total wanker anymore," said Harry biting into a biscuit, "That's probably the only reason I'm not forcing Hermione to leave this god forsaken country rather than go through with this wedding."

All the sound went from the room, leaving just an echo of what Potter had just said. Wedding. Then came the blood pounding in his ears and he could partially acknowledge that his hands and feet were tingling. His chest wasn't working properly anymore, there was something sharp under his ribs and it was sending shivers of pain down his arm. Why wasn't there any sound? Why was it so hard to see Potter? Suddenly there was a splash of ice water on his face and the sound came rushing back into the room.

“Bloody Hell, Draco, just a touch dramatic!” Tonks said, putting down an empty glass and Draco registered that she must have thrown water at him.

Draco’s ribs still hurt, but at least he could breathe again. A wedding, if even Potter thought there was going to be a wedding... did that mean? He let out a shaky breath. No. Potter had underestimated Granger before. It was practically a routine of theirs at school. That’s what this must be, Potter underestimating Granger, yet again.

“Right,” said Potter, looking a touch more disheveled than he had when he entered the room, “and it seems Tonks wasn’t lying when she said you were convinced there would be no wedding.”

Draco shuddered, chilled now that he was wet and he longed for a wand to cast a drying charm on himself. Potter spotted it and half raised his wand in the unspoken question, may I? Draco shook his head. He would rather be cold and wet than at the mercy of Potter’s wand. Potter didn’t protest, just lowered the wand and moved on.

“Well mate, unless you’ve been working on some appeal, there’s going to be a wedding,” Potter said, finally.

“You are not my mate, Potter,” Draco glared at him. Potter looked at Tonks and rolled his eyes.

“Well, obviously, but you’re about to marry my Best Mate, so we’ve got a few things we need to go over. Unfortunately, someone has more morals than me and won’t let me stay for the Veritaserum part of the program but we still need to talk, yeah?”

It was a little punch to the gut, hearing that Potter knew about the conditions of his house arrest but it gave him a little hope that Tonks was in his corner. Just a little bit.

“By all means then Potter, talk,” said Malfoy, trying his best to hide the fact his heart rate had increased by at least 20 beats per minute.

“All that blood nonsense, you’re through with it?” he asked.

No one had directly asked Draco that since his trial. He replied in the same way he had at his trial, and hoped, just as he had then, that Potter didn’t see through it.

“Of course, playing host to He Who Must Not Be Named tends to take the shine off things.”

It wasn’t a lie. It wasn’t. Voldemort was absolutely batshit, stark-raving mad. As was Aunt Bella and Greyback and a whole host of other Death Eaters he was forced to eat breakfast with. Their plans, their goals for wizarding Britain were insane and he’d been as happy as anyone else when Potter got supremely lucky with both Narcissa’s willingness to put everything on the line and a disarming curse of all things. But did that mean he was sure there was nothing to Blood Purity, no. He felt the years of blood magic that tied him to the House of Malfoy and House of Black. He knew of rituals and traditions that tapped into magic in ways muggleborns would never understand, and from what he had seen or heard of

Muggles, they had nothing remotely comparable to it. So was he done with blood purity? He could no sooner disconnect from that part of himself than cut off his own arm.

“Granger has nothing to fear from me, Potter. Given the circumstances, I should be one who is worried.”

Potter didn’t say anything else, just stared at him. Stared so intently, Malfoy briefly worried that Potter was trying his hand at Legilimency, even though it was a widely known fact that he was rubbish at it.

“You should have the wedding ceremony outside,” Potter said finally, breaking his stare with a satisfied look on his face, “she’s undecided about the manor, so it will probably be easier if the ceremony is outside.”

“She’s undecided about the manor?” Draco said sarcastically, “I would think, the groom is probably more of a sticking point. I am still not convinced there will be a wedding, Potter. Granger being unsure is a pretty good indication.”

Harry ignored him, “Can I see the rooms you have prepared for her?”

“Rooms? Potter, there are no rooms, because I’ll believe that Hermione Granger is going to marry me when she comes through the floo in a wedding dress.”

“Yes, well, Ginny and ‘Mione are currently at odds over the dress, but come August 8, she will be coming through the floo. Get the rooms ready.”

“Oh of course, I’ll be sure to redecorate an entire wing in Gryffindor colours, shall I?”

“Actually she prefers softer colours, cream, periwinkle, light purple, that kind of thing.”

“Potter!” Draco threw himself against the back of the armchair in frustration.

“And remove the overhead lighting, the chandeliers, from her room at least,” Potter added, looking Draco directly in the eye.

For one moment, the two men were caught in a shared memory, a glittering chandelier falling from the ceiling. A crumpled body underneath. It was brief, but it was enough to urge the ache under his ribs back to life and instead of trying to say something clever, Draco nodded curtly.

“Right, I’m done then. I need to pick up some jaffa cakes and fish fingers, which yes, will be eaten together, and head home. Tonks,” Potter stood and nodded at Tonks, “Malfoy, see you on the 8th. Don’t be a prat,” with a final nod, he left the room.

“Should I be worried that Saint Potter is roaming my house unsupervised?” Draco said to Tonks, trying very hard to appear relaxed after the last 30 minutes. She just rolled her eyes at him.

“So, are you ready to concede you will be marrying Hermione Granger in, oh what it is now? 9 days?” Tonks fired back at him.

"As I said to Potter, not until I see her in a wedding dress in my floo. It's remarkable, you know, how many times your side underestimates that witch," he reached for the last chocolate biscuit figuring he was owed at least one of the biscuits in his own house.

"We actually know that witch, Draco. It's not... She's not... I know it feels like the war just ended for you. You haven't seen any evidence to prove you otherwise, but it's been 7 years. What you remember, it's different now."

Tonks' tone was lacking her general confidence and was there a hint of pity in her expression?

"Just remember that although the last time you saw Hermione was in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, she hasn't been there, studying in the library and topping classes the way you remember her, the whole time."

"That wasn't the last time I saw her," Draco snapped, his stomach churning at his cousin's words, "That was at my sentencing, when she watched as I was taken away to come here."

The words were ice, trying to shut down the conversation and remind Tonks that despite the time, they were still two people on opposite sides. However, saying them sparked another memory, one that if Draco had occlumency available to him, he would have buried under a foot of ice in his mind. Hermione Granger, sitting dressed in what he assumed were her best robes that swam on her shrunken frame, picking at the skin on her hands as she recounted Draco's actions that night in the manor. She wouldn't look at him or anyone, but she made it clear that he did not identify them, even though he knew who they were. Her eyes remained on her lap as she shared her own opinions that he, like her, was a child in this war and a child in war has little choice in their actions. The bloody golden girl was defending him and he hated that it was one more thing he would owe her for.

Chapter End Notes

Ok a bit longer than usual, I know. But now, the next chapter will be the wedding chapter!!

Also, as for this chapter, for all of those who were hoping for a supportive Narcissa Malfoy, I apologise but you won't find her here. I just find it too unlikely that a woman who has lived and breathed such prejudicial values would be able to reform so quickly, particularly if she's not forced to do so. You can see how much Draco is struggling and he has far fewer years of nonsense to overcome.

Thank you to everyone who has written comments and said Kudos. It's so lovely to know I am not yelling (typing) into a void.

The Wedding Rites and The Wedding Cake

Chapter Notes

Brief TW. There is a little blood in this chapter. Not born of violence, but there.

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

Apparently, all Draco needed to do to end his ministry imposed isolation was host a ministry imposed wedding. All morning, he had been sitting in a pair of his father's old dress robes (pulled out of the cupboard by Bobsy with a stern instruction that Draco would not insult Miss Granger by being improperly dressed) watching person after person come through the floo. This was after he'd walked past the terrace and seen a veritable feast of a wedding breakfast laid out. It seemed that Vim had taken his vague instruction to 'put together a nice morning tea in case people come expecting a farce of a wedding', and run with it. There were platters of french pastries, fresh exotic fruits, and tiny finger sandwiches laid out on the finest china platters the Manor had in its vaults. In the centre was a beautiful three tiered wedding cake, with lavender and periwinkle fondant flowers flowing down the side. Draco wondered if it was a coincidence that Vim had chosen Granger's favourite colours for the flowers, or if Bobsy had been listening at the door to his conversation with Potter. Given those colours had turned up in the linens chosen for Hermione's new room, and in the bouquets of flowers that Bobsy had dotted around the manor, Draco suspected it was the latter. The manor hadn't looked so beautiful since before the war, but all Draco could do was sit and brood in his armchair as people rushed about him and asked him inane questions.

There were an extraordinary number of extra guards and aurors. Kingsley's may have made assurances to him that the ministry didn't see him as a threat, but no one had passed that memo on to whomever had arranged for the guards. Tonks was with them, but instead of standing in a designated spot like the rest of the surly crew, she was nattering with Bobsy, tasting things as they came from the kitchen and generally looking at Draco with an "I told you so" air. At 20 minutes until the appointed ceremony time, the ministry officiant came through the floo. He was extraordinarily young, and Draco wondered if none of the established officiants would agree to marry him to the Golden Girl and so they needed to find a new recruit to do it. Tonks immediately took the officiant's arm and led him to the small area in the garden Draco had nominated for the ceremony.

It was a lovely area under a willow tree not too far from the Eastern terrace, chosen as it fulfilled Potter's request of "outside", and he could nominate it without moving from his chair at the breakfast table, which is where he had been sitting when Bobsy asked. It was shaded and pretty enough, and though he'd expressly told his elves that there was no need for additional preparations in the area, at some point one of them had surreptitiously draped lavender ribbons and tiny sparkly lights throughout the boughs of the tree. Draco begrudgingly wondered that if Hermione Granger was about to set foot in his house, she would have more luck directing his elves because they made ignoring him a sport.

The floo roared to life again but instead of more aurors, Theo and Pansy stepped out. Draco leapt to his feet and rushed over to his friends, seeing them together in a room for the first time since his trial.

“How?” was all he asked, as he grasped at them.

Theo, like him, was wearing dress robes, although he assumed that his were a more current style than the ones he’d pilfered from his father’s closet. Pansy was wearing a muggle style dress; a deep crimson, thin straps over her shoulders and fitting her figure to the knees. Draco didn’t know which was more shocking, the fact she was in a muggle dress or the fact she was in Gryffindor colours. If he hadn’t been so happy to see her, he might have felt betrayed.

“Apparently, the ministry decided you were allowed 6 guests to this little shindig. Granger only wanted to invite two people, so Tonks sent us and Blaise an owl.”

Draco should have been thrilled, should have been soaking up the unexpected visit with his friends but all his mind could do was fixate on the two guests Granger was supposedly bringing. Surely, she wasn’t going too... then he was striding off through the manor towards the garden, Theo and Pansy calling after him as if he’d lost his mind.

“Tonks! Tonks!” he bellowed as he walked, his voice echoing across the stone hallways, causing the aurors stationed there to grasp their wands. Suddenly, there was a soft pop and Tonks appeared before him in the corridor.

“Calm your farm unless you want to get stunned by some of my colleagues,” she hissed, rolling her eyes at him and his irritated state. Behind them, she motioned for the guards to lower their wands.

“Please tell me that Granger has not invited her muggle parents onto the Manor grounds,” he sputtered, his heart rate racing as he imagined it.

Tonks sighed and looked disappointed, “Draco, I would have hoped that after all this time, having Muggles in your house would not cause you so much angst.”

“Me angst?” Draco was so thrown he realised he’d started to form sentences like a Weasley, inelegant and grammatically incorrect, “Tonks, I don’t care in the foggiest if the whole muggle population of Wiltshire comes around for croquet on the lawn, but the Manor probably will. I know you and Kingsley inspected the wards, but have you had a curse breaker look into it? There are centuries of twisted minds and magic at work here. You have no idea what foul things could happen to them.”

Tonks smiled gently, a little puff of air leaving her lips in what Draco suspected was a suppressed sigh.

“Hermione’s guests are not her parents, Draco,” she said.

“And you’re sure?” he was not convinced. Surely if you were able, you’d want your parents at your wedding. Draco wanted his mother. Not his father but unless Granger’s parents were also homicidal maniacs it was unlikely they shared reasoning there.

“100%,” Tonks nodded and pointed him back in the direction of the floo parlour, “Now go back and greet your guests like the dashing groom you’re meant to be.”

“The guest part of this wedding is fine, but I am not a groom until there is a bride and she hasn’t shown up yet,” Draco grumbled, walking back to the floo parlour.

The room was more crowded than when he left, with a small group of people standing off to the side but Draco couldn’t quite register who they were because standing in the hearth was Hermione Granger. Her normally riotous curls had been somewhat contained into a low bun, and she was wearing an impossibly light blue dress that left her shoulders bare but had soft silk sleeves that draped over her arms. It was nipped in at the waist and followed the path of her curves to fall to calves. Was this a muggle wedding gown? If so, he might have to concede there was at least one thing about muggle culture that was superior. Silver sandals wrapped delicately around her ankles, and she was either wearing heels or had grown in the past 7 years, because she was taller than he remembered. When his eyes made their way back to her face, he realised she’d been watching him take her in, and she let out a little shuddering sigh that made his chest feel tight and throat dry.

“Am I going to have to throw water on you again?” Tonks said quietly from beside his left ear, having followed him back to the parlour. Draco wanted to shake his head but he was still frozen in place by the absurdity. She was here.

“Right,” a familiar, irritating voice called out, “Let’s give the bride and groom a minute, and head out to the garden?”

St Potter, clapped his hands together to emphasise his statement, and tried to usher the assembled guests to the door.

“It’s ok,” Granger squeaked and reached for the Weaselette’s hand, “Unless Malfoy has some fine points of constitutional law he wants to discuss we can just skip ahead to the satisfying the ministry part.”

“Are you sure, Hermione,” the Weaselette murmured, “it wouldn’t hurt to have a short conversation...”

Draco watched as Hermione’s grip tightened at Ginny spoke, her knuckles going completely white.

“Quite sure,” Hermione gulped, “Let’s just get this done.”

Tonks took the lead and Draco’s bride left the room with Potter and his wife. Her steps quick as she walked away from him.

“Well mate, I think your bride is either desperate to marry you or desperate to get away from you,” Blaise laughed, Draco dully realised he must have arrived after Theo and Pansy.

Oh shit. Oh fuck. Bride. Hermione Granger was here in a wedding dress. He wasn’t willing to believe it until Hermione Granger was there in a wedding dress and well, there she bloody well was. There was going to be a wedding. Merlin’s saggy ballsack, there was going to be a

wedding? What was she playing at, showing up here for a wedding? He needed... he needed...

“Bobsy!” he yelled, and the elf appeared with a crack.

“I need the ring from the vaults,” he gasped. He was going to have to use that fucking ring. It was atrocious. He never thought anyone would have to see it. It was just to appease his mother. Fuck... Tonks had already seen it. Tonks knew exactly what that ring represented. Tonks was going to be there to watch him place it on Granger’s finger.

He could feel his chest growing tight and tried to focus on forcing air in and out of his lungs. He was going to be ok. He thought the ring was ugly, yes. But it was also flush with diamonds. Maybe Granger wouldn’t notice that it was awful. Women were distracted by lots of diamonds, weren’t they? And yes, Tonks knew the reason the ring had been chosen, but she wouldn’t tell Granger. She wasn’t a cruel woman. He was okay. This was going to be okay. He noted that Bobsy had not apparated away, instead was holding out the velvet ring box to him with a look on his face that said ‘of course you need a ring you absolute idiot’.

Fuck, he was actually getting married. She was here. In his home. In a wedding dress.

“You right mate?” Blaise said cautiously.

“He’s fine,” came a musical voice next to Blaise and Draco realised for the first time that Luna had come with her new husband, her pale hand was wrapped tightly in his dark one, “all grooms get a little flustered when they first see their brides.”

The shock of her voice was like a mini enervate, bringing him back to the moment. Now, instead of thinking of his wedding, he couldn’t focus on anything except for the fact that Luna Lovegood was back in his home. Part of Draco felt like he had to strike at the casual way she’s spoken to him, maybe with a cruel remark and cutting sneer. Another part realised he should fall to his knees, apologise for everything that had happened to her in this house and beg for her to let him keep Blaise. The largest part of himself, urged him to do nothing. Show nothing. So that’s how he responded, he nodded at Blaise once and led his friends, and Luna to the garden.

Granger stood under the willow tree, her hand still gripping Weaslette’s so tightly it looked painful and while Harry was saying something to them, Granger wasn’t looking at him; her eyes were darting around the garden in an almost frantic motion. They landed on him the moment he stepped off the terrace, and she dropped Weaslette’s hand and wiped her palms on her dress. Ancient manners and traditions overcame Draco and before he was conscious of his actions, he offered her a hand to accompany her to the officiant at the front of the small gathering. It wasn’t accepted, her small hands remained balled in fists at her side.

“You’ll have to touch me for the ceremony,” Draco said carefully out of the corner of his mouth. He wasn’t sure how many wizarding weddings she’d been to. Maybe none. Maybe she had no idea. Draco certainly had no idea of how a muggle wedding ceremony went.

“I know,” she hissed back, “but given I don’t have to right now, I should think we’ll both be happier if I don’t.”

They stood in front of the official, who was a truly cheery looking boy with a round face and sandy blond hair. He was cautiously flicking over papers stacked on a stone plinth provided by Bobsy. Yet another thing Draco supposed he should thank the elf for. Without his incessant nagging and outright ignorance of direct orders, there was a huge chance everyone would have shown up today to Draco in joggers, with a hastily prepared wedding breakfast of tea and toast.

“Mr Malfoy, Ms Granger, I’m Thadddeus Bell,” the officiant said jovially, “I hope you don’t mind I’ve bought some notes with me here. The Malfoy wedding rites are a little longer and more complicated than I am used to.”

Draco choked on air for a minute as his lungs temporarily forgot the pattern of breathing.

“Malfoy rites? We don’t need the whole drawn out affair of that,” he stuttered. He had been expecting the bog standard ministry rubbish. To evoke Malfoy magic, with Granger. It was unthinkable.

“No, no, I have it written here somewhere,” Thaddeus shuffled the papers in front of him until he pulled out the correct piece of parchment, “yes, unless the wedding rites are the specific Malfoy rites, the wedding will not be binding. Ergo, Malfoy Wedding Rites.”

Draco swallowed, he hadn’t even considered that his ancestors would put such a loophole into family law. The Malfoy rites. Old magic. Blood magic. Granger watched him cautiously, her jaw flexing. Did she think he’d come up with that loophole by himself? It stroked his ego to think that the Smartest Witch of Their Age saw him capable of such cunning, but alas, it was a happy coincidence. Unless, and he had to admit this was more likely, the smartest witch of their age had figured out the loophole on her own and was now quietly seething that the ministry had foiled her plan. Perhaps it was the only reason she was actually here? Of course that was the only reason she was actually here. She had never intended for a legally binding wedding. But what happened now? Would she call it off? Surely that was the only course of action, he just had to give her a moment to realise it. Silence hung over them. Draco waited. And waited. Was she recalculating? What was her plan now?

Eventually Thaddeus broke the quiet and spoke, suggesting that given the time, they should all get on with it. There were two more beats and it dawned on Draco that Granger wasn’t going to call anything off. Whatever plan her giant bushy brain was constructing now included a wedding .

He turned to look at Tonks, “It appears, cousin, I will need a wand.”

Tonks scoffed, holding an unfamiliar wand out towards him, “Why do you think all the Aurors are here? We weren’t worried that you were going to bludgeon the official with a bunch of daisies or a slice of wedding cake. Apparently, you’ll need this too.”

She reached back into her robe and bought out a narrow black box. Lovely, he couldn’t wait to see Granger’s face when he opened that up. He took the box and placed it straight on the stone plinth, wanting to touch it for as short a time as possible, before nodding at the official to get started.

The opening speech was just a low hum in the background. Occasionally, words like bond and partnership broke through, but he knew the opening speech. He'd memorised them when his father had tutored him in all the old family magic and history, so instead of listening, he just waited for the invitation.

"Mr Malfoy, you can begin," came the call eventually and Thaddeus held the box towards him. Draco sighed and reached to take Hermione's casting hand in his and began to recite incantation.

*Hand that is thine, reach out to mine.
Heart that is mine, you have found,
Magic that is thine, with mine entwine,
And blood of us both, enrich this ground.*

He said the ancient words before motioning to Thaddeus to open the box, revealing an ornate silver dagger resting on black satin. Granger immediately tried to pull her hand away, but Draco held it tightly. In the corner of his eye, he could see Harry trying to make his way to the makeshift altar, but Tonks stopped him, whispering something that made him sit down. Hermione still struggled, her gaze fixated on the knife. Knowing he couldn't say anything without disrupting the ritual he'd begun, he started making slow circles with his thumb against Hermione's hand. Slow and steady, until she stilled and her eyes were coaxed back to him.

Looking back down to their clasped hands, Draco turned Hermione's hand palm up and dragged the knife along her skin, a line of red appearing on her palm as he went. He couldn't look at her face after he did it, knowing that the evidence of the last time someone had dug a blade in her flesh on these grounds was hidden under one of her billowy sleeves. Instead he focused solely on her warm hand, slightly cupped in his own, hovering palm up between them.

"Leave it there," he wanted to say, having to trust that his eyes would convey the message. It did; he let go of her hand just long enough to slice his own palm and return the knife to its box. Cradling the small pool of blood that had formed, he dribbled it into Granger's hand, before clasping their hands together and lowering them to hip height, letting the mixed blood trickle down their entwined fingers to the earth. With a steady trickle coming from between them, he took his wand and uttered the spell he'd known he'd perform once in his life but could never have imagined it would be to this witch before him.

Simul Tenetur.

Purple flames erupted from the ground, burning up the trickle of blood until it circled their hands, warming them slightly, before burning away, healing their palms as it went.

Granger looked up at him, a little awed perhaps by the magic just witnessed and she made no move to drop his hand. Nor did he, instead luxuriating in the prolonged touch that he'd been deprived of for so many years and really examining her eyes. Despite their history, Draco realised that before today he couldn't have told you what colour they were. He could now. Brown. Not a single shade of brown he realised, there were tones that ranged from gold to chocolate.

“Ahem,” Thaddeus cleared his throat and shuffled through his paper again; the spell between them faltered, “Then, it’s on to the exchanging of rings and I believe this is also where you can add your own vows if you wish to modernise.”

“No!” said Granger and Draco simultaneously, dropping their hands.

“No, you don’t want to modernise? Or no, you don’t have rings?” asked Thaddeus, looking through the papers more frantically, as if there was an answer for what to do if the couple had forgotten to bring rings.

“I have a ring,” said Granger softly, “but would prefer not to make any vows.”

“Me also,” Draco said, digging in his pocket to find the dreaded ring box. Thaddeus started speaking again, but it was back to a hum now. Draco dug the awful ring out of its nest and felt the cool weight of it, until he was able to slide it onto Granger’s finger. Her hand made smaller and paler by the ugly twist of metal and stones he deposited there. His ring was simple, a gold band and somehow, though no one had requested any measurements and the band didn’t seem to have any magical fitting charms, it fit his finger perfectly.

“Excellent!” declared Thaddeus, the relief the ceremony was coming to a close evident on his face, “and with a kiss, I declare the union sealed.”

This time Draco froze. He had been so focused on the blood magic and the ring that he’d forgotten about the kiss, and though he knew it was expected for him to initiate it, he couldn’t move. Across from him, Granger rolled her eyes, before taking a step towards him, resting her hand on his shoulder and capturing his lips in the gentlest kiss he may have ever experienced in his life. She pulled away, searched his eyes for a minute. Could she see a storm in them? He felt a storm. He’d been kissed before, obviously. He and Daphne Greengrass had shared many kisses in 4th, 5th and even the first part of 6th year. But they had all been harder, more fierce, each taking something they wanted from the other. This had just been an offering. Freely given or was she wanting something back? Surely, there was something. Draco looked but there was nothing besides curt nod before she turned back to her friends.

“Right, is there cake?” she asked, walking briskly back to the terrace, completely unaffected by whatever had just occurred.

Chapter End Notes

Hermione Granger has entered the chat! I am so excited to post this chapter. It is a little longer than previous chapters, but I needed the words to do the wedding justice.

Also, I know there will be typos and grammatical errors. I have no beta and hate fine tooth proof reading with a passion. I hope that you enjoy reading this anyway.

The Insubordinate Elves and the Pudding

Chapter Notes

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

Once Draco had handed his wand (and knife) back to Tonks, he felt the aurors and guards collectively relax. So much so that the beautiful wedding breakfast was all but annihilated before Draco and his guests even had time to leave the garden. Apparently, guarding the youngest ex-Death Eater in history led one to work up quite the appetite. Theo, Blaise and Pansy hadn't lingered for long, just long enough for some quick hugs and words of encouragement and though Draco knew he would be regretting his actions when he was plunged into the depths of isolation next week, he found he had no desire for company.

Despite claiming she wanted cake, his bride was not on the terrace. She, Tonks and the Potters had slipped into the depths of the house and Draco wasn't sure what he was meant to do now? Follow her? Wait by the food? Go back to his daily schedule? For the first time in years he could feel his magic; it was restless and swirling in his stomach. Telling him to go to her; his new wife. It simply wouldn't do, Draco's magic may have wanted him to go to her, but Draco himself wanted to be as far away from two thirds of the Golden Trio as possible. Judging by the way his wife fled the scene of the crime, she felt similarly. Superb, there was no need to go looking for her. He found her anyway, whether due to blood magic or bad luck seemed irrelevant. Silhouetted in front of one of the large windows on the landing, Granger was rubbing the petals of a hydrangea between her fingers while Potter and Tonks spoke to her.

Draco could only catch the tone (urgently worried) and snippets of what they were saying, '*I'm sure Kingsley would*', '*least awful of the options*', '*at least let me get Glitter...*'

"What is Glitter?" Draco interrupted before he could hear anymore. He was sure someone was going to say something truly cutting at any moment, and he didn't particularly want to hear it.

"The herpes of the craft world," Potter muttered and his wife gave him a not so subtle elbow to the ribs.

"What is herpes?" Draco asked, still confused and Tonks snorted. The Potters too looked as if they were barely holding back a laugh. Draco loathed being laughed at and he'd felt this morning had been enough of an insult to his ego without whatever mocking was occurring now. He felt his face going warm and knew an angry blush was cresting his cheeks. Finally, Granger looked up from the flower and directly at him.

"Ignore them," she said with a sigh, "Glitter is my cat."

"You still have your cat? That big ugly orange thing?" Draco asked, looking around the landing. He didn't see where she could have put it during the ceremony but if he remembered that cat (and the whole of bloody Slytherin remembered that cat, it hovered around Granger

like a curse and if you ever insulted her in its presence you would find a dead rodent on your pillow in due course), it couldn't be too far away.

"No, well, yes. I don't have Crooks anymore. After the war..." she trailed off and her eyes took on a faraway quality, "But I have a new kitten, Glitter. But it's fine, she can stay at Grimmauld. I didn't think you'd want a pet roaming around your home."

Was that what she thought of him? So cold and unfeeling he would deprive someone of their pet? If that was her opinion, why the bloody hell had she married him at all? Oh, that's right because the loophole she thought she had found had been destroyed by the ministry and hundreds of years worth of ancient Malfoys.

"You can bring your bloody cat, Granger. It's of no significance to me," he looked around, "actually, shouldn't you have more things? Clothes and what not?"

Her watery smile told him all he needed to know about the damn cat and its importance to her.

"I have a few things packed, I was going to ask Harry to fetch them later."

Draco shook his head, "Only a few things? I'd thought for sure there'd be at least a carriage worth of books."

"I don't need much, and I'll still have my house. I know I have to live here, but I am keeping it, just in case..." Hermione shifted her feet nervously. Of course she had a house; she had to be living somewhere before this very moment. Draco hadn't put any thought into where that was, if he had tried to imagine it, he'd probably have her and her cat holed up in the Gryffindor common room before the wedding. He swallowed anxiously and nodded.

"He doesn't need to, we can send Bobsy," Draco offered and watched as his new wife's eyes narrowed slightly. Right, Granger and House Elves. It was a touchy subject. He braced himself for the onslaught of high handed verbal battery that was Granger's signature but nothing came.

"I can show you to your room?" he offered, trying to change the topic. She nodded before turning back to the Potters and Tonks.

"I think you can go now," she said.

Tonks and the Weaslette nodded, but Potter just turned and glared at him.

"I'll be around Malfoy," he said threateningly, and Draco briefly wondered if having Granger present was going to lead to more visitors at the manor. Not that Potter would be his first choice of guest but it was better than unending isolation.

"Do you have your coin?" Potter asked Granger, his expression morphing from glaring to quietly worried. She nodded, accepted brief hugs and then stared out the window while their footsteps echoed away. Just like that, Draco Malfoy was alone with his wife.

“Shall we?” he asked, gesturing to the flight of stairs that would take them up to his wing. Although, he supposed it would be more fair to say ‘their wing’ now. Hermione nodded without meeting his eye and followed him. Draco was waiting for questions, or maybe a clear “laying down of the law”, but she was silent as they walked. Even her footsteps barely made a sound.

“Your rooms are the closest to the library wing,” he said, more for filling the silence than anything else, “you have your own bathroom, obviously, and there is a small sitting room attached. It’s a bit too small to be converted to an office in my opinion but my mother used to like to take her breakfast there.”

“I’m in your mother’s rooms?” Hermione halted suddenly.

“No, of course not. But my wing is an exact replica of my parent’s,” Draco tried to keep his voice casual. He didn’t want to discuss his parents with her. *Well why did you bring them up then?* A voice in his mind berated him.

“I’m in your wing?” Hermione couldn’t keep the anxiety from her voice, and Draco looked behind him to realise she still hadn’t moved.

“Yes,” Draco swallowed, “My parent’s wing remains prepared for them and the guest wing... well our last guest was...”

“Oh,” said Hermione and Draco was grateful she didn’t make him say the name.

“It’s a large wing, there are many doors between my rooms and yours,” Draco was relieved when she started walking again and they both arrived at a set of doors. He pushed them open and was immensely grateful that his elves had heeded Potter’s message and prepared it. As suggested, they had removed all the chandeliers from above and instead replaced them with a series of floor lamps and table lamps that gave the room a warm glow. The walls had the standard ivory damask wallpaper that his mother had favoured when she redecorated the manor many years ago, but the Slytherin green drapes had been replaced by the softest of pink. The bed, a large four poster, had all its heavy curtains removed and replaced with gossamer panels that offered a degree of privacy but still let in the light. And Bobsy had filled as many surfaces as possibly with vases of fresh flowers, so many that the room smelt like a florist.

“Your elves prepared this?” she asked, taking a step into the room. Of course she would know he had nothing to do with this and though she was a hundred percent correct, part of him wanted to lie and take the credit anyway. Except that was a ridiculous thing to do. For one, there was no way that she would believe it and two, he didn’t want her to think he was happy about this situation. That he’d done anything to suggest he was eager to have her stay here.

“Yes,” was the only thing he said, watching as she walked deeper into the room, touching different things as she went.

“I’d like to meet them?” her voice was uncharacteristically unsure.

“Of course,” Draco stood up straighter, put his hands behind his back and called, “Bobsy! Vim!”

With twin pops, both elves appeared before him. Bobsy did not look impressed.

“Mister Draco, we have a lot to be doing in the kitchen, surely you don’t need us to coddle you right at this moment,” he said dryly. Draco chanced a look at Granger, whose lips had formed a surprised “o” listening to Bobsy talk to him. Part of him wanted to rant at Bobsy for embarrassing him in front of her and the other was quite pleased to see something had surprised the swot. He was sure she was expecting a Lucius/Dobby situation.

“Your new mistress would like a word,” he said, gesturing towards Hermione and watching as Bobsy almost fell over himself to bow at her feet.

“Oh please, you really don’t need to do that,” Hermione said, her eyes darting up to his as if to decipher exactly how to turn off the bowing. Now it was Draco’s turn to barely conceal his amusement at her expense.

“Oh no mistress, we are honoured to have a brave and valiant war hero in our home,” said Bobsy, emphasising the war hero to make sure everyone in the room was quite aware of which sides of the war everyone was on, “and the dedicated and clever work you did at the ministry for house elves...”

Bobsy let out an exaggerated sniff and seemed to be at a true loss for words. It took every ounce of self control that Draco possessed but he didn’t snort or roll his eyes at Bobsy’s effusive manner instead looked at Granger to see how much she was enjoying the fruits of her labour, misguided as they were half the time. He was surprised to see she looked more uncomfortable by the praise than she had been standing in his floo parlour before the wedding. The colour had left her cheeks and she was back to nervously rubbing a hydrangea petal between her fingers. Should he interrupt? If Granger was actually his wife, he should immediately put a stop to anything that made her uncomfortable. Especially if it was his blasted elf that was making her uncomfortable. But she wasn’t a real wife. His magic gave a belligerent twist behind his sternum at his thought. Fantastic, apparently his magic had its own opinion on the topic.

“Am I going to have to stand here all afternoon for this little tête-à-tête?” he sneered, finding the tone he’d grown quite skilled at during his years at Hogwarts had grown rusty. Regardless, it seemed to trigger something in Granger and she dropped the flower she’d been fiddling with and glared at him instead.

“You don’t need to be here for this at all,” she dismissed him. It wasn’t quite the same know-it-all tone as he was used to, perhaps she was rusty too.

“Well then, I have things to do. Bobsy will inform you of the dinner arrangements. He will also see to your things.”

“Once Bobsy has finalised the dinner arrangements with Mistress to ensure they are to her liking, Bobsy will let Mister know,” said Bobsy, with a glare that would rival McGonagall.

That dratted witch let out a giggle at that and Draco cursed the elf and his impertinence. Without offering another word, he turned to leave before he could be humbled any further. Not three paces past the door, he released he'd forgotten to tell Granger exactly where his rooms were. Not that she would need to go to them, but it might be helpful to allow her to avoid them. When he turned to tell her, he could see her kneeling down to speak to his elves at eye level, and whatever she was saying she was most serious about. Almost all her hair had escaped its elegant chignon from the wedding now, and between it, her hand gestures and the earnest expression on her face, he could see the witch he'd known from school. It was only then he realised, the witch he'd been dealing with for most of the day was a mere ghost of that girl.

Bobsy never came to Draco with updated dinner plans and Granger never showed up for dinner. The table in the small dining room was set for two, and someone had been very optimistic in decorating the table with red roses and long white candles, but Draco sat alone, picking over a dinner of duck confit and watching the door. He'd eaten dinner alone for over 6 years; it shouldn't have felt strange or lonely, but knowing that somewhere in the house was another person, presumably also eating a meal alone put Draco's seclusion into sharp focus. Saying nothing of the fact that his magic would occasionally tug at him, reminding him that he was bound to something just out of his reach and he should be reaching for it. If only he could occulude, he could slice that tug in half with a razor sharp wall of ice.

"Bobsy!" Draco called sharply, sick of sitting alone in flickering candlelight, and the elf appeared with a crack, "I'll have my dessert in the sitting room tonight."

"There is no dessert tonight," responded Bobsy and looked as if he was going to apparate away again immediately.

"Granger removed dessert from the dinner menus?" Draco hissed, unable to believe the stupid swot had been in his house for less than 24 hours and managed to take one of the few joys he found in his days.

"No sir, there was dessert on the menu," replied Bobsy, checking his nails rather than looking at Draco.

"And the reason it is not available?" Draco was losing his patience.

"We thought you and Miss Granger would enjoy some wedding cake tonight, and when we served it to Miss Granger she expressed such joy and love of cake that we thought it prudent to keep it for Miss Granger, solely."

"So you're telling me that I can not have one slice of a three tiered wedding cake because Granger does not want to share?"

"Oh no Mister, I am sure Miss Granger would share. She is a kind and generous witch. And exceptionally clever, the top of your year, every year, no? Bobsy decided that Miss Granger should not have to share."

With a curt nod, he apparated away, leaving Draco alone and puddingless. Draco threw down his serviette and stormed to his study. There, a fresh piece of parchment awaited. He had

missed his letter writing time due to the morning's events but he believed there was no better time than the present to communicate with his new *darling* wife.

Granger,

Or should it be Malfoy? We haven't discussed whether you'll be taking my name now that we are married. Not that we've discussed much of anything since you stepped foot over my threshold. While normally I would be thrilled to have as little to do with you as possible, it would be perhaps prudent to discuss a few things. Say, I don't know, what the ever loving fuck you are doing here, married to me. You're the darling of the magical world, brightest witch and all, who helped defeat Voldemort, you can't tell me you couldn't have thrown around a few "do you know who I am?" and get out of this ridiculous mess. Were you setting all your hopes on one loophole? I must say if that was your only grand plan you're slipping. Only having one plan to avoid certain doom is only an 'Acceptable' at best. In this case, I think we can both agree it's a 'Poor'. So what's the plan now, dearest? I'd sure like to know if you would deign to join me for a meal and conversation.

Draco

PS. Can you tell my stupid, insubordinate elves that you do not need three tiers of wedding cake to yourself.

Draco folded the letter with more force than needed and briefly considered slipping it under her door, but he gritted his teeth and shoved it in the drawer of unsent missives. He'd kept his anger and questions to himself for 6 years; there was no point in sharing now.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has read and commented and sent kudos! I can't tell you how much it gives me a boost. Honestly!

Also I know I am just posting all over the calendar at the moment, I would love to one of those people who can keep to a schedule but alas, it is not to be. Instead, I get all excited and write a bunch and as I finish a chapter I publish it. This fic has a completed outline though, so I am not working blind!

Finally, I know there are questions about Hermione and her motivations, her character (it might feel a little OOC) and I promise it will be revealed. But this is a slow burn and primarily Draco's story. That said, as I am writing this one, I am writing Hermione's POV as a separate fic. I won't be publishing it simultaneously with this one, because you and Draco are bound to learn things at the same time but after I have finished this one, I will publish Hermione's story. It does exist!

I think that's all! I hope you like Bobsy in this chapter. Little Man has sass for days.

The Cat and The Car

Chapter Notes

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

A gentle tickling woke Malfoy from his sleep the next morning. Impossibly gentle, little brushes against his forehead, cheek. It was quite lovely, all being told and Draco resisted opening his eyes in an effort to keep the sensation for longer. It reminded him of Vim fussing over him as a young boy or Pansy fussing over him as a slightly older one.

“Glitter!” an indignant squawk ruined whatever chance he had of lingering in his dreamland. He opened his eyes to two unexpected sights. The first was a bushy white tail less than a centimetre from his nose. It was attached to one of the fluffiest and classically attractive cats he’d ever seen, who was sitting on his chest looking towards the door where the second unexpected sight was waiting for him.

Hermione Granger, feet bare, hair wild, dressed in nothing but a soft pink silk nightgown. If he thought Muggle wedding gowns were superior, they had nothing on muggle nightgowns. Little strings held it up over her shoulders, before it dipped neatly between cleavage that either hadn’t existed in school or the Hogwart uniforms had a lot to answer for. Like the muggle wedding dress it wasn’t skin tight, but the silk was cut in a way that followed the nip of her waist and the swell of her hips. Unlike the wedding gown, the skirt stopped mid-thigh leaving plenty of creamy white leg bare for Draco to admire. The thought made him swallow uncomfortably, was he admiring Granger. *No, answered his magic, you’re admiring your wife*

His eyes snapped to hers, hoping she hadn’t realised that he had been ogling her like a common Weasley but found her eyes equally busy darting over his bare torso, taking him in just as much. Oh, his ego liked that and the magic of their bond even more so; he propped himself up, dislodging the cat, to give her a better view. Thankfully, the covers bunched at his waist offered some modesty, it was morning after all.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, her cheeks red, “I don’t know how he got out of my room. I didn’t want him to wander. And I didn’t realise that this was your room.”

“Clearly,” Draco drawled. The cat stayed curled up on his stomach, now purring softly, “well, are you going to remove the little beast?”

Hermione took some tentative steps into the room and called her blasted cat. The cat looked at her but ignored her, staying curled up on Draco’s stomach. So Hermione crept a little closer and tried again. Still no luck. Draco wondered if he should prod the little beast, encourage it to move towards its mistress but wasn’t sure how said mistress would respond to him getting physical with her pet and instead clucked his tongue to hurry her up and try and persuade it to move. Still nothing. With a sigh that rivalled Bobsy’s when he was forced to actually care for Draco, Hermione took some giant steps forward and swooped up her cat. Her fingers brushed against his bare stomach as she did so and Draco had to bite back a little groan at the contact. *Circe* how long had it been since anyone had touched him on bare skin?

It was embarrassing how his pulse jumped and little trails of goosebumps erupted at the touch.

“Sorry,” Hermione squeaked and cat in hand fled from his room.

Draco took a couple of deep fortifying breaths before hoisting himself from his bed and going for a shower. He would not get distracted by an insignificant and accidental touch from Hermione Granger. The fact it had rattled him so in the moment was nothing more than a natural side effect of the cruel and unusual punishment that was house arrest and years of isolation. That was all. There was absolutely no need to give it any more thought. No matter how much the touch had also boosted his magic in much the same way as holding his wand for the first time had.

Wiping the steam from his mirror, Draco stepped from the shower to his large walk-in closet and faced the next, apparently debilitating, question of the day. What does one wear under house arrest with a former schoolyard enemy turned wife? Joggers and quidditch kit seemed too casual, formal suit or robes seemed a touch over the top. Eventually, Draco settled for slacks and a button up shirt in shade of grey. He spent no longer than usual on his hair (he was not going to preen for her), and then went down to the terrace where he braced himself for an awkward conversation over breakfast. He just hoped that Granger was wearing actual clothes.

There was no one else on the terrace when he arrived, just a plate of toast, various spreads and a steaming pot of tea. Draco set to having his breakfast and after several slices of toast and two cups of tea, he groaned at the prospect of having to change back into his joggers for his morning run; no need to dress for a new wife when the wife didn’t bother showing up. Not that he wanted her to. He didn’t want to sit down and have a meal with Hermione Granger, but surely they should have a conversation at some point. He took as long as he could to finish the last cup, drew it out to give her a chance to join him, and then finally, she appeared. Her hair was down, but somewhat more tame than it had been earlier and she was in a pair of jean shorts and an oversized shirt that said “Oxford ” on the front. If his mother had been there, she would have had a heart attack.

“Granger,” Draco said, pushing the second chair out with his foot under the table. She walked over and sat in it, hands and eyes in her lap.

“Malfoy,” she answered and Draco waited for her to pour herself some tea or take some toast. When she did neither he raised the pot in an unspoken question.

“Uh, no thank you, I’ve already had breakfast,” she said, her eyes only lifting from her lap for a second, “I wanted to talk to you.”

“I assumed, given you are not here for breakfast,” Draco drawled, trying to remember how to appear disinterested when the questions from the night before were bubbling under the surface, along with new ones like, “Where did you have breakfast?”, “How old is your cat?”, “Why are you wearing a shirt that says Oxford on the front?”. Honestly, his desperation for someone to talk to was a fucking embarrassment.

"Right, I just wanted to say, I am not going to disrupt your life in any way," said Hermione, looking up at him, face resolved.

Draco raised his eyebrows, "You do realise we got married yesterday, yes?"

Maybe Granger had finally lost it. Because he was under the impression that marriage was a pretty big disruption. She just huffed.

"On paper only Malfoy," she said and at her words, his magic boiled up and he feared there was going to be a burst of accidental magic.

"And with blood," he pointed out, hoping giving a voice to whatever magical temper tantrum their blood bond was having would make it calm down.

"Yes, well, we have the illustrious House of Malfoy to thank for that. But it doesn't signify. Do you want a marriage with me?" she asked.

"No, I don't wish to be married at all," Draco responded, feeling the need to point out it was marriage that was objectionable, not her personally, lest she think it was some blood purity nonsense that was the sole root of his objection, "however, what I want has not been taken into consideration for a very very long time."

"Well, it's fair to say in regards to the Marriage Act, wants have very little to do with it for anyone. All we can do is find the least awful option we're provided. So I propose this. We are married, in so much the paperwork says so. I will leave you alone, you will leave me alone. One day, if they ever repeal this stupid act, we can divorce and be done with it. Until then, I see no reason we need to interact at all."

The logical part of Draco could appreciate what she was saying. They did not like each other, never had and likely never would. They could ensure they both obeyed the law, while not actually changing their lives. It made sense. The part of him that had been alone for 6 years flexed against the "leave alone" phrase of her speech, so desperate for some sort of consistent human interaction. The part of him and his magic that was now bound to her rioted furiously. Before he could do anything the teapot in front of him exploded, and tea flooded the table, falling onto both his and Granger's lap. They both pushed back from the table, rattling china and silverware as they did. Granger studied his face so intently, Draco didn't think she even noticed the now lukewarm tea on her legs.

"My apologies," said Draco, picking up a still dry napkin and handing it to her.

"Does that happen often? Since they took your wand?" Hermione asked curiously, taking the napkin and wiping the tea from her bare thighs. Draco swallowed uncomfortably. For a smart witch she had no idea what the blood magic she had entered into meant and he wondered why she couldn't feel it, rolling and flexing at any mention of their union. Maybe it was a muggleborn thing, she didn't have the ability to sense it. If that was the case, he felt no need to enlighten her. Until there was a chance at an on paper divorce anyway, at which point he would need to tell her so her big brain could find a way to undo it.

“Sometimes,” he lied, better she believed that he was as incapable of controlling his magic as a child than to learn there was an itch in his hand that he knew would only be soothed by reaching out and touching her.

“I can agree to your terms Granger, I’ll do my best to pretend you aren’t here.”

She nodded and went to leave before turning to him, the determination on her face for their previous conversation replaced by nervousness.

“Malfoy, do you have a map of the manor? I’d just like to know where all the rooms are, so I don’t accidentally stumble on you sleeping again or end up in the draw-” she stopped mid sentence, although Draco knew immediately what room she was thinking of.

“Yes, I’ll have one sent to your room.”

Draco did not have a map of the manor, but saw no reason he couldn’t create one before his morning run.

Ignoring Granger was spectacularly easy, even though she had not left the manor since their wedding. Draco had done it successfully all week. She never seemed to eat in the dining room (which begged the question where was she eating), he never saw her walking the grounds (which made Draco wonder if she ever went outside) and she never seemed to be in the library when he was (which made Draco question if she was indeed Hermione Granger, or a polyjuiced substitute, which he had to admit would have been a very clever way to get out of the whole ‘marriage’ thing). She didn’t make noise, his elves said nothing about her.

Living with Hermione Granger was like living with a ghost. A ghost that he knew was definitely in the manor because every so often he would feel a tug on his magic and he’d know she had just walked past whatever room he was sitting in.

Tonks had not avoided Granger, either the person or the topic. She’d bound out of the fireplace the first Tuesday after the wedding, grilled Draco on his life as a married man and been quite perturbed when she found his marital status had no effect on his day to day in any way. It had been rather awkward to admit to his burst of accidental magic under veritaserum; Tonks had raised her eyebrows at that as if to say “blood magic, am I right?”. Thankfully, her professionalism had let the omission pass without comment, although Draco suspected by the way she scribbled furious notes, there was going to be a substantial report on someone’s desk about the effect of a blood bond on Draco’s magic. The ministry wanted to stupid bond, the ministry could deal with the consequences.

After their chat, Tonks disappeared to “charge the wards”, a task that took three times as long as usual and Draco suspected that Granger was now getting a similar grilling to the one he’d just received. He tried not to feel jealous that Tonk had spent as much, if not more, time with Hermione than him. Afterall, they were friends, he and Tonks were... prisoner and officer? Estranged family? Complicated was probably the best word for it. It wasn’t like Tonks had abandoned him completely; she still spoke to him. Still, he had to wonder, had she shown Granger photographs of little Teddy? He and Tonks still weren’t back on that level of friendship after the ring debacle.

Ignoring Granger had worked beautifully, until Sunday, 10 days after their wedding. That afternoon, he'd been rudely pulled from a rather exquisite book on the Salem Witch Trials, from the perspective of a house elf of all things, by a roaring noise at the front of the house. It was a noise never heard before in the manor and had Draco dropping his book and running for the front drive in panic at whatever ancient curse Granger may have awoken. By the time he got to the front door, only slightly sweaty and out of breath, it was clear it was not a curse causing the awful noise, though its source had been awoken by Granger. Outside, rounding the fountain, was a blue Land Rover, Hermione Granger at the wheel.

"What is that?" Draco spluttered, still trying to get his racing heart rate under control, as Hermione turned off the engine and exited the vehicle.

"It's a car, Malfoy," Hermione responded, one eyebrow raised as if to say, how daft are you?

"Yes, I'm quite aware of what a car is. I'm a wizard, not an 18th century simpleton. What is it doing here?" Draco gritted his teeth. While he'd never been in a car or used one, he'd seen plenty on the street. They were noisy, and dirty but he supposed without the luxury of floo or apparition, Muggles didn't have much choice.

"It's mine," Granger shrugged, "you said I could bring my things."

"Why on earth do you need a car, Granger?" Draco briefly wondered if she was being deliberately Muggle just to annoy him. Or test him.

"Asides from the fact I quite enjoy driving, I need a way to exit the Manor," she said.

"Exit the manor? You get to exit the manor?" Draco asked. It made sense, he supposed. Not even the Ministry with their penchant for cruel and ridiculous punishments could really think locking Hermione Granger up for months was a serviceable idea. However, the pang of envy and longing hit him more than he'd expected. A little anger too.

"Every Sunday," she said, appearing sad instead of happy about it. Strange witch.

"Why don't you floo? Or apparate?" Draco asked, still failing to see why she needed a car.

"Your floo is rarely connected and anyway, you aren't allowed to have floo powder on the premises. And apparition in the grounds of the manor is tricky," Hermione grumbled, "a car allows me to drive to the nearest wizarding village and use one of their public floos."

"Apparition is tricky?" Draco repeated, wondering what she meant.

"Yes, the wards. I don't know if it's the ministry wards or the fact I am muggleborn, but the Manor resists when I try to apparate in or out. I'd rather not get splinched, so..." she gestured to the car.

Draco immediately wished he hadn't asked. It could very well be the wards resisting a Muggleborn witch; Merlin knows his ancestors would have set it up like that if it was an option. However, he also knew there was instinctive magic at play when it came to the Manor wards. She had imbued blood into the manor, but without a willingness or attempt to connect

to his family name, it wouldn't be enough for the manor to see her as one its own. However, trying to explain to Hermione Granger she was doing magic wrong according to his ancestors who would have gladly seen her die in a symbolic and gruesome manner was probably a guaranteed way to end up in Azkaban. Or on the other side of a demonstration of exactly how powerful her magic was. At the very least any hope of this calm truce in their marriage continuing would be dashed. So he opted for changing the topic.

"Does the ministry know you have a car? Aren't they concerned that I could use it to escape? Violate the terms of my house arrest?"

Hermione laughed at him, "Malfoy, if you know how to drive a Muggle car, I'll pay for the petrol for your escape myself. It's a manual. I think we're safe."

"It can't be that difficult," he scoffed, looking at the machine and thinking, "What's petrol?"

Granger laughed at him again. He should loathe it, being laughed at but her laugh was light and lovely and he couldn't remember the last time there had been such a happy sound at Malfoy Manor.

"See, nothing to worry about. I'll even leave the keys in it," she said and made a big show of placing the keys on the front seat. Then without another word turned and walked back towards the house.

Draco was quite perturbed. She'd never answered his question about petrol and well, it wasn't an awful conversation they were having and she left abruptly. As far as interactions with Hermione Granger went, he considered that it might have been the most pleasant one they had ever shared. *Except for that morning with the cat* his mind reminded him and he snarled at his own errant thought.

The car stood in front of him like a challenge. Still and silent, although Draco felt some warmth coming from the front of it. Was it meant to be warm? He pressed his hand to the front of it and confirmed it was definitely warm, then looked around to make sure that Granger had definitely gone inside and was definitely not watching him.

It didn't look too difficult. There was a wheel that he assumed was for steering, or maybe that was what the long pole between the seats was for. He opened the door, took the keys and slipped into the seat. If Muggles could do this, surely he could. Not that he would leave the Manor grounds, he wasn't that stupid, but he could drive it a little way down the drive. Prove Granger wrong. Confuse her when she came out to it again, and saw that it wasn't where she left it. She might even come and find him to tell him off about driving her car when she saw it.

There was a slot near the wheel that seemed like the obvious place to put the key and so Draco slid it in. Not too difficult at all. Just a quick turn and - the car stuttered to life, lurched forward and immediately turned itself off with a shudder. What in the world... He tried again with the same result. It must be broken! He tried a third time and this time when the car lurched forward before its shuddering stop, it bumped one of the centaur statues near the drive and pushed it over. Right. Fine. Granger was correct. Draco did not know how to drive

a car. He only wished he had his wand so he could repair the statue before Granger saw it and knew exactly how poorly he'd failed.

Chapter End Notes

Again, just thank you all so much for the kudos and your lovely comments.

The International Rocks and the Liar

Chapter Notes

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

After living with a car for the best part of a month, Draco had to agree with his original assessment. They were loud and dirty. What he hadn't considered was how useful loud could be, because the roar of the infernal blue vehicle filtering through the Manor each Sunday morning and evening was a tangible signal of when Granger left and when she returned.

It was odd when Granger left the Manor. On the one hand it shouldn't have been that much different from any other day, given he never saw her when she was there, but not seeing her but knowing she was somewhere on the premises was a completely different feeling from not seeing her and knowing that he had no chance of seeing her. He felt somewhat more relaxed on Sundays. He wore his jogging gear to breakfast, he didn't mind if he still had dirt on his person at lunch, he spent his reading time in the library, as opposed to taking a book back to his room so he could leave the space free for her.

In other ways, he felt less relaxed. The bond between them didn't exactly protest at their separation, but it was like a low hum in Draco's mind. A constant reminder that his wife was not with him. That low hum meant he couldn't just forget her completely, and after dinnertime, after a whole day of niggling, it became almost unpleasant. So much so, he'd taken to sitting in one of the guest rooms that overlooked the drive after his Sunday dinner, just so he could watch and wait for the lights of the car to drive towards him. It was a visual confirmation of what his magic knew the moment Granger crossed the wards. She was home.

She never came to see him or say anything about the still horizontal centaur statue, nor the fact that the keys were sticking into the car next to the wheel, rather than on the seat where she'd left him. Draco was a little peeved about it; especially as he was sure that if he had figured out how to drive it a little ways down the path, she would have come to speak to him. And it wasn't that he wanted to converse with Granger. It wasn't. She was insufferable and brash and ... and... He was finding it harder to remember all the adjectives he'd once used to describe her. Quiet wasn't one that he remembered from school, but it was the only one that seemed to apply her now. And honestly, shouldn't he be glad that she was quiet because he did not want to have to deal with her. Except, well, they were the only two people in this giant, echoey house. Didn't she want to talk to someone? Also, where in the world was she eating all her meals because he hadn't seen her in the dining room or terrace once.

Visiting day was still Saturday. Draco briefly wondered if it would be changed to Sunday to fit in with Granger's plans but Tonk had said it wouldn't. Then he wondered if Granger would be getting her own visitors on a Saturday and he'd be subjected to Weasley and Potter traipsing through is floo parlour as he waited for his own friends. He bet that they wouldn't need to stay in the floo parlour or have their interactions monitored by a guard. So when Visiting Saturday arrived, he waited for her to join him to receive whoever came but she never appeared. There was the answer to that question, she was not rhaving guests. Like

every other day, she spent her Saturday tucked away somewhere alone and left Draco to himself.

It was a nervous wait, that first visit after the wedding. He didn't know who was going to come, given they had all been present for the wedding so their schedule was off and he was surprised when Blaise came through. The floo roared to life a second time and instead of a guard, Luna Lovegood stepped out, her pale blue eyes searching out her husband; her face relaxed into a smile when she saw him.

"Draco," she said, with her musical lilt, stepping forward and wrapping him in a hug. Draco stiffened, waiting for the fireplace to light up a third time and for a guard to step through. Knowing his luck the guard would see Luna's arm's around him and assume Draco was assaulting her in some way and he'd end up flat on his back stunned.

"It's okay, Drake," Blaise said, stepping forward and taking Luna's spot with a hug of his own, one that he did not breakaway from, but just continued speaking in his ear, "The Ministry was happy for Luna to supervise this one, her being an Order member and all."

Draco didn't know how to respond, so he just grasped onto his friend longer and squeezed him a little harder, relishing the hug that he'd wanted for so long and had always been cut short. Luna had taken herself to one of the sofas and sat delicately on the edge, her eyes wandering to the window where they stayed, giving them a modicum of privacy.

"Better than the usual ministry stiff, yes?" asked Blaise as they eventually broke apart and went to sit next to Luna. Draco immediately picked up on the dual tones of pride and apprehension.

"Infinitely," Draco replied, trying to sound as sincere as possible. This was the moment, probably. Draco should apologise or something to Luna. Especially as, if you didn't count the wedding which Draco didn't because of the strangeness of the day, the last time Draco had been in a room with Luna Lovegood, he'd been occluding aggressively and ignoring the harm done to her by his own kin. But where do you even start with something like that, so instead he sat looking at the couple awkwardly, noting their hands were clasped together between them.

"Where's Hermione?" Luna asked.

"Somewhere in the manor, I'm not sure where exactly," he replied. Not the topic he would have chosen to start with, although it was alway Tonks' preferred opener too, so he supposed he should be used to it.

"And how is married—" Blaise began but Luna cut him off, a gentle hand on his forearm silencing him. Cocking her head she stared at Draco so intently, he worried she was trying to perform some form of Legilimency on him.

"Do you like rocks, Draco?" she asked finally and Draco shot a look towards Blaise, who was just staring at his wife with an equally dopey and knowing smile. Right.

“Rocks are fine,” he answered finally, unsure if that was the correct response to such a ridiculous question.

“Rocks are fascinating,” Luna agreed, “all of the most magical buildings in Britain are made of stone, Hogwarts, Gringotts, your own manor.”

Draco thought that was probably more due to the building materials available at the time of their construction than anything else, but he nodded anyway,

“And even through the war they stayed standing. Still powerful. They were just so strong”

Draco wasn’t sure what Luna was getting at, was she making a point about the futility of his actions during the war? She needn’t have bothered. He’d accepted his role in the war was insignificant about half way through it. From feeling all powerful in 5th year with an Inquisitorial Squad badge on his chest, to realising he was a pawn to be used for the Dark Lords entertainment in 6th. It was a violent tumble.

“But then in my masteries,” she continued and Draco looked to Blaise for clarification.

“Luna has a double mastery in Herbology and Magizoology,” he broke in, his tone so proud of his blonde witch Draco could scarcely believe it.

“Yes, sorry, I forgot that you wouldn’t know that,” Luna said kindly which confused Draco further, why was she being kind to him, “Anyway during my masteries, I had to travel and you would never believe what I saw. These massive stones at the base of a trickle of waterfall, a tiny little stream dribbling in a forest, with divets worn into them, all from where water had dripped for hundreds of years. Completely worn away but nothing stronger than a gentle trickle of water.”

Draco cleared his throat, “Remarkable,” he hedged with no idea what response was appropriate. It would seem Luna had not completely lost her penchant for the ridiculous since school.

“And then, I was visiting Australia. Beautiful country. Very, very harsh. And I went to these gorges, sheer cliff faces of hard limestone. And yet, there were trees that were growing in this rock! And not magical trees, just plain trees. They grow so slowly and are so persistent that the roots are able to work their way into the rock, slowly pressing and cracking the hard surface until they are so intertwined that the rocks are an impregnable anchor for the tree. I would have never known rocks could behave in such a way, if I had only seen the solid, strong stone buildings of Britain; I’d never have known that rocks could do that.”

There was a bewildered silence as she finished speaking. Draco had no idea what to say so he nodded uncomfortably and murmured something about the value of travel (which given his predicament was something he only knew in theory), while Blaise just sat silently looking between Draco and Luna as if he expected something to more to happen but Luna was done and they all had to be content to move on.

“So tell me about the world outside, Blaise,” Draco asked, desperate for the reminder about what awaited him when he finally got out.

"Well, Luna has moved into Zabini Manor. She prefers the countryside to London, so we've chosen to close up the townhouse," Blaise said, smiling at his wife.

"There are just so many things in the country to explore. Did you know Zabini Manor has a fascinating colony of Jobberknolls on the grounds," Luna said enthusiastically.

Draco only knew of Jobberknolls for their feathers as potion ingredients, and didn't think that many people would find them the defining feature of Zabini Manor. Most people would be more interested in the 7 dead husbands of Bianca Zabini, all buried on the grounds.

"Plus, it's nice being closer to Pansy and Theo. We can just apparate to visit them now, as opposed to taking the floo," Blaise stretched out on the sofa and lay a casual arm around Luna's shoulders, brushing at an errant lock of hair as he went. It was an innocent act, but felt so intimate Draco simultaneously felt the need to look away and look closer.

"They have instituted a regular game night," said Luna, seemingly less affected by Blaise's gesture than Draco was.

"A game night? I can't imagine Pansy allowing anything so mundane," Draco scoffed trying to imagine it, "A wine tasting? Yes. A society dinner party club? Absolutely. Game night? Never."

Blaise and Luna exchanged a look.

"Well Parks does still pull out the good wine for the evening," Blaise said.

"And what else, where else have you been this month? New bars, restaurants? How's the Old Boy's Quidditch league going?" Draco was hungry for more tidbits. It was now mid-September. Just a few more months and he'd be able to join the lives that he'd only heard descriptions of for years.

Blaise took a deep breath, leaned forward and rested his hand back on Luna's thigh. They were awfully touchy feely. Luna looked less comfortable with this touch than she had with the others, which Draco was glad for. If she also didn't like it, maybe they would stop

"Quidditch is ace. You would never believe the save that Bletchley made last week. With Bludgers on his tail and everything. It was epic."

"Who was playing Seeker?" Draco asked, hoping that whoever it was wouldn't mind sharing duties with him once he was released. Gods he missed flying. He missed Quidditch. He missed being part of a team.

"Pucey sometimes, but he's busy a lot. Some weeks we have to convince Parks to get on a broom," said Blaise and Draco couldn't help but snort at that. Pansy was actually a very good flyer, however her mother had been adamant that Quidditch was a sport best left to boys and the lower class of girls that those boys might sleep with but would never marry. It was a lesson Pansy had internalised.

Before Blaise could add any more details of the games, Luna made a disgruntled little noise. When Draco turned to her, he saw she looked distinctly unhappy. Blaise too had noticed and his mood quickly mirrored hers. Maybe it was too much Quidditch talk? Draco tried to remember if Luna liked quidditch and could only recall her ridiculous costumes at the games. He didn't want her to be unhappy, aside from the fact she was, by far, the best supervision he'd ever had on visiting day, he wanted Blaise to feel like his wife was being considered. There was clear affection between the pair. Unlikely as it may seem.

"You're welcome to go see Hermione, Luna," offered Draco, trying to offer her something she might enjoy, "I promise I'll just sit here with Blaise."

Luna reached for Blaise's hand and Draco noticed her own hand was shaking.

"Thank you Draco, but I'll stay here. Wandering the halls of the manor alone isn't something I am quite ready for," she said, her voice less musical. Blaise lifted her hand and pressed a quick kiss to the back of it and she shot him a grateful smile. Again, it wasn't inappropriate, but the intimacy made his stomach twist. His words escaped him again so he just nodded.

"Have you been reading anything interesting?" Blaise sensed his uncertainty and prodded him on with another tried and true topic of conversation.

Draco immediately launched into a synopsis of the book regarding the Salem Trials and House Elves. Luna had not only already read it but had a couple of other suggestions that were similar. It seemed that when she wasn't off with the fairies (both literally and metaphorically), Luna Lovegood was incredibly well read. It was a surprise but a pleasant one and the trio were able to spend the rest of their time discussing books. Luna's musicality returned, and Blaise leaned back in the chair and gently played with the ends of Luna's hair until it was time to leave.

"Oh Draco," said Luna reaching into her cloak and pulling out a small square package wrapped in silver paper, "can you give this to Hermione please."

"I can," he took the package and turned it over in his hands. It was about the size of a book but much lighter, "What's it for?"

"Her birthday, of course, it's tomorrow," said Luna with a small giggle, as if this was common knowledge and he was silly to forget.

Given they were married, had gone to school together for six years, it probably should have been common knowledge. However, until that moment, he wouldn't have been able to name Granger's birthday month if there was a wand to his throat.

"Won't you see her tomorrow then? She leaves the manor on Sundays," he asked.

"Oh no, she doesn't spend her Sundays with us," said Luna, looking at him thoughtfully, "but you haven't learnt that yet."

Blaise gave him another hug, bid him goodbye and stepped into the floo. Luna shocked Draco by stepping forward and placing a soft kiss on his cheek.

"You should think about rocks, Draco," she said cryptically, "fascinating things rocks."

And with a little skip, she too disappeared in a blaze of green flames.

Draco wasn't quite sure what to do with the parcel Luna had given to him. He could give it to a house elf to hand to Hermione. But Luna had asked him to deliver it and he had promised he would. The operative word being "him". So that left him to decide whether he should deliver it immediately, or wait until her actual birthday. His eventual decision had nothing to do with the insistent tug on their bond, nor the little intimate touches he'd witnessed all afternoon which had awoken a longing that hadn't existed previously. It was just expedient. He could discharge his duty to Lovegood and get back on with his life.

A quick knock on her door, that was answered quickly with a soft "yes?" and he was in her rooms for the first time since he'd shown them to her. He couldn't believe how much they'd transformed in that time. For one, there were stacks of books just about everywhere. The seating area that was in the alcove his mother used as a sitting room was moved into the main bedroom and desk and bookshelves had been arranged in their place; turning the space into an office. Draco had been wrong. It wasn't too small. Just very, very crowded. Granger's cat lay sleeping in a lingering patch of sunlit and Granger herself was curled up in a chair, a wooley cream blanket wrapped around her shoulders and giant knobbly socks on her feet. It made her look smaller than usual.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but Luna came today and asked me to give you this," he said dumbly, holding up the package before passing it to her. A small part of him hoped that their fingers would brush as she took it, a cheap imitation of the little touches he'd witnessed all afternoon. It was an impulse he would interrogate later, but just at this moment, he just wanted it. He was disappointed, the parcel was transferred without so much as a whisper of a touch.

"Thank you," she said, clutching the package to her chest. Looking between him and the door. Draco didn't want to leave.

"You were able to squeeze an office in here after all," he gestured to the temporary set up.

Hermione studied him for a beat, "Bobsy and I found some furniture in the cellars, I hope that's okay?"

Merlin, since when did Hermione Granger sound so unsure?

"Of course Granger, you are the mistress of the house. Even if it is just on paper. Rifle through the cellars at your heart's content," Draco really didn't care what she did to his house, after 6 years trapped in it and all he'd witnessed before, he felt no affection for the building.

"Well, thank you," said Hermione.

He should leave. He'd passed on the gift, his duty was done. Her eyes had drifted back to her book, a clear dismissal. But he still didn't want to. Another impulse he should interrogate at a

later date but for now he tried again.

“Do you work?” Draco asked, trying to control the irritation at her disinterest.

“Hmmm?” she replied, not taking her eyes away from her book.

“I know you were at the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, but I haven’t seen your name in the papers in connection with any of their-”

“No, I’ve moved onto academia. I am at Oxford now. The wizarding part,” she’d finally looked up from her book.

Draco wanted to ask why. He was sure when they were at school he’d overheard her expressing ambitions to be Minister for Magic to her friends in the library. Following the papers for the years after the war, it definitely looked like she was on that path. After liberating all the house elves of course, and merpeople. Even campaigning for the inclusion of werewolves into mainstream society; clearly she’d never heard the things Greyback had muttered about her or she’d have stayed away from that cause with a ten foot pole. Academia wasn’t an awful fit for her mind but it didn’t suit her ambition.

“How are you managing your work while you’re here?” he gestured to the room, “You can’t be doing what’s required in only a single Sunday.”

Hermione closed her book and set it on the side table, at the same time as leaning forward. After receiving barely any of her attention, Draco suddenly felt like he had too much. This would be the moment, she’d snap at the implication she wasn’t capable of doing her job and he’d be on the receiving end of a classic Hermione Granger dressing down. He’d never admitted it during school or the way, and would never admit it to anyone but himself, but he found her a touch terrifying. The way her hair seemed to move with magic, the glint she got in her eye when she decided to do something, to say nothing of the fact that she was currently in possession of a wand and he was not.

“My work has been persuaded by the ministry to afford me a generous honeymoon leave. Until the end of your sentence if you would believe.”

Though the words were ones of displeasure, her tone wasn’t. She sounded more resigned than anything else. Did she not like her work?

“My research can continue here in any case. I am allowed correspondence and I’ve bought some reference texts with me,” she gestured to the stacks of books, “I do miss the Bodleian though.”

“I’ll think you’ll find that the manor library is just as impressive,” Draco responded, buoyed that she had chosen to engage with him.

“Yes, but the Bodleian is far more agreeable,” she quipped back with a wry smile.

Of course she’d find the Bodleian more pleasant. It didn’t have reminders of the past or links to him. In the extended pause, Hermione picked up the little parcel from Luna.

“Are you going to open it?” he asked. There hadn’t been anything resembling a birthday gift in the manor for longer than he’d been under house arrest. From before sixth year; that year his parents had been kept under such strict conditions until he was able to fix that damn cabinet, they weren’t able to send him anything besides notes that instructed him to do whatever it took.

“Eventually,” she said, gently stroking the wrapping.

“You should open it now,” he encouraged. He wanted to see what was in it.

She looked at him with an eyebrow raised, but slipped a finger under the edge of the paper and pulled it open. It was a painting, or more accurately a portrait, capturing the moment that the purple flames encased their hands and bound them together. The look of awe and surprise on Hermione’s face was one he remembered but the intensity on his own shocked him. Was this an accurate rendering? Surely Lovegood had embellished for a more pleasing wedding portrait. The saving grace was that Granger looked as uncomfortable with her image as he felt about his.

“Luna likes to paint,” she said with a forced chuckle.

“Why aren’t you meeting up with her and your friends tomorrow?” Draco asked suddenly, letting one of the questions that swum in his mind free. Immediately, Hermione’s body language changed. Her expression, which had shown hints of emotion moments earlier, was quickly wiped away, leaving a quiet, blank slate. Her hands reached for her book and brought it back in front of her.

“Maybe I just don’t like birthdays,” she said, shrugging as if it was nothing and looking down at her book.

“I think you do,” Draco challenged.

“Well, I don’t, not really,” she didn’t look up from her book as she spoke.

“You’re a shit liar Granger,” Draco said, because she was. Whatever her reasoning for not seeing her friends tomorrow, it wasn’t anything to do with how she felt about birthdays. That caused her to look up and her expression changed again, going from blank to cold.

“I am an excellent liar, when it counts,” she said icily and looking into her eyes he knew they were remembering the same moment. A knife at her throat, a mad woman holding her back, Draco and his parents looking on as Hermione Granger used every last bit of strength she had to lie to their faces. Again and again and again. His stomach turned and he was glad it had been hours since he’d eaten. There was nothing he could say. He turned and left her to her book, their small wedding portrait propped up on the side table.

Later that night, as Bobsy came to deliver Draco his dinner, which he ate alone in the dining room, Draco stopped him before he would apparate away.

“Bobsy, it’s Ms Granger’s birthday tomorrow. Can you make sure she has cake or something for dinner?”

Bobsy waited a beat and Draco waited for the cutting remark that Bobsy was known for whenever Draco made a request. None came, instead the elf inclined his head very slightly, "Of course Master Draco."

Chapter End Notes

She's a big one today! Although 1500 words longer than my average chapter. I do love it when Luna shows up though. I always feel like she's a great contrast for Hermione as they are so similar except Luna had incredible EQ whereas Hermione feels like EQ is a new age scam. I love her partnership with Blaise and I also feel like it should be canon that Slytherins are ridiculously loyal simps when married.

Also, I know Sassy Bobsy is a fav, and believe me, he will be sassing in future chapters, but he is a harsh but fair kind of elf.

Finally thank you so much for all the comments and kudos. They are no motivating and they do give me little ideas of tweaks to characters and plotlines. You'll notice that I have added a final chapter count, I always had an outline but now I've broken that outline into chapters. It may change a little as I write if something takes longer than expected but it's mostly set.

Thank you all again!!

The Vegetable Patch & The Library

Chapter Notes

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

September gradually dwindled to a close. All the leaves around the estate changed from green to yellow, red and orange and though winter wasn't fair, Draco kept himself busy in the garden with autumn fruit and vegetables. Bobsy would occasionally join him to harvest, and by join he meant that Bobsy would come out to the vegetable patch with a basket almost as large as he was and point out which vegetables he wanted for that night's meal.

"You know," Draco said, grunting as he made his way to the middle of the pumpkin vine to get a pumpkin that looked no better than those much closer, "This is meant to be an elf's job."

"Gardening is not something Bobsy is interested in taking on," said Bobsy, "If Mister Draco would like to dismiss Bobsy and find an elf who is more inclined... oh wait..."

Draco scowled, until his sentence was over he had no way to hire anyone nor control over the Manor's accounts to pay them. They were all handled by a ministry trustee and Bobsy knew it.

"I could get Granger to do it," he hissed and Bobsy just shook his head haughtily in a remarkable impression of a younger Draco.

"Mistress Granger would never," he said, his voice turning soft at the mention of her name, "aside from the fact that Mistress is fair too kind, Mistress also likes Bobsy's Pumpkin Pasties more than anything else. Which is why Bobsy will be needing that pumpkin if you could hurry up."

Blasted elf. Oh course he would be half in love with Granger. Draco got the pumpkin requested and decided not to inquire why Granger got Pumpkin Pasties, while he'd not even caught a hint of one. And he grew the bloody pumpkin!

"Is she well? Granger?" Draco asked Bobsy, because he hadn't caught even a hint of Granger since the day before her birthday either. Say what you like about Gryffindors (and he did, often), but they kept their word. She'd promised to ignore him on that first morning and she'd been doing an excellent job of it. If it wasn't for a tug on his long dormant magic every so often, he'd question that she was actually in the house.

"*Mistress* Granger is in good health, as far as Bobsy can tell," Bobsy took the proffered vegetable and pointed to some peas he wanted next, "however, if Mister Draco wants to know more, he could try asking *Mistress* Granger himself. A grown wizard and yet he wants Bobsy to do everything. Pick the pumpkins, check on his wife."

Draco rolled his eyes and handed over the peas.

"She doesn't want me to check on her, Bobsy. Would you have me disregard her wishes?"

It was Bobsy's turn to roll his eyes.

"Pick the pumpkins, check on my wife, give marital advice," his list took on a sing-song quality, "Bobsy is not paid enough for this job."

With his peas in hand he left the vegetable patch without saying anything else, advice or otherwise.

Later, Draco ate his lunch and stewed over Bobsy's words. Was he meant to check in with Hermione? She'd said they could ignore each other but was it out of the realm of possibility that she'd meant that in a general sense, not an absolute sense. Afterall she hadn't been too annoyed the two times they'd spoken since then. Although, she hadn't been too thrilled about it either. Nor had she sought him out or inquired as to his well being either. Which suggested more absolute than general.

He went to the office after lunch, opting to write first instead of reading; his mind wouldn't let him focus on a book in its current state anyway. With her fresh on his mind, he took out a piece of paper and started to write.

Granger,

My house elf thinks I should be inquiring about your well-being. Well, rather he thinks that if I wish to know about your well-being I should ask you instead of him. And let's be clear, I do not ask him often. I have asked him once. Just once. I have better things to do than think about you all the time. I am solely responsible for the Manor gardens you know. Those Pumpkin Pasties you like so much? I grew the pumpkins in them. Without Magic. You are welcome.

Anyway, are you well? There, I've discharged my duty and followed what I think was some poorly delivered advice. I will admit, I am curious, this ignoring each other thing, is that a general idea or an absolute one. If I see you in the hall can I greet you or should I turn and walk in the opposite direction?

Also while I have you, where did you spend your birthday? And where are you eating your meals? And why are you working in academia? And how do you learn how to drive a car? Is there a book one can read? Also, I don't know if you know, but our friends seem stupidly besotted with each other. Blaise and Luna that is. I had never seen Blaise besotted until now. He's more touchy feeling than I would have guessed. Not that I spend much time thinking about what my friends would be like in a relationship. As I said, I have better things to do. Gardens, etc.

*Your silent flatmate,
Draco.*

Draco folded the letter and shoved it into his drawer. His mind was now clear enough that he could focus on something else. So began a new routine for Draco, after lunch each day, he would sit and write a letter to his invisible wife. Usually they were short, he'd inquire after

her well being, maybe make a comment on the manor. But sometimes he'd be more verbose, ask the questions he was dying to ask, complain about whatever injustice Bobsy had inflicted on him, or share gossip about the people they seemed to share; Tonks, Luna, Blaise. Each letter went into his desk drawer, but just the act of writing it helped focus his thoughts. Or rather, just writing it helped remove her from his thoughts. She was so present in his mind; it was as if her silence was screaming at him half the time. Once his head was clear he was able to go to the library for a book and actually focus on what he was reading.

That was how he stumbled on her in the library one day in the final days of October. She was half way up a ladder, standing on her bare tip toes trying to reach a book. Her tongue peeked out between her lips and her gaze was determined. She looked like she belonged there; the library, her perfect habitat. Why she was on the little used ladder was a mystery though.

"Are you a witch or aren't you?" he asked after a moment or two of watching her, realising she hadn't heard him come in.

Hermione jumped at his words and her foot slipped on the rung of the ladder. Draco moved without thinking, covering the ground between him and the ladder in two long strides and reaching up to catch her around the waist before she fell. One hand brushed her bare stomach where her shirt had ridden up, whereas the other found its way to her hip, holding her steady. Merlin were all witches this soft to touch? Her skin burned his palms and for a second Draco couldn't think. He could only feel. It was as if his hands were on fire, absorbing the heat from her. He could help but lean into it slightly, and that's when he could smell her, a fresh scent that reminded him of the basil and geraniums from his garden. It was a sensory overload to a man who had been locked away alone for so long.

"I'm okay," said Hermione letting out a sharp breath, and Draco registered it was time to let go, her feet were back under her. Part of him protested, but instead he took a deep breath of her and stepped away. They looked at each other in silence, the space between them still less than normal, until Hermione broke their eye contact and Draco had the good sense to take another step back.

"Why are you up a ladder? You are a witch with a wand and I'm pretty sure you mastered Accio in fourth year," he tried to appear disparaging but his hand shook by his side, still shocked by the impact of touching her.

"It's your library," Granger groaned, climbing down the ladder. Draco studied her intently to see if she was feeling the after effects of their interlude and only saw a hint of irritation. Was that at him for touching her? Or the library?

Feet firmly on the ground, Hermione pulled out her wand and cast an Accio towards a book high up. It didn't budge.

"See!" she said, it was the most animated he'd seen her since school, "and to say nothing of the fact that that book was originally on a lower shelf and the moment I decided I wanted it your bigot of a library reshelfed it out of my reach."

Hermione zeroed her gaze on another volume about hip height, and as she walked towards it, the library shelves sent all the books on a march further up, the book now out of her reach.

She turned to him, hands on her hips, eyebrow raised, hair flickering with life and magic.

Draco looked between Hermione and the bookshelf, “is this what you meant when you said the Bodleian was more agreeable? You meant it literally?”

“Oh course I meant it literally, what do you think I meant?” Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. There was finally some life to her. Some colour in her cheeks. Draco should have known it would have been a library book that would make her crack.

“That the Bodleian was away from the Manor and had no affiliation with the Malfoy family? Therefore is infinitely more pleasing,” Draco replied, thinking, quite frankly, that it was kind of obvious.

“Oh, I’m not the one who is prejudiced based on someone’s family! I wouldn’t hold a library’s origin against it! It’s the library that has the problem with me and my *mudblood status!*”

Draco’s blood ran cold at the use of the word and for a moment he stumbled in their repartee. Hermione looked so angry, he wouldn’t have been surprised if she kicked one of the shelves. So angry and completely wrong in her assumption. While he understood why she assumed the library was ‘being difficult’ because of her blood status (and in other parts of the house it might be a valid concern; his father’s suite for instance), Draco had experience with this particular quirk of the Manor and knew it had nothing to do with blood status. It was the same quirk that made it difficult for her to aparate in the manor grounds, and he knew from experience, would make it nigh impossible to help herself the wine cellar or the larder. He’d had the same restrictions placed on him as a child, until he’d given and learnt more of the ancient magic that made the manor more than just a building.

“It’s not your blood status,” Draco said finally, knowing he would need to say something and dreading the way Granger would take what he was going to say.

“Oh really, the library in a house owned by generations of witches and wizards who happen to hate Muggles and Muggle-borns just happens to be making my life exceedingly difficult, and it has nothing to do with the fact I am a Mudblood?”

The fire in her eyes was equal parts terrifying and comforting, because for the first time in months, Hermione Granger was someone he recognised.

“Can you stop using that word?” he asked, feeling his skin going a little cold at its continued use. He was not going to sleep well tonight.

“Why? You use it,” Hermione spat back at him.

“When have I used it since you entered my home? I would not dream of disrespecting my wife in such a way,” Draco spat back.

The look on her face when he said “wife” was priceless and for a moment Draco felt proud of his line of reasoning. But only for a second, before his own mind pointed out the fallacies. Two months of good behaviour does not erase a lifetime of bad behaviour. He knew that and

waited for Granger to remind him of it. Instead the fire left her completely. Her expression changed to a blank one, her chin lowered, her hair lost the crackle of magic that warned something was about to explode.

“You’re right,” she said, looking down at her feet, “I was angry and not thinking. You’ve been nothing but accommodating since I arrived. What the library does or doesn’t do and why is irrelevant. I can go to the Bodleian on Sunday and borrow what I need.”

Without another word, she turned and walked away, leaving Draco feeling smaller and more alone than he had just hours earlier. He wanted to call out after her and finish their conversation. He wanted to tell her what she needed to do to access the library, but he was too shocked by her sudden deflation and retreat. He’d seen Hermione Granger standing on the front lines of battle, facing witches and wizards with years of experience on her and a very real desire to kill her and she did not flinch. She certainly did not retreat. What in Salazar’s name had happened to her since the war?

Chapter End Notes

ok, I hope you all like this chapter because there is something about it that I love. Possibly the return of Sassy Bobsy or the fact there was a scene in a library or maybe the fact he writes her another letter? I don't know. And yes, the idea of hot Gardener Draco is a motivating factor for this fic. Got to love a man who works with his hands.

Thank you so much to everyone that had liked and commented. It really does mean so much every time I get a little inbox notification. Also thank you to all the lovely writers on the DWS Discord. Seriously, without the sprints kicking my butt into gear there would be a much longer time between chapters.

Bread and Shadows

Chapter Notes

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

Samhain. Simultaneously Draco's least favourite and most precious holiday of the year. Least favourite, because even Hogwart had been infiltrated by the boorish buffoonery that Muggles had created to celebrate the day. Ridiculous costumes, excessive decorations in orange and black, and candy (although he didn't mind that last part quite as much). It was a farce and showed no understanding and respect of the magic that was woven into the day. Most precious, because it was the day he was able to connect with his own magic, the magic of his family and the magic embedded into the very stone of the Manor. Even before he could wield a wand. Even under house arrest. When the veil between the dead and the living thinned, the ancient Magic that flowed through his veins rejoiced.

This Samhain, he had a mission. He didn't want Granger to feel like his house rejected her very presence. It didn't mean that he liked her, was trying to befriend her or anything else, it was just an embarrassment to his ancestors, that the Lady of the House couldn't get a book off a shelf, and it was in his power to correct it. He waited until after dinner then went to her door and knocked.

"Granger?" he called out through the door.

It swung open to reveal Granger in her pyjamas. Not her pink nightgown from that first night, thank Merlin, but a blue flannel set complete with the knobbly socks he'd seen her wearing the last time he was in her room. Her hair was out and wild.

"Yes?" she asked and Draco swallowed. There was a large chance this whole interaction was going to go poorly.

"It's Samhain," he said, for all his planning of what they would do this night, he hadn't actually planned the words to invite her to it.

"You mean Halloween?" she asked, her brow furrowing a little.

"No, Granger, I mean Samhain. There are certain things, certain parts of the magical community do on Samhain, to mark the day. Would you like to join me?"

The question dangled between them and Draco held his breath. There was no way she'd even seen or participated in a Samhain ritual before. Only the very oldest families still did them and even they didn't really speak of them. Malfoys guarded their secrets like dragons. There was also a chance that the mention of subgroups in the wizarding world would offend her greatly; and to be honest, Draco didn't quite know where the line between pureblood supremacy and pureblood culture was. The way his father presented it, there wasn't one. He hoped though that they could find it together, and maybe build their fragile truce along it.

"Will it take long?" she asked cautiously.

"Yes," said Draco; Samhain traditions were not short, "but it might help you get along with the library."

"I am not doing anything to betray my blood status," she said, voice sharp.

"What? No Granger, I've already told you the library had nothing to do with your blood status," Draco said. He was right. Any mention of subcultures or groups would be immediately associated with their ugly past. He could only hope that his actions would prove otherwise.

Hermione pulled her bottom lip into her mouth and chewed it, the action capturing all of Draco's attention and making his palms feel sweaty even though the manor could never be described as warm this time of year.

"Okay," she said, coming out of her room to stand beside him. Her cat, seeing a chance to break for freedom, ran out the door after her and rubbed itself on Draco's legs. He decided he might like cats afterall. Hermione watched the two with amusement.

"Don't feel too special, Glitter is willing to give anyone a chance," she said, reaching to scratch her cat behind the ears, "Can he come?"

Draco nodded, choosing to ignore Hermione's advice. What harm was there in believing the Cat liked him for himself? He was under no illusion that his mistress would ever feel the same.

"So where are we going?" asked Hermione and Draco started leading her through the halls.

"Well, Samhain is an ancient pagan celebration—" he started but Hermione cut him off.

"Yes, celebrate the end of year, the veil between the living and dead is thinner, yada yada. I have read multiple books on the topic," she snapped and Draco smiled at the return of his Hermione Granger, the one from his memories of school. Not the one who'd been in his manor for most of the past months. Naturally she would assume she knew all there was to know because she read a book. It would make the moment she saw and experienced all that much sweeter.

"Granger, I am sure you've read a veritable library's worth of information, and yet, you still won't be able to tell me how Samhain and my library are linked... Can you?" Draco heard his tone echo that of his schoolboy self. Granger gave an awkward nod of her head as if to say 'fine, go on' and Draco smirked.

"You spilt blood here, during our wedding," Draco tried again cautiously. Hermione surreptitiously rubbed at her forearm, a reminder to them both that blood was spilt on other occasions too.

"That, with the marriage bonding spell, links you to the manor as a Malfoy," Drao continued, taking a deep breath; this next bit was going to be the bit that wouldn't be received well, "but the Manor has no further connection to you or understanding of your magic. You are an unknown entity to it, a magical infant as it were. There were... other rituals, ones that weren't

necessary to make the marriage legal, but if performed which would have identified you further, and linked you to the Malfoy's as an adult witch, but they were ignored. And your bloodline, your ancestors must have not interacted with the Malfoy line before so there was no prior recognition in that regard."

"Ha! It is to do with my blood status," Hermione crossed her arms, but at least she had been listening.

"No it isn't, if I had married a witch from Australia with the purest blood known to wizardkind, the Manor would have responded the same, because her line had never crossed with the Malfoy line, in that instance due to geography," he said and Hermione visibly flinched. Draco wondered if it was because her magic had snapped at the mention of him bonded to another, the way his had when the words left his mouth.

Draco pressed on, "until the Manor learns your magical signature, until you contribute to the magical signature of the Manor, it's treating you like a child. Restricting your movements, your access to precious items, etc. It did the same to me when I was very young."

Hermione stopped, eyebrows rocketing into her hairline.

"The manor and some crazy ancient blood magic thinks I'm a child?"

"The manor and some very powerful and complex blood magic doesn't know what to think of you and is putting protective measures in place," he hissed, tension creeping through his shoulders.

He should have known this was a bad idea. He'd seen her in Divination, and flying. Anything that required ancient magic, instinctive magic, Hermione Granger opposed. If it couldn't be understood from a book, it wasn't of value to her. He stopped with her, waiting for her to storm off. Or maybe slap him and storm off. But she didn't, much like that day in the library, she let out a shuddering breath and the fight seemed to fall away from her.

"So we're going to go do these other rituals now?" she said, starting to walk again.

Draco almost choked, "No, absolutely not. We're going to the kitchens to make Samhain Bread for the ancestors. If they like it, maybe they'll let you into the library."

Hermione froze again.

"You have something against baking, Granger?" Draco asked, wondering what he'd said this time that could possibly have offended her so much.

"Can we take the long way to the kitchens, please," her voice was small and her eyes didn't meet his. Realisation dawned on him; the most direct path took them straight past the drawing room. He lifted his hand slightly as if to touch her, comfort her, before pulling it back. That's not what she wanted. Instead he nodded and turned, leading them to the kitchen the long way round.

They were walking silently through the darkened corridors, Glitter weaving amongst their feet as they walked when Hermione spoke again. Her voice was stronger now, with some distance between them and that room.

“So what are the other rituals? Do they involve more blood?”

“Depends on the witch,” Draco smirked and Hermione slumped more beside him. It appeared Draco couldn’t say anything about blood without her mind turning into an insult. “*And whose fault is that?*” the voice in his head taunted him. It sounded surprisingly like Bobsy.

“Consummation, Granger. The other ritual is consummation. And yes, the idea in times gone past was for ‘blood on the sheets’ if she was a good virtuous witch.”

Hermione blushed brilliantly red, “We’re not doing that!”

Draco laughed, “Absolutely not, which is why I never suggested it. You just asked. But should a consummation take place immediately following a binding, the house would recognise the witch as the new lady of the manor immediately.”

Hermione walked beside him in silence, seemingly considering that.

“And if there was no ‘blood on the sheets’ then what?” she asked and Draco smiled at her curiosity. Her fight might have been dampened since their school days but it seemed her curiosity wasn’t.

“Nothing different, it’s the act itself that strengthens the bonding magic. Trust me, I’ve found a diary from one Lady Amelie Malfoy circa 1756, if blood on the sheet were a hard requirement, the Malfoy line would have ended there. Good and virtuous are not words that could be used to describe Lady Amelie in any universe.”

Hermione giggled at that. It was that lovely light sound again. This time echoing off the stone walls and growing. A warm feeling spread in his belly; he’d prompted that sound.

“You can borrow it, if you like? The journal. It’s salacious reading,” he offered, wanting to cause more of that sound.

“You’re offering to lend me a dirty book?” Hermione sounded incredulous. Draco choked a little.

“It’s not all dirty, it’s interesting too. Besides, the more you learn of the Malfoy line, the more it will learn about you,” he said, grateful the dim hallway was hiding his blush he could feel on his cheeks as he scrambled to think of a legitimate reason to lend her to the book. In reality, he didn’t think reading it would do anything other than make her blush, and he would so love to see her blush.

Circe, what was he doing? He was meant to be helping Hermione settle into the house, allowing her to use the library or the wine cellar if she was so inclined. Not lending her books like he might do to a friend. Not making her blush like he might do a... very good friend.

The pair rounded the kitchen door. It was a large space that was well appointed with broad kitchen benches and a shiny stainless steel double stove, but there were no decorative trimmings or opulence that the rest of the manor boasted. This was a space solely for work. Vim, bless her, had laid out all the things they would need and left the oven lit, so the room was warm and cosy. A blessing, given the October air outside was bitingly cold and the kitchen could be draughty and damp. There were two emerald green aprons laying on the bench; presumptuous of Vim that Granger would be joining him for this sacred event.

“Right, put this on,” Draco handed Hermione the apron and tried not to feel the sinking weight of disappointment when again, their fingers did not touch in the transfer. Gods. He was just a pathetic excuse for a wizard. Wishing for a touch from a witch he didn’t even particularly like.

Hermione put the apron over her head, making no comment on the colour or him when he did the same.

“Right, Malfoy Samhain bread,” Draco rolled up his sleeves to the elbow, before reaching into his pocket and pulling out the recipe he’d scrawled earlier and handing it to her, “Can you follow a recipe, Granger?”

Hermione unfolded the paper and swept her eyes over it.

“You do this without Magic?” she asked, her soft voice surprised.

“Well, not if all the wizards in question are old enough to wield a wand and are not barred from using Magic like I currently am. But this is something everyone in the family does, even the smallest of children. So obviously, they do it without deliberate magic,” Draco said, measuring warm water, sugar and yeast into his bowl.

“Deliberate magic?”

Draco should have known that Hermione Granger would parse the full meaning from any of his sentences.

“It wasn’t uncommon for accidental magic to surge when I was a boy, during the process,” he admitted, blushing a little, “but not now I’m an adult. I have it well in hand, Granger.”

She nodded but looked sceptical, maybe remembering the exploding teapot over breakfast. She brushed the recipe again, before reaching for her own bowl and like him, started the steps to make the bread without magic. Was she resisting using magic because of him, or did she just prefer cooking the Muggle way? Draco wanted to ask, but tamped the question down like all the others and they worked in silence for a while. When they both turned their dough out to knead it on the counter, a glint caught Draco’s eye. She was wearing that blasted ring. It was an ugly stain on her unblemished hand.

“You’re wearing your ring,” the statement escaped before it could be banished.

“So are you,” Hermione countered.

“That’s different, it’s not” he stopped himself. He was about to say ‘ugly’ but remembered that she’d never acknowledged the ring or its faults and he wasn’t about to point them out, “it’s not so ostentatious.”

Ostentatious wasn’t an incorrect description. It may have been ugly, but it was covered in diamond. It also wasn’t the first word that came to mind when anyone saw it.

“You picked it out for me,” Hermione shrugged, getting into a rhythm while she kneaded, “I’m assuming the estate had other rings you could have chosen, that were… less ostentatious. But you picked this one for a reason.”

Malfoy squeezed the dough a little harder than necessary. She knew it was ugly. He could tell from her tone. But like him, she was pretending not to notice. Should he tell her he hadn’t picked the ring? Should he tell her at the time it was chosen he would have more readily believed that a dancing pink elephant was going to become the next Minister for Magic than Hermione Granger would ever marry him? He tried a few phrases in his head and none sounded right.

“Well, you don’t have to wear it,” he settled on finally, hoping that she would stop wearing it and then he’d be able to stop seeing it.

“It’s a good reminder,” Hermione said, looking at her hands as they worked the dough rather than at him. Draco didn’t ask her what it reminded her about. He very much doubted it was a fond memory.

For the rest of the kneading and rising process they worked mostly in silence. Hermione made them some tea (Draco was embarrassed to realise that he wasn’t familiar with the kettle or the stove, always leaving that task to Vim) and she seemed comfortable moving around the kitchen. More than he was in any case and he’d lived here his whole life. It was late by the time the smell of fresh bread permeated the room and they took the little loaves out of the oven.

“Now what?” Hermione asked, as Draco put the loaves into a large basket. He checked his watch and saw that they had 30 minutes to midnight.

“Now we go to the crypt,” Draco said, picking up the basket.

“Is it safe for me in the crypt?” Hermione asked, following him out of the kitchen. The crypt’s main entrance was in the grounds, but there was a secret passage between the cellar and the crypt that would take them there without subjecting them to the frigid air outside. Still it was about to get colder and he pulled two cloaks from a hook by the door. He put one on and held the other out for her.

“Yes, Granger,” Draco sighed, “Believe it or not, I am not trying to kill you. Aside from the fact that if the Golden Girl of the Wizarding World died in my home I could kiss any chance of freedom goodbye, it’s well established and documented that I don’t have the stomach for murder.”

“Don’t call me that,” Hermione snapped, but allowed him to help her into the cloak that was far too big for her tiny frame. If he’d had a wand, he would adjust it for her, but instead he watched as she rolled up the sleeves so they didn’t engulf her tiny hands. It was fascinating, the way she didn’t reach for magic to solve every problem. He didn’t remember her being like that at school, but maybe he just hadn’t noticed then.

“Golden Girl? I’ll be the only person in the world who doesn’t.”

As he’d started to predict, Hermione fell silent. She might allow herself one or two quips back at him when he prodded an uncomfortable topic but never more than that. He gave her one more beat to snap at him again, but when she remained silent he just led her to the crypt.

The crypt was large; each member of the family had a carved monument, often in the shape of an animal they felt an affinity for. Although, the Malfoys who lived through the religious wars of the reformation sometimes chose Muggle religious symbols like angels; a subtle nod to the machinations they were privy to in those dark times. As such, the room looked like a sculpture gallery as much as a graveyard. Draco already knew when he died he’d be buried under a stone dragon; his parents had guaranteed that when they chose his name. It wasn’t an unpleasant thought, death and interment into this sacred place wasn’t something that was feared in his family and therefore spoken of regularly. He knew his mother wanted to break with tradition and have stone daffodils on her grave; it was something he planned to honour when the time came. His father wanted to be interred under a stone peacock. It was not something Draco planned to honour. Lucius would never rest here among his ancestors when he’d been willing to destroy the future of their family. Some acts were too great to forgive, too terrible to taint this place.

Hermione stood frozen in the door to start, her eyes darting between each monument. He let her take it in, wondering if she could feel the hum of something other like he could. Or whether it was just the shadows and stone that caused her to hesitate. Eventually she entered the space, when Draco started picking up little loaves of bread and leaving them resting before different graves on the right hand wall, she did the same on the left.

“So this is the grand Malfoy tradition? Leaving Samhain bread of graves? I hate to tell you Malfoy, but even Muggles know about this,” Hermione said, and he noted her voice was at least a little strained.

“Where do you think the Muggles learnt it,” Draco smirked, “and no, it’s not just this.”

Choosing not to elaborate, he continued down the aisle until every grave had a loaf and then lowered himself to the ground, sitting with his legs outstretched and back leaning against the wall. Hermione sat down next to him and his magic hummed a little at her closeness. Trust the bond to get involved in this moment. The crypt was so silent he could hear their breathing and rustle of clothes with every movement. There were a couple of low sconces lit, affording a low light and shadows from each of the monuments. Mishapen shadow angels, fairies and dragons graced the stone walls and earthen floor, seeming to move slightly in the flickering light. With a flick of his wrist to see his watch, he confirmed they still had time.

“Now we wait,” Malfoy said, leaning his head back and looking to the ceiling, “All my Magic, all the family magic comes from the witches and wizards in this room. It flowed

through their blood, they strengthened it with their acts, with their connection to the land and the natural magic there. Without these ancestors, I would be nothing. Have nothing. My power is only through theirs.”

Draco didn’t know why he was talking. He didn’t need to tell her this for the ritual to mark Hermione, connect her to the manor, but he wanted her to understand. Or maybe he just wanted to talk to someone, accepting he was in fact pathetically lonely.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably, “How can you believe that when witches like me exist? If Magic only comes from your parents and grandparent, where does my power come from? Or do you still believe that us muggle-borns stole it.”

Draco groaned at the common argument, “No one thinks you ‘stole magic’ Granger. Not unless they’re spectacularly thick. Actually, Crabbe might...”

Draco trailed off, remembering the boy that he once called a friend was dead. He tried to feel a little sadness but found there was nothing there. Where sadness or anger should be, there was a hollowness.

“Oh, so where do I get my magic?” Hermione prodded.

“The same place as mine,” he said simply, “You’d never find it on any family tree, but there are Squibs in every pureblood family. Rare, and hard to find, but I’ve had 6 years to go through the family archives; they are there. And when they occur, they are given a handsome sum and sent out into the muggle world. Where they live quite happily as far as I can tell, with their Muggle spouse and Muggle children and Muggle grandchildren and great-grandchildren until...”

“...until me,” Hermione finished for him. She sat silently for a moment, apparently thinking it over.

“But you said my line had never crossed the Malfoy line before. I can’t possibly be from a Malfoy Squib.”

“Oh Granger,” Draco laughed dryly, “trust you to take everything so literally. No you are not a Malfoy Squib, but every magical family in the world is in the same position. If we looked hard enough in your family tree we’d find a witch or wizard. And for whatever reason, their blood in your veins called to magic.”

Hermione said nothing for a minute and Draco wondered how she’d never considered it a possibility before. Giant Swot that she was, she must have questioned how she got her magic. Must have investigated it in the books she loved so much. Or did her own hatred of purebloods mean she couldn’t even fathom being linked to them.

“So why do you hate me then? If you’re willing to accept that my magic comes from the same place as yours?” Hermione’s voice was so quiet, he had to strain to hear her and he was shocked that her question so closely mirrored his thoughts. Draco’s chest clenched at the wretchedness of it; the two of them locked together and tormented by their own assumptions. It must be the bonding magic; his reaction to her pain. It was the only explanation.

"I don't hate you, Granger," said Draco, letting out a sigh. He considered continuing the thought. Tell her that he didn't hate her but that he found her refusal to accept there were things about him and his culture that were worth knowing, infuriating. To explain that while he found her equally deserving of magic as him, her inability to acknowledge that not all magic could be found in books, limited her. To point out that if she shut her mouth and listened, that incredible raw magic she possessed (and he had to admit her raw magic was breathtaking) could be sharpened and wielded into something else entirely. But to have that conversation, he'd have to admit to once hating her; born out of jealousy and embarrassment that even with that wielding and history he was bested by her. He'd have to confess that his own blood still hated her and thought of her 'less than'. He'd have to admit that the ring on her finger was proof of that fact. He'd have to apologise. Those words, they wouldn't come and would take far more time than he had at this moment anyway.

Midnight. The wall sconces flickered but didn't go out and all the little loaves burst into purple flames. There was a sharp intake of breath from Hermione, but neither spoke as they watched the loaves crumble to ashes and the room fill with a dark purple smoke. Draco got to his feet, Hermione did the same; their backs pressing against the wall. In the thickening smoke, shadows of people appeared. They all stood still at first, before one, the shadow of a tall man, old fashioned pointed hat sitting on his head, took a step towards them. Hermione gasped and grabbed Draco's forearm, still bare from where he'd pushed up his sleeves while delivering the bread. Instantly, the figures in the room became inconsequential, the only thing that existed for him was the five little points of pressure where Hermione squeezed and the warmth that flowed between them. Magic unfurled in him and reached for her. Flowing from low in his gut, up through his chest and down his arm. It felt exquisite. He closed his eyes to bask in it. Only a tightening of her squeeze caused him to open them; there was no doubt there would be little crescent imprints of her nails on his forearm when she let go.

The shadows had surrounded them now. A dark hand was reaching out, as if to stroke down the side of Hermione's face and her expression looked trapped. A second shadow reached for the hand that was not holding Draco and Draco could dimly make out that it was clutching her wand, her white knuckles glinting in the low light. He wished there was a way to tell her it was okay, that she was fine, but like many of these ancient rites, speaking would break the spell. Instead he stood perfectly still, allowing her to clutch his arm as tight as she wanted. Lying to himself that it was only to offer support. Pretending that his attention was on the shadows who were coming to examine Hermione one by one, ghosting touches over her person, and not on the soft warmth of her touch and the delicious bite of her nails.

When the smoke cleared, the shadows disappeared but Hermione still did not let go. Instead she lifted her wand and cast a *lumos*, filling the crypt with more light than before. Chasing away the shadows she saw as monsters.

"What was that?" she croaked. Her face was completely white and wand hand shaking.

"Well, as we celebrate the end of the pagan year, the veil between the living and dead is thinner, yada yada," Draco couldn't help himself as he quoted herself back to her. She dropped his arm and glared at him.

'*You interminable idiot*' that little internal voice said.

"That is not what I meant," she hissed, pushing off the wall and walking to the door.

"Fuck," Draco said more to himself than her, pushing off the wall after her, "You just met the Malfoy ancestors. For this one night, they can interact with us. Judge us to see if we are worthy, learn our magical signatures. It was just an introduction."

Hermione being infuriated with him was not his planned outcome of this evening. It likely wouldn't have happened if he had kept his mouth shut. Something about the touch and ghosts of Malfoys past had renewed his confidence, or his ego, and had him acting like his teenage self.

"I can't imagine a bunch of Malfoy Ghosts are going to find me worthy," Hermione spat over her shoulder.

"Can you stop!" Draco reached out to grab her shoulder and spin her round to face him. Her cheeks were flushed and her mouth made a little "o" at him in surprise. Her shoulder felt thinner than he'd imagined and part of him wanted to slide his hand to her back to hold her in front of him. He ignored that part of him and let go of her shoulder immediately.

"Stop bringing it back to ... you know. They aren't ghosts anyway, they're shadows. The remnants of a magical signature. They don't care about anything else but your magical signature. And trust me, one as strong as yours being bought into the family would have them rubbing their hands with glee. Imagine the heirs."

Hermione's jaw flexed and the gold in her brown eyes danced in the light. Draco didn't drop her gaze, instead let her look at his eyes and face as long as it took her to see that he had no malice. No intention of harming her. He knew it was coming. He'd counted, she'd already thrown two barbs at him. Her limit. Still, it was devastating to see the moment she chose to let it go in her eyes. He remembered how it felt to stop fighting against something that hurt him and he wished it on no one.

"But there will be no heirs," she said finally, words possibly still a protest but the tone most certainly not.

"They don't know that," Draco responded, even though he was sure there was no comfort in it.

Hermione nodded slowly, tucking her wand back into her sleeve and drawing her arms around herself. Even with his heavy cloak, Draco felt chilled and was sure Hermione felt the same.

"So now the shadows talk to the bookshelves and I can use the library?" she asked.

Trust Granger to witness one of the most intimate of family traditions and only care about the library at the end of it. She was nothing if not predictable. He tried not to feel disappointed that she hadn't been more touched by the gesture. He hadn't done it to impress her anyhow. He'd done it so she could access the library. She focused on the exact right thing.

"I am not sure how it works exactly, but yes, it should help," Draco rubbed his eyes. It was late. They were cold. Nothing good was going to come from standing in the corridor from the crypt any longer.

"Okay then," Hermione let out a sigh and a nod. Draco took it to mean they were done and they both started walking to their wing. Not speaking but staying in step with each other the entire way. When Draco had planned this night he'd pictured them talking on the way back from the crypt. He'd imagined her asking questions about the Magic or making plans to learn more, with him. He realised as he fought against the growing disappointment in his chest, he'd imagined the start of a friendship. Fool. Six years to think and all it had made him was foolish. At Granger's door she faltered and Draco felt his heart stutter. But she just looked around.

"I don't know where my cat is," she said, a pink flush on her cheeks.

Of course, she was just worried about her cat. Hope was such a dangerous thing.

"Let him roam," Draco said, "He'd probably enjoy exploring and I don't mind."

"Not even if he gets into your room again?" Hermione challenged.

Draco remembered the soft brushes waking him and the sight of Hermione standing in the doorway with sleep tousled hair.

"I don't mind, Granger. It would be nice to see another living being around the place."

Granger nodded, slipped into her room without so much as a goodnight, and shut the door. Draco stared at the closed door for a minute, his fingers ghosting over the little crescent moons her fingernails had left on his skin.

Chapter End Notes

So the length on that one kind of got away with me... so dense! So many things to explain. And I hope the emotional work is working for you!

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I am sure there are a few more typos than usual, but I am no going to lie, if writing this fic becomes too line editing heavy, I will probably abandon it. Line editing is not my fav and I do just do this for fun in the wee hours!

Thank you to everyone who leaves kudos and comments. They are so so motivating. Seriously. I get a lovely comment and immediately feel the need to write and update!

Cats and Being Conversation Adjacent

Chapter Notes

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

In the weeks that followed Samhain, Draco's invisible wife became more visible. It wasn't just the cat, who would join Draco at random points in the day or the cat's hair which infiltrated every room in the manor much to Bobsy's disgust, it was signs of her. A book left on a side table in the library, an empty tea cup in a sitting room, a lingering smell of basil and geraniums in the hallway. Occasionally he even saw the witch herself, curled up in one of the big window seats in the library with a book, those knobbly socks ever present on her feet. At first, he never disturbed her, never broke her silence and announced himself but instead he caught himself watching her. The way her hands would turn the pages, or twist one of her curls absentmindedly. He started to notice the physical differences from the last time he'd seen her before his sentence. She was still short, petite but there was a new softness to her; she didn't look war-ravaged anymore. Her hair was still a riot of curls, but they were longer and shinier. Mostly he noticed her expressions; after years of having no one to really examine besides himself in the mirror, the space to person watch was a gift. There were the expressions he knew, the curious look, the blank look and every so often, usually when Glitter was batting at the book she was trying to read, the annoyed look. Then there were the new ones; the grief stricken look, the defeated look and his favourite that only came out when Glitter had managed to steal her attention with one of his antics, a look of pure adoration. Had anyone ever looked at him that way? Was he jealous of a bloody cat?

After a week of just watching, he felt bold enough to let her know he was there. After writing his daily letter (*Dear Granger, I don't care what you say, I know your cat likes me. He also likes watching me shower, which is weird. I hate to be the one to tell you but your cat might be a pervert*), when he went to the library and pulled out his book for the day, instead of retreating silently to his room, he walked over to the other side of the enormous window seat and sat down. Granger jerked her head up and saw him sit, but didn't leave. Instead, she gave a tentative smile and continued reading. Draco smothered a broad grin of his own and started his own book.

The next day he wrote his letters, including one to his wife (*Dear Granger, What are you reading? Couldn't see the cover over your knobbly knees. I'm reading a book about the magical cultivation of winter blooms which is no use to me given I don't have a wand. Any chance you could find me a muggle gardening book on your Sunday foray?*), before going to the library and sitting on the other end of the window seat and reading next to his wife. The following day, it was the same, except this time, there was a plate of biscuits sitting between them. Granger, with her back against the window frame and knees drawn up, nudged it towards him with one of her sock clad feet in a silent question. He reached forward, took a biscuit in answer, before sliding it back to her. She also reached forward and took a biscuit and they looked at each other as they took their first bites before returning to their respective books. It wasn't quite a conversation, but it was conversation adjacent.

Another letter (*Dear Granger; I don't know how you convinced Bobsy to let you take biscuits into the library. He always tells me he has better things to do than clean up crumbs.*) another book (this one on the Norman Conquest, it was becoming depressing to read about magical gardening) and this time an actual exchange of words ("Malfoy," "Granger"). It felt like their routine was set. What's more Draco's letters were getting shorter as he rushed to see her in the library, his evenings spent organising disappeared as he stretched his time with her. They still never ate together. And their mornings were their own. But for a couple of hours everyday, Draco sat in a room with another person. Even without conversation, he found that when Tuesday rolled around, he would have preferred to sit in silence with Hermione than go and converse with Tonks. He knew that following their interaction he wouldn't be able to join Granger, not with veritaserum coursing through his system and the knowledge that he wouldn't see her at all that day caused a dull throb in his stomach.

"So how is married life treating you?" Tonks asked him, the way she always did when she visited. Bobsy was with them in the sitting room, serving tea, although it had to be said, moving extremely slowly while doing so.

"Fine," Draco grunted, it was the same response to the same question she asked every week. Bobsy snorted.

"Have you managed to talk to her yet?" Tonk prodded and Draco glared at Bobsy out of the corner of his eye. Damn house elf gossiping about him.

"We sit in the library together every day," Draco defended himself. The last thing he needed was to be double teamed by his cousin and house elf.

"Well, that's...frankly cousin that's a bit pathetic," Tonks took a sip of her tea and smiled her thanks to Bobsy, who picked up the plate of chocolate biscuits and offered her one. There was no need for him to still be there, Draco thought he must be lingering just to fawn over Tonks.

"How is it pathetic? We're respecting each other's space," Draco said, reaching forward and helping himself to a biscuit because Bobsy sure wasn't about to offer him one.

"By sitting together in the library, not speaking?" Tonks raised her eyebrow at him.

"They even sit on the same window seat, Miss Nymphadora, sit next to each other not speaking like petulant feuding children... or middle aged divorcees" Bobsy chimed in. Draco didn't try and hide the glare this time and Bobsy didn't even have the decency to look abashed.

"It's a big window seat, there is at least a metre between us, we may as well be sitting on different seats," Draco rushed.

"Yes, sitting together not talking on a big seat rather than a regular sized one makes it far less pathetic," Tonk said, voice thick with sarcasm, "Have you tried talking to her? A simple 'how are you going?' or maybe, 'what are you reading?'"

"She doesn't want me to talk to her Tonks. Would you have me disregard her wishes?"

"I would not bother engaging Miss Nymphadora. I've tried. Some wizards just can't be helped," Bobsy piped up.

Draco spluttered. He'd love to know just exactly how Bobsy had tried to help. From his point of view all Bobsy did was mock him and order him about like a ... well, like a house elf!

"Why are you even here?" Draco turned and asked him.

Bobsy held up the teapot, his features schooled in a patently false docile expression, "Serving Tea."

Draco snarled, "I really don't want to talk about Granger. She is fine. Being married is fine. Everything is fine."

"I wish you luck, Miss Nymphadora, Mister Draco is stubborn. And blind. And socially lacking. And -"

"- Are you done?" Draco cut Bobsy off before he could continue his list of Draco's flaws; he was sure it wasn't short.

Bobsy sighed and looked at Tonks hopelessly before disappearing away.

Tonks didn't watch the elf go, but stared at Draco for a while longer over her tea cup.

"Are you sure you're fine?" she asked, her tone softer than it had been before.

"I am nearing seven years of house arrest and am married to the girl I used to torment in childhood against both our wills; there's a different yardstick against which to measure fine now," Draco answered her.

"That's right, you are nearing seven years, only two months left and you'll be free," Tonks mused and Draco tried to ignore the slight flutter of panic that appeared at the thought. It would be fine. He would go to dinner with Theo and Blaise and Pansy. He would play quidditch with his old friends from Slytherin. He'd go for a meal at his favourite French bistro, the one his parents would take him to after they picked him up off the Hogwarts Express. It didn't need to be new or scary. The fact that the thought of approaching the manor gates made him feel light-headed was inconsequential.

"Whatever will you do with your Tuesdays?" Draco muttered, using quite a bit of effort to sound nonchalant and Tonks face contorted strangely.

"We could still have tea on Tuesday, minus the Veritaserum of course. You could meet Teddy, Mum even."

Tonks wasn't looking at him and Draco couldn't judge what she was offering. Was it born of pity? Possibly. He'd suspected at least half of her decency came from pity for his pathetic lonely state. She was a bleeding heart Hufflepuff after all. Or was it from suspicion? Wanting to keep an eye on him after he was released. He had been aligned with the same witches and wizards that killed her husband. No matter how nice she was to him over tea, there must be at

least one part of her that refrained from trusting him. If the situation was reversed he'd do the same.

"I think I've coopted enough of your time for one lifetime," Draco said cautiously, watching his cousin's face to see if he'd said the right thing. There was a twinge of her lips and a slight tightening of her eyes but he couldn't quite figure out what that meant. Possibly she was annoyed, but at what? The amount of time she'd had to spend with him?

"Besides, it's been so long since I've used magic, I might need to head back to Hogwarts. Sign up for a refresher course."

Tonks let out a bark of laughter at that and Draco felt pride that he'd turned the conversation around.

"I'm sure as soon as you get a wand back in your hand it will all come flooding back," she said.

"As long as the same thing happens as soon as I get a broom between my thighs. I have my eye on a seeker position in a league Blaise and Theo play on."

Tonks' smile dimmed briefly but soon returned, "No doubt it will."

It turned out the way to start a conversation with Granger wasn't to ask how she was, or inquire about her book, it was to go into the library when she was in there with her cat. She was sitting cross legged on the window seat, her back pressed against the frame and Glitter sleeping in her lap when Draco came across with his own book to join her. He'd dragged an armchair next to the window seat, so he could sit with more padding against his back, and rest his feet on the window seat. Still close, he didn't particularly want to move away from Granger.

They'd exchanged their cursory last name greetings and both settled into read when Glitter unfurled herself from Granger's lap, stretched, trotted along the seat before using Draco's outstretched legs as a bridge to get to his lap where he settled.

"Really Glitter?" Hermione's indignant voice roused Draco from his book, "you'd abandon me so quickly?"

Draco searched Hermione's face to see if she was actually annoyed or hurt but all he could see was amusement.

"See Granger, I told you your cat liked me," he said, stroking the little creature along its back to prove a point and the cat started purring as if on cue.

"And I told you he likes everyone," she snipped back, but the smile on her face showed she wasn't actually irritated. She was just a witch who loved and delighted in her pet and his antics it seemed.

“Nuh-uh Granger, you told me he gives everyone a chance. The liking is entirely in reaction to me as a person.”

“Well, I have no proof his allegiance hasn’t been won with nefarious means. Do you keep a jar of treats in your room? Is this bribery at work?”

“Oh you wound me Granger, I would never be so underhanded with someone’s pet,” Draco pretended to clutch his chest in mock hurt and Hermione rolled her eyes at his dramatics and her tongue flicked out to wet her bottom lip. Immediately, Draco felt his blood run south. Salazar Slytherin, they had just been playing. That was all. Apparently, a lighthearted interaction and focus drawn to Granger’s full lips was enough to make him respond like a 13 year old boy. It must be the bonding spell, or the almost 7 years of isolation.

“Crookshanks would have never,” she said, glancing at the cat curled up in Draco’s lap, a wistful look flashing across her features.

“No, he wouldn’t,” Draco agreed, “I’d probably end up with a dead rodent in my bed if I’d ever had the audacity to offer him a bribe.”

“Oh yes, he did that to Ron once, after a particularly angry spat,” Hermione mused, her face suggesting she was lost in her own memory. Even though it wasn’t a particularly positive memory of Ron, Draco felt himself tense at the mention of Weasley’s name. Most of the time, it was easy enough to not think of him, but having his name mentioned by his wife, in his house, brought all the animosity from their youth flooding to the surface.

“If Weasley only had to endure it once, he was a fortunate man,” Draco muttered. That shocked Hermione from her memory and she looked at Draco in surprise.

“Crooks left a dead mouse in your bed? More than once?” she asked, her book now abandoned beside her.

“Granger, every time any member of Slytherin said anything remotely mean to you, we’d end up with a dead mouse on our pillow,” Draco said, unsure why he was offering her information that most of Slytherins had found embarrassing, “The worse the slur, the smellier the mouse. Like he kept a little store of rotting corpses around just to punish us. We tried all manner of wards to protect our dorms, but nothing could keep that orange demon out.”

Hermione laughed but her eyes took on a shiny quality and Draco hoped that he hadn’t made her cry. She was finally talking to him, he didn’t want her to cry because of it. Luckily it seemed that whatever he’d evoked was confined to that shimmer of emotion.

“Evading wards sounds like Crooks. He found every secret passage in the castle the first year he was there,” she had that soft wistful smile.

“When did he die?” he asked, both because he was curious and because he knew that sometimes all you wanted to do was talk about the painful stuff with someone. With some memories, the best you could wish for was to have someone listen and acknowledge the pain in them; instead of screaming about them into an abyss and wondering if it was all in your head.

"I don't know," Hermione sniffed, "he could be still alive for all I know. He was half-kneazle and you know how long they can live. He left before I did, during the war. It was as if he knew I had to go somewhere he couldn't follow and didn't want me to have to say goodbye."

Draco ground his back teeth together. He wasn't ready to hear about her experiences of the war. Not when they would all accumulate to the most awful moment of her life at the hands of his family. He shifted uncomfortably and waited for her to stop talking or leave, which is what had happened the previous times they'd tiptoed down this path, but she surprised him. She kept speaking.

"I like to think he found another girl to live with, someone shy and plain just like me, and he could keep her company."

Draco wanted to tell her she wasn't plain; it was his first impulse. He'd spent weeks watching her and if there was one thing he could attest to after all that objective study, was that Hermione Granger had grown up to be beautiful. Or maybe she had always been and he'd never bothered with the objective study before now. However, Draco was well practised in controlling his impulses and as rusty his social skills were after 7 years alone, even he knew that blurting out that you found a witch beautiful when that witch had only just started to talk to you was a bad idea. The fact that he had probably (ok definitely) deserved at least half of those dead mice just complicated things further.

"And is leaving dead rodents in the new girl's bully's bed?" Draco said instead, conscious that he had just verbally acknowledged that he was a bully. He hadn't done that before.

"Yes, that would be nice. Crookshanks, the champion of frizzy-haired swots everywhere," Hermione smiled again, this time without the moisture in her eyes.

Draco thought of a million things he could say, "*I'm glad you had a champion, Granger*", "*Frizzy-haired swots are quickly becoming my favourite group of people*," or even some self aggrandising proclamation about being her champion now (and he was pretty sure that impulse was driven purely by the blood bond that had been rejoicing during their whole interaction).

"And now we're blessed with Glitter. Glitter, champion of reformed bullies and mistakenly plain witches, distinguished connoisseur of both laps and treats," he said. It wasn't an apology, he knew that. But it was apology adjacent. And who knew where that might take them.

Chapter End Notes

So remember how I said that my rough chapter outline could possibly grow if chapters got a bit unruly in length. I must be a seer because the number of chapters has grown.

Thank you for all the lovely comments and kudos; they are so motivating when I am writing especially when people are able to "get" Draco. He is 6 weeks from being

released from house arrest, and I for one can not wait... except maybe I can because you know H and D trapped in a house together is never a dynamic I would say no to...

Also, Glitter the cat was intentionally written as the anti-Crookshanks, not because I didn't LOVE Crooks, but because I love the idea of young, optimistic Hermione having this cynical, ornery cat, and older, more closed off Hermione having this cinnamon roll of a pet. And yes, Draco absolutely bribed him.

The Piano and Potions

Chapter Notes

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

Theo had come to see Draco for his November visit and while it went against his very nature, he'd listened without rolling his eyes (much) while Draco talked about Hermione and their silent reading. It felt good to share the details with someone. The way she'd moved the plate. Everything about the cats, both the one in his manor and the one out in the world. The books she was reading, incredibly varied. Once Theo had reached his limit of serious conversation, and Draco was feeling genuinely rotten about the idea of Hermione waking up one morning to find her beloved pet had abandoned her, Theo proceeded to spend an entire hour making up dirty limericks about the Hogwarts Ghosts. He started out by himself, finding it easy enough to come up with a good range of words that rhymed with Nick, but eventually Draco had to shake his dark mood and join him in creating increasingly unhinged ditties. By the time they had come up with their rhyme for the Fat Friar (*There once was an awfully fat friar/Who was known for being a cryer/He sobbed when he came/All over some Dame/And then he was forced to untie her.*), Draco was laughing so much that his side hurt.

"Imagine the creative heights we could reach when we're allowed a firewhiskey again," Theo said, clapping Draco on the shoulder and receiving a look from one of the guards by the fireplace.

"No touching!" the guard growled, his hand going to his wand at his belt. Theo just rolled his eyes.

"I don't know if that will be a good thing," Draco said, wiping the tears of laughter from his face.

"Correct, it won't be a good thing, it will be a great thing. Two more months. Not even. Seven weeks and you'll be sitting in my library with all of us," Theo looked at Draco so intensely it cut through the mirth.

"Yeah," Draco agreed, "Just seven weeks."

Before Draco could say anything else, the guard pushed himself back from the wall and informed them that it was time to go. Without a half hug or even much or a wave, Theo was hustled through the floo, closely followed by the guard and Draco was left alone. Again. The room was silent, save for the last tongues of green flame. The air was immediately colder; the warming charm the guard had cast disappeared with him.

According to his self imposed schedule, Draco should go and have some lunch in the dining room now. He was sure Bobsy had it laid out and was equally sure that not showing up to eat it would piss him off, but he wasn't hungry. He needed to get outside, away from the walls that seemed to be just a little closer than usual after Theo's visit. He didn't even bother to stop for a cloak and realised his error the moment she stepped out on the veranda. It was

freezing. The type of cold that sliced your skin like a million tiny paper cuts. Still, the cold was more appealing than the walls.

The first time Granger ever knocked on his door was the Monday after a visiting weekend.

“Malfoy?” she called through the crack in the door. He never closed it completely in case Glitter wanted to come in and see him. This visitor was much better. He pushed himself off the bed, where he was lying prone with a book.

“Granger?” he asked, opening the door to her.

“I am so sorry,” she said, her hair seemed more ruffled than normal, her cheeks were flushed, and she couldn’t quite meet his eyes. She was already wearing pyjamas, more flannel but this time pink polka dots, “I was just wondering if there might be a spare Dreamless Sleep potion in the manor?”

“Sorry?” Draco was confused.

“I usually bring my week’s supply of Dreamless Sleep back on a Sunday and I did, but I had them in the bathroom cabinet and must have left the door open and Glitter got in and knocked them all over and well... don’t expect to see him for a few days. He’s having a potion assisted nap.”

“Glitter drank a week’s worth of Dreamless Sleep Potion?” Draco suddenly worried for the little feline. Could a cat survive such a thing?

“Oh, not all of it. It’s more he spilt a week’s worth of Dreamless Sleep Potion and got it on his paws and then when he was cleaning himself,” Hermione shrugged awkwardly, “He’ll be fine. But I’m short on my potions and so I know this is the absolute definition of disrupting your life, but if I could borrow one I would be very appreciative.”

“Granger, I don’t care about disruptions, but you do remember I am on house arrest right? With a ban on using magic? I’m not allowed Dreamless Sleep potions.”

Surely she knew that. Granger was a smart witch and from his hazy memory, had been there as the Wizengamot handed down their sentence. She had to know he wasn’t allowed a potion anymore than he was allowed a wand.

“But, you’re not making them,” her voice faltered and she looked him straight in the eye. Draco could count every fleck of gold in her irises if he wanted.

“You’re not allowed to make them, sure, but they must let you use them. They’re practically medical care! Everyone I know from the war takes them at least occasionally,” Hermione’s voice went higher, she was speaking faster.

“Where did you think I was getting them from?” Draco asked drily, trying to help her see the ridiculousness of her assumption.

"I thought Tonks bought them with her every week," Hermione whispered, her eyes not leaving his. Studying him the way she did a passage of a book she found particularly confusing or unexpected.

"I assure you the only potion Tonks lets me dabble with is veritaserum, just to make sure I remain a completely open book for the ministry to peruse whenever it feels so inclined."

It was hard to keep the bitterness from his tone, but instead of defending the ministry and reminding Draco why he was subjected to such a sentence, Hermione's brows furrowed.

"But how do you sleep without them?" Hermione whispered. The look of concern on her face was devastating. It almost brought him to his knees. No one had looked at him like that in a really, really long time. Like she could see what was wrong and would do anything to fix it.

"I make do," Draco croaked, still gathering himself from the impact of her concern. His words hung between them for a minute and for a moment it seemed like Hermione might reach for him. Instead, her expression shuttered. The openness closed, she took a step back and then Draco wanted to reach for her, as if he could physically stop the kind empathetic woman who had just been there from disappearing.

"Well, I guess I will make do this week, too. Sorry to have interrupted you," she nodded at him and with her arms tightly wrapped around her body, she walked away. Draco looked after her, mouth silently opening without the words to call her back. Feeling a loss greater than any he'd experienced since the judge had slammed down his gavel. What had he said wrong this time?

A bloodcurdling scream ripped Draco from his sleep two nights later. Without thinking, he shot from his bed and hurled himself towards the sound. He knew it. It had filled these halls once before and sounded just a gut wrenching then as it did now. It was only Hermione's closed door that gave him pause. There were no shrieks now, just soft sobs and babbling he couldn't quite decipher into words. She was almost, most certainly dreaming. She wasn't in real danger. But if she saw him would she think she was? In what world would she want Draco to enter her private space and rouse her from her sleep.

"Bobsy?" he called tentatively. It would be a better option, having the elf wake her. A softer option. There was no crack of apparition.

"Bobsy!?" this time he called it louder. Still nothing.

"Vim!?" he yelled into the shadows of the hallway but still he remained alone. He shifted from foot to foot, trying to decide how to proceed when another scream pierced the night air. It wasn't time to think, he needed to do something and he pulled open the door, barely registering that it wasn't locked or warded, even though she had the ability to do both.

There was Granger, in those pink spotty pyjamas, curled into herself in the middle of the bed. Her hair was damp and tangled, as if she had been tossing and turning for some time, but had settled into a foetal position, clutching her knees to her chest, screams once again subdued to sobs. Draco approached the bed carefully, resting on knee on the mattress as he climbed

across to gently touch Hermione's shoulder. Although she was sweaty, she felt cold to the touch.

"Granger," he said softly, shaking her a little, "Granger, it's just a dream."

She didn't gasp and sit up the way he did when he exited a nightmare. To start with there were no signs she was about to leave it. She still sobbed and babbled. Still clutched her knees with such ferocity her knuckles were white. Draco kept talking to her softly, 'it's just a dream', 'you're safe, Granger,' 'time to wake up, Granger.' Eventually her grip relented, her sobs quieted and her breathing evened out until her eyes fluttered open and met his.

Even in the dark of the room, Draco could tell they were bloodshot and if he had to guess, the soft crying had started long before the screams that woke him.

"You awake Granger?" Draco checked and she nodded at him, sitting up in the middle of the bed, pulling her knees to her chest.

"Let me get you some water," Draco pushed himself up from her bed and rushed to her bathroom, hoping there was a glass there. What he wouldn't give for a wand in these moments so he could actually be useful. Rather than this impotent excuse for a wizard who relied on luck and circumstance. Luck and circumstance were on his side this time, and he found an empty glass on the vanity, which he filled with water to take back to her. She took it with shaking hands and Draco watched as she sipped, feeling awkward standing next to the bed but sure that sitting on it would be taking a liberty he had not earnt.

"I'm so sorry," Hermione said, looking up at him with bloodshot eyes and red cheeks, "I must have fallen asleep before I could silence the room."

It was like someone had hit him in the face. She was apologising, when it was him and his family that had given her nightmares like that in the first place.

"You really don't need to apologise Granger, not when I was there for the act that gave you those nightmares and did nothing," Draco spat it, so determined that she would not entertain even an ounce of guilt for a fraction of a second.

"No!" Hermione answered just as quickly, her tone just as urgent, "I wasn't dreaming of that day... at least not tonight. I rarely do anymore. It's not the memory that hangs with me the most."

Draco did sit on the bed then. Unsure if his legs could still support him after that revelation. What was she dreaming of then? There had been many many horrors in the war. Draco had seen lots of them. But in his mind, that day in the drawing room, the way the knife moved as it cut that word he'd used so liberally his whole life into her thin arm, the way his aunt had cackled, taking so much unbridled joy in creating so much unchecked pain had been the most horrific thing he witnessed. What had Granger seen that could eclipse that in her mind?

"How do you do it?" Hermione's voice broke through to him, "sleep without the potions? For seven years. You must think I'm so weak, I can't survive a few days..."

"No Granger," Draco scoffed, trust this witch to turn dealing with nightmares into some sort of competition, it took him just a second to decide before he stood and held out his hand to her.

"Come with me, I'll show you how I cope."

Hermione looked at the outstretched hand for a beat, before taking it and allowing herself to be pulled from her bed. Instead of letting go when she got to her feet, the way he expected she would, she kept a tight hold of it. As if for that moment, the pressure of him would keep her tethered to the waking world. Draco wasn't letting go. He was too scared to entwine their fingers the way he wanted to, or to squeeze her reassuringly, but he remained steady, feeling the licks of his magic burn a way towards her. He was equally shocked to feel tendrils of hers reaching back. Could she feel it as well?

"The music room?" Hermione said when they arrived at their destination after a silent walk.

"Uhuh," Draco said, using their joined hands to manoeuvre her onto the piano stool and then sat next to her, trying to ignore the way his entire right side was flush against her on the small seat, "Do you play?"

"Only Chopsticks," Hermione confessed, "my parents had me learn trombone when I was a girl."

Draco couldn't help but snort, "Gods Granger, they really were setting you up to be that kid weren't they."

He was mortified the moment the words left his mouth. Was he really teasing the woman who had just been sobbing, trapped in a nightmare? Was he that stupid? He prided himself on the way he controlled his impulses, what in Merlin's name had caused him to lapse just then? At such a delicate moment? Just as he was convinced that he'd ruined everything, Hermione let out her own inelegant snort of laughter.

"Yes, I suppose they did," she chuckled a little more, "in their defence, I think they wanted me to play an instrument that lent itself to playing in a group, so I could make friends that way. It didn't work."

"Hogwarts isn't known for their marching band," Draco added and even though it was an awful joke, Hermione let out a fresh snort of laughter.

"So I suppose you play, piano being the preferred instrument of posh wankers everywhere," Hermione was teasing him now. Her cheeks regained a little colour finally.

"Only the very poshest," Draco agreed, allowing his fingers to gently brush over the keys as he started to play. Though he couldn't be completely sure, he felt that Hermione rested against him slightly as he did.

"Mozart?" Hermione queried after hearing the first section of music.

"Very good, five points to Gryffindor," Draco drawled as he continued to play, "but can you name the piece Miss Granger?"

"But he's muggle," she said, ignoring his teasing question completely.

"Is he?" Draco turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow, "are you sure?"

"Yes! He's definitely a muggle!" Hermione crossed her arms defiantly which was quite the task given how close they were sitting and she bumped him as she did so, causing him to fumble a couple of notes.

"Okay, yes, he was a muggle," Draco conceded, looking back to the keys to find his place, "but his Weber sisters were witches."

"His Weber sisters?" Hermione questioned.

"Yes, Aloysia and Constaze Weber. One the girlfriend, one the wife. Aloysia, the elder sister, was first entangled with Mozart, but her father, a staunch pureblood, was appalled by the match. Keep in mind that this all took place in 1777 and the last witch burning in Europe was in 1782. Witches and wizards avoided muggles for a reason. He wouldn't approve of a relationship and he arranged for Mozart to be sent to Paris, and using the distance and time, managed to talk Aloysia out of the match. When Mozart returned, she wouldn't even speak to him. Alas, the same could not be said for her younger sister Constanze, who then became besotted with the talented musician. Constanze it seemed was more strong willed than her older sister, and wouldn't be dissuaded. Mozart too had learnt and this time refused to leave. They married and if you need any evidence that Mozart knew all about magic I suggest you listen to Great Mass in C Minor."

"So the Weber family finally accepted him?" Hermione asked

"A talent as exceptional as Mozart, they'd have to be fools not to," Draco said, bringing the movement to a close, the room growing silent again.

"And this helps you sleep?" Hermione asked, uncrossing her arms and reaching out to stroke a single key.

"I find that music and demons are unable to exist in the same room. The right piece will drive them completely away if I play for long enough," Draco smiled across at her, aware of how close her face was to him.

"Teach me?" she asked tentatively, "I mean, unless you have a trombone sitting around somewhere?"

Draco laughed and shuffled the sheet music to find a simple piece and then started to show Hermione where each of the notes were on this new instrument.

The following Sunday, Draco sat in his window watching the lights of Granger's car come up the drive. She was later than usual and he needed to see her exit the car, see that she was

fine, before getting up to walk to the music room. They'd taken to meeting just before bedtime for piano lessons, usually short ones, and whether the music was enough to drive Granger's demons away or she'd gotten better at silencing her room he wasn't sure. He also wasn't sure if she would want to keep meeting at the music room now that she would surely have her potions. Still, he sat on the piano stool, spine stiff, waiting for her.

The door creaked open not 10 minutes after he'd heard the car engine die. She was still wrapped in a giant purple puffer coat, the kind favoured by muggles, and a bulging tote bag hung over her shoulder. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose was pink from the cold air outside.

"Oh good, you're here," Hermione smiled as she sat down on the stool next to him, "I have something for you."

Draco wanted to lean into her warmth, so pleased she was home after a day away. The magical bond in his blood roared to life, demanding some form of contact. It had grown greedy after a week of unfettered time in the library and the tiniest little touches as they both played the piano. And the fact she had brought him something, had thought of him while she was out, it filled his chest with something similar to hope but much more potent. Hermione seemed happy and eager too. Her smile had not left her face and she was reaching into her bag eagerly. From within the tote, she pulled out a series of vials filled with a familiar purple potion. Dreamless Sleep.

"I bought these back for you," she said, her voice cautious though her smile remained as she lined up seven of them on the top of the piano, "if you want them. You don't have to use them of course. You might be completely happy with the piano, but just in case..."

She trailed off, sounding incredibly unsure. Draco felt himself turn cold, as if any warmth that had flowed from Hermione had abruptly stopped. The happy fullness in his chest turned heavy and fell to his stomach like a stone. Though he felt as far removed from happiness as one could get a baleful laugh escaped his throat.

"And Kingsley said that he didn't see you as a risk to the terms of my house arrest. It is amazing how wrong that man can be. Are you trying to get me arrested, Granger? Have this bizarre torture extended? What do you think they will do to me if they find I have these? And they will find out. I am forced to devolve every little secret, every private thought, every Tuesday," Draco snarled.

He wanted to push the potions onto the floor, smash all of them, so the temptation was completely removed. With one of those potions he could fall asleep safe in the knowledge that nothing would haunt him as he slept. He could drift off to sleep without the fear that usually accompanied the act. What was she doing? Was she naive or was this truly an act of revenge?

"No!" Hermione said suddenly, her hand hovered between him and the potion vials, as if she was unsure if she should reach for him or them, "that's why I am running late, I went to see Tonks. She can phrase her questions in a way that the potions will never come up. She knows I'm giving them to you and is happy to keep it a secret. I know it's just a few weeks but we just thought... well ... you don't need to be tormented by your nightmares anymore."

Draco couldn't look at her, just at the potions. His hands gripped the edge of the piano stool, holding it instead of reaching for the promise of relief. Could he take them? Was Hermione telling him the truth? Would Tonks really agree to a dereliction of duty just to protect him? It wasn't a risk he was willing to take.

"I don't want them," he said, still staring at vials, his voice sounded harsh and unfamiliar.

Hermione still didn't move, her hand hovering in the space between he could feel her gaze on his face.

"Take them!" he snapped, his voice not quite a yell but louder than was polite.

Her hand moved then, grabbing at the vials and shoving them back into her tote. Her gaze finally dropped from his face. Draco didn't know what to say to her. He couldn't let go of the piano stool, unsure exactly what his hands would do when they had nothing to occupy them. All he knew is he didn't want to be in that room anymore.

"I trust now you have your potions, you won't need piano lessons anymore?" he said stiffly, still not looking at her.

Hermione made a squeak and Draco wanted to look, he really did but wasn't sure what good would come from it.

"I'll be ok," she said, her tote now full, but she didn't rise and leave.

Draco decided to take the initiative instead, letting go of the stool, he stood and nodded in her general direction, then he walked briskly from the room. Hoping that if he walked fast enough, he could leave his feelings behind just like the potions.

Chapter End Notes

Ahh! I feel like this chapter has so much in it but I didn't know how to cut it into separate chapters so you get it all at once! I hope you like it.

I had a grand time creating dirty limmericks about all the Hogwarts' Ghosts. Spent far too long on it and they were all rather off colour. I will hold on to the ones I haven't used here, as I like to think creating dirty poems is a favourite pastime of Theo's so we might need them later in the story.

The story about Mozart is mostly true, he did sleep with one sister, have her father disapprove and then marry the other. However there is not evidence or accusation that they were witches. Their father was also a patron of Mozart so didn't dislike him as a person. And it's also true that the last witch burning in Europe was in 1782, in Switzerland.

As for this chapter, I can feel some of you screaming at me after chapters of Hermione being passive, Draco reacting so badly to her actually doing something! What can I say... Draco may be desperate for human interaction but he's also a broken person at the moment. As is Hermione. And we love them for it!

Pine and Hyacinth

Chapter Notes

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

Draco was familiar with the feeling of cowardice. He'd been a coward more than a few times in his life and most of the time it wasn't something that bothered him too much. Call it a Slytherin sense of self preservation, call it intelligence for knowing when retreat was the best option. Yes, he was familiar with cowardice but not so much the shame of being a coward. He could count the number of times he felt shame about his cowardice on one hand. The first when he had lied to his mother when he'd broken a vase given to her by her sisters; she'd cried at the loss of the gift and he hadn't been able to face her disappointment. The second time was when he demanded that the hippogriff that had attacked him in 3rd year was put to death. It was true that he was angry at that stupid oaf who had no business introducing 13 year olds to those dangerous creatures. However, turning his anger on the hippogriff... it hadn't been his finest moment and he knew it before Hermione Granger slapped him across the face and drove the point home. The third also involved her, as if she was put on earth as a mirror to his worst features; it was when he had watched her writhe on his drawing room floor and done nothing. Ironically, if ever a situation required self preservation it was that one, but it turned out that even that prized Slytherin trait had a limit and he'd found it that night.

Now, he had a fourth moment to add to his list; avoiding his own library the weeks after snapping at Hermione when she had been trying to do something nice. For him. He'd examined that night from many angles after he'd walked away. Spent hours trying to remember every moment to ensure he hadn't missed something in his effort to understand it. In the end, it seemed pretty clear. She was just trying to be nice. And he'd yelled at her. Because he was an idiot. Because he'd been scared. Because he couldn't imagine a world where she would do something kind for him. Now he owed her an apology. Another apology, to go with the ones he still didn't know how to say. It would be strange to apologise for his most recent crime and not all the others. Trouble was, he still didn't know how to word those. So rather than figure it out, he chose to avoid the library. Coward.

To make matters worse, after two weeks of brooding he'd completely run out of reading material and Bobsy refused to fetch him anything new insisting he was not a Golden Retriever. So he was bored, missing his time with Granger like a phantom limb and then Bobsy had decided that it was time to decorate for Christmas.

"I don't understand," Draco said, watching as Bobsy tried his best to shove a 14ft fir tree into his room with 12 ft ceilings, "We have never decorated for Yuletide before, why are we doing it now?"

"Firstly, Bobsy feels the need to point out, as he is the only one wrangling a tree at present, that *we* are not decorating for Christmas," Bobsy's pointed ears emerged from behind the tree that was bent at a 90 degree angle from where it pushed against the ceiling, "Secondly, there

has never been a mistress in the house at Christmastime. Bobsy wants Mistress Granger to feel happy and festive.”

“And you didn’t care if I felt happy or festive?” Draco grumbled.

“Bobsy didn’t think that Mister Draco cared if he felt happy or festive,” Bobsy muttered and Draco had to strain to hear it. With a clap of his hands Bobsy summoned many boxes of decorations, almost dropping them on Draco where he sat near his fire.

“Mistress Granger seems so sad these past weeks,” Bobsy continued, as if he’d said nothing on the topic of Draco’s happiness, “Reading the library by herself... sitting in the music room by herself...”

Draco’s chest twinged at the thought of her in his music room; it was yet another place he was avoiding in his house. He tried to swallow though his mouth suddenly was very dry. Was she waiting for him? She had said she didn’t need the piano lessons anymore, but was it possible that she wanted them?

“I don’t see how decorating my rooms is going to improve that,” he said stiffly.

“No, of course you don’t. Thankfully, you don’t need to, Bobsy knows,” said the elf, pulling out long strands of beads in gold and red. Wonderful. He’d be subjected to a Gryffindor themed yule.

“Bobsy also knows he needs flowers. Amaryllis, of course, and poinsettias, holly. Also ferns and pine. And mistletoe!”

“Not Mistletoe,” Draco snapped and Bobsy just rolled his eyes.

“Petulant feuding child... fine not mistletoe. But Bobsy does need all the others. Tonight,” he waved his hand at Draco, effectively dismissing him from his own room and not for the first time Draco wondered what his father would make of him if he saw him being bossed by a house-elf. Probably not much different from what Lucius thought of him already; it was unlikely he could drop any further in his father’s estimation. He had to actively remind himself that he didn’t care. Lucius was rightfully rotting in Azkaban and Draco didn’t need to care what he thought of him.

Draco took his cloak and went out to the greenhouse, his feet crunching through frost as he went. It wasn’t quite dark yet but the December days were short and the days’ light had almost disappeared; there were just indiscriminate shadows around him. He would have to work quickly to get the flowers or he’d need to light candles.

Rounding the path to the greenhouse he was surprised to see it already glowing with light. Opening the side doors as silently as he could, he searched for the light’s source even though his body already knew. It was her. She was standing amongst orbs of glowing light that seemed to follow her as she went and gave her skin a golden glow. She was wearing the ridiculous puffer jacket she usually wore when she left the manor and there was a grey knit cap flattening her curls. There was no apparent destination to her wandering, just a quiet

stroll, stopping to examine certain plants as she went. She paused and reached out to stroke the petals of a pink camellia.

“I often give Bobsy those for your room,” Draco said, breaking the silence. He couldn’t stand to watch her anymore and not speak to her.

“I thought I recognised them,” Hermione smiled and looked at him, tilting her head, “I’m sorry to be in your space, usually you’re elsewhere in the manor at this time. I can go; I don’t want to disturb you.”

Draco needed her to stop apologising to him. For one she was doing nothing wrong, but also every apology that effortlessly fell from her lips, only made the ones he wasn’t saying more obvious. He just shook his head and walked to his hyacinths, picking one purple and one blue. Then walked back and handed them to her.

“These are the others he likes for you,” he said, looking at her slender fingers as they took the stems, gently brushing against his own as they did. For a moment he couldn’t help but close his eyes. It was a whisper of heaven and more than he deserved.

“Thank you,” said Hermione, lifting them to her nose to breathe in the sweet scent, “it’s impressive you can grow them this time of year.”

“Thank you,” said Draco, echoing her, wondering how long she was going to stand with him, with her glowing light and warm presence. He didn’t know what to say to keep her there. Didn’t know if he should try and keep her there.

“You’re not reading at the moment?” she inquired and it took Draco a moment to realise she was referring to his absence from the library.

“I am, I just have books in my rooms,” he answered quickly, wondering at what point this truce, as delicate as the blooms in her hands, would last.

“Oh, ok,” Hermione said, and by the way she shifted her feet and looked away, Draco could tell that she was getting ready to leave, plunging him back into darkness.

“But I’ve almost finished them,” he said, noting his voice had shifted up an octave and was rushed, “I’ll have to come back to the library soon. Find something else.”

“Oh ok,” Hermione repeated but her tone was sweeter and she smiled at him.

Again, Draco just let the silence settle and again, she started to move away, cradling the two flowers Draco had given her. This time Draco let her go, waiting for the darkness.

She didn’t make it to the door before stopping suddenly and looking back at him; the soft light making her eyes glow as they fixed on him, “Do you need the light?”

Draco shook his head. It was cold and almost dinner time. It was best she went inside; she’d be more comfortable there.

"It's ok," he told her, waving her towards the doors, "I've gotten very good at working in the dark."

Chapter End Notes

Just a short and sweet chapter today. This scene didn't work with the last chapter or the next one, so it sits by itself. I hope that you like it, even though it is a bit shorter. I am going to try and fall into a regular posting schedule now, posting once a week on either a Friday evening or Saturday morning Australian time (I am an Australian).

Now, personally, I adore Victorian flower language and so did a lot of reading for the flowers in this chapter. So just for interests sake here are the meanings of the flowers in this chapter.

The flowers Bobsy requested for the pair's Christmas decorations;

Amaryllis - pride

Poinsettia - success

Holly - peace and optimism in the home

Fern - fascination and shelter

pine - hope in adversity

The Flower Hermione was drawn to

Camellia - longing

The flowers Draco gave her

blue hyacinth - sincerity

purple hyacinth - desire for forgiveness

Now the big question is do our characters know Victorian flower language? I am sure it is no surprise to you that I think Bobsy knows everything (he is our King) but Draco and Hermione? One with a pureblood aristocrat's education? The other with a penchant for reading? Or did they just gravitate to colour in Hermione's chosen colour palate Who knows... I guess that is up to you each to decide!

The Bet and The Gift

Chapter Notes

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

Draco went back to the library the day after he'd seen Hermione in the greenhouse. He couldn't ignore the worry that when he got there she wouldn't be. If she chose to ignore him, she would be within her rights. Or maybe she'd decide to follow his lead from the past weeks and read in her room. Again it would be fair. As much as he knew her absence would feel like a punishment, it would be a punishment earned.

But she was there. Framed in the soft winter light of the window, knobbly socks on her feet and a festive red tartan blanket on her lap. Draco just watched her for a while when he came in; whatever she was reading was good it seemed, the thick paperback was resting on her drawn up knees and her face was so close to the book, her nose almost touched the pages. Draco didn't really look at what he was grabbing from the shelf, just pulled a volume without taking his eyes from her and walked to the window seat. As soon as the cushions dipped with his weight, Hermione's face snapped up from her book and eyes found him in greeting. Her smile was reserved but no less devastating as he felt it warm him from the pit in his stomach down to his toes.

"Malfoy," she said, still smiling, and he could be mistaken but he swore there was a faint flush of pink on her cheeks.

"Granger," he responded and he knew there was a bright flush of red on his, "good book?"

At that, Granger did blush and held up the cover for him to look at, *The Thorn Birds*.

"Yes, it is. Muggle and from an Australian author so I dare say you've never heard of it, but it's... engaging," she lowered it back to her lap and Draco tried to figure out why a book about birds in Australia would make Granger blush.

"And you?" she asked, gesturing to the book in his lap.

Draco looked down to examine its cover for the first time and spluttered when he read it. *Locks and Looks: 101 Charms for Perfect Hair*. Merlin's Beard. Of all the books he could have taken.

"It's nothing," he said, refusing to lift the cover to her. Granger hummed noncommittally but didn't push and went back to her own book. Draco tried to figure out if he could go and exchange the book for something else without appearing strange. Failing that he tried to figure out what he could say to her to get her talking again, but nothing came to his mind.

A pop broke their silence and Bobsy appeared before them, arms full of pine boughs dressed in festive red and gold ribbon. Hermione immediately jumped to her feet to help him, but Bobsy waved her away.

"No Mistress Granger, Bobsy is quite alright," he said, levitating the pile to a low table nearby and immediately summoning more boxes with a clap, "Bobsy does need you both to exit the library however, so Bobsy can decorate for Christmas."

Draco seethed. It was over already. Trust the little elf to stop him moments after he finally got back to his favourite place with Granger. The little imp had it out for him. He needed no further proof.

"Why?" he drawled trying to convey with his eyes that he would rather shave off his eyebrows than leave at this exact moment, "You were more than content to decorate my room with me in it."

Bobsy raised his eyebrows, "And what a delightful experience that was for all of us. Bobsy does not need to explain the running of the house to Mister Draco, unless of course Mister Draco would like to assist him?"

Draco just scowled in response.

"I am terribly sorry Mistress Granger," Bobsy's tone switched from authoritarian and snide to sweeter than honey, "but I have laid out tea and an assortment of Christmas cookies in the blue sitting room, perhaps you would like to take your book there for the afternoon?"

"Of course Bobsy, unless you would like our help?" Granger bent to pick up her book and clutched it to her chest. Draco felt his own chest tighten at the casual mention of 'our' help. While he had zero desire to spent an afternoon sticking holly to windowsills (especially as without a wand and subsequent sticking charm he had no idea how he was meant to do that), if it meant being part of a "our", so close to a "we" he would do it gladly. But Bobsy just shook his head and Hermione walked away, Draco following her.

"Mister Draco!" Bobsy called, picking up the book he'd left behind and holding it out where both he and Hermione could see it, "You've left your book."

In front of him, Hermione snorted and immediately clapped her hand over her mouth. Draco wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole. His entire face heated and he was frozen, unsure whether it would be better to take the book from Bobsy and hide it immediately or to ask Bobsy to put it away. In the end, the wizard on the cover, who was winking and tossing his long platinum ringlets playfully at them, made his decision for him. Wanting nothing more than to hide the ridiculous man who looked so similar to his father, he could have been a relation, he snatched the book from Bobsy's hands and shoved it under his arm. Hermione was silent but her shoulders shook with laughter and Draco started to the door, unable to even think about saying something. She followed him, but instead of immediately walking to her waiting tea and biscuits (and they were most definitely hers, Bobsy would never be so obliging to him), she turned to him, cheeks red with mirth, eyes sparkling.

"Are you coming?" she gestured down the hall with her head.

"Do you want me to?" Draco's words fell from his lips, eager, hopeful.

Hermione shrugged, “If you want to. I know it’s a disruption to your routine but—”

“-Bobsy was the disruption,” Draco cut her off and then cursed himself. That wasn’t a good response. He should have told her that she wasn’t a disruption or at least confirmed that he did in fact want to have tea with her. She didn’t say anything more, just shrugged again and started walking to the Blue Room and Draco had to jog a few steps to catch up.

Calling it the Blue Room wasn’t exactly true anymore. Christmas had vomited everywhere and there were only glimpses of the sophisticated blue. Instead there was a visual assault of gold and red, clashing tartan and boughs of pine and holly. There was not one, not two, but three Christmas trees dotted around the room. The manor had not been decorated for Christmas since before the war, but when it was, it never looked like this. Narcissa had favoured understated and tasteful decorations and she would never allow any red.

“Would you like some tea?” Hermione drew his attention away from the festive mess, sitting on the edge of a chair, tea pot in hand.

“Please,” Draco walked over and sat on a chair near her, ready to take the cup of black tea and add his own milk and sugar. Hermione surprised him by instead asking him how he took his tea.

“A splash of milk and two sugars please,” he replied, feeling awkward that he was just sitting there while Hermione fussed over his cup before she handed it to him.

“Just like Harry,” she said smiling, and without meaning to Draco jerked so suddenly the cup clattered in its saucer, spilling tea. Draco closed his eyes and tried to summon some calm, no doubt spilling tea made him as commonly bred as the Boy That Couldn’t Die Even with Multiple Attempts.

“Yes, I know, ‘Potter and I have nothing in common, Granger,’ and all the rest,” Hermione rolled her eyes but smiled, “I’m sorry I bought it up.”

Draco didn’t know what to say. His reaction was more the shock of hearing Harry Potter being spoken of so casually, so intimately in a house where his name had only ever been spoken in hate or to plan his murder than the comparison between them but knew starting a conversation there would devolve into dangerous territory much quicker than he would like. There was no way that he was going to utter another word about Potter.

“Do you celebrate Christmas?” he asked, unable to think of anything else to ask. How did people do this again? Converse over tea?

“Not to this extent,” she replied, gesturing around at the decorations that seemed to multiply when they weren’t looking.

“I don’t think St Nick himself decorates to this extent. Trust me, this is not normal. These are the first decorations we’ve had in the manor since, well, since before,” Draco spoke casually, but he hoped she wouldn’t pry into the before.

“Really?” Hermione asked.

"Yes Granger, believe it or not, I am not in the habit of draping Gryffindor red everywhere. It wouldn't surprise me if Bobsy went and purchased the decorations just for you."

She blushed again at that. Who knew that Granger blushed so easily with attention. If he'd been judging by the way she used to almost levitate from her chair in school to answer a question or get the professor's attention, he would have guessed she loved it.

"I'm sure that's not true," she took a sip of tea and dropped her eyes from Draco.

"Really? Well answer me this Granger, do you honestly think there were boxes of red decorations in our cellar just waiting for this? At Malfoy Manor?"

Hermione wouldn't answer that, but the stubborn red flush remained.

"You don't like traditional red and green decorations?" she asked.

"I have no issue with green," Draco teased her, "but honestly, my favourites were always silver. They reminded me of snow. I like snow."

Hermione didn't say anything at first, just studied him and Draco wanted to look away. Part of him wanted to take the words back. He'd just given her several pieces of information about himself, something he would have thought abhorrent if asked. His aunt had been a crazy bitch, but she was also right when she'd taught him that any part of himself, no matter how small or inconsequential, could be used against him. But another part rejoiced at being able to tell someone something about himself. Even if it was small and inconsequential, Hermione Granger had something else to say about him than 'death eater' and 'bully'. It also made him feel more permanent; having someone know small things about him. If he disappeared from the world tomorrow someone would know he liked snow.

"Maybe Bobsy just hasn't gotten to the silver decorations yet? He'll bring them out soon?" she said, hopeful, cautious, as if she knew immediately that the small tidbit he'd share was causing him to have some sort of internal battle like a right nutter.

"There's a difference between being an optimist and a fool, Granger," Draco laughed, "these decorations are for you Gryffindor Princess, make no mistake."

"No, they're not just for me," Hermione grumbled.

"Want to bet? I challenge there won't be a hint of green and silver this entire month," Draco smiled, this was good. Chatting was good. Playing was good.

"What does the winner get?" Hermione replied, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Honestly, I would just be happy in the knowledge that I beat your swotty arse," Draco said, reaching for a biscuit.

"I'm not right about everything."

Draco was about to tease her again when her tone stopped him. It was subtle but something had shifted in that last sentence. Hermione's shoulders had slumped and a little of the sparkle

had left her eyes. He knew whatever he said next mattered more than before.

“What about a favour?” he offered, “to be collected at a later date?”

Hermione stayed subdued but nodded, “within reason.”

“We can both hold veto powers,” Draco agreed. He knew he was going to win and he also knew the only favour he wanted from her was her presence, but he wasn’t about to tell her that.

After their tea in the library, waiting for Christmas became a game. Draco would find her hunting for green or silver decorations in random rooms. They’d both sit in silence watching Bobsy cart decorations around and Draco would raise an eyebrow at her when it became clear that it was more red and gold. Hermione would roll her eyes in response and it would make Draco smile before they both went back to whatever they were doing. If Bobsy realised what they were doing, he said nothing and for the space of about a day, Draco wondered if Hermione would enlist Bobsy to win the bet; she’d certainly get whatever decorations she requested. The Gryffindor sense of honour must have precluded that option, and the red and gold just expanded until the house was glittering with it.

The week before Christmas, sitting in his office penning a letter to Blaise and Theo reminiscing about past Christmas meals at the manor he thought to call Vim. She popped in, the sound of her apparition much quieter than Bobsy’s.

“Yes Mister Draco?” she asked, brushing down the skirt of her dress. This one patterned with bright sunflowers, covered with a white linen apron.

“Has Bobsy asked you to prepare a Yuletide dinner?” Draco asked.

“Would Mister Draco like one prepared?” Vim replied and Draco noted that it wasn’t an answer to his question.

He considered; Christmas fell on a Thursday this year, Granger should be in the manor. And while they were yet to take meals together (and the fact he had no idea where she ate was still a mystery that drove him crazy), surely she would join him in the dining room for Christmas dinner?

“Yes, I would Vim,” he said and as he said it he felt the swell of hope. His first Christmas with company in seven years and that company was going to be Hermione Granger. And he was excited about it. Who could have foreseen that turn of events?

After he knew there was going to be a Christmas dinner, he started to question a gift. Gift giving was traditional for the holiday, and they were technically married, so it wouldn’t be too strange to get Hermione a gift would it? He was sure she wouldn’t expect one but that didn’t mean he couldn’t get her one. He found that he wanted to get her something; he’d had no one to give a gift to in a long time. Unfortunately, it wasn’t as if he could pop to the shops and buy her something. Not that he knew what she’d want anyway. His mother had always

preferred jewellery and perfume; Draco knew that Granger would not be the same. The image of the ring with the purple stone flashed in his mind but Draco dismissed it. Besides the fact he couldn't access it, he wasn't about to give Granger a ring; that was far too serious a gift. There were always books, but if he was being technical about it, the only books he had available to him were already in the manor library and they were by right, already hers as Mistress of the Manor.

The answer came to him as he sat playing away his demons late one night. She'd never come back for piano lessons, even after their truce had brought him back to the library and found her in more spaces around the manor than ever before. He wanted her back at his piano. So, for Christmas, he transcribed by hand some of the simpler pieces of music he'd learnt as a boy. The original sheet music had long disappeared but he could recreate it, with careful strokes of his quill.

On Christmas Day, he'd gone to the dining room for dinner, with the sheet music rolled into a tight roll. That morning, he'd picked some of the camellias she'd admired when they met in the greenhouse and added some white roses to make a small, sweet smelling posey. He'd tucked it into the white ribbon that tied the music and placed it at her place setting.

It had been a difficult decision choosing what to wear. The only formal clothes he owned were once owned by his father, outfits he felt awkward in around Granger. However anything that was just his, was extremely casual and sent the message that he took no care nor respect on the occasion. In the end, he'd chosen one of his father's old suits, but forgone a tie, not wanting Hermione to feel awkward if she chose to wear something more casual.

The dining room was empty when he arrived, save for a magnificent table setting with white linens, an enormous floral centrepiece featuring flowers he'd grown and picked for Bobsy the day before and long white tapers. At first he didn't sit. It wouldn't be improper to sit before all the guests arrived but the clock on the mantel ticked by and the soles of Draco's feet, encased in his stiff leather shoes, grew sore. Draco shifted from foot to foot, and though it was something that would have caused his etiquette instructor to strike him over the knuckles with his cane, leant on the side buffet, trying to relieve the strain. Eventually, there was the loud pop that signalled Bobsy's arrival and moments later a roast turkey with all the trimmings appeared on the table.

"Would you like me to serve, sir?" Bobsy's tone was far softer than any he'd used before, his eyes were fixed on the small bundle at Granger's place.

"No, I'll wait for Granger," Draco replied, kicking at nothing on the floor.

"Mistress Granger isn't here," Bobsy answered.

"It's Thursday, of course she is here. Besides, I didn't hear the car this morning," Draco said.

"Miss Nymphadora opened the floo for her this morning," Bobsy sounded genuinely sorry to convey it.

Draco swallowed thickly. Of course Granger wasn't here. Of course her friends and family wouldn't have allowed her to spend her Christmas locked up in a manor with him, like some

fairy tale princess locked in a tower with a monster. Of course she wouldn't want to spend her Christmas that way either. He'd been so stupid. Unable to speak, he pulled his chair out and sat down, nodding curtly at Bobsy to begin serving. He ate his turkey without tasting it, staring at the posy he'd picked, watching the flowers wilt the longer they sat untouched in the warm room.

After his meal, which would have been better with wine or whiskey, two other things he was forbidden to have while locked in his own version of prison, he left the dining room, determined to go to his study and write a long letter to his wife. Telling her what exactly, he didn't know; perhaps an angry letter about her absence, perhaps an understanding one, detailing exactly why she should avoid him for Christmas dinner, perhaps a short one of one sentence '*I missed you tonight, Granger*'. To be fair that last was unlikely, anger was probably the safe route to go. As he walked, gathering his thoughts and directing them towards anger, away from melancholy, he found her. Wearing a ridiculous jumper with a reindeer and little bells on it, a paper crown with childish drawing scrawled across it nestled in her curls. She was the picture of a middle class Christmas. Something he'd been brought up to despise but long suspected were more jolly affairs than the formal dinners he experienced at the manor. When she saw him her face broke into a smile.

"Draco!" she said, taking a couple of steps towards him, "Merry Christmas!"

"Granger" he said stiffly, motioning to the hat on her head, "You've had a good day I see. I have things I need to do."

Without waiting for an answer, he pushed past her. He had to get away from her, her and that stupid paper hat. Did Teddy make it for her? In another life would he have made Draco one? Whoever made it for her, it was all the proof that he needed to remind him that she belonged elsewhere, to other people, not to him. He slammed his door as he returned to his room. Better she was with other people. He was sure his desire to eat with her was born from either that crackpot binding spell or the seven years of ministry imposed loneliness and when circumstances were different he wouldn't want to eat with her anyway. Definitely wouldn't have his heart skipping when she greeted him in the hall looking warm and merry and happy to see him. Then it hit him. *Draco*. She'd used his given name. Before he could contemplate it fully, Bobsy appeared with a crack. A small box wrapped in green and silver paper in his hands. His first gift in almost a decade.

"From Mistress Granger," Bobsy said, his familiar harsh tone had returned and he handed him the box without flourish before disappearing again with a pop.

The box was cradled in his hand for only a second before Draco ripped at the paper without ceremony, what had she given him? Surely it was something generic. Something he didn't like or need. Purchased as an afterthought, out of obligation. Then he saw the gift and wondered how it was possible that he continued to underestimate Hermione Granger. There, nestled in tissue paper, was a series of blown glass ornaments in the shape of snowflakes, each delicately painted with silver. A slip of paper sat amongst them. A note in Granger's messy scrawl, '*for next year*'.

Draco dropped the box onto his bed and felt the impact of it then. The gift that showed both promise for the future and acknowledgement of a small part of him. The way his given name

had sounded from her lips. Warm and familiar. Like he was someone she knew and was glad to see. How the moment she'd rounded the corner and surprised him in that stupid ridiculous *adorable* jumper, his magic had roared to life as if to say '*see, it's just here, that thing you've been looking for*'.

Suddenly he was racing back to the dining room, needing to find the scroll and the posy. The name, the snowflakes, the smile; he had to give her something in return. She deserved something in return. The carpet of the hall was eaten up by his long strides and by his estimates it had been barely 15 minutes since he left the dining room. Surely everything would still be there, waiting for him. Surely there would still be the small gift he had pulled together. His lungs were burning when he opened the dining room doors, but when he got there his gift, along with all of the other Christmas trimmings, had been cleared away. There was nothing left for him to give.

Chapter End Notes

So, yes, my commitment to posting weekly on a Friday evening lasted all of 5 days. In my defense, I had the best of intentions but then the chapter was just sitting there ready to go and I was like "meh, why not?". So can I make a new commitment, I will never let you go longer than 7 days without an update... but I may get excited and post at the 5 day mark as well because I have no self control.

I hope you like this chapter, there is this one and one more and then Draco is a free man and the fun and games really begin. Expect to see more of Theo, Blaise and Pansy!

For those of you who love a bit of flower language, there was a tiny bit in this chapter. We have the camellias again (longing/adoration) but he added white roses (which in addition to symbolizing purity and innocence, were often used in Victorian times to signal secret admiration) Fitting don't you think?

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments and kudos. They are so lovely and make my day. I love that I am not the only one in the Bobsy fan club.

Biscuits and Fireworks

Chapter Notes

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

Draco didn't avoid the library this time. He was back sitting on their window seat, learning from past mistakes and choosing a book he wouldn't be ashamed to discuss, on Boxing Day. This time, she didn't show. She stayed away the next day. And the next day. And the day after that. The manor was quieter than it had been for months and Draco didn't know what to do. He toiled in the garden, but in the depths of winter there was less to do. He wrote letters but could think of nothing to say. The only letter that made sense was the one to her and he wrote a variation of it over and over.

*Granger,
I loved my Christmas gift. I had one for you too.
Draco*

*Granger,
I do hope you had a wonderful Christmas. I liked your jumper. Sort of. It was a bit weird and I've never seen anything like it before but it looked happy. Also, can you say my name again?
Draco*

*Granger,
I am so fucking sorry. Come back.
Draco*

He read in the library, but the words didn't sink in at all. In reality, he wasn't reading, he was waiting. He refused to go elsewhere to sort and organise things in the manor in case he missed her coming to the library. He tried going down to the greenhouse at dusk to see if he could catch her but it was always dark. He lingered in the hallway near her door, considering whether he should knock. He didn't.

The Tuesday after Christmas, Tonks came. He met her in the floo parlour before walking them both to the blue room, which was still appallingly decorated.

“You celebrating a Gryffindor quidditch win, cousin?” Tonks asked, looking around at the decorations with a smirk to rival his own.

“Bloody Bobsy, I swear that elf was put on this earth just to antagonise me,” he growled.

Tonks rolled her eyes at him, “For a nemesis, he gives you some good biscuits.”

“Those biscuits are for you,” Draco would have thought that was obvious.

“Are they? Brilliant,” Tonk reached forward and grabbed one, inhaling it in two bites.

"You know, given your mother's upbringing, I would have hoped that she taught you some table manners," Draco snipped.

Again Tonks rolled her eyes at him.

"You've got your knickers in a knot today, haven't you? I was expecting you to be a much happier man, given your sentence is up in a couple of days. Freedom and all that."

Draco shrugged. It was true, he should be a much happier man. Everything he'd been waiting for for seven years was about to arrive and he couldn't shake the black cloud that had shrouded him since Christmas.

"So how is that going to work exactly? Freedom?" he asked, and was genuinely unsure. This once abstract concept was about to become very concrete.

"Right, well, on New Year's Day, I'll arrive with a ward specialist. They'll remove the Ministry wards from the property. I'll come bearing a letter from the minister confirming your sentence is complete and a ministry issue wand--"

"Not my wand?" Draco cut in.

"Sorry, we don't know where it ended up, after the war," Tonks reached out and laid a hand on Dracos forearm, as if to comfort, "but the ministry wand is just to get you started, you can go to any wand maker you like and get a replacement."

"With what funds?" Draco asked, in rights he was heir to both the Malfoy and Black fortunes, possibly the Lestrange fortune as well. Whether they were left after his sentence he didn't know. His inheritances had been discussed at his sentencing but at the time, it didn't seem that important.

"With your enormous vaults you little prat," Tonks tone was light, teasing, "Seems the Wizengamot wasn't comfortable touching people's money and insisting on repatriations. It's almost as if some of them didn't want the government examining their own accounts too closely. Whatever the reason, your money is untouched, save what I've used to keep the manor running."

"What you've used?" Draco asked, trying to piece it together.

"Yes, you idiot, I've been the Ministry trustee for you for seven years. But come Friday, you will be proudly in control of the Malfoy and Lestrange vaults and I'll be enjoying the main perk that comes with being decidedly middle class, less paperwork. Technically, your mother is in control of the Black family portfolio, but I suspect it will pass to you in time as well. Given the whole deeply embedded misogyny thing that you "Sacred 28" lot have going on. You just need to take your letter of release to Gringotts and sign a few things."

Draco was shocked. Tonks had been his executor all this time? She'd kept everything waiting for him, poised for a life he was sure she felt he didn't deserve. Then came a wave of shame. Not only had she shown him kindness when he deserved none, but the Black fortune she'd so casually mentioned would have been partly hers and Teddy's if her mother hadn't been

blasted off the family tree for the simple act of falling in love. Draco made a silent promise that when the Black fortune came to him, he would make sure Tonks and Teddy received their fair share.

“Thank you, cousin, I can never repay the kindness,” Draco watched as Tonk shifted uneasily at his earnestness, “even if in some indirect way it was you that foisted Bobsy on me.”

At that Tonks let out a bark of laughter.

“You’re welcome, and for the record, I would happily have Bobsy foisted on me if my ministry wages could handle it. Spoilt brat. Now your mother’s sentence still stands, and she is not allowed to contact you or any other Death Eaters, ex or otherwise. The ministry will still know if she contacts you. However, your ban on correspondence will be lifted the moment your sentence is. You could write to anyone and we won’t be tracking. I wouldn’t recommend you start a pen pal program with Voldy’s inner circle but legally there is nothing stopping you. You can travel wherever you want. Do whatever you want. And I think that’s it.”

In celebration, Tonk leaned forward and took another biscuit and this time, Draco didn’t feel the need to point out her table manners. She may not have learnt the Black manners from her mother but she also hadn’t been taught how to be a heartless bitch like most of the Blacks, which Draco had to admit was possibly a more impressive legacy.

“So did you have a good Christmas?” Draco asked, feeling as though he should at least try and engage here in some polite conversation, a small gesture to convey how much her actions meant to him. He was also aware that with his sentence lifted he didn’t know the next time he would be able to chat idly with his cousin. Would Teddy be a man before he heard about him again?

“Quite,” replied Tonks leaning back in her chair, “We had a quiet morning, Sander made Teddy little robots as a gift and they spent all morning programming them. Some muggle thing that they are both quite taken with. Then we joined the Potters and Weasleys at the Burrow in the evening and Molly’s cooking is second to none.”

“Ah, so you saw Granger then,” Draco couldn’t help himself. He hadn’t necessarily asked the question to find out more about Hermione’s Christmas but now that the information had presented itself, he couldn’t help himself.

“No,” Tonk raised an eyebrow at him, “she wasn’t at the Burrow.”

“Then where did she spend Christmas?” he asked, exasperated.

“I don’t know, but it sounds like an excellent question you could ask your wife in a... I don’t know... what’s it called? Bobsy?”

Tonks barely raised her voice on the last word but Bobsy popped into the room instantly, as if he was waiting for a summons. Any warm and familial feelings that he’d felt towards Tonks vanished.

"Bobsy, what's it called when a husband asks his wife something and she responds and they go back and forth exchanging information?" Tonk asked, smirking.

"Adult behaviour, Miss Nymphadora?" Bobsy replied dryly.

"That's close, but not quite the word I was looking for..."

"I believe the word is 'conversation', Miss Nymphadora, however for that to apply, Mister Draco is going to need to try that thing where you express regret for an action or behaviour... now what is that called?"

Bobsy had picked up on the game a little too quickly for Draco's liking.

"I believe the word you are looking for is "apology", Bobsy," Tonks answered with a wink.

"Precisely Miss Nymphadora, you really are so wise. Unfortunately, as Bobsy has said many, many times, it is a lost cause. If that is all?"

Tonks was too busy chuckling to answer him and instead nodded before Bobsy disapparated again.

"Was that fun?" Draco drawled, less amused than he was when he entered the room.

"It was, thanks for asking," replied Tonks, wiping little tears of laughter from her eyes, "I'm really going to miss these moments."

"And I don't know how I will live without them," Draco said, voice thick with sarcasm. He sighed and pushed his teacup towards her, "Shall we get this last one over with then?"

The laughter across Tonk's face disappeared and she shook her head.

"No, I don't think we need to. No one will ever know we skipped the last one," she said, completely serious. As she spoke, Draco knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would have kept the Dreamless Sleep a secret, had he chosen to partake and the gratitude he felt for this woman overtook him. There were no words to convey it, instead he just smiled and pushed the plate towards her, holding the last biscuit.

It was a light that drew him in. Usually, by the time he was walking back from the music room, the hour was closing in on midnight, the rest of the manor was pitch black. Not on New Years Eve though. That night there was a light in the library. He was drawn to it like a moth to a flame. It was Granger. Of course it was. Sitting in their window seat, but instead of a book, she was looking out the window at the tiny flashes of lights that were appearing sporadically on the horizon. The village nearby must have had fireworks. It was the right moment to apologise to her. With the darkness soothing him and the hope of a New Year and new beginning, he could do this.

"Granger?" Draco said, coming to sit next to her. Unsure exactly what he was going to say but trusting the words would come when they mattered most. Then she turned to face him

upon seeing her cheeks awash with tears any words he may have had for her fled and were replaced by a deep ache in the bond between them.

"Granger, what's wrong," he asked, sitting as close to her as he dared.

She tried a half hearted smile and wiped at her cheeks.

"Nothing, I thought everyone was in bed," she started to get up.

"Wait, Granger, this isn't because... I wasn't very kind at Christmastime and-" Draco stumbled and reached out for her wrist, trying to keep her long enough to get the words out.

"- Oh no Malfoy, it's not because of that," she'd cut him off with one of those light little laughs; if tears weren't still spilling quietly down her cheeks he may have believed it, "this is just silly."

She gestured to her face to make sure he knew exactly what 'this' she was referring to and then again tried to get up to leave but Draco kept light pressure on her wrist.

"It's not," he countered, bringing the hand that wasn't on her wrist to his stomach, "I can feel it here."

It was the first time he'd acknowledged the blood magic that tied them, and was both surprised and relieved when her face expressed understanding and not shock.

"Is that normal? To feel it?" she asked, rubbing at a spot on her chest.

"I don't know," Draco answered honestly, "I've never been bound by blood to anyone before."

Hermione's eyes flicked to the tattoo on his forearm and it was enough for Draco to remove his hand from her wrist. He wanted to tell her that it wasn't blood magic, the mark, but then again it probably didn't matter to her what type of magic it was.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked her instead.

He shifted to settle more into the seat and was pleased to see that Hermione did the same, obviously giving up on her plans to leave. He was further pleased to note there were no fresh tears, just the glistening silver tracks of old ones.

"What, the bonding?" she asked.

"Sure, or you know, that," he made a vague motion to her face and still wet cheeks.

"It really is silly," she said but with the attention back on the topic, fresh tears gathered.

"I like hearing silly things."

He didn't know why he didn't leave it, she was obviously hesitant, but the ache he felt in his stomach urged him to keep asking.

"It's just, it's New Year's Eve. It was always my favourite holiday. My father would throw a big party. He's like me, bookish, serious, but for one night of the year he'd invite everyone who was important to him and just have fun. It was wonderful. The music, the dancing, the laughter, the food. By midnight, he'd always find my mother and I. Ready to kiss us both. He always said who you kissed at midnight was who you would spend your year with and we were who he wanted the most."

Draco didn't speak but was stupefied that the tradition that he'd always thought was uniquely pureblood was shared with Muggles. He wondered if there was a way to tell her that his family had also hosted a big party on New Year's Eve, although he suspected it was less fun than the one she was describing.

"I suppose this year, I'm here, and at midnight... well what does that say about my year ahead if at midnight, I'm alone in a library."

He could kiss her. The thought came from nowhere and made him question his actual sanity. But he could do it. It must be minutes from midnight and she was already sitting so close; he could smell the basil and geraniums of her perfume or shampoo or whatever made her smell so damn good. Just one brush of his lips with hers and maybe it would be like the tradition dictated, he'd get to spend the year with her. It was an intoxicating thought.

"Listen to me, ask me any other night of the year and I'd tell you spending the year alone in a library sounds like my idea of heaven. Like I said it was silly," she wiped the fresh tears away again and with her words the moment was gone. Draco stared for a beat, letting silence and calm wash between them. It wasn't the right moment. Probably never would be.

"Like I said," he said shifting until he was leaning on the opposite side of the window to her, his legs outstretched until they had to negotiate and share the space with Hermione's, "I like silly things."

It didn't mean anything that he wanted to kiss Granger. Nor did it mean anything that he sat with her, their legs tangled in the middle of the seat, watching the flashes of light on the horizon until they both fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we've done it folks. The last day of Draco's house arrest. Now the real fun and games begins! The New Year's Eve scene was one of the first ones that came to my mind when I was brainstorming this fic so it is so satisfying to having it written and published. I hope you like it as much as I do (and yes, I am aware Draco still hasn't apologised.. for anything!).

So many things to say but the main one is thank you! Thank you all so much for your wonderful kind comments. They mean so much and I get so excited when I get every

single one. Thank you for reading. Thank you for trusting me when I find new ways to make Draco miserable. Just thank you!

Wands and Hamstead Heath

Chapter Notes

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

Draco woke up alone on the window seat. Well, almost alone. Much like the first morning after Granger had moved into the manor, her cat was sitting on his chest, purring. He hoped, like that morning, its owner would appear and scoop it into her arms, brushing against his bare stomach as she did. Ignoring the fact he was wearing a shirt and they'd long moved past the assumption that the cat would bother him.

Draco sat up cautiously, gently moving the cat from his chest to his lap, noting that at some point in the night, someone had placed Granger's red tartan blanket over him to keep him warm. It was an oddly sweet gesture and as he absently-mindedly stroked Glitter, who was purring happily in his lap, he considered what he should do next. He wanted to go to her door and check she was ok. The image of her with tears rolling down her face wasn't one he was going to forget anytime soon and though they'd seemed to reach a calm place by the end of the night, he could still feel a quiet ache in his magic, letting him know that not all was well with his wife.

They'd also broached the issue of the bond last night for the first time, and now that he knew she could feel something too, he wondered if they should talk about it. Surely the original plan to "*leave each other alone*" didn't apply when both of them could feel the push and frisson of shared magic through blood. Not that they had been ignoring each other completely recently, but that seemed like more an accident than a design.

Finally, there was the issue of the apology to contend with. He'd been ready to do it last night, though he hadn't known exactly how much he was going to apologise for, the words, "I'm sorry" were going to come out of his mouth and with them, maybe a chance at something new. After all she was his wife, a fact that no longer galled him as it once did. There were worse things, he supposed, than being married to a beautiful and well-read woman. His mind flashed again to the impulse to kiss her in the dim library and he ran a hand absent-mindedly through his hair. Much worse things. He ran his tongue over his teeth and looked down at his wrinkled trousers and shirt. Before he went to see her, he should probably go see a shower and a toothbrush. He gently picked up the cat and moved him to the seat, swung his legs around and got ready to leave before Bobsy interrupted him with a loud crack. He looked Draco up and down and wrinkled his nose.

"Miss Nymphadora is here with the ward specialist. Should Bobsy instruct her to wait while you conduct your usual extensive grooming routine and love affair with your mirror?" he said.

Draco wiped his face. It was New Year's Day. He was free. Yet he'd been so concerned about Granger and the night before, he hadn't remembered. Or maybe it had just been so long locked in this house that he hadn't truly believed it to be a possibility.

“No!” he said, hurrying to stand and running a hand through his dishevelled hair and retucking his shirt, “I’ll be right there.”

Bobsy said nothing but popped away, and then came back with a can of muggle deodorant, the type Draco had been forced to use since the appropriate spells had been taken with him along with his wand.

“I bring this for Miss Nymphadora’s sake, not for yours,” he said dryly, handing him the can.

“You know, you’re awfully lippy for an elf that I will be able to fire as soon as I sign the appropriate papers from Gringotts,” Draco narrowed his eyes, but then felt an overwhelming sense of guilt at the threat? Would he fire Bobsy now he had the power to do so? He could, it wouldn’t be uncalled for after seven years of sarcasm, but he found the idea of it left an awful taste in his mouth.

“Oh no, please master, let me stay and wash your underpants,” Bobsy broke his internal monologue with his sarcastic plea. Before Bobsy, Draco hadn’t been aware that House Elves understood sarcasm.

Returning the deodorant to Bobsy, Draco hurried to the floo parlour to see Tonk standing with a tall, thin man with grey hair.

“Wotcher Draco,” said Tonks, looking him up and down and then lowering her voice, “Look, I’m not going to say anything even though it was still technically against the rules, but did you get on the whiskey last night? You look awful.”

“Charming as always, Cousin. No, I just slept poorly.”

“Right, too excited to sleep, I bet. Well let’s get on with it. With your permission, Andrews here is going to go to key points in the manor and lift all the wards,” Tonk was brisk and efficient in her manner, as if she wanted this done as soon as possible. Probably keen to get back to her family.

“Does the ministry ever need permission to go wandering around my home?” Draco drawled.

“Yes,” Tonk looked as serious as sin, “From now on they do. So do you grant it?”

There was no way Draco was going to be able to speak the way his throat was closing up, as if he was on the verge of tears. So instead he just nodded at the man, who returned his gesture and strode off.

“Fantastic, next we have your letter,” Tonks reached into her cloak and withdrew an envelope bearing a ministry seal. It looked so similar to the one that she’d given him all those months ago that had announced his match to Granger. Both changing his life in ways he couldn’t begin to comprehend.

“Now, the ministry has a copy, obviously, but I recommend you make a copy, keep that on your person for the while and keep the original in a safe place,” Tonks reached back inside her cloak and pulled out three long wand boxes, laying them out on the table.

Immediately, Draco was taken back to the summer before he started Hogwarts when his parents had taken him to Ollivander's to get his wand. He'd been to Diagon Alley many times before then, often mooning out the front of the Quidditch Supply store with Theo while their fathers were in the bank doing business, Vim trailing along behind them to keep them out of trouble. This visit was different. The family was going with the express purpose of getting things for him and as such it just felt so much more special. When he went into Ollivander's he didn't miss the way the old wandmaker had acted around his father, who had started issuing orders about which wands to try first the moment he walked into the store. Ollivander had seemed subdued and respectful, confirming to Draco that his father was an impressive man. Adult Draco could look back on the memory and see that it was fear. His father had a very specific image in mind for Draco's wand and immediately demanded wands made with Blackthorne and Yew, always with phoenix feather or dragon heartstring cores but none had seemed to suit Draco. They'd been inside that shop for an age, everyone growing more and more frustrated, none more so than Lucius, as Draco gradually destroyed the shop with every wand he picked. Eventually, his father's temper threatened to overtake everything and he had to step outside, his mother following close behind to calm him. In the brief moment of quiet inside the store, Ollivander snatched a box from the shelf and pushed it towards Draco, the wandmaker meeting his eyes and giving him a look that had confused child Draco but adult Draco could recognise signs of curiosity and hope. The moment his fingers touched it, he knew. This was the one for him. Hawthorn and unicorn hair, 10 inches, slightly flexible. His father had been appalled; no self respecting follower of the Dark Lord had ever held a wand with a unicorn hair core. He'd looked at Draco as if he was a disappointment before he'd even had a chance to try. However, Draco was nothing but fond of his wand. It had always served him well, and when it came time to perform acts he'd rather forget but needed to do, the wand conformed to his will, despite Lucius's hesitations. Not that it mattered, the way it all ended up and now that wand was lost to the ether much like the eleven year old Draco who was so certain he wanted to be just like his father.

"Right, usually the Ministry will just send one wand, but I did some digging around the back room and have found you a couple to choose from. See which feels right," Tonks spoke and brought Malfoy back to the present.

She pushed the first of the boxes to him and Draco opened it with shaking hands. He'd held a wand during his wedding but he hadn't been able to concentrate on the feeling, a certain curly-haired witch had 110% of his attention. Now, there was nothing else in the world but the wands. The moment his hand wrapped around the handle it felt amazing and wrong at the same time. Amazing, as his magic roared to life, finally able to be channeled somewhere. Wrong because this was absolutely not the wand for him, and Tonks had to duck sideways to avoid a shower of angry red sparks that shot towards her.

"Right, not that one," she said, pushing the next box forward.

It was only marginally better; at least this time no sparks tried to burn his cousin, but the lovely tingling that came when he touched his own wand was absent. Unfortunately, the third wand was worse than the first, and the ray of angry orange light that shot from the tip of it, broke a window.

"Well, at least you can fix it now," Tonk shrugged and pushed the second wand back to him. He took it from the box, trying to focus on the way his magic seemed to shimmer at the excitement of being accessed and not at the wrongness of the wand in his hand. With an outstretched arm, he aimed it at the broken window.

"*Reparo*," he uttered the incantation with a croaky voice and the window set about repairing itself.

"See, good as new!" Tonk cheerfully put the other wands back while Draco walked over to the newly repaired window. It was fixed, that was true, but there were silver lines where the breaks had been.

"Not quite," he murmured, stroking the mended glass gently. Andrews came back to the room and Malfoy marvelled at the fact that the wards that had kept him confined to the manor for some long were removed so quickly by one unimpressive looking man.

"Well, that's it. It's all a little anticlimactic really, the end of it. Not with a bang, but a whimper and all that," Tonk shuffled her feet, "Make sure you go to Gringotts when they open tomorrow and get those papers signed. And then, well, don't be a stranger, yeah? Mum really would like to meet you."

Draco nodded at her, unsure what to say. For all his years of etiquette lessons, he'd never been taught how to manage this exact scenario.

"Thank you," he croaked out, it was so grossly insufficient everything she had done for him, but it was all he had for now.

"Say nothing about it," Tonks replied and stuck out her hand for him to shake. He took it, bemused at the formal gesture between family that weren't quite family. Without another word, she left the room with Andrews, leaving Draco alone with no clear instructions as to what to do next.

Hermione found him in the floo parlour hours later; just standing with a wand in his hand, in front of a floo that he could now use to get anywhere he desired to go, and yet, he couldn't get his feet to move. He'd been unable to move since Tonk left. Was just standing where she'd left him, staring at the window he'd failed to repair completely, feeling the ill fitting wand in his hand.

"Hello," she said, coming into the room but not walking much past the door. Just standing, giving him space. "Tonk sent an owl saying the floo had been reconnected?"

"Yes," Draco forced out not turning to look at her, instead, examining how the silver fault lines in the window marred the view.

"Are you using it?" she asked, still not coming closer.

Draco turned to look at her then, noting she was bundled up in her purple puffer coat and grey knit cap. That made sense, her sentence, albeit much shorter than his, had also come to an end today. She was also free; of everything except him. It was rather cruel, looking at it from her point of view. Made him question whether her side of the war led by Dumbledore that had espoused love and tolerance was any kinder than his. If this is what they had left her with.

"No, I don't think so," he said, "go right ahead."

Hermione smiled at him, small and tight, but her golden flecked eyes found him and seemed to read him the way she did one of her beloved books.

"I was going to go and check on my house in Hampstead Heath, maybe take a walk around my old neighbourhood. I haven't been since I moved in here."

Draco nodded and Hermione walked past him to stand in front of the floo, so close that he could smell her perfume as she passed. He greedily sucked it in, hoping the pleasant smell would be enough to unstick his feet. Maybe he didn't need to use the floo today. He would just leave the manor through the front gates, take a walk around the village nearby. A small first step, one that didn't require him to walk into that floo and call out a location, when for seven years his entire world had been contained by the manor walls.

"You could come with me? If you want?" Hermione asked, so quietly Draco wasn't sure he'd heard her correctly but her burning red cheeks confirmed that he did.

"I mean, I am sure you have lots of other places you'd like to go. But if you'd like somewhere quiet to go first, or those other places aren't open today...it's nothing special and I am sure it will be dusty, but it's quiet."

Draco had to wonder if his magic had reached out to her, letting her know of his anxiety the same way he'd been able to sense her pain the night before and that was the reason she offered. Whatever the reason, when she stepped into the fireplace and held out her hand to him, his feet finally allowed him to move, taking her hand and entwining their fingers as she called out the address, taking him somewhere new.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all,

He's done it! He's free. And as we begin this new phase I am just going to ask you to trust me. There is a plan.

Also, you might have picked up a little mention to the title in this Chapter (Tonks references it). I don't think I've ever shared that the title of this fic "Not With a Bang..." comes from the TS Elliot poem "The Hollow Men". The poem was written in response to World War One and I think is such a good representation of how many of the characters must have felt after the wizarding war. This section in particular reminded me

of Draco and the other Slytherin children.

Remember us-if at all-not as lost

Violent souls, but only

As the hollow men

The stuffed men.

Anyway, thank you for indulging me and if you like poetry I encourage you to give it a read.

Anyway, I hope you like this chapter. Thank you for every one for left a kudos or a comment, but particularly the comments. They are so motivating and I love reading your thoughts. It seriously makes my day whenever I get a notification.

Gringotts, Ollivanders and Snakes

Chapter Notes

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

The trip with Granger had been what she promised, quiet. Neither of them had said much as they walked around Granger's slightly dusty house; though the static photos of a young Granger dotted all over the walls were an excellent way to distract himself from the fact he was away from the manor. She'd looked like a happy child, with happy parents. Very few of the photographs were posed portraits but instead, moments of mirth caught in time. There were also many photos of Granger with awards, a couple with her trombone in what he assumed was an orchestra uniform, and one of her in some sort of sports get up. It was hard to imagine Granger playing sport; she'd always loathed Quidditch. When Granger went to the second story of the townhouse that Draco knew had once housed the entire Granger family and not just from the pictures on the wall, he chose to stay in the sitting room, examining the books the Grangers had collected. She hadn't been gone long, and when she'd come back down, her eyes a little redder than when she'd first arrived, he'd offered her his arm while they walked around the neighbourhood in silence.

The trip with Granger had been enough to give him the confidence he needed to venture further. When he rose the next morning, he rose with a plan. He'd showered, dressed in the suit and robes his father had favoured for business out of the manor, before flooing to Diagon Alley. It was time to go to Gringotts and officially sign on to his life.

The goblins must have been expecting his visit; he'd been intercepted the moment he'd walked through the door of the bank and ushered to a small office with a wizened goblin sitting behind polished oak desk the size of a billiards table.

"You have your letter, Mr Malfoy?" he'd croaked, holding out his hand and Draco handed it over.

"Sign here please," the goblin pushed three separate pieces of parchment towards him and as Draco signed each one, his quill marks flamed green, some goblin magic burning his mark into records.

"You are now in control of the Lestrange, Malfoy and Black vaults, although one, Mrs Narcissa Malfoy has access to the funds in all but the first," the goblin said without looking up at him, "Do you wish for her to maintain access?"

Draco felt sick at the power he'd acquired with the stroke of a quill. He could make his mother destitute and she still wasn't allowed to even speak to him.

"Of course," he shifted uneasily in his chair and then remembered the silent vow he'd made to himself for Tonks and Teddy; his power could be used for something good as much as something terrible, "Can I move a portion of the Black vaults into a new account?"

“Only the wealth in galleons, not any of the artefacts, but yes, it is possible. Is this a separate account for your wife?”

“No, for Ms Nymphadora Tonks. I would like half separated out for her,” he said.

He could remove half and his mother would still have more than enough to live on for the rest of her days. He felt good about it, like a debt was finally settled. The goblin across from him didn’t say anything for a minute, just stared at him across the polished wooden surface, large eyes shining with questions.

“Fine,” he said finally, and without taking his eyes off Draco, he prepared another document for him to sign. The same flash of green light as he signed and the goblin informed him that a new account had been created and the transfer was underway.

“Do you wish to notify Ms Tonks of her newfound fortune or shall we?” the goblin inquired.

Draco smiled, imagining Tonks’ face when the owl arrived informing her she was no longer decidedly middle class and trying to figure out a way he could deliver the news in person.

“I will,” he said.

“Very well, sir. Will we be adding your wife to your accounts today or will that be all for now?”

“She’s not added already? Add her immediately,” Draco felt a kernel of shame in his gut. Malfoys and other pureblood families expressed their views with their money. Should anyone find out that Hermione Granger had been cut off from the family funds for the first 4 months of their marriage, they would make assumptions. Assumptions about his feelings on her blood status. Assumptions he knew she herself had already made. The goblin cleared his throat and pulled Draco from his spiralling thoughts.

“It is done sir, but can we ask a small favour?” the goblin looked unsure for the first time in this interaction.

“Perhaps,” Draco growled, feeling a protective urge pulse from his gut.

“If your wife is required to do business at the bank, especially in regards to the vaults you share, could you accompany her? She is not a witch that we like to have unsupervised on the premises.”

Draco furrowed his brow and wondered what the hell Granger could have done to piss off the Goblins so much. It would make more sense if they wanted him to be accompanied by someone, not his war hero wife. Then he had a pleasant realisation, given the current state of their relationship, he might actually be able to ask her. A conversation... Tonks and Bobsy could eat their words. He would gloat over the best biscuit in the manor. The bemused curiosity was for her alone though, everyone else would need to afford her the respect she deserved as Lady Malfoy.

"If my wife wishes to access the vaults, you will assist her regardless of who is with her," Draco drew on every memory of his father as he issued the command, trying to land the perfect order.

"Yes sir," the goblin sniffed but did not cower from Draco's gaze the way others had from his father's.

With a few more signatures and a quick trip to the Malfoy vault to fill his money bag, Malfoy was back in the winter's sun out the front of the bank, a fully fledged member of wizarding society again. He cast a quick tempus charm, relieved to see it was not yet ten and decided to walk to Ollivanders to replace his ministry issue wand. It was working but still not comfortable and the memory of a wand that worked with him instead of in spite of him was too attractive to resist. There were a few people strolling down the street as he walked and he tried not to dwell on those that were openly staring. He supposed it was to be expected, even if it made his skin and chest feel tight.

The door to Ollivanders was a welcome escape to the scrutiny and as he pushed it open the bell jingled to announce his arrival before he stood at the counter as he waited for the eponymous shop owner to appear.

"One moment," came the wandmaker's familiar voice and he appeared from behind a shelf holding a stack of wand boxes. When their eyes met the boxes clattered to the floor.

"Mr Ollivander, sir, I was hoping to purchase a new wand," Draco said, suddenly incredibly self-conscious. This felt nothing like the visit he'd made when he was 11.

The wandmaker said nothing, just froze half crouched to the floor, hands shaking.

"Mr Ollivander?" Draco asked, taking a step toward the old man. It was enough to break him from his frozen state.

"No!" he shouted, fumbling in his robes to retrieve his wand, "get out of my shop!"

Draco raised his hand to show there was no threat.

"I'm just here to purchase-"

"-No!" Ollivander cut him off with a louder protest, "I said get out of my shop. You are never to set foot in here again. How you and your mother aren't in Azkaban I will never know but I do not have to have you here. I will not have you here! You forget too quickly that I was there in that house, during the war. I saw it all. I heard it all. You can't hide who you are from me Draco Malfoy. Get out!"

Draco quickly turned and fled the shop, only able to let out a breath when he heard the bell over the door trill, announcing his departure. How his knees didn't hit the gritty cobblestone he didn't know, he could barely feel his own legs. He swallowed and gritted his back teeth. He should have predicted it, if he'd spent more time thinking about exactly how people would react to him. Draco Malfoy; youngest marked Death Eater in history. The memories that would haunt them. Memories that weren't false. He was every bit the monster they

assumed. His cautious truces with Tonk and Hermione had made him foolish, led him to think that maybe the other side of the war were better, were able to rise above, were willing to let things move on and maybe give him a chance once he'd served his time. It was stupid, stupid belief.

He looked down the long street, trying to plan where he could go but every shop front represented a face, and every face remembered a crime. He'd been there when Florean Fortescue had been dragged away from the ice cream parlour. He remembered watching Greyback harassing the owner of the apothecary, smashing all the vials of Wolfsbane in stock. He was pretty sure the owner of Flourish and Blotts had a 10 year old daughter, a squib, and Draco had heard of the plan to derail the emergency international portkey that was to take her and other children like her to safety in mainland Europe. Whether the plan was enacted or not, he'd never discovered. She may have become another casualty of war. Her parents may still wonder if it was his face behind the Death Eater mask that took her from them. The air was closing in on him, the ground was starting to slant under his feet when he spotted a familiar face. Something he could latch onto before he collapsed in on himself in the middle of himself in the street.

"Bletchley!" he called, raising an arm to Miles Bletchley, former Slytherin chaser and from what Blaise and Theo had told him, current member of the Old Boys Quidditch league he was soon to join. It was what he needed, a friendly familiar face. The same way the promise of that face had been enough to have him hold on for seven years. Walking across the street, he held out his hand to his old teammate.

"Bletchley, it's good to see you. From what I've heard, you've been doing a stellar job as Seeker on the Old Boys team. I'm sure it's no surprise but I'm dying to get on a broom again."

Bletchly looked at Draco's hand and sneered.

"What are you on about Malfoy? Has all that time locked in your family's precious manor sent you raving?"

Draco looked up from his own hand, still outstretched, still empty.

"No, Theo and Blaise, they told me about the league you all have going? Old Slytherin members, on a weekend sometimes? I know you're usually the seeker but I was hoping to cycle in, not all the time, just when you're busy or..." he trailed off.

Miles laughed cruelly, reaching out and grabbing the front of Draco's robes, pulling them closer.

"I've never heard of such a league, but I can assure you of one thing, there is no world where I would do anything willingly with you Malfoy. You and your fucking blood traitor bitch of a mother are the only reason that the Dark Lord lost and we're where we are in this shithole of a society," he pushed Draco back with a sneer and Draco had to scramble to keep his feet. Bletchly spat at the ground next to him before he turned and walked away without another look back at Malfoy.

The ground was definitely tipping now and all thoughts of new wands were forgotten. He let his feet carry him back to the public floo in the Leaky Cauldron where he tossed down the powder and called out in a shaking voice ‘Nott Abbey’.

Nott Abbey had been Draco’s second home as a child, before the passing of Lady Nott at which point both Draco and Theo preferred the Manor as a sanctuary from Lord Nott’s tempestuous moods and rage fueled outbursts. Though it had been years since he’d visited the gothic building (acquired by a Nott ancestor in the mid 15th century when he’d been moonlighting as the Archbishop of Canterbury), he was shocked to see its renovation. Gone was the grey and dark wood, replaced by as much pristine white and cream as possible. When the floo delivered him, Draco fell from the fireplace onto his knees, watching the soot he’d bought with him marr the white rug.

“Draco?” Pansy came into the floo parlour holding a crystal vase of white lilies, “Draco! You’re here.”

The lillies were quickly deposited onto a nearby side table and she joined him on the floor to hug him rather than pull him to his feet. Draco tried to relax into the hug, tried to cherish the feeling of one of his oldest friends wrapping her arms around him, but it felt cold, hard. From somewhere else in the Abbey, Theo rushed in and joined the pair on the floor, pulling Draco in with his own hug before pulling him up to his feet.

“Draco! I’m not going to lie, I was slightly offended that you didn’t come to see us the first day you were out. Given we are your best friends and all,” Theo pulled out his wand and banished the soot from Draco’s clothing. A surprisingly intimate gesture that had Draco flinching.

He stood back and took in two of his oldest friends. Pansy had her black hair styled in its sharp bob, a black silk dress with long sleeves and an asymmetric hem over shiny black stockings made her appear like a shadow against all the white of the room. Theo was dressed in a riot of colour, emerald green pants, a mustard yellow jumper over what appeared to be a peach coloured button up. He rocked up on the balls of his feet, so much energy and excitement in him that it was impossible to stand still. He searched his friend’s face and the energy dimmed when he took in Draco’s state.

“Dray... you don’t look so good,” Theo followed up when it became apparent that Draco wasn’t going to say anything.

Pansy darted into action, silently summoning a chair and shoving Draco into it. She then produced a glass with a measure of firewhiskey and pushed it into his hand. At the first sip, Draco spluttered like a teen tasting liquor for the first time, so unfamiliar was the taste on his tongue. The burn was quickly replaced by a warmth that slid down his chest into his belly and he felt the vice around him relax a little.

“Diagon Alley,” he choked out, trying to offer some explanation as to his current state in their floo parlour.

"Oh, I see," Theo replied and the dimming in his eyes told Draco everything he needed to know, "Parks, we might want to get Blaise for this conversation."

Pansy nodded and apparated silently away, returning only moments later with Blaise by her side. The tall man walked over to the bar cart and poured himself a double of whiskey.

"Depending on how this conversation goes, I am going to be returning to the world's biggest 'I told you so' from my wife," Blaise took a large sip of his whiskey before summoning his own chair to sit next to Draco.

"Geez Blaise, you've been here for only 27 seconds and have already found a way to bring up your wife; is the constant talking about her some sort of weird foreplay you two engage in?" Theo snarked, accepting his own glass of whiskey from Pansy, who'd bought over one for him as well as her own.

Blaise leaned across and smacked Theo up the back of the head, "Mind the way you speak about my wife," he said, the low timbre of his voice holding a hint of seriousness as if to remind Theo of a line that existed even if they were friends, "and trust that any foreplay we engage in anything but weird."

The teasing sparkle returned to his eyes with the last part of his sentence and Draco felt the vice around him loosen again as he watched his friends. Minus the mention of the wife, they could have been back in school. The dynamic and banter was something familiar to him.

"So, Draco, you went to Diagon Alley?" Pansy prodded gently and Draco took another sip of whiskey to steady himself.

"Yes, I had to go to Gringotts, sign some papers. It was fine," Draco began, rolling the glass around, watching the amber liquid within move.

"I bet it was fine. Are you richer than God now?" Theo cut in and this time it was Pansy who smacked him on the upside of the head.

"Then I went to Ollivanders. I need a new wand, the ministry gave me this one but it's not quite..." he pulled it out of his pocket as if his friends would be able to see the wrongness of it.

"Ah yes, Ollivanders," Blaise said, "I was only able to go back in their the first time since the war because I went with -"

"-my wife. Yes we know. Morgana's tit Blaise, I swear you sit there waiting for the opportunity to bring her up," Theo drank again.

"In this case, it's very relevant, you dick, she was locked in the manor with him, or don't you remember?" Blaise gave Theo the finger for emphasis before turning to Draco saying more seriously, "Look, Ollivander is carrying his war scars more visible than most. He's become quite selective about who he'll work with, what wand woods he'll use. Any trace of a link between you and the Dark Lord or the Malfoys and he'll have nothing to do with you."

Draco took another long pull of his glass, remembering the small wizard, remembering the daily torture he'd been subjected to at the end of a wand all because there was something the Dark Lord had wanted from him.

"I couldn't—" he started but couldn't finish the sentence, "I mean, I never wanted to.. And it was—"

Blaise cut him off, raising one hand.

"Look, we know mate, there was nothing you could do, that it was hell in your house for you during the war. You don't need to convince us or justify what you did or didn't do. We are on your side. But for the people in your dungeon," Blaise shook his head and Draco wondered if he was thinking of Luna and what she could have told him. It took Blaise a moment to gather his thoughts and continue, "It was a different kind of hell and for them, you were one of their demons at the gate. They'll have to be a little space for that mate, now that you're out here. For some people, there will never be enough time passed to let go of the war."

"But Luna," Draco knew what Blaise was saying was true. He'd felt like a bloody demon at the time but he'd been an unwilling one, and that had seemed to be enough that others, Tonks, Hermione, Luna hadn't cowered at him the way Ollivander had. Luna had sat across from him and smiled kindly.

"Luna is special, Dray," Blaise's eyes sparkled at the mention of her, "Her entire world is in shades of grey. But most people, they work in black and white, scary or safe."

Draco took a deep breath and nodded. It made sense, he'd been foolish to think it was going to be any other way.

"Then I saw Bletchley," he continued, knowing deep down the second interaction had shaken him almost more than the first. At that, all his friends visibly paled and couldn't meet his eyes. They'd known exactly what had happened when he saw Bletchley. Draco just waited for one of them to start speaking. Praying that they wouldn't make him reveal and relive the entire awful moment.

"You have to understand what you looked like that first year under house arrest," Pansy started, both of the boys were still looking at their shoes, "You were a fucking mess, dark circles under your eyes, not even trying to talk to us, thin and wearing robes that were rapidly becoming too short for you. I mean you didn't put on shoes for most of our visits or comb your hair for fuck's sake. We were sure we'd get a notification one month that there was no visit scheduled because there was no one left to visit. We didn't know how to help you out of it, we barely saw you, couldn't touch you, couldn't bring you anything, couldn't even write you a damn letter. So we started telling you stories. Stories of things you'd have to look forward to when it was over. You needed a light at the end of the tunnel Dray and it needed to be so fucking bright it could drive away all the damn shadows you have hanging off you."

Draco felt his stomach recoil. None of it had been real. Everything that had brought him any semblence of happiness had been a figment of their imagination. '*Not everything*', an errant voice whispered to him with a corresponding tug on his magic, '*they didn't make up Granger*'. Draco discounted it, and plunged forward.

"So there's no quidditch league, what about the restaurants? The bars?" he asked in a tight voice.

"You'll find Ollivander's isn't the only establishment that has a firm 'No Snakes' policy," Theo said, voice uncharacteristically serious.

Then he realised that all three of his friends were able to be sitting around drinking and talking to him, mid-morning on a work day.

"And your careers? I guess Theo never became a healer, Pansy doesn't have her own design label and Blaise does... well actually Blaise I never quite understood what it is you do."

"No one does," Theo said, finishing the rest of his drink and standing to get another.

"No, Theo never became a healer, and while I don't technically have a design label I do a quiet business for other pureblood witches," Pansy pushed her hair back behind her ear and Draco felt his blood turn to ice. Business only catering to purebloods; surely this divided world wasn't the one he was coming back out to. It was true, he'd still had some questions about blood politics, still trying to decipher what was poisonous bullshit and what was a genuine respect for ancient magic and ways, but he knew that a divided world wasn't the way to go. After living with Granger for four months he felt even more strongly about it.

"Don't tell me you still believe that bullshit Pansy? Any wizard or witch who has magic is deserving of it! Their skill and worthiness is determined by them, not their parents. You should understand that!" he hissed and all three of his friends looked taken back.

"Yes Draco, I do understand that and I do not subscribe to blood politics. However, your impassioned defence is somewhat surprising? Anything you'd like to share with the group. Maybe about your lovely wife? Last we'd heard you'd managed to exist in the same room as her, but hadn't quite progressed to speaking? Has that changed?"

Draco ran his tongue over his clenched teeth.

"That's not what it's about Parks, I'm just trying to understand the world I'm back in. Especially given my friends have been fucking lying about it for seven years," he gritted out.

Pansy didn't say anything for a moment, just narrowed her eyes and raised an eyebrow.

"Circling back to the wife later, there is still pureblood bullshit, it's just got different names now. I am sure your invitation to join the newly created "*Magical Heritage Society*" will be coming shortly. Assuming they have forgiven you for all the things Potter said about you in your defense. You are in the unique position of pissing off both sides in this little schism. Seems like your *wife* isn't the only overachiever in your family," Park paused her monologue to raise her eyebrow and watch his reaction, no doubt to continuous mentions of Hermione, "However, you are, as Theo so tactlessly pointed out, richer than God, so I am sure you'll be forgiven by the Stuffy 28. The only thing they love more than blood purity is money. As for where we stand, none of us have the desire to participate in pureblood nonsense, we've learnt our lesson. But those snobbish pureblood cows are the only people who will hire me, so I do what I must."

“So there’s nothing then, for me out here?” Draco said hopelessly, processing the information. The world that tore him apart with a war was somewhat unchanged except now both sides hated him. The life he imagined for himself was as realistic as a Beedle of the Bard tale.

“You have us Draco,” Blaise said solemnly, “You’ll always have us.”

Chapter End Notes

The outside world! So a couple of you picked up that the Snakes weren’t quite level with Draco but now you know exactly what happened.

Also in writing this chapter I totally went off on a Blaise/Luna tangent and would love to read any fics where these two are the main couple if you have suggestions, otherwise I may have to write something myself. I love Luna but am always amazed that out of all the characters, she is the one who seems to come out of the war unscathed when people write her in fics even though she was kidnapped and kept in a dungeon. So I love the idea that she has been on her own healing journey with Blaise as a help.

I know this is a light Hermione chapter (although I do love that Draco is finally thinking of her as his wife almost exclusively) and there was a lot of plot. We will eventually get back to our two idiots falling in love!

As always thank you so much for the comments. These next couple of chapters are hefty (this one was over 4000 words as opposed to my usually 3000) and they have been quite difficult to write, so every single comment has motivated me to go back to the computer and keep chipping away at it so it gets done! Thank you!!

Robes and Tahiti

Chapter Notes

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

All Draco wanted was some new clothes. Some that fit him and weren't originally his fucking father's. Something about slipping into Lucius's old clothes made his skin crawl; a sensation that had only gotten stronger now he was wearing them out in society. At best, he felt like a little kid playing dress up; at worst, he felt like his inescapable fate was to become his father. Just another Malfoy heir, blonde and loathed. Powerful only when hanging from the coattails of someone else.

It didn't help that he knew that anyone who passed him in the street, looked at him and saw his father. The hatred that would flood their faces, the ways they would hiss insults at him, *death eater, murderer, coward*. A couple had even spat in his general direction. However, he supposed that they didn't have to think he was his father to elicit that type of reaction; he'd done enough terrible things of his own to warrant it.

In service to his mission to clothe himself in something other than memories and disappointment, Draco visited a new robe store or tailor each day. Theo had volunteered to come with him on his shopping trips, claiming he needed a chaperone. They'd exhausted every tailor and robe store in England and at that point they'd started their exploration into Wales and Scotland. Each time it was the same, they'd meet at Nott Abbey in the morning, Pansy would be waiting in the floo parlour, lounging in a black dress with a cup of black coffee and the Daily Prophet. She'd inquire if they were going to continue on their futile mission. Theo would confirm that they were, before he'd steal a sip of her coffee, remind her that milk and sugar existed and then the two men would depart via the floo. At each store, Draco would receive a reaction that was similar to that of Ollivander or Bletchley, depending on the sympathies of the proprietor. On bad days wands were drawn and Draco would be forced to listen to the pain the shop owner had experienced because of Voldemort and the war, as if Draco was personally responsible for it all. A few of the pureblood owned stores would insult his mother and imply he was as integral to bringing down Voldemort as Harry Potter, which caused Theo to dub him '*The Blonde that Lived*' much to Draco's chagrin. Finally, the shop owner told him to put his *blood money* away and never come near them again. Theo would try to take them somewhere to get a drink, only to be faced with a similar reaction before heading back to the Abbey where Pansy would be waiting with glasses of whiskey.

"I don't know why you keep doing this to yourself, Draco," she'd tut, refilling his glass after he downed the first like a shot, "I'm perfectly capable of making you a new wardrobe. My craftsmanship will be ten times any of the little hovels you've been visiting anyway."

But Draco didn't want to give up. He wanted new robes so he could burn the ones he currently wore; their high collars like a noose around his neck that tightened every time he was unsuccessful. And he wanted to be able to go to a store and buy those fucking robes like a normal fucking person. Was it really too much to ask?

Except that wasn't all he asked for. He also wanted to go out with his friends for a drink, a meal. He wanted something to do each day. He'd never given much thought to what he'd do after Hogwarts, working was decidedly middle class and therefore not something he even thought he'd engage in but now free from the manor he could see the attraction. Something to fill the days. Somewhere to go, something productive to do. He'd assumed that his friends, saved from a sentence like his, lived vastly different lives to him. Ones filled with purpose and joy, but their routine was not all that different from his under house arrest. Admittedly they could see each other, but in the same way he'd structured his life with a routine of pointless activity, they filled their time with hobbies that were about as productive as his gardening. Pansy sewed, Blaise acquired and Theo drank. They ate together, at home, slept and did it all over again. Draco suspected part of the reason Theo was indulging him in a tour of all the tailors in the UK, was their trips were something different, something new, away from the humdrum of his life.

The only thing that seemed to be the truth from what they'd told him during their visits was game night. A solitary flicker of joy for them all. All of them but Draco. For Draco, game night brought the problem of Luna. She was, for the most part, quiet, content to sit tucked under Blaise's arm observing, but Draco never felt free in her presence. There was a sick feeling in his gut that wouldn't go away when he looked at her. Her present day face, cheeks flushed with happiness as Blaise slowly stroked her arm, would merge with the memory of her face in the Malfoy Dungeon. Cheeks hollow and grey, hair lank and knotted. It confused him; how those two women could be the same person. How she could sit across from him without hating him, when if Draco thought about it too hard, he hated himself. There was no joy for him when Luna was in the room. Only shame.

It wasn't just Luna. Freedom had him facing many people and places whose pasts blurred with their present and left Draco feeling sick with shame. There was never a reason or a pattern; he'd be out, turn a corner and all of a sudden the cobblestone street with mostly peaceful patrons and colourful shop fronts would morph with the street of the past. One he'd walked down next to his aunt, a shiny silver mask over his face, kicking over anything that got in their way while small faces watched him in terror through darkened windows. It would suddenly be hard to breathe, he'd flinch at the sound of a laugh, convinced it was about to become his Aunt's high pitched cackle, even though he knew she was long dead.

The first few times it had happened he'd vomited in the gutter, with passersby looking at him in disgust, not one stopping to see if he was ok. He'd been able to train himself into just freezing, letting the horror wash over him like a wave, not fighting it until it receded. Then, in the cold aftermath, he experienced a longing he hadn't felt since he was a little boy; he wanted his Mother. He wanted her more than anything because she was meant to the person that kept him safe from all of this. Once he'd believed that nothing would stop his mother from being there for him, but her presence in, away from the clusterfuck of his life in England proved he'd been wrong.

"Why do you stay here?" Draco asked Theo and Pansy one afternoon as they all sat in the library at Nott Abbey, drinking whiskey in silence.

“At Nott Abbey?” Pansy asked, looking up from her spell book on magical embroidery.

“No, in England. Surely it would be nicer elsewhere, France, America, Tahiti?” Draco tried to imagine his friends on the beach in Tahiti. Maybe they’d be able to all go to a beachside bar there. Get a drink without being spat at.

“Well, we’ve been to other places, obviously, for vacation and what-not. But we weren’t going to leave you behind Dray,” Theo answered, swallowing his whiskey.

“Could you do your Healing Mastery somewhere else?” Draco asked, suddenly questioning how much of Theo and Pansy’s outcast status was self imposed.

Theo flicked Pansy a look before he answered and silent conversation occurred between them. It was like his friends had learnt another language while he’d been locked away.

“Yes,” Theo finally answered, “I have been offered a placement for a Healer Apprenticeship in Switzerland, Italy and Argentina.”

“Argentina?” Draco asked, confused.

“It really isn’t important Draco, as I said, we’re not going to leave you behind,” Theo got up to pour himself another drink.

“And if I came with you?” Draco asked, trying to imagine a life where he wouldn’t have to look into the faces of people who reminded him of it all. The war. Who he’d become.

“I’d be interested to hear what the *wife* you still won’t talk about has to say to a proposed move to Switzerland or Argentina,” Pansy joined the conversation.

Ah, his wife. Draco hadn’t faced her in the month since he’d been released. She’d gone back to work and the afternoons of lounging in the library were over; the original plan to “*leave each other alone*” was back in full swing. Now, every morning, she dressed in some staid black robes, gathered a bunch of papers in a battered leather briefcase and stepped into the floo where she called out for Magdalene College, Oxford. Not that he was watching her. He was just aware of her, constantly. The blood magic that tied them made sure of that. He felt her flutter of nerves before she left each day, and felt her exhaustion when she came home. There were little flutters of happiness and affection throughout the day and every so often the crushing sadness he recognised from that night in the library. So, if he just happened to be walking past, so he could drink his fill of her image as she left, well that was just an unexpected side effect of the spell. It was little surprise really that he wanted to see the moment she disappeared in a swirl of green flames because that was when the niggle would begin. The same one he felt when she left on a Sunday while they were both under house arrest. A gentle reminder she was elsewhere, that built and built throughout the day until he was boardline uncomfortable.

“She might want to come along?” Theo asked, sitting back on the arm of Pansy’s chair, interrupting Draco’s thoughts, “If you put enough books in a Swiss chalet surely Granger would be happy enough? She could bring her cat.”

Draco considered that. Would she move to Switzerland? Or Argentina? Or even France? It wasn't so far from London. He thought of her dusty house in Hampstead Heath, empty and still in her absence. Her first day of freedom in months and she'd chosen to go to an empty house with nothing but decades old memories.

Theo interrupted again, apparently not needing Draco to say anything to keep the conversation moving.

"Besides, she can't be all too happy here, otherwise she'd be married off to Weasley by now, gestating the next generations of Weasels, rather than tied to your miserable blonde arse. Any idea what happened there?" Theo prodded some more.

Draco shook his head and chewed the inside of his cheek. He didn't know what had happened. When he saw the announcement that Weasley had married another he assumed the red-headed prat had fumbled the greatest match of his life and that Hermione was heartbroken. But was he living with a heartbroken witch? She resembled nothing of Pansy or the Greengrass sisters when they'd been slighted in their Hogwarts days. She wasn't plotting revenge or sharpening knives; nor was she weeping everywhere. Except for that night. She didn't want to be alone that night but what of the others? He didn't know what she thought or what she wanted besides "*leave each other alone*". It wasn't the worst starting point. Maybe '*leave each other alone*' could morph into just '*leave*'.

Having a new purpose reinvigorated Draco. He finally just agreed to let Pansy make him a new wardrobe and devoted his time to finding the right moment to talk to Granger. It led to him lurking around the manor more, instead of Nott Abbey. Bobsy was not pleased.

"I thought Mister Draco had friends?" he muttered as he worked around Draco, for some reason planning his cleaning of a room for the exact same time as when Draco was in it.

"I do have friends," Draco snapped back, unable to help himself.

"Really? Because would a person with friends spend his time with an old elf dusting? Or would a person with friends spend time with those friends, doing something asinine you wizards seem to enjoy so much, like whizzing around on broomsticks or counting Galleons you've done nothing to earn?"

Draco gritted his teeth and said nothing. It was true he'd done absolutely nothing to earn the Galleons he had at his disposal. Unless you counted surviving a childhood as the Malfoy heir including inherited servitude to a maniac but Draco got the distinct impression that Bobsy did not count it. As for Quidditch, he hadn't ridden a broom yet. Something about the interaction with Bletchley had soured the idea for him. He didn't think he could enjoy the sensation of the wind whipping through his hair, knowing how every witch and wizard in England felt about him. Maybe when he got to Switzerland or France he'd find a league that would accept him and finally be able to enjoy something again.

Cornering Hermione proved harder than he'd expected. She didn't emerge from her room until it was time for her to stride to the floo and when she got home Draco could feel her fatigue through the bond. He didn't want to bring it up when she was tired. He knew from approaching his father, you shouldn't ask for something when someone was tired or stressed or hungry or concentrating on something else. He'd need to pick his moment. Optimise his chance for success.

The moment came on a Saturday; which was really the only day Hermione was at the manor for any stretch of time. Draco went to his greenhouse and clipped a small bouquet of snowdrops and blue and purple irises for Hermione, took them up to her room and knocked on the door.

"Come in," she called and Draco let himself in.

Now that he had seen her former home in Hampstead Heath, he could see even more of the distinct style she'd woven through the room. The soft colours had been complemented by warm textures in both the throws and cushions she'd bought from home. There were some misshapen pottery pieces that Draco knew hadn't come from the manor collection, some small plants on her desk and a basket of wool, with something half knitted sitting on top and of course all the books. Every genre available, both leather bound tomes so large that they required a lecturn to be read comfortably, and slim paperbacks with pastel coloured cartoons on the covers; it was like her childhood sitting room all over again. The only difference was the lack of photographs. While Hermione's home had been littered with them, her room had none.

"Hi Malfoy," she said when she saw him, sitting up a little straighter from her seat behind the desk, putting down the strangest quill that Draco had ever seen.

"I bought you these," he said awkwardly, thrusting the bouquet towards her.

Hermione gave him a puzzled smile but accepted the flowers, conjuring a vase and setting them on her desk.

"Thank you," she said, "you don't need to bring me flowers. That's not what... well, we never agreed to that."

Draco felt himself flush at her words and immediately questioned himself.

"You didn't have to get me a Christmas gift," he countered and Hermione only nodded once in response before chewing on her bottom lip in thought.

"Are you here to claim your prize for winning the bet then? From before Christmas? You were right, not a skerrick of silver and green to be found."

She shifted nervously and Draco started to say that he wasn't but realised it could work for him. She did owe him a favour; at the time of making the bet all he'd wanted was for her to spend more time with him and the price of the wager meant little to him, but the reveal of the outside world had changed all of that. Now, he wanted something desperately. More than

anything he'd wanted in a very long time and with the reminder of the bet he realised he might have what he needed to negotiate for it.

"Sort of," he confessed and gestured to a seat across from her, a non-verbal question asking if he could sit. Again she nodded once and he sunk down into the chair, thinking carefully before he said anything.

"Well," she prompted, and Draco could see her picking at the cuticles of her fingers where they rested in her lap.

"I've been considering my options this past month, now that I am able to leave the manor," Draco swallowed thickly. Should he tell her what life was like for him outside the manor? Should he tell her about the insults and the spitting and the inability to buy a simple set of robes? Surely she already knew. He'd hazard a guess that at one stage she'd have joined with the spitting and insults. From her, the person he'd tormented before the war had even begun, it would probably be warranted.

"I don't think my future is in England," he said finally.

"Oh?" Hermione questioned and her face gave none of her feelings away.

"No, I would like to investigate moving to one of the Malfoy homes on the continent. We have properties in France of course, but also Italy, Switzerland, Germany..." he felt something tight grip in his chest as he spoke and was unsure if it was nerves from the conversation or the bond sensing her apprehension.

"Malfoy, I promised you when we were forced into this farce of a marriage that I would cause as little disruption to your life as possible. You do not have to seek permission from me to move. I appreciate being told, but to adhere to the law, as long as the properties are owned by the family, we don't have to reside in the same one."

Malfoy swallowed again. She didn't understand, of course she didn't. It was ancient blood magic and she was muggleborn; she had no idea what they had dabbled with. He'd hoped, when she confessed she felt something on New Year's that she would understand, but he was to be disappointed once more.

"It's not that simple, I'm afraid. You've felt the tug between us?" he asked and Hermione nodded, rubbing at that spot on her chest, "Do you feel it when you go to work? Or out to visit your friends on a Sunday?"

Her teeth were back worrying her lip again now and again she nodded.

"The blood magic in the marriage rites, it's designed to keep us together, in every sense of the word. If I was to go to France without you for any length of time... we would be in physical pain."

Her face drained of blood, shock apparent on her expression. Then something flickered, something Draco was very familiar with from school times, curiosity.

"But your parents, they were apart many times," she said, slowly rubbing at her chest, "They are apart right now."

"Yes," Draco agreed, "However, only ever at the behest of Voldemort or the Ministry. And neither of those parties seem particularly worried about pain caused."

Hermione said nothing to that, just continued to rub at her chest and process the information.

"And you're sure about this? It doesn't seem very practical. Even for purebloods," Hermione asked again for more confirmation.

"Well we can run a test if you like but I have very distinct memories from my mother from the 5th year summer holidays, when my father was in Azkaban," Draco answered, remembering his mother, unable to get out of bed, mumbling how much it hurt. Draco's joy at his father's escape had had little to do with his father.

"So we will never be able to physically be apart for longer than a day?" she asked finally.

Draco sighed. He wished he could give her more answers. In truth, the Malfoy wedding rites weren't something he'd discuss in depth with his parents. In the same way he longed for his mother after one of his episodes where the past merged with the present, he longed for her now. Someone to answer his questions.

"I don't know," he answered honestly, "It's not something our family talked about very much."

"Right," scoffed Hermione, "tying your child to a stranger by blood doesn't warrant an in-depth conversation about potential side effects and consequences."

"Well, branding your child with a hate symbol and tying them to a madman didn't."

Draco couldn't hold back the words and they settled over the pair, Hermione still rubbing at her chest as if she could wipe the bond away, Draco unable to look her in the eyes. He took a deep breath and tried to remember the point of the conversation.

"I think each husband and wife get a little more freedom once an heir is born," he said shakily.

"Oh I am sure, given the entire point of a wife is to make for a nice broodmare," Hermione spat back and she finally stopped rubbing her chest only to press the heels of her palms against her eyes.

"So what are you here to ask me, Malfoy? Is that the favour you're hoping to claim? Because we agreed to veto rights and if your request is to produce a little blonde half blood heir so you can swan off to France, I have news for you and it's all bad."

"Gods no!" Draco felt sick at the thought, the only thing he had no business being more than a husband was a father, "No, I would like to move to a different country, France, Switzerland, the 'where' isn't important but I can't go without you. Would you consider moving with me? As my favour?"

The end of his sentence came out in a rush and he studied Hermione's face for any clue of what she was going to say. The silence stretched for at least a minute before Hermione took a deep breath and released it with a rush.

"No, Malfoy. I can appreciate that it's difficult and I am curtailing your plans, but I am not in the position to move countries. I would have to veto that request."

"We can find you a position in a different university, if your name doesn't garner you an offer in any university you chose, my gold will," Draco rushed out, trying to keep the hope he'd felt all week alive, "and I really have no preference of country. Germany, Finland, Tahiti, Japan. It can be your choice."

Hermione took another long breath before she spoke.

"It's not just my work Draco. I am not in the position to move," her tone was steady and calm and it made Draco feel even more panicked. She seemed so certain, so set.

"Then help me break the bond. Help me find a way to sever it so I can go without you. That's my favour. You are so smart. The Brightest Witch of our Age. You could break it," Draco was acutely aware of the pleading tone that had crept into his voice.

"Draco, the moment we do that, we defy the law and face all the consequences of doing so," Hermione sounded less measured this time, leaning towards him as if she could soften the blow of what she was saying and Draco felt more reckless.

"You're Hermione Fucking Granger! Since when have you ever stopped doing something you thought was right because of consequences?!" he yelled at her now.

It was like he'd struck her; the hurt and shock on her face. He waited for her to retaliate, maybe draw her wand but again she took those deep breaths and looked up at the ceiling as if she was searching for something. When she looked back at him her expression was blank and steady.

"I am sorry that you are married to me. I am sorry that it is stopping you from doing something you want. I really am trying to be as least disruptive as possible. When I arrived we agreed, we didn't need to interact at all, and I am trying as best I can to honour that agreement."

She may have been about to say move but Draco couldn't stand it. He cut her off.

"Well maybe the agreement isn't working for me anymore," he hissed, waiting for her to respond. Wanting her to lose the calm measured tone, the soft pleading gestures. Fight with me, he wanted to say. Let me fight with someone about this because it's not fair. But all she did was hold her palms up to him in supplication and looked at him with impossibly sad eyes, the gold in them completely extinguished.

"I'm sorry Draco. I really am."

Chapter End Notes

Hello! We're in the thick of it now! For everyone who was hoping that Draco was going to respond in a mature and measured way... my apologies.

Not many notes on this one. Yes, Draco is a mama's boy but we already knew that. And don't we all just want our mums when the whole world is going to shit? Also, there's some flowers again, snowdrops symbolise a friend in need and blue and purple irises symbolise hope, faith and wisdom.

Thank you so much for everyone who commented on the last chapter. Oh my gosh they made my day. I know I haven't replied to everyone yet, but that's because I am have been writing furiously. If i get too far ahead I might do a double chapter drop as I hate having too much waiting for you to read. I am very excited to share the next part! Anyway, I hope you like this chapter!

A Drunken Snake Pit

Chapter Notes

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

“Did you tell her about the books, mate? All the books that you would put in a chalet for her?” Theo slurred, the whiskey in his glass sloshing over the edges as he gestured wildly.

After Hermione had so firmly shut him down, Draco went back to his room and moped for a little and then went to the piano to play away his frustrations. While he now technically had access to Dreamless Sleep, the habits he’d formed under house arrest were so much a part of him it just felt more natural to stick with them. However, on his way to the piano room, he realised he didn’t need to stay moping. He could go to see his friends. He could get drunk. Which is why after a couple of quick floos, Theo, Pansy, Blaise and Draco were lounging around a sitting room in Nott Abbey, absolutely sozzled.

“Yes, I told her about the books,” said Draco before stopping and running the conversation back through his mind, “well, I didn’t. BUT, the books were implied. I did tell her she could pick the place, anywhere in the world. I even offered Japan and you know I hate sushi.”

“Fucking nasty stuff, raw fish and soy sauce,” Theo shook his head looking disgusted.

“So tell me again, what did she say exactly?” Pansy asked. Unlike the boys, she was not struggling to remain upright, sitting primly in a chair but Draco knew her better than to assume that meant she was sober. Pansy just had had etiquette classes drilled so deep into her that she’d sit primly and look elegantly disinterested on her deathbed; even if it was gruesome and painful.

“She said ‘I’m sorry Draco, I really am’” Draco raised his voice to mimic Hermione’s. He was pissed that she used his first name. The first time she’d said it at Christmas it had felt like a gift, part of a bridge that was building between them. This time it felt like a consolation, a gesture of pity.

“No, before that,” Pansy snapped.

“I believe it was ‘I’m not in a position to move countries right now’ unless you are referring to the part when she refused to help me break the bond because of the ‘consequences’” Draco made his voice particularly high and squeaky whenever he was quoting Hermione. He knew it was petty but god it felt good to mock her again. Just a little. Made him feel like he was back on familiar ground. That he wasn’t a child in need of her pity.

“I can’t believe you fuckers were planning to move countries and didn’t bother to consult me,” Blaise grumbled from behind his own glass of whiskey, breaking the repartee between Draco and Pansy for a moment.

“Oh fuck off, Mr. ‘I’m Actually an Italian Count’ or some shit. You and Luna spend half your time at your Italian estate chasing after narwaffles or pigsniffles or whatever imaginary

creature Lovegood is after as it is,” Theo rolled his eyes at Blaise.

“Still, it would have been nice to have been consulted. Especially if Granger was going to make us all move to Japan and eat sushi. Which is not disgusting, it’s delicious, you pair of uncultured heathens.”

“Well, Granger isn’t letting us move anywhere because Draco didn’t tell her about the books,” Theo grumbled.

Pansy had not taken her eyes off Draco throughout this exchange, but had narrowed them considerably, “No, what did Granger say before that? Back after you got married? In August.”

Draco took a deep breath. When he’d first arrived he’d word vomited over his friends as they shared the first few glasses of whiskey. He’d ranted about how his wife wanted nothing to do with him, but also wouldn’t lift a finger to break the marriage bond. Although it was deeply private, he’d even told them about the tug between their magic, as if they were tethered to each other and at times he could feel her mood through the tether. They’d sat silently, letting him talk and drink before sharing their opinions on the absolutely fucked up tradition of combining marriage and blood magic. They didn’t need to convince him.

Draco took a deep breath, ready to divulge the words that when first spoken had caused him to explode a teapot like an untrained, emotional child.

“She pointed out that neither of us wanted to be married but we had to make the most of the situation. That we could live relatively free lives just ignoring each other. Ensuring we caused each other the least amount of disruption possible.”

Pansy mulled on that for a minute, lifting her empty glass up in the air to indicate she wanted another drink; Theo rolled off the couch to go and fetch it for her.

“And that’s what you’ve done. Ignored each other? Her life has gone on relatively undisrupted” she asked.

A barrage of images flashed through Draco’s mind. Granger slipping on the library ladder and his hand against her soft skin; clutching his arm as the shadows of his ancestors caressed her; sitting next to him on the window seat, the piano stool; her face lit by the glowing orbs in the greenhouse; her face streaked with tears on New Years Eve; their fingers entwined as they disappeared through the floo on New Year’s Day.

“Yes,” he finally agreed, “for the most part her life has remained unchanged. Aside from the ministry bullshit while I was on house arrest.”

“Well,” Pansy purred and a familiar, yet dangerous gleam entered her eye, “that’s the problem right there. Why would she break the bond and risk the consequences? Being married to you isn’t difficult for her at all. The risk and reward benefit is off.”

Theo bought the newly filled glass over for Pansy and sunk down to the floor at her feet.

“What are you getting at Parks?” he asked, slurring his words.

“I’m saying that in order to motivate dear Granger, Draco might have to make the prospect of being married to him a little less attractive. Why would she fight against something that is causing her little to no inconvenience. Draco needs to become a little more inconvenient.”

Theo put his glass down and started a slow clap, “All hail Queen Parks, the Queen of Finding a Loophole.”

Draco just stared at his friends, puzzled.

“I’m sorry, you’ve lost me. I don’t understand what you’re proposing,” he said, struggling with all the syllables of the last word so it came out more like proproplosing.

“I hope that you have lost me, Parks, because if you are suggesting what I think you are, I’m going to have to leave,” said Blaise.

“Oooo Blaise, worried what the wife will think? Will you get in trouble...” Theo giggled and Blaise shot him the finger.

“If Pansy is saying what I think she is, then I know what my wife will think and you’d have to be a total arsehole to think it was a good idea.”

“Oh why? It’s Hermione Granger, she’s been in far worse binds and found a solution. A little bit of *marital inconvenience* won’t break her. She’ll have it fixed like that,” Theo snapped his finger and held them above his head gleefully.

“Nott, you know it’s not as simple as that mate-”

Draco couldn’t stand listening to them without knowing what they were talking about for a moment longer. It was like they were all speaking that secret language they’d learnt. That or he was far less able to handle his liquor than his friends.

“For the love of Salazar, will someone please explain to me what you are talking about? In simple terms,” he cut in, voice slightly louder than it needed to be.

Blaise and Theo immediately stopped their bickering and turned to Pansy, who was still smiling in that serene detached way that should be a warning to everyone around.

“I am saying if you want Granger to fight harder to dissolve your marriage, make your marriage more unpleasant for her. Make the risk of staying married to you greater than the risk of seeking a dissolution,” Pansy leaned back in her chair and waited for Draco to process that.

He swallowed uncomfortably, looking between his friends faces, still trying to understand exactly what that meant.

“You want me to put her at risk? As in physical harm?” he asked, feeling sick at the thought.

"Oh gods no, for one if you did that you'd end up locked up again, this time in Azkaban, so it kind of defeats the purpose," scoffed Pansy.

"Good to know there is a line to your machinations Parks," Blaise muttered, his jaw tense.

"Just be the worst husband you can think of. I mean let's face it, you and Granger are a match made in hell to start with, just act in a way that reminds her of that."

"Be a bad husband?" Draco asked slowly.

"Yes," said Parks, "and make a point of drawing attention to all the reasons you pair are an awful match. Offer her some motivation. Then I am sure that she'll put that big bushy brain to use, along with that Golden Girl reputation and overthrow the law, and we will all be free to move to Switzerland, Theo can do his Healer mastery, I might be able to open a design house, Draco can walk down the street without being spat on."

Draco stayed silent, processing that information. The image of him and his friends, actually free, with their new lives in Switzerland was so alluring. He yearned for it. The Swiss Alps would look magnificent from the back of a broom.

"What would I have to do?" he asked, drinking more deeply from his cup.

Pansy's grin grew broader.

"Well, I mean there are the classic bad husband moves, I am sure between the four of us we've seen enough awful treatment of women at the hands of their husbands to come up with a few ideas."

"I can't believe you are actually considering this..." Blaise muttered, running a hand through his hair, before turning to look Draco in the eyes, "Dray, you *can't* be actually considering this. Think about it. You're going to set out to hurt her. You'll disappoint her. You may make her cry."

The memory of Granger's tear streaked face filled his mind. That night all he had wanted to do was reach out and soothe that hurt. Hell, he'd even been willing to kiss her to do it (and that must have been the reason he had the urge to do so; it was the only explanation that made sense). Now he was going to be the cause of that hurt, if the plan worked the way it was meant to. And he was going to feel flashes of what she felt as he did so. Could he do it?

He looked across at his friends; Blaise a storm cloud glaring in his direction, Pansy and Theo looking hopeful. They'd waited for 7 years. They'd lived frozen in a world that hated them for 7 years, all for him. He looked at his cuffs, noting with disgust that he was still wearing his father's robes. He couldn't even go to a shop and buy new robes. How could Granger expect him to stay here? He'd done the reasonable thing. He'd asked her nicely, even offered several solutions and she'd turned all of them down without consideration for him. Could he deliberately hurt her? Wasn't she already hurting him?

"What should I do specifically," Draco asked slowly and Pansy let out a little clap in delight.

Blaise groaned and stood, shaking his head at them all.

"I can't believe you're actually doing this," he said, setting his glass down and striding to the floo, "This is a bad idea, Dray. I know things seem pretty bleak right now, but maybe if you try talking more to her or something... I can't stay and listen to this. I'm going home."

He grabbed a handful of floo powder and got ready to depart, but paused before he could get into the fireplace.

"When this all blows up in your face Dray, I will just be a floo away. Come and talk to me, yeah?"

He waited for Draco to answer or acknowledge him, but Draco just stared at his shoes, his father's shoes, unable to meet Blaise's gaze. With a whoosh of the floo, he was gone.

"Don't worry about him, he's got his ticket back into society in the form of a little wifey that he's disgustingly besotted with," Theo drawled, "he's forgotten what it's like out here on the fringes. Did you know he was able to go into the Leaky for a drink the other day? Alone! Without Luna? Maybe if I'd let the ministry pair with me some simpering do-gooder I'd be allowed to do my apprenticeship at St Mungos. But all I have is you Parks."

Pansy smacked Theo on the back of the head, "Trust me Theodore, no simpering do-gooder would put up with you. Be grateful I do."

"I am everyday, Darling," Theo grinned and planted a loud kiss on Pansy's hand, one that she made a show of wiping off.

"He's right though Dray, don't worry about Blaise. He now has a Ravenclaw shoulder angel steering him away from certain things, but he won't begrudge you once this works. He'll just refuse to watch it take place. And honestly, it's Hermione Granger, nothing you will be doing should be a surprise to her, it will just be a reminder."

Draco rubbed his hands over his face, taking a few fortifying breaths. It would be easier to discount Blaise's hesitations if he didn't have his own.

"Ok, then how do I go about this? Specifically?"

Chapter End Notes

Now, just remember that we all agreed that we were going to trust me? Right?

I know this is posting super close to the last chapter, but it was there, it was ready to go and honestly, if I didn't publish it I was going to keep tinkering with it instead of finishing Chapter 23 which is a big one...

As always, thank you so much for all of your amazing comments, I promised I read every single one, multiple times. I love that you all love and care about my Draco and Hermione (and Bobsy because he is our king) as much as I do!

Inconvenience and Disruption

Chapter Notes

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

Pansy had been very clear on the first step. Draco needed to talk to Granger and tell her their original agreement was not working. Renegotiate the terms.

“Don’t let her hide from you anymore,” she’d said, “She needs to face the reality of being Lady Malfoy, your wife in more than just name.”

Draco didn’t know how to point out that if he was actually going to treat her like a Malfoy wife, he’d worship the ground she walked on, guard her like a dragon with his horde. Malfoy wives traditionally were treated like rare jewels, rarely let out of their husband’s grasp. Malfoy men would never aim to drive their wives away, although now he had experienced the blood binding, Draco had to wonder if that was magically induced madness more than genuine desire.

He had to trust Pansy though. If there was a person alive who was shrewd enough and tactical enough to get them all what they wanted, it was her. Never mind that her loyalty to him for their entire lives was good enough reason to try.

His suggestion was to wait until the following Saturday to renegotiate the terms. Pansy had vetoed that immediately. It needed to happen soon, the sooner the better. Sunday, he’d been allowed to stay at the Abbey, recover from a hangover painful enough to rival the Cruciatus curse and try to reason with the sick feeling in his gut about what he was about to do, but that was his only respite. On Monday, he’d been sent home with a mission and, therefore, gone to her rooms the moment she’d gotten home. He knocked once at her door before flinging it open (*‘remind her she’s living in your house, Draco, that you are the master of it’*). Hermione gasped, grabbing at the pale blue blouse that was strewn over the back of an armchair and clutching it to her chest.

“Malfoy!” she shrieked, “What are you doing?”

Draco immediately turned his back to her, cheeks burning as he faced the door. She was in the process of changing. He hadn’t considered that. Now that he’d seen blush coloured lace against her pale skin, he knew he’d never forget it either. *Salazar Slytherin*. He didn’t know if he could form words, which was not ideal for what he’d come here to do.

“I wasn’t aware you were dressing,” he finally choked out.

“Yes, that’s why people generally wait after they knock. It’s impossible to know without an answer,” Hermione’s tone was strained and Draco could hear the rustle of fabric behind him.

“Ok, you can turn around. What do you want, Malfoy?”

Draco turned and took in her flame red cheeks, unsure whether it was embarrassment or anger that caused the colour. He himself was struggling to put together his thoughts, having seen her in so few clothes just a moment before and didn't know how he was going to say what he needed to say. Then he Thought of Theo, waiting for seven years to do his healer's apprenticeship because he refused to abandon Draco, and he knew he would have to.

"I need to talk to you about our arrangement," he said, not quite able to meet her eyes.

"Ok, talk," she huffed, and Draco got the distinct sense that it was anger that flushed her face.

It would have been easier for him to say what he needed to say if he let it tumble out now, but Pansy's voice echoed in his head, '*the aim is to make her uncomfortable, so don't bring things up in her rooms, take her to your study... or better yet, your rooms.*' Draco didn't think he'd be able to handle the discomfort of having her in his rooms, especially not after seeing... so much of her.

"You can join me in my study after dinner. We will talk there," he said, looking at a point over her shoulder, hoping she didn't notice the way his fingers drummed nervously against his thigh as he spoke. Hermione paused, as if waiting for him to say more, and when he didn't, she pulled her arms around her middle.

"Okay," she said simply, "I tend to eat early; would 7 be too early for you to meet?"

He wanted to invite her to eat with him. Maybe it would be better to have this conversation over a meal, nice even, but he stopped himself before the daydream could get too far. Nice wasn't the point of this after all.

"That will be... suitable," he tried to infuse his voice with the calm control he'd heard exercised by so many of the men in his life, his father, Severus Snape, Theodore Nott Senior, but it didn't come out. To his own ears, he sounded like a nervous boy. As he walked away, wiping his sweaty palms on his trousers, he felt like one.

It was a dreadful idea, waiting to have the conversation, making her come to him in the study. He'd rushed dinner, so concerned that he would miss her despite the clock with perfect time on the dining room mantel. In his rush, he'd spilled soup on his shirt, and hadn't remembered he was now capable of a simple *Scourgify* until he was short of breath, buttoning up a new shirt in his room. Then ran back to the study, only to find he was still too early, and he had to sit, waiting for her, behind his desk with nothing to do except think. In an effort to keep his hands busy, he pulled out a piece of parchment and, out of habit, began to write a letter to the wife that had occupied all his waking thoughts that day.

Dear Granger,

I just want you to know I am sorry. For what I am about to do. What I'm about to put us through. And I realise that I'm doubly the arsehole for apologising in advance for this particular sin while Ignoring all the others. Not that you're ever going to read this, so I haven't actually apologised for anything. Not really.

If there was another way, I would do it. It seems my life is destined to be me wishing there was another way, another choice, but it appears fate doesn't want to give me any of those. Walking around Hampstead Heath with you was the closest I've ever gotten to seeing another way. I suppose the only consolation in what is about to happen is after, you will be free of me-

“Malfoy?”

A light knock sounded at the door and Draco rushed to shove his letter away into his drawer.

“Granger, come in,” he said, feeling his cheeks heat at being caught writing to her; not that she could have seen that from where she stood.

The drag of the chair over the rug was the only noise as she came to sit across from him. She said nothing, just waited for him to speak, which made him more nervous. Since when did Granger sit silently, waiting?

“I said the last time we spoke that our arrangement wasn’t working for me,” he began, trying to remember the script that he’d formulated with Pansy and Theo. Admittedly, the whiskey he’d had that night was making it difficult to remember. Granger said nothing, just waited for him to continue.

“The concept of a wife that ignores me, doesn’t work for me or the Malfoy name,” he continued, again trying to find the tone of cold disinterest he’d heard so often from his father and again, he felt like he missed it.

Pansy had been very clear in phase one. He needed to remind her that she’d married a Malfoy, he needed to remind her about the Malfoy family and everything that it had represented.

“It should make her skin crawl, being associated with the Malfoy name after everything that has gone down between her and your family. Maybe a reminder will be enough to spur her into action.”

Draco couldn’t help agreeing with Pansy; she should recoil at the name, at him, at his family, at this house. Should want nothing to do with any of it. The fact that he knew how good it felt that she didn’t recoil made this all the more difficult.

“Oh, I didn’t think you were worried about the Malfoy name?” Hermione said cautiously, her eyes examining his clean desktop rather than looking at him.

“I am the heir to the Malfoy name,” he answered, knowing it was not an actual answer to the question but hoping it would be enough to stop her from prying further.

He didn’t want to lie to her and in truth he didn’t know how he felt about the Malfoy name. Could so many decades of tradition and ritual and connection be wiped out by the actions of one weak man? Could he turn his back on something that had been so essential to his identity? How much of Malfoy Family Tradition was caught up in decisive politics? He thought of the shadows of his ancestors and didn’t know.

"So what do you need from me? I must confess, I can't imagine the Malfoy name would want anything I have to offer, muggleborn and all," she said and raised an eyebrow at Draco in question. Even after all these months together she was waiting for him to insult her. It was ridiculous that she wouldn't trust they were past that. Well, except with the plan forward, maybe it wasn't.

"I'm just asking for your presence," he said, allowing a rare moment of unguarded truth to slip out in his distress. This definitely wasn't the line he'd practised with Pansy but it felt good to say all the same.

"This idea that we can be married and barely speak is absurd."

"Really? I thought it was the norm in your aristocratic arranged marriages. Polite distance, separate rooms."

Draco scoffed, memories of the passion that had existed between his parents coming to his mind. If only she knew.

"I would like us to dine together, every evening," he said, returning to the Pansy approved script. *Disrupt her routine. Disrupt her life.*

"I already have standing dinner plans," Hermione snapped back.

Draco ground his teeth. She knew he could sense when she left, and therefore was lying straight to his face knowing he knew the truth. Even so, he found he wasn't brave enough to call her on it.

"Breakfast then," he ground out.

"I don't eat breakfast," she countered.

"Well, you should start."

"Fine," Hermione said with a sigh, her jaw tight but her tone still soft and calm, "is that all, *Lord Malfoy*?"

Draco tried to take a deep breath and steady himself. He was almost done. This part was almost over and then he could breathe again.

"There are certain duties that are traditionally performed by *Lady Malfoy*; you will need to accompany me to certain events, perhaps host certain people here. Traditionally, the lady of the manor also assisted in the record keeping of the manor and the family. It was a task I did alone while I was under house arrest but I would like you to assist with it now. It will be helpful for you to learn the history of the family as well."

"When would you like me to do this record keeping? I work full time," Hermione replied, with no emotion in her voice and Draco wondered if she had learnt Occlumency since their time together at school.

"The weekend should suffice, although traditionally Lady Malfoy didn't work," Draco said, knowing the last part would irritate her. He felt equal parts appalled at himself for saying it and pleased as it was exactly what he needed to remind her of for this plan to work.

"I have a standing appointment on Sunday that I will not change, however I will make sure I am available on Saturdays for my duties," Hermione replied, her hollow voice matched by her dull eyes.

"That will be all then," Draco said, unsure how much longer he could keep the facade, needing her to leave the room.

Without saying or acknowledging him, she left, pulling the door shut behind her. The moment he heard the door click closed, Draco lowered his head to the cool polished wood and was surprised when silent tears started, leaving a warm path as they flowed from the corners of his eyes, down the bridge of his nose to leave a pool on the desk. Rationally, he knew why he was doing it. Rationally, he knew that one more person in England who hated him wasn't much in the grand scheme of things, but irrationally, he didn't want that person to be Granger.

The next morning, Draco sat, formally dressed, down the end of the formal dining table. He hated this room. It had been Voldemort's favoured place to hold meetings, to bring prisoners and conquests. It sickened him to think that had Granger not escaped with Potter and Weasley that day in the manor and eventually had been bought before the Dark Lord, she may have been suspended over this very table, waiting for her fate. Greyback or Nagini? Both would have been gruesome ends. It made him feel sick. It made him feel angry. It made him feel the need to sweep Granger away somewhere safe, even though he knew the greatest danger to her in this room now was him. He considered having their shared breakfast in the sunroom, where he himself preferred to eat when the weather wasn't amiable to dining outdoors. However, Pansy was right, the way to end this quickly was to upset Granger as severely as possible. There could be no half measures now the path had been chosen.

The one concession he'd made, when he'd asked Vim to set a breakfast table for two in the formal dining room, was to have Granger to his immediate left, rather than down the other end of the table where the distance would make it impossible to converse. Also, that chair had been *his*, not one that he wished anyone to sit in.

"Good morning," Hermione said as she slipped into the room and Draco stood to pull her chair out for her. She looked bemused and gave him a shy smile as she sat. Draco himself felt a little perplexed by his actions. The courteous act had been a reflex, but it felt more in service of building a bridge between them than crafting an unscalable wall. Draco sat, and watched as his wife made her tea, noting she liked it black with a slice of lemon.

"Would you like something else? Coffee perhaps?" he asked, again unsure with each polite action how this was meant to drive her away.

"Well, I prefer herbal tea if it's not too much trouble. Peppermint?"

She took a sip of her black tea and Draco made a note.

“Your preferences are noted,” he replied, “Would you like the paper?”

Gods, this was definitely not what Pansy had in mind, it was far too nice, too polite but he didn’t know what else to do, to say. The same way the two of them being in the same room as children had almost guaranteed a conflict, after all these months, there was a guarantee of polite domesticity.

“No thank you,” she said, “I’ve given up reading the paper.”

“You, Hermione Granger, have stopped staying up to date with current events? Are you sure you’re not a polyjuiced substitute planted here in an effort to get around the marriage law?”

Draco would have sooner believed that, than Hermione Granger had stopped reading the newspaper voluntarily. Even as an eleven year old first year she’d dived into that thing every morning during breakfast. He’d seen her, emerging only to try and draw her buffons of friends’ attention to something she’d deemed important.

Hermione chewed her lip for a moment, as if considering her answer before she spoke.

“I’ve found that if there is something terribly pertinent, someone will draw my attention to it. Usually by way of requesting my assistance. As for everything else, well, it doesn’t change much does it?”

“I suppose it doesn’t,” Draco acquiesced, “When I was under house arrest I got into the habit of reading it every day. It was the one exemption to my ‘no post’ clause. It helped me stay somewhat connected to the outside world.”

Hermione tilted her head to the side, “It must have felt strange though, reading about a world that you existed in but didn’t.”

Draco couldn’t answer for a minute, instead took a long sip of his tea and busied himself preparing some toast. Trust Granger to understand his position and express it perfectly in a single sentence. This was definitely not going as Pansy had intended.

“So what do you do over breakfast instead?” he asked, changing the topic.

“I told you, I don’t normally have breakfast,” she said, helping herself to toast of her own.

“And I know that is an outright lie; you forget house elves know all and I’ve seen you rushing, almost late for work every morning. Sometimes you even have toast crumbs on your robes,” Draco replied.

Again Hermione chewed her bottom lip.

“It’s terribly stereotypical but I like to read, fiction usually, though I was given a poetry book for Christmas and I have been dabbling in that. Or sometimes I just watch the morning through the window. The estate is very beautiful,” she said, looking out the dining room windows which unfortunately looked over a stone terrace and simple hedge, nothing as

spectacular as the views from her rooms and Draco felt a twinge of guilt that he'd deprived her of them. He'd been surprised to get any compliment from her about the manor. By all rights she should hate the place. Pansy and Theo were counting on it.

"Well, I still like to read the paper, so you should bring your novel down to breakfast," he informed her brusquely, before opening the paper and burying himself in it, lest breakfast became more pleasant and he was forced to report to Pansy and Theo, that all he'd done on his first morning of being inconvenient and unpleasant was found more reasons to admire his wife.

Breakfast continued much the same for the rest of the week, save for the fact that Hermione did bring her book and Draco didn't arrange for herbal tea. That was at least one inconvenience he could control. It grated on him though, every time she poured herself a cup of black tea and lemon, knowing he wasn't giving her what she wanted, but she never complained. He was still unsure how this was going to give her reason to start fighting for a divorce, especially when she wasn't even going to fight him on the type of tea served, but Pansy had faith in her plan. Besides, she pointed out, the next phase was much more potent.

"The point of digging into the family history with her is so she is forced to be reminded of all the reasons she can never forgive the Malfoy family. That your family stands for everything she despises," Pansy directed with the focus of a drill sergeant.

She and Theo then proceeded to come up with a list of everything from the Malfoy's past that would cause Hermione's fists to clench and hair to become sentient with rage fueled magic. The list was extensive; house elves, Wizengamot bribes, blackmail, crimes against muggles and muggle borns, trading of illegal and dark objects, hoarding resources and wealth, and so on, and so on, and so on... By the end of their brainstorming Draco felt like he would cave in on himself. No wonder all of Britain hated him, there were enough reasons to hate the Malfoys before the war. Before the murders and ruin. Before their home had become a feared black site, synonymous with torture and disappearances. After brainstorming the list, he realised that any bridge he felt he was building with Granger was an illusion. There was no bridge that could overcome who he was, where he came from. The best outcome was for her to dissolve their marriage and find some happiness away from him. He could take what was left and start over somewhere else.

Pansy had wanted him to start out with House Elf records, dusty old scrolls that needed preserving, that detailed the sale and purchase of every elf by the Malfoy family from the 1600s onwards. However, Draco knew the more recent history would appal her more. Particularly when his kin brushed against those that she loved. Those that she cared for. So he pulled all the copies of Lucius's correspondence with Hogwarts and with the ministry and put it to one side for her to sort through.

Everything his father had done was there, things that made him burn with shame to read. There were his dealings with Arthur Weasley, including documentation of well placed bribes to ensure he never progressed in his career, even when his work warranted it. There was the

business with the hippogriff in third year where Lucius demanded the execution of the creature and Hagrid's criminal prosecution for negligence. In that parcel, there was even a testimony from Draco himself, written in his uncertain 13 year old hand. The letter he found most troubling was Lucius's response after he had been informed of the petrification of one Hermione J Granger; the man's flippancy to her fate and suggestion that this was evidence Hogwarts was not the place for a lesser witchling made Draco feel more sick with shame than he usually did. But he left it in the pile for her to read. Better she knew. Better she saw all the ugliness. Better to leave.

When she came to his study for their first session, she was dressed in muggle jeans and a chocolate brown turtleneck. Her hair was tied back in a braid and that god awful ring was sitting on her fourth finger of her left hand. He subconsciously reached across and thumbed at his corresponding gold band. A motion that drew Hermione's eye and her gaze fixed on the ring.

"It was my father's," she said simply and Draco looked down at his hand.

Surely she couldn't be referring to the ring. Surely she hadn't given him something so precious or personal. Hermione actually liked her father, at least that was the intelligence given to the Death Eaters. Intelligence that was further corroborated by the fact she'd made the effort to hide him. He must have misunderstood.

"I was..." she stopped to consider her words, "somewhat unprepared, the morning of our wedding. I hadn't shopped for a ring, and no longer had time to. My father's ring was sitting in a box in the house and well, it's now on your finger."

She shrugged and looked away and Draco couldn't speak. What was it about this witch? Anytime he felt like he was in control, like he understood the path in front of him, she would come and cut him off at the knees. She couldn't just go around telling him things like that, not when he was about to hand her a letter where his father wrote with thinly veiled glee at her almost death as a child.

The same way the dining room table had triggered an impulse to snatch her away to keep her safe, he briefly imagined taking her hand now and pulling her from the study. Away from the horribleness. Could they walk hand in hand away from this unscathed? Maybe to the greenhouse? Could he pick her some flowers and watch as she lifted them to her face to breathe in the scent? Maybe the petals would brush her lips as she did. Maybe she would smile at him. Maybe even blush. It was a glorious sight when Granger blushed.

"Is my ring a family ring?" she asked, interrupting his daydream and causing him to look once more at the ugly jewel on her hand.

He swallowed, grateful for the reminder of what he needed to do, why this was all for the best. There was nothing left for him here but daydreams. There was no such thing as a clean slate. The history between them wasn't just sitting in a pile on his desk for her to sort through. It was resting on her hand. It was carved into her flesh.

"Everything in this manor has come from family," he replied, not elaborating, just gesturing to the seat before him and the pile of papers, "Come, today we need to memorialise my

Father's correspondence as both an esteemed Ministry lobbyist and governor of Hogwarts. You need to read everything, sort by topic and year, and then perform simple preservation spells. I assume you're capable of that?"

Hermione tucked a curl behind her ear and nodded before turning to the stack of papers and starting work quietly. Draco gripped the edge on his seat to keep his hands from doing anything he couldn't take back and he couldn't watch her as she read. He didn't want to see the disappointment mar her face.

Chapter End Notes

And so it begins! These next few chapters are some of my favourite so far but also have been an absolutely slog to write. So a huge THANK YOU to all the amazing writers over on the Dramione Writer's Society discord server for their incredibly company, cheer leading, hand holding and laughs.

Thank you as well to everyone that has commented on this fic, I can not express how much your comments mean to me and motivate me. The all get read multiple times and I love hearing your takes of the characters and events. I know I have not been as quick replying to comments at the moment, but I will get to them!

We are officially halfway! (Although, I reserve the right to increase the chapter count because sometimes these two just get away from me and I have to split a chapter!)

Events and Ankles

Chapter Notes

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

“She is unshakeable! Impossible! No matter what horrid thing the Malfoy family has done, she just sits silently and works her way through it. She says nothing!” Draco ranted, pacing back and forth between a seated Pansy and Theo, too worked up to sit.

“She honestly said nothing when you made her sort through the Bill of Sale for Bobsy and Vim,” asked Theo, leaning forward studying Draco.

“Nothing,” Draco confirmed and looked to see if Pansy was going to offer something; this was her plan after all.

“Are you sure you’re married to Hermione Granger, it’s not some polyjuiced substitute?” Theo asked and Draco turned and pointed at him excitedly.

“Exactly! I have had that exact thought!”

“You can both stop being so dramatic,” Pansy said, “Possibly Granger has just learnt the feminine act of keeping her cards close to her chest. Just because she’s not saying anything doesn’t mean she’s not feeling it.”

Draco ran his hand over his face. That didn’t make him feel better. He knew she felt it. When she felt it, he could too. Just twinges. Infuriatingly, it was always deep sadness, never anger. For some reason he felt like he could deal with anger better than veiled grief, especially as he suspected anger would be necessary if she was going to fight and bring down a law.

“It’s all about the foundation of discontent. If I learnt anything from watching Perseus and Evangeline Parkinson, a foundation of discontent is vital for an unhappy marriage. How are your dinners going?” asked Pansy.

“Breakfasts,” Draco corrected, “We’re having breakfast together.”

How were they going? All in all, he found them lovely. A bright spot everyday. Every morning he would pull out her chair and she would fix their tea; tea that was not her favourite but that she never complained about. They would read together, eat toast. Every so often she would ask him a question about something she’d seen in the garden or he’d ask about her book. He learnt a little about what she was researching at Oxford; some sort of historical study on the impact of obliviation on the recording of both wizarding and muggle history. She sat close enough that her scent would linger near him after she left. It was not, as Pansy had hoped, a foundation of discontent. At least not for him. One could even go so far as to say he was content... very, very content.

“She’s having breakfast with me and she didn’t want to,” Draco finally offered. It was enough for Pansy.

"Well, that combined with a guided tour of the Malfoy family history should be enough. We need to move onto phase three, making her appear as your wife, publicly," she said, examining her nails.

"And how do you propose that will happen? Or have you forgotten I am not exactly welcome in public in general, let alone to anywhere in particular," Draco grumbled.

"I've taken care of it," Pansy replied, "My business connections may be few but for this purpose they will do nicely. You can expect an invitation in the mail shortly. I'll have your formal robes done by then, but I will need Granger's measurements. She too is going to need a specific outfit for the occasion. One I am sure will make her moan and groan about stuffy old pureblood fashion."

Draco tried to imagine Granger devoting any time to thinking of fashion and found the notion laughable, but mumbled something about sending an owl with the details. Pansy tutted.

"No, no, send the woman herself for a fitting," she said, "I think it's about time Granger and I got reacquainted."

"Pans, is that really necessary? You being mean to her isn't going to make her divorce me," Draco felt his chest grow a little tighter at the idea of Granger being left alone with Pansy. For some reason, as cruel as he himself had been to Granger these past weeks, he loathed the idea of someone else being unkind.

"Nonsense, I don't plan on being cruel. We're just going to have a little chat," replied Pansy, smiling serenely, like a woman about to light herself on fire to ensure that her enemy burns.

Like Pansy alluded, a couple of weeks after their conversation, and about a week after he'd convinced Granger to visit Nott Abbey for a fitting, an invitation to the Winter Fundraising Gala for the *Magical Heritage Society* came on thick silver cardstock. The society was, Draco gathered, just the Council of the Sacred 28 rebranded. Included with the invite was a handwritten note, letting him know that while they could certainly respect the Slytherin sense of self preservation that had surely led to both his and his mother's more questionable actions during the war, they were confident his actions from now on would only be those befitting someone of his lineage. They also wrote that the large donation Ms Parkinson had promised on his behalf was compelling evidence of his commitment, and would go a long way to sooth the concerns of some of the more conservative members. Passive aggressive old crones. Draco imagined that during the war they'd all taken to their holiday homes on the continent, content to wait until they could come back to a new order, never having had to face the realities of war. He'd wanted to toss the invitation into the fire, but wouldn't risk Pansy's ire or derailing her carefully crafted plan.

The evening of the gala, Draco paced nervously in the floo parlour. Hermione hadn't said anything against accompanying him when he'd requested it over breakfast in the weeks prior, and if not for the blood magic binding them, he'd never have known that she was anxious. Her face had been completely blank. Still despite the anxiety, he never thought she'd leave

him waiting. The Granger he knew was nothing if not punctual. If they didn't depart soon, they were going to be late.

"Bobsy!" Draco hollered and a loud crack sounded as the elf appeared.

"You don't need to yell quite so loudly," said Bobsy, running a finger along the rim of his large ear as if it was still ringing.

"Do you know where Granger is?" Draco spat, trying to keep his nerves from getting the best of him. Granger might be anxious about this outing but Draco would guess he was equally so.

"Do you mean Lady Malfoy? Isn't that what she should be called, seeing as how you are insisting on her playing dress up," Bobsy raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes, I mean Lady Malfoy, Mistress Hermione, Granger, whatever you wish to call her! Where is she?" he asked, his patience thin.

"I would assume in her rooms," Bobsy replied.

"Well, will you go get her? We are running late," Draco gritted out.

"No, Bobsy will not. Bobsy is not a golden retriever," Bobsy answered slowly and Draco wondered for the millionth time whether he'd be better off firing the little cretin. He pulled himself up to full height, ready to threaten Bobsy with this exact thing, when Bobsy answered with his own cutting glare that would have made McGonagall proud.

"Fine," Draco said, allowing his shoulders to slump once more, "I'll go get her myself."

"Excellent choice, Mister Draco. If Bobsy may make a suggestion? This time, after you knock, perhaps wait for an answer?" Bobsy paused and stared just long enough to let Draco know that he was aware of exactly what he'd been doing and what Bobsy thought of it, before disappearing. Draco sighed and made his way to Granger's door.

What he found, after he'd knocked and waited for an invitation, was breathtaking. Hermione Granger, sitting on the end of her bed, dressed like she'd walked straight from a dream. Noted, she was struggling to reach her feet and shoes, but for some reason that added to the effect, not lessened it. Pansy had outdone herself; the formal robes that she had made for Granger were tailored to perfection. Midnight blue velvet sat just off her shoulder revealing a long and graceful neck and decolletage, further accentuated by the soft sweep of her hair into low chignon. The robes had long sleeves, as were appropriate for these types of event and this particular social circle and they cinched in at her waist with intricate draping and pleating following her form. The long skirts brushed the floors and thousands of tiny pearls were peppered throughout, giving the skirt the illusion of the night sky. Beside her, lay a pair of high, pearl-coloured heels and Draco could just see her toes poking out the bottom of her robes as she tried to bend to get them.

"You look stunning," Draco said honestly, swallowing uncomfortably. The whole effect was oddly reminiscent of the Yule Ball in fourth year, when Hermione had appeared resplendent and proud on the arm of Victor Krum. She'd been breathtaking then too; though he'd never

have admitted it to anyone. At his words, Hermione looked up at him and the uncertainty and anxiety in her eyes shocked him. The little lioness from that night so long ago was nowhere to be seen.

“I can’t put my shoes on,” she said, a hint of despair in her voice, “the extent of the internal infrastructure in these robes that is designed to keep me looking just so, means I can’t actually bend at the waist.”

“May I?” he asked, taking a step towards her and gesturing at the shoes. Hermione looked up at him, somewhat defeated and nodded.

Gingerly, Draco moved to kneel before her, keeping his eyes steadily on her face to check she was ok. She gave him another half nod which he took as permission to touch, before he dropped his gaze, picked up one of the shoes with one hand and reached for her foot with the other. His magic flared on contact as he slowly slid his hand from the arch of her foot to her ankle and snaked his fingers around it. It was so small and delicate that his fingers easily circled it. Using the contact, he guided her foot into the satin pump, unable to stop himself from stroking a small circle across her ankle with his thumb before moving onto the other side. It was the same movement, her soft warm skin under his palm, a brush of her velvet skirt against his cheek as he dipped his head lower before her. Again, he couldn’t help but brush another circle and take in a deep breath of her perfume before he pulled back.

“Beautiful,” he said softly, looking up at her and standing.

Hermione remained seated, chewing her bottom lip and looking at him curiously.

“Thank you,” she said, releasing her lip and looking away. She made no effort to move and Draco took a moment to just drink her in. She was everything he’d imagined for himself as a boy when he thought of his future wife, beautiful, elegant, intelligent, powerful. If only he wasn’t about to take her to be fed to the wolves.

“Shall we?” he asked, and offered her a hand to help her stand. She took it, and without letting her move away once she was standing, Draco tucked that hand into the crook of his elbow to walk them both towards the floo. Letting himself pretend for just a moment longer.

Draco woke the morning after the gala with a pounding head and a cottony mouth. Not that he’d overindulged at the event. As a recently disgraced heir of two pureblood lines, he knew that behaving uncouthly and drinking too much would not be tolerated by the old biddies at the *Magical Heritage Society*. So it meant he had to be perfectly sober as he guided a breathtaking Hermione Granger around the room and watched as every person in it insulted, belittled and underestimated her. It was truly remarkable the number of euphemisms for *Mudblood* that could be used at one social event.

Each member of the Society had made a performance of trotting out their family’s magical lineage and accomplishments, passive aggressively apologising if the tales made no sense to Granger. Draco gritted his back teeth and kept a hand on Granger’s lower back, more for his sake than hers. She gave him an anchor, stopped him from exploding. The crones they

chatted with made sure everyone in the conversation knew that each tale required a nuanced and indelible understanding of the magical world that was impossible for a muggleborn to have, given she'd grown up without the benefits of a magical childhood or appropriate family history. It made Draco's blood boil, only to make it worse when they asked questions about Hermione's magic, her power, whether she needed medical assistance often or overdrew herself with particular strenuous charm. All veiled in mock concern but Draco saw them for what they were, insults. It wasn't entirely fair, his anger, given he'd made similar assumptions about Granger's ability to understand everything from the blood bond to the Manor's magic. He shouldn't feel indignant, but he reasoned that he also acknowledged everything Granger had to offer and that somehow made him less terrible than these harpies. Or did it? Probably not. And that realisation just made him feel so guilty he punished himself by removing his hand from her back and depriving himself of the contact. He had to stew the rest of the night in sober, solitary misery.

Which is why, after bringing Hermione home and walking her to her room, feeling her bone deep exhaustion mixed with sadness, he'd gone to his own room and drunk himself into a stupor. Now that he'd woken, he revelled in the feeling of a thousand tiny knives burrowing into his skull. He deserved it. He wanted to wallow in the sensation all day. In the dark. Alone.

Unfortunately, Pansy had not been given that memo and before it was 8am, she'd flounced into his room, thrown open the drapes and slammed something down on the small dining table he had in the sitting room just beyond his bed.

"What is this?" she asked hotly, a hand resting on her hip.

"Good morning to you too, Park," Draco gumbled, sitting up and feeling his stomach lurch. Oh, that did not feel good. If he moved that suddenly again he had a feeling the incredible dry and flavourless quail they'd served last night was going to make a reappearance.

"Draco, I did not come here for pleasantries. I came for an explanation," she said, raking her eyes over his pathetic state before taking pity on him and bringing whatever she'd slammed on the table over to his bed.

It was the paper. Open to the society pages, where he got to witness a looping image of him and Granger from the night before. His hand was on the small of her back and at the start of the loop, he was gazing down at her with a look that was one he definitely didn't recognise; it was soft and... reverent? However, what surprised him further was at the end of the loop, after he'd looked away, she'd glanced up at him with a small but grateful smile? That definitely didn't seem right.

"So, explanations? Because this certainly doesn't look like a couple that are desperate for a divorce," Pansy asked, tapping her leather shoe on the floor with a *tap, tap, tap* that he was sure was going to split his head in two.

"I don't know what to tell you Parks, it must be some trick of photography, because I was there last night and can assure you it was completely miserable," Draco said, slumping back down against his pillows and closing his eyes.

“She doesn’t look miserable,” Pansy huffed.

“Well, then either I’d just told her we were leaving or the woman needs to be committed to a mental institution because she spent the night being insulted by every person in that room. It was bloody miserable.”

Pansy looked at him, one eyebrow raised and eyes narrowed. She swept up the paper and tossed it to the side, taking her own seat on the edge of the bed.

“You know, you don’t have to keep doing this if you don’t want to. Theo and I can figure out something else. International portkeys exist; we can commute,” she said finally, her face softer than usual.

Draco closed his eyes again and tried to dull the pounding in his head just long enough so he could think. It was true he hated what they were doing. His instincts and magic screamed against it. But it was also true that the other alternative had to be his life in seclusion. There was no place for him in England and the parts of his life that he liked at the moment, the ones that revolved around a certain curly haired witch were only in existence because of his plan to force her into situations that made her uncomfortable. Without that, she’d never choose to have breakfast with him or accompany him anywhere. Besides, he still wasn’t invited anywhere that he wanted to go. No, the only chance he had for a life, was if he could go far from here.

“I want to leave, Pansy. I want a life and there isn’t one for me here,” he replied, unable to look at her.

Pansy took in a sharp, deep breath and patted the bedcovers once as she stood.

“Right,” she said and Draco heard the fumble of a handbag before a cool glass vial was pushed into his hand, “drink this and then we’re going to the Abbey. If you are sure, we need a strategy meeting, because we may need to change tact if last night hasn’t got her banging on the door of the Wizengamot this morning.”

Draco opened his eyes and in his hand was an acid green potion he recognised to be Pansy’s own hangover tonic, perfected over many years.

“You just carry a hangover potion with you at all times?” he asked, uncorking the vial and swallowing the contents in a single swallow. The relief was immediate.

“I’m married to Theo, of course I do,” she replied, going to an armchair and sitting down, “now go, shower and get dressed, you smell dreadful. I have exactly 10 minutes left of reading in today’s paper so don’t dawdle.”

Draco didn’t waste any of his time replying. Going to his bathroom, he stepped into the steaming shower and let the hot water wash away any of the ills that the tonic didn’t cure. Once dressed, he offered his arm to Pansy and the pair walked into the hall. Straight into Granger, who looked slightly frazzled. Her hair was frizzier than usual and she had dark circles under her eyes.

"Granger," drawled Pansy, talking in her appearance slowly and tightening her grip on Draco's arm, "My robes made you look almost regal last night. It was a much better look for you than, well, that."

Pansy made a dismissive wave towards Granger's current outfit; her weekend uniform of jeans and a jumper that Draco had become rather fond of. He looked at Granger's face to see if Pansy's comments had upset her at all, only to find that her eyes were fixed to Pansy's hands on his arm.

"Granger?" he prompted and her eyes found his, a subtle blush on her cheeks.

"Sorry, yes, they were lovely, thank you Pansy. A touch hard to move in," Granger gave them a tight smile and nodded, "I need to go. I've got my Sunday appointment."

Wrapping her arms around her middle she strode off towards the floo parlour without a goodbye or glancing over her shoulder. Pansy released her grip on Draco's arm and watched her leave with a broad smile.

"Well, Draco, we might not need to have a strategy meeting at all. After that little interaction, I know exactly what our next move should be."

Chapter End Notes

Okay folks, I will acknowledge two things.

1) I have absolutely no rhyme and reason for my posting. I was planning on posting this tomorrow morning and then I had to stay up late waiting on a work call so... I am working on a least once a week for a post. It's averaging every 5 days at the moment. However, these few chapters are heavy though and really important to the story, so if I take a little longer to get them right I apologise!

2) I have no idea what's going on with my chapter names. Literally, they are just naming two things in the chapter so if I (or you) need to refer to them later they are easy to find. And I am tired tonight and when I think of this chapter all I can think of is ankles.

3) Thank you to everyone who reads and comments and gives kudo and recommends (I tell you guys, I am not very active on social media, but the other day I saw my fic recommended in the wild and it blew my mind. And made me jump up and down excitedly.) So thank you so much! I love being a part of this fandom. It's the best!

Anyway enjoy Draco Malfoy on his knees.

Fake Infidelity and Real Conversations

Chapter Notes

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

Of all the schemes Pansy had come up with, this was the worst. The absolutely worst. On the surface the plan was simple. What was a sin that no wife could forgive a husband? Infidelity. And for some reason after watching Hermione's reaction the morning after the gala, Pansy had decided that it was just the thing that would tip Hermione over the edge. Draco had immediately put his foot down, whatever the state of or reason for his marriage, he was not and would never cheat on his wife. Pansy had rolled her eyes at his indignation and pointed out that even if he was willing, she was good, but unable to conjure up a witch willing to sleep with him on demand. However, she countered, she might be able to find a witch who would be willing to pretend to sleep with him, and therein lay the basis of the plan. Draco would accompany a young lady home, said young lady and Draco would ensure they were spotted by Hermione, and Pansy assured him that instinct would take care of the rest.

There had been some concern that Granger would be out or in her room for the duration of this plan, however Pansy suggested that Draco insist on Hermione hosting some of the biddies of their Magical Heritage Society at the manor for the same time.

"Those witches will insist on leaving exactly half an hour after they arrive, so it should be easy enough to plan your arrival with their departure. Besides, having a witness to that kind of betrayal makes it hurt all the more," Pansy said confidently. Draco put up his occlumency walls, as weak as they were after years without use

The day of, Draco met Pansy in Nott Abbey. There, he was introduced to Julia Parkinson, one of Pansy's German cousins who had been portkeyed in just for the occasion. Nice girl, as far as Draco could tell, but he couldn't even look at her.

"Now remember, she doesn't need to think you are in love, but it would help if she believed you were going to screw each other's brains out," said Pansy, and Draco got the distinct sense that she was directing her criticism at him. Julia immediately complied and draped herself around Draco's upper half, which felt so wrong he wanted to push her off again.

"Salazar Slytherin, this is never going to work," said Theo, going and pouring a double of whiskey and pushing it into Draco's hand.

"We will make it work," said Pansy through gritted teeth, "Draco try saying something in Julia's ear"

Draco downed the whiskey and leaned across to whisper to Julia. She smelt wrong, her perfume too cloying, too spicy. Nothing like Granger's fresh floral scent.

“My sincerest apologies that you came all the way from Germany for this,” Draco whispered and Julia giggled as if he’d told an amazing joke.

“Okay, that’s better,” said Pansy, tapping her chin with one finger, “Julia try kissing him, just below his ear.”

“No!” Draco said, pulling himself free from Julia’s grasp, “Pansy, we talked about this. I refuse to do anything that is actual infidelity”

Pansy rolled her eyes, “Fine, Julia try brushing a lock of hair off his forehead.”

Julia rearranged herself across Draco and Draco felt his back stiffen considerably. Instead of following Pansy’s instructions and brushing his hair, she just sighed and let him go.

“I don’t understand why you are trying to drive away his wife when he clearly loves her,” said Julia, a slight German accent punctuating her speech.

“What?!” screeched Draco and Pansy simultaneously, while Theo just sat in the corner cackling.

“That is not my objection, I assure you,” Draco spluttered, wondering if it was inappropriate to take Julia’s arms and replace them around himself, as it would somehow prove a point.

“A beautiful woman wants to touch you, kiss your neck, brush your hair and you respond as if I am about to hex you? It seems like the actions of a man in love with his wife, yes?” she cocked a hip in question.

“When she puts it that way Dray...” Theo teased and Pansy turned and glared at him.

“I’m not in love with Granger,” Draco spat out, “I am bound by blood magic to the bint. There are conditions on that.”

In truth, Draco didn’t know if the binding would do anything should he try and be physical with another woman, but he also wasn’t too keen to find out. Judging by the gaping pit that opened up in his gut when he so much as thought about it, he could guess it wouldn’t end well.

“Not to mention,” he continued, rubbing his temples, “I am guilty of pretty much every moral failing a person can be guilty of. I’d prefer if I could leave infidelity off my laundry list of sins.”

“Shame, as far as moral failings go, I’ve found infidelity to be the most fun,” Theo winked at Julia, who just rolled her eyes at him.

“Theo, stop hitting on your cousin-in-law. It’s creepy. Draco, either buck up and make this work, or stop wasting our time,” Drill Sergeant Pansy was back.

Draco let out a deep breath and rallied himself. He could do this. He could do this because he was not in love with Granger and if this worked he would no longer be married to her.

“Ok, I’m sorry Julia. Sorry Pansy,” he said sincerely,

“Sorry Theo?” Theo called from the sidelines.

“No, fuck off Theo,” snapped Draco, “Okay, Pans, tell me what to do.”

With that, Julia’s arms went back around him and the whole deceptive dance was choreographed once more.

Despite all their careful planning, Draco and Julia stepped out into the Malfoy Manor floo parlour to find it empty except for Granger, sitting neatly in an armchair wearing pale grey, conservative robes, reading a book. There was no contingent of silver haired harpies to act as witness to Draco’s shame. Although it was counter to Pansy’s plan, Draco was immediately grateful.

“Oh, it’s you,” she exclaimed when Draco, with Julia’s arm wrapped tightly around his waist, stepped out of the floo, “I thought you might be Mrs Bulstrode and Mrs Burke, remarkably late.”

“They didn’t come?” he asked, taking a step towards her, only to be pulled back by Julia, who wasn’t ready to move forward. Julia went on her tiptoes and whispered into his ear.

“Remember what we are meant to do. Pansy will kill you if you mess up her careful plotting,” she whispered.

Draco leaned down and responded, “If those two crones disrespected my wife by standing her up, Pansy won’t be the only one on a warpath.”

Julia lowered her gaze coyly and giggled, before lifting her lips to his ear once more, “This from a man who says he’s not in love with his wife.”

Then, just as they had rehearsed, she lifted her hand and swept the hair off his forehead. Draco knew his move was to reach for her hand and place a kiss on the back of it, but just as he was about to Hermione cleared her throat. Draco expected to look up and see a red faced Granger. She should be angry. If another man had been touching her like this Draco knew without a doubt that he would be livid. However when he turned to her, it was not the scene; Draco took in her blank expression and weak smile.

“Well, I think it’s fair to assume after 30 minutes of waiting they decided not even a showing of rare Malfoy jewels was enough of an enticement to spend an afternoon with a mudblood,” Hermione shrugged as if it didn’t bother her and Draco felt equal surges of rage and sadness. He wanted to say something but Hermione beat him to it.

"Anyway, you're clearly engaged, so I'm going to go back to my room," she nodded, more to herself than to him and walked away. Draco stood looking at her retreating form dumbfounded.

"Well, are we meant to go to your room now?" Julia asked, dropping her arms and taking a small step away from Draco now that they were unobserved.

"I don't think she cares," Draco replied, truly at a loss for how things had gotten so messy.

"Hmm, hard to tell. She's very pretty, your wife, but hard to read" she said.

"She is," agreed Draco, unsure himself which part of Julia's declaration he was agreeing with.

Julia did not accompany him to his room as Draco felt no need to continue the farce any longer. He'd given her a polite kiss on the cheek, said thank you and sent her back through the floo. Alone. He would deal with Pansy later. Strolling through the halls on the manor he tried to sort through what he was feeling. The first was anger at the behaviour of the two pureblood matrons that had snubbed Hermione and therefore snubbed him and his family. They'd offered them a private viewing of the Malfoy Ascension jewels. Trinkets really, but gifted from one of the Muggle kings years ago in homage to the Malfoy line. Or at least that was the story his family had always gone with; tangible proof that even Muggle royalty knew they were inferior to the mighty Malfoy magic. They were a highly prized collection among pureblood society, or at least they once were. His displeasure could definitely be attributed to the audacity of the two women who used to dither at his mother's hem for insulting his name, but then there was the chance that part of his displeasure was also linked to the more direct insult to Hermione.

Which led him to the next thing he needed to stew on, Julia's accusation. That had unsettled him more than he'd liked and couldn't decide which part of it was most disturbing. Feeling the need to move, he went to his room and put on some running gear, ready to go outside and let the rhythmic thud of his feet pound away his frustration. In his mind, his thoughts arranged themselves like mantras, repeated to the beat of his feet.

He didn't love Granger....

He just didn't dislike her...

It was a reasonable reaction...

She was by all standards pleasant...

Clever and interesting and calming...

...and pretty.

But he didn't love Granger...

And so the loop continued. He ran for over an hour and came back knowing one thing. He needed Granger to fight to end their marriage, she was the only one who could, but he didn't know if he had it in him anymore to provoke her. It was too difficult and made him feel too broken. He wanted to leave England for the chance of a new life, but if he had to destroy her to do it, he wasn't sure he could live with himself after he'd started it. Just as he'd explained to Julia, there were certain moral failings he wanted to leave unbreeched in an attempt to leave his soul unburdened. Before he could talk himself out of it, he went to his study and wrote a letter to Pansy. A letter that he actually sent. One that shared what he had just come to realise and informed her that his role in their plan would have to come to end. He wanted Granger to fight but he didn't want to fight her to get her to do so.

On his way back from his study, he couldn't help but check the library. Even though he was still in his running gear and was sure he smelt awful, the lure of finding Granger sitting on their window seat was just too strong. She wasn't there, but Draco pulled a book from the shelf anyway and waited to see if she would appear.

It was past dinner before she did. Draco had decided to forgo his evening meal in favour of the particularly interesting book he was reading on doxy venom and waiting. The room was dark, save for some enchanted candles, when Granger came over to join him at the window seat, her book from breakfast in her hands.

"Has your friend left?" she asked as she sat down, looking everywhere but at his face.

"Yes, she left almost immediately after you did in fact," Draco smiled as he answered because the blush that was creeping across her cheeks was nowhere near as subtle as her tone.

"Oh," Hermione opened her book and started to read before closing it abruptly, sitting up straight and looking him dead in the eye, "I hope I wasn't the reason she left."

Draco mirrored her and closed his own book, "No Granger, I asked her to leave. I wasn't sure why I'd invited her back in the first place."

Hermione suppressed a snort and muttered under her breath, "Seven years under house arrest I have a pretty good idea what you invited her back for..."

Draco rolled his eyes at her, "Granger, we're married. I am not going to do that."

"You can, you know... do that. If you want to," Hermione said and the blush came back into her cheeks.

There was a flex in his magic at the suggestion. A subtle peak letting him know that their bond was not going to allow him to do that, regardless of what he wanted and Draco gritted his teeth.

"I mean, we're not really married and you were here by yourself for a long time... it's not fair of me to expect—"

Draco couldn't listen, the subtle peak became an angry upsurge.

"Stop!" he interrupted her, "Can't you feel that, the primal reaction to even the words? Can you feel that and honestly say we're not married."

Hermione moved her hand, as if to rub at her chest the same way she did the last time they spoke of the bond between them, but stopped herself and returned her hand to her lap and started to fiddle with the cover of her book instead.

"Just because there is blood magic binding us together, doesn't mean we're really married. I just see it like any other spell that has been cast on us. We have to experience the side effects but it doesn't change who we are; we still have free will," she shrugged and Draco tried so hard not to get angry, or frustrated. It wasn't deliberate the way she baited him, but he felt like she was wilfully ignoring a truth right in front of them.

"So does that mean that you are... you know... doing that with other people," he blurted out, trying to keep the jealousy from bleeding into his tone.

"Gods no," Hermione chuckled to herself, "I find I don't have the energy or inclination to go searching for an appropriate partner. But if you do, you should go for it."

Draco wanted to shake her.

"I won't," he said instead, decisively because he knew that while he was bound to Granger there would be no one else for him.

Granger didn't say anything, just looked at him for a beat longer before opening up her book again, and Draco took it as a signal that the conversation was over. However, just as she'd done before, she closed her book abruptly and looked him dead in the eyes.

"Malfoy, you can tell me to fuck right off because this is absolutely none of my business and I know they say curiosity killed the cat and all that, but I can't help but be curious and I have to wonder..." she trailed off and for a second Draco thought she might be about to open up her book again and abandon the conversation for the third time.

"Spit it out Granger. If I find it too offensive I will indeed tell you to fuck right off," he couldn't help but smile when he said it. It was by far, the least polite and most informal they had been with each other and he loved it.

Granger smiled back at him and took in a deep breath as if to gather herself.

"Have you ever... done that... with anyone?"

She blushed brilliantly red as she said it. Draco felt himself heat and imagined he must be much the same shade. He didn't need to answer her question, his face was doing it for him.

"Before the war started, we were just children," he offered as a way of an explanation, "During, I couldn't think of anything but what awful thing I would be asked to do next. Not the most romantic company... just ask Pansy. And after, well, after I was right here."

Hermione nodded understandingly and Draco immediately wanted something vulnerable from her too.

“I suppose you have, done that?” he asked, completely aware that they were grown adults avoiding the use of the word sex like they were children. However there was something safe about the euphemism. It made the conversation easier.

Hermione didn’t say anything, just nodded and Draco noted that her cheeks were far less pink answering the question than asking it.

“Weasley?” he followed up.

“Which one?” Hermione said before bursting out laughing at his shocked face, “Sorry, I was teasing. Yes, Ron was my first. And my only Weasley.”

Draco noted that her qualifier was on Weasley, not only man and the petulant dragon inside him immediately wanted to know who else. He fought the impulse down and instead allowed himself to indulge in another question, one that had been plaguing him since before they married.

“What happened with you and Weasley? I’d always assumed you’d make like Potter and the Weaslette and marry in a wedding fit for the front pages.”

Hermione chewed her lip and looked away and Draco wondered if she was going to reopen her book. It was personal, but he didn’t feel like it was any more personal than what they’d been discussing before.

“Come on,” he prompted, “You got me to admit I’m the oldest virgin in Britain, surely you can tell me this.”

Hermione let out a dark chuckle followed by a deep sigh.

“Ron is a good man,” she said looking out the window instead of at Draco as she spoke, “He deserved a wife that could give him everything he needed. Everything he wanted.”

It was an answer but it wasn’t really. There was so much crammed between the lines of what she was saying, Draco couldn’t make it out.

“So you ended it with him then?” he asked, trying to get some clarity.

“Mostly,” she replied. Another infuriatingly vague answer.

“And now he’s married to Cho? Is she the right witch for him then? The witch he deserves,” he continued to pry and she continued to stare out the window.

“I don’t know, I hope so. It would be a lot easier for me if he was happy and settled somewhere. The only thing I do know is that I was never going to be that witch. I couldn’t give him what he wanted anymore.”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and turned back to look at him, her face pained.

"But now I am here, not giving you what you want or need either. Seems it's a theme that follows me around."

Draco didn't need the bond to know what she was feeling. Her expression alone made him feel like a wild animal was pawing at his chest.

"Oh Granger," he sighed, "You know better than most my list of misdeeds and failings. I'm pretty sure I don't deserve anything I want or need."

Hermione reached across the bench seat and lay a hand on the shin of his outstretched leg.

"Draco, the ministry has already forced you to become the oldest virgin in Britain. I think we can all agree you've suffered enough," her straight face slipped as she finished her sentence and the peel of giggles that filled the library swept away all the heaviness that was sitting in his chest and he couldn't help but join her as she laughed.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is posted two day after the last chapter but I couldn't not share this chapter any longer. I think it is my favourite one yet and it had me giggling and kicking my feet as I was writing. I hope you get the same reaction when you are reading.

Thank you to everyone who is reading and commenting. I love, love, love all your comments and appreciate the time you take to write them. Somehow this fic is nearing 1000 kudos and subscribers which is just wild to me!

Anyway, enjoy this fluffy chapter in amongst the heavy angst! Also praise Julia for saying what we are all thinking. And Theo for just finding the whole thing amusing.

The Owl and The Golden Goose

Chapter Notes

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

The mood at breakfast the next morning was different. Draco felt a little lighter as he got up to pull out Hermione's chair. She smiled a little broader at him in response. When the tea was poured, Draco watched her face carefully, waiting to see her reaction when a stream of steaming peppermint came from the teapot rather than black. The flash of surprise and pleasure was a worthy reward, and Draco smiled to himself as he reached for the toast. It was a small thing, giving her the tea she wanted, and he knew if he was going to completely reform, he should inform her that she could eat breakfast wherever she chose; she had no obligations to him. Selfishly, he just wanted the company for a little longer.

Hermione had already picked up her book, another book of poetry, and Draco went to reach for his paper and start his own reading when an elegant eagle owl swooped in through the window and went to land next to Hermione. The handwriting on the envelope attached to his leg was so familiar and Draco was overwhelmed with equal parts longing and dread. *His mother*. He wanted her so badly and there she was, in letter form at least, after months of nothing. However, the letter was addressed to Hermione. Of course it was, her probation conditions wouldn't allow it any other way. Which begged the question, what could his mother possibly have to say to Hermione?

For a brief moment, as Hermione untied the envelope from the owl's leg and offered the bird a strawberry from the breakfast table, Draco tried to imagine that his mother was writing to Hermione as an elegant loophole for communicating with him. She was allowed to write to his wife after all, and there were no restrictions that prevented said wife from reading the letter out loud to him. It could be a wonderful solution and offer him just a modicum of relief from the hostile world. Another person on a list of very few who would speak to him with kindness and care. Then Hermione opened the letter and he knew it was a foolish hope. Her chocolate eyes darted across the parchment, before her gaze dropped briefly to the ring resting on her left hand, the colour draining from her face as she continued reading. Hermione's breathing changed, became quicker and shallower. She reached for her cup of tea but her hand shook and the porcelain clattered in the saucer so loudly that she immediately lowered it. Without looking at Draco, she stood.

"I should be getting to work," she said, running her hand up and down her forearm under her robes, and Draco didn't need to see it to know what lay there.

"Ok," Draco nodded at her and resisted the urge to reach out and grab her, find out what was in the letter.

With a weak smile she turned and fled, leaving her untouched toast and tea, and the letter to the side of the plate. Draco stared at the piece of parchment for a minute, wondering if he actually wanted to know what was in it. It would be an invasion of Hermione's privacy but at

the same time, it was his mother. And his wife. He'd been throwing landmines at Hermione for weeks now and never gotten a reaction; what had eventually caused her to run from him? Did he want to witness what horrendous thing did? Eventually the draw of his mother's hand enticed him and he picked up the letter.

Miss Granger,

I have recently received correspondence from Miss Pansy Parkinson describing your recent fitting with her for formal robes. She mentioned that she asked after the history of your betrothal ring and you confessed to being ignorant of it. While it doesn't surprise me that a witch with a background such as yours would be ignorant of the history and tradition that surrounds such gifts in magical weddings, I will confess I was taken aback that my son had not seen fit to educate you. That said, I can hardly blame him for not wishing to take on such a tedious exercise, in addition to the responsibility of providing for a wife. A responsibility he did not want and was burdened with at the Ministry's behest. In an ideal world, he would not have to educate his wife as she wouldn't come with your deficits.

However, as even you must concede, there is no point arguing with your ministry and we must work within the constraints of their laws. And while there are some gaps in your understanding of magic that I am sure will never be overcome nor you would even admit to, you should be aware of the proud piece of Black history you wear on your finger.

Your ring has been in the Black family since the 13th century, where it was given as a wedding gift in a significant union between the French Black line and an English family on the rise. The marriage was the start of a powerful political alliance and therefore has always symbolised power. From there it lived in the vaults untied to any particular owner until my generation. You are probably unaware, but it is customary in magical families to give a wizard a watch on the event of their coming of age, and a witch a ring. For those with a long family line and the inclination to honour it, it is customary for that piece to be a family heirloom. Your ring was chosen for my sister Bellatrix on the event of her 17th birthday. Now Bellatrix was not without flaws, as we all possess, but even you have to admit she was able to wield incredible magic. The ring's legacy now speaks to the unfathomable power of my sister. Maybe having a part of her legacy on your person will give you cause to reflect your own abilities and likewise your own flaws.

Draco chose the ring for you before the wedding, and I couldn't help but admire the lustre and colour of the diamonds. Such a unique colour; like rich, freshly wet soil. I am sure the hue compliments your attributes nicely. A wedding ring is a powerful symbol and every witch should know exactly what their chosen ring symbolises. I trust you will understand why this knowledge is important.

Lady Malfoy.

Draco didn't need a wand to set the parchment on fire. Uncontrolled magic flared from his fingertips, incinerating the letter in an angry burst. He barely noticed as the flames scalded his hand and spread to the white tablecloth below.

“Master Draco!” Bobsy popped into the room and immediately doused the flames with his own magic, an elf specific fire control spell that left the beautiful breakfast spread slightly

damp and wholly inedible.

Bobsy looked at Draco, his eyes wide, before he turned and took in the scene, including Hermione's untouched plate. His eyes darted to Draco's hand, looking at the angry blisters that were rapidly forming there.

"Oh Master Draco, what did you do?" he said, voice hushed, shaking his head.

Draco could barely contain the anger. To read such hatred in his mother's own voice; to have her words so close to him and yet for there to be nothing for him in them; to have her drive from the room one of his only sources of comfort.

"I have done nothing," he replied, finally finding the cold tone he had been aiming for for weeks, "but I shall be doing something."

Draco arrived at Nott Abbey to find Pansy exactly where he expected her to be. In the floo parlour, black dress, black coffee and when she saw him, black expression.

"When did you write to my mother Pansy?" he asked, not bothering with pleasantries.

"Yesterday," she answered without shame, not bothering to pretend she didn't know what he was speaking about, "the moment I received your letter."

"And what part of my letter made you think it was a good idea to involve my mother?" he asked, impressed by his own ice cold tone.

Pansy was unaffected, taking a delicate sip of her coffee before answering him.

"Sit down Draco," she said and waited until he lowered himself into a chair opposite her to keep speaking, "Let's skip the antagonistic banter, shall we. What exactly have I done that has offended you?"

"It was my mother Pansy, and you told her about Hermione," Draco said, trying to gather his anger into an argument.

"Ok, I told your mother about Hermione. It wasn't as if she wasn't aware of the girl before then. I still don't see a problem," Pansy replied.

"If you had seen her face, Pansy. If you had read the letter..." Draco started, his mind woefully behind his mouth.

"I still wouldn't have understood how this offends you? I am going to go ahead and guess what happened, because despite my request we speak plainly, you are still only offering the tiniest, out of context glimpses into the issues with your wife and your situation at the manor. My assumption is that after I wrote to your mother, telling her you were unhappily married, wanted the marriage dissolved, but needed Granger to fight against the union, she wrote to Granger. My guess, knowing Narcissa, is that she said something delightfully pointed and harsh. Granger naturally took offence, because despite her flaws she's not stupid and

whatever Narcissa wrote was offensive and then, she fled. Ran away from you without so much as a word. Now, you are angry and with nowhere else to direct it, have come to my door. Does that sum it up?" Pansy finished her monologue with a raised eyebrow and another pointed sip of her coffee.

Draco shifted on his chair, unable to relax into it. She was right, annoyingly. Pansy had an uncanny way of grasping a situation with only a sliver of information. It's why she was the first of his friends to figure out when he'd taken the Dark Mark, right at the beginning of 6th year. It was why for the rest of 6th year he'd made a valiant effort to keep her away from him. Not that it had worked. Pansy would always seek to look after you, even if you were asking her not to.

"Do you want to hurt her that much?" Draco asked eventually. It was a weak question. A diversion really. He already knew her answer.

"What I want has never been a factor in this, Draco," she signed, reaching across to a jewelled trinket box and pulling out a piece of crumpled parchment. His letter from the day before, "It's always about what you wanted or rather needed. You've said it all here. You need Granger to be the one to fight for the divorce but you don't want to be the one to push her into it."

She held the letter out to him, as if he couldn't remember what he'd written and she was there to offer him a reminder. Draco didn't take it.

"But you don't understand, the line my mother crossed..." Draco trailed off. What he had to say was of little consequence. Pansy was right, he was just looking for an outlet to his anger. However, his half-hearted defence did nothing but provoke Pansy and she sat up straighter before she answered him

"How could we possibly understand? The lines you have drawn around Granger? You don't even realise it, do you? You don't speak about her. In fact, I heard nothing about her, save some second hand drivel from Theo from when you were under house arrest about that time you sat in the same room, without speaking. Granger was the name you wouldn't utter so none of us could. Until you were furious that she wouldn't let you break the bond and leave the country. The first substantial thing you told me was you wanted out. That you needed her to fight the marriage law and for some reason she wasn't. When I offered you a way to encourage her to fight, you agreed? Didn't you?" she said, fixing him with a stare and Draco got the distinct impression he was meant to confirm the facts. So he did, with a single nod. Pansy took a deep breath and continued speaking.

"You go along, you look to me for guidance, you take none of the exits that were offered to you. Until I get a letter explaining that actually *you* don't want to be the one to drive her away. You don't want to be married to Granger; a dissolution of the bond is still your final aim but *you* can't do it. *You* don't want to. So, I went and found someone else to do it for you."

The look that Pansy pierced him with was fierce and he could do nothing but swallow and let her words sink in. It was so much easier to think of this morning's event as her fault,

something he had no choice in, no control over. Something he had been forced to endure. Naturally, Pansy wasn't going to allow him to deny his agency in it all.

"But did it have to be my mother?" he asked, resting his head in his hands, trying to find one last out. One last piece of evidence that it was she who had taken it too far, not him for starting them down this path in the first place.

"I am going to guess she was effective or you wouldn't be here stamping your feet," Pansy said, returning his letter to its storage place and raising an eyebrow at him. Draco nodded and looked away. For the first time they had been able to rattle Granger. It was their first outright success and yet Draco felt like he'd lost.

"Ultimately, you are allowed to change your mind, Dray. We just want you to be happy; you'll find no pushback from us in the form that happiness takes. And I've asked you if you wanted us to stop, leave Theo and I to find another way and you said no," Pansy said.

"I know," Draco groaned, running his hand through his hair.

Pansy just stared at him for a minute, watching him try and grapple with his desire to be free from this new set of ministry shackles but also his absolute loathing to watch Hermione crumble from a scathing attack of words spewed by his mother. He didn't want to have to make the decisions.

Pansy let out a deep breath, "Draco, I am trying to help you. But honestly, I can't help if you won't give me all the information. Tell me what has happened in that Manor since August."

Pansy paused, and he knew it was to give him the space to speak. His loyal friend to the end, she was trying to understand him. Understand his frustration and his desire. The silence stretched and Draco's mind was grappling with his situation. His mouth would not form words. The silence was enough of an answer for Pansy though and a flicker of hurt crossed her face before she hid it.

"Fine, don't talk to me. If you would prefer to figure it out by yourself, that is your right. But don't come into my house and throw a hissy fit because I was just trying to give you what you want. It's all any of us have done in a very long time."

Pansy turned away, her sharp bob flicking like a curtain, hiding her face from him and Draco took it as his invitation to leave.

Back at the manor the Elves had cleaned up from breakfast. There wasn't a trace of ash in the dining room, no hint of the hurtful words spewed, save for the one carved into Hermione's flesh that Narcissa had cruelly alluded to. Draco expected that he would be alone until the evening when Hermione returned from work, so went out to the garden where he tried to lose himself in the heavy work of shovelling and hoeing. Feel the ache in his muscles instead of his chest.

About an hour after he started, Vim appeared, complete with burn salve and bandages. Apparently Bobsy had felt the need to explain the smouldering remains at breakfast to her and Vim saw it fit to treat his burns. Until she'd mentioned them, Draco hadn't noticed them. Even though the blisters had long been ripped open by his manual labour and they looked red and angry against the wooden handle of the shovel. He allowed Vim to tend them, even though he could have easily healed them with magic. The sting was a welcome distraction from the turmoil in his head and her kind ministrations a balm against dull ache in his chest.

Just before lunch, the low hum that was his constant companion whenever he and Granger were apart, vanished. She was home. Early. Suddenly the sting in his hands couldn't compete with the rush of emotions through the bond. Well, he assumed they were all through their bond; sadness, anger, uncertainty, anxiety, panic, determination, hope. However, it was just as likely that some of them were his own. Breaking through the cerebral corral he'd placed them in at the knowledge that she was here.

Draco stuck the shovel in the ground and walked up to the house without glancing back. He'd always planned on talking to her today. There was no other option but to do so. But her early arrival suggested it was a conversation that needed to happen earlier rather than later.

The first place he visited was her rooms; it's where she generally retreated to when she arrived home. When he got there however, the door was slightly ajar and after knocking lightly and waiting he heard no noise and received no response. A second knock only served to draw Glitter from the room; the little cat rubbing against Draco's legs and purring as if it was eager for human interaction. As if it had been alone all day.

The next spot he checked was the library; he walked through the high shelves expecting to turn the corner and see her curled up on their window seat, but again he was disappointed. The library was empty and still.

With the two most logical places Granger free, Draco walked outside, searching the greenhouse and the gardens but again everything seemed empty and quiet. For the first time since it had formed, he tried to tune into the blood bond between them but while he could feel a whisper of anxiety and sense she was on the grounds, there was no way of knowing where on the grounds she was.

Standing in the middle of the terrace, not too far from the tree under which they had wed, Draco called for Bobsy.

"Yes, Mister Draco? Are you lost?" Bobsy appeared, looking bored.

"No, well sort of. I am trying to find Hermione. Do you know where she is?" she asked, trying not to sound flustered and not succeeding.

"You're trying to find *Hermione*?" Bobsy replied, looking at Draco strangely.

"Yes, Hermione... Mistress Granger, Lady Malfoy, whatever title you have decided I should be calling her. Do you know where she is? And before you berate me, I am not asking you to fetch her, just seeking information," Draco tried to counter Bobsy's arguments before he

could form them but Bobsy was still looking at him strangely. There was a long pause before he answered.

“*Hermione* is in the drawing room,” Bobsy finally said and then, instead of disappearing away as soon as his duty was discharged he stood back and examined Draco.

Draco felt himself turn cold and had to fight his own mind, lest the Manor that appeared before him morphed with the Manor from his memories, complete with a permanent frostiness than came with dark magic and the blood curdling screams of his now wife collapsed on the floor.

“Why is she...” he tried to ask the question but the words were stuck in his throat.

Bobsy looked slightly concerned and replied to the question Draco was unable to finish.

“She asked to have tea in there,” he replied, seeming to think a moment before adding, “She was more reserved than usual, but not distressed.”

Draco nodded and let his feet lead him to the drawing room, unsure exactly what Bobsy did after he left. He appreciated Bobsy offering his own assessment of Hermione’s mental state but failed to believe it. Afterall, he was distressed at the idea of her in that room. Not to mention he could remember Samhain, where the mere act of walking past it caused Grange to shrink with fear.

The drawing room was dimly lit when he entered, just the weak March light filtering through the windows. Hermione was sitting in the middle of the settee, perched on the edge, staring at the tea service before her on the coffee table. She made no move to pour, just sat and stared, her hand absentmindedly rubbing at her forearm. Draco took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold.

It always amazed him that no matter how many times the elves had cleaned this room, it still smelt the same. Musty and Dark. He didn’t know until that day that fear literally had a smell. A mix of sweat and tears and blood. He smelt it every time he was in this room now. Today, there was a new smell, the light scent of Granger’s perfume; out of place with the heaviness of the space.

“I didn’t choose the ring,” he offered, walking slowly towards the centre of the room, not wanting to startle her.

“I don’t want to talk about the ring right now, Draco,” Hermione answered, not looking at him, rubbing her clenched fists back and forth on the tops of her thighs. He noted the ring in question still sat on the fourth finger of her left hand, mocking him.

“It’s true, my mother came with a box of rings before our wedding, but you have to understand I never thought you would actually consent to marry me. I had no intention of picking a ring because I honestly didn’t think-”

Hermione cut him off.

"I said, I don't want to talk with you about this right now, Malfoy."

Her hands stilled and she took a deep breath, reaching out to pick up the cup in front of her. Her hands shook but only slightly.

"And the colours of it, you have to know, I would never... I know what word she was alluding to when she spoke about the colour of the stones and I would never, have not used that word since--"

A clatter broke his sentence as Hermione's shaking hands dropped her tea cup and it shattered on the parquet floor near her feet. Draco stopped talking and looked at her face. She was so pale, impossibly so. She wouldn't look at him, instead leaned forward to pick up the pieces. A sharp cry escaped her throat and when Draco looked at her hand he saw a bloom of red from her palm. For a minute, the pair could do nothing but stare at the small pool of blood that was growing on the floor.

The air was suddenly too thick to breathe. Draco had never drowned but he had the distinct impression that this was what it felt like. Surrounded by something that suffocated rather than soothed. In his periphery he could make out Hermione moving; she may have even said something, but all he could focus on was the blood on the floor. With that image, fresh in front of him, there was no way he could fight the melding of his past and present. The modern day room slipped away to be replaced with the room of the past. The smell of Granger's blood overtaking the other smells and the colour of it, as rich and vibrant as it had been that day, burnt his eyes. Red. Just like his. He couldn't hear anything but the echoes of his Aunt's laughter and Hermione's scream and the small pool of blood before him seemed to grow. He waited for the crash, waited for his wand to be taken from him. Every one of his muscles tensed, waiting for the pain. He knew it would come, either from his Aunt for not immediately identifying Potter or from the Dark Lord, who would arrive furiously any moment. His father had already collapsed onto his knees, ready to beg for forgiveness on behalf of himself and his wife. Ready to throw his son at the mercy of the Dark Lord when he insisted that if Draco couldn't have identified Potter after six years of school with the boy, it was unreasonable to expect Lucius and Narcissa to. He waited. And waited. And waited until the scene from the past cleared and he was alone in an empty room, nothing but an abandoned tea service, a broken tea cup and a small pool of blood before him.

Draco took five long breaths before he called for Bobsy and Vim. He wanted both of them. He wanted the scene before him cleaned away as quickly as possible. This time they were allowed to clear it away immediately. This time, it wouldn't be left to congeal and rot on the floor as a tribute to their failure. This time, it would be set right.

When the elves arrived, not even Bobsy ventured to say something. He just turned to the mess and summoned scrubbing brushes; they were experienced in removing the evidence. Draco escaped to the hall. Eyes closed, he focused on his breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Waiting for the action to soothe the terror in his chest. Bring his heart rate back to normal. Far from calm though, he felt his terror morph into something new. Anger. Blood boiling, churning, anger.

How could she endure to bleed in that spot again? How could she just stand and walk away as if it didn't matter? Force him to relive it all by going into that room in the first place? Why

would she revisit history like that? Weren't the reminders in his mother's letter bad enough? Her actions reminded him of every response she'd had to every awful thing he'd put her through, stillness. Nothingness. She stood unmoved and in doing so held a giant mirror up to him so he could examine his actions. Was that her plan all along? Remind him? Punish him? Out of the two of them, how dare she walk away the least affected?

The simmer of rage powered him as he stormed down the hall to find her. He threw open the door to the library wondering if he would find her curled up in the window seat with a book, so unaffected by the day's events but it was empty. Never mind, onto the next. The door to her room was thrown open with the same vigour but again, the room was empty. However, there was the sound of running water coming from the closed bathroom door.

Draco considered throwing it open too. Bursting in on his *wife* in the shower would definitely announce he was finished tiptoeing around her. Let her know that he was done with being polite and distant and she was going to give him some answers and take off that god awful ring. But he found he couldn't make himself cross that line. Pansy was right. There were lines he'd drawn around Granger that he himself didn't understand. So he stood, fist clenched and waiting.

Eventually, the door swung open and there she stood. Wrapped in a white cotton robe, her hair damp and everywhere, feet pink and bare on the tiles. Her face was scrubbed raw and her eyes looked a little red, but it was hard to tell with her heat flushed face.

"Malfoy?" she asked, brushing her curls back out of her eyes. He noticed she already had a plaster across the cut on her palm. Like his burns from this morning, she had chosen not to heal her wound with magic.

"Why aren't you fighting?" he asked, voice haggard. Of all the questions he had, their future boiled down to this one. Why wasn't Hermione Granger fighting; the marriage law, the match with him, his treatment of her since they had wed.

"Fighting?" she asked as if she was confused and she tried again to push her unruly hair out of her face.

With her left hand this time, and the action drew his attention to that fucking ring which was still perched on her finger. The only reason she could have to wear it, after everything that she had learnt about it, was to punish him. To force him to look at it and remember his failings and prejudices and how they had morphed together to condemn them both to this hell.

"Yes, fighting," he stepped forward and grabbed her hand, held it in front of them so they could both see the ring, "Fighting against me, fighting against this. So there was a law that said you had to bind yourself to me. I know you Hermione Granger, you don't care for rules that don't make sense. You don't pause and consider and make do with intolerable situations. You, you have argued and kicked and screamed against anything you've found unpalatable since you waltzed onto platform 9 ¾ at age 11. You can't tell me you find this situation palatable. So why aren't you fighting?"

His words were laced with as much venom as he could muster and he dropped her hand without ceremony. She said nothing, just stared blankly at him.

“Are you trying to punish me? Is that what this is? Tie yourself to me so I am forced to feel guilty, forced to remember, because you’re always there as a reminder.”

Still she stared and Draco continued.

“I don’t need you as a reminder Granger, everytime I step out of these walls there is someone who is willing to remind me what a giant fuck up I am. How incredibly evil I am. How little I deserve in life. There really is no need for you to chain yourself to me if that is your goal. Just wait until I go outside and someone else will do it for you. And maybe that’s what I am owed. Maybe that’s the price of my incredibly fucked up life. All I ask, is that in my home that maybe I can find some respite and not have you bleeding all over fucking drawing room floor! So do something. Please just act. Fight this marriage. Fight this law. Tie back that hair, pick up your wand and turn back on that impulse that insists you know what’s best for everyone, and fight!”

Draco took in a breath, ready to spew more anger if she was going to continue staring and blinking dumbly. But Hermione raised her hand to stop him.

“Why aren’t I fighting?” she said, the question clearly rhetorical and her voice soft, though her tone brokered no argument, “why isn’t the frizzy little mudblood leading the charge?”

Draco flinched at the word.

“We’ve only asked her to fight for a world we won’t let her completely belong to since she was an 11 year old child. She’s faced dark wizards, death, dementors, dragons. What’s a little law? She’s been fighting against inhumane laws her entire career. What’s one more?”

Draco swallowed, completely transfixed by her words, though her quiet voice was the antithesis to his roar.

“Do you know how heavy a fight is Draco? Have you ever truly had to carry the consequences of a decision? Harry is ‘The Boy who Lived’. You’re ‘The Boy Who Had No Choice’. And I’m “The Brightest Witch of Her Age”, “The Golden Girl”. We Muggles have a fairytale you know, about a Golden Goose. In the tale, the goose helps the hero of the story get everything he ever wanted but they never talk about what happens to the goose afterward. Never asked the goose what it had to do in order to achieve the hero’s aim. Never thought of the goose as anything other than a means to an end.”

She looked down at her feet and let out a breath, “Why aren’t I fighting Draco? Because I’m tired.”

She looked back up at him and Draco could see the truth of it. It wasn’t just dark circles but a dullness that belied something deeper.

“I am just so damn tired. All I want now are my books, my cat and some quiet.”

She flashed a brief, sad smile and Draco puzzled over what wasn't said when the expression crossed her face because he could just tell there was something. He couldn't puzzle for long however, because she wasn't done. And now her voice rose, her chin came up a little and again Draco got the sense he was seeing a shadow of the witch he'd known before the war.

"Your guilt, your memories, your punishment as you so call it; that has nothing to do with me. I've got my own to deal with and trust me, it's more than enough to keep me busy. So, if you want to try and outrun it, build a glorious future for yourself far away from here, I suggest *you* start fighting for it. Because I am not the Golden Goose anymore, Malfoy."

There was a soft puff of magic pushing him back out of the room, whether it was non verbal or unintentional he didn't know, but it was very clear in its message. Get out. The same puff of magic closed the door in his face. Not a slam. Not the same energy with which he'd thrown it open, but powerful in its message all the same.

Chapter End Notes

Okay friends, this is a giant chapter. I considered splitting it but it just goes together so well, I didn't want to. It's been leading to this for a while... but finally some answers (sort of).

Thank you everyone who has been commenting and kudos and recc-ing. I read every comments, at least 3 times and when I wake up at 5am (it's the only time I get to write... waking before my children), it's like a warm hug if there are comments before I open the google doc. So thank you so much!

The Bed and the Soup Tray

Chapter Notes

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

Draco wasn't aware of what his feet were doing. They were acting without conscious thought from his brain as they carried him down the hall to his own room. There, he toed off his shoes and shed his clothes. He wasn't even sure if they were the clothes Pansy had made him or ones he'd taken from his father's closet. At the end of the day, the styles were so similar to what his father favoured, it was almost impossible to tell the difference. His new wardrobe was just a more fashionable version of the old. Standing in just his boxer briefs, he went to the window and pulled the draperies shut, plunging his room into a grey darkness. He couldn't think about what Granger had told him. After the day he'd had, he didn't want to. So instead, he pulled back the covers of his bed and crawled into it. Buried deep under his duvet, he let his eyes flutter closed. Maybe he could hide from the past in sleep.

When he woke, his belly grumbled and his bladder protested. He knew he would have to attend the second but was sure he could ignore the first if he set his mind to it. A short trip to the bathroom, the chill in the room raising goosebumps across his bare shoulders, chest and stomach, and he was back in his nest. Warm. Dark. Alone. Safe. He rolled onto his side and clutched a pillow to his stomach before he let sleep take him again.

It must have been daylight the next time he woke. His room was still grey, but a lighter shade than before. Granger was going to be free of her breakfast obligation after all. He had no intention of leaving his room and going to join her. The room was icy now and though his wand lay within reach on the bedside table, he made no move to grab it and cast a warming charm. He desired the ice. He also made no move to take it and cast a tempus charm. He had no desire to know what time it was. Learn how little of the next day he had spent in the respite of sleep. The only thing he planned on doing, after another short trip to the bathroom, was to lie in his bed and stare at the canopy above it.

It was emerald green. Of course it was. His nursery had been too. There was no colour but green for the only son of Lucius Malfoy. He was told tales of Salazar Slytherin from the cradle. One of his ancestors had met him once; in France before the Malfoys ever had designs on English shores. Slytherin had apparently told the man that he was destined to be a great wizard. That if only he was willing to support the right man, all manner of riches would befall him. Only 100 years later, another ancestor swore fealty to a Muggle Duke, a bastard called William, and got on a ship destined for English shores. There, if you believe the way the Malfoy family told it, the Malfoy magic and cunning was key in turning the battle. That it was a well placed spell from a Malfoy wand that ensured the arrow flew true before it pierced King Harold's eye, leaving William of Normandy to become William the Conqueror, undisputed King of England. Through the context of his own life, Draco had to assume the entire tale was bullshit. A Malfoy hand did not turn the battle, just grabbed at whatever power they could get through association. He wasn't from a line of battle worthy heroes, but one of opportunistic cowards. Willing to let someone else fight for them. He turned in his bed and

pulled the covers up over his head. Even with the curtains closed the room was too light for him. He wanted total blackness.

He had no idea how long he spent with the covers over his head. At some point his stomach had given up complaining it was empty, leaving him to contemplate nothing but the darkness. The weight of the feather duvet. It was calm in the dark, until clunking and muttering drew his attention. Draco ignored it, clutching his covers a little tighter. The muttering and clunking just got louder.

“You can hide like a child as much as you like Mister Draco, Bobsy can keep making noise!” Bobsy’s familiar withering tone reached him through his shield.

Still he did not lower it.

“Aren’t you meant to be a wizard? Your rooms are absolutely freezing. I’m led to believe that there are charms that can take care of that type of thing... but no, Bobsy has to do everything,” Bobsy muttered, loud enough that Draco could hear it. The direction of the clunking, followed by the immediate heating of the room, let Draco know that Bobsy had lit a fire. It was going to be too warm to keep his head under the covers much longer. Besides, the air was growing stale. With a sigh, Draco pushed back his covers ready to face the creature that would not just let him rot.

“Yes?” he asked, trying to fix Bobsy with a withering stare.

“You’ve been in bed for two days,” said Bobsy, looking over Draco with a critical eye.

“Have I?” Draco responded flatly.

“Yes, that’s six meals that Vim has made that have gone to waste. All that work for no purpose,” Bobsy snapped. He was always protective of his partner.

“I’m not hungry,” Draco said.

“After two days? I wasn’t aware wizards had figured out a way to survive on air and self pity,” Bobsy climbed into a chair that he had pulled next to Draco’s bed.

“Was that all?” Draco asked, refusing to engage and Bobsy just stared at him.

“No, that is not all!” Bobsy squeaked, indignantly, “I am also out of produce. You haven’t been in the greenhouse for days. I can give you a list of what I need.”

“I have no intention of going to the garden,” Draco said.

“They are important ingredients, Mister Draco. And as I have said before, Bobsy does not garden.”

“As I am not eating, I fail to see why you require ingredients,” Draco drawled. He wanted this conversation to be over. He was used to Bobsy being infuriating but this was a new level.

“Miss Hermione is eating,” Bobsy served right back to him, “Could you stop feeling sorry for yourself long enough to get the things that she needs?”

Draco turned and looked at Bobsy. Taking in his expression, like a chessmaster who believed he’d just made the winning move.

“Trust me Bobsy, Granger wants nothing from me,” and with a sigh he pulled the duvet back up over him. Damn the heat. He would endure it.

There wasn’t noise in his room again until the grey had become darker. At some point Draco had peeled the covers back from his face conceding that he was either going to have to cast a bubblehead charm or get some fresh air. But he could still lie, looking up at the dark green, being soothed by the darkening grey.

It was Bobsy again, this time with a whole cart full of cleaning solutions.

“Right, Mister Draco, this room smells like a Wumpus den. Get up! Bobsy will be doing the sheets,” Bobsy snapped, his hands on his hips.

“No,” Draco answered, refusing to move.

“Really? You can not tell me that a boy who spends 20 minutes doing his hair each day enjoys smelling like a giant’s armpit. Get up, get in the shower and let me deal with the slovenly monstrosity that are your sheets.”

“I said no, Bobsy,” Draco answered again, and though the fresh air had been nice, he pulled the duvet back up over his head, blocking out the judgmental little elf and his probing stare.

Sleep had come for Draco again, though it was more reluctant in its approach now and never stayed as long. No matter, Draco had perfected the art of staring blankly at the bed canopy, seeing nothing but green, thinking of nothing at all. The next thing to break him from it was a small knock at the door which he ignored. The door creaked open anyway and a rattle of a cart broke the silence. If it was Bobsy with his damn cleaning items again, he was going to reach for the nearest item of clothing and throw it at him. The symbolic gesture should convey his message clearly enough. But it wasn’t Bobsy and cleaning supplies. It was Vim and a food trolley.

“Okay Master Draco, it’s been too many days without eating. We is worried you are sick,” said the little elf as she jumped deftly onto the bed and made a start to plump and rearrange his pillows, pulling him with surprising strength into a sitting position.

Not waiting for a response she levitated the tray from the trolley and brought it to the bed, where it rested on the duvet.

“I’m not hungry,” Draco mumbled, trying not to breathe in too deeply, lest the smell of Vim’s incredible chicken soup broke his resolve. He wasn’t sure why maintaining his hunger strike

was so important to him, but it felt fitting.

"If Master Draco is sick, he wouldn't be hungry and would still need to eat," replied Vim, picking up the bowl of soup and a spoon and coming to sit closer to him. The kind elf dipped the spoon into the soup and then held it to his lips, "Eat."

Draco narrowed his eyes at the little elf but did as he was told, and the riot of flavour pierced the grey nothing of his room and mood, much to his dissatisfaction. He did not want flavours. He did not want colours. He wanted to stay in his grey room until everything stopped being so difficult. Vim did not seem to care, just returned the spoon to the bowl, gathered more soup, and brought it to his mouth. She did not falter nor say anything, and before Draco was aware the bowl was empty and his tummy full.

"There Master Draco, something to give you some strength. I will be back tomorrow morning and you will be taking a bath. If you refuse to cooperate it's not matter; I have bathed you before and I am quite capable of doing it again."

With a polite curtsy she left the room, leaving Draco to lie in bed again. It was harder to go back to the nothingness this time. Not with the taste of Vim's soup on his tongue.

The next morning Vim returned. A food tray with porridge and tea, a stern prod into the bathroom which Draco chose to obey because although Vim had bathed him and seen him naked in the past, he was a small boy when it had occurred and didn't really want Vim to see his adult body. While he showered, Vim finally was able to change the sheets and he had to admit that the smell when he came back was much nicer. The drapes remained closed, a fact which Draco appreciated. It was one thing relenting on showers and food but another altogether to let light back into his room. She had lit a candle though, and left a small stack of books next to his bed, in case he wanted to look at something other than the canopy. He did not. There was a line.

She was back at lunch. This time with potato and leek soup, which Draco liked even more than the chicken. She also ripped open the curtains without warning before she came to him with the food, forcing Draco to squint at the light. Vim still fed him, even though he was likely able to feed himself. There was something nice about it. It reminded him of being a child. Vim used to dote on him like this when he was sick then too. She really had been most dedicated to him early childhood.

"Thank you," he said to Vim, when she returned the spoon to the empty bowl for the last time, "for caring for me."

Vim did not meet his eyes, just took the plate from the bed and put it on the tray, before pulling a chair next to his bedside and sitting with him for a little while.

"Vim is used to caring for Master Draco," she said, smoothing her linen apron and looking at him.

"You were always the one who provided the most comfort when I was sick as a boy," Draco said, smiling at the memories. Vim would not only feed him when he was unwell, but sit by him and stroke his hair, or read him long stories, complete with character voices.

"Ah Master Draco, you were rarely sick as a boy, you just wanted someone to spend time fussing over you and would pretend. Lady Malfoy would always believe you though, and I would always be instructed to leave my post in the kitchen to care for you."

"You were posted in the kitchen? That's not right. You were my nanny elf; you were posted to the nursery," Draco said, combing his memories from his childhood. He had distinct memories of Vim being his elf. Of them both in the nursery.

"Only until you were 5, Master Draco, and started lessons. At that point, your parents decided you should not be around creatures quite so much. They didn't like how attached you were growing. After that, I was only allowed back when you were ill; Lady Malfoy never much liked being around you when you were ill."

Draco shifted uncomfortably under his covers. He didn't want to talk about this, about his parents. And it didn't seem right anyhow. He remembered Vim caring for him, playing with him, doting on him, didn't he?

"Well, I appreciate your care from whatever position you were in. Then and now. I know that it is because of you and whatever affection you have for me, that you stayed when my house arrest began," he tried to thank her again and he had to confess, he wanted her to admit she was his elf. That she cared for him.

After the war, his father had been forced to free every elf from the manor before he was locked up in Azkaban. Then, to add insult to injury, he had to pay them a sum of compensation for their time working during Voldemort's occupation. There was nothing in the conditions of his house arrest that stopped Draco from hiring an elf, but they would have to choose to work at the manor. Stay due to their own free will. Draco knew that it was only Vim's loyalty to him, her connection to him from his boyhood, that had caused her to stay. Every other elves had left immediately. It was a decision that left him with Bobsy, because wherever Vim was, there was Bobsy. However, without them, he would have been alone without a living soul in the Manor and would have had to learn to cook.

Vim let out a sigh and leaned over to smooth an invisible crease on Draco's bed spread.

"Oh Master Draco, you were a very cute boy and a very sweet child. All cheeky smiles and curiosity. I enjoyed being your Nanny Elf, very much. But Vim would be doing a disservice to Master Draco to conceal the truth. The things the Vim saw in this house... the things Vim endured..." Vim looked out the window lost in her own thoughts for a minute, "Vim would have been quite content to take the money we were owed and retire to a little cottage somewhere far from all witches and wizards. I love you as well as any Nanny elf can love their grown wizard Master Draco but... I still would have gone to a cottage."

Draco felt the words settle over him silently before blasting apart the narrative he knew of himself like a bomb. It didn't make any sense. Vim cared for him. That's why she was there.

Vim had been his Nanny elf until he left for Hogwarts and that is why she cared enough to stay.

“It was Bobsy who wanted to stay,” Vim studied Draco as she spoke, “Bobsy never liked what happened to you. That curious, cheeky boy who loved romping through the gardens, following the elves around asking question after question. He resented your parents for restricting our access to you and then trying to make you as cruel as themselves. Bobsy always said you resisted it, told us all that you were not naturally cruel, just a young vine who was being trellised into an unnatural shape and it never quite took. And he never liked leaving a job half-done, my Bobsy. He thought that you were left half-raised. He wanted to stay, after the war, during your house arrest. He didn’t want to leave you to cope with the fall out alone, leave you to finish growing up alone. And Vim loves Bobsy, so Vim agreed.”

“But Bobsy’s awful to me!” Draco spat, refusing to believe what Vim was saying. There was no way what she was saying was true.

“Is he?” Vim snapped back, looking more uppity now, “Bobsy pushed Master Draco to explore his interests, and helped create a routine that kept Master Draco sane. He made sure he always had something available to sort or organise when his mind needed order. Bobsy was always overly polite to any guest that Master Draco had like Miss Nymphadora, even when Draco was being surly and sullen, trying to make sure they came back so Master Draco was not completely alone. Bobsy tried to prompt Master Draco to solve his own problems, rather than wait for someone to do it for him or tell him what to do. Give him a chance to make his own decisions to see what it felt like. Master Draco has spent his whole life being told what to do and it has not worked well. And with Miss Hermione...”

Vim trailed off and did not finish her thought, although Draco could not guess what Bobsy had done in regards to Hermione.

“Indulgence is not love Master Draco. Mandates and threats are not guidance. Bobsy has not done everything perfectly; Merlin knows he has been frustrated with you. You are a frustrating boy. But he has tried to act with love and guidance. To finish the job and see you grow into a man.”

Draco sat propped on his pillows, his tummy warm and full, and tried to comprehend what Vim was telling him. It was so foreign he wasn’t sure it was English. He didn’t want to have to try and understand it; he wanted someone to come in and translate it for him. What did it mean? How should he feel about it? What did he have to do now? How was he meant to respond?

Then the uncomfortable truth dawned on him. That was the problem. He was waiting for someone else. The whole point of what Vim was saying, what Bobsy had apparently been trying to lead him to, what Hermione had hinted at, what even Pansy had stated, was it was up to him. He needed to stop waiting for someone else to come in and tell him. Tell him how to interpret things. Tell him what to feel about them. Tell him how to respond to them. He needed to decide what he thought and felt and wanted and then he needed to act on it. Fight for it had been Granger’s words. The trouble was, he wasn’t exactly sure how.

Chapter End Notes

When you post a chapter because you are sick of editing it! Hope you all enjoy it!

Historical note: There is no evidence of magic at the Battle of Hastings where William the Conqueror defeated Harold Godwinson and became the King of England. However, Harold was (reportedly) shot through the eye with an arrow and that is how he died. William was called William the Bastard when he was Duke of Normandy and invaded because he believed Edward the Confessor had named him heir. It's hard to know if that was true, as Edward apparently made that promise to a few different people.

Thank you so much everyone who reads and comments. But I want to give a special shout out this week to what we writers call the "Unicorn Readers" (the official term). You're the ones who read every chapter, leave a thoughtful comment on every single one. Tell us your favourite lines (often ones that we've spent ages agonizing over to get exactly right) or discuss the characters we've created like they are real people! You make us feel like you are on this ride with us. The Dramione fandom is a community, and those unicorn readers are so important. Without them, so many writers would give up. It was a tough week for me in the community this week, as I repeatedly saw feedback from Dramione readers in forums I contribute to, "If writers didn't want criticism for my work, why were they putting it out there?", which made me start to think "why am I publishing this?" but then I had a unicorn reader binge 'Not with a Bang...' in an afternoon and leave a thoughtful comment on every chapter and was reminded why! Because it is so much fun creating this with you all. So thank you so much! You guys are the MVPs. Without you, I would guess there would be far fewer fics for us all to enjoy!

Trust Fund Wankers and Crunchie Bars

Chapter Notes

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

By dinnertime, Draco was out of bed, dressed and waiting at the small table in his sitting room. He wasn't sure how to fight for the life he wanted. Fuck, he wasn't even sure what the life he wanted looked like, but he was somewhat certain that lying in bed in his underwear was not the best way to go about it. Still, while he was ready to leave his bed, he didn't feel ready to leave his room, and so was glad when there was a polite tap at the door and Vim came wheeling a dinner tray in for him.

The little elf didn't say anything as she moved the plates from the trolley to the table, but she didn't avoid Draco's eyes either and before she left she gave him a comforting pat on the arm. Draco thought he might purr like a cat at the touch. Familiar. Comforting.

"You should look at the books on your bedside," she said, "Bobsy chose them for you."

Draco took his time with his dinner. It was a simple roast chicken, some potatoes and peas. Simpler than what was generally served at the Malfoy dinner table but as Draco chewed each bite deliberately, he decided he quite liked roast chicken. He certainly preferred it to duck, which was what his parents had insisted on.

After dinner, he followed Vim's advice and looked at the stack of books left for him. From Bobsy apparently. Hard to believe when he thought of Bobsy indignantly refusing to fetch him books when he was avoiding the library; until Vim's words came back to him.

Indulgence is not love. To allow Draco to hide from Granger all those months ago would have been indulgence, but would he have benefited from it? He thought of the moments that came after, after he'd left his room and found Granger again and there was the answer to his question; no he wouldn't have.

The top book from the stack was completely devoid of moving images and italicised incantations; a muggle book on gardening. It piqued his interest, and he took it over to an armchair by the fire. March was drawing to a close and soon April showers and sun would require him to spend substantially more time in the gardens if he wanted them to look their best. And after 7 years of gardening without magic, he speculated that he would continue that way. He searched the index, and finding the section on restoring a garden after winter, turned to the correct page. There, a folded sheet of parchment fell out. It was the notice from Gringotts, stating the details for the separate account he'd created for Tonks and Teddy.

That meddling bloody elf. Here Draco was, frozen in his room with no idea how to proceed and while Bobsy would never be so presumptuous as to tell him what to do, he was going to surreptitiously point Draco in the direction he thought he should be going in. It was equal parts annoying and endearing. What's more, Bobsy was right. Draco might not know a whole heap about the life he wanted but he was starting to suspect a little about the type of man he wanted to be. That man needed to keep his word and go and see Tonks.

There was no time for breakfast the next morning. Or at least, that is what he started to tell himself before acknowledging the lie and admitting that he wasn't ready to see if Granger had given up on eating with him. He didn't want to be the type of man that lied to himself. Lucius Malfoy was the king of lying to himself and look where that had gotten them all. He got dressed, trying not to think too hard about what clothes he was wearing; his wardrobe and style preferences would have to be something he thought about in greater depth later. Once dressed, he checked the address on the top on the paper with the account details (thank Merlin for goblins and their slightly creepy, limitless knowledge of personal information), and grasping the wand that still did not suit him, apparated away.

He reappeared down a country lane. The only home around was a medium cottage beyond a hedge, with a large shed behind it and a large rambling garden. This must be Tonk's house. Or Lysander Prewett's. He had vague memories of his cousin moving in with her ministry appointment husband after their wedding.

"Hullo," a small boy with vibrant blue hair, popped his head over the hedge and looked at Draco. Draco felt his spine stiffen, waiting for the boy to say something more. A hiss or sneer. He knew this boy from the photos Tonks had shared. This was Teddy Lupin and Draco knew all too well what had been taken from him in the war.

"Are you my cousin Draco?" the boy asked, his brow furrowed as if he couldn't figure out why Draco was standing so stiff and silent.

"What?" Draco asked.

"Are you my cousin, Draco? My mum told me I have a cousin with hair like that. She even changed her hair to that colour so I could see it," as Teddy spoke, his blue hair morphed to white blonde, "See? I've never seen anyone else with hair like that before."

"Yes, I'm Draco," Draco said, staring at the little boy, bewildered that he not only knew who he was, but was speaking to him so openly. It was not how he had imagined their first meeting.

"Teddy!" a tall gangly man with freckles and messy, mousey brown hair came out the front door of the cottage. His feet seemed to trip over themselves as he stumbled to a stop, surprised to see someone in their lane, but his face showed a flash of recognition as he spotted Draco, and no wands were drawn at his presence.

"Ah, hullo. Are you here to see Dora? Draco right?" the man said and stuck his hand out as he spoke. A bewildered Draco took it and nodded. Lysander didn't seem at all put off by his guest's sudden muteness. Just gestured to the gate further along in the hedge.

"Lysander Prewett... her husband," Lysander said, blushing at the word husband, "Well, come in, she's just in the cottage getting ready for work."

Lysander picked up Teddy, who's hair was still a facsimile of Draco's own, and led the trio back to the house.

"Dora!" Lysander called as he stepped through the front door. Draco followed him in and took in his surroundings.

The house seemed warm and quirky; a mix of wizarding gadgets he recognised and then others that were completely new to him. Given that Lysander was an inventor of sorts, it made sense. There was a portrait from their wedding on the wall in the hallway and Draco noted that in it, Lysander was dressed in clothes benefiting a workshop more than a ceremony, as if he'd been caught by surprise by his own wedding. However, he was looking at his new wife kindly and hopefully and that made Draco warm to the man. There were guests in the photo and Draco's eyes were immediately drawn to Hermione standing in the small crowd. She looked happy. Truly happy. Her arm casually looped through Potter's, as they stood to the side of the couple smiling at the photographer. Her hair was out and blowing gently in the breeze, and she wore a soft pink sundress. Draco wondered if she knew of their match then. Whether she'd thought of him as she watched Tonks marry. Whether she had already decided that she wasn't going to fight the match or whether that was decided later.

"Does Teddy have everything he needs to go to Mum's?" Tonks asked as she walked into the hall, dressed in her auror robes ready for work.

Stupid Draco. Of course she would be going to work. It was 8:30 am on a Friday morning. Unlike him, she had a purpose. Her eyes widened as she saw him, lingering next to the wedding photo.

"I'm sorry," Draco forced out, "I forgot that you would inevitably be busy on a weekday. I can go. Send an owl like a polite person and make an appointment for a more appropriate time."

He gave a quick nod to each member of the family before turning back to the door, ready to make his escape. He was a foolish man. For all the things he could have forgotten about in his rush to 'fight for his future', as Granger had so succinctly put it, basic etiquette was possibly the most embarrassing. He'd never be able to tease Tonks about the way she inhaled biscuits again.

"Wait a minute," Tonk hurried her pace and caught up with him before he could leave, "Draco it's fine. I'm glad to see you. Stay for a while. It's been months. The ministry will survive without me while we have a cup of tea."

Draco froze and parsed apart her words, trying to find any double meanings or hesitation in them.

"Are you sure?" he asked, still facing the door.

"Yes, you plonker. Just give me a moment to send off Teddy and Sander," Tonks said with a chuckle.

Draco stood awkwardly to the side and watched as Tonks busied herself with her son. She was a relaxed mother, he thought. Tactile in a way his mother had not been. She used the hem of her own robes to wipe some dirt from her son's face and her hands as a makeshift comb to smooth his still platinum blonde hair.

"I don't want to go to Grandma's yet," Teddy whined as his mother zipped up his jacket and helped him into his backpack, "I want to stay and play with Draco. You told me I would get to play with my real cousin one day."

"And you will," Tonks cajoled, "But Sander is taking you to Grandma's on his way to work and she's waiting for you."

"But it's not fair. He's here now and I won't ever get to play with him again if I don't stay," Teddy said.

"Well, I am sure Draco will promise to come back another day to play, won't you Draco?" she said, speaking to Teddy but looking up over her shoulder at Draco with an expression that told him with no uncertain terms what his answer should be.

"Yes," he answered automatically, although completely at a loss as to why both Teddy and Tonks would want him to come back to play.

His answer was enough of a reassurance for Teddy and without too much more grumbling, Tonks was able to send the boy and Lysander out the door 5 minutes later. With a small clap, she turned to face him and gestured to the kitchen.

"Right," she said as they both entered the room and she immediately went about the tasks of putting on the kettle and opening cupboards to retrieve mugs, tea bags and a half eaten packet of biscuits, "My apologies if Teddy was coming on a little strong; you probably haven't had much to do with kids before. He's just quite fixated on the idea that he has a cousin. We spend plenty of time with the Weasley brood, and Harry's kids of course, and well, they all have a million cousins. Teddy feels left out, so I kept telling him about you."

"You told him about me?"

"Yes, and I know you are technically my cousin, his second cousin, but it's slim pickings when you're the only child of an only child," she said, placing a steaming cup of tea in front of him and sitting down herself.

"What did you tell him about me?" Draco asked, keeping his hands tucked in his lap. How you could possibly explain him to a child. Explain what he'd done. What he'd believed. Especially when the child was living without a father because of it.

"That your mother and my mother are sisters. And that if his Grandmother hadn't fallen in love with his grandfather, I probably would have grown up and had a life very similar to yours," Tonk said, shrugging, "He's seven. He doesn't need to know the whole complicated tale."

Draco looked at the tea in front of him, searching for his next response in the brown liquid. It was easier when she was mandated by law to visit him. Here, now, she could ask him to leave and request never to see him again if he said or did the wrong thing.

"What do you want me to tell him about you?" Tonks asked, interrupting Draco's thoughts.

"I don't know," Draco answered with a sigh, running his hands over his face, "I just... I don't know."

Every emotion he'd pushed away while he was staring at the bed canopy, embracing the oblivion of nothing, flooded back into his body. It made him curl forward onto the table, hiding his face and pulling at his hair to provide a physical sensation to counter the emotional ones.

"Oh gods, I was worried this was going to happen. You've gone full tortured white male haven't you?" Tonks asked and Draco sat back up and looked at her. Her face was not mocking, though her words had a touch of jest in them. If anything she looked genuinely concerned. She untwisted the top of the packet of biscuits and pushed it towards him.

Draco gratefully accepted a biscuit and nibbled the edge of it. His stomach was hollow and aching.

"I don't know what that means," he admitted.

"It means that you're learning why therapy should have been a condition of your release," Tonks said, "It means you're completely overwhelmed not only with the outside world, but all the stuff that happened before you were locked away. It meant the ministry pressed unpause on your life and now you are flailing. I told Bobsy..."

"Bobsy's trying... but I am frustrating," interrupted Draco, feeling oddly defensive of the little elf. Oh, how the mighty had fallen. If you had told him a month ago he would have been defending the little imp, Draco would have claimed insanity. However, as he'd stayed up in front of the fire with his muggle gardening books, reflecting on Vim's tale, he had to admit to seeing the truth in what she was saying. Bobsy had cared for him in ways that no one else ever had.

Tonks snorted, "Merlin, things I never thought I would hear Draco Malfoy say. So tell me, how bad is it?"

Draco couldn't meet her eye as he spoke.

"I don't think Hermione will ever speak to me again," he said, taking in a deep breath before continuing. Like Vim's speech, he also had to accept Hermione's. He had been willing to hide behind her as she fought for his future. And before that he had been on the other side of the battle, attacking her.

"I may have been an unforgivable prat."

He wondered if he should list out all his individual sins so Tonks could get a sense of how bad the situation was, but when he looked at her to gauge if she was waiting for more information, she just rolled her eyes at him.

"The fact that the first thing you brought up when I asked you how bad your life was, tells me not all hope is lost. Continue. What else?"

Draco took another deep breath. She was asking after all. And it might feel good, just this once, to say it all.

“Everyone hates me. Your lot hate me for obvious reasons. Blood supremacists hate me because they think I betrayed the cause. Which shouldn’t annoy me because I’ve found betraying the cause is the only worthwhile thing I’ve ever done, even though I am not sure I actually did it. It’s just I thought that if there was one group of people who wouldn’t try to spit on me in the street, it would have been my fellow Slytherins. And I had stupidly thought that the realities of a war based on blood politics would have caused everyone to... I don’t know... reassess their opinions. I can’t go anywhere without someone reminding me that I deserve to be locked in Azkaban or dead. That I am a waste. That I am awful. That, because of my family, there are people who were better than me, who are dead. And then there’s these moments. Where I can’t quite figure out if I am in the past or not and...” Draco couldn’t finish describing them. He sounded insane. Maybe he was. He cleared his throat, “I only just figured out that I like roast chicken over duck and I hate my clothes.”

It was a weak finish but for reasons that defied logic, he felt his last two points were important. Significant. Shouldn’t a 25 year old man know whether he preferred chicken or duck? The silence hovered between, and Tonks waited a moment longer before she started to speak. As if she was checking he was actually done.

“You know, after the Battle of Hogwarts, I climbed into bed and stayed there for over a week. Mum had to take care of Teddy. I just curled up under my covers and told myself that I had lost everything. That I would never be happy again. That I had failed. When I left my baby to join my husband for the final battle, I had failed because I was unable to bring that baby’s father back with me. That Teddy would grow up to resent me for my failure. Eventually, Dad came in and dragged me from bed. Made me hold my son. Had me actually question some of the things I was telling myself. Made me see it wasn’t all bad.”

Draco listened, remembering his own refuge under the covers. Was he meant to be comparing the two tales? Part of him felt uneasy to do so; he didn’t feel like he had the right. Another part of him felt ready to defend and attack, should she be about to tell him to buck up and get on with it. While there were similarities in their tale, there was also a main difference; Tonks had been fighting for the right side. She had been good.

“I’m not saying it’s not bad. I’m not saying that it’s not awful and hard. People suck. I mean Teddy’s father died a war hero and yet there are still kids whose parents won’t let them play with him because he was also a werewolf. I’m just saying not everything you’re telling yourself will be 100% true. Just as I hadn’t lost everything, not everyone hates you. I don’t hate you. Teddy doesn’t hate you. Nor does Lysander; he’d actually quite like to get to know you. Bobsy and Vim care for you. So do your friends. I’m even 99% sure that Hermione doesn’t hate you. As for the rest. We’ll figure it out. Eat chicken instead of duck. Buy some new clothes.”

“From where? No one will serve me,” Draco asked, latching onto the last part of her statement. It felt like the only part he could process at the moment.

“No one in the wizarding world will serve you... Although I would guess that if you asked your little wifey to come along with you, they would fall all over themselves to offer their

assistance—”

“Not going to happen,” Draco interrupted her.

“Fine,” Tonks said, holding up her palms to him in surrender, “as I was saying, no one in the wizarding world will serve you, but there are thousands of muggle owned stores with shopkeepers who have no idea who you are. Go there.”

As she said it, Draco felt like he was a kid again, standing in front of his class, drawing a blank as the professor asked him the most basic of questions. He was mortified. He hadn’t thought of going to a Muggle clothing store. But they must have them. Where they were and how they worked was a complete mystery to him however. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had certainly never shopped in Muggle Britain.

“Um, I don’t know how to go into a muggle clothing store,” Draco said, his cheeks burning hot and Tonks did him the kindness of not laughing.

“I’ll take you,” she said, shrugging, as if it was no big thing, “not today though. Unlike some trust fund wankers, I actually need to go to work and make a living.”

How had he forgotten his entire purpose for the visit? He’d been so caught up with Teddy and the cottage, and then the shelter that Tonks had offered him as he unburdened himself. Draco fumbled for the piece of paper tucked in his pocket.

“Actually, that’s why I came,” he said, “not to cry over tea and biscuits. I have something for you, well you and Teddy. And actually in hindsight, I probably should have included your mother.”

His hand shook slightly as he passed her the piece of paper. Tonk set her mug down on the table and took it with both hands, eyes growing wide as she read.

“At the risk of sounding stupid, you’re going to have to explain this to me,” she said, her eyes not leaving the parchment.

“Well, it’s your half of the Black family inheritance. Only the gold unfortunately. There was no way for me to split and transfer the jewellery and other heirlooms. Not without going into the vaults and sorting piece by piece. Which I can do. You can come with me if you like. Pick out the pieces you want... or your mother. In case any of them mean something to her. Again, I should have thought of her when I drew up—” Draco started rambling as his nerves overtook him.

Tonks leaned across and put a hand on his forearm and Draco looked her in the eye. The warmth of her touch on his arm immediately put his mind more at ease. The casualness of it. It was worth more than all the gold in that new vault.

“Hold up, you are just giving me half the Black family fortune?” she asked and Draco took a moment to enjoy the shock on her face. He had looked forward to this moment. He’d imagined this moment. He could have had this moment a month ago if he hadn’t been so scared.

“Sorry Cousin. I hate to tell you, but you’re a trust fund wanker just like me now,” he smirked and watched as the smile she couldn’t fight overtook her face.

“You might be insane, Malfoy. Just so you know. All those years in that creepy big mansion have fried your brain. You can’t go giving away this amount of money!”

“It’s just what would have been rightfully yours anyway. And your mother’s. I do feel awful I forgot to put her on the account,” Draco felt himself blush.

“Don’t worry, we’ll take care of her. Hell, we could take care of the whole village in perpetuity with this,” Tonks looked unsure at what to do before taking the parchment and sticking it to the fridge. Right beside a child’s drawing of what Draco assumed to be a car.

“There, now I will get the pleasure of watching Sander faint when he sees it after work,” Tonks said, looking between the paper and Draco and smoothing her robes. “I’m still going to go to work though. I refuse to become a stereotypical layabout! At least, not for a couple more years anyway.”

“I never thought you wouldn’t. I am starting to see the appeal of a job. If you know of anything an ex-death-eater with an incomplete education would be suitable for?” he said, his tone light but there was truth behind his words. He wanted a purpose. Something to do each day that was productive.

“We’ll add it onto your list of things to figure out along with clothes and food preferences,” Tonks said, teasing him in a way that was familiar and he had to admit to himself, a little caring.

“Look, I do need to go to work, but here’s my first piece of big cousin advice. Don’t apparate straight home. Walk down that lane for about a mile and you will get to our closest village. Completely Muggle. There’s a sweet shop on the corner of the highstreet, go in there and buy something. I recommend the Crunchie bar. Or the Fizzy Cola Sweets. Or both. Go big.”

Tonks grabbed a little urn off the top of the fridge, reached in and pulled out some colourful slips of paper and handed them to him.

“This is Muggle money. Just take your sweets to the man at the counter and hand him the money. Numbers still work the same in both the magical and muggle worlds. There will be more than enough there to cover a couple of sweets. Just get your things and then go walk around. There’s a lovely park. Go enjoy it. See that not everyone in the world hates you. And I’ll owl you. We’ll go clothes shopping and you need to come and play with Teddy, because you promised him you would. You’re going to learn a lot about robots.”

Draco found he was quite looking forward to learning about robots. It was the first thing he’d had to look forward to in a while. Besides seeing Granger at breakfast. He’d looked forward to that everyday. Tonks grabbed both mugs and dumped them into the sink before she and Draco left the house; her to apparate to the Ministry, him to follow her advice and walk to the village.

Draco spent the whole day in the little muggle village. He followed Tonk's advice and bought the sweets and decided that they were just as good as magical ones. The Crunchie was even better because he didn't have to catch it before he got to enjoy the sweet, chocolate goodness. He went to the park, admired the daffodils that were already in bloom and watched as a man in some sort of uniform tended a garden bed. He'd seen Draco watching, and started a conversation about the late planting and Draco felt lighter as he'd conversed with the man. Proud, when he realised that he had enough knowledge to talk about tulips and fertiliser and mulch in a confident way. Happy when the man offered his dirt stained hand to shake before he left, saying it was lovely to meet him and that he hoped to see him around again. Maybe at the garden centre on the weekend. Draco had no idea what a garden centre was but it sounded great. No one hissed. No one spat. No one avoided him.

He felt so buoyed that he'd spent the rest of the day in the village. He'd had enough of the strange muggle money to buy a sandwich for lunch (though he'd needed the shopkeeper to help him decipher the coins, which had earned him a strange look but they had done it all the same). He even found a library with a whole section on Muggle gardening. It took everything in him not to pull out his wand and duplicate some of the texts. He would have to come back.

Back at the manor, he went to the dining room, ready for dinner. The clock on the mantel ticked past 7 but still the table remained empty. He waited until ten past and when there was still no food, he walked to his room to see if Vim had bought him a trolley again. Still nothing. He considered indulging in a dinner of muggle sweets (because he had gone back and bought several more Crunchie bars before he came home) but decided against hiding and went down to the kitchen. He should at least see Vim and Bobsy.

There was light spilling from the kitchen into the hall and a murmur of voices as he approached. Turning into the room, he was surprised to see Bobsy and Vim sitting, sharing a slice of cheesecake, while Hermione stood at the stove, fixing a kettle. They all froze when he came in.

"Mister Draco," Bobsy said, breaking the awkward silence, "You've finally found where the food is."

Draco swallowed and took in the scene. There were three clean plates sitting on the dish drainer, the smell of something Italian in the air.

"You all eat dinner together?" he asked, trying to ignore the stab of pain in his chest. All those nights he sat alone. Ate alone. They were all in here, eating together.

"Yes," Bobsy said, not at all ashamed, "Vim and I have always eaten together and when Mistress Granger came to the manor, she inquired if she might join us."

"I didn't..." Draco trailed off. He'd never thought about the fact that Bobsy and Vim must eat dinner. He'd wondered every night where Hermione was but he'd never thought of the two elves sitting down and eating like he did. Have never assumed they would be so much like him. Hermione knew immediately and sought it out.

"When your house arrest started Mister Draco, I asked what you would like to do for dinner and you replied, and I quote 'It shall be served in the dining room at 7 as it has always

been''," Bobsy met his eye and gave him a look that clearly said he was not going to be blamed entirely for Draco's isolation as it had been his choice. It had been his choice because at the time, he had never considered that Bobsy and Vim would be suitable dinner companions. Or indeed company. The same way he had never even considered shopping in the Muggle world.

"It wasn't tonight," Draco said, fighting his own shame and wondering what had changed. Hoping that the shift was another round about prompts from his meddling elves. Wondering if it was too late to change.

"No," Bobsy agreed, "After your *illness*, I was unsure if you wanted to eat in the dining room tonight. If it is your wish, I can continue serving dinner in the dining room tomorrow as per normal."

Draco looked around the room, noting Hermione in the corner with her eyes fixed on the kettle. She was listening, he could tell. He didn't want to be there if his presence would make her uncomfortable. However, he had to assume that Bobsy would not do anything that made her uncomfortable.

"Or I could eat with you all?" he said, his voice sounding hoarse and cautious.

"That would also be acceptable," Bobsy said, and Draco thought he saw a flicker of a smile on the wizened elf's face. "We eat at 6:30 and Mistress Granger insists that she gets to cook for us on Saturdays. You can do the dishes for her."

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Hermione's voice cut in from across the room and Draco turned and met her eyes. Seeing the golden flecks of her irises made him react in much the same way that the first taste of Vim's chicken soup had. It flooded his world with colour and flavour and his magic danced in triumph. He'd missed her. Or the bond had. Gods, how it had missed her. It had grown accustomed to daily interaction and this past week it had been starving. Unable to speak, he just nodded.

"We've finished eating," said Vim primly, breaking through the moment and drawing his attention back to his two elves, "But I have more than enough leftovers to fix you a plate."

Draco sat down on a stool around the kitchen counter and felt the warmth of Hermione as she leaned over his shoulder to place a mug of tea in front of him. He caught a whiff of her geranium and basil scent and breathed in deep. The bond seemed to think that alone would sustain him.

"Actually, I have some sweets we can share," he said, digging into his cloak pockets and dumping half a dozen Crunchies in the middle of the bench. Vim tutted.

"You can't eat sweets for dinner," she got up and went to get one of the clean plates from the dish drainer. Summoning a dish from whatever pocket the elves kept food, she served him a plate of lasagne and placed it in front of him.

"Eat this first, then sweets," she said firmly, and handed him a fork. Draco said his thanks and took a bite. As he chewed, he thought it was possible he liked lasagne even more than roast

chicken.

Hermione had joined them at the island, and was examining the chocolates.

“These are Muggle,” she said, before taking one and opening it.

“Yes,” replied Draco, feeling part proud and part nervous as he spoke to her, “I got them from a Muggle village near Tonk’s house. They’re good.”

“I know they are. Although they’re very sweet,” he said, taking a bite and Draco tried not to stare at her mouth and the crumble of honeycomb stuck to her lip.

“I like sweet,” he said.

“Hmm,” Hermione hummed noncommittally. Draco wondered what shallow truce this was. Were they really going to sit and converse in the kitchen? She didn’t want to fight, but surely that didn’t mean she had forgiven him.

“And did you like the muggle village?” Bobsy interrupted and Draco looked at him. He was fixing Draco with a very strong gaze. As if he was trying to nudge Draco in a certain direction but wouldn’t tell him outright what it was.

“Yes,” Draco answered instantly, because it was the truth, “Very much. There was a nice park, a library and a sandwich shop. I was actually speaking to a gardener and...”

There it was. Another question. He trailed off and looked at Hermione again. He could keep it to himself. He could go away and write it in a letter that he would never send. But instead he took a deep breath.

“Granger, I know this may seem like a stupid question but what’s a Garden Centre?”

Chapter End Notes

I know, this is the longest you've ever had to wait for an update (a whole week which isn't too bad in the grand scheme) but she's a hefty one so I hope that makes up for it. I didn't want to publish another chapter without a Hermine and Draco scene.

Fair warning my mother in law is coming to visit so it will probably be another week before the next update as well. Trust me, I am more unhappy about it than you are.

Thank you so much for the love last chapter. You guys are truly the best readers and cheer squad a girl could ask for. I love that only the best members of the fandom end up here!

Chicken Korma and Naan

Chapter Notes

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

Draco needed to apologise. Dinner the night before had been pleasant. Hermione had politely explained what a garden centre was before excusing herself to bed and Draco hadn't meant to watch her leave, hadn't really noticed that he was, until Bobsy levitated the empty mugs into the sink and deposited them with such a crash that Draco turned back to both him and Vim and saw their matching, knowing smirks.

"What will you be doing tomorrow, Master Draco?" Bobsy asked, raising an eyebrow, "Will you be taking breakfast in the dining room with Miss Granger again?"

"I don't know," Draco said truthfully, "Did she? I mean while I was in my room, where did...? I mean, do you know if she wants to eat breakfast..."

He trailed off and internally winced at how pathetic he sounded and when he looked at Bobsy, knew exactly what Bobsy was going to say.

"Right," Draco said, "If I want to know if my wife wants to have breakfast with me I should ask her myself."

"Hmm, turns out the young master is capable of learning. Albeit very slowly," Bobsy said, his tone amused and a little affectionate. Which was unsettling. Enough so that Draco stood, thanked the elves for both the dinner and company and went straight to his room.

Once there, he considered the reality of the situation. He enjoyed spending time with Granger. Whether it was because of the blood magic that bound them, or because he'd developed some attachment during their extended period of forced isolation, or whether it was just her, once he removed his own prejudice, he didn't really know. But it was bloody awkward. He couldn't really look at her without remembering her deadly stillness as she calmly took him, his arguments and his behaviour apart. And if that wasn't enough of a king hit, there were the memories of his behaviour at school, or worse, the war. Or worse again the way she moved around like a spectre of her former self. How could he indulge in her company when all of those things hung between them. He couldn't.

He didn't want to be the type of man that lied to himself and looking at Granger made him face one singular truth. He'd hurt her. Repeatedly. For no other reason than he had either thought her beneath him or hadn't considered her at all. Whether they could ever build anything resembling a friendship out of that, he didn't know. Though he suspected if they did, and again he didn't want to be a man who lied to himself and so he had to confess he hoped they would, and it would have to start with an apology. Not that he'd had a whole lot of practice with them, or seen very many good examples but he was led to believe that if you had hurt someone, the appropriate response was to apologise. For everything. From the moment he'd flung the word mudblood at her in second year to the moment he'd stomped into her room, angry because she wasn't fixing everything for him.

In an ideal world, Draco would stumble upon Granger in some picture perfect setting to apologise. Maybe on their window seat or in the greenhouse at dusk. She would look otherworldly with her hair loose and eyes sparkling and he could go to her and fall to his knees ready to prostrate himself on her altar. She would be silent for the entirety of what he needed to say and he would be able to find the exact right words to convey the depth of his shame and the sincerity of his remorse. And afterwards... Well, he didn't dare let his imagination build an afterwards in too great of detail but he hoped that afterwards there would be some blank slate for them both.

In reality, there were too many logistics to coordinate. He wanted to have breakfast with her but did that mean he needed to apologise before he asked her to have breakfast with him or after? It was likely he'd have breakfast alone tomorrow, but what if she showed up anyway? Out of habit. Or because she thought he would insist on it again now he was *recovered*. She had no reason to believe he would be reformed because he hadn't apologised. So if she came down to breakfast, should he do it over breakfast? Was it less meaningful if he did it after they met by chance? Should he seek her out? Should he ask her somewhere special to do it? Or would that be too much like a date? Definitely. Probably. And he didn't want her to think that it was a date? No. So should he go to her before breakfast? Or after? But after would mean he'd quite possibly have to sit through breakfast not apologising to her. And then follow her to her room like a stalker. So should he skip breakfast? Or go to the kitchen for breakfast? But what if she was in the kitchen when he got there?

Eventually, his legs took over the roar of questions in his brain and he found himself walking down the hall to her room and knocking at her door. She pulled it open and he took her in. Her hair was tied in a messy bun on the top of her head, and she was wrapped in her white robe again. Her smell of geraniums and basil was stronger, as if she had just reapplied it or maybe it was just her entire room that had taken on the scent.

“I’m sorry,” he rushed out before she could speak, “in an ideal world, I would find a way and a moment to convey exactly how sorry I am. It would be something more than this. Merlin knows you deserve something more than this, especially after everything I’ve put you through these past months. But I’ve got nothing else but the meagre words. I’m sorry for everything. For what happened at school, for what happened in the war...”

Draco had to take a minute, his mind filled with images of her in the drawing room once more. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths of her perfume, allowing it to ground him. There wasn’t the tang of blood and fear in the air, just geraniums and basil. Eyes flickering open he continued.

“And for my behaviour since you arrived. More specifically, since I was released and tried to manipulate you and use you to get what I wanted, but also for everytime I snapped at you, or yelled or disrespected your very clear boundaries. And... and... I’m sorry. They are vastly insufficient words but they are all I have. And they are yours. I am so sorry Hermione Granger. I will be sorry for the rest of my life.”

Draco let out a deep breath and stood before her, unsure what was going to happen next. In an ideal world he would have felt the guilt lift from his chest, and in a sense something did lift. But something also settled in his gut. Insecurity. Uncertainty. Vulnerability. He searched her

face and found it blank, though looking into her eyes he got the sense that she was thinking furiously. Processing rapidly. The way she wrapped her arms around her middle, the only hint she might feel as uncertain as him.

“Okay,” she said finally, her hands grappling with the belt around her waist, pulling at it until it was so tight Draco was concerned it was painful “Okay. I can do that. I can accept that. Thank you, Malfoy.”

“Ok,” he repeated, watching her a moment longer. His magic surged, urging him to reach out and touch her but he locked it away. It wasn’t the time. That wasn’t why he’d apologised. He thought of asking her to breakfast then, telling her that he liked her company and would appreciate more of it, but didn’t want to cheapen his apology. He didn’t offer it to get something in return. She needed to understand that.

“I’ll leave you to your night,” he said, marvelling at the anticlimax of the moment and trying to keep the disappointment at bay. There was no blank slate. Something had shifted but history could not be erased with an apology it seemed.

“Okay,” she repeated, but did not move to close the door.

Draco took the lead instead and nodded good night, then turned to go back to his room.

He’d only made it a few steps before she’d called out to stop him.

“Draco?”

He turned to see she’d taken a few steps into the hall after him.

“Yes?” he asked, looking her in the eye and she went back to fiddling with the sash of her robe.

“Do you still want to have breakfast together?”

Draco could help but smile before schooling his features into what he hoped was a calm look.

“I don’t want you to feel obligated. You don’t have to. But I quite enjoy your company,” he replied, hopeful yet prepared to have her deny him.

“I quite do too,” she admitted, and a small smile graced her face, “So I’ll see you at breakfast then?”

Draco didn’t bother trying to hide his smile as he nodded and only after she had returned to her room and shut the door, did he turn and walk back to his room. An apology didn’t erase history, but maybe there was a tiny chance it could be the first sentence of a new chapter.

The next morning, Draco went to breakfast earlier. He was there to make sure he could pull out Hermione’s chair and watch as she poured her peppermint tea. It was a Saturday and so instead of robes, she was dressed in jeans and a jumper. Draco didn’t know what Pansy was

thinking; it was a great look for her. And it was a hint at the casual routine they might be able to manage now the air had been cleared. They didn't speak as they both picked up their respective reading material, but Draco saw her watching him from the corner of her eye, because he was watching her. A large barn owl swooped into the room and for a second, Draco experienced a mini flashback. Not to the war this time. To the moment less than a week ago, when everything fell apart. However, this owl did not land next to Hermione, instead came to perch next to him and he did not recognise the messy scrawl on the front of the envelope.

After he'd untied the letter from the owl's foot, Hermione once again took care of spoiling the creature with treats from the table. She was cooing softly to the bird, as he opened the letter and realised it was from Tonks. A short missive instructing him where to meet her in a muggle town. Down the bottom, she'd written the words 'DON'T APPARATE INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE MUGGLES' and underlined it three times. A fantastic vote of confidence. As if he would be that stupid.

"Tonks wants to meet in Salisbury," he said to Hermione, and wondered if he could ask her the best way to get there without alarming the muggles. If only he knew how to drive, maybe he could borrow her car.

"Oh," Hermione answered, looking up from the owl. "Why?"

"I asked her to help me with some muggle shops... I want to buy some new clothes and..." he shrugged rather than finish the sentence and admit that he couldn't get anyone to serve him in wizarding England. Although she must know, it was still embarrassing to admit.

"You're getting new clothes?" she asked, taking a sip of her tea. Book abandoned to the side.

"Yes, I'm not particularly fond of these," he answered honestly.

"Why? You look-" Hermione stopped herself mid-sentence and blushed, "I mean, your clothes are very nice. They seem to fit well and suit your... frame."

Draco took his own sip of tea to extend the moment and revel in it. She liked the way he looked in his clothes. Maybe they weren't so bad after all.

"They remind me too much of my father," he said, "Half of them are my father's and I find I don't really like that feeling anymore."

"That's reasonable," she replied and for a second he thought she was going to say more. When she didn't he prompted her.

"But?" he asked.

"But nothing, it's reasonable. It's just... you look nice in grey. That's all," Hermione said and looked down at her tea.

"You can come with us if you like?" Draco heard the invitation come out of this mouth before he'd consciously decided to make it. "Help me choose."

The invitation dangled between them and for a minute Draco thought that she might be going to accept but instead she smiled and shook her head.

“I’ll let you and Tonks spend the time together. It’s good. Spending time with your family. You’re lucky to have her.”

Draco just nodded and pretended that the rejection didn’t hurt as much as it did. Instead he smiled and agreed with her; he was lucky to have Tonks. He wondered if this was where he should ask about her family, but a pang of sadness through their bond had him think better of it. They were having breakfast together. It was better than he could have hoped for. It would be enough.

Shopping with Tonks was an unexpectedly pleasant affair. She’d kept her laughter at him to a minimum and brought along more muggle money. He tried to pay her back but he had no idea of the exchange rate and Tonks had taken great pleasure in informing him that she could afford to buy him as many clothes as he desired. She had urged him to try on jeans, something he found that he couldn’t get behind no matter how much she assured him that it was perfectly acceptable to wear jeans instead of trousers. At least he couldn’t get behind them until she’d bought up the fact that if he ever went anywhere with Hermione, she would likely be wearing jeans and it would look weird if he was dressed too formally, (although her exact words had been ‘dressed like a twiggish prat’). He’d bought three pairs. Just in case.

Muggle clothes were, he was pleased to report, much like wizarding clothes. There were no charms on them that made them fit to his body instantly, or build in water repellent charms, but he managed to find cotton and wool as fine as any wizarding tailor. Tonks had chastised him for choosing too much grey, but he’d supplemented it with soft blues, whites, tan and even a couple of flashes of purple. He’d stayed away from the green. This trip at least. He’d had enough green for a while.

Laden with bags (Tonks had not allowed him to shrink them and put them in his pocket, insisting he get the full muggle experience), Tonk had pulled him into cheap looking restaurant and after ordering something called a Chicken Korma and Naan for them both, cast a silencing charm around the table.

“So, clothes check?” she asked and Draco cast an eye at all the bags that surrounded the table.

“No, I don’t mean you need to physically check them, you daft plonker. I mean can we check them off from the list of things that are going wrong. It’s one thing that we’ve managed to work on this morning,” Tonks barely kept a straight face as she corrected him and Draco thought she must be reaching her limit of not teasing him.

“Oh, yes. I think I should have enough here for a while. And I am not going to lie, the thought of what my father would think if he saw me bring all these muggle clothes to the manor fills with a joy I didn’t know existed,” he said, picturing Lucius’s face but also being acutely aware that the man didn’t know enough about Muggles to recognise any of the clothing brands on the bags anyway.

“So Lucius is definitely on your shit list then?” asked Tonks, taking a little bite of her lunch, trying to appear casual and failing miserably. Draco wondered how she went on undercover missions.

“Ah, and now the need for the silencing charm becomes clear,” he said, taking his own bite and almost falling off his chair at the explosion of flavours. This was definitely better than duck. He chastised himself for judging the restaurant by the dingy chairs and plastic table cloths.

“Well cousin, you can’t expect to come to my house on a random Friday, have a breakdown and not have me ask prying questions.”

Draco didn’t say anything, just shrugged and reached for the bread to see if it was as good as the Korma. It was. How had he lived such a sheltered culinary existence all these years? How had Hogwarts not seen fit to include this on the menu?

“You can distract yourself with food as much as you like, I am still going to expect you to talk about something more meaningful than jeans today Draco,” Tonks tapped her finger on the table impatiently.

Draco looked up at her and took a deep breath. He should want to talk to her. He should. It had felt lighter when he had on Friday and the gift she’d given him when she sent him to the village had been one of the greatest of his life. However, he wasn’t used to talking. He didn’t know where to start.

“Lucius has been on the shit list since the moment he thrust me into the path of the Dark Lord and didn’t look back at what happened to me,” Draco said finally. “He’ll be in Azkaban for the rest of his life, which I can only hope is short and uneventful and then they can toss his body in the ocean for all I care.”

Tonks nodded, not at all affected by the violence in his words, “And your mother?”

Draco flinched at that. He loved his mother. He wanted his mother desperately. Missed her. But that letter to Hermione was still fresh in his mind. To see in black and white the extent of her viciousness and invariability of her beliefs... It was unsettling. That, combined with the conversation he’d had with Vim. It made him question the image of his mother that he carried with him. The woman who loved him, who lied to the face of the most powerful wizard in history for a chance to save him. He had thought she would let nothing keep her from him. But she wouldn’t care for him when he was sick as a boy. And he wouldn’t let him keep his Nanny Elf. She hadn’t tried to find a way to contact him, even though there were clear loopholes. And he’d not written to her either.

“I don’t know,” he replied because there were no words to describe the turmoil in his head and Tonks nodded.

“And your wife?” Tonks asked.

“You know you used to lead with that,” Draco replied dryly.

"I was hoping leaving it till later would catch you off guard and you would actually tell me something," she quipped back.

"It doesn't appear to be working," he stalled, wanting to talk about Hermione even less than he wanted to talk about his mother.

"It's not working yet but I'm tenacious," Tonks replied.

"You're nosy."

"I'm trying to help."

Draco sighed. She was trying to help. As difficult as it might seem to believe. Had the situation been reversed Draco knew in his bones he would have never raised a finger to help his cousin and that knowledge was at least part of the reason why it was hard to look at himself in the mirror each morning.

"Where do you want me to start? My memories of her torture or the fact my magic has a party everytime we're in the same room together courtesy of a blood bond neither of us consented to?"

"Oof," Tonks winced, "Ok, that's not ideal, but do you talk? Have you.. I don't know... figured out how to... or discussed why you both..."

"You don't even know how to finish that sentence do you?" Draco asked after Tonks trailed off, unable to find a fitting end to her sentence.

"No, I have no idea what to do with that and I have a few more social skills than you, no offense, given I haven't been held in complete isolation for years. You're screwed."

"Exactly. Thank you," Draco said, feeling better just having heard Tonks admit that it was a difficult situation. Was that the first time anyone had? Acknowledged how fucked his situation was?

"You know, after the Battle, after Dad dragged me from bed, I still wasn't right," Tonks took another bite of her food and chewed, letting her words sink in.

If she was trying to convey there was no quick fix for Draco's life, he was already acutely aware.

"Eventually, I took the ministry up on their offer and saw a mind healer. Still do from time to time. Usually around milestones to do with Teddy. Or major life events. Like before my forced marriage to a stranger. It helps."

Draco nodded. He knew mind healers existed of course, but didn't know anyone who went to them. Beside mental patients in St Mungos who had been tortured into madness. And that certainly wasn't him. But then again, he wouldn't have guessed it was Tonks either and yet...

"When you were released, I asked my mind healer for recommendations of someone who might be a good fit to work with you. I'd spoken enough about you in our sessions that I felt

she might have an understanding of who would be suitable. She gave me this name," Tonk took out a piece of paper and slid it across the table at him.

Draco took it, but did not unfold it, just fiddled with it. Tonk's watched his hands before sighing a little.

"Look, I'll always be here to talk, and whatever. You're family. But as you can see this is a bit beyond me. I'm the blind leading the blind on some things. Like your mother; I can listen but I have no idea what to say about that. And I have my own feelings about her that should stay completely separate from your thing. That guy, he knows the way through this mess. Can be impartial. He can help. If you'll let him," Tonk said.

Draco nodded and put the paper in his pocket. He'd look at the name later. He'd make a decision later. It seemed to be enough for Tonks though.

"Fair warning, he's a little unorthodox, but my mind healer assured me it's in a good way," Tonk tacked on, as though unorthodox didn't describe his entire life at present. Draco gave her a look trying to convey as much and it must have worked because she gave a dry chuckle.

"Yeah, Yeah. Well if you're done with the heavy, emotionally charged part of our outing, hurry up," she said, increasing the speed with which she shoveled curry and rice into her mouth, "Teddy is waiting with my mother and both are eager to see you."

Chapter End Notes

I can't sleep, so you all get this chapter early. Woohoo!

Also, fun fact, the use of names in this fic is very deliberate; Bobsy does not use Master Draco and Mister Draco interchangeably. He is deliberate with his use of each and if you are so inclined you can guess as to his thoughts based on the name he uses.

Anyway, it's here. Only took our boy 27 chapters and 90000 words but he has apologized. Yay!

Thank you for all the comments (particularly those of support for my mother in laws visit. It was fine. I read a lot of smutty Dramione on my phone when no one was paying attention). I am so happy you guys are loving this as much as I am!

Robots and Waterlillies

Chapter Notes

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

Robots were shiny little figures made of metal that were animated, not with magic but with something called *electronics*. That last part was apparently very important; Draco had tried to impress Teddy by making one of them march around with a simple spell only to be met with an unimpressed look and the statement that '*anyone can make something march with magic. It's not that cool.*' Draco had blushed and gone back to watching Teddy and Lysander fiddle with the figures, adjusting wires and screws.

Lysander was an affable type of fellow. So long as you weren't hoping for a linear conversation. Describing him as a male Luna Lovegood wouldn't be inaccurate; although he seemed to have less of an affinity for imaginary creatures. He also treated Draco with an openness and respect that he was not used to. Not overly familiar but also not coloured by past experiences or history. It was refreshing. Draco had no idea what Lysander had done during the war, no knowledge of his blood status and he found he didn't need or want to know either. He just appreciated meeting someone new.

Technically, his Aunt Andromeda was also new, but there was a history there. She was less open and looked so similar to her sister Bellatrix, that Draco found he was unable to look at her for too long. The line between the past and present became a little wobbly when he did. She seemed to sense that and after their initial greeting, had been content to sit with her daughter chatting, while watching him with her grandson and son-in-law on the floor, scrambling after robots.

Just before he left, his Aunt took him to the side and informed him in a refined yet firm way that was reminiscent of his mother, that they would talk more next time they met and there would be a next time. She also looked at his face for a long moment and declared he reminded her of her father. Which, given the man had cast her out from the family, Draco felt the comparison had to be some sort of an insult.

He got back to the manor at around five in the evening. Too late in the day to really do much and too early to go to dinner. It was Saturday, and even though it had only been mentioned in passing, he knew that Hermione would be cooking dinner and he would be required to wash the dishes. Not that he had any idea of how to wash dishes. Or cook for that matter.

As much as the idea of family dinners appealed to him, the prospect this evening felt a little too exhausting. He'd spent the entire day with people. Some of them were brand new people who he desperately wanted to like him. It was exhausting. Required a stamina he did not have. Left him with too many thoughts that he was not yet ready to process.

Reaching for something familiar he remembered his routines and patterns. Writing letters, running, organising. Desperate for something to calm him, he dumped all his new clothes on the bed. Systemically, he snipped off each tag, folded each item and organised by type and colour. The empty bags were carried into the wardrobe, where they were filled with items that

were once his father's. It seemed wasteful to throw them out, so he just put them to the side. Then, he methodically worked to put his new purchases into the empty spaces. With each shirt that went on a hanger and each pair of socks that he slipped into a drawer, he felt a sense of calm control.

The last thing to be cleaned and organised were the contents of his pockets. A few notes and coins of muggle money, another Crunchie bar and the slip of paper from Tonks. With his mind calm from his structured unpacking he took in a deep breath and unfolded it. *Marvolo Higgs*. Higgs wasn't a wizarding name that he recognised. Which he supposed was a good thing. Maybe it meant that Higgs would also be unfamiliar with the name Malfoy. The first name Marvolo made his heart race a little faster than he would have liked but he started sorting the Muggle money by size and shape until it calmed down. He'd need a little urn like the one Tonks had on her fridge.

The little piece of paper sat on his bedside table as opened and chewed on the Crunchie, teasing him with the possibility of more help. More progress. He'd done a lot today. He knew that. Had enough self-esteem left to acknowledge the leap he'd taken. However, he was also realistic enough to know he had a long way to go. That there were some things he had no hope of sorting for himself. It was part of the reason he'd tried to drive Hermione to fix it for him. Or leave the country, hoping the ghosts that haunted him wouldn't get him once he was far away. It was a childish dream. One, that had he been honest with himself, he could have seen would never have worked. There were too many things inextricably tied to him to outrun them. Before he could talk himself out of it, he took the piece of paper to his office, ready to write a letter and request an appointment. Even if he only went once, if there was a chance that *Marvolo Higgs* could guide him through the quagmire, it would be worth it.

After he sent his letter, Draco was truly wrung out. He had to force himself to walk to the kitchen for dinner. In his head, he rehearsed conversations; things he could say without thinking too much. Ways to interact until he could collapse into bed. The last thing he wanted to do was appear rude and the only way to avoid that was to push through until he could be alone.

Hermione was the only one in the kitchen when he got there, serving some sort of vegetable stack onto two plates. It surprised him, and he fought the urge to cast a tempus charm to see if he was early.

"It's just us tonight," she said, bringing the two plates to the island bench before turning to fetch cutlery. "Bobsy and Vim have decided to go on a date."

Draco gratefully accepted a fork and sat down in his spot, watching as Hermione sat opposite him.

"House elves date?" he asked, before he considered how it might sound to Hermione Granger; founding and only member of S.P.E.W.

"Bobsy and Vim do," Hermione answered and there was no annoyance in her tone.

Draco nodded, unsure what else to say without making the conversation awkward. The dating habits of his elves was not on his list of pre-rehearsed conversations.

“This is delicious,” he said, picking from one of his prepared topics.

Hermione stabbed a piece of pumpkin and looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“You haven’t tasted it yet,” she said.

Fuck. He hadn’t and now the carefully selected, neutral conversation starter was making things more awkward. Not less.

“Right,” he said, hastily shoving a forkful into his mouth. *Double fuck.* It was hot and he’d burnt his tongue. Would it be completely impolite if he cut his losses and excused himself?

“It is delicious,” he repeated, although his words were slightly slurred due to his burnt tongue.

Hermione gave him a close-lipped smile, “Thank you.”

“Very tender,” he added and again Hermione looked up at him with a raised brow and confused expression.

“Roast vegetables generally are,” she said.

Merlin’s ballsack! It was a compliment he’d preselected assuming they would be eating some sort of meat. She’d made a vegetarian dish. Could he be any more awkward? Draco decided his best bet was to stop talking altogether.

“Are you okay?” Hermione asked him after a beat of silence.

“Honestly? I think I have run out of ability to make sensible conversation after a full day with the Tonks family,” Draco said, adding in his head that he also felt like a bumbling idiot around her specifically.

Instead of looking confused, she just nodded and picked up her wand. With a nonverbal charm, both her book and his paper from the morning came flying into the kitchen. She caught both gracefully and handed the paper to him.

“I understand that,” she said, opening up her book, “Sometimes I don’t want to talk either.”

She smiled at him and Draco was grateful, as that little smile let him know that he had not offended her. With no hard feelings, they were left to read in companionable silence. The only noise was the scraping of cutlery as Draco enjoyed his dinner, which was quite delicious. After about 20 minutes, Hermione cleared her throat.

“Did you meet Andromeda today?” she asked.

“I did,” Draco replied, feeling a little uneasy at the question. Waiting for it to somehow turn against him.

"She looks less like your other Aunt the more you get to know her," Hermione said, "It took me a few visits to be able to meet her eye, but eventually..."

She trailed off and Draco realised that she was sharing something to try and help him.

"Thank Merlin," he let out a sigh, "I couldn't look at her for longer than a minute without..."

This time he trailed off, realising he was about to come dangerously close to telling her about his little episodes where he slingshotted between the past and the present.

"Oh, I know. I used to dread being in the same room as her," Hermione agreed, "Give it time."

"Time heals all wounds?" he asked, trying hard to keep the mocking from his voice.

"Oh gods no," Hermione snorted, "If I ever meet the person that came up with that saying... it just gives you time to adjust, that's all. Find a new normal."

Draco nodded and took a deep breath. There was a question hovering in his mind, '*What will time do to us?*'. However, as much as he might want an answer, he wasn't brave enough to ask the question. He looked away from her face, down at her hands. One hand was holding her fork and the other keeping her place in her book. A glint on her left hand drew his eye and he realised she was still wearing her ring. That awful fucking ring. He ground his back teeth together to stop himself from saying something. Why wouldn't she take it off?

"I'm not wearing it because of you," Hermione said, and Draco realised she had noticed him looking at it.

"Why are you then?" he asked, desperate for an answer. Although he knew better than to assume that anything she did was to punish him after their argument, it sure felt like it. He couldn't forget his past when she was wearing it on her finger.

"One day, we might know each other well enough that I'll tell you," Hermione replied, "but not today. It's personal. Just know it's got nothing to do with you."

Draco nodded at her. It was not what he wanted to hear but there was something deep inside him telling him not to push this. Not yet. Maybe it was the bond between them, maybe it was a reemergence of social skills long buried by loneliness and pain.

"I'd like to get to know each other better," Draco decided to say instead of pushing, "Not that I expect anything from you. To do anything. I heard you...the other day. But I'd like to get to know each other. Aside from the fact that we're married, getting to know you feels like the most natural progression of my reeducation. A kind of fate; what should have happened in the first year had I not been blinded by ancient bullshit."

"Hmm, describing it as some sort of fate might be overselling it," Hermione replied, and Draco rejoiced in the fact she hadn't said no, "I'm not always the best company."

"Neither am I," he said, gesturing at the reading material that lay between them to illustrate his point.

“Don’t use that as an example; anyone who’ll let me read at dinner immediately makes it into my list of top ten dinner companions,” Hermione said with a chuckle.

“You can read at dinner every night when you’re with me, then,” Draco said instantly, willing to give her whatever she wanted.

“Bobsy does not approve of reading at the dinner table. I have been reprimanded before,” Hermione said, eyes sparkling and Draco found it hard to believe that Bobsy would say anything that wasn’t gushing praise to her.

“Don’t worry, if I’m with you at the dinner table, Bobsy will direct all his disapproval at me. You’ll be free to do as you wish.”

Hermione smiled at him instead of answering and looked into his eyes. He allowed himself to sink into her warm chocolate gaze and thought that he could overlook the ring if they could stay in this light, playful place.

“We can get to know each other, Draco Malfoy. It makes sense I suppose, given we’re living in the same house and all. Besides, my plan to pretend the other didn’t exist went tits up the moment you crashed my car into a centaur statue”

“You did notice!” Draco said, indignant.

“Oh course I noticed! You put a dent in my bumper. I had to spend 120 quid at the body shop putting it right!”

“You know, only 50% of the words in that sentence mean anything to me; I will need more context if you expect a reaction,” Draco said, wondering if Hermione had accidentally lapsed into another language.

She didn’t say anything else, just rolled her eyes with an indulgent smile and got up to take the dishes to the sink.

“Right, I have an early start tomorrow, so I’m off to bed. Before I go, do you know how to do dishes?” she looked at him over her shoulder and Draco shot her a look as if to say ‘*What do you think?*’

“Right, stupid question. Come over here, and I’ll teach you,” she rolled up her sleeves as she spoke, “Would you like to learn the wizarding way or the muggle way?”

Draco thought for a moment, wondering if this was a test. In the past, if ever he’d been given a choice it certainly had been. However, as he scanned her face for any micro clues in her expression, all he got was the sense that she was asking a genuine question. It was a choice with no wrong answer.

“Um, maybe the muggle way?” he asked, partly because he thought it might convey his desire for change more and partly because he was embarrassed to do magic in front of her with his resistant wand. What if he couldn’t handle a simple cleaning charm?

“The muggle way? Really?” Hermione cocked her hip and gave him an incredulous look.

"Well, yeah? Look, I haven't got my own wand and the one the ministry gave me has... unpredictable results. I'd rather not face Bobsy's ire if I can't clean them properly or worse, break them," Draco replied, trying not to feel embarrassed as he confessed the truth.

Hermione's gaze softened with understanding and she nodded, then busied herself filling the sink with hot soapy water and showing him how to use a sponge to wash each plate. She didn't disappear after the initial instruction, instead pulled out something she told him was a tea towel and dried each plate. They worked in companionable silence, and when the kitchen was spotless, walked silently together towards their rooms.

Draco could feel the warmth of her body as they walked and he let his hands rest by his side as they went, wishing she would lower hers from where they were wrapped around her middle so there could at least be a chance that their hands would brush. It was an urge motivated by something that was not friendship but he was determined to chalk up to the blood bond. At least for now.

Breakfast the next morning was a mostly silent affair. Long gone was the casual banter from the night before. Hermione seemed preoccupied and was not reading, just picking at her breakfast and staring at the teapot. Draco was content to take more time. Like every day, he had nowhere to go, nothing to do. There was no paper today, being a Sunday and so he occupied himself watching Hermione.

No one would ever guess she had a mane of curly hair today. It was tightly contained in two braids that were wrapped into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her leg bounced a little as she jiggled it under the table. Was she always like this on a Sunday? He'd never paid enough attention before. He was about to ask if she was ok when she pushed back the chair and stood.

"Time for me to head out," she said, ignoring the fact that her teacup was still half full and she'd only eaten a couple of bites of her toast.

"Ok, I'll see you tonight?" Draco asked, standing as well. It was the proper thing to do when a lady left the table after all.

"Hmmm," Hermione nodded but didn't move, as if she was waiting for something.

Draco watched, wanting to do something to soothe her obvious agitation but having no idea what would be appropriate. He briefly considered offering to meet her for a piano lesson after dinner. All he could offer was his own coping mechanisms and the irony in that was not lost on him. If Tonks thought she was the blind leading the blind...

"Ok," she said, properly looking at him for the first time all morning and Draco felt the same push of his magic that had prodded him when he apologised, urging him to reach out and touch her. *Not the fucking time.*

It was too late anyway and with a final smile, Hermione left the room. After 5 minutes of sipping tea in silence, he heard the roar of her car engine. She was gone.

He wasn't left to sip tea alone for long. Within minutes, another owl swooped into him. More unfamiliar handwriting.

12 Nitmulik Cottage, 3pm. Please wear gumboots. M.Higgs

Well, Tonks did say he was unorthodox. Draco ran a hand through his hair and tried not to listen to the voice that was screaming that this was a bad idea. Looked like he would be searching the cellar for gumboots this morning.

Nitmulik Cottage was in a secluded pocket of the New Forest in Hampshire. A smaller building with a greenhouse next to it that was almost the same size as the house itself and a large, overgrown pond to one side. Draco arrived fifteen minutes early via apparition and used the extra time to hide behind a tree, watching the building, trying to see if there were any clues about what might lie within.

At 3 minutes to the hour, an older gentleman, dressed in a green linen shirt, waders and gumboots came out of the front door and stood with his hands on his hips.

"You can come over now, Mr Malfoy," he called in the general direction that Draco was hiding and swallowing. Draco stepped forward.

"Ah good, you found some gumboots," said the man, looking Draco over.

Draco had found gumboots, however once found, he had no idea what to wear with them. For all his shopping with Tonks, they hadn't touched on *Outdoor Chic* as a style. In the end, he'd reached for a pair of jeans, a striped blue button down and a grey woollen jumper. It made more sense than wearing them with a suit.

"Marvolo Higgs," said the man, holding out his hand and now Draco was closer and the man was not yelling, he could detect an Australian accent as he talked.

"Draco Malfoy," said Draco, taking the man's hand and shaking it firmly.

"Excellent, do you know anything about water plants?" Marvolo rocked back on his heels as he spoke and Draco slowly shook his head. Shouldn't they be going inside, to an office or treatment room?

"Shame. I experimented with a new variety of magical water lilies last autumn. Tried to make something hardier, that would withstand your shocking winters. Alas, it worked a little too well, and as you can see the blasted thing has taken over my pond."

The man gestured to the pond which Draco had noted on his arrival. It was indeed completely overwhelmed by a single plant.

"I was hoping you might help me remove it while we chat. I've heard through the grapevine you have a bit of a green thumb?"

The pause stretched and Draco suddenly realised that Marvolo was waiting for him to speak, yet he'd been shocked into silence. This was not what he anticipated when he requested an appointment.

"Of course," Draco said finally, not wanting to disappoint the man and still hoping that in between pulling out a rampant water weed he would be able to offer some assistance. He also reminded himself that he had only promised that he would attend one appointment. If this madness continued he would simply not come back.

"Splendid," said Marvolo, conjuring two pairs of waterproof gloves, "Shall we get into it then?"

Back at the manor, Draco's body ached. After spending two hours with the man pulling mutant waterlilies the whole time, he had no idea of Marvolo Higg's efficacy as a mind healer but could speak to the man's ability in herbology. The plants he had created were truly something else.

While they had worked, he'd asked Draco questions. About his own garden to start with, then about how he found using muggle methods compared to magic, and then his wand. Talking about his ministry-issued wand that didn't work properly was the closest he'd gotten to asking Draco about his life post-release and the entire time Draco wondered if it was time to leave. He would have left when Higgs inquired why he didn't buy a new wand, except he felt guilty leaving the man with a pond full of rampant weeds. Higgs was not a young man, if it was hurting Draco's body, it had to be worse for Higgs.

Before he left, Higgs managed to extract a promise from Draco to bring him some seeds for water lilies that did well at the manor. On Wednesday. Draco was due to go back on Wednesday. To take the seeds. It didn't mean that Draco approved of the man's methods, it just meant he was happy to help a fellow gardener. And that he could take any excuse to fill his pathetically empty schedule.

Now, with just over an hour until dinner, he wanted nothing more than to sink into a hot bath and wash the pond muck off his body, but he was not going to be so lucky. On his way to his rooms, he was intercepted by Bobsy.

"Theo Nott is waiting for you in the blue room," he informed Draco stiffly, looking him up and down, taking his dishevelled appearance, "And for Merlin's sake before you take another step can you scourify your boots? I have better things to do than clean up your footprints tomorrow."

Draco smiled indulgently at the elf. Now he was listening for it, he could hear the familiarity in Bobsy's chastisements. It almost reminded him of the way McGonagal had scolded Potter and his ilk at school. Like she was never completely disappointed in them but felt she needed to discipline them anyway. He pulled out his wand and performed the necessary spell before heading to the blue room, trying not to feel anxious about what Nott wanted.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” Theo asked as Draco walked into the room. Given Theo was dressed in an assortment of colours ranging from olive to a purple that reminded Draco of aubergines, he felt it was a little bit of a hypocritical question.

“Why the fuck are you here?” Draco retorted and Theo raised his already half-drunk drink to him in a salute, as if he approved of Draco’s vulgarity.

“Just checking you were alive. Given the last time any of us saw you, you marched into my home before I’d even had a chance to get out of bed and insulted my wife,” Theo said and Draco poured his own drink before sitting down across from him.

“Don’t tell me you’re here to defend her honour?” Draco asked.

“Pansy’s honour is her own business and she doesn’t need anyone to defend her. I am curious how you ended up after your little hissy fit though. She mentioned you were... perturbed.”

Theo’s tone was casual but the look he fixed Draco with let him know that he was more concerned than he was letting on.

“Perturbed?” Draco replied with a snort, “Given all things that have happened, I don’t know if the word perturbed quite covers it.”

Theo joined him in his cynical chuckle, “I don’t know, I quite like the word perturbed. What about discomfited? Disquieted?”

“Agitated? Unnerved?” Draco added.

“No, I’ve got it! Discombobulated!” Theo declared with a flourish and Draco couldn’t help but laugh. Theo could always make him laugh.

“Well, I don’t know how I could top ‘discombobulated’,” Draco smiled and took a sip of his drink.

“You can’t, but topping it isn’t really the point. Have you found a way to work through your discombobulation? Do I need to be worried that you’re holed up here not eating and staring at the wall?” said Theo.

Draco stared at him in shock. How had he known?

“You forget, I’ve known you for a very long time mate. You’re not as mysterious as everyone makes out. So how are you?” Theo asked and Draco felt his throat do that tight, scratchy thing.

“Are you still trying to convince Hermione to get you out of this one? Run away to the continent?” he asked other questions, maybe sensing Draco couldn’t answer the first.

“No,” Draco could answer this one with certainty. He wasn’t going to have Hermione fight his battles. Not after he’d seen her in all her exhausted glory. Not now he’d admitted to himself that he wanted to spend time with her.

“So what’s the plan then?” Theo asked and Draco shook his head.

“Fuck you! Did you honestly come here to ask me a bunch of difficult questions?” Draco drained the rest of his drink.

“Well… yeah. I mean it’s not generally my style but we didn’t spend seven years worrying over your arse just to let you wither into despair the moment you were free,” said Theo.

“Thank you,” Draco said sincerely. Just like apologies, words of gratitude weren’t ones that came easily. He tried to remember if he had properly thanked his friends for everything they had done for him while he was under house arrest and failed. There wasn’t a moment that came to mind.

“If you’re about to get too sappy, I’m going to leave. We’re high society after all. I’m pretty sure we inherited an allergy to emotional displays, along with our massive bank accounts and childhood trauma,” said Theo, wrinkling his nose.

Draco laughed again and went to refill their glasses.

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, handing Theo a fresh drink and clinking it with his own before sinking into his chair, “However, turnabout is fair play, and if you’re going to come into my house and ask me the tough questions… what’s your plan?”

Draco raised an eyebrow at Theo, waiting expectantly. It wasn’t so easy on the other side of it, was it? Theo didn’t look too put out though, just rolled his eyes and leaned back.

“Well, Pans wants to go to Switzerland. She thinks I should enrol in my Healer’s Apprenticeship there,” he said, not looking particularly enthused.

“It’s what you always said you wanted to do, back before, you know…”

“Life turned to shit? Blew up in our faces? We followed our parents blindly into a war based on bullshit? Yep, fifteen-year-old me who knew nothing did want that. I don’t know what I want any more but I have a sneaky suspicion that going to Switzerland isn’t to make it magically clear.”

Draco looked at his friend and felt such a deep pang of empathy it turned the whiskey in his stomach. He wanted to smooth it over, soothe him somehow, just as he had with Granger that morning. Maybe they were all the blind leading the blind. All children thrust into a war they had no business being in, and not one of them came out unscathed. Perhaps even the great Harry Potter sat in his sitting room, with his friends, contemplating what the fuck he was meant to do now.

The one thing he’d benefitted from was something he could offer Theo now. A harsh mirror. The same one Granger had held for him.

“Well, it’s not going to become magically clear holed up in Nott Abbey drinking whiskey either,” Draco said, putting his own unfinished drink on a side table. “What have you got to lose? Even if you hate healing, there’s good skiing.”

"Is that your plan then, to just try things? See if something helps?" Theo asked.

Draco shrugged, "Well, yeah. That and I'm trying this thing where I try not to lie to myself."

Theo's thoughtful face morphed into his mischievous grin.

"Oh, not lying to yourself? Does that mean you've had time to ruminate on what Julia was saying?"

The glee in his voice was blatant. As if he had been waiting to bring up this very topic and couldn't believe the opportunity had arisen so soon.

"Oh fuck off, you bastard," Draco said, trying to find the right playful tone and feeling his cheeks heat all the same.

Theo chuckled but did not push, instead stood as if to leave Draco to his dinner plans and Draco realised he didn't want him to go. Not when they were on the precipice of having fun together. When was the last time he'd had fun with his friends? Not just sat in a parlour with a chaperone or drank to soothe their shared misery.

"Do you want to stay for dinner?" Draco asked impulsively, "Will it put Pansy out or..."

"I'd love to," Theo answered with a grin.

Draco couldn't help himself, looping an arm around Theo's shoulders and dragged him in the direction of the kitchen.

"Excellent," he said as they walked, "You can do the dishes. Without a wand. It will be good for you."

Theo laughed but did not refute it and they walked off, down the hall, together.

Chapter End Notes

Authors notes are purely fun facts today. Fun fact regarding Nitmulik Cottage. I stole the name from Nitmulik Gorge in Australia, which also inspired part of Luna's rocks speech all the way back in Chapter Nine. It's stunning and if you are ever in the area I recommend going on a boat trip down it.

Second fun fact: New Forest was where William Rufus, aka William the second, the second Norman king of England died. He was killed by an arrow in "hunting accident". Coincidentally, his younger brother Henry (aka Henry the First) was with him on this hunt expedition and left his brother's body in the forest as his rushed back to the treasury at Winchester to have himself declared king. But it was a "hunting accident"... A fun fact that has nothing to do with Draco and Hermione or this story but I love Kings and Queens of England and once may have planned a holiday purely around visiting their

final resting places. I write fanfic as a hobby. No one should be surprised I am a giant nerd.

Thank you to everyone who has commented and kudos and recommended my fic to others. Every single comment makes my day and motivates me every time I sit down at the computer. I love writing with you all!

The School and The Wine

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione never came to dinner on Sundays. He learnt that the night he'd brought Theo down into the kitchen and spent more time than he would like to admit stealing glances at the doorway. Bobsy had eventually taken pity on him and explained that Miss Hermione preferred to be alone on Sundays. Something that had stayed true for all the Sundays following. It was one of the new rhythms he was learning.

Breakfasts together were another new rhythm. Usually they would read but Draco learnt he could often tempt Granger into conversation if he brought up the right topic. News and Current Affairs were a bust, she would only briefly indulge him. As was any conversation about her past; childhood, Hogwarts, post-war all had her answer in the briefest possible sense. It went without saying that they did not discuss the war itself. She didn't offer much from her current life either, occasional snippets about work mostly. But the way to get Hermione to talk to him was to discuss ideas and facts. Ask her an opinion on something she was reading, or a theory that had been niggling him and she would put down her book and her eyes would sparkle in anticipation. He had always known she was smart but hadn't quite foresaw how much of an excellent conversation partner that made her.

Dinners with Bobsy and Vim were another rhythm, one with a slightly different beat. They were funny. It wasn't something Draco saw coming, but Bobsy and Theo would have been absolute menaces if they ever had a chance to spend any length of time together. They had a very similar, diabolical sense of humour. Bobsy must have liked Theo too, because he didn't insist on him doing the dishes, even scolding Draco for suggesting it. During dinners with the elves, Hermione kept quiet, occasionally asking questions about history, as Bobsy and Vim had been there to see it. Draco had never bothered thinking about the life expectancy of elves before, so was shocked to learn they outlived wizards by decades.

Tonks became his standing Saturday appointment. He arrived early to collect Teddy and take him to the park in the village. Leaving Tonks and Lysander to enjoy a lie in. They would wander up around morning tea time looking happy and relaxed and they would all enjoy something sweet in the park. In the afternoon, Andromeda often joined them at the cottage and Draco slowly learnt the differences in her face, her hair, her hands. Everything was slightly softer than Bellatrix and slightly older. Time had passed.

Marvolo liked seeing Draco twice a week. He never said "You require biweekly appointments", or even really called them appointments, but he would always ask something from Draco that necessitated his return. A book he wanted to borrow, a new tincture brewed from his greenhouse, a project that he needed some muscle for (as if they didn't both have wands). He never took Draco into a room to sit down and talk. Never took a note, at least not while Draco was present. He did ask questions though, and they had gotten gradually more invasive. They'd discussed his father, Voldemort, even the death of Albus Dumbledore. The retelling of which had left him so shaken he'd had to spend the afternoon back under the

cocoon of his blankets. Only emerging because he knew he was expected at dinner. That night Higgs had owled over a calming tincture not quite as strong as a Dreamless Sleep Potion but something to take the edge off all the same.

He wasn't sure if his time with Higgs was helping, but he was certain each Saturday with Tonks and Teddy was. One Saturday, Teddy decided he wanted to give Draco a tour of the village. Draco agreed, happy to do anything that would make his little cousin smile and the May sun was warm and soothing. He wasn't really paying close attention to Teddy's monologues, given that the buildings that Teddy was pointing out were ones he'd been frequenting for almost two months now, but as they rounded a stout, red brick building, Draco paused.

"And this is the school I'll be going to next year," Teddy declared proudly and Draco looked at his cousin from the corner of his eye, slightly surprised.

Draco had been homeschooled, as had all of his friends. He knew that not every wizarding family had the funds to pay for private tutors as his parents had, but even the less well-off of his classmates had banded together to share a tutor. Gods, even the Weasleys had been tutored at home by their mother.

"You're sending him to muggle school? Why?" Draco asked Tonks, relieved when Teddy ran across the empty playground to inspect what play equipment would be available to him next year.

"I went to muggle school when I was a girl," Tonks answered, "It was always the plan. We just had to wait until he was old enough that he wouldn't change his hair to bright blue in the middle of class, or tell his teacher that his Dad wouldn't be coming to parents' night because he was a werewolf that died in the Second Wizarding War."

"Oh, that makes sense, I suppose," said Draco, wondering why Tonks preferred muggle school to the finest tutors that Europe had to offer. She certainly had enough money to pay for them now. However, it didn't seem like the best question to ask. Offensive in a way he didn't quite understand.

"It's more important to me that he learns how to play with others and meet people different from himself, than speak Latin or perfect French," Tonks added, answering the question he hadn't voiced in a way that only she seemed to be able to do.

"Oh, that makes a lot of sense," mumbled Draco, immediately wondering why his parents had valued Latin over social skills and realising he didn't need to wonder for long. He knew exactly why. What Tonks wanted for her son and what Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had wanted for theirs was vastly different. The realisation hurt more than it would have a month ago; an irritation to an open wound this time.

"Have you ever considered it?" Tonks asked, bringing Draco back to the present.

"Considered what?" he said.

“Considered looking into a muggle education? I know you jest about your lack of qualifications, and I’ll admit, it’s not like you could go back to Hogwarts and get your NEWTS but you could look into Muggle University,” said Tonks.

Draco stopped to consider it before he spoke. It wasn’t a terrible idea, but surely it wasn’t that simple.

“Can I go to muggle university? Don’t muggles have something like NEWTS that they have to do before they can go? Aren’t you the slightest bit worried I’ll perform a thoughtless *accio* in class or tell my teacher that my father won’t be coming to parent’s night because he was a ruthless Death Eater in the second wizarding war and is currently rotting in jail?”

“I don’t think universities have parents’ night,” replied Tonks with a cheeky grin, “And yes, I believe there are exams you’ll need to pass to gain entry. But with your excellent tutors I am sure you’d be able to pass them without any issues. Or you can do what most witches and wizards do when they want to complete a Muggle education post Hogwarts. Get a forged transcript.”

“A forged transcript? That seems like cheating,” Draco tucked his hands into his pockets. He felt like cheating would be the exact opposite of what he needed to do. It was too much like lying to himself.

“It’s what your lovely wife did, before she studied her history degree at Oxford,” said Tonks.

“That doesn’t seem like her at all,” Draco responded instantly. He was the first to admit he didn’t know Granger well, or at least not as well as he would like as the subject of the ring had still not come up again, but even he knew that given the choice between easy and right, Granger would always choose right.

Tonks shrugged, “She had a lot of her plate when she was due to start. I think Ron was able to persuade her that this once, she was allowed to take the easier path. Extenuating circumstances and all. The same could be argued for you at the moment.”

Draco laughed and made some comment about having an excessively empty plate, but his mind was at dual purposes, trying to tamp down the surge of anger and *jealousy* at the mention of Weasley’s name and trying to figure out what exactly was so crippling that Hermione Granger had agreed to using forged documents. Tonks didn’t say anything, but studied him as his mind raced. Giving him time to process.

“You could use your free time to study. Take your A-Levels. If you want. Go to university. You could study robotics and then come back on the weekends and wow Teddy with all your new knowledge.”

“I could study robots?” he asked, suddenly aware that he knew nothing about the options that were in front of him. He had options.

“I think so,” Tonks said, ready to continue walking as Teddy ran back over to them, “You’d need to get a catalogue to see what your choices are. And what the requirements of each course are. Not all A-levels let you take all courses.”

“Kind of how you need to take a NEWT in herbology if you want to become a healer?”
Draco asked, slowly drawing the parallels between his world and the broader world, the one that might have a place for him.

“Yes, exactly,” Tonks agreed.

“How do you know all this?” Draco asked, a little intimidated by the breadth of her knowledge.

“Muggle primary school,” she said, scooping up her red cheeked son, even though he was possibly too big for it. The blue haired boy wriggled in his Mum’s grasp, completely unaware of the gift his mother was preparing for him; the ability to move between worlds.

His least favourite of the new rhythms were Sunday breakfasts. Watching Hermione fidget and not eat. Each week it was the same, his magic would reach out, urging him to comfort, to touch. Each week he ignored it, because blood magic might not understand the delicacy of their relationship but he sure as fuck did. It was going well. He didn’t want to ruin anything by reaching for her hand only to have her recoil.

Then came Sunday dinner, and while he had no issues with spending time with just Bobsy and Vim, he felt her absence. He knew, by way of the bond, that every Sunday night she was somewhere, alone in the manor, unhappy. He wondered if it had been that way every Sunday and the bond had never alerted him. Perhaps, the time they were spending together was strengthening their connection. Making it easier for him to tap into her feelings. Or perhaps before he’d just been too involved in his own head to notice.

After six consecutive Sundays, he couldn’t take it anymore. He didn’t want to storm all over her boundaries again (because that worked out so well for him the first time) but she was just sitting there, being sad. Every. Single. Week. And if anyone else knew, they were doing nothing about it. Which left him. Her husband. The man down the hall with a direct connection to her emotions. He went to the cellar first, retrieved a bottle of red wine, one of the finest vintages they had in their collection, and then went back to her room and knocked on the door. Trying to gather all the confidence he could find.

“Malfoy?” she asked when she opened the door and a dash of white escaped. Glitter. Draco hoped that she would agree to what he was about to propose or he would have not only ignored her boundaries but left her without a cat while sad.

She was still wearing the same clothes from this morning, jeans and a big woolly white jumper. Her hair had started to escape her braids; proving again that it could only be contained for so long. Most striking though was her face. Raw exhaustion.

“Come with me, Granger,” Draco said, stepping to the side and motioning for her to join him in the hall.

“Sorry?” she asked, seeking clarification.

“I can feel it, Granger. All of it. Every week. Come with me, please? I promise if you want to leave after you see where I am taking you, you can do so without a word from me, but can we just try this?”

Hermione hesitated for a minute longer before taking the step into the hall and closing her door behind her.

“Right, let’s go,” Draco said, walking off and gripping on the bottle of wine to stop him from reaching across and taking her hand. Blasted magic.

“You know, you really don’t have to worry,” Hermione said as they walked and Draco wondered what internal conversation was going on in her big brain.

“I know,” he said, because agreeing with her seemed to be the safest way to ensure she kept walking.

“I am fine, whatever you are sensing. And even if I wasn’t, it’s not your responsibility to do anything about it.”

“I know I’ve been a bastard to you for most of our lives Granger, but I’d like to think we’d gotten to a point where you could accept that I’m not going to leave you miserable and alone,” Draco said, grinding his teeth.

“Of course not. It’s just you didn’t want a wife and so it seems unfair that you’re stuck worrying about one.”

“Granger, how about just for tonight, we assume that this has nothing to do with any marriage law and is instead just me trying to be a decent person?”

He came to a stop in front of the music room and looked over at her, where she stood, arms wrapped around her middle, chewing her bottom lip with a furrowed brow. She did not, however, say anything and deciding that was as good of an assent as he was going to get, he opened the door and set about making a fire in the dimly lit room.

When he turned back to face Hermione, he found her sitting in one of the armchairs to the side. The seat his mother used to occupy when she came to listen in on his lessons. He went to the other armchair, the one that was nominally for his father. Although the man had never sat in it. Piano lessons were something he accepted were necessary, as all well brought up young men should be able to do something musical should the need to impress come about, but it wasn’t a process Lucius himself had taken any joy in and therefore had no interest in observing his son.

“Wine?” Draco asked, holding up the bottle and Hermione nodded. Draco took out his wand and tried to conjure two glasses but all he could manage were enamel mugs. Sighing, he poured the wine into them anyway and handed one to her.

“Want to talk about it?” he asked, thinking he should check at least once this evening, though he was sure he knew what the answer would be. Predictably, she shook her head.

“Is this what you meant when you said your wand has unpredictable results?” she asked, turning the mug in her hands before taking a sip, “Oh this good.”

Draco smiled. While it wasn’t planned, watching Hermione Granger drinking the best of the Malfoy cellar out of a tin mug was the best *fuck you* to Lucius Malfoy he could think of.

“Yes, sometimes,” said Draco, answering the question she’d asked before she’d been distracted by the wine, “Sometimes, I can perform the spells but they are not as powerful as they could be. And some spells it resists altogether. Like cleaning spells. Makes me think the last owner was a slob of the highest order who refused to clean up after themselves.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully, taking another sip of wine. He braced himself for the question, ‘*why don’t you get a different wand then?*’, but it never came.

“I know what you mean. I ended up with Bellatrix’s wand after the war. Used it for over a year before I got something else for daily use. I mostly had its allegiance but it was resistant to certain types of magic,” she said.

Now it was Draco’s turn to want to ask the inevitable question, except he knew how annoying it was and so didn’t. It didn’t stop him from thinking it though. Her reasons must have been different to his; he’d hazard a guess that wandmakers would have tripped over themselves for a chance to work with her.

“What happened to your wand from school?” he asked instead.

Hermione gave him a sad smile, “I don’t know. I lost it when the snatchers brought me here in ‘98. I don’t suppose you’ve seen it lying around anywhere? It’s about 11 inches, vinewood.”

It was a poor attempt at a joke. One that made Draco take a deep drink of his wine, an action Hermione mirrored.

“Believe it or not, I did not bring you here to talk about topics that would make you more miserable,” he said, trying to turn the mood.

“I’m not miserable,” Hermione snapped indignantly, and Draco just raised an eyebrow at her and put his hand on his chest, giving it a little tap. A silent reminder that he felt what she felt.

“I wish I knew which one of your twisted relatives thought it would be a good idea to add that little side effect into a marriage,” Hermione grumbled, finishing her wine and holding out her mug for him to refill.

“I don’t know, it’s somewhat useful. And quite frankly on the list of questions for my twisted relatives, it’s low down. At least there is some practical use for it. Some of the other Malfoy oddities are less clear.”

“Like what?” Hermione asked, settling back into her armchair and fixing him with her curious look. The one she got when he presented her with a passage from a book that he wanted her opinion on.

“Like the fact that Malfoy Manor must have peacocks on the grounds at all times,” Draco said, assuming that she would prefer the ridiculous oddities to the darker traditions.

“Really?” she asked with a snort and Draco felt the thrill of amusement through their bond.

“Yes! Have you ever wondered why I keep those creepy white things on the lawns?”

“I just assumed they were ostentatious shows of wealth. Or your pets. I mean if wizards keep toads as pets, peacocks aren’t that big of a leap.”

“Ha, for Lucius they were a show, that’s why he insisted on albino ones; they cost more money. I bloody hate the things. Creepy, beady-eyed monsters. But without their presence, the magic in the wards will malfunction, bringing ruin to the House of Malfoy.”

Hermione smiled and Draco wanted to freeze it. Store it somewhere he could look at it when he was having a particularly awful day. A reminder that for all his sins and failings, he was able to make Hermione Granger smile when she was having a bad day.

“You know, Muggles have a similar superstition about the Tower of London,” she said and Draco refilled his own wine, ready to settle in for a lesson, “There was a prophecy that should the ravens ever leave the Tower of London, both the tower and the kingdom would fall. Charles the Second was so concerned that he made a royal proclamation that the Tower Ravens be protected and a Raven Master was appointed to look after them. There’s still a raven master to this day.”

“Really?” Draco asked, wondering if the Malfoy family had stolen the idea from the Muggles or vice versa.

“Oh yes, when it comes to ridiculous traditions, muggle royalty puts pureblood wizards to shame.”

“Tell me more of them,” he asked, wishing for nothing more than to be able to listen to Hermione talk in the soothing warmth of the piano room, with the wine easing him into relaxation.

Two hours and two bottles of wine later (Draco had to summon a second), Hermione was stretched out on the floor telling him the story of how George the Fourth hated his wife with such a passion that he refused to let her into the coronation. She stood on the street banging at the door while her husband was anointed. Draco has been held entranced the entire time, learning the stories of the Kings and Queens. So like Pureblood society, except much more enjoyable as it could be viewed through the lens of time and distance. He wanted to be able to lie down next to her and bask in her, but had to be content with sitting in his chair watching. Her hands occasionally came up to animate what she was saying, and her hair fanned around her like a halo. The moment when she’d reached up and unwound it from its braids had made him forget to breathe momentarily. It felt so personal, so intimate.

"So, was this your plan then? To bring me here, ply me with wine and have me teach you muggle history until I could think of nothing but?" she asked, rolling from her back to her side and propping up on one elbow to look at him.

"No, I mean, the ply with wine bit, maybe, but I actually thought you might like a piano lesson. It's what I like to do when I'm feeling..." he trailed off not wanting to say the word and remind her of her earlier mood. Not when the only emotion he'd gotten through the bond in the past hour had been contentment.

"That would be nice. I've missed our lessons," Hermione said, moving into a sit and stretching, "Help me up will you?"

She held her hands up to him and Draco froze for a minute, his wine logged brain struggling to process the invitation to touch. She gave her hands a little shake, just to grab his attention and he stood, reaching forward to take them. He gave a tug, a stronger one than he had intended and Hermione stumbled a little as she reached her feet, her hands dropping his only to brace them against his chest to stop herself from knocking into him completely. Instinct had his own hands drop to her waist to steady her, resting on the dip before her hip. He swallowed thickly, not wanting to move. Beneath the pads of his fingers, magic swirled, ready and excited as if it expected this was something more than a steady grip.

Hermione giggled and took a step back from him, "Sorry, wine legs."

Draco cleared his throat and fought the urge to let out a calming breath. It would do no one any good if she was aware of exactly how affected he was. There was some simple sheet music already sitting on the piano and as they took their seats side by side, Hermione started stroking the keys gently. She made no effort to play the music in front of her, instead composing her own simple, repetitive ditty based on the notes she liked. It didn't take long for Draco to get the general gist of the tune and he added a baseline, infusing the simple melody with depth.

"Did you know, musical scholars can't agree whether a piano is a string instrument or percussion?" he asked softly.

"Really?" said Hermione, not looking up from her hands as they stroked the keys but Draco could have sworn she leaned a little closer to him.

"Hmmm," Draco said, taking what he hoped was a subtle breath, smelling her perfume, somewhat smothered by the smell of the wine they had both been drinking, "An instrument is classed as stringed if the sound comes from the vibrations of stretched strings."

"Which is how a piano makes a sound," Hermione added, taking the melody lower and bringing her left hand so close to his; he could brush it if he changed the chords just a little. Resisting the temptation he continued.

"Yes, but only after it is struck by the little hammer attached to the keys. A percussion instrument is defined as an instrument that makes a sound by being struck."

"So a piano is a percussion instrument," Hermione said, stopping her playing and turning to look at him. She was so close he could see the tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose, make out each of her eyelashes, and when she breathed out, her warm breath brushed his face, teasing him to lean a little closer.

"I think the only fair conclusion is to accept that it is both," he said, leaning closer still. Wishing that it was close enough that their lips would brush. His magic wanted it so badly. The bond between them wanted it so badly. And maybe, he did too. Just by himself, for himself.

"Sometimes things aren't as clearly defined as we would hope," Hermione agreed and Draco knew that she wasn't going to move any closer.

Could tell by the tone of her voice and yes, he sensed it through their bond. She had made the move while he'd been frozen at their wedding, but she would not do it now. She was going to wait and see what Draco was going to do. Draco let himself fall. With a tiny movement, he bought himself closer and finally, his lips brushed with hers.

For a moment he was allowed to indulge in the soft quiet of the moment. The kiss was not rushed, not seeking, just a delicate introduction. Then, his magic and their bond roared to life and that sweet touch of lips woke a fury of sensation that ran the length of his body. His hands left the piano and came to cradle her face, while his tongue ran gently along the seam of her lips. They parted for him, and he dipped inside her mouth, tasting the tang of the red wine and something that was just Hermione. Without meaning to, he groaned, and one of his hands slid from her jaw to her curls, all to pull her closer. He had been waiting for this. This sensation. This rightness. From the moment the words were said, sealed by blood. This was how it was meant to be.

Hermione moved as if she felt the same, her lips and tongue an active and eager participant. Her hands, which had initially come to fist the front of his shirt, worked their way to the nape of his neck, her fingers entangled in his hair. He was lost to her. The feel of her hair and skin, the taste of her. He was lost and happily so.

Then her left hand moved from his hair around to cup his jaw and he felt the cool bite of metal. Her ring. The insult that branded her, that she would not take off. Would not tell him why she wore it even now she was aware of its meaning. It was enough to give him pause. Enough to remind him that this was much more complicated than a boy, a girl, a piano and two bottles of wine.

There was their past, symbolised by that damn ring she wore on her finger. Though he was cognizant that he had not chosen the insult for her, he stood by and let her be marked with it all the same. How many times had he stood by and watched? Did only watching make him any less guilty of the sin?

There was a bond, one that she had made clear felt should not define them. What had she called it? Side effects like any other spell. Was this her choice? Was is his? Or was it just forced upon them?

Then there was him. Lost and broken him, and, he was starting to suspect, lost and broken her too. It would be so easy to cling to her like a life raft. But how was that any better than asking her to fight?

Gently, he reached for her hands, untangled them from around his neck and brought them back to her side. At the same time, he slowly eased his mouth away, almost losing his self control as her lips chased him.

“Granger,” he whispered, resting his forehead against hers, praying that she realised that he broke the kiss for reasons that had nothing to do with her.

“Oh my god,” Hermione whispered back, thankfully not pulling away, just hovering in the moment with him, her breath steadyng.

“Perhaps, given the wine...” Draco started, trying to figure out a way to describe his hesitation when he himself was struggling to understand it.

“... and the ancient blood magic acting like some sort of rampant wingman...” Hermione added, though still not moving her forehead away from his.

“... we should-”

“-go to bed,” Hermione finished, finally pulling away and taking a deep breath, “Alone.”

The last part had seemed like a reminder more to herself than him. The sound of three deep breaths overtook the silence; Draco’s gaze locked on her hands where they rested in her lap. One twitched, as if it may have been about to reach out and touch him once more. Draco both longed for it and dreaded it, but it never came.

“Goodnight Draco. Thank you,” she said standing and without waiting to see if he would follow she left the room silently.

The door remained ajar after she left and the cool air from the hall infiltrated the cosy sanctuary of the music room, shocking him further. What the fuck had just happened?

Chapter End Notes

Well guys, you did tell me in in the comments that I was welcome to nerd out on you any time, so guess who's getting more history facts in the future. Both the story of the Tower Ravens and Queen Caroline being locked out of the coronation are completely true. You've erode my self control now... so be prepared! More may be coming!

Speaking of eroding self control... who new all it would take was being lock in a room with wine? About time am I right? I hope you enjoy, I can't tell you how happy it made me as I was writing!

Thank you so much to everyone who is leaving comments, kudos, bookmarks. The vibes keep me writing. These have been some chunky chapters so I really appreciate it.

Also, I wanted to give a big shoutout to Orolin. This story is still without a beta (all typos and errors are my own) but she did some lovely alpha work for me moving into this healing Draco stage, and gave me a place to brainstorm. She also is the world's best commenter.

Finally did guys know I have a pinterest board for this fic? [Here](#)

Aunt Andromeda and Ted Tonks

Chapter Notes

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

It was still dark when Draco got up the next morning and took himself to the library. Although, given that he hadn't really slept, he didn't think it could be rightfully called "getting up". Most of the night he'd alternated between replaying every moment from the music room in exquisite detail and interrogating just what the hell he was doing.

It was clear that he liked Hermione, found her agreeable to be around and she was a beautiful woman. These were just facts. He couldn't deny that he'd liked kissing a beautiful woman either. It had, after all, been a very, very long seven years. But why should she kiss him back? Given all things. It could only be explained by the Marriage Rites, the magic that bound them together. Which begged the question, what did he actually want? And what did the bond demand? There had been a moment, just one before he leaned closer, where he would have sworn it was just him. But then the cold bite of her ring had reminded him that it couldn't possibly be just her. So was his first assumption real? Each question led to another.

Which is why he was in the library before the sun had yet to grace the horizon, trying to cast a strong enough *lumos* to light the aisles in the section on Malfoy Family History. There had to be more information about the blood magic that bound them. Somewhere in a book, somewhere in this room, there might be the answer about how much was him and how much was a spell. Focusing on that question allowed him to ignore others; namely how they could ever overcome his past and if they were both too broken for anything more.

The books on Malfoy family history were numerous, if not, Draco suspected, entirely factual. Most of them relayed the exploits of various witches and wizards in the line who brought glory to the name. Occasionally marriages were mentioned, but only in the alliances they formed and the power they symbolised. Draco had read some of the tales, of course. Many had been required reading during his younger years, in his lessons before Hogwarts. Then his father, inspired by the idea that his son should be second to none in knowledge, and frustrated that despite this goal, his son came second to a Muggleborn witch each year, had implemented a summer school program with more tutors. More of the Malfoy family history was added to the curriculum, and various ancestors were held up as models of Wizarding Excellent for Draco to emulate.

There was Cassius Malfoy, a man who had completely rid a village of muggles under the cover of the Wars of the Roses. No one asked too many questions about the numerous dead, when two kings played war. There was Ignatious Malfoy, a man who had called for the exclusion of Muggleborns from Hogwarts and had, for a time, been successful. There was Tiberus Malfoy, who, after his son had fallen in love with a muggle woman, killed the woman and disowned the son. So great was the boy's sin, he was not allowed to darken the doorway of the House of Malfoy, even after his father had made it impossible for him to be with the woman he wanted.

Draco had to take a break from reading after that. He tried to imagine the relationship he and Hermione would have had, had his father been able to influence anything. Tried to imagine what would have happened if Voldemort had won on that day in May, all those years ago. Hermione would have been executed. Publicly. Maybe in the courtyard at Hogwarts on the same day as the battle. Maybe she would have been kept alive to use as an example; the most famous Muggleborn witch too much of a prize to waste without showing her off first. Maybe Bellatrix would have finished what she started with that knife. Would Draco have just stood by while it happened? Probably. She'd have ended up cold, bloodied and hungry in the Malfoy dungeon, just like Luna. He would have avoided her eyes too; never to know the flecks of gold in the chocolate.

For not the first time, he sent a silent thought of gratitude to his mother for her act of bravery which allowed Harry Potter to triumph. It was something he'd done multiple times, but this was the first time he wasn't only grateful that her act had saved him. This time, his thanks was for the life of his wife, who should be tucked up safe in her bed. He was grateful that he knew she had flecks of gold in her eyes, that she conveyed history facts like they were raucous and current gossip and she preferred herbal tea to coffee.

He sighed and reached for another book. As he skimmed through the pages he couldn't focus. The logistics of the marriage rite seems inconsequential compared to the history of his family. Hermione should never have been bound to it. She didn't deserve such a millstone around her neck. Shame prickled beneath his skin, and realised that he had found himself in a scenario that he could not handle alone. He wasn't going to lie to himself about that. That was his first rule of his new life wasn't it?

Draco had been trying. Merlin knew that he'd been trying. But clothes, and muggle school and time spent with Tonks was not going to absolve his past. How could the people in his life look at him and see anything but the past. Cassius, Ignatious, Tiberus, Lucius, Draco. It was a line. One he'd been proud of once. One that made him feel dirty now. And there was nothing to be done. No one who could understand or guide him.

He paused. There was one person. One person who knew what it was like, to come from such a history. One person whose heritage was the first thing people saw when they looked at her. So, in a step braver than almost anything he'd done since his release, or at least that was how it felt to him, he tucked the book he'd been reading under one arm and went to send a note; asking if he could meet his Aunt for tea at her earliest convenience.

Andromeda did not disappoint. Halfway through his breakfast with Granger, his owl came back with a card in such perfect calligraphy it could only be from a witch with a pureblood education. He was invited to tea that morning, at an address in London which surprised him. He'd expected to find her in a cottage in the countryside like her daughter.

Granger had come to breakfast looking far worse than he felt, and from the way she picked at her toast and tea, Draco had to guess that she was feeling a little nauseous. Made sense; she was much smaller and had drunk at least as much wine. She was also still in her pyjamas, covered by her white bathrobe and when Draco had asked if she was going to work, she'd just mumbled something about a sick day.

It was hard to tell if there was any awkwardness. Not with the fact that Hermione was obviously not at her best and therefore didn't want to talk. Draco didn't push, just slid some orange juice in her direction, his own favoured beverage after a night with too much alcohol, and went back to his book. She'd eventually given up pretending to eat and left, with a mumbled goodbye and a little wave.

It wasn't the worst interaction they could have had with the memory of the previous night hanging between them. Indeed, Draco in his sleeplessness had imagined many different scenarios that left him hexed or worse, alone in the manor after Hermione declared she couldn't bear to stay with him in the same house anymore. A mumbled goodbye and a little wave was infinitely better than that.

Following breakfast, Draco went upstairs to change. He, like Hermione, had come to breakfast in a bathrobe wrapped over his pyjamas. Something that would have made Lucius Malfoy foam at the mouth, but Draco hadn't thought twice about. So comfortable he'd become in his own home. *With her*, his magic whispered as an afterthought. As if it had been emboldened by the night before and like it had in the weeks immediately following the wedding, it was ready to prompt and cajole until they were together in every possible sense.

Andromeda lived in a neat London townhouse in Islington. Orange brick with white window frames and a white door. It reminded him of the Malfoy London townhouse, although theirs was in St James's. Trust a Malfoy to build adjacent to power. He knocked on the door at 10am exactly, and prepared himself to use all his etiquette training over the course of the next hour.

"Aunt Andromeda," he said formally with a small nod when she opened the door and for a moment his aunt's smile was broad and unburdened. Then she looked him over, from his stiff posture to the mugglemade navy suit he'd chosen that morning and gained some control over her expression. It morphed to a polite smile.

"Come in, please," she said, stepping to the side and inviting him in.

Inside, it was an odd mesh of styles. Some parts reminded him of the manor, other parts reminded him of Tonks' country cottage. There was fleur-de-lis wallpaper in the hall and a rag rug runner. As they moved into the sitting room he spotted a Queen Anne settee next to an end table that was definitely made of pine. A picture frame on the mantle that looked like real silver, next to one that was decorated with painted macaroni.

"Please, have a seat," Andromeda said, gesturing toward a chair.

"Thank you," he said, still looking around, taking in the eclectic assortment of objects, "I didn't expect you to live in London."

Andromeda smiled, "It's true, when things were uncertain, we preferred the country. More of a buffer between us and the ministry. More warning if there was danger. But with the end of Voldemort, I couldn't help but be drawn to the hustle of the city again. As soon as we could, I came back to London. Originally to somewhere smaller in the outer boroughs, and then when

I came into my Black inheritance we purchased this townhouse. It's quite close to Grimmauld Place, you know. Another of the Black family holdings."

Draco nodded, though he was only aware of it because he'd heard his mother ranting about how her cousin had left it to Potter. Something he'd considered a great injustice at the time. He'd since learnt a lot more about injustice.

"Does it bother you? Living so close to a Black family home?" he asked, taking the cup of tea she offered him.

"Why would it?" she replied, making her own cup and glancing at him from under her long, black lashes. The shape and colour of her eyes so similar to both Bellatrix and his mother.

"Well, given the history..." Draco started but found himself tongue tied. This wasn't how he envisioned this meeting going. Well in some ways, it was exactly what he hoped. Because wasn't his question the crux of what he wanted to know? How could one stand to be so close to such a painful past? But Andromeda seems so unbothered; the one person he had expected to understand his dilemma. He put his cup down on the coffee table so she couldn't see his hands start to shake.

"It was not me that wanted nothing to do with the Black family, it was the Black family who wanted nothing to do with me," Andromeda responded snappily.

"But the Blacks- they disowned you. They hated Muggles, everyone who was associated with Muggles. The Blacks did terrible, horrid things, how.." his words tumbled out in an inelegant train of thought. Surely, the animosity was mutual.

"Oh, Draco," she sighed, and the mask of politeness slipped as she reached out and took both his hands in hers, "I meant to give you time and space because a young man doesn't need his elderly aunt meddling in his affairs, but I can see that I should have stepped in sooner. For this bit at least."

"What do you mean when you say "The Blacks"? 'The Blacks were horrid', 'The Blacks hated muggles.' Who are you referring to? They're not a single entity. The fact remains I am a Black, whether I appear on the tree or not. It is their blood in my veins; my magic flows from theirs. I don't hate muggles. Nor did my cousin Sirius. My Uncle Alphard. My Great Aunt Cedrelia. They are all Blacks. And then it gets more complicated. My cousin Regulus may have been a bigot when it came to blood purity til the day he died but he sacrificed his life for an elf. Attempting to take down Lord Voldemort in the process. Is he evil? Horrid? A bit of both? Does his final act of bravery make up for all the rest?"

Draco tried to place all the names she threw at him. There were no faces; they had all been burnt off the family tapestry. Save for Regulus, and his story confused him. He'd never heard it before. The way he knew it was that the boy had died in service to the Dark Lord.

She sighed and let go of his hands.

"It's difficult. When our very appearance reminds people of the darker parts of our history," she said and Draco realised that she must hate looking like her sister just as much as he hated

looking like his father. That the first thing people thought of when they saw her was Bellatrix's legacy.

"The history is an abomination," he said when he realised his Aunt was waiting for him to speak.

She just shrugged.

"The history that's written down," she said, "It will never tell the whole story. For example the story of Regulus' death can't be found in any family tome. Nor for that matter can the story of my life with Ted. And in my opinion they are both stories of love and bravery that our family should be proud of. We should know the darker sides of our history. But we should also know the lighter ones too."

Draco thought back on the passage he'd read that morning, Tiberius Malfoy, who had murdered a muggle girl and disowned his son. He'd never stopped to consider the son. Didn't know his name. What had he done after that terrible moment? What was his story?

"And history and identity is not the same thing, regardless of what you were taught." Andromeda continued, "It is part of you, yes, but the greater part will be determined by your actions, like mine has. You're a young man; you've scarcely begun. Take the name back from your father and prove him wrong. Buy a townhouse in the same neighbourhood as your family seat and live there with your muggleborn spouse. Technically, you are the head of the family now. You can set the tone. You started when you gave Nymphadora access to her birthright."

Draco swallowed, unwilling to talk about the money. The money was worth so little in the scheme of things. So he distracted himself by looking across at the photographs on the wall, an entire life. His eyes caught on an image of Andromeda in her Slytherin School robes, her arms wrapped around her sisters, also dressed in their robes. It hung between a photo of Tonks in her Hufflepuff robes and a family shot of the whole family on what looked like a family adventure into Muggle London.

"Did you ever... I mean before you were disowned, did you ever do something that wasn't brave?" he asked, trying to find out in the most inoffensive way possible if Andromeda had ever been a bigot. What she was saying was hopeful, but looking back at his own life, he had only contributed to the darker side of history.

"If you're asking whether I used the word mudblood and thought muggles and muggleborns were lesser than me, the answer is yes. At least for my first few years at Hogwarts. I had grown up knowing no different."

"Then what changed?" Draco asked, wondering how she had gotten from that, to this and taking comfort in the fact she had not been perfect.

"Circumstances forced me to reassess. I started to try and make amends for my past actions. Much like you have been doing. I learnt to trust myself that I would never do them again. One day, you will trust yourself too. Our journeys aren't too dissimilar, although I will

forever be grateful that the circumstances that forced me to reassess were much more gentle and joyful than yours.”

Draco looked at her, confused; what could she mean by the last sentence?

“I fell in love, my boy. That’s what forced me to change. Ted and I were forced together on a project and despite my initial concerns that he was going to be stupid and uncouth, he was clever, a gentleman, and made me laugh like no one else ever had. Plus, he was quite dishy.”

Draco felt his cheeks heat at her admission. More joyful than a war indeed. He allowed himself to imagine an alternate world for a moment. One where he’d been forced to work with Hermione at school. What would have happened? Would he have admired her intellect then? Her looks? Her sense of humour? Would he have slowly grown to question his father because of it? He remembered the sound of her laugh and thought it a real possibility. What he wouldn’t give for a time turner so he could try.

“What about Mr Tonks? When you just started changing? What did he do? Did he... did he come to terms with your family?

Andromeda smiled knowingly.

“Ted thought I was quite dishy as well. And was patient as I questioned and changed my opinions and loved me for who I was. I was not just my prejudices, anymore than you are. You’ll find that most people are willing to be generous when you are making an effort to change. Especially bleeding heart Gryffindors.”

Draco nodded, taking in and considering her words when the last sentence snagged at his memory.

“I thought Tonks said her father was a Hufflepuff, just like her?”

“He was,” said his Aunt with an eyebrow raised in a very Slytherin way, “and that’s all I’ll say on that because, as I said earlier, you don’t need your elderly Aunt meddling in your affairs.”

Draco didn’t return to the Manor until after lunch. He and his Aunt seemed to break through a barrier between them after their initial conversation and Andromeda had been eager to share with Draco. She’d pulled out family photo albums for him to see, and they’d discussed the pureblood traditions she’d upheld. She was determined to show Draco how she’d untangled the magical traditions from the prejudice.

Ted had joined them just before lunch and after introducing himself, he’d insisted Draco join them for a meal and the conversation meandered between both heavy and light topics. Halfway through the meal Draco had two realisations. The first being that Ted was the first muggleborn he’d met outside of his Hogwarts classes, and the second was that his Aunt seemed to be happy. It gave him hope. Both things.

Granger was already heading to dinner when he started on his path down the hall. Out of her pyjamas and looking much brighter than she had that morning.

“Granger,” he said, as he fell into step next to her.

“Malfoy,” she returned and they walked in silence.

Silence in itself was not unusual for the two of them. They spent a lot of time in companionable silence. Comfortable silence. But this was not that. Draco could feel the tension rolling off Granger in waves and he didn’t need the bond to understand her body language.

“Do we need to talk about it?” she asked eventually, slowing her pace.

“I don’t know Granger, do we?” Draco answered, because it was the truth. He didn’t know. He was, in a way, still reeling and a huge part of him wanted to put the question on hold until he knew his own mind a little better.

“It was bound to happen eventually,” she said, and Draco got the distinct impression that she had already had this conversation with herself, “The wine and the… atmosphere… just heightened everything.”

Draco couldn’t refute anything she was saying, though he wanted to add the way she smelt, the way her eyes danced when she was happy, and the way she smiled to the list of contributing factors.

“And just because last night things were a little *undefined* for the briefest of moments. Doesn’t mean we need to start thinking of each other as anything other than friends,” she continued.

“We’re friends now, Granger?” Draco asked before he could stop himself and immediately regretted his words when she turned a deep shade of red, her eyes darting around rather than looking at him.

“I mean, we’re friendly,” she stammered a little as she spoke.

“I never thought I’d get so lucky to be considered a friend,” said Draco, wanting her to know without a doubt that friend was more than he could have ever hoped for. It was definitely more than he deserved.

“Oh yes, well. Again, close quarters and it turns out you’re not a complete prat, so it was bound to happen,” she shot him a curious look out of the corner of her eye, as if she was testing him. Waiting to see if he would pick up on the teasing tone, a little thread he could follow to take them back to comfortable, normal, ground.

“I agree, you do tend to adopt friends too easily and without critical thought. You adopted Potter and Weasley almost immediately in our first year for some unknown reason. Doubled

the IQ of their team when you joined,” he offered. He was more than happy to go back to teasing and sharing and being.

“Hey!” she said, giving him a playful shoulder nudge as they walked. Apparently, there was now teasing and sharing and being and *touching*. That was new. He tried not to read too much into it.

“They had to rescue me from a mountain troll before we became friends. All I’ve asked of you is to occasionally entertain me at breakfast.”

“Well, technically, all you asked of me is that I leave you alone and I failed at that dismally, and yet, here we are. Friends,” he grinned at her as he said the word, feeling it warm him as it left his lips, “It’s definitely more than I expected.”

“It’s probably more than the ministry expected when they locked us up here together too,” she replied, her blush lightening but still there.

“Well, I mean they did expect us to pop out a wedge of babies, so they had to hope at some point we’d get there,” said Draco.

“Maybe not Malfoy. There is such a thing as a hate-fuck you know,” Hermione volleyed back before she walked through the kitchen door with a cheeky smile, leaving him in the hallway. Now, it was his turn to blush.

Chapter End Notes

Well hello! Look at me sticking to an update schedule! I hope you like this chapter, it is a little heavier than fun Dramione but a needed scene. I am nervous posting it though so please be nice.

Now, we are on school holidays here in Oz, and I am taking the kids for a holiday, so I am not sure if I will be posting next Thursday or whether it will be after that. I will post within two weeks though! Just warning you there might be a little gap but we all need a holiday! I hope you will be patient with me :)

Finally, fun history fact. In this Chapter, Draco mentions how an ancestor used the War of the Roses to cover up a massacre of muggles. The War of the Roses was a conflict in English in the 1400s where two cousins fought over the thrown of England. It was considered a very bloody part of history and the Battle of Towton in 1461 is still considered the bloodiest battle on English soil.

Thank you to everyone that has read and left comments- you make my day and then when I go back and reread, you make it all over again. Honestly, without you, I think I would have given up long before now. This chapter was particularly difficult so I really needed your cheerleading this week!

Lessons and the Wisdom of Marvolo Higgs

Chapter Notes

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

If Bobsy and Vim had suspected anything had changed between Draco and Hermione, they didn't let on. *Thank Merlin.* Part of Draco had expected Bobsy to know from looking at him that he'd crossed a line and kissed Granger. Expected disapproving glances and barbed comments. Instead, he was just asked to pass the peas and if he wanted wine with dinner.

After dinner, Granger went through her nightly routine of making everyone some tea and then, coming back to the island, used her wand to summon her bag from her room.

"So, I went to see Tonks today," she said, and the Elves and Draco looked at her in surprise. Granger rarely volunteered information about her day.

"How lovely Miss Hermione. How is Miss Nymphadora?" said Vim.

"She's well, misses your biscuits, Vim," Hermione replied and Vim smiled shyly, "Draco, she mentioned you'd talked to her about maybe taking your A-Levels, going to university?"

Merlin. They'd been talking about him. That was both thrilling and horrifying. He tried to appear nonchalant as he confirmed the information and he watched as Hermione pulled out a stack of flyers from her bag.

"Well, some of the departments at Oxford are taking part in a new initiative. For students who are willing to undertake dual studies in both muggle and magical realms. There is a summer program to prepare for your A-Levels and any NEWTS that the students may have missed or not done well enough on, and then if your grades are suitable, you are accepted into a dual study program. Get a Muggle Degree and a Magical Mastery at the end."

Draco picked up the flyers and scarcely let himself hope. The program was a brilliant idea, one he suspected his wife had had a hand in crafting, but it would not be for an ex-Death Eater.

"I doubt the halls of Oxford would welcome someone like me," he said, putting back down the flyer before he was able to feel too excited about the prospect. Hermione took a deep breath as if she was about to speak but Bobsy beat her to it.

"Oh Codswallop!" he snapped, causing them all to look in surprise, "They would be lucky to have you Master Draco. Merlin knows you have far too many brains to waste around the manor anymore."

For a moment, they were all speechless. Hermione gathered her composure first.

"It's true. In fact, at the risk of sounding indelicate, the departments participating would fight to have you. The whole point is to bridge the muggle, magical divide and you would make a

wonderful example,” she said, and then looked down at her hands and fidgeted “Besides, there has to be at least one benefit of being married to me. I’d like to see them try to deny my husband a place when I helped design the whole thing.”

Draco felt his jaw drop open a little and was conscious that both Bobsy and Vim were staring at him, eyes wider than they usually were. How was he meant to respond to that? His first furious instinct was to list the many, many benefits of being married to her; starting with how he preferred spending time with her more than any other person he knew and ending with the softness of her skin and the way she smelt. That, however, would be completely inappropriate and he was a little unsure where the instinct came from. Unfortunately, no other impulse came to the forefront, so they all waited in silence.

“Well, it is a good time for Bobsy and Vim to go to bed,” said Vim, hopping down from her stool and tugging at Bobsy’s arm to follow, “Goodnight!”

Without waiting for a response from either of them, she apparated away, taking a speechless Bobsy with her. Hermione was now looking uncertain and Draco grabbed a flyer and searched it for a conversation topic in an effort to stop her from leaving as well.

“Oh, they’re offering healing and muggle medicine as a combination?” he asked, realising what the flyer he’d picked up was about.

“Oh yes,” said Hermione, the relief evident in her voice as the conversation continued to more familiar ground, “We’re quite excited about that one. Healing has been limited for many years because of the unwillingness to absorb Muggle teachings. If wizards could understand what muggles do about genetics and the immune system. The possibilities are endless. Are you interested in it?”

“Um, no,” said Draco, not wanting to disappoint her but needing to be honest, “The herbology aspect appeals to me but I don’t have the people skills a good healer needs.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at that but he noted that she did not disagree.

“But, do you think if I passed this one on to Theo Nott, he might be able to...” he trailed off. It would be a godsend to Theo, a healing program in the UK, but he didn’t want Hermione to feel like he was abusing the lifeline she offered him. Particularly as he wasn’t aware until a moment ago that she was willing to throw him one at all.

“Oh, of course,” she said, smiling, “I only just remember Theo from school. Brown hair? Nice dimples? Quite clever?”

“Flirted with anyone in a skirt,” Draco added, feeling a little jealous that the only history his friend had with his wife was positive. What he wouldn’t do to be in that position. He definitely didn’t know what to make of the recollection of ‘*nice dimples*’.

“I wore a skirt. He never flirted with me,” she said, and Draco prickled at her words. *Bloody good thing too.*

“Anyway,” she continued, seemingly unaware of his distraction, “there are other combinations. Arithmacy and Mathematics for example, or Astrology and Astrophysics, and of course my department gives you the ability to study both Magical and Muggle history. You could learn more about the kings and queens if you wish.”

Draco paused, remembering the sanctuary of the music room last night. What he wouldn’t do to go back there. Then he thought of his conversation with Andromeda and his curiosity peaked further.

“Could I study family history, the parts that aren’t well known? Maybe the parts that aren’t written down?” he asked.

“That’s sort of what I do,” Hermione confessed and Draco was confused.

“I thought you studied the history of Obliviation?” he asked, trying to remember the tiny snippets he’d gathered at various breakfasts.

“Not exactly. I reexamine history, from the perspective that key figures or witnesses may have been obliterated. Trying to ensure that there is some way their stories are told. Take for instance Mr and Mrs Roberts and their children.”

Draco looked at her blankly; she said the names as if they should be significant and yet, he didn’t recognise them.

“They were the muggles from the campground at the ‘94 World Cup,” Hermione reminded him gently and Draco felt the shame that was always present ripple in his gut. He’d been there to witness that. His father had participated in their torment. The woman in front of him had been in danger that night and at the time he couldn’t decide if he wanted to warn her or insult her. *You did warn her though*, a little voice pointed out. It hadn’t been nicely or obviously, but 14 year old Draco had warned her. The realisation acted like a balm to the shame. He wasn’t completely awful that night. Wasn’t completely lost.

“Well, the event was significant to history; it marked the start of Voldemort’s second rise. However, Roberts’ perspective on the event is lost because of a memory charm. We will never know what was said to them, how they felt, what they saw. And that is an easy event to know the truth of, because at least their obviations were recorded, and it’s quite recent history. What about hundreds of years ago? What parts of the story are we missing because they were stolen away? I look at the past and try to find those blind spots and then piece them together. And then if you consider how muggle and magical history intersect and consider what is missing in those tales, it’s mind boggling.”

She looked alive as she spoke. Colour in her cheeks from the best possible cause, a smile on her lips.

“There’s a famous Malfoy tale that one of our ancestors was the reason for victory at the Battle of Hastings... guided the arrow that killed Harold Godwinson with a spell,” said Draco, wanting to keep the happiness in her features.

“Really? That’s fascinating. There are so many muggle battles where we suspect magic was used but due to memory charms find it very hard to prove,” said Hermione.

“Yes, well, don’t get too excited. Knowing the Malfoy penchant to overstate our importance, it’s likely bollocks,” said Draco.

“Still… the Battle of Hastings was such a pivotal point in history and the trajectory of that arrow was almost too perfect to be natural,” her eyes took on a faraway quality as she considered the possibility.

“Granger, stop. It’s a waste of your time. This is a Malfoy we’re talking about. We are many, many things but we are not battle heroes. For it to be true, my great, great, great, plus a few more greats, grandfather would have had to be in the middle of a battle. Brave and loyal. More likely he was on his ship paying people to go to the front lines for him, ready to swoop in after the win. Don’t forget who we are,” said Draco, not wanting her to waste time on something that was most certainly self aggrandizing bullshit.

“Maybe. It’s still a fascinating idea. You’ll have to become an historian and find out the truth,” said Hermione before blushing, “Not that I’m pressuring you to join my department. There’s also a botany/herbology combination that would suit you. Make sure you look at all the options. And if you’d like to do it, and need any help with the application, I’d be happy to assist. Or you can forget it all and I won’t say another word. Completely up to you.”

With a final smile she pushed the stack of papers toward him and got up to leave. Not wanting her to go yet, Draco reached out and grabbed her wrist. She had introduced casual touching earlier afterall. Instantly, he was back to the warmth of the music room, his magic poised at the contact.

“Thank you,” he said, not able to stop himself as he rubbed gentle circles on her wrist, feeling her pulse flutter rapidly beneath his fingertips. “Honestly, thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Hermione bit her lip and did not pull her hand away.

“It’s no problem. I’m happy to help. And you can pass whatever you’d like onto Theo. If it would help him too, I can look at his application as well.”

Draco smiled but the mention of his friend's name was like a bucket of ice water over the warmth of their connection. He let go of her wrist and reminded himself that they were friends. And that was more than he could have ever possibly expected.

It was like they were back at Hogwarts. Theo and Draco spent as much time as possible hunched over the desks in the Nott Abbey Library, planning, writing and revising their applications, while Pansy sat nearby flicking through a magazine and watching them with a keen eye. She didn’t 100% trust either Oxford or Hermione but was not, *not* supportive of both men applying. She’d also taken to having Draco back around without any reference to their last conversation. Pansy was good like that. For the people she loved she was always

willing to draw a line and move on. And she had to admit, from the moment Draco turned up with the flyers something had changed in Theo. He was excited about something. Namely the muggle medicine side of the degree.

“Did you know muggles sometimes cut people open to look at their insides to heal them?” he’d asked randomly one afternoon, “do you think I’ll be allowed to do that?”

“Probably not on your first day,” Draco replied flatly, an answer that didn’t seem to dim Theo’s enthusiasm.

“Hmm, maybe I should ask Granger when I’d get to cut up bodies,” he asked, flicking through a book he’d pulled to help with his application.

“How about you leave Granger alone, lest she black list you and you’re not allowed anywhere near Oxford,” Draco growled, a tone that made Pansy look up and raise an eyebrow at him. He gave a sharp shake of his head to indicate that he did not want to talk about it. *Bloody dimples.*

Draco had read all the flyers carefully, but in the end returned to the history program. He loved his garden, it was true, but it was the physicality and practicality of it that appealed to him. He wagered that it would be lost in academic study. Besides, the temptation to find the truth in the things he’d believed for so long was too great. As was, he had to admit to himself, the chance to experience a little bit of the joy that Hermione seemed to get from her area. And maybe even the joy of working with her. Although maybe that was blood magic compelling him.

He still hadn’t found out very much on their marriage bond. Little pieces here and there. He’d found the books that were the most helpful, were the ones written by the women in his family. They seemed more determined to write down the day to day of life as a Malfoy and he was grateful. There was wisdom in the mundane. They all spoke of the bonds, noting that it allowed them to know if spouses were injured while away at battle, and (he blushed when he read this) encouraged them to be with each other when the witch was fertile. A side effect that the Malfoys eventually manipulated to ensure just one heir was born each generation. Interestingly he noted that the discomfort that came from separation was not a universal side effect; Malfoy wives were often separated from their husbands throughout history in the days of longer campaigns and not one reported any negative side effects of it. He also noted that while the wives often spoke of a draw to their husbands, and an appreciation for their devotion, affection was not guaranteed. It made him wonder if that was only felt on the male’s end. A way to secure their fidelity. If only the men had thought to write something other than pompous grandstanding.

The next Sunday, Draco came to Hermione’s door with a bottle of wine and a charcuterie board, courtesy of Bobsy. Somehow, the little elf had known that Draco was now visiting Hermione on a Sunday evening and did not approve of drinking on an empty stomach.

“Ready for your lesson?” he asked, taking in her tired face and rumpled clothes, “I promise I will keep my hands to myself.”

She let out a slight smile, and gestured to the bottle of wine in his hand.

“Leading with wine suggests otherwise,” she jested, taking the wine from him and joining him in the hallway.

“Ah, but I’ve bought food this time. No more drinking on an empty stomach.”

“Thank Merlin, I don’t know about you, but my days of drinking a bottle of wine and waking up fine the next morning are over,” she said, reaching across and helping herself to a strawberry from the platter. Draco tried (and failed) not to watch her mouth as she ate it.

“You have many nights like that Granger?” Draco asked, trying to unravel some of her secrets. Trying to imagine her as a secret party animal. It just reminded him that if it was true, it would probably mean she’d get along swimmingly with Theo and his stupid dimples.

“No,” she answered honestly, “but there were plenty of nights where I switched the Dreamless Sleep for a nice Merlot to see if the benefits were greater.”

“Were they?” Draco asked

“Well, Dreamless Sleep never had me dancing around the kitchen in my underwear, but it’s also never made me vomit up a cheap takeaway either.”

Draco tried to imagine Granger dancing. Not that his mind could even begin to comprehend the underwear part of the image. Though it wasn’t necessarily a sad one, the way she described it made him feel like it was.

“It’s why you should stick to classical music Granger, you’ll never be tempted to shimmy in your knickers to Beethoven,” he replied as they walked into the music room and both sat on the rug in front of the fire.

This time, Granger conjured the enamel mugs and he took to quizzing her about the types of music she liked. She was a truly god awful singer, but a good sport as she sang different bars of muggle songs, refusing to accept that he had never heard modern muggle music before.

“You must have!” she insisted, “even if it was just through some tinny speakers on the way to Platform 9 ¾ . It was impossible to live in Britain in 1996 without hearing The Spice Girls.”

She made it her mission to find one song he recognised after that, insisting that she was going to go to Hampstead Heath as soon as she had a moment and reclaim her old tape player. Whatever that was.

She finished the night in a similar position as the week before, lying on the rug with her hair fanned around her. This week however, he was on the piano stool, playing her his favourites. Grateful that he didn’t need to read the music and could let his gaze drift to Hermione’s face, her eyes closed as she listened, mouth slightly open, the red wine leaving a deep stain on her lips. Halfway through his performance of *Clare de Lune*, she propped her feet up on the piano stool, and her bare toes grazed the top of his thigh. He kept skipping notes after that.

Draco was reading yet another book on magical bonds over breakfast, trying to focus on the descriptions of charm work involved and not of the fact that Hermione's leg was so close to his under the table he could feel the heat of it, when an unfamiliar breed of owl came through the window and perched next to him. Hermione immediately put down her own book, annoyingly moved her leg, and went to coo over the animal. Her hands stroked him gently and her face was animated and loving. Tearing his eyes away from his wife who continued to whisper compliments and inquire about the owl's origin (as if it had a chance of answering), he looked down at the note it had delivered.

Can I have your assistance at 1pm? Bring Dragonhide Gloves. M. Higgs.

He was intending to spend the afternoon polishing his application before giving it to Hermione at dinner to look over. Theo had already finished his and would be delivering it soon and Draco wanted his own to be read at the same time. It wouldn't do for Theo to have all of Hermione's focus. But as much as he would have loved to avoid another afternoon answering questions that forced him to examine the darkest parts of himself, he knew that he couldn't. Not yet. Not when he had to finally relent and admit that the sessions with Higgs were helping. He felt... lighter. Not all the time but more than he used to.

When he apparated to the cottage just after lunch, he didn't hesitate but walked up to the door of the greenhouse and inside. The late May sun meant the giant building was far too warm, so he rolled the sleeves of his shirt as he walked, ignoring the fact that his faded mark was now visible.

"Draco! Excellent. Do you have gloves?" asked Higgs as he approached, looking up from the plant he was examining under a magnifying stand. The plant reminded Draco of an Abyssinian Shivalfig Tree, but much, much smaller. Draco held up his gloves in response, not taking his eyes off the little bush.

"Ah wonderful, pull up a stool and look at this."

Draco did what was asked and sat beside the man, noting that for such an imposing figure he was actually a full head shorter than Draco himself.

"What is it?" he asked, peering down at the peculiar plant. His first assessment seemed correct. It was a perfectly miniaturised shivalfig, complete with teeny tiny fruit.

"I have been experimenting with the Shivalfig. As you know the fruit is a powerful potion ingredient, key in creating an Elixir for Inducing Euphoria among other healing potions?"

Draco nodded.

"Well, I've been trying to develop a new tincture, one that doesn't induce euphoria, but just helps lift a particularly depressive mood. I worked on shrinking the tree, to see if it would change the potency of the fruit, and it seems to have worked in my first trial but a rather unfortunate side effect is the sap has turned caustic."

"Hence the gloves," Draco said.

"Exactly! I'd like to do more trials but I need to harvest more fruit. Are you able to help me with that?" Higgs pushed a magnifying glass on a stand toward him and passed him a potted plant as Draco nodded and put on his gloves. The pair settled into silent work, picking the tiny fruit from the miniature trees with tweezers, careful not to get the sap on themselves. Draco waited for Higgs' first question but it never came. Today, he worked in silence.

"So, what do you hope to achieve with this tincture?" Draco asked eventually, in part because he was curious and in part because the silence was unsettling.

"Well, it's hard to explain without going into the scientific side of the brain and hormonal medicine," Higgs started and Draco quirked an eyebrow in question.

He was having the experience he'd only ever had with Hermione. A lack of understanding not based on the language Higgs was speaking but the required knowledge of another world. It made him shift uncomfortably.

"Right, and probably even more difficult to grasp without an understanding of biology. Let's see, sometimes a person's brain makes it almost impossible for them to be happy. Despite what the person does or how hard they work with someone like me. In those cases, muggle doctors can give them a medicine that helps their brain feel happiness again. Or even, just not feel so much sadness. Wizards have no corresponding treatment. I'm trying to make one."

Draco considered that for a while. Imagined drinking something in his darkest times at the manor. Something that could have made him forget his despair. The thought was enticing. But also hollow.

"Isn't that dishonest though?" he asked.

"How so?" asked Higgs, his tone morphing from that of a kind professor into the one he used when he slowly pried personal information from Draco.

"Well, it's not real is it? It's just a spell or rather, a potion, to tell you what to do. How to feel. How can you trust happiness if it's come from a vial?"

As he said the words he realised he'd been asking the same questions all week about another spell in his life. This one, blood magic that bound him to someone else. How could he trust that?

"In response I can only ask another question; is the constant sadness real? Is it realistic for a person to only experience sadness and pain or are they being tricked by something in their brain?"

Draco thought about that. Thought about Vim's chicken soup, the explosion of flavour breaking through his despair. He thought of the feel of his fresh sheets against his skin when he finally got up to shower. He thought about his friends and their devotion for seven years. He thought about sitting with Hermione in the library, watching the tiny bursts of light from the fireworks on New Years Eve. Even when things were at their worst, there were still tiny moments of joy, of love, of hope.

"No, I suppose it's not," he acquiesced but was still unsure how that applied to his other question. Everyone experienced both highs and lows of emotion, but not everyone experienced love for another person.

"Draco," Higgs interrupted his thoughts of Hermione and blood magic, "If there is something troubling you, you can bring it up without waiting for a question."

Draco had never volunteered any concerns without a probing question from Higgs before. It seemed much more significant that way and yet...

"I was matched to Hermione Granger by the ministry and when we were married, we were bound by blood magic," he let out in a rush and Higgs merely nodded and lowered his eyes back to his work. Without the eye contact, Draco felt more able to continue.

"We have a complicated history and that's putting it mildly but we've formed a friendship, of sorts."

Draco took in a deep breath, ready to share the final piece. The part he hadn't spoken out loud to any one.

"But I want more than a friendship. Or at least I think I do. Sometimes. Then I remember we are both being compelled by a spell to be together and I'm not sure. And it's probably not even a real question anyway, because when I say our past is complicated, what I mean is our past should ensure she wants nothing to do with me. Ever."

Higgs nodded slowly but didn't look up from his fig tree.

"Do you know the biggest issue I am having with my tincture?" he asked and Draco shook his head, knowing Higgs well enough to trust that he was going to answer him in some way.

"It's near impossible in magic to create something from nothing. We can amplify, we can multiply, we can summon if we know where something is. But create. That's tricky magic."

Draco nodded, trying to remember McGonnagal instructing him on Gamp's Law, which addressed this very thing.

"Now, when I started this project, I set out to create happiness and each time I was unsuccessful. It wasn't until I accepted this fundamental rule of magic did I have a breakthrough. My tincture doesn't cause happiness, it just creates the conditions in which it can naturally take hold by tinkering with the brain's chemistry."

Again, Draco nodded. It really was fascinating magic.

"Now, blood magic is a tricky business. I will be the first to admit that and the conditions of your bond will be highly dependent on the structure of the charm. But can you honestly say, that had you spent considerable time with Miss Granger outside of this bond, you wouldn't have the same reaction to her as you are having now? Is it possible that the bond isn't forcing anything, merely creating the conditions for an affection to take hold? Or amplifying what already exists. To be frank with you, you are spending considerable time with a beautiful,

intelligent young woman, who from what I gather has shown you curiosity, kindness and humour. I would be more concerned if you came to me and said you weren't feeling anything for her."

Draco kept his eyes on the fig, using the tweezers to remove the miniature fruit and drop them into the glass dish to his right. One fig, two figs, three. As each fell, he thought of the possibilities that Higgs was hinting at.

"But there is physical discomfort when we are apart. That's not creating conditions, that's forcing us together," he said, voicing his greatest fear. Without the magic, Hermione would disappear altogether. That he had trapped her there with him.

Higgs looked up from his work, "Hmm, that is an interesting side effect. Very rare from what I know. I would question how much of that is the bond creating the pain and how much is the bond augmenting the witch or wizard's own insecurities."

Higgs kept his gaze steady on Draco as the sentence sunk in.

"You think I feel pain because I'm insecure about being apart?" he asked finally. Wondering if this part of the magic was something that was beyond the old man's comprehension. The suggestion was ridiculous. He'd felt the discomfort from the first time Hermione had left the manor. Before he'd gotten to know her. Before he had learnt to like her.

"Perhaps. If the bond works to amplify what you are already feeling. It would make sense that once you gained a companion after 7 years of house arrest, that you'd naturally feel anxious when she left. Have you ever experimented with it?"

"No," he said, remembering that Hermione had asked him the same thing and he'd discounted her suggestion too, "but I remember my mother being in intense pain when my father was locked in Azkaban at the end of my 5th year."

Higgs didn't seem surprised by this, just nodded thoughtfully.

"That makes sense, though I hesitate to make assumptions given I've never met the woman, but when facing separation from a spouse just before the outbreak of a war, with the Dark Lord living in your home, anxiety would be a natural reaction. Does she feel pain now?"

Draco wanted to tell him that he had no way of knowing that, because he wasn't allowed to talk to her. Except he was. She couldn't respond directly to him, but he could write and ask and she was cunning enough to get a response back to him. He thought back to their last meeting. She didn't seem in pain then, but then perhaps she was just good at masking it. And yet, Higgs' reasoning was sound.

"So you mean to say, that if I could feel less anxious about being alone, I would be able to live in Europe without needing Hermione to come with me?"

Marvolo shrugged but nodded.

"Possibly. We could work on that if you'd like," Higgs said, lowering his eyes back to his work in a manner that left Draco certain that the next thing he said would be phrased in such a way that forced the introspection that Draco found unnatural and somewhat painful.

"But the real question Draco, is if you still want to start over somewhere new? Do you want to leave Hermione behind?"

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I am back from holidays! It was a lovely week away, catching up with family and spending time with the kiddos while they are on break. It's nice to be back though and I did have some fun writing these two from a spot with a fantastic view.

Just a few housekeeping things. First, I will be going back to weekly posting but will post on a Monday morning (Australian time), basically each week at this time.

Second, I am considering locking this fic it's only accessible on AO3. There are a few reasons for this, but the main one is AI pulling stories from AO3 to use elsewhere. It goes without saying, I don't want my story to end up on some stupid story app that makes the user pay for each new chapter. I just wanted to give everyone the heads up, so if you are reading and don't yet have an account, you have time to make one so you can still access the story. AO3 accounts are free, you just have to wait for a couple of weeks to get an invitation.

Finally, thank you to everyone who is reading and commenting and reccing my fic. It means so much. I probably would have given up long ago if it wasn't for you amazing reader.

A very big thank you to Orolin, who alpha read this chapter for me as it was a heavy one to write. She is such a great sounding board for ideas and an awesome cheer reader. As well as a ridiculously talented writer herself.

As always, all typos, formatting and spelling errors remain my own. Yes, I could fix them, yes I know better... but I really hate line editing. It takes too long and it's time I could spend writing the 'eventual smut' part of this fic.

Two Truths and a Fly

Chapter Notes

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

Did Draco still want to go to Europe? Three months ago he wouldn't have hesitated. But now? Thankfully, Higgs hadn't seemed to need an answer to his question. They went back to their work, Draco sharing what he'd learnt about the blood bond from his books and Higgs offering his thoughts and theories about what Draco had read. After two hours, Draco was ready to go home and think.

He went to his study immediately after arriving. The austere location seemed to fit the seriousness of the question. As he sat in the leather chair, his hands brushing against the smooth walnut of the desk, he realised he had no framework with which to make big decisions. He was so unfamiliar with making them, and any he'd made up until this point had been made on instinct.

He tried to imagine what Granger would do to make a decision. He imagined she would be excellent at it; probably had a system and everything. Would wrinkle her nose and stare at a piece of paper with all the facts, her tongue peeking out at the corner of her mouth. Making notes, crossing things out. It was probably adorable. Fuck. If only he could ask her for help.

Holding onto the image of her, he reached for a piece of parchment, ready to jot notes. List all the pros and cons. There was a chance that Higgs was wrong. That Draco could work with him and at the end he still wouldn't be able to be away from Granger. However, it wasn't just Granger he'd be leaving now would it? It would be Teddy, Tonks and Lysander, Andromeda and Ted; his family by blood. It would be Bobsy and Vim; his family by choice. It would be the promise of a new focus with his university course. Those were all reasons to stay.

However, there were likely going to be people in that course that hated him. Thought him Death Eater scum who deserved life in Azkaban. There was the chance that when he finished his studies, he'd be unable to find any sort of employment. He'd be back, moping around the house while Granger went to work. And what would happen to Granger if he went? If he abandoned her in the house she'd been tortured in, he would be scum, or at least he'd feel like it. Would she move back to her house in Hampstead Heath? If she did that, she wouldn't have Bobsy and Vim to look after her. She'd be alone and sad every Sunday.

While he was lost in his thoughts, the door to his study swung open and the woman he'd been imagining stood before him, hair wild, cheeks flushed and smiling. It was only just past three; she was never home this early. Had he summoned her with his mind?

"Draco!" she said, the energy infectious as if rolled off her, "I have to show you what I just found."

She walked to stand beside him on his side of the desk, placing a large leather bound tome on top of his piece of parchment covered with notes, completely ignoring the fact he was in the middle of something. Draco found he didn't mind, from the moment the smell of geraniums and basil engulfed him as she leaned down, her cheek level with his, he realised that she was

his list. He'd rather fight for more moments like this one than some vague promise of something better elsewhere.

"Look," she said, completely unaware he was having a moment that stuttered his breath and quickened his heart beat, "I was thinking about what you told me the other night, about your ancestor at the Battle of Hastings."

"Yes, and I told you that it was likely rubbish," he replied, trying to focus, get his head in the game. *Staying. He was staying. No list needed. Focus on what she's saying you idiot.*

"And, believe it or not, I prefer to deal in facts rather than conjecture," Hermione replied, rolling her eyes, but smiling at him all the same. *Keep smiling at me, please keep smiling.*

"Now, look at this. I found a book in the Bodleian that compiled accounts from soldiers who were on the battlefield. In French, obviously, but I assume you are fluent? Read this part."

Draco looked down at the passage she was pointing at and wanted to remind her that he was fluent in modern French but this was not modern French. However he also wanted to impress the swot side of her so he muddled through.

"It just says that some soldiers were short on weapons, so they picked up sticks to use in battle?" he was confused, possibly because his head was still swimming with the decision he'd just made.

"Yes, but these are muggle accounts, read the description of the sticks. They're not describing sticks, they are describing wands. There were wizards at the Battle of Hastings."

"Okay," he said slowly, "But that doesn't prove that a Malfoy had anything to do with it."

"No," she agreed, using her wand to carefully turn the pages to another section, "but this does."

The next section described the moment the arrow flew from the bow of an archer, with Lord Armand Malfoy standing next to him. It described Armand, who was so loyal and determined that William would win, he, like other unarmed soldiers, had picked up a stick, and held it in the air, muttering something the witness could not hear, his eyes fixed on the arrow. The witness speculated that Armand was going to throw his stick at the opposing forces, but didn't need to, as the arrow flew straight through the air and into the eye of King Harold; as if it was guided by god himself.

"It was true," Malfoy whispered, reading over the section for a second time, in case he missed anything in the translation.

"It was true," Hermione confirmed, turning from the page to look at him.

She was so close. Her nose just inches from his cheek and her eyes roved his face, looking for signs of what? She wasn't smiling yet, in fact she looked a little worried. Was she concerned he was upset?

"I thought it must be difficult, not knowing if anything you'd believed growing up was true," she almost whispered, her eyes still darting around his face searching for a reaction, "Forgive me if I overstepped, but it was in my power to offer one truth."

Draco closed his eyes, took in a deep breath through his nose. *Fuck the bond.* The idea that he wouldn't want this witch as his own under any circumstances was laughable. He opened his eyes, his grey immediately seeking the gold in her brown before plunging a hand into her curls and pulling her to him.

There was no resistance. Their lips met in a frantic rush, teeth and tongues warring with each other, determined to gain as much ground in whatever short time they had. Draco turned his chair to face her more fully, trying to pull her closer and she surprised him by moving forwards, her arms wrapping around his neck, climbing to straddle his lap. *Sweet Merlin.* As her chest pressed against his, he groaned, aware that if she lowered herself just a little she would feel exactly how much this was affecting him. And he wasn't sure that he cared.

Fighting against this was pointless. She may have set out to offer him one truth but in reality she'd offered him a second. This wasn't born of blood magic, the way he felt when he was with her, the way he sought her out in every room he entered. It was her. The quiet kindness, the curiosity and intellect, the soothing calm. Even when she was exhausted, had nothing left to give, here she was offering not just something, but exactly what he needed.

Above him, Granger shifted her weight and slid down further onto his lap. She must feel him now, how hard he'd grown, he could feel her heat, and yet she didn't stop. Her hands were still grasping at his hair and he relished the slight sting when she pulled a little too hard. He still had one of his own hands buried in her curls, but the other had come up to rest on her lower back, teasing the hem of her shirt. Could he be brave enough to slip a hand to the smooth skin of her back? He still remembered it from that day, so many months ago in the library. It had burnt.

Deciding he was not yet so bold, he allowed himself to get lost in the other sensations of her. The feel of curls where they wrapped around his knuckles, the pressure of her thighs where they pressed on the outside of his, the taste of her tongue as it brushed against his own, her hands which were exploring his hair, his neck, his shoulders. She was perfection. She was bliss. She was everything.

"Hey Draco, can you look over this last section on my application before I give it to Granger?" Theo Nott's voice called through the door, as he rounded the frame and Hermione abruptly pulled away to look at the source of the sound.

Draco stifled a groan as she twisted and ground her core into him. He barely had time to take in Theo's shocked face before Granger was scrambling backwards, her cheeks flaming red and hair delightfully mussed.

"Oh my apologies," drawled Theo, looking the furthest from apologetic as one could get, "Hello Mrs Malfoy, I wasn't expecting to find you here as well."

Hermione stood awkwardly next to Draco's chair and he could feel her uncertainty through the bond. Without thinking he reached out and took her hand, giving it a slight squeeze.

"Granger, this is Theodore Nott, a harmless miscreant who needs to learn how to send an owl before he invites himself over," he said, watching as Theo gave her his most charming smile, dimples in full show, and extended a hand towards his wife. *Prat*. He turned to look at the witch in question and noted that she was not looking at his friend, but rather at their clasped hands. He froze. Had he crossed a line? Given she was just in his lap he didn't think so, but he also didn't know the rules.

The pause was all it took for Hermione to remember herself and she dropped his hand to reach forward and shake Theo's. The prat (as he would henceforth be known), had other ideas and once he had Hermione's hand in his own, placed a soft kiss on the back of it.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance," said Theo, still grinning at her like the cat who had the cream.

"Likewise," replied Granger, taking a deep breath, "Malfoy said you are interested in healing?"

"Well, if I am being completely honest, it's the Muggle Medicine degree that really excites me. Do you think they'll let me cut up a body to see what is wrong with it?" said Theo.

"Probably not on your first day..." Hermione said, her brow furrowed.

"Damn it, that's what that wanker said," Theo replied, gesturing to Draco, "Oh well, looks like I'll have to pay my dues before they hand me a knife. Probably fair. No one wants to give a Nott a weapon without a thorough vetting process. Anyway, I brought my application over. Draco said you were willing and able to pass a critical eye? Make sure I haven't said anything too inappropriate?"

He pulled out a scroll of parchment and held it to her, his eyes intense and Draco felt the urge to cast a stinging jinx in his direction. This was not what they had agreed. Draco was going to ask Hermione; Theo was not to approach her himself. He didn't want her to feel obliged and liked to think she would have no qualms saying no to him.

"I'll take that," he said, stepping forward to take the scroll before Hermione had to answer, "If Granger has time, I can pass it on."

"It's ok, I have time," she replied, reaching forward and taking the scroll from him, her fingers brushing against his own as she did, the movement bringing her close enough that he could smell her perfume again. Draco let his eyes flutter closed for the briefest of moments, savouring. Only the cool air as she moved away brought him back to the moment. Was there a chance that Theo hadn't seen that? Judging by the shit eating grin he was wearing, probably not.

"Well, I should go, read this," said Hermione, her arms back around her, clutching the scroll and looking at the door like a lifeline. She gave a tight lipped smile and moved towards it.

"Wait," called Draco, just as she reached the threshold, "Your book."

“Oh, thank you,” said Hermione, pulling her wand out from her sleeve and summoning the tome, leaving Draco’s list from earlier bare. He didn’t look at it, just sought out her eyes, desperate for an indication that she wanted to stay but with a final glimpse of gold, she was gone.

“Well, Mrs Malfoy is looking very comfortable in the Manor indeed,” said Theo, walking around the desk and taking a seat in Draco’s chair. Which, given the events of the last 15 minutes, was now his new favourite piece of furniture in the manor.

“Theodore... don’t” growled Draco.

“Don’t what? Sit? Do I need to scourify the chair?” Theo shifted from side to side in jest and Draco looked to the ceiling, actively reminding himself that Theo was one of his oldest friends.

“Don’t start,” he said.

“Yes, well, it would be unfair of me to start, especially seeing as how I interrupted your chance to finish.”

Draco didn’t hesitate, just pulled his wand from his pocket and shot a stinging hex at Theo.

“Oh fuck off,” yelped Theo, rubbing his left ear where the hex had landed, “You can’t blame me for commenting, it’s not like any of us knew you and Granger were doing anything more than talking.”

Draco ran a hand over his face. He didn’t know if they were doing anything more than talking either. Well, obviously they had been earlier but it wasn’t like that was some pattern. He might want it to be but that wasn’t exactly the point. Or maybe it was. He’d done a lot of thinking very quickly the moment she’d arrived in his study. First, he’d decided to stay (although now he was thinking about it, working on some of his anxiety about being alone was probably still a good idea regardless), then he’d decided he wanted Granger just because she was Granger not because of any magical prompting, and then he’d decided... what? What did he need to decide now?

A snort drew his attention and he looked up to see Theo with one eyebrow raised and his boots propped up on his desk.

“Fuck, if I knew Granger had the ability to get a wizard that tangled up, I’d have paid more attention to her at school.”

“But you didn’t,” Draco partly asked, partly insisted, remembering Hermione’s claim that Theo had never flirted with her and needing for it to be true.

“No, I figured given I had neither red hair nor freckles, I was not her type.”

Draco scowled, the only thing more irritating than the image of Theo flirting with his wife, was the knowledge that Ronald Weasley had and been successful.

“Do you still need to be here?” he asked Theo, walking over and pushing the man’s boots off his desk, surreptitiously covering his list from earlier as he did so. He didn’t really want to enter that information into the conversation.

“No, although I must confess I’m enjoying the matinee entertainment.”

Draco just raised an eyebrow in response.

“Fine, I understand, you want to get back to your wife. Tend to her needs. Submit your own application, so to speak.”

This time, Theo dodged the hex before it could make contact.

Dinner was a silent affair. With Bobsy’s approval, Hermione spent dinner marking up Theo’s application before asking for Draco’s and reviewing it too. Draco was pleased to note that he had far less red ink across his, though he enjoyed the way she puzzled over each phrase before she slashed it with red. As if she wanted to make sure her feedback was exactly right and deserved. She would make a formidable professor and Draco tried to imagine taking one of her classes. It was a safe bet that he would find it hard to focus given he could barely focus on the sausages and mash potatoes Vim had placed in front of him. They seemed inconsequential compared to the question of how Hermione could be so focused on a paper when he felt like he had been hit with a Featherlight Charm.

There had been no chance to talk after dinner either; Granger had sent him with Theo’s application to find an owl and return it to him. By the time he came back to the kitchen, she was gone. Back to her rooms, he supposed. He slowed down as he walked past her door, but didn’t knock.

The next morning at breakfast, she was happy to talk. But about his application, not the fact that he’d had rather delightful dreams of her squirming in his lap, grinding against him. In his dream, he’d been brave enough to reach beneath the hem of her shirt. In real life, he was too nervous to even bring it up.

Besides, what would he say, “*I like your mouth Granger, can I taste it again?*”

Actually, that wasn’t half bad. He filed it away for later. Some undetermined time when he would magically become confident and suave.

“I won’t be the one reviewing your application of course, given the conflict of interest, but I feel confident in saying that both you and Theo will be accepted,” Hermione said, interrupting his daydream.

Right, she was helping him. He should be paying attention.

“Just maybe talk to him, tell him it’s not appropriate to ask to cut up people straight away. Even in a medicine degree,” she added, worried expression taking over her face.

“He was just joking,” said Draco quickly.

“Was he?” Hermione added, taking a final sip of tea and finally putting down her papers. Excellent, he was going to have her complete attention. So long as it wasn’t squandered talking about Theo.

“Mostly,” Draco responded, and tried to think of a way to bring up their kiss. Was this where a normal person would ask a witch out to dinner?

“Okay, I need to go to work. I’ll see you tonight?” Hermione asked, getting up from her chair. Although her tone and words were casual, the same she used everyday, there was a tightness around her eyes that let him know that she hadn’t completely forgotten. There was a pang of anxiety through the bond too.

“Yes, of course,” he replied, fighting the instinct to reach out and take her hand like he had the day before. He didn’t, of course, but the way she smiled at him made him feel like he had all the same.

Fuck. What was he going to do now? Wait around the house all day hoping that she would come home and smile at him again? Wait for Theo or Pansy (because that little snitch would have definitely told her about yesterday by now), to come over and ask questions he didn’t know the answer to? With a sigh, he hauled himself from his chair and walked to the Floo Parlour.

Draco stumbled out of the Floo at Zabini Manor and was immediately taken aback by the colours. It wasn’t gauche, but just bright. Sapphire blues, forest greens, even a dash of royal purple. Blaise the shadow amongst the colour, sitting on a charcoal grey armchair dressed in black, reading a book, as if he was waiting for him.

“So, has it blown up in your face yet?” he asked, closing the novel and looking at Draco as if no time had passed since he’d stormed out of Nott Abbey months prior.

“Hard to tell,” Draco replied honestly, walking over to sit next to him, wondering if he’d been terribly unfair to his friend, knowing the answer was yes.

“So you’re here because?” Blaise asked, hand coming up to rest on his chin.

“Because I have been an unmitigated arse,” Draco admitted freely. Humbling himself, he decided, was something one could practise. It got easier each time.

“Well, she hasn’t killed you, so it could be worse,” Blaise drawled, going to pick his book up again.

“Not to Granger. I mean, I was an unmitigated arse to her as well, but in that specific instance, I was talking about you,” Draco stuttered out. For Merlin’s sake, one day he was going to be able to string together a sentence without sounding like an idiot but it wasn’t going to be today. This was what happened when you locked someone up alone for seven years; they lost their ability to sound passably intelligent.

“We’re talking about Blaise? That’s one of my favourite subjects,” said Luna walking into the room and all of the colour made sense. She smiled at Draco and came forward to give him a kiss on the cheek. He was going to be humbling himself with an audience it seemed. Excellent.

“I should have listened to you. And then I should have come to see you after I realised you were right, and ok,” Draco took a deep breath and turned to Luna, “Luna, I am deeply, deeply sorry for everything that happened to you in my family home. I can not begin to explain the regret I feel for not doing more or really doing anything. And then I apologise for not falling at your feet earlier than this, especially when I realised you’ve made Blaise so incredibly happy. You deserved so much more.”

Draco let the apology pour out of him. Imperfect, yet it existed. He’d given words to the shame and regret in his gut and with them, they’d found an outlet leaving him lighter. He turned to look at Blaise and see how it had been received and found his friend’s eyes were not on him; they were steady on his wife and her blue eyes fixed back on his. A silent conversation was taking place, one so intimate Draco looked down to his feet to give them the privacy to complete it.

“Thank you Draco,” Luna said, walking to stand next to Blaise, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Have you tried those new apology skills out on your wife? I am guessing she is deserving of one,” said Blaise, his hand reaching up to rest on Luna’s.

“Yes and yes, she was,” said Draco.

“And...” Blaise prompted but Luna just giggled.

“And Draco’s not going to Europe anymore,” she said, before Draco had a chance to answer.

“Really? If only someone could have seen that coming,” said Blaise and with a practised move, he pulled his wife’s hand from his shoulder and placed a kiss on her palm.

“Theo’s right, you two are nauseating,” Draco grumbled, watching the pair smile at each other and then at him.

“Jealous mate?” Blaise asked with a raised eyebrow and Draco didn’t respond because the answer was, yes actually. He tried to imagine kissing Granger’s palm before she left to work each day. Imagined her just resting a hand on his shoulder casually.

“It’s not that hard you know,” said Blaise, cutting into his thoughts, “It was one of the things our negligent parents actually bothered to teach us. How to woo a witch. Flowers here, a dinner there. Some slightly inappropriate words whispered into her ear at the right moment.”

Luna giggled again at that, and reached out to stroke Blaise’s earlobe. Urgh. He should look away.

“You think I should court Granger?” Draco asked.

"Well you want to don't you? Judging by your reactions just now," Blaise vollied back and Draco just gritted his teeth.

He did want to. He wanted what he had been promised as a boy. He wanted to be the dashing wizard who swept his witch off her feet. The hero in the story. It was such a pipe dream when he'd been the villain for far, far too long.

"Just remember the rocks, Draco. People can learn so much from rocks," said Luna from her spot beside Blaise.

"Rocks?" Draco repeated, still not seeing any sense in Luna's madness. The only rocks that had anything to do with courting were the shiny kind.

"Or dragons I suppose. Think of what dragons do when they find treasure," Luna's lilting voice prompting him to imagine.

Blaise's expression changed from soft and loving as Luna spoke to anticipatory when he saw Draco's face.

"Now you are speaking the right language, love. Malfoys understand dragons better than most. Will you be visiting the vaults soon, Dray? Ready to drape something shiny around your wife's neck?" said Blaise.

"Small but meaningful, Draco, Hermione appreciates small but meaningful," Luna offered her own advice.

Draco let his head swim with possibilities. There were some trinkets in the Malfoy vault he'd like to give her. Along with flowers. All grown by him, without magic. And maybe he could take her somewhere. Some horribly cold but historically significant church in Scotland. Take her to the Malfoy holdings in France. See the libraries of historical books. Come up behind her in the library and press a kiss to the nap of her neck only to have her swat him away playfully while she read. She told him to fight for the life he wanted. Did she mean it? Because the life he wanted had her in it, swatting him playfully when he interrupted her reading and letting him kiss her anyway.

"So are you about to rush off and plan your grand gestures?" Blaise asked, interrupting his thoughts. Draco looked at his old friend, smug and satisfied in his colourful house with his colourful wife.

"No, not just yet," Draco replied, forcing himself to focus on the people in front of him, because the life he wanted included Granger, but needed to include Blaise, and Luna he supposed. Not that it would be a burden getting to know the woman who had made his friend so content.

"I thought we might take the brooms out?" he asked Blaise. He was yet to go flying; it had been over 8 years since he'd gotten on a broom. It seemed like it was time; time to accept he was finally free.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the start of Draco living out his boyhood fantasies of being a romantic hero. You just know he pictured himself as one. However, he's been isolated for 8 years, so don't expect him to be any good at it yet!

There is a scene in this that was written with one of my lovely readers in mind. TheSunflowersQueen commented a while ago that they couldn't wait for Theo and Hermione to meet and when she did I realised I didn't have that scene in my outline and needed to add one. So here we are... I hope you like it SunflowersQueen! I love Theo, so I definitely enjoyed writing it.

A huge thank you to everyone who has commented and kudos and recc'ed. I love reading your comments and thoughts and they are so motivating. Also a huge thank you to Orolin who alphaed this chapter for me. You are an absolute gem and the loveliest human!

Oh, the history, we obviously don't know for sure that Harold Godwinson was shot through the eye, but there are contemporary accounts that he did. The book Hermione found is complete fiction, created for this fic so I could prove a Malfoy was there.

Romantic Heroes and Awkward Pauses

Chapter Notes

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

It was a common misconception that pureblood courting started with a contract between two families. Sometimes it did, particularly if the families were trying to acquire wealth and power with the match (so for a Malfoy it almost certainly did), but sometimes it started with an attraction. A boy saw a girl and thought, “It’s her.” Those were the stories that Narcissa Malfoy had told Draco when he was a boy, as he followed her around her greenhouse. Stories of witches who had charmed their wizard and their wizard in return had fought for their love. She’d made the stories sound exciting and romantic and as they walked, she made sure he had memorised the language of flowers, so when the time came, he would be able to say exactly what he needed to say to the witch that caught his eye. *Irises for Faith. Hydrangeas for Gratitude in Being Understood. Pink Camellias for Longing.*

It never seemed to bother Narcissa that her own marriage hadn’t been an initial love match. In true Malfoy fashion, the betrothal contract between the Black and Malfoy families had been written long before Narcissa had ever set eyes on Lucius. It also never seemed to bother her that Lucius would be unlikely to allow a love match for her son; she was determined Draco would know the power of the right bouquet of flowers. *Orange blossoms for marriage. White rose for innocence. Red tulips for a declaration.*

The right bouquet would be unlikely to convey to Granger what he was feeling and wanted. He suspected she was unaware of what each bloom meant if her reaction to the flowers Bobsy had placed around the manor from the day of her arrival was any indication. Obviously, her parents had decided that teaching her morals and ethics was more vital than how to say “you’re pretty” via flowers (a calla lily or hibiscus). That said, he wanted to give her flowers. Wanted to treat her like he’d imagined one day treating his future wife. This was one pureblood tradition he was not willing to give up.

Taking a pair of pruning shears, he set about choosing his blooms. Blue salvia (*I think of you*), morning glory (*affection*) and a single white gardenia. While it may have been much too soon to say the word out loud, he felt he could put it in a bouquet, hidden among the other truths, knowing she wouldn’t hear it yet.

The manor was quiet while he waited for her to come home from work. Not an oppressive quiet though, a calm one. The type of quiet that he associated with Hermione. He took his time, revising his application, and applying her notes, before sending it off, all the while the little bouquet he’d made sat on his desk, perfectly preserved under a stasis charm. The moment she arrived home, he knew. However, it was a frisson of satisfaction through their bond this time, rather than an alleviation of discomfort. Interesting. It was a much more preferable option. He gave her time to change and get comfortable, not wanting to rush or crowd her, before gathering the flowers and going to her.

The fact that courting a witch was so nerve-wracking was absent from every single one of the tales his mother had told him. The dry mouth, the pounding heart. All details omitted from

those stories. What if she rejected him? What if she left? There was only one ending in his mother's version of this event, but in reality, there were many less preferable ones and given everything, they were more likely.

He didn't need to knock on her door. It swung open before he could, and there she was, lovely and smiling. Work robes were replaced by a long-sleeved t-shirt and well-worn jeans. Muggle fashions that he was incredibly fond of. Hair tumbling free of the bun on top of her head, eyes bright and surprised.

"Oh, I was just coming to look for you," she smiled and pushed her curls back off her face; they immediately fell forward again.

"I was coming to look for you," he said, his tongue darting out to wet his lips, wondering if he should say his piece or wait for her to speak. Deciding he could not wait, not with his palms growing increasingly sweaty around the bouquet he was holding, he offered it to her.

"These are for you," he said and Hermione smiled at him and took them.

"The last time you gave me flowers, you asked me to move to Switzerland. Do I need to be worried?" she asked a hint of hesitation in her voice. Of course, this moment would remind her of that. He had so much ground to make up.

"No, these are for you, just because," he said, hating himself as he spoke because he sounded like a bumbling idiot. Which didn't stop Ron Weasley from landing a date with her but he hoped that he might offer a slightly better option than that.

"Oh," Hermione seemed at a loss for words and filled the moment by sniffing them, "thank you?"

Draco stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked away. What was he meant to do now? Narcissa hadn't taught him what to do after he handed over the flowers and now they just were standing, staring awkwardly at each other. He wondered if she was going to bring up their second kiss. More difficult to blame that one on wine and atmosphere. Should he bring up the second kiss? The brave and errant thought stuttered in his chest and died. There were too many things she could say about it that would shatter the fragile confidence he'd managed to build. No, he would not be doing that.

"So, why were you coming to find me?" he asked instead when the silence stretched for far too long.

"I wanted to see if you had submitted your application. Theo as well. There was a meeting about it today and the heads of each department wanted to start selections," she said.

"We have. Your suggestions were very helpful," said Draco watching as her cheeks pinkened at the praise. So uncomfortable with praise. He wanted her to get used to it. He would be offering it regularly.

"I wasn't too heavy-handed? Too harsh?" she asked, her hands absent-mindedly playing with her bouquet.

"Trust me, Theo responds well to a heavy hand. But be warned, if you're too mean to him, he will fall in love with you," Draco said without thinking. *Fuck*. Why did he bring that up? *Idiot*.

"*Slytherins*," muttered Hermione, shaking her head, "What about you? Was I too heavy-handed for your liking?"

"I think you handled me perfectly," he said honestly and her cheeks grew even darker. Was it the praise, or could she hear the double entendre in his words? He'd intended it to be there. Saying it made him feel like that confident 15-year-old boy again, convinced that life was going to work out.

"Right, well, I'm glad you were satisfied," she said.

"I wouldn't say I was satisfied," he countered because he couldn't help himself. This was definitely not in the Narcissa Malfoy guide to courting but she looked so pretty when she was blushing.

"I think the real reward will be if I get an acceptance letter," he added and watched as Hermione visibly let out a breath, the tension draining from her body as he linked it back to the application. Was it wrong to tease her? She was still smiling at him so he didn't think so.

"You might have to wait for that," she said, chewing her bottom lip and narrowing her eyes at him.

"Luckily, I'm very good at waiting," he said, and without talking himself out of it, he reached out and pushed her curls back behind her ear. This time they stayed.

Hermione swallowed and took a step away from him. The soft expression she'd worn for their conversation hardened a little and Draco worried he'd gone too far. He shouldn't have reached out to touch, no matter how much he'd wanted to. Should have given her more time. More flowers. She crossed her arms across her chest and Draco noted her thumbing her wedding ring, spinning the ugly band around and around her finger.

"Well, I'm not needed for that part then. I'll see you at dinner," she said and with a final nod, she retreated back to her room.

Two days later, Draco was in the Malfoy vault with Theo and Pansy, looking over the different family jewels. Theo had already bedazzled himself with large clip-on emerald earrings, a pearl choker and diamond tiara. Draco was looking through chests of heirlooms trying to find the exact right thing that would say '*Sorry I touched your hair, but also, I think I want to touch all of you, often, and would you be okay with that*'.

"Why am I here?" asked Pansy, looking around the vault with barely veiled impatience.

"I thought you might actually be able to assist, unlike some people," Draco muttered pointedly at Theo, who had moved on to putting a different gaudy ring on each of his fingers.

"I am being helpful. I'm modelling your options," said Theo, striking a pose and ensuring that as many of the gems as possible caught the light.

"And what is it exactly that we are meant to be helping with?" she asked, ignoring Theo who was now strutting around the vault, showing off the jewellery like a high fashion model.

"Well, that's obvious, darling. He's trying to find something to give to Granger that says 'Thank you for climbing on my lap the other day, can we do it again without the clothes?'" Theo said as he strutted past, veering off course, distracted by a hatstand of expensive fur-trimmed cloaks.

"Really? Is that what we're doing?" Pansy asked, suddenly looking interested in their outing.

"No," Draco scowled but then stopped himself. It wasn't exactly what they were doing but it also wasn't *not* what they were doing, "I would just like to give her something nice."

"This is nice," called Theo, jewellery abandoned, wrapped in a fur-lined cloak, rubbing his cheek on the collar, "Just imagine a witch in this... and nothing else but some tasteful lingerie... black or even better, emerald... actually can I have this?"

Pansy waved her hand at him and he dutifully fell silent.

"You want to get Granger something nice? After you were caught, how do I put this delicately, canoodling, in your study? What am I missing... are you trying to court Hermione Granger?" Pansy came closer as she spoke, her dark eyes trained on Draco, waiting for any sign of weakness.

Draco immediately felt defensive. So what if he was trying to court Hermione; surely Pansy wouldn't find that distasteful. She didn't like the girl at school, but neither had he. Surely she could see that she'd grown to be beautiful and clever and kind. Unless the objection was him. There was more truth in the fact that Draco Malfoy did not deserve Hermione Granger. Even if the ministry had seen fit to give her to him, gift-wrapped.

"I have no objection if you are," Pansy interrupted, her dark eyes still studying, measuring, "It's merely a development I was previously unaware of. And you know how much I hate being caught by surprise."

Draco nodded and accepted Pansy's blessing without another word.

"It will probably amount to nothing anyway," he said, thinking back to Hermione's face in the hallway; the moment he'd reached out and she'd shuttered. Just when he'd thought that maybe there was some spark.

"What makes you say that?" Pansy asked, raising an eyebrow to let him know that if he lied to her, or concealed anything from her, she would not be offering any of her assistance. So he took a deep breath and explained his reasoning.

"*Merlin*, and you call yourself a Slytherin," she said after she listened to his whole tale.

"What's that meant to mean?" Draco asked, again defensive.

"I know that you probably have an image in your head that you'll hand a witch flowers and she'll melt to a puddle at your feet if she's interested, but this isn't just some witch and this isn't 1996. This is Granger we're talking about and you've been approaching her like a common Gryffindor. Blustering up with flowers and no plan of what to say next...ridiculous" Pansy rolled her eyes, "You're going to need a little of your Slytherin cunning for this one."

"Or she could just be not interested," Draco countered. Pansy raised her eyebrows at him.

"I wouldn't say that," she said, dropping her eye contact.

"Pansy, what do you know?" Draco asked, narrowing his eyes at her and taking a step forward. She just raised a hand to stop him and pursed her lips.

"What I do or do not *suspect* is none of your business," she replied and Draco backed off straight away, he knew better than to push Pansy when she had said no, "what I *know* is that jewellery is not going to work."

"So what will?" Draco asked.

"Time," replied Pansy simply, "As much as I will deny it if I'm ever asked again, the ministry seemed to know what they were doing when they paired the two of you up. My guess is the more time you spend with her the less she'll be able to deny it too. That and you can't come on too strong. If you show up with a diamond necklace and daydreams of little curly-haired blonde babies—"

Draco made a noise to interrupt her then. He wanted to take her to dinner, maybe kiss her again. Reach under the hem of her shirt and explore her smooth skin...No one had said anything about babies. However, before he could voice his protest Pansy silenced him with a wave of her hand.

"Oh don't bother denying it. You are both a Slytherin and a Malfoy. The moment you decided to court that witch, your brain started dreaming up a future where you followed that woman around like a dog. If your mind hasn't made those dreams known to you, that's simply a lack of self-awareness."

From the corner, Theo snorted and Pansy whirled on him.

"And don't you get started, Nott. You may think you're above all this because I occasionally let you sleep with other women but when I say speak, what do you say?"

"Woof, ma'am" he replied.

"Good boy," Pansy smiled at him and Draco felt like he'd slipped into a twisted daydream charm. If the dynamics between Blaise and Luna were nauseating, these were just unsettling. These two were meant to just be friends, right? Was he that unaware?

"But back to you," Pansy didn't let Draco think on it for too long, "As I was saying, if you come on too strong, Granger is going to run, far away. I don't know exactly what happened between her and Weasley but I heard from my fashion contacts that the man had bought a

ring before they split. So spend time with her, but keep it casual... I'm led to believe that's how muggles like to do it when everything is starting out."

"Casual?" Draco repeated, thinking that was preposterous given they were married and living in the same house.

"Yes darling, leave the jewellery here for now and figure out a cunning little plan to take her out without making her think you're trying to marry her."

"But I'm already married to her," he pointed out.

"Are you though? In her mind?" Pansy asked, coming to stand next to Draco, perusing the tray of rings, "I don't know much of the woman, but my guess is she wouldn't be straddling you in a desk chair if she thought that was the case. Trust me on this one, leave the jewellery here. Casual drinks and dinner."

Draco swallowed, feeling a little stunned. He needed to find a way to go out for a casual drink with Granger. Nothing with Granger was casual.

"Oh, on second thoughts, this delightful piece can come with us," Pansy reached over and took a ruby ring from the box and slipped it onto her finger, "it can be a little thank you gift for all my hard work."

She turned and walked towards the door to the vault, Theo trailing after her, the fur-trimmed cloak still over one arm.

Draco wasn't prepared to give up the flowers. He'd waited his whole life to give flowers to his witch and he didn't want to stop now. However, after listening to Pansy, he made a point of giving them to Hermione in more discreet ways. A single bloom left innocuously on her side of the window seat in the library, placing a bouquet on the island bench in the kitchen where they had dinner, tying a flower to Glitter's collar before he scuttled off to Hermione's room for the night.

Then he watched. He didn't see her reaction to the flowers every time, but the times he did made up for it. She would blush, without fail. Her eyes would dart around to make sure no one was watching and then she would reach out and gently touch the petals. Sometimes she would bring it to her face to smell the scent. The soft petals brushing against her lips as she did. It made something in his gut twist with longing to see it.

Time was something he also tried to give. However, upon reflection they already had quite a lot of time together built into their lives, breakfast and dinner, reading in the library on a Saturday morning. He was very conscious not to try and touch her again, and tried to keep his flirting to a minimum; which would have been easier if she had done the same, but when they were together it just seemed to happen. A brush of leg under the table, a smile and a cheeky comment about a book. He would rather set himself on fire than say anything good about the ministry but he had to agree with Pansy; there did seem to be some form of... something.

One afternoon, he slipped into the library to leave a single variegated tulip (*beautiful eyes*) on the window seat to find Bobsy collecting books.

“Bobsy,” Draco said as he entered, trying to think of a way he could subtly leave the flower without the elf noticing, “what are you up to today?”

“You should start a conversation with ‘hello’ Master Draco; I expect your etiquette tutors covered that with you when you were a boy?” Bobsy replied with the slow bored tone that now made Draco smile.

“Of course, hello Bobsy. What are you up to?” Draco tried again, holding the tulip loosely to his side, slightly behind him, hoping Bobsy wouldn’t notice it, trying to find out if he would leave soon or whether Draco would need to come back at a later time.

“I’ve decided Miss Hermione’s library in her room needs updating, so I am gathering a few books that I think would be of use to her,” said Bobsy, before summoning another book to the small stack next to him. Draco looked at the title as it landed ‘*The Floral Code for Little Witches: Blooms and their Meanings*’. Draco looked up to see Bobsy looking pointedly at the tulip by his side and Draco braced for a comment.

“You could try leaving one in the floo parlour for when she gets home from work if you were so inclined,” Bobsy said, levitating the stack of books with a click of his fingers and starting to walk towards the door, “It’s a shame she won’t let us clean her office at Oxford, as a flower on her desk would be a delightful way to start the week.”

Draco watched bemused as Bobsy strolled away. He wasn’t 100% sure but it was possible that the little elf had just given Draco his... blessing? What a strange, strange world he lived in. Along with his blessing, Bobsy had given Draco an idea. Her office in Oxford; Draco had an overwhelming desire to see it and a favour that she owed him.

“Do you remember December?” Draco asked her over breakfast the next day.

She took a minute to pull herself from her book, eyes blinking adorably as she did. He liked that about her, the way she seemed to disappear into whatever she was reading and it always took her a little while to come back to reality.

“As in the month?” she asked, putting her book to the side, and Draco felt a wave of pleasure at having her full attention.

“Yes, specifically our little bet,” he hedged and watched her prepare herself. Guard herself. He’d been expecting that. They hadn’t spoken of it since that day when he’d unleashed on her and asked her to move. It was bound to be a sensitive topic.

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to ask you to move or anything like that, but you do remember you still owe me a favour?”

Hermione arched her brow at him, “Given I just helped not only you with your application, but also your best friend, I would think we’d be even on that front?”

“Ah Miss Granger, you never set your price for that little bit of assistance. Without clear terms, I will always assume it’s pure benevolence on your part.”

“Devious snakes,” she shook her head but smiled at him.

“Overly trusting lions,” he retorted with his own smile.

“So what is it you want from me then?” she asked, leaning back and taking a sip of tea. He took in her relaxed posture, her delicate fingers holding the teacup, her full lips wrapped around the rim of the cup. What a loaded question.

“Um, Oxford. I’d like to go there. Walk around, see the muggle and the magical parts. Would you go with me?” Draco asked, tearing his eyes from her lips to her eyes; they glinted with curiosity.

“You want me to show you around Oxford? As your favour?” she asked.

“Yes, with you I might be allowed into a store,” he said, before blushing and wondering if he said too much.

“Both Muggle and Magical?” she asked.

“Yes,” he responded instantly, although surely she knew by now that he didn’t have any issue with going into the muggle world.

“OK,” she said

“OK?”

“OK. I have some time this afternoon if you want to floo to my office around lunchtime? We can eat together?”

“Yes,” Draco was quick to agree, without a thought to what he actually had on for the afternoon. A casual meal. This was better than he had planned. Better than he could have hoped.

“OK, I’ll see you then,” replied Hermione, picking up her book again but looking at him curiously from over the top of it.

Draco worked hard to keep the smile off her face, trying not to think of all the lunches that he wanted to take her on in the future. He wanted to take her to Italy, for a long lunch with wine. He wanted to take her on a picnic lunch on the Manor grounds and afterwards lay her out on the rug and trail little kisses all over her, pushing her sleeves down her arms as he traced a line from her ear to her shoulder with his mouth. He wanted to take her to lunch in Diagon Alley on the first day of school; the same way his parents had after they dropped him off at the train, right after they’d held hands and waved off their son. *Fuck*. Maybe Pansy was right.

Chapter End Notes

White Gardenia - Secret Love.

Also, yes the chapter count has increased a tiny bit more. What can I say... I am wordy?

Going a little early this week as I've had a big weekend and am planning to sleep in tomorrow morning. Fun fact. This fic is written between the hours of 430am and 7am, when I wake up earlier than my kids to have some me time and write about these two idiot in love.

Thank you so much for the lovely comments and kudos. They mean so much and are so motivating.

A Trip to Oxford

Chapter Notes

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

Jeans. Draco was wearing denim jeans to go and see a witch. It made him wince but also, he had to remember that this wasn't any witch. This was Hermione Granger, and they were going to muggle Oxford. Jeans were acceptable. In fact, jeans might be preferred. Casual. They were going for a casual lunch and nothing said casual like a pair of jeans.

Why, sweet Merlin, couldn't he have given her a diamond necklace and be done with it?

He decided to pair the jeans with a light grey jumper, over a white button-up. He may have been wearing jeans but he wasn't about to wear a t-shirt to take his wife to lunch. A man needed to have boundaries.

At exactly 1 pm, Draco stepped into the floo and called our *Hermione Granger's Office, Oxford* and let the flames whisk him away. Her office looked just like her room in the manor. Crowded by books and trinkets, little dashes of colour and the sole visitor's chair had a pile of scrolls so precariously balanced that they must be charmed to stay put. Like her room at the manor, there were no photographs anywhere. There was also no sign of any of her accolades. Not her masteries or muggle degrees, no awards, not even her Order of Merlin.

"Hi," Hermione said, looking up from her desk, smiling at him.

"Hi," he replied, smiling just as much. It felt significant being here. Like that day in her home in Hampstead Heath. Though they were together every day, it was always in his domain, not the other way around. The glimpses of who she was away from him were so fleeting.

"So, this is Oxford?" he asked, as she stacked some papers and he noted her half-full mug of tea to the left of her hand and a tiny silver vase with the sprig of baby's breath (*sincerity and everlasting affection*) he'd tied to Glitter's collar two nights ago. He smiled at that.

"No, this is my office. But it's in Oxford, though hardly the most interesting part," she stood and took her beaded bag, slipping her wand inside, "So, where will it be for lunch, Muggle or Magical? I'm starving."

"You choose," replied Draco, mesmerised as she slipped her wizarding robes off her shoulders and draped them over her chair. He'd only ever seen her in casual muggle clothes he realised, aside from her wedding dress and somehow that was different. This was... this was a form of torture if he was being completely honest. A tight black skirt that clung to her arse and hips and made his jeans feel a little tight. A white silk blouse that he just knew would be so soft to touch, with a loose bow at the neck. If he pulled on the bow, what would happen? Salazar Slytherin, he really wished he could have just given her a diamond necklace and this would all be finished and she would be his.

“Well then, I feel like a pie. And mushy peas,” she walked to the door and raised her eyebrow when he offered her his arm.

“I don’t know what mushy peas are but would be delighted to take you to get some,” he responded, moving his elbow again to let her know that she should take it. He may have been going for “casual” but he was still a well-educated and well-bred wizard. She should get used to it. Even if friends who went on casual lunches were all they would ever be, he would still offer his arm.

They walked through the cobblestone streets of Oxford, Hermione resting her hand in the crook of his elbow, pointing out the different colleges, the Bodleian and the Divinity School.

“Looks like Hogwarts,” Draco said as Hermione flashed her staff ID to show him inside the latter.

“It does a bit,” Hermione agreed, “Fewer moving staircases and paintings giving you lip though, so I might prefer it. Actually, given I haven’t almost died even once since I started, I definitely prefer it.”

Fair point that. Given that Draco was allowed the walk around with this brilliant witch on his arm and no once gave them so much as a second glance, he decided he preferred it too.

Eventually, she took him to the covered markets where he was hit with a cacophony of sound and an array of smells. It was busy, the sky blocked out by a high roof that made the voices echo, occasionally disturbing the pigeons that roosted in the high white eaves. There was natural light coming through the large windows at the ends of each row of shops and artificial light from electric lamps hanging from beams in an almost magical way. And then there were the shopfront; which were at some point probably little more than stalls, but over time were perfectly miniature buildings complete with enticing window displays and brightly coloured doors. A tiny village square, protected from the elements.

Draco smelt freshly baked biscuits and he wanted to follow the aroma, but Hermione kept a firm grip on his arm until she steered him into a busy little shop that exclusively sold meat pies. The only available seats were on high stools near the bar that ran against the window and the pair sat side by side, eating their pies and watching the people mill around the market. She had ordered and paid for them both while he was distracted by the framed photographs on the wall. He tried not to be too put out, as much as he’d wanted to spoil her on this outing. Next time. This was meant to be casual after all, so it didn’t matter who ordered or paid. At least, that was what he tried to tell himself.

“So, this is the Muggle part of Oxford?” Draco asked, as he ate the last of his mushy peas, which he had to admit were quite good.

Hermione gave him a sharp kick under the table, looking around to see if anyone heard before casting a wandless *Muffliato*.

“Honestly, I can’t take you anywhere. You’re as bad as Ron,” she scolded and Draco felt his cheek heat at the comparison, “Yes, this is all muggle, although before the Statute, I believe the market was mixed. Muggle and Magical wares being sold side by side. Have you really

never been to Oxford before? I would think you upper-crust types were destined for the place. Or are you a Cambridge man?"

She said the word Cambridge like it was a swear and Draco had to smile that even in the muggle world, there was loyalty to houses and schools.

"Malfoys traditionally do their masteries in France. Italy if you're feeling rebellious."

"Oh la la, how fancy," Hermione said with an indulgent roll of her eyes.

"Tu n'as aucune idée, ma femme," replied Draco, holding her eye contact and enjoying the way his switch to French seemed to rattle her. She chewed on the inside of her lip before looking away.

"So, is there a magical market somewhere else now?" he asked, standing, ready to continue the tour and yes, eager to have her hold his arm again.

"Yes, I can take you if you like? For potion ingredients and magical plants, there isn't a better market in England, no matter what those liars from Cambridge tell you."

She slipped her hand into the crook of his arm and led him back into the bustling lane. The people were packed together so tightly, that she had to press against his side at times when they walked and Draco considered slipping an arm around her to protect her further from the surging crowd. Ultimately, deciding against it and was unable to regret his decision when she trailed her hand down his forearm and grabbed his hand, so she could lead him single file through the crowd. He could get used to this. He would follow her anywhere.

Eventually, they made their way to the edge of the market, where old windows and archways had been bricked up, tattered posters glued directly to the bricks like mismatched wallpaper. Hermione turned to face him, pulling him closer with their hands until her front was almost pressed against him. What was she doing? She slipped one arm around his neck and Draco felt his jaw go slack.

"Ready?" she asked, her warm breath fanning across his face and he gave the slightest nod. She looked up at him through her lashes, gave him a small smile, then stepped backward, tugging him with her as she went. She should have been pressed against the brick wall, but they were suddenly standing in another covered market, this one populated by people in robes and magical plants and creatures.

"Barrier Charm," she explained, releasing his neck and taking a step away, "Like the one on Platform 9 ¾. It can be difficult to slip through without notice, particularly in groups, but we've learnt that if you look like you're about to snog against the wall, no one looks twice. It is a university town after all."

The jealousy that she had done that with someone else pierced through the disappointment that she'd stepped away. He took a deep breath and tried to gather himself. He needed to keep it casual.

"So, this is in the Oxford Market!" she said, gesturing with her hands, "Shall we go to the herbology section?"

Draco took a deep breath in through his nose, and smelt, as he had in the muggle section, something sugary and delicious baking.

"Or we could go and find dessert?" he asked, hopefully. Hermione let out a little laugh.

"I don't know if we'll find anything as sweet as Crunchie bars, but we can do our best," and with that, held out her hand for his, and once she had it, started strolling through the market.

It wasn't nearly as busy as the Muggle side, they weren't pressed together, and Draco was finding it hard to concentrate on anything but Hermione's hand in his. Merlin, he hoped his palm wasn't sweaty.

Hermione seemed to be more focused on the stalls than their casual tangle of fingers, and would occasionally wander away to look at something, dropping his hand when she did. But she would also make her way back to him and when she did, he would reach for her hand again and she'd give it without protest. The bond between them humming with pleasure at the contact.

Soon, Draco felt confident enough to enjoy his own explorations. When he saw a stall of second-hand books, he dropped her hand and walked over to browse the spines. Looking for books on Norman history, he tilted his head to read the titles, and pulled an interesting-looking volume from the pile, when a gruff voice interrupted him.

"I don't serve Death Eater Scum."

Draco felt his cheeks flame and his stomach harden to ice. He'd relaxed too much. Forgotten himself. Immediately, his focus went to the breathing that Higgs had taught him. Long slow breaths that went in for the count of three, held for the count of three and exhaled for the count of three. All designed to keep his body here, in the present.

"Excuse me?" Hermione's voice came from behind him, and the dread increased. This was the last thing he needed. For her to witness his shame. For her to remember who he was, who she was and why this was doomed. He didn't think the breathing would be enough. He could feel himself starting to slip.

Then, there was touch. Warm, smooth skin as her fingers entangled his. Her body pressed against his side. Her cheek rested on his upper arm. He took another deep breath and smelt her perfume. He was here. In the present. The hazy past slipped away. He could focus on the touch.

A second hand joined him now, reaching across his torso taking the book from his other hand and passing it back to the vendor. Turning her forearm in such a way that the man couldn't miss the raised red scar that spelt out *mudblood*. He hadn't noticed it early in the day. She must have dropped the glamour just for this moment.

"You should be careful about name-calling," she said, her voice icy, "you never know what it will lead to."

Her hand still tight in Draco's, she looked the man dead in the eye, giving the stall owner time to confirm that he was indeed talking to war hero Hermione Granger and she was indeed pressed against Draco Malfoy's side protectively, before pulling him away, back in the stream of people walking past.

She was silent as they walked, and even though she had defended him, Draco couldn't help but worry that she was regretting it in her head. Was questioning what she was doing out with him. Friends with him. Only the pressure of her palm against his kept him from completely losing himself.

Once they had reached a quiet section of the market, behind some stalls where all he could see were empty crates and graffitied brick walls, she stopped walking. She turned and faced him, but did not drop his hand. The low murmur of the patrons in the background competed with the hum of panic in his head.

"Does that happen often?" she asked.

Draco nodded once, "Only in the wizarding world. I try to avoid it as much as I can."

"And that's why you want to leave the country?"

"Wanted," Draco corrected, "I wanted to leave but now..."

He trailed off and looked down at their hands which were still linked together. Returning his gaze to her face, he noted that she was looking at their hands too.

"I didn't realise," she said, swallowing, "I've kept myself fairly bundled away, between the manor and my office. Not reading the paper..."

Draco reached out and with two fingers, gently lifted Hermione's chin so she was looking at him again. The concern and guilt in her eyes made something in his gut ache and his hand shook a little.

"You don't need to realise," he said, remembering her tired eyes and beaten form from their argument months earlier. How much of that was caused by feeling this concern for everyone else but herself? How much that exhaustion was from the guilt of what she could never fix, even with her giant brain that everyone treated like an immediate fix-all.

"You should be able to stay cosy and secluded in the manor with books and tea and flowers... if that's what you want. This one isn't your fight."

Her brow furrowed and Draco fought the impulse to reach out and smooth the little wrinkle that formed between her eyes.

"This is enough, Hermione. I'm OK," he said, trying to convey exactly how much her hand in his meant to him. How he was ok. He was building something new. He was learning how to breath through the panic. He was ready to fight for a life where he had the privilege to hold her hand in a covered market.

She looked down at their joined hands again before pulling her hand free. He closed his eyes and tried to swallow his disappointment. It was bound to happen and he should have expected it to hurt this much. However, before the disappointment could flood his every sense, there was gentle pressure around his neck. His eyes flew open and he registered Hermione Granger, on her tiptoes, arms around him, her body pressed to his. He didn't hesitate. Both his arms came up behind her lower back and crushed her to him. He buried his face in her curls and from the first lungfull of her scent felt like he could properly breathe again. She was here. She was staying. She saw him. It really was enough.

Chapter End Notes

The trip to Oxford. Thank you to the lovely Orolin for alpha reading this for me and answering my nervous writer questions. As we get closer to the end and I get more worried about sticking the landing on this fic, she's had to deal with more messages that are just me asking if I am about to break my own story. She is patient and also a really good writer, so you should go and read her stuff. "It's Just Science" is one of my top 5 fics and the only Dramione that has made me blush while reading in public.

Please note, Orolin is an alpha reader not a beta- all the spelling, punctuation and grammar errors are mine.

A couple of notes.

1. Part of the Harry Potter movies were filmed in Oxford, The Divinity School being a very recognisable setting, hence Draco saying it looked like Hogwarts. It was Hogwarts... at least in some of the films. It entertained me.
2. "*Tu n'as aucune idée, ma femme,*" = you have no idea, my wife.

Fun history fact of the week (I could not get this in no matter how hard I tried), Empress Matilda (daughter and only living heir of Henry 1) pulled off the most incredible escape from Oxford while under siege in Oxford Castle by her cousin (and usurper King Stephen... yes England has had a King Stephen). She was surrounded in the tower by enemy forces, when, after heavy snow, she climbed down the tower dressed all in white in the middle of the night, crossed the frozen Thames on foot, and using the snow as camouflage walked straight through enemy camps to escape. She was a BAMF. Her war with Stephen continued to stalemate and though she was never crowned, her son became Henry the Second. Her grandson is the well-known, Richard the Lionheart (who was actually a pretty rubbish king but that wasn't Matilda's fault).

I know the chapter this week is a little shorter than usual, but I hope it does have some important moments which I hope makes up for it. Also next week's chapter is epic in

length. Seriously.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy. Thank you so much to everyone who has left comments and kudos. The last act is always the hardest to write, so all the encouragement and love means so much!

Draco's Birthday

Chapter Notes

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

Twenty-six years. Draco was twenty-six years old. When he was under house arrest, Draco preferred to let birthdays pass without notice. There had been no gifts (obviously), no friends, no cake, no reason to celebrate. This birthday? This birthday, he wasn't really being given a choice. Andromeda had sent him an owl explaining he would be joining them for morning tea, and he would be having the traditional birthday accoutrements. Blaise, Pansy and Theo had owled him and explained that he would be joining them for dinner and drinks. His room had been filled with a multitude of silver balloons, and if he popped one, it sang Happy Birthday loudly and shot pink glitter at him. He assumed he had Bobsy to thank for that.

The one person in his life who had not said anything about his birthday was his wife. He had to assume she didn't say anything because she had no idea that it was his birthday; he certainly hadn't known hers. As he stood in the shower, letting the hot water pound against the back of his neck, grounding him, he tried not to feel too disappointed that she didn't know. If for no other reason, he hadn't told her and if it was so important to him that she knew, he should have told her. Only, he didn't want her to feel obligated. Which was why he was going to walk down to breakfast, make normal conversation over tea and toast and try to make her laugh at least once. No, twice. He was going to get two laughs from her before they set out on their respective days.

As he'd held her in the covered market a little over a week ago, he'd felt the tension in her body. She hadn't let it go straight away, her muscles coiled with anxiety and restlessness. Until she'd just let herself melt into him, both giving comfort and receiving it. He'd wanted to hold her all afternoon. Apparate them back to the manor and curl up with her on their window seat, away from all the people who wanted something from her and had opinions about him. But eventually, she had let him go, looked up at him with that resolved, gathered expression he knew so well and led him away to find some biscuits.

Draco was surprised when Tonks opened the door when he arrived at Andromeda and Ted's London townhouse.

"Have you finally decided to give in to a lifestyle befitting a Black heir then and do away with your job?" he asked, giving her a one-armed hug and looking over her shoulder for Teddy.

"No, it's called a personal leave day," she said with an eye roll.

"Sounds dreadfully middle-class. Are you sure you don't want to give it all away? I can give you the name of a man who can set you up with some lovely albino peacocks."

Tonk swatted him on the shoulder, "Stop talking before I regret taking leave at all."

Draco made a zipping motion across his mouth and moved into the sitting room where he was almost bowled over by a small child with his exact colour hair.

“Draco!” yelled Teddy and Draco took great pleasure in sweeping the small boy up into a hug.

“Nice hair,” he said, putting the boy back onto his feet, “Have you come to eat some cake?”

“I have, although Mummy says that we have to let Grandma do her birthday magic thing before we have any of it,” Teddy said with such disdain, that Draco had to chuckle. Is that what he sounded like as a child when he was unimpressed with something? No wonder Hermione had slapped him; it was a miracle it hadn’t happened sooner.

“Who doesn’t love magic though?” said Draco, casting a wandless Accio to summon the Crunchie he’d stowed in his pocket to pass to the boy. Sure, he could have just reached for it but a little bit of showmanship never hurt anyone and he was still trying to impress his little cousin.

“Happy Birthday, Draco,” said Ted, coming over to the trio and again pulling Draco into a hug.

The hugging had taken quite a while to get used to. Narcissa and Lucius were not huggers. Ted had informed him that it wasn’t a pureblood wizarding quirk, not to hug, it was a rich person thing. Apparently, the old wealthy muggles had the same aversion.

“Dromeda would come and greet you but she’s busy getting everything ready. Naturally, we will be completing the birthday palaver in the formal dining room. And it’s a good thing you wore your robes, son. She can get a bit tetchy when we’re underdressed for important occasions.”

Draco cast his eye around the room and registered that everyone was in slightly nicer clothes than usual, with wizarding robes fastened around their shoulders. It made him smile. Such a small thing, but with the gesture he was taken back to his childhood birthdays; when his parents, his friends, and their parents had all stood around him, smiling. Celebrating. He looked away trying to wonder if he was allowed to miss them, at least the people they had all been when they had celebrated his birth all those years ago. Andromeda entered the room then, clad in spectacular formal robes and a broach he recognised. His mother had a matching one. With a gentle smile and a crinkle of her eye, she let him know it was ok. He could grieve what he’d lost.

“It’s time,” she said, leading them all into the darkened room where sitting on the table was a spinning golden orb. A miniature sun. They took their seats and Andromeda whispered the incantation.

Memorias et specs.

This was the first spell Draco ever remembered doing. Back when he was younger than Teddy. It has been a competition of sorts; who among Draco’s cohort would produce this magic first. The parents of the winner claimed the glory. Proof of power. It wasn’t the type of

magic that could be tracked or monitored, it couldn't be channelled through a wand. It was just part of him. Like the summoning of his ancestors on Samhain. It was ancient magic. Deeply instilled.

He took a deep breath and focused on his power, sitting in his gut. As he exhaled, a wisp of something came out of him, a silvery memory. The essence of his 25th year on earth. He watched as the wisp rotated the glowing orb and was joined by others, memories of him offered by his loved ones, their own impression of him and the past 12 months. They each made twenty-six rotations before they were absorbed into the small pulsing sphere. One for each of his own trips around the sun. With another breath, he felt the magic take hold and this time he exhaled a wisp that was pure crimson. His hopes for the next year. Again, it was joined by others, each their own bright colour. Again, they made their circles before being absorbed into the centre, this time with a flash of brilliant light. And it was done. Who he was at this age was recorded, and what he and his loved ones dreamt for him saved in prosperity.

Andromeda smiled at him, and with a wave of her wand, the orb flew from its stand in the middle of the table, and into his hands. As soon as he touched it, he could feel the warmth, the power, the love. And with another flash, he could see them. All the impressions and memories. All the hopes. A love letter to a beloved family member. He didn't know how long it lasted, it felt like an age but knew from watching others do it that it was only a couple of minutes. When he came back from the images, everyone was looking at him expectantly. He just smiled at his aunt, what one saw on their birthday was a secret after all, and carried the Sun Orb back to the mantle. That's where his mother used to leave hers during the birthday celebrations.

As he turned back to his seat, twin cracks broke the silence and in the middle of the table stood Bobsy and Vim. Each dressed in an impeccably tailored outfit, holding a large chocolate birthday cake.

"Are you all finished with your wizarding things?" asked Bobsy, putting down the cake, jumping deftly from the table and offering his hand to Vim.

"Perfect timing Mr Bobsy," replied Andromeda, summoning a stack of cake plates with her wand before lighting the candles with another swish.

Draco looked around in disbelief as this group of people, who had always been distant players in his youth, burst into joyous song. Celebrating him. The back of his throat felt scratchy and tight and he made a point of looking each of them in the eye. A silent thank you and hope that they would be able to see how much this moment meant to him. It was more than a flash of hope on the horizon; it was a roaring fire on which he could warm himself, no matter how cold the day.

After he'd blown out the candles and Teddy had been served a rather large slice of cake, Lysander and Ted carried in a large, brightly wrapped package.

"For you on your birthday," said Lysander, placing it in front of Draco, "it's from all your Tonks relations."

Draco smiled and started to carefully peel away the wrapping paper.

“No!” yelled Teddy from down the table, his face covered in icing, “Not like that! You have to rip it!”

Draco laughed and with Teddy’s prompting, tore the gift wrap with vigour. It was an act that caused some cheers and so Draco tried it again. He’d never been allowed to tear into his gifts as a boy. His father had insisted it was undignified.

With all the wrapping off, Draco looked at the box. On the front was a picture of a sleek white... thing. A bright picture on one part, and small little squares with letters, numbers and symbols on the other.

“It’s a laptop,” said Tonks, “Muggles use them to write. When you start your course, you’ll need to as well. No muggle professor will accept an assignment handwritten on a scroll.”

Draco brushed the box with his hand.

“I haven’t been accepted yet,” he said.

“You will,” Tonks replied confidently, “Now, Lysander has tinkered with that one. Given there’s no electricity at the manor. It’s got one of his devices in there to keep it powered up. Probably best you don’t plug it into anything when you get to class. The result might be a touch explosive. Otherwise, Hermione should be able to teach you how to use it.”

“Yes, it was tricky getting it small enough, but I was quite inspired by Constant Motion charms and converting kinetic energy...” Lysander jumped in, ready to explain exactly what he’d done. Draco tried to focus but the mention of his wife made him long for her presence. What would her impression of him have been in the orb? What would her hopes for him be in the next year?

If morning tea and cake with the Tonks was a wholesome family affair, dinner and drinks with his friends was the opposite. There was far too much firewhiskey, far too many off-colour jokes and just the right amount of people lounging around the Nott Abbey library, playing a rotating game of drinking chess (a creation of Theo’s where each piece was hollow and acted like a shot glass; when defeated, the piece would groan, “Drink the blood of your enemy” until the shot was taken... by the victor. Theo claimed that way everyone won).

By the time Draco stumbled out of the floo, holding his very own Luna Lovegood birthday portrait (this one featuring himself and Blaise standing side by side with their brooms), he was feeling rather jolly. There was still a slight ache in the fact that Hermione hadn’t said anything about his birthday but he tried to ignore it. Again, he knew that if he wanted her to know, he should have told her. If he wanted her at morning tea, he should have invited her. If he wanted her, taking shots with him and his friends in the Nott Abbey Library, he should have walked to her door before he left and asked if she wished to join him. Logically, he knew this. Emotionally, he’d watched Blaise sit with Luna on his lap, her hair tangled in his fingers absentmindedly and he’d hungered.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to get to sleep yet, and not wanting the images and memories of the music room, he took himself to the library. Hoping to find a book he could read before he was ready to drift off to sleep. The aisles were dark and musty and he wandered aimlessly, unsure if it would be best if he grabbed a long boring treatise on the politics of cauldron standards, or if he looked for one of the filthy romance novels his mother had stashed in here somewhere. He and Theo had stumbled upon them by accident in the summer between his 3rd and 4th year. Stolen them to read before he fell asleep then too. Fantastic. Twenty-six years old and still relying on his mother's romance novels when he wanted a wank. Maybe he should just rely on his imagination, but when left to its own devices it delivered just one image.

"Draco?"

Fuck, he really was starting to believe he was able to summon her with his mind. He did not want her here. Not after he'd learnt that the downside of playing chess against yourself for seven years, was that when faced with drinking chess, you ended up drinking the 'blood of your enemies' more than was necessary.

He took a deep breath and steeled himself, before turning to take her in. *Merlin's Saggy Ballsack*. He'd either been incredibly bad in a past life or unbelievably good. Her hair was out and slightly tangled. Had she been asleep? It was past midnight, so it would make sense. Her feet were bare and she was wrapped in a thin cotton robe. Whatever was underneath had a lower neckline and shorter hem than the robe, as he could see no trace of it and he definitely looked. In her hands was a white envelope and small green box. Surrounding her were the glowing lights she'd had with her in the greenhouse all those months ago when he'd handed her flowers to say what he could not. So much had changed and yet some things were exactly the same.

"Did you have fun?" she asked, walking closer to him, bathing him in the light that followed her.

"Yes," he replied, swallowing. Could she smell the whiskey on his breath?

"I'm glad. Birthdays should be fun," she came closer still.

His breath stuttered. She did know.

"I thought you didn't like birthdays?" he whispered.

"I lied."

"I knew it."

They stood staring at each other, far closer than was necessary for a friendly conversation. The curls around her face cast shadows across her cheeks and his hand itched to brush them back. He wanted to see her. All of her.

"I have something for you," she said, handing him the envelope, "Congratulations."

Inside was a form letter on Oxford letterhead. An acceptance. He started his catch-up program for A-Levels and NEWTs next week. Twenty-six years old and his future was a tiny bit brighter.

“Is this my birthday gift?” he asked, the words coming easy, his tongue loosened by whiskey.

“No, that’s what you’ve earned. This is your birthday present,” she said, stepping just a little closer, passing him the small, thin box, and placing a soft kiss on his cheek, “Happy Birthday, Draco.”

Draco didn’t respond, just let the warmth from her lips heat his entire face. Merlin, that kiss alone would be enough, but he took the box, not wanting to pull it from her grasp as their fingers touched around the cardboard edges.

“Thank you,” he said, finally taking the box completely and pulling the black satin ribbon tied around it.

It was his wand. Not a new wand. *His* wand. Ten inches. Hawthorn wood. Unicorn hair core. He looked at her speechless. She may have been the smartest witch of her age, but surely even she couldn’t perform miracles.

“I only realised last week the reason you hadn’t gone to replace your wand so I went searching for your old one,” she said simply, “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

It had taken Draco Malfoy twenty-six years, but he finally recognised that there was a moment before the inevitable. A moment where a person could choose. Could risk. A moment when for a split second all the options were available if you were brave enough. This was that moment.

He could see all the things that could go wrong. List every reason why this was a bad idea. Pinpoint the safest choices, the ones that would protect him, would leave his life unchanged, would take the least from him. And he reached for her anyway.

The box and wand clattered to the floor as one hand slipped around her waist and the other reached for her hair. He needed to tangle his fingers in her hair. She came to him so easily, opening to him with a sigh, and he pulled her bottom lip into his mouth. He wanted to hurry and consume her while the low light and smell of old books cast the spell that created this easy intimacy. Another part of him wanted to take his time. Catalogue every part of her, memorise every dip and sigh.

“Granger,” he murmured, allowing his lips to stray to her jaw, finally tasting the spot just below her ear where her pulse fluttered.

She didn’t say anything, just let out a little whimper and clung to him. One leg moved to rub against the outside of his. This time he didn’t toy with her hem, he moved his hand swiftly and confidently, stroking from her lower back, down her hip, to wrap around her bare thigh and pull her closer still. Fuck, he was going to have to admit that Gryffindors were right about something. Risks were definitely worth it when these were the rewards. With a twist,

her back was against the bookshelf and her head fell backwards against the books as his lips made their pilgrimage down her throat.

With every centimetre of ground he gained on the slope of her neck, Hermione responded with a corresponding sound. A little sigh, a soft groan, an impatient whimper. Punctuating each sound with a scrape of fingernails against his scalp. He reached her collarbone far too quickly, pulling away just enough to watch her face as he took a finger, hooked it under the collar of her robe and gradually eased the sleeve off her shoulder. Leaving a stretch of bare skin for him to explore, a dusting of freckles across the expanse.

“Granger,” he groaned again because there really wasn’t anything else to say.

Her leg was still wrapped around his, pressing her pelvis to him and he ached against the tight fabric of his trousers. Her hands came up to cradle his jaw and she forced him to look her in the eyes. They were bright, the gold overtaking the chocolate but a crease had formed between her brows. Frowning, he moved to break free of her grasp, to taste her neck again, trailing kisses upwards this time with a plan to reach her forehead and remove that crease by any means necessary.

Whatever she’d been about to say morphed into another breathy sigh and her hand let go of his jaw to roam his back. With a thrill of anticipation, he felt his shirt start to tug free and he tensed waiting for her touch on his bare skin. He needed to feel her against his bare skin. A breath, then the moment her hands made contact. It sent a jolt of desire to his cock; far too easy for his mind to imagine the other places she could touch and stroke.

Encouraged by the way she moved against him, his hand, which had been kneading the soft flesh of her thigh, started to drift upward. Dipping under the hem of her robe, swirling designs on her bare skin and relishing the softness before skirting back to the top of her clothes to the tie at her waist. It would be so easy. One quick pull and like the ribbon around his gift, she would be unravelled for him.

“Draco,” she murmured, her hands retreating upwards again, back to catch his jaw and pull his mouth away from her throat where he’d been alternating between reverent kisses and tiny tastes of her skin.

She managed to force his eye contact, her eyes glassy and unfocused; he was sure he looked much the same.

“What are we doing?” she whispered and he pulled his face out of her hand and returned his lips to her neck; the other side this time.

“Celebrating,” he said, his lips brushing her skin as he spoke and for a moment she leaned into it; tilting her head to the other side to give him better access.

“Draco,” she whined and the need in her voice almost buckled his knees, “We should stop. We should stop and talk about this.”

“But there are so many other things I want to do with my mouth right now, Granger,” replied Draco, letting the whiskey make him brave, capturing her lips with his own as if to prove a

point.

She matched his motion. Her tongue brushed against his and her back arched again. It was almost as if he'd won. She'd agreed. Then she pulled back.

"Wait," she said and Draco dropped his forehead to her shoulder, taking in ragged breaths, not wanting to stop but willing to do whatever she told him to.

"We need to think about this. It can't just be something that we do on a whim... you've never..." she trailed off as he moved a hand to her thigh where he started tracing his name with a finger.

"Please don't hold that against me right now," he said, wondering if she would be opposed to begging. He was ready to beg if that's what she needed.

"No, we should consider it, you can't just..." she trailed off again, the words lost in her heavy breath.

"Do you expect me to save myself for marriage?" he asked, as he took another stupid risk and ran his tongue lightly along the line of her shoulder. One last taste. "It's a little late for that wife."

She stiffened.

"Stop," she said, voice clearer than before and he immediately released her, took a step back and looked at her with level eyes. Her hair was still wild, clothes dishevelled and he could see her mind racing.

"We're not actually married. That was our deal. A marriage on paper only. This is a friendship. Apparently with an undercurrent of something that means we're struggling to keep our hands to ourselves," her eyes darted around, panicked. "I can't be your wife Malfoy. Not a real one. Not the type of wife you want."

She dropped her eyes and let out a sigh, defeated.

"I never thought when I agreed to this that we would get here. We were always just meant to orbit around each other, never collide. I understand if that's not enough. If you want ... as I've said before I have no issue with you seeing someone else," her voice caught on the last phrase.

Draco studied her as she spoke. The fear in her eyes, the shake of her hand, the quiver of her lip. It was the only thing that distracted him from the way his stomach turned at the idea of being with anyone else.

As the moment crystallised, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that if she'd had even the slightest hint before their wedding that they would grow to care for each other she would have run. But all those months ago the idea was absurd. Draco Malfoy would never care for Hermione Granger. She'd be married, but not. Together, but alone. She'd expected him to leave her be until either the law was overturned or one of them died. Expected him to finish

his house arrest, then take some other woman into his bed while she was sleeping just down the hall. Expected him to treat her like she meant nothing. The realisation gutted him. Angry stinging at his throat and a hot flush at his skin. It made him want to break something, tear something, throw something. Run and lick his wounds in private.

But then he looked at her. Standing with her robe hanging off her shoulder, leaning back against the bookshelf as if it was the only thing keeping her upright. Regardless of how hurt he was feeling, he couldn't walk away from her. Not when he *saw* her. If there was one thing he could recognise after being in isolation for seven years, it was loneliness. And she was cloaked in it. And while he'd had his loneliness forced upon him, she was courting hers. Embracing it with both arms and hiding from anything that might scare it off. And right now, when he was on the precipice of sinking to his knees before her and asking for everything, he was scaring the hell out of her.

With a deep breath, he gathered his thoughts, took a step closer, and righted her robe before resting one hand above her head on the shelf.

"Granger, I know I've been tucked away from society for a while, but the last time I checked, you didn't need to be married to fuck."

Hermione's eyes darted to his, widening a little in shock at his change of tone and coarse language. Good. She seemed to have no issue with the physical but if she wanted emotional distance between them, he could offer her that. At least to start. He could use the physical to make way for the other. She told him to fight for the life he wanted? She must have known he wasn't afraid to fight dirty. He wasn't a noble lion after all.

"I don't think it's a secret that I want to kiss you, touch you and yes Granger, I would like to fuck you. And again, I've been a little out of the loop for a while, but I don't think I'm wrong in interpreting your body language as wanting the same thing."

Hermione swallowed thickly, but neither confirmed nor denied his assumption.

"Now, I have no inclination to search for a girlfriend right now. Even if it would be an opportunity to get off to something other than my hand. A girlfriend would be a complication I do not need," the tone was coming easier now, slightly haughty, words chosen to shock, to offer the disconnect she wanted.

"I'm happy to be your friend. Honoured even. But given we seem to have this thing that makes it impossible to keep our hands to ourselves, I also can't see a reason we can't be friends that fuck," he lied through his teeth.

There was one giant reason, and it started and ended with the fact that he was in love with his wife. That was his problem though. Not hers. If she needed a friend, he would be a friend. If she wanted a lover, he would be a lover. If she wanted someone to make her feel good for just one night, he could do that. He would be whatever she wanted him to be if it meant he got to be hers.

"But I can't do the other stuff. I can't make any promises. I can't listen to your problems and fix them or help you plan your life...I'm not a person to rely on" she trailed off and Draco felt

equal surges of anger and shame.

Was this what she thought she had to offer? Is this why she preferred to be lonely? He wanted to rage at the imbeciles that had made her feel this way, except he had been one of them. Waiting for her to fix things. Never again.

“I won’t ask you for anything more than you’re willing and able to give. I swear it to you. But I am the oldest virgin in Britain and would love to lose that title,” he let her pause, let her take in what he was suggesting.

“But we can stop Granger, walk away with no hard feelings right now. Go back to polite breakfasts and piano lessons. I like both of those things. However, if you are open to something else, I need to know. Do you want this?”

The hand that wasn’t above her came back to her waist, by way of her arse, squeezing slightly so there was no mistaking what the ‘this’ he was referring to was. Would she let him in, just a crack? She didn’t answer for the longest time, just stared into his eyes and he watched as the gold faded away into the chocolate. Then she lifted one hand and traced his lips with her finger.

“I want,” she whispered with a tremble, “I don’t want to hurt you but I want-”

He didn’t let her finish her sentence. Simultaneously, he reclaimed her mouth and tugged on the belt of her robe. It fell open and Draco thanked Merlin, Salazar and Godric bloody Gryffindor when he saw what was underneath. The pink silk nightgown from that first morning. An increasingly frequent star in his dreams and daydreams. It was as soft to touch as he had imagined and he took great pleasure in running his hands up her sides before pushing the robe completely from her shoulders and watching it land on the floor in a puddle.

Hermione had clearly let herself fall into the moment and while he was studying the way her nipples pebbled against the cool air she was now exposed to, her fingers had found the buttons of his shirt and were easing them open.

She worked quickly and efficiently and, with an aggression he hadn’t seen since he’d come to know her as an adult, she wrenched the shirt from his shoulders and pressed herself against his bare chest. The silk that had felt so good under his hand was divine against his chest, a sensation he had little time to savour before a nip at his earlobe drew his focus. Hermione was demanding his full attention.

“Touch me, please,” she whimpered and Draco groaned and kissed her again. There was nothing he wanted more.

With careful deliberation, he decided to start at her wrist. That tantalising soft part of skin that gave him hope from the first brush. Without letting his mouth leave hers, he ran the pads of his fingers over it. Experimented wrapping his long fingers around it before drawing it above her head and pinning it against the shelf. The stretch of her body brought her breasts hard against him, and he luxuriated in it. With Hermione relaxed in his arms, nipping at his bottom lip with abandon, he wasn’t planning on rushing. He wanted to savour.

He released her wrist, pleased when she left it there. So much easier to continue his exploration. His fingertips reached the soft inner skin of her forearms, and he skirted down them. His soft touch was rewarded by a spray of goosebumps on the flesh of her upper arms and he smiled against her mouth when he realised his effect. Next was her neck, long and elegant. As his fingers glided across the skin of her throat she let out a little gasp, and Draco catalogued the reaction for future examination. *Merlin* let there be an opportunity for future examination. Her collarbones were fine and pronounced, but the flesh beneath them was lush and inviting.

His thumb took over now, gliding across the cool silk, following the swell of her breast before circling around to run over her hard nipple. Another gasp. So he circled again, enjoying the way she squirmed and her breathing became uneven. Curious, he brought his pointer finger into play and gently pinched, delighted when Hermione's hands came away from the shelf above her and grabbed at him. They followed their own, much quicker path from his neck to his chest, to his belt, where she grabbed and tugged him closer.

"Careful Granger, you're testing the limits of my self-control here," he murmured.

"Don't you know Malfoy, I'm prone to testing limits," she said and moved her lips to his neck. Her fingers eased between the fabric of his waistband and his skin, her nails glancing across the fine trail of hair on his abdomen. So close to where he wanted them.

"I don't know, at the moment certain boundaries seem to be stopping you nicely," he goaded, switching his hand to her other breast, enjoying her lips at his throat.

His goading worked. In one quick move, she'd unbuckled his belt, eased down the zipper of his slacks open and was palming him through the cotton of his boxer briefs. There was no hesitation to her action; she was determined and it made Draco's blood roar. His witch and right now she wanted him.

"Still accepting those limits I see," he prodded again, letting her know he was all in. She could touch him as much or as little as he wanted.

Hermione pulled away from his neck and met his eye, fixing him with a determined stare as she hooked her fingers in the waistband of his boxers and slid them down over his arse. His cock sprang free and without looking at it she took it in her hand and stroked it, from tip to base. Draco shuddered a breath and let his head fall back.

This wasn't the first time someone else had touched his cock. While at Hogwarts there had been more than a few hurried fumbles in empty closets and one delightful experience in the Quidditch sheds after a game in 5th year. But nothing came even close to this. It may have been the years of nothing or the months of wanting but Draco suspected it was just because it was Hermione. Learning his body with the same focus and precision she learnt anything. At the end of her next stroke, her thumb came out and circled the tip, spreading his precum as she did. With a hiss, he fisted her nightgown, surprised at the intensity of the sensation.

"And now it seems that you're the one struggling with limits," whispered Hermione in his ear and he could hear the smile in her voice.

Thrilled that she had shed her air of hesitation, he hooked the strap of her nightgown and dragged it down her shoulder, watching as the flimsy slip fell away and exposed her perfect breasts, pert and waiting for him. With a sharp exhale, his lips made contact yet again with the skin of her neck, this time on a quick trip south until he could take her waiting nipple into his mouth. Her moan as he did was a worthy reward, and he alternated between playing with the hard nub with his tongue and his teeth, taking careful note of which she seemed to respond to more.

It was getting harder to concentrate. The more Hermione moaned and arched in his arms, the more deliberate her grip and strokes became. It was taking all of his self-restraint not to start thrusting in time with her movements. To stop himself from letting the sensations take over and come all over her dainty fingers. It wasn't going to happen. This moment wouldn't finish yet and he needed to see her face wrought with pleasure before he let his own take hold.

With an act of preternatural control, he grabbed her wrist and placed it back around his neck. Then, with a hand under each of her thighs, lifted her and wrapped her legs around his hips, pushing her further against the bookshelf.

"We might have to put a pause on that Granger. I'm not finished with you just yet."

He so desperately wanted to call her wife. Wanted to call her love. Wanted to apparate them away to his room where he could lay her across his sheets and take his time to explore every inch of her with his hands and mouth. But he couldn't. Not while he was playing the long game.

Their new position brought her soft core into direct contact with his bare and aching cock and he groaned when he felt her damp underwear. Unsure of exactly how to proceed, they were quickly moving into territory that eclipsed his experience, he was delighted when Hermione started to move, grinding her cunt against him.

"Oh Merlin, you are perfect," he said without thinking before a sharp intake of her breath made him rephrase, "You feel perfect against my cock."

Hermione moaned and Draco pulled her in for another kiss, if for no other reason than it would stop him from saying something monumentally stupid.

Watching Hermione chase her own pleasure was mesmerising, the way she moved her hips, the little groans and whimpers, the way she grasped at his shoulder, no care for how hard she grabbed or the way her nails were no doubt leaving little red trails across his back. Let her mark him. He wanted nothing more.

Eventually, the mewls of gratification gave way to frustration. The way she threw her head back and scrunched her eyes closed changed, was more in exasperation than pleasure.

"What do you need, Granger?" he asked, watching as she moved, tilting his hips to offer another angle.

She didn't answer, just pressed herself closer and switched to grinding small circles against him.

"Granger, I would really, really like to see you come, but you're going to have to tell me what you need," he tried again, taking her earlobe between his teeth as he finished whispering.

"I can't," she gasped, "I need something..."

She trailed off with another groan as the tip of his cock shifted and hit the taut cotton of her underwear.

"Granger..." he growled, frustrated himself now. He wanted her to trust him. Ask for what she wanted. Take what she needed.

"I want you inside me," she said, burying her face in the crook of his neck, "I know I shouldn't ask but..."

Draco lowered her legs, setting her back on her feet and looked her dead in the eye.

"There is nothing I would like more than to be buried inside you Granger," he said, watching her carefully. Her cheeks were flushed, lips swollen and her eyes had recovered their golden gleam. Would she have him? Was it too much for her?

"Are you sure? You don't want to wait—" she checked with him again and while he wanted to shake her for being so incredibly obtuse, he knew there was nothing positive that would come of pointing out exactly how badly he wanted her.

"I've been told that virginity is just an imaginary social construct imposed on us by the patriarchy as a means of control," he said instead and Hermione let out an inelegant snort of mirth.

"Where on earth did you hear that?" she asked, and he reached out and pushed the curls away from her face so he could see the laughter in her eyes.

"Pansy used to enjoy lecturing the Slytherin boys over a whiskey in the common room," he admitted.

"And yet she never let you into her knickers," Hermione said, still smiling, more relaxed than she had been.

"I never wanted to get into her knickers," said Draco, feeling the laughter ebb to something else, the burn of desire. He let his hands dance across her hip bones, creeping her nightgown higher until he could see the simple white cotton briefs she wore underneath. A thin strip of lace at the waist and a tiny little bow. He wanted to take them off with his mouth.

"Now, these knickers, however... these I am quite eager to explore," he sank to his knees before her, looking up in question.

She gave him the slightest nod and he dragged the garment down, his eyes never leaving hers as he did. Once she had stepped neatly out of them, he fought every instinct to bring them to his nose and inhale the sweet scent of her.

He returned to his feet and went to wrap her leg back around him.

“Wait,” Hermione said and Draco froze. It was over. He’d pushed too hard. He was going to need the coldest shower of his life to recover from this.

But she didn’t move away, instead with a wandless, nonverbal Accio she retrieved his wand from the floor and cast a contraceptive charm on them both. An icy sensation spread in his abdomen, and yet he barely felt it. He was too focused on the wand in her hand. *His* wand in her hand, casting for her with ease.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, her face turning red as she realised the intimacy of the act, “I wasn’t thinking and my wand is in-”

He swallowed whatever words she was planning on saying next as his mouth crashed back to hers. The wand cluttered back to the floor as both her arms came back around his neck and this time when she pushed herself against him, he could feel her, soft and ready directly against his cock. He hitched her leg around his hip and rocked experimentally. The glide through her soaked folds was divine torture. Surely it couldn’t get better than this.

As if she’d heard his question, she reached down between them and positioned him at her entrance. He couldn’t think as he slowly sunk into her, only feel. Feel the wet heat around him. Feel her forehead pressed to his and her hot breath across his lips. Feel his magic reach out and for the first time entwine with hers so tightly, that when it flowed back to him it was coloured with her.

Once he was fully seated inside her, he paused and revelled. He had never been more aware of his body or hers. He could feel her fluttering around him. Her breath was as unsteady as his. He’d never felt safer or stronger in his life.

“God Draco, please move,” she whispered and it was all it took for him to pull himself slowly out, before thrusting back in.

He started slowly, enjoying the slow squeeze and soft kisses but soon the sensations and the little moans that Hermione was making took over. He increased his pace, lifting her as he had earlier.

“You have no idea,” Draco moaned into her ear, “No fucking idea how incredible you feel.”

Like earlier, he wanted to say more. Wanted to call her his, tell her he was never going to let her go, wanted to tell her she had him, every part of him, if she wanted.

Her noises increased in volume and Draco could help increase his speed to match. Her cunt was pulsing, as if she was growing closer to something and he needed her to get there. Then, abruptly, there was a telltale tingling in his balls, a tightness behind his pelvis and before there was anything he could do, he came. Hard and long. The sensation blanked his mind and slumped his body.

When he came back to he recognised that his head was resting on the crook of her neck, her breathing was still heavy but slowing and he wanted to disappear into the floors. He may

have come but she certainly hadn't.

Hermione wriggled free, putting her feet back on the ground and he slipped from her body. Immediately missing her warmth. With a weak smile, she reached up pushed the hair out of his eyes and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Don't feel bad," she said, "You lasted longer than most men their first time. And it still felt wonderful."

She stepped away and went to reach for her knickers and robe. She did not, he noted, make any move for his wand, even though he was sure she could feel him dripping down her thighs.

"Granger, wait," he said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her back in front of him. Although his cheeks burned and his confidence was on wobbly legs, he couldn't let her go. Not yet.

"What?" she asked, and Draco noted that her own cheeks looked a little pink.

With what he hoped was a cheeky smile, he let his hands drift back to her hem, inching them upwards, towards the apex of her thighs.

"Oh," Hermione gasped, understanding his intention, "you don't have to..."

Her head fell back and she took in a shuddery breath as Draco swiped a finger through her folds. He could feel his cum, sticky and warm and it shot a thrill through him to know he had filled her. His witch.

"And if I want to?" he asked, watching her face as he moved his thumb, looking for the hard little nub he wanted to play with. He found it and rubbed back and forth, the pressure barely there. It made her moan.

"Can I try Granger? Please?" he asked, in his head substituting her name for all the other ones he wanted to use instead, darling, love, wife, Hermione.

The yes came on a choked sigh and Draco gathered his spend and pushed it back inside her with his pointer and middle finger while Hermione moaned and grasped at his shoulders. Yes, she would let him and she would take his release again while he did. His witch.

With slow deliberate thrusts, he moved his fingers inside her, while he experimented with her clit, alternating patterns and pressure, watching how she responded to each. All the while she murmured her encouragement, letting him know what felt good, when to go light and when to increase his pace.

When his thumb found the right rhythm on her clit, he began fucking her with his fingers in earnest. Her foot rested on the shelf beside her so she was open wide to him and he knew the image of her sprawled against the shelf, mouth falling open and skin flushed and breath ragged, would be seared into his memory for the rest of his life. There could be nothing more beautiful in this world or the next.

Her eyes flew open just before she fell apart. Her gold searching for his silver. The raw emotions in them were too jumbled to understand. Pleasure, hope, despair, fear. The crease between her eyes returned and he lifted his free hand from the shelf where he braced himself to smooth it away with his thumb, following it with his lips.

“Come for me, love,” he breathed, so softly as he wasn’t sure if he wanted her to hear. Wasn’t sure if it would ruin the moment they were building to.

Whether she heard or not, he felt her clench around his finger and with a final cry, she found her release. Her muscles tensed, frozen in the moment before she collapsed forward and Draco hastily removed his hand so he could take her in his arms and hold her, littering kisses on the crown of her head and cherishing the opportunity.

“Thank you,” she whispered, not yet letting go of him and Draco ran his fingertips over her spine, letting her take as long as she needed. If he thought he could do it without scaring her completely, he would have apparated straight to his bathroom, ready to lay them in a hot bath where he could cradle her against his chest, wash her body and rub her tense muscles. Instead, he savoured what she was offering, knowing that she would be the one who pulled away first.

The moment came with a sigh, she pulled herself away to look at him, fingers coming up to his lips again, just as they had at the beginning.

“Are you ok?” she asked and Draco smiled against her touch.

“Granger, I say this with complete sincerity, this is going down as one of the best nights of my life and definitely my best birthday,” he reached for both his wand and her underwear, casting the necessary cleaning charms and handing her the knickers so she could redress.

It was a delicate balance. He needed her to know he was okay, but not let on what he was thinking in his head. A chorus that was chanting, *mine, mine, mine*. His magic soared, so thrilled that his bond had been finally consummated. There was an edge to his power, it felt more rounded, more complex and he wondered if she could feel it too.

If she did, she didn’t let it show. Just redressed, pulling the dressing gown tight around her. They both turned to the door without speaking. A silent agreement that it was time to go. With every step down the hall, Draco felt the urge to reach for her hand, but hers stayed tucked around her waist, so he couldn’t, even if he would. When they reached her door, she went to slip inside but then turned back to look at him. Her brow was creased and he could tell she was scrambling for the words to say.

“I’m never going to ask for more than you’re able to give Granger,” he said before she could speak, “I’ll see you for our friendly breakfast tomorrow. We can figure it out then if you want... or we can pretend it never happened if you need. I’m happy with whatever you want to give.”

Hermione nodded, gave him one last smile and slipped into her room. Leaving him to walk alone on his own. With each step, a new chant started in his head *liar, liar, liar*.

Chapter End Notes

I know. This is late. I am sorry. I literally forgot what day of the week it was. Like Draco in Chapter One, I misplaced Monday.

Huge thank you to Orolin and Offthemap for their Alpha reads and giving me the confidence I needed to post. I have never posted any smut before and this is the second smutty scene I have ever written.

I have no more notes. This chapter was huge but I couldn't split it up. I hope you enjoy it and thank you for all the comments and kudos. They make my entire week.

Names and Definitions

Chapter Notes

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

For the first time since they started having breakfast, Hermione was in the dining room before Draco the next morning. She had a book in her hand and steaming tea already in her cup but she didn't seem to be paying attention to either. Instead, her eyes darted to him, then down to her book, then back to the floral centrepiece in the middle of the table, never resting for longer than a few seconds.

"Good morning," he said, striding to his own chair and lamenting the fact he absolutely could not greet her with a kiss.

He'd spent time that morning staring at his bed canopy planning for this moment. His body had been buzzing, his magic swirling and the bond pushed him to reach out and find her. His mind, however... His mind was acutely aware of what a precarious position he found himself in. So close to having everything he wanted and yet he felt like it could crumble at any moment. Whatever happened in the next 30 minutes, he needed to handle it delicately.

"Good morning," she replied, not meeting his eyes, putting her book down and fumbling her hands in her lap before reaching for her tea. Every movement, short, staccato.

Draco sighed. Definitely needed to handle it delicately. He just hoped that he could keep his own nerves and questions at bay.

"Do we need to talk about it, Granger?" he asked, hoping that using a combination of her last name and her own words from after their first kiss would remind her that it was okay. They were still them.

"I don't know, Malfoy, do we?" she mirrored his own words back to him with a small smile, the tension in her shoulders dissipating slightly.

He shrugged.

"I promised that if you wanted to pretend it never happened, that would be fine. Whatever you need Granger."

The words came out like he'd practised them in his head. Caring, casual. She tilted her chin and watched while he reached for his own tea and toast, trying not to shake under her inspection.

"Ok, I think we need to talk about it," she said eventually, "Last night... it went beyond things being undefined. It was catastrophically messy."

Ah yes, thought Draco, messy and sticky and perfect and he'd repeat it again in an instant but he knew she was referring more to the labels she was so determined to avoid.

'I can't be your wife Malfoy. Not a real one. Not the type of wife you want.'

When he'd been lying in bed that morning he'd promised himself that he wouldn't ask exactly what she meant by that but the question was itching to come out anyway.

"And you'd like things to be defined?" he asked instead, buttering his toast to give his hands something to do.

"I think it would be helpful, yes," she replied.

"And we've established that we are not man and wife," Draco said, forcing the words while his magic revolted.

"On paper only," Hermione agreed, looking at him expectantly.

She was waiting for him to say boyfriend, girlfriend or some variation thereof; he could tell. She had that look she used to get in class when she knew the answer before the professor had even finished the question. The moment something of that ilk came out of his mouth, she was going to use it as a reason why she should disappear into herself again. Pull away from him. Too bad. She'd forgotten she wasn't the only one who used to know the answer to the question before it was spoken.

"Well, I believe we said something last night about being friends who fuck?" he said, watching as her face flashed surprise for just a second.

"Yes, we did," she said, her eyes wary, waiting for him to go on.

"So we can stick with that, or we can remove the 'who fuck' part and keep the friends. I'm not going to lie, I have a preference for the former, but the latter is non-negotiable."

That prompted a confused stare.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"I mean, I spent eight years unable to get to know you because of my own prejudice, followed by another seven locked up with nothing but the ghosts of those prejudices to keep me company. With this ministry-mandated opportunity, I've discovered I'm quite fond of your friendship and am not willing to give it up. Not even for another chance at an absolutely wonderful shag in my library."

He wasn't lying. If all she would ever offer was friendship, he would grab it with both hands. He was also omitting the part where he fully intended to change her mind about the "more than friendship" part.

Her surprise wasn't concealed this time. It was laid bare on her face. Whatever she had been thinking about when she'd lain in her bed before breakfast, it wasn't this scenario. The silence stretched and Draco felt his doubts rise to the surface.

"I mean, I hope that last night was... obviously I was a little overwhelmed physically and that meant that I... in an ideal world you would have, before I.. and I thought it was

wonderful but perhaps from your perspective... that's all to say, I hope that you still enjoyed yourself."

Draco couldn't believe the inarticulate nonsense he'd just spouted but he'd spent so long considering why and how Hermione wanted to avoid an emotional attachment, he'd neglected to consider that after his performance last night, she might not want to engage in anything physical again either. When he looked up she was smiling at him. Looking more relaxed than she had all morning.

"I did, very much," she sipped her tea, considering for a while and for a minute he thought she was going to add something but she remained silent.

"Is it something you would like to do again? From a purely physical standpoint?" he hedged, trying to tap into the bond and get a sense of what she was feeling, but aside from curiosity and a touch of anxiety he found no clues as to what her answer would be.

She chewed on her bottom lip before she said, "I would not be opposed."

Draco let just a sliver of the grin that was clawing its way out appear on his face.

"So, if I was to lean across the table," he did so as he spoke.

"- and push back this lock of hair- *Merlin, her hair was soft.*

"- so I could place a kiss just here-" his lips grazed the pulse point on her neck, the way he had wanted to do when he'd first seen her that morning.

"- would that be okay?" he asked. Reluctantly returning to his previous seating position.

Hermione let out a breath and closed her eyes.

"It would depend on why you were doing it," she said.

"Really?" he asked, prompting her to continue, wanting her to lay some of her cards on the table so he could get a sense of what he was working with.

"Yes, if you were doing it as a sign of affection, a loving gesture between two people in a relationship, it would probably breach the bounds of the definition we've agreed to."

"Friends who fuck," he confirmed.

"Yes. However, if you were doing it because you hoped it would lead to me dropping to my knees in the middle of breakfast and showing you exactly how much I enjoyed last night, well that would probably be fine," she finished.

Draco swallowed, mouth dry and all his blood diverted south immediately. *Salazar*. He was an idiot for thinking he could manage this situation. Not when Granger could say things like that and completely render him brainless.

"And if I say the second?" he choked out.

"Unfortunately we'll never know, it's already after 8 so I need to go to work," she said with a cheeky grin, and Draco felt himself relax infinitesimally.

As much as the thought of Hermione taking him into her mouth at the breakfast table was something he absolutely, definitely wanted to explore (and would be thinking of later in the privacy of his own room), the intensity of it scared him just a little. He hadn't really had time to consider what a physical relationship would look like in a specific sense. He'd had seven years without any sort of touch. For him, the feel of her hair in his fingers was overwhelming enough. Her on her knees would have made his dismal performance last night look like a marathon.

He tried to focus. This was going well; at least in that she hadn't completely shut down and answered him with that calm measured look he'd grown to hate. He chanced a look at her just to make sure, only to find she wasn't looking at him at all, just gathering her things to leave. Her curls fell around her face and the urge to tangle his fingers in her hair overtook him again.

"Right," he said, "and kissing you before you left would be out of bounds."

Hermione blushed.

"Correct," she said.

Draco decided to push just a little bit anyway. He stood when she did, as he did every time a lady left the table, but before she could go, he reached one hand to the back of her head and pulled her to him, capturing her mouth in a fast kiss. After a wild meeting of lips and teeth, he allowed his tongue to dip into her mouth just once before pulling back.

"And if I wanted to kiss you as the start of something that you needed to promise to finish later?" he asked.

Hermione fumbled, trying to put her wand into a pocket before giving up, twisting her hair in a messy knot and plunging her wand through the middle of it.

"I suppose that would be ok, purely in that context," she said, her voice strained, cheeks flushed.

"Good," said Draco, sitting back down to finish his breakfast, "I'll see you later then."

Thank Merlin for gardening. Without it, he would have wandered around the manor all day, without reason, waiting for her to come home. No doubt annoying Bobsy in the process and earning him either a tongue lashing or worse, interrogation. Gardening was heavy work. Work his muscles could get lost in. By the time sweat beaded on his forehead and his cotton shirt was sticking to his torso, he could only focus on telling his body what it needed to do. Any thoughts of his wife were drowned out by the burning in his arms and lungs. By 4 pm, the flower beds had never been better tended and Draco was ready for a long shower where he could finally attend to certain images that he'd avoided thinking of all day.

Clean and freshly dressed, he waited in his study. The low hum he used to think was building to pain became a buzz of anticipation, of excitement. He only wished he had something substantial to do while he waited. So he could look busy and impressive when she came to find him. Unless of course she never came to find him. That was an option he tried not to dwell on.

He was in freefall waiting to see if Hermione would catch him. It should have made him feel uneasy but instead, he felt exhilarated. The start of something new. He was a fresh-faced boy again, dressed in new robes, ready to walk into the Hogwarts Hall for the first time—his future unknown but there for the taking.

By 5:15 pm, her curious gaze poked around the door. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought she was as excited by this new beginning as he was. Fresh-faced, as if she had come home and scrubbed the day off her skin before coming to see him, and in a parallel that made him smile, she was wearing the same Oxford tee and jean shorts she'd been wearing that first day in the manor.

"Hello?" she hedged, slipping into the room and closing the door behind her.

Draco felt the pulse in his neck increase in tempo. The steady drumming that had kept his nerves company intensified until it beat like hummingbird wings.

"Hello... *friend*," he replied, pushing back from his desk and angling his chair towards her, "Are you here for a friendly chat?"

Hermione's small smile grew and she walked closer, stepping between his legs and resting lightly on the edge of the desk.

"Hmm, sure. How was your day *friend*?"

The mirth in her eyes felt like a test and Draco reached out for the waistband of her jean shorts, momentarily revelling in the privilege of being able to touch her just because he wanted to, and pulled her to him.

"Long," he sighed, before tugging her down and taking her mouth.

The first touch of skin on skin was both electric and comforting. Soothing his anxieties from the day and alerting him to the possibilities for the evening. Regardless of what they'd talked about that morning or where the boundaries and definitions fell for their relationship, having her like this, relaxed and pliable in his arms, just felt right.

Like the last time Draco had pulled her to him in his study, she climbed and straddled his lap. This time though, his hand didn't fumble nervously. This time, they found her bare legs and the frayed edge of her denim shorts. He loved the way his hands felt splayed across her thighs. Like he could hold all of her. Possess all of her.

"I think we are going to have to make a rule about kisses at breakfast," Hermione mumbled against his lips.

“Really?” he asked, one hand ghosting up her back, under her shirt and realising that she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Yes, I was completely distracted all day because you just had to go and start something,” she said, her hands pulling his shirt from where it was tucked into his trousers, palms sliding across his abdomen.

“You’re one to talk, Granger. I’ve been imagining you on your knees in the dining room all since breakfast. The amount of showers I’ve needed to take... If we’re going to talk about starting something.”

Draco grabbed Hermione’s hips with both hands, pulling her down harder so he was sure she could feel exactly what she was doing to him, even through the thick denim. Hermione paused. Her hands were both under his shirt, and there was just the slightest sting from where her nails had raked at him.

“That’s why you kissed me, right? To start something?” her voice was more fragile than 30 seconds earlier and Draco bit his bottom lip to stop himself from saying anything stupid. Like the truth.

He leaned forward and buried his face in her hair, breathing her in. Then moved the curls from his path until his nose was tracing the shell of her ear.

“Yes,” he breathed before capturing the lobe of her ear in his mouth and delighting in her whimper.

“Good,” she sighed.

She pulled away to tug her t-shirt over her head and throw it to the ground before sliding her fingers back in his hair and snagging his bottom lip between her own.

Trying to keep his head, Draco grasped for his wand where it lay on the table, shooting a *colloportus* at his study door. The click of the door drew Hermione’s gaze and when she realised what he’d done she smiled.

“Expecting visitors?” she asked,

“Not taking any chances,” Draco gritted out, the feeling of her grinding on him making it hard for him to speak, “It’s a better option than cursing the wanker, which I would be forced to do if anyone but me saw you like this.”

Hermione faltered and Draco immediately brought his mouth to her now bare breasts, sucking her nipple into his mouth in an effort to distract her from whatever he’d said that gave her pause. She groaned, both of her hands coming to cradle his head and hold him to her.

“Okay, time to vanish the clothes,” she sighed, gesturing to the wand that was still in his hand.

"What if I like it when you take your time? Want you to use those clever hands to stroke and touch as you undress me?" he asked, shifting, hoping her hands would move to his buttons. Shirt or trousers, he wasn't picky.

"Later, now we finish what we started," she said, palming him through his trousers instead.

"We can still finish and take our time," Draco hedged, partly because he wanted to take her slowly and partly because he enjoyed the way she flushed when he disagreed with her.

"Oh for heaven's sake," she mumbled, pulling back and grabbing his wand.

She vanished their clothes with a nonverbal charm, in an act of magic that was so flawless it could have been used as an example in a textbook. Though Draco was immediately assaulted by the feel of her, hot and wet against his now bare cock, it was the casualness with which she reached for his wand that had his blood surging.

There was a chance she had no idea what it meant to him. She had no reason to understand the intimacies of wand sharing within pureblood culture, but it made it so easy for Draco to believe this was more. He'd grown up being told that wand sharing was something you only did within family. Immediate family. Or as a sign of your deep devotion and trust. No matter the words she was saying, when his wand was in her hands, it felt like a sign. Both he and his magic knew that she was meant to be his.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sensation of her fingers wrapping around his length, positioning the tip of him at her entrance.

"Contraception charm?" he choked out, amazed that he managed to remember.

"Potion, this morning," she hissed, as she eased herself down onto him, tight and wanting.

This time it was she who paused when he was finally seated inside her. Her breaths were long and shaky and she rested her forehead on his shoulder, still. Unsure what to do, Draco just dragged his fingers lightly over her back. Small designs, meant to soothe. Her breathing evened, her hands came back to twine through his hair and finally, she began to move.

To start, just subtle rocks of her hips, combined with the clench of her cunt had Draco panting for her. She was in complete control of the pace, the pattern. His hands rested loosely on her upper thighs, her skin warm to his touch.

He was sure what else to do with them; should he move them to her arse, her hair, her breasts? Hermione had hers resting on his shoulders, using them as leverage as her gentle motion increased and she rose a little at the end of each rock.

She was quieter than she had been the night before. Maybe the sunlight had made her shy, chased the magic from the night before away. Her face was one of concentration, although, at certain moments, flickers of bliss overtook her features. Was there something more he could be doing? Something else to offer her so she could let go and just feel?

He unmoored one of his hands and reached for one of hers. Draco wanted guidance. Wanted to know exactly how to please her. Like last night, he wanted her to trust him and ask for exactly what she wanted.

“Teach me, please. I want to learn you,” he whispered and hoped she understood. He twisted his hand, giving her control of it.

Those chocolate eyes glowed, and without breaking their eye contact, she moved his hand to her lips and took his pointer and index fingers into her mouth, sucking slightly. The sensation sent a jolt of desire directly to his cock and he felt his blood surge in response.

The sound of her mouth, coating his fingers with her saliva was obscene and Draco let out a low groan before she finally pulled them from her mouth with a pop and guided them down to press against her clit.

“Just keep your fingers there,” she whispered, leaning forward to kiss him.

It was a lazy kiss, one where lips and tongue collided haphazardly. No urgency. Just pleasure.

And then she picked up her pace. The gentle rocks from before gave way to rapid thrusts, and Draco felt the heels of her feet digging into the back of his knees as she wound herself around him to find traction. Finally, he could hear her. The whimpers and cries as she threw her head back, her curls tumbling over her back and arse and caressing the inside of his thighs like a whisper.

“Draco,” she moaned, and the sound of his name on his lips made him meet her thrusts with his own.

“Hermione,” he answered, scraping across the skin on her throat with his teeth, “You’re doing so well.”

Her cunt clenched, whether it was at his words or the swipe of his tongue at her throat he didn’t know, but he was determined that this time he would have the pleasure of knowing what it felt like when she came around him.

Leaving the hand she’d positioned still at her clit, taking care to ensure the pressure and placement was exactly as she had asked of him, he moved the other to the nape of her neck, able to position her head where he could whisper into her ear.

“I fisted my cock in the shower to thoughts of you like this,” he told her honestly, observing the way her hips jerked in response.

“Visions of you naked, spread for me across my bookshelves just like you were last night,” Draco closed his eyes, willing him to hold on a little longer. No matter how delectable the image in his mind and the one before him, he couldn’t lose himself in it. Not yet.

Hermione moaned and increased her pace just a little. She liked him talking.

“I didn’t think there was anything more fucking exquisite but then you come into my study and ride me in my father’s chair,” he rasped and the corresponding moan had him suck on the

side of her neck so hard he was sure he'd left a mark.

"Fuck Hermione, I need you to come for me, sweetheart."

The term of endearment slipped out and he was lost. As soon as he finished speaking, he felt her shatter and he let go to follow her over the cliff. They stayed suspended, tense in the moment. No sounds but breathing, too many physical sensations to catalogue.

Then she collapsed against his chest, tiny aftershocks moving her body. Draco waited until she had completely stilled and then rearranged her so her legs rested sideways against his lap, her head nestled in the crook of his neck. His arms were around her and his lips brushed the crown of her head as he breathed her in. Basil, geraniums and something new, the scent of them together.

He considered whether it would be polite to offer cleaning charms, but he didn't want to do anything that disturbed her from her position. Not when she felt so right in the quiet. Draco and Hermione. An unlikely puzzle that fit together. They sat in silence for a minute before she took a deep breath and leaned forward to look at him.

"Sweetheart? Really?" she asked, her tone wry.

"You don't like it? I have to confess when I'm seconds from coming, going through the thesaurus for appropriate things to call you isn't exactly on the forefront of my mind," he jested, secretly thinking that of all the names that he could have let slip, sweetheart was one of the more innocuous.

"Not my favourite," she answered, getting up from his lap and gesturing to the mess that was on both his thighs and hers, "do you mind?"

Draco leaned forward to take his wand and vanished the mess with a flick.

"Would you prefer, Darling? Kitten? Beautiful?" he asked, reaching for the shirt she'd discarded on the floor. As the only item that hadn't been vanished, it was the only piece of clothing between them. Draco would need to either transfigure or summon himself something. He handed it to her.

"Precious, Pumpkin, Love?" he added.

"Do you have to call me anything?" she asked, pulling the shirt on, and tugging on the hem to try and cover her bottom.

"I don't know Granger, I suppose I could be silent, but I got the impression that you quite enjoy me speaking."

He held up his wand in question and she nodded before he cast a charm to lower the hem of her shirt. There. Now at least one of them was decent.

"I do like you speaking, it might be an undiscovered talent of yours Malfoy. One I am happy to help you practice. But I don't understand why you just can't avoid names altogether," she

said, looking around and realising, as he had much earlier, he was destined to stay completely naked.

“I can’t help what I say in the heat of the moment Granger, just as I am sure you can’t help those delightful little whimpers of yours.”

Hermione scowled and blushed simultaneously, which had to be the most adorable combination he’d seen on her yet.

“Fine, well I will put up with it, but as long as you keep it contained to the moments we are actually fucking,” she said, spotting a throw on the armchair near the fire, striding over to it.

“Noted sweetheart,” he said with a grin watching as she turned to glare at him.

“Malfoy!”

“Sorry love but I could be working towards another round. Legs like that on display are just made to tempt a man.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and tossed the throw at him.

“Incorrigible,” she said.

“No, Insatiable Darling. Not quite the same thing.”

Hermione shook her head but couldn’t help the smile that escaped the corners of her mouth.

“I will see you at dinner... *friend*,” she said pointedly before unlocking the door and leaving Draco to slump into his chair, still nude, to scheme exactly how many terms of endearment he could slip into their next conversation.

Chapter End Notes

So first up, thank you so much to [Orolin](#) for alpha/cheer reading this for me and most importantly telling me to step away from the delete key. There were at least 15000 words written for you to get this 4500k word chapter and who knows how much longer it would have taken me without her support.

On that, you will note the chapter count has gone up again (whoops) due to some rejigging of the next couple of chapters. With that in mind, I’m not sure if the next chapter will go up next Sunday or the Sunday after. Or sometime within those two Sundays. I promise it’s coming though. No more than two weeks.

A giant thank you to anyone that has left kudos and comments. They are better than chocolate. Make me sit down to write each morning. I reread my favourite ones many many times.

Dennis Creevy and George Weasley

Chapter Notes

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

If someone had told Draco a month ago that his new Friday routine would look like a morning of classes on the Muggle Industrial Revolution, followed by NEWT preparation courses and finishing with a few rounds of drinks with his friends, he would have told them they were insane. He had a clear idea of how his time in the summer program would go. It involved him being mainly invisible. Slipping into classes of muggles and hiding behind his laptop screen. Arriving at his NEWT preparation classes less than a minute before they started, to protect himself from any outbursts or attacks. Slinking home immediately after.

But that hadn't happened. To start, in his first Muggle class, the professor had put them in small groups and had them do something called "ice breakers". Snape would have turned in his grave. All the other students were younger than him, but also open and friendly. They shared personal details like dogs' names and favourite colours like it was nothing; Draco had to make up names for his peacocks to fit in. Now Ronald, Rodolphus and Umbridge all lived on his front lawn eating worms.

As for his NEWT classes, they were much smaller than expected. Older students he didn't recognise mostly. Each more invested in their own lives than him. He'd sat at a table in the back thirty seconds before the start of his first class, parchment and ballpoint pen at the ready, when fifteen seconds before a slight man with mousy brown hair sat down next to him and pulled out a notebook and his own ballpoint pen.

"Alright?" he asked, glancing up from beneath his fringe and though Draco knew the features, he couldn't place them or remember the name.

"Hello," he replied, taking a discreet look behind him to make sure that the man was indeed talking to him. There was no one there- he was.

He waited for the man to say anything else, but he just hunched over his papers and took notes as the professor outlined the course for the summer and the expectations. And that could have been it. Except he was in the next class. And the next one. And every time he sat down next to Draco and hid behind his hair.

It took seven separate classes but eventually, Draco got a name. *Dennis Creevy*. A muggle-born a couple of years below Draco at Hogwarts and while Draco couldn't remember being personally horrible to the man, he was sure that he'd been at least adjacent to some form of bullying. He'd been part of the cult that had wanted him dead after all. Fuck he'd been an awful person.

The guilt that flared when he'd put the face and name together made him contemplate staying home. His blankets were looking like an excellent option once more. Except Marvolo still expected him once a week and Bobsy had decided to pull out a list of "*Well-Known Witches and Wizards Who Failed to Live Up to Their Potential*" from a 2002 copy of Witch Weekly

and leave it at his place at the breakfast table. Draco got the message. Hiding was not an option.

Dennis seemed to know exactly who he was from the first day and amazingly didn't hold it against him. Just turned up to class, studied as much as he could and slowly started to converse more.

He'd lost a brother at the Battle of Hogwarts, after spending most of that school year in hiding due to their blood status. His guilt in surviving when so many had died, especially as he'd not only gone into hiding but not gone to fight in the final battle, had caused him to retreat entirely to the muggle world after the war. He never went back to do his NEWTs. Never sought a place in Wizarding Britain. Until the Marriage Act had left him with the choice to either have his wand snapped and truly renounce his magical side or take a wife.

Dennis had married Daisy Lutton, a Hufflepuff from his year, on the 30th of August and was slowly considering a place back in the Wizarding World with her by his side. Starting with his NEWTS, and growing to include Friday night drinks at a Muggle Pub with Draco and Theo. The first time they'd all gone out, Draco had stammered through an apology before being cut off by Creevy.

"Look, I appreciate it, I do. But in the same way, my mind healer has had me accept that I can't take responsibility for the deaths of my friends and family because I was a kid who didn't want to go into battle, I don't know that you need to take responsibility for the fact you were a kid whose parents just happened to have homicidal tendencies. Can we just draw a line under it? Move on to seeing what this all looks like if we're not divided down the line of blood and houses?"

Draco hadn't been able to respond to start. Just shook the hand that the man held out to him.

"You see a mind healer?" he finally blurted out, because of all the things Dennis had said, that had been the most surprising.

"Of course I see a bloody mind healer! Children aren't meant to witness torture and murder. Instead of sending everyone a ministry-issued spouse and mandate to marry, it should have been a ministry-issued mind-healer and a mandate to take up therapy hobby. Mine's pottery."

"Gardening," Draco grunted and the smile that spread on Dennis's face was one of real delight.

"Look, I don't mean to be the tosser who interrupts this tender moment, but what in the ever-loving fuck are you talking about?" Theo asked, looking flustered.

"How about you get the first round Nott, and we'll fill you in when you get back?"

So began the Friday drinks routine.

“So, turns out we have these things called *chromosomes*. And they have all the *genes* that decide everything. From your hair colour to whether or not you are going to be a murderous psychopath like your father,” Theo shared, waving his half-full pint in the air to emphasise his points, “It’s like fucking magic!”

Muggle science had become Theo’s new favourite topic of conversation. Pansy had sent him to the pub each week to get it all out. She’d threatened that if he so much as mentioned DNA once he got home, she would make him wear a ballgag all weekend to save herself from boredom.

“It’s meant to be the opposite of magic, Mate,” Dennis said, getting that bemused look he had whenever Draco and Theo tried to venture into the Muggle world.

“Then why is it so fucking magical?” said Theo, finishing his drink in a single swallow, “Another round? I still need to tell you both about cell structure before we go.”

Draco and Colin both nodded and watched as Theo approached the bar.

“How long do you think it will take him for Pansy to hex him when he gets home?” Dennis asked with a good-natured smile.

“Knowing Theo, he’ll walk straight into their bedroom and yell ‘amino acids’ just to get a rise out of her,” said Draco.

Dennis laughed, “Probably, although they are meant to be coming over to Daisy and mine on Sunday for drinks, so whatever she does to him will have to be reversible by then. You still coming?”

Draco nodded. He had started making plans on Sundays. Not the mornings or evenings; he always ensured he was at the manor for breakfast. Not that Hermione really engaged with him much, but he wanted to be there. Then in the evenings, after dinnertime, he made sure he was back to take her a tray and play the piano for her while she lay on the floor with her eyes closed, letting the music wash over her. On good days, she let her feet rest against his thigh; on bad ones, she could barely make eye contact.

Some things had stayed completely the same since they had started sleeping together. They still ate dinner every night with Bobsy and Vim, Hermione quietly listening more than contributing to the conversation. They still had breakfast every morning, although now on the days Draco had classes, he travelled with her via the floo in her office. Sundays she was still sad. She didn’t tell him where she went or why she was sad and Sunday was the one day there was no chance of coaxing her into his arms.

Other things changed. Or rather they had integrated a new pattern into their lives. Every few days they would seek each other out. Mark their intention with the pointed use of the phrase *friend* and explore each other. In the library; his study; the dining room; the hallway; the greenhouse; the sitting room. But never his room. Never hers. Merlin forbid there was anything that could be perceived as a marital bed. For every boundary that had been erased, dropped purposefully like her shirt on the study floor that first day, new ones had been erected. Stronger, taller and more obvious than the ones previous.

“And Hermione’s not coming?” Dennis asked, looking curiously.

Dennis knew Hermione, well, had known her at school. So he invited Hermione to everything, both as Draco’s wife and an old schoolmate. Pansy had spent time with their little group. Daisy had come to pub night a couple of times. Hermione never ventured out with Draco.

“No, she has some things on,” Draco lied. In truth, he hadn’t asked her. Not since the first time he suggested she join them on Pub night and she’d looked horrified before not seeking him out or saying *friend* for three days.

“Maybe next time?” Dennis asked and Draco nodded non-committally.

“Ok, so the nucleus!” Theo declared, coming back to their table with three full pints and a grin, “You’ve got to hear about the crazy shit the nucleus can do.”

Pub night never finished too late, and both Dennis and Theo disapparated from a dark alley back to their wives. Draco started the stroll through the dark streets of Oxford to go to Hermione’s office to use the floo. At first, Oxford had seemed intimidating, and he’d kept mainly to the areas for his classes. However, he’d slowly allowed himself to explore the muggle side, and then the wizarding. Whether it was due to the gossip that he arrived each morning with one Hermione Granger, or perhaps everyone had just gotten used to him, he didn’t face the same sort of anger as he had those first months after his release. That said, he hadn’t gone back to the magical covered market either.

Rounding the corner onto Hermione’s lane in Magdelene College, he sought out her window in the stone facade. He knew it well by now. She might have already left for the night; which was fine. If she had, he’d just walk to the public floo in one of the wizarding pubs in town. However, if there was a chance that he could accompany her home he’d take it. There was a soft glow that let him know she was still there and with a smile, he let himself into a side door and started to climb the stairs to her office.

“You really need to come round The Burrow more ‘Mione. Mum has been asking after you more than Charlie and he’s in Romania, so that’s saying something,” a cheerful male voice filtered into the hallway and Draco felt all of the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

“I know, I know, please tell Molly I’m sorry. It’s just been busy and...”

Hermione’s voice joined the man’s and Draco paused wondering how she was going to finish the sentence. She didn’t get a chance, the man cut her off.

“You know if Mum doesn’t set eyes on you soon, she’s going to assume things. Maybe start knitting baby booties? All her children married off and not one of us have had the decency to procreate yet... well asides from Gin but as it’s her second one it’s not that exciting.”

“Really?” Hermione responded but it didn’t have the school marmish quality Draco remembered from the past when she’d told off a Weasley; she just sounded tired. It matched

the pang of unease he felt.

Though he would have paid an obscene amount of galleons to hear exactly what Hermione was going to say next, he wasn't about to stand in the hall while someone was clearly making her feel uncomfortable. With a quick knock, he let himself into her office.

The remaining Weasley twin was there, lounging in Hermione's visitor's chair, the scrolls that usually help the space in a haphazard pile at his feet. Hermione was hunched over her desk, looking at a stack of papers that were far too white to be historical documents.

"Good evening," he said stiffly, staying by the door.

"Well if it isn't our favourite ferret!" George said, getting to his feet.

"George," Hermione warned from her desk and Draco hid his smile; his little lioness.

"Calm down 'Mione. I was just teasing. Now the git is married to you we have to accept him," George said, holding out his hand for Draco to shake. Draco took it, and George immediately tightened his grip, "Unless he hurts you of course, at which point all bets are off."

Draco tried not to grimace; the man had a grip like a vice.

"No offence, but I'm more scared of her than you," he said, chancing a glace at Hermione and being shocked to see that instead of mild amusement, she looked stricken.

He looked back to George to see the other man was also observing Hermione with interest. It made Draco bristle once more.

"That's a bit unfair, I own a joke shop. I could unleash all manner of annoyance on you and never be charged with a single offence," George said, not taking his eyes off Hermione.

"I survived Peeves, I think I can survive you," Draco responded robotically, no longer truly engaged in the repartee but neither was his conversation partner. They were both focused entirely on the witch who looked ill, she was suddenly so pale.

"Ah Peeves, I wonder what he's up to now. Hey Mione, what are the legalities involved in hiring a poltergeist? Are they classed as a creature?"

That seemed to be enough to break Hermione from whatever trance she was in. She looked over at George with an indulgent smile.

"Are you really going to try and hire him George, or just have me do the paperwork for it and then get distracted by something else like real-life imaginary friends for children?"

"That was one time Hermione, and it was a killer idea! I mean Drop Dead Fred, it was inspired and hilarious."

Draco had no idea what they were talking about.

"As it is I should be able to get these checked for you by Monday if you want to stop by and collect them?" Hermione gathered the crisp white papers in a folder and went to slide them into her bag.

"Or you could just bring them round to the Burrow for Sunday Dinner, make both me and Mum happy in one fell swoop?" George cocked his head.

Hermione's jaw clenched and Draco felt a rush of discomfort through the bond.

"She can't, we have other plans," Draco lied smoothly, stepping forward so his body was slightly in between George and his wife.

The physical barrier didn't seem to dissuade Weasley, he just peered around Draco's shoulders to talk directly to Hermione.

"Really, he's succeeding where little Ronniekins failed?" he asked, the surprise in his voice evident.

Hermione sighed, "George."

George took a step back as if he knew that the question crossed a line and was immediately ready to retreat. Draco was dying to push forward and find out exactly what it all meant.

"I'll pop back in on Monday. And pass on your love to Mum," he said, looking around and picking up an appalling garish purple briefcase.

Hermione mumbled something, maybe a few words of thanks before she gave George a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek and saw him out the door. Meanwhile, Draco stood in the centre of the room, about as useful as a chocolate cauldron.

In some ways, he felt he knew his wife very well. He felt like he saw her in a way that she allowed no one else to see. Plus the trust they had built during their exploration; it meant something. It felt special. All it took was one conversation with someone else in her life to realise how little he knew. How removed from the rest of her life he was.

It was easy to forget, when he and Hermione were tucked away in the manor together that just because he'd spent seven years some kind of pause, she hadn't done the same. Quite the opposite. She'd undertaken studies; she'd built not one career but two; she'd had relationships, of both the romantic and platonic variety. For all she'd taught him about history, she'd never shared her own.

"Are you heading home?" she asked, closing the door behind George and breaking him from her thoughts; the use of the word *home* was a life preserver to the sinking feeling in his gut.

"Yes, you?" he said, trying to shake off his anxiety and focus on the woman in front of him.

Hermione nodded and he moved a hand to lower back to guide her to the floo. In the grand scheme of boundaries and intentions, it probably broke the rules, but he needed to touch her for just a second.

"So does Weasley come by often?" Draco asked, flexing his finger slightly against the fabric of her robes..

"Not usually. My floo is generally closed and he doesn't like the trains from London," she said, either not picking up on Draco's tone or purposefully ignoring it.

"And what did he bring you?" he asked, taking the pot of floo powder off the mantle to offer her some.

"Just some supply contracts for the joke shop. He likes me to look them over if they are a bit tricky," she replied taking the powder and stepping into the hearth.

"He knows there is someone he can pay for that right? I believe they are called lawyers. If can afford that monstrosity of a new money briefcase he can afford to pay a professional," Draco grumbled.

Better for the man to pay for something than take advantage of his wife for free. Anyone could see she was tired enough without doing busy work.

"It's just something we do," she sighed and offered a hand to him, "Are you coming?"

Draco felt his eyebrows raise in surprise. They'd never flooed together before. Always one after the other. He wasn't about to let an opportunity pass him by, he'd interrogate the reason she'd offered later in the privacy of his room. He took her hand and then tucked her into his side. Touch that wasn't a direct prequel to sex. Who knew it would be so precious?

Chapter End Notes

Look, I made my imaginary posting deadline! All thanks much be give this week to whatever virus that made my children sleep in extra late so I could write before they got up. And those long naptimes, the real MVPs. Also thanks to Orolin for her alpha work. I really appreciate it.

I made an [Instagram account](#) the other day if anyone would like to follow along. There isn't much there at the moment, but I plan to put little spoilers (maybe some snippets from Hermione's POV) there if you are interested. I basically just wanted somewhere else to yap about these two idiots and this story on the internet.

Anyway, enjoy! Thank you for all the kudos and comments. They make the part of me that is forever trying to get a "good work" sticker shimmery with happiness.

A Golden Picnic and The Floo on Sunday

Chapter Notes

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

Two things had invaded Draco's mind as August dawned. Took over like an obsession that slowly robbed him of the ability to enjoy the other moments of his life. The first was Sundays. After replaying the conversation he'd overheard between George and Granger it became clear that whatever happened on a Sunday was not new. It had been the one day she'd insisted on leaving when they were under house arrest, which meant she had discussed it with Kingsley in the negotiations. What's more, the Ministry deemed it important enough to allow her the leave- they hadn't done that for her work.

It was also clear that whatever it was was somehow directly linked to the haunted look she wore sometimes. The way she crawled into herself. It hadn't been obvious when she'd first moved in, although perhaps he just hadn't been paying any attention, but she didn't react. Not when they'd first been forced to interact, not when he'd tried to provoke her. She would walk away from a fight. The Hermione Granger who helped win the war, never walked away from a fight. She said she was tired, and maybe that was partly true but it wasn't just fatigue.

He considered asking for Pansy's thoughts or Blaise for information, but it felt like a betrayal of Hermione's trust. To ask, he'd have to describe the shell of a woman he sat with every Sunday night and to expose her like that to someone else was unthinkable. For the same reason, he didn't ask Tonks for any information. Hermione asked so little of him, the least he could do was respect her privacy.

It didn't stop him from wondering though, as he gazed at her face when she wasn't watching and catching the flickers of emotion she couldn't control. He wanted to know where she went on Sunday more than anything else, except maybe for one thing.

The second thing that invaded his mind. August 8th. A date which fell inauspiciously on a Tuesday. His wedding anniversary. There were so many things he wanted to do. He wanted to take her somewhere. Paris maybe, or Florence. Stay in the penthouse of one of the luxury hotels he remembered from his youth and spend the week tangled with her in white bedsheets, finally knowing the pleasure of sleeping with her in his arms.

He also wanted to go to the Black Family vaults and retrieve the purple ring he remembered from the chocolate box of jewels. Take the current monstrosity off her finger and fling it into the river, only to replace it with the one he'd chosen for her. One he could look at her wearing and feel pride, not shame.

Despite her assurances that she might tell him why she still wore it one day, she hadn't bought it up. Like where she disappeared to on Sunday, Draco knew that he shouldn't ask. Not if he wanted things to stay as they were, with breakfasts and piano lessons and orgasms in various rooms on the manor.

So he was left with an anniversary he wanted to acknowledge but would need to do so in secret. From everyone, including his wife. He immediately decided to change the day he would mark it. For one, it would be less suspicious, if Hermione wondered what he was doing and the second reason is it would just be easier to take his time on a Saturday.

He spent the morning preparing, before going and knocking on Hermione's door. The summer heat was lasting longer than it usually did, and when she opened her door Draco was pleased to see her in a mustard-coloured sundress, her hair piled in a high bun on the top of her head.

"I was going to take my books down by the river and study over a picnic lunch, do you want to come with me?" he asked, his nails pressing into the soft flesh of his palms, where he clenched his fists in anticipation and nerves.

"Is this a way to try and trick me into helping you study for your A-Levels?" she asked, leaning against the doorway.

"Yes," Draco readily agreed, grateful that she hadn't guessed what he was actually trying to trick her into doing.

"Fine, but there better be cake," she said, reaching for a light cardigan and following him into the hall.

There was cake. There were slices from the top layer of their wedding cake that Bobsy and Vim had taken and preserved for this very moment, though the slices were cut in such a way that Hermione would never recognise it. That is if she had even committed the cake to memory. His recollection of the day had her darting from the wedding as soon as she was able.

The light was golden as they walked up to the picnic rug that Draco had laid out. He'd made the meal himself; sandwiches, soft cheeses and crackers, summer berries from his garden. Simple fare but he was unable to mess up simple. He'd wanted to place a dozen red roses on the blanket but had to settle for hiding them in various bouquets around the manor. So spread out they wouldn't be obvious.

"This is lovely," Hermione murmured, sinking onto the picnic rug and looking out at the river, "every time I think I have seen the most beautiful place on the estate, another spot comes along and surprises me."

"I thought the library would have won on the first day," he said, internally preening at the fact that she liked the Malfoy land. He wanted to remind her that it was half hers. She was tied to it by blood.

"True," she sighed, reaching for a berry, "it is hard to beat the library as predictable as that makes me. So what are you studying?"

Draco looked down at the stack of books he'd placed next to him.

"The Crusades," he groaned. He'd hoped he'd had a little more time to just be with her before she insisted they study, but alas, she was still Granger.

He reached across and picked up two books; one an overview of the 5th crusade, the other a new release fiction novel Hermione had mentioned in passing over breakfast, that he'd gone with Tonks to buy at Diagon Alley. His first attempt shopping in Wizarding Britain since the clothes debacle. With Tonks by his side, it had gone...silently. No one said anything as he made his purchase at Flourish and Blotts. Good or bad. Just watched him and Tonks with interest.

"Here," he said passing her the book, wondering if she could gather the significance of the paper gift, "I don't need to be quizzed or anything yet, but if I could just ask you questions if I need to?"

She took the novel and her eyes widened in surprise at the new title, but didn't say anything about it.

"OK... thank you," Hermione's tone went up at the end of the sentence, almost as if she was asking a question, before looking away.

She turned to lie on her belly, reaching for a sandwich and opening the cover.

Draco tried to focus on the Crusades. He really did. A-level exams were a real thing and the Crusades, which had seemed interesting when he'd selected them as his topic for his Breadth study, were dastardly complicated and infuriatingly stupid.

However, he couldn't help but watch her. Sunlight was inordinately kind to Hermione Granger. It made her glow; her brown hair came to life in a myriad of shades. The freckles on her shoulder became more visible in the sunlight and Draco had to fit the urges to drag his lips between them, mapping out constellations. She was all consuming and that was even before he took into consideration that she was eating.

When he'd packed strawberries in their picnic hamper, he hadn't considered what her lips would look like wrapped around one just before she bit into it, juice spilling onto her lips when she did. He was getting hard watching her and quite frankly didn't give a flying fuck about Pope Innocent III's desire to retake Jerusalem.

"You're not studying," Hermione said, not looking up from her book but a small smile spreading across her face.

"I know," he groaned, putting the book to the side and moving so he could lean back on his elbows next to her. His long legs stretched out, pressing on the side of her body.

"Do you want a strawberry?" she asked, picking up the dish and offering it to him, her eyes still stubbornly on her page.

"Yes please, *friend*," he answered.

Hermione paused for a minute before finally looking at him. With a smirk, she closed her book, picking a small daisy from the grass beside them to mark her page. Then she lifted herself to her knees and moved slowly towards him until she was level with his hips. Sitting

back on her heels, she reached for a berry and brought it to his mouth. Draco bit, feeling his lips brush her fingers where she held the stem.

Hermione went to get another, but Draco nabbed her hand before she could and brought it back to his mouth. He pressed a kiss on the pad of each finger, humming contentedly.

“You are not going to be ready for your A-levels if we start doing that,” she sighed, but her other hand came to brush through his hair. Gentle. Loving. Or maybe he was just imagining things that weren’t there.

“I can study tomorrow,” Draco mumbled, moving from her fingers to her palm to her wrist. It wasn’t Paris, but worshipping every part of her in the August sun was a worthy alternative.

“I thought you wanted my help.”

“I’ve decided I want other parts of you more,” Draco said to the soft skin on her inner arm.

“I wouldn’t be a very good friend if I distracted you,” Hermione leaned closer to him as she spoke, her words and actions at odds with each other.

Draco took advantage of the closeness of her neck and leaned forward to kiss the spot he knew would make her moan. She shivered against him, but her lips stayed firmly pressed together, silent and only then did he realise her goal. The textbook he’d abandoned beside him. He fell back to the ground with a defeated puff and Hermione pushed the book into his hands.

“Read,” she instructed him sharply and Draco sighed, waiting for her to move back to her spot, robbing him of her warmth and scent.

But she didn’t.

“Read,” she repeated and Draco propped himself back on his elbows, holding the book precariously on his belly.

It was not comfortable but he started to skim the page anyway.

“Read to me,” Hermione clarified her instruction and Draco looked at her over the top of the book.

She hadn’t moved back, just shifted to sit on her knees. Their bodies were still so close there was no light between them. She raised an eyebrow and nodded to the book and Draco tried to focus on the words swimming on the page, not the discomfort in the position. If he moved, would she move away?

“In July 1216, newly consecrated Pope Honorius III called upon Andrew the Second of Hungary to fulfil his father’s vow and lead a crusade. Andrew, who had postponed the crusade at least three times, finally agreed...”

There was a gentle brush against his lower abdomen, and Draco stopped speaking to see Hermione’s hands frozen on the buttons of his shirt.

“Keep reading,” she said, not moving a muscle.

Draco took in a deep breath and continued, “*Andrew mortgaged lands and royal estates to become part of the crusading party, as well as giving up his claim...*”

The words continued, but his mind was only half focused on them. The rest of him was engrossed in the feel of Hermione’s hands on his belly and chest, delicate touches, and then on the feel of her lips on his chest. He couldn’t help it; the sentence he’d been reading morphed into a moan.

Hermione froze, lips still so close to his skin he could feel her warm breath. She said nothing, and for a moment the sound of breathing and summer bird song was the only noise. With a sigh, Draco fell down off his elbows so he was flat on his back, raised the book above him and kept reading.

“*Andrew, with the other campaign leaders, held a war council in Acre before launching a campaign for the Jordan River...*”

As the woeful tale of the 5th Crusade unfolded, Hermione returned to his chest, layering kisses and licks in a path downwards. Draco’s arms were shaking with the steady weight of the book, but he dared not lower it or stop reading. Especially when he felt Hermione’s hands reach his belt, making quick work of undoing the buckle and lowering his zipper.

He was already hard. Of course he was. His voice caught around a phrase regarding Andrew’s visit to Tripoli as Hermione pulled her mouth away long enough to ease his trousers and underwear down, and he lifted his hips to help her.

“Hermione,” he growled, as she took hold of the base of him and looked up at his face, her eyes glowing the colour of whiskey.

“Keep reading,” she insisted, frozen with her hand around his cock waiting for him to start again.

The words were strained but he did it.

“*On his return from the crusade, Andrew procured a series of betrothal contracts for his children; including notably, a contract between his daughter and Ivan Ansen II of Bulgaria, who had detained Andrew in his palace until he secured the match.*”

Hermione hummed, pleased at his reading before taking her hand away and when he felt it again it was slick with her saliva. The sensation as she stroked him made his eyes roll back in his head and he lost his place. The brief pause in his reading was matched with a pause in Hermione’s ministrations.

He found a place in the book, not his place, but it was the start of the sentence and he had to hope that Hermione didn’t notice that he had skipped around the narrative. The idea that this would produce any depth of understanding was ridiculous although he’d be damned if it didn’t come close to satisfying a schoolboy fantasy of his from days studying in the Hogwarts library.

Back then, it had always been one of the Greengrass sisters he'd imagined under the table, maybe Cho Chang for the brief period that Potter had also seemed interested in her. Now he realised what a short-sighted, bigoted idiot his younger self had been. What with Hermione Granger always two tables down. Thank goodness he'd grown up. Thank Merlin he'd lost the war.

Hermione's hand movements were slow and sure and Draco could have revelled in them before he came all over her hand, but halfway through a sentence on the Hungarian Barons, Draco felt Hermione's tongue, warm and wet, flick over the tip of his cock. He hissed through clenched teeth but didn't stop reading and Hermione showed her approval by taking the whole head of his cock in her mouth and sucking lightly. He continued to read and she continued to reward him by taking a little more of him into her mouth with each bob of her head until he was hitting the back of her throat.

He'd never considered Granger a cruel woman, nor a particular scheming one, but as she found a gentle rhythm and he stuttered his way through a paragraph on post-Crusade finance he decided that she may have discovered the most effective form of torture.

His arms were burning, fingers itchy to bury themselves in her curls and his mind revolted at the indignity of having to do anything but enjoy the sensation of Hermione's mouth. The words that were coming out of his mouth were not the ones he was dying to say. The witch probably knew it. Had found a way to ensure the terms of endearment he used liberally were silenced

Well fuck that.

He stopped reading and predictably Hermione paused, her gorgeous pink lips halfway down his cock. She looked up at him from under her lashes expectantly, waiting for him to start reading again. The sight was so incredible it solidified Draco's decision and he unceremoniously tossed the book to the side with one eyebrow raised.

Hermione immediately released his cock with a pop and sat up looking predictable peeved.

"Draco, that was a book!" she said, her cheeks flushed, curls escaping the bun atop her head.

"Witch, I really don't care," Draco replied, gathering her in a kiss and rolling her smoothly beneath him.

From his new position, he had all the control and Hermione was pliant as his mouth found her neck and his hand inched up her thigh under her dress. He took his time to kiss her, finding all the spots he knew would make her yield. Putting all the knowledge he'd acquired in the past two months to use.

"You know love, if I was a petty man, I'd torture you the way you just did me," he murmured into her neck.

Hermione whimpered in response.

"Where is that novel of yours? Maybe I would like to hear it while I lick your pretty cunt. Make sure you're nice and wet for me?"

Draco's finger found the seam of her underwear and eased his index finger underneath, extremely pleased by what he found.

"Except you're already drenched for me, love. Was it the historical study that has made such a mess of your knickers or did you enjoy tasting my cock that much?"

Hermione arched up into him with a cry, chasing friction against his finger.

"Please Draco, I just want you inside me" she murmured, widening her legs, encouraging his hips to fit snugly between them.

He could no sooner deny her than himself. Taking hold of his cock and moving her underwear to one side, he filled her with a single stroke. Stilling once he was fully seated, so overwhelmed by the sensation.

Hermione had no such need it seemed and he was barely given a moment to gather himself before she started moving, grinding against him. He tried to focus on other things, the pressure of her fingertips where they dug into his back, her distinct scent mixed with the smell of summer sunshine and strawberries, the sound of the birds overhead. However, nothing could distract him for long when she moved in the way she was moving. The way she chased her pleasure, merely using him and his body to do so.

He gazed down at her face. Whisps of hair were haphazardly falling out of her bun, her mouth slightly open, breathy whimpers punctuating her movement. Her eyes were screwed shut and her face turned to the side. She rarely looked at him during sex. Not since that first night in the library when her eyes had flown open and searched for him.

Craving her attention, he took her jaw and made her face him, then brushed a kiss against her eyelids until they fluttered open.

"Sweetheart, if you want to come you need to look at me," he said, staring into her eyes.

She whimpered, still moving against him, her calves wrapping tightly around him to give her purchase. He thrust his hips to meet her and with another one of her gorgeous noises, she tried to look away again. Stubborn witch.

Draco stilled his hips, pressing down in such a way that Hermione had no choice but to cease her movements. When her eyes flew back to his, a scowl decorating her pretty features, he pulled back a little and resumed his thrusts, languid. A clear message. The moment Hermione looked away, he would stop.

It wasn't difficult to reach the point of no return with Hermione's golden eyes locked on his. Her skin, the way she moved, the sounds she made. Draco felt a familiar tightness in his lower belly and willed himself to hold on just long enough to feel her come apart beneath him.

Hermione's face was still cradled in his hands and he brought his thumbs across to trace her cheekbones, her lips, not dropping her gaze for a second. As his thumb stroked her lower lip, she tilted her chin just enough to take it in her teeth and bite. It was a sharp burst of pain in the golden haze.

"Hermione," he gasped, but before he could say anything else she was coming.

Her body taunt, eyes wide and his thumb released as she gasped for air. Her eyes heated and through the bond, he felt an unaltered burst of something he was not brave enough to call love but stupid enough to wish for it. He allowed himself to be lost to his outlandish hopes and surrendered his body. Coming and filling her, allowing himself for one moment to believe she was completely his.

They were still for longer than usual afterwards. Draco made no move to roll off her, although was careful to distribute his weight on his forearms to ensure she wasn't uncomfortable. Hermione did not look away, even though the threat that Draco had used to guarantee her eye contact had elapsed.

He released her chin and started brushing her hair back off her forehead.

"Good?" he asked enjoying the sensation of her relaxed underneath him.

"Good," Hermione confirmed but still did not move.

Taking a chance, Draco pressed a small kiss to her forehead, lingering for a second, thinking '*I love you*', but not wanting to risk even breathing the words. Gathering himself, he moved first, deciding that as hard as it was, having her push him away would hurt more.

Hermione took her wand and cast the necessary spells and looked perfectly put together again within seconds; she was still fully dressed after all. Once done, she rolled back to her belly and opened her book. Draco redressed, tucking his shirt back into his trousers. Wanting to push the easy intimacy they seemed to have found, he moved closer to Hermione and started kneading her back, working the little knots of tension he found there.

Hermione let out a sigh of happiness.

"Are you doing that as my friend or my *friend*?" she asked, not looking at him although Draco perceived a hitch in her breath.

"I'm doing this as Draco," he answered honestly, his fingers pressing against her skin, his mind waiting for her to move. She didn't, just smiled and Draco was allowed to continue his work.

As he reached her shoulder, his fingers meandered their way down her arm until he reached the ring that sat on her left ring finger. It was cold and hard in contrast to her sun-warmed skin. Unable to help himself he twisted it around her finger until it was resting just above her first knuckle. So close to coming off.

"Why do you wear this?" he asked, the question puncturing their happy bubble.

Hermione sighed and rolled away from him. The hem of her dress fell back down and her relaxed expression faded.

“Draco,” she sighed fidgeting with the ring and slipping it off to hand it to him, “Do you want it back if it bothers you so much?”

Draco looked at the ring, he didn’t want her wearing that ring but the idea of her wearing no ring rankled him even more.

“Would you let me replace it with something nicer?” he asked, knowing what the answer would be but wanting to ask anyway.

“I don’t need a ring,” she said, not lowering her hand, the ring still between them.

Draco sighed, this was exactly why he shouldn’t have asked. There was no way this situation had a good outcome now. Well, not the outcome he wanted anyway. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around Hermione’s hand, pushing the ring into the centre of her palm.

“It’s yours. What you do with it is up to you,” he acquiesced, “but I will always regret that I didn’t speak up when my mother chose it for you.”

Hermione looked at him and Draco gave her the space to say something if she wanted to. But she didn’t, just slipped the ring back on her finger.

“I’ll put it in a jewellery box in my room when I’m at the manor” she offered, “you don’t have to look at it anymore.”

Draco nodded, not happy. The solution completely missed the point. How he felt about the ring was immaterial compared to his desire to know about her feelings towards it.

“Why did you let your mother choose my ring?” she asked so softly he almost didn’t hear the question.

“Honestly, I was so convinced that you’d rather stage a coup than marry me, I thought I would never need one. It was the first time I’d seen my mother in seven years and she was so terse,” Draco trailed off remembering the way his mother had come as close to insulting muggleborns as she possibly could without crossing a line and feeling much more uncomfortable with it now than he had been that day.

That day he’d been concerned that his mother’s words would get her into trouble, or that he would lose something because of them. Now the shame went deeper.

“I never thought you’d see it, let alone have to wear it. I was so confident you would fight the law to the death,” he finished, wanting to make sure she knew the ring had nothing to do with her.

Instead of looking relieved or understanding, she just looked sad. Defeated and sad.

“Lots of people expected me to fight the law to the death,” she sighed, “I’m very sorry that I let you down.”

She leaned forward and placed a single chaste kiss on his lips, before getting up, taking the book he'd bought her with him, and walking back up to the house.

Draco watched her go and felt the bond stretch between them. There was hurt and sadness from her end, but from his, there was a burst of hope. Hermione had just kissed him, not as a prelude to something more, but as a sign of affection, wanting nothing in return.

Hermione didn't come to breakfast the next morning. Being a Sunday, he could feel her unhappy through the bond but it was the first Sunday she didn't come to breakfast. By the time he had decided she definitely wasn't coming and went to knock on her door to check on her, she'd already left for the day.

Draco tried to go about his morning as if it was any other. There was still work to do in the garden, still books to study about the Crusades. Dinner was quiet. Bobsy and Vim seemed to sense that it was a night that Draco needed some quiet. A chance to process and reflect.

After dinner, he waited in his room for the buzz to subside so he would know she was home and it was time to take her some food and play for her. It never did; he fell asleep with the persistent reminder and a creeping feeling of unease. He woke as the first fingers of light graced the horizon to roaring panic. She still wasn't home. For the first time in over a year, she had stayed away overnight.

He didn't know what to do as he paced his room in yesterday's crumpled clothes, barely able to think as his magic swirled around him in a panic. He had no idea of where she went so he couldn't go there to find her, and aside from Tonks, he didn't know how to contact any of the other people in her life. He supposed he could floo to the Ministry, to the DMLE and seek out Potter. What time would he get to work? The Weasley twin had a shop, right? He would have to brave Diagon, but once he got there, he'd have access to the whole Weasley clan. Maybe he could call for Bobsy and he could use some form of elf magic to find her. *Circe*, maybe she'd even told Bobsy where she was going. Or he just knew; the blasted elf seemed to know most things.

Before he could open his mouth to yell the name, the buzzing stopped. She was home. Without getting dressed he ran to the floo parlour, needing to set eyes on her to make sure she was ok. He met her in the hallway. Her hair was damp as if she'd just had a shower and she was dressed in jeans and an old Gryffindor jumper. Her little beaded bag hung over her shoulder and as she'd promised in the garden, her fingers were bare. She looked surprised to see him.

"You're ok," he said, the words tumbling out of him, following the wave of relief.

She nodded, chewing her bottom lip.

"I had to visit my old house. I got caught up and decided just to sleep there," she said, not quite meeting his eye.

“Do you go back to your old house every Sunday?” he asked because the question was right there.

He already knew the answer though. No, she didn’t. The ministry wouldn’t have decided visiting a house was more important than work. She slowly shook her head and confirmed it. The silence stretched and though the next question, the one where he asked where she was then, just begged to be asked, Draco didn’t say it.

“Can I just-” he took a step towards her, arms slightly out, and when she didn’t move away he pulled her into them, breathing in deeply the scent of her shampoo.

“I was worried,” he confessed and though Hermione’s arms did not wrap around him, she relaxed into him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t very organised, I should have sent an owl or floo called or something.”

She stepped back and a glimmer of gold around her neck caught Draco’s eye. Hermione didn’t wear jewellery. Without thinking, he ran a finger along her collarbone and hooked the necklace out to look at it more closely. There was no pendant, just her ring, gold, black and brown. Hermione covered it in her fist and flushed red.

“It felt strange not having it,” she said, tucking it back into her jumper. “I thought, at least this way, you wouldn’t have to see it.”

Draco didn’t say anything as he sifted through his feelings. Relief that she was safe, fear that she was pulling away, hope that she wanted to keep her ring on her, as if taking off the symbol of their marriage felt wrong to her.

“I should get dressed for work,” she said, gesturing to her clothes, “I’ll probably have breakfast at my office.”

Draco nodded and watched as she hurried down the hall without looking back.

If that had been the only thing that had been off that week, Draco could have ignored it. Allow the odd interaction and behaviour to be buried between friendly banter and late-night trysts. Only, it wasn’t the only thing. Hermione started working late more often, during breakfast it was harder to pull her attention away from her book and though he had been able to find her once in the library after dinner and peeled away her clothing before sinking into her, he couldn’t coax her to look at him again the way she had on the picnic blanket in the August sun.

He knew it was his question about the ring that had caused it. Pulled at a thread that was causing something to unravel. He just didn’t know enough to figure out what it was that he’d started. He couldn’t understand and was missing pieces of information. Information that he was dying to know. He needed to know if he was going to help anything. He was her

husband; it was his duty to help her. Especially as it was abundantly clear that no one else was.

That was the justification he used on himself as he waited for her to leave the table the next Sunday, before casting a notice-me-not charm and following her to the floo parlour. His intentions mattered he repeated to himself like a prayer as he pressed himself against the door to listen to the destination she called out when she left. He expected to hear an address. Potters or Weasleys. Which is why when he heard her voice say '*St Mungos Hospital*', he didn't think. He just acted. Opened the door, covered the space to the hearth in long, anxious strides, and grabbed a handful of powder.

There was one minute of profundity, before he threw the powder down, ready to call out the name of the hospital. His better angels forced him to pause and ask himself the questions. Would she hate him if he followed? Would she push back? Retreat further? But then he tried to consider all the reasons she would need to go to the hospital weekly, none of them good, and without hesitating again, threw down the powder and followed her into the flames.

Chapter End Notes

Hi All, just a couple of flower notes for you this week.

A Dozen Red Roses = Be Mine always
A white daisy - a secret

For those of you who haven't found it, I gave a tiny sneak at the picnic scene from Hermione's POV over on my [Instagram](#).

The crusades are not an area I am well versed in but the history in the chapter is accurate to my research. I just like the idea that Draco would be drawn to another war based on ideology that was ultimately pointless.

Thank you so much to everyone who comments and kudos and came over to Instagram to say hello. I am finding this last act the most difficult part of the fic to write so your kind comments give me such a boost.

Peach Walls and A Park Bench

Chapter Notes

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

Draco's first thought when he stepped out of the hearth into the busy atrium of St Mungo's was that he hadn't really thought about where he was going. In his mind, he was just following Granger who was going to a hospital and therefore needed him. Exiting the floo in the middle of a large crowd made entirely of witches and wizards, however, he realised he had ended up in the middle of Magical Britain. A place he generally avoided at all costs. He could feel eyes on him and it made the collar of his shirt feel scratchy and tight, but he just focused on his breathing. He had to stay in the present; it would do no one any good if he slipped away.

His second thought was that he had no way of finding Hermione. The minute of indecision back at the Manor had given her time to leave the busy lobby for whichever part of the hospital she needed. He searched in vain for her familiar brown curls but eventually gave up and walked over to the directory of floors to scan the list, hoping that one of them would give him a clue as to where to go. Jump out at him and say, '*this way you idiot*'.

"Can I help you sir?" a smiling Welcome Wizard stood at Draco's elbow and Draco flinched at the closeness. He took a step back and examined the man looking for signs of trouble but no matter how closely Draco looked he couldn't see anything but polite interest in the man's face. He wasn't about to spit at him or curse him.

"Um, I'm looking for my wife," his voice cracked over the last word. For all the times he'd said it in his head, he'd never claimed her as such out loud to someone else. "We seem to have been separated and I'm not sure where she was going."

The wizard nodded understandingly, as if hopeless husbands who lost their wives were a regular occurrence in his line of work.

"What was she here for?" he asked, assuming, as any ordinary person would, that a wife would disclose that information to her husband.

"Well, Hermione didn't quite—" Draco was cut off before he was forced to devise an excuse.

"Oh, Ms Granger? She's already taken the lift up to the 4th floor. She never dawdles," the Welcome Wizard pushed the call button for the lift, "It's lovely that she has some support today. Always comes alone that girl."

That assertion from a stranger turned his insides to stone. It was confirmation that whatever Draco would find on the fourth floor, it was bad. Also, confirmation that Hermione was facing this alone and had been for some time.

"Thank you," Draco's inbuilt manners kicked in as he boarded the elevator car and gave the man a nod.

With wooden fingers, he pressed the key for the 4th floor and refused to make eye contact with any of the other people who boarded the lift. Unfortunately, it was a full ride, with stops on every floor on his way to the fourth. The ding at each stop broke through his thoughts, the smell of hospital antiseptic keeping him very much tethered to the location. He was at a hospital. He had followed his wife to a hospital and any hope that what she was keeping from him was somewhat mendable had stayed firmly in the floo parlour at the manor. People don't go to the hospital once a week for over a year to deal with something easily fixed.

When the four above the door finally illuminated and the elevator opened, he was faced with a peach-coloured wall and a sign telling him to turn left for the *Janus Thickey Ward for Long Term Spell Damage*. He had to keep counting his breaths to stay calm.

Though he hated it, there was part of him that wondered if there was still time to go home instead of turning left. The unknown might be easier to handle than the truth. *Long Term Damage*. What consequence of war amounted to that? Was he going to lose her? He had just found her, he wasn't ready to lose her. If he left now, he could still pretend he wouldn't.

Draco fiddled with his cuffs, trying to ready himself to walk, when a voice to the right caught his attention. It sounded like... Granger. Thanking someone called Susan. And it wasn't coming from the left, but the right. That was when he saw the second set of doors. The same peach colour as the walls.

There was no sign for this ward, and when he approached them, the doors stayed shut. He tried an unlocking charm to no effect and was considering knocking when a mediwitch walked past him.

"You need to put your wand in the reader," she said, pointing to a small box to the left. "Only family members are allowed to visit, so assuming that's you, the doors should slide right open."

The mediwitch raised her eyebrows at him in challenge but said nothing more once Draco met her gaze, just hustled back down the corridor.

The Hawthorne wand felt heavy in Draco's hand. It was the moment of truth. His worry as to Hermione's health quietened and instead reassigned itself to the wand and the reader. There was about to be a definition of their relationship. One not decided by him or her or the ministry but by a magical signature. Breathing in, he placed the wand into the slot and, without noise or ceremony, the doors slid open. He was her family. It was the thing he needed to know to keep walking.

In the ward, there was a small waiting area with a front desk, various files scattered across it in neat stacks, but no signs. Or staff. The desk was unmanned. Just past it was a hallway, the same peach-coloured walls and a few doors.

"Yes, I'll be here for lunch. Thank you, Susan."

Hermione's voice drifted out of an open door halfway down the hall and a mediwitch with a familiar face stepped through it. She started back towards the front of the ward and Draco, drawn by the voice, met her in the middle.

“Malfoy,” the mediwitch said with a smirk and a nod, “Good to finally see you here.”

Draco looked at the employee badge that hung from a chain on her hip. *Susan Bones*. As soon as he had the name, he could place her. She’d been in their year in Hogwarts, a Hufflepuff. How fitting she was here caring for others even still.

“I’ll put you down as staying for lunch too,” she said with a wink and gestured towards the room she’d just exited.

He was grateful. There was no doubt that he owed her an apology of some description or at least a conversation but all he wanted was to find out what was happening and where Hermione was.

Each of the doors in the hallway were half-glass, meaning Draco could look into them. They weren’t set up like hospital rooms, but small sitting rooms. Some people were sitting, eating breakfast, some staring at the wall. Some of the rooms were solo occupancy, others had couples, and one had a small family. None of them held his attention for long, nor gave him much indication of what he would find when he got to Hermione’s door. Was this where she was staying before she got married off to him? Is that why she’d brought no belongings with her?

Swallowing thickly, he got to his destination and looked inside. She wasn’t alone. His beautiful wife was sitting on the couch with an older woman who could only have been her mother. So similar was their hair, their eyes, their countenance. In an armchair across from them sat a middle-aged man, quite tall and flicking through a catalogue of some kind. Whatever she was experiencing, she had the support of her parents.

He was going to meet Hermione’s parents. If he went through that door, which he fully intended to do, he was going to meet her parents. It was a concept that made his palms feel clammy and chest tight. It wasn’t what he expected but at the same time, wasn’t an opportunity he was going to squander. He’d been looking for a way to break through the barrier she had built up around herself. This might just be the perfect one. Maybe if they liked him, they’d even persuade her to give him a chance. Even if they didn’t like him, Hermione might be less likely to eviscerate him in front of them. He straightened his clothes and took a deep breath, before opening the door to the other part of Hermione’s life.

“Hello, please excuse my intrusion,” he said, walking through the door and fixing his eyes on Mrs Granger, slightly too scared to look at her daughter.

Silence. No one spoke. No one moved.

“You must be Mrs Granger? You look so much like your daughter, it’s unmistakable,” he tried to remember the way to charm parents and held out his hand.

Mrs Granger took it slowly.

“Draco,” Hermione interrupted, speaking slowly and quietly.

“I’m not old enough to have a daughter,” Mrs Granger giggled.

Draco kicked himself, “Of course not Mrs Granger, you could be her sister.”

Again the older woman collapsed into giggles and Draco tried not to let the reaction get to him.

“And you must be Mr Granger?” Draco turned to the man and held out his hand. The older man took it but only after looking at it suspiciously.

“Draco,” Hermione’s tone was more urgent now, and still Draco refused to look at her.

In for a knut, in for Galleon. He’d started now, if he didn’t at least win over one of her parents, he would have only succeeded in driving her further away.

“Draco is a funny name,” Mr Granger responded, wrinkling his nose, “Do you like Lego?”

Draco opened his mouth and then closed it again, quite unsure what to say to that. What was Lego? Was it some sort of muggle insult?

“I... um... I like your daughter. She is a remarkable young witch. Tells me she is very much like you. It’s a credit to you, Sir,” Draco stuttered out.

“You’re weird. I think talking to you is stranger danger and I don’t like it.”

Mr Granger got up and went to sit next to his wife, taking his catalogue with him to show her. Ignoring Draco completely. This was not going well. What in Merlin’s left nostril was ‘stranger danger’?

“Have you all been here long?” he asked, taking a step towards the Grangers, trying to draw their attention.

It seemed to be an adequate distraction and Mrs Granger looked up at him, perplexed.

“Yes! We have been here long!” she declared, standing abruptly, “Minnie, you promised you’d take us to the park!”

“We’ll have to go next week,” Hermione responded weakly, and Draco moved closer to her, ready to be the support her tone said she needed.

“You said that last week!” Mrs Granger’s hands were small fists by her side and Draco was taken back by the anger rolling off the woman. He was familiar with volatile moods, but this was something different entirely. And over a park. While their daughter was ill.

“We could all go together this afternoon,” he offered, trying to make some form of peace, “After Hermione sees the healer of course. Perhaps get some lunch?”

“Hermione?” Mrs Granger’s eyes glossed over and she brought her hand up to pull at her curls, the same colour and texture of the ones he so loved to touch.

“No, No, No,” she said, shaking her head, “I don’t like that, that’s very unkind, you saying that.”

Did Mrs Granger think him unkind? For offering to take them to lunch? Mr Granger moved closer to where Hermione sat on the couch and Draco finally looked at her, hoping to glean some answers.

Her eyes were wide and locked on her mother, her arm had slipped protectively around her father's shoulders.

"It's okay Jean," she said soothingly, "Mr Draco is just confused. Do you want to come and sit with us and look at the Lego catalogue?"

Jean Granger didn't appear to hear her. Just kept tugging on her curls and shaking her head.

Hermione stood up and approached her mother carefully, reaching out to take her hand.

"No! Don't touch me!" the woman yelled and yanked back from Hermione.

"Minnie," Mr Granger called from his place on the couch and Draco turned to see him with his feet curled beneath him, "Make Jean be quiet. She's hurting my ears."

"No, I'm not!" Jean yelled, turning her ire on Mr Granger.

"It's ok. David, why don't you go into your bedroom for a minute, just while Jean calms down a little?"

At that, Jean moved and pushed the ceramic lamp off the end table, chin set in a defiant sneer as she did. It shattered into a thousand pieces all around her bare feet. David took a leap off the couch, over the mess and ran off to a door Draco hadn't noticed when he walked in; two single beds sat inside, one blue coverlet, one pink.

"Jean! Don't move! Your feet!" Hermione called out and pulled her wand from a pocket.

At the motion, Jean launched herself in the direction of her daughter and without thinking Draco stepped between them, taking the brunt of Jean's fists against his chest. The woman pounded her hands against him while Hermione whispered frantic words and made frantic movements to clear up the sharp pieces of pottery and heal her mother's bleeding feet. And Draco just stood there. Hands impotent by his side, not sure what to do, but suddenly very aware that Hermione was not at the hospital for herself.

"Jean!" Susan came bustling back into the room, stepping between Draco and Mrs Granger, taking her wrists gently.

"Darling, what's happening?" Susan asked, her tone soft and warm.

Jean's face crumpled and she started pointing at both Draco and Hermione, conveying a story in gasping sobs that Draco couldn't understand.

"Hermione," Susan said, tilting her head to the door and looking incredibly apologetic.

Hermione gave her a tight-lipped smile, a tiny nod and left the room. No one had spoken to Draco and with no clear instructions as to what to do, he just followed Hermione back down

the hall to the small waiting area and took a seat beside her on the lumpy couch, the same indiscriminate peach as the walls. The colour looked far more depressing now than when he'd arrived.

Hermione wasn't crying as they sat there but her cheeks were flushed and her eyes fixed to a point above the desk, not seeing. Draco didn't know what to say. For all his intentions when he left the manor that morning, all he'd achieved was finding more questions than answers and causing Hermione whatever silent torment she was in now. He looked over at her again. Her fingers had found the gold chain and ring around her neck and she was fiddling with them. Moving the ring back and forth along the taunt chain. The face of the ring pressed hard enough on the pad of her thumb that it blanched her nail white.

"They're settled, in front of the television," Susan said, coming out of the room, her hair slightly mussed but otherwise looking calm and collected.

Hermione stood as she came closer.

"You didn't have to..." she trailed off as if she couldn't quite complete the sentence.

"No Hermione. Teletubbies were more than enough to distract them. Just a small blip today" Susan reached out and rubbed Hermione's upper arm in comfort and Draco felt a jolt of jealousy. He wanted to do that. Comfort her.

"Still, it might be best if you give them some space. Just for another week. I can owl you updates if you like, and you're always welcome to pop in and see me during the week."

As Susan spoke Draco witnessed Hermione close in on herself a little tighter. A clam sealing shut.

"You," Susan turned to him as she dropped Hermione's arm, "Take her out for a nice lunch. Maybe a glass of wine."

Hermione started to protest and Susan shot her a look, "You could use a glass of wine, Hermione. Let him buy you one."

Draco felt a wave of gratitude for his old classmate. Despite the clusterfuck that he'd managed to ignite with his clumsy visit, she didn't hold him responsible. He had a sinking feeling that Hermione was not going to see things in the same way. He didn't.

It was a silent walk down the corridor. A silent elevator ride. They walked silently past the floo that would have taken them back to the Manor or through to Hermione's home in Hamstead Heath. Once on the streets of Muggle London, Hermione wandered without speaking and without much direction until they found themselves in a small park. The irony.

Hermione perched on the edge of a bench and finally looked at Draco. Through the bond he could sense her apprehension; not the anger he'd anticipated. He sat down next to her and reached out between them, placing his hand over hers where it rested on the cool metal and squeezed. He figured she was probably going to explode at him soon anyway, he might as well offer her one gesture of comfort before she did.

Hermione pulled her hand back and looked away from him. The silence enveloped them, not heavy, just patient.

“I removed myself from my parent’s memories before the war,” she said finally, her hand returning to nervously play with the ring on her necklace as she spoke. “I thought it would be safer for them. It wasn’t a secret I would go wherever Harry was, and I knew the Order wouldn’t have the resources or the ability to keep them safe. Especially as no one knew the roles Harry, Ron, and I would take; Dumbledore thought it best to keep that information between himself and three teenagers.”

Her tone was bitter and she shook her head as if to discard the memories.

“So the obliviation didn’t work properly?” Draco asked, trying to understand the scene he’d just watched.

“No, that part worked perfectly,” Hermione replied, letting out a sigh.

“You saved them,” Draco tried to offer some form of comfort, “There were plans to find them. They would have been tortured, possibly killed.”

“I know,” Hermione said, the pragmatism in her tone and her expression gutting when he combined it with her outburst all those months ago. “I don’t regret it. Not that part. They took on new identities that I gave them, moved to Australia, which was something they had always wanted to do anyway, and began a new life. It was a pretty life, from what I can tell. Complete with a beach cottage and friends and book club.”

Draco waited for her to go on, although he already got the sense that the next part of the story was going to be the part that broke him; it was likely the part that had already broken her.

“After the war, I stayed for the start of the restoration and the first trials and then just before I went back for my 8th year at Hogwarts, I went to Australia to find them. It wasn’t difficult. I had their new names; they were still dentists. I’d left all of their technical knowledge. And when I saw them... I just wanted a hug from my Mum. The war had only been over for a few months and the things that had happened during...”

Hermione paused to swallow and rubbed her forearm. Draco longed to touch her. Comfort her. Wanted to pull her forearm to his lips and kiss away the memories associated with that scar but he knew the moment he touched her, she would stop speaking. Their bubble would burst and she’d rebuild a wall with him on the outside.

“And I was so cocky. I had just won a war. I had just ridden a dragon. I had kept Harry and Ron alive. All my planning, all my studying. I was right. Every single time it had mattered, I was right.”

She tugged on the chain around her neck until it cut so hard into her skin that he was sure it would leave a mark.

“So when I saw them again, and they were just there, I didn’t think. I just acted. I cast the spell that I thought would rewind the obliviation. But it just rewound them. Their minds. All

the things that I carefully preserved with the first charm, were destroyed by my hubris in the second.”

The tears fell freely now, but they were silent. As if Hermione had long since learnt to control her voice but her tears remained untamed.

“From what the healers can tell, they have the mind they did at 4 years old. Or thereabouts. At first, we hoped they might mature again from that point, but it’s been years. They are stuck that way. Most of the time, they’re happy, although constantly wanting to go to the park, but every so often something agitates their mind. Makes them fight against the charm and it can cause them to be aggressive. Angry. Unfortunately, I am one of those things. If I visit them too often it...”

It was another sentence abandoned but one Draco could finish. Her hands played with the ring on her chain like a lifeline and though there were details that Draco wanted, blanks he would need filled in, in due course, another question forced its way into the forefront of his consciousness. One that he may never have another chance to ask.

“Why do you wear that ring Hermione?” his voice was low and gravelly and for a second he felt a flash of gratitude between them. Whether that was for the way he didn’t offer platitudes in response to her story or the chance to talk about the ring he wasn’t sure.

“Consequences are powerful, important things,” she said, her voice taking on an almost mocking tone, “The things that I did for years, without properly stopping and considering the consequences. And the consequences I was sheltered from because I was on a mission to help the Chosen One.”

She screwed her eyes shut and was silent for a moment and Draco wondered if she was trying to find a way to explain herself or whether she was running through all the things she thought she had done without recourse.

Whatever she was about to say, Draco was going to disagree with her. While there had been a certain leniency when it came to the Golden Trio, particularly where their old headmaster was concerned, he thought the weight of a war resting on slim 17-year-old shoulders was more of a consequence than most people faced. That and the scar that marred her perfect skin.

“To start with, I wore it as a reminder,” she said, opening her eyes and looking at him, her expression plain, voice clear, “A reminder that every choice had a consequence. I chose not to fight the law, and as a consequence, I was bound to someone. But then I got the letter from your mother.”

Draco started to speak. That damned letter. He needed to apologise for it again, apologise for his role in the ring again, but she just raised a hand to stop him and continued.

“I was not hurt by her poor allusions to blood purity. I expected nothing less from her. Nor did I believe by that point that you held any such beliefs.”

Draco raised his eyebrow at her. How had he convinced her of that without trying? As if to silently answer his question, she tapped on a spot on her chest.

"You forget sometimes that it goes both ways," she said, "I had glimpses of how you felt about blood purity by then. The night we went to the gala was particularly telling."

Draco felt his whole face heat. He did indeed forget sometimes that it went both ways or rather assumed her too stubborn to take any note of it.

"But in the letter, your Mother helped me understand something. Added some perspective. Bellatrix was a person. A flawed and powerful person who without checking herself morphed into something truly heinous. But I'm powerful too, Draco. The cleverest witch of her age. I could be so much more powerful than Bellatrix. And as your mother said, I too am flawed. The harm I could unleash, well just look at my parents. So then I wore it as a visible reminder to check myself. Contain myself. Think before I act."

Draco couldn't reconcile the words Hermione was saying with the witch before him. The idea that she could think herself anything like his aunt was preposterous. Rather than argue with her though, he asked the final part of the question. The part he needed for himself. Selfish maybe, but desperate.

"And why do you wear it now?" he asked, reaching to meet her fingers where they toyed with the piece.

Hermione smiled and the silent tears filled her eyes again.

"I don't know," she sniffed and let out a shaky sigh, "I took it off because I didn't want to hurt you, but the way I felt when it was away from me..."

She trailed off with a subtle shake of her head. Golden eyes burnt into his own and for a minute Draco thought that despite the horror of the day he'd done it. Breached the walls around her and they were now in this together. He moved infinitesimally closer, ready to hold her. Then, the light in her eyes dimmed and Hermione pulled her hand out of his and tucked the ring back into her blouse.

"The way I felt when I took it off... it made me think I already had."

Chapter End Notes

Guys... we finally got here. I don't think I've ever been so nervous posting a chapter before.

Inspiration for what happened to the Grangers came from both Arthur's curse in Manacled and also from watching loved ones take care of parents with dementia. It's a truly cruel disease and the level of aggression and anger can be shocking and

heartbreaking and it can break the carers in ways I didn't think possible for people to break.

Thank you to Orolin for her work alpha reading and calming my nerves. And thank you to everyone who has left a comment or kudos- I love them more than coffee and chocolate.

There is going to be a two week gap between now and the next chapter. Unfortunately, it is time for the yearly audit at my work and so instead of writing in my free time, I am going to be chasing down tax invoices and double checking employment contracts. Believe me, I would rather be writing wizard smut.

Fact Finding and Lego

Chapter Notes

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

Draco hadn't arrived unannounced at his cousin's house in months. Not since the first time when he'd come over with the Gringott's paperwork. However, he wanted answers. Hence, why he was pounding at her door at 530 in the morning; he wanted answers now and he needed to be back for breakfast.

"Cousin?" Tonk said sleepily, still dressed in pyjamas, pink hair askew.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" he asked, the question that had plagued him since he'd tucked his arm around Hermione on that park bench and guided her home to the Manor.

They hadn't sat for long after she confessed her fear. He'd assured her that she hadn't hurt him. That he was fine. Better than fine because she hadn't hexed him into oblivion for following her (he'd kept that final thought to himself). Then, he'd helped her to her feet and they'd returned to the floos at St Mungo's as silently as they had made their way to the park. The difference? His hand sat on the small of her back, a tangible link between them. She hadn't protested when he had guided her next to him to floo home together. Just leaned against him a little, as if she was finally empty. There was no fight left.

"Tell you what?" Tonks asked, standing to the side and letting him walk down the hall to the kitchen where Draco, familiar with the layout, set about making them both a cup of tea.

He was silent while he prepared the cups, not ignoring the question, just waiting to answer it. Waiting until they could sit opposite each other and he could look dead in the eye as he did.

"Some key information about my wife," he growled and watched as she looked away a little sheepishly.

"Right, well, to start, there wasn't exactly a good time to share that particular snippet of information. Before the wedding you were... and after you were..."

Tonks made little hand gestures instead of the adjectives he assumed were meant to describe his general mental state.

"And then by the time it seemed like things might actually work out, or at least you were invested enough that it was information you wanted and needed to know, it just seemed like it might be best if she told you herself. Which she has. Good show. Things must be going well then?"

Tonks looked away and took a nervous sip of her tea. Draco just glared at her. Whatever bonding situation Tonks was imagining, it was nothing more than a fantasy. If only Granger had come to him and shared her burdens unprompted. Tonks must have realised that was an unlikely situation, so she took a breath and continued talking.

"And also, I don't know all that much. Really. Hermione and I are friends but it's not something we talk about and she doesn't particularly like the details being broadcast."

"Well, I'm her husband not some stranger off the street. So what do you know?" Draco asked, trying not to feel frustrated at the pace of conversation but also desperate to fill in some blanks without needing to go to Hermione and drag the information out of her. It was a painful topic. Each question would wound her anew.

"Probably as much as you," Tonks sighed.

"Well given you weren't under house arrest when it all first happened, I'd wager that's unlikely. Perhaps you could start with when it happened?"

"Right, well. Hermione went off to Australia by herself in August of '98. Harry and Ron offered to go with her, but she insisted they stay so they could testify at the trials. From what Harry tells me, she found her parents quickly enough, went to their house, knocked on the door and when they answered, immediately performed a spell to undo her memory charm. Only it didn't work. They both just collapsed."

This Draco knew. It was in line with what Hermione had told him. He was hoping for a little more detail.

"It was not simple memory failure. The reversal was devastating to every part of their bodies. So Hermione was in a completely new country with no idea what to do. She couldn't call muggle doctors and she hadn't thought to acquaint herself with the Australian ministry or contact any local healers. I'm honestly not sure what happened exactly. My best guess is she kept them alive by herself using whatever healing magic she'd taught herself for the war until she was able to contact Harry."

Draco remembered Hermione's words from the day before '*I had kept Harry and Ron alive. All my planning, all my studying.*'

"How long did that take?" asked Draco.

He thought back to her nightmare all those months ago. The one he assumed had been about her capture and torture in the manor, but with this new information, he had a sneaking suspicion she relived this period of her life in her dreams every night. Alone in a foreign country, the weight of her parents lives on her shoulders yet again.

"About a week, I think," Tonks shrugged, "They don't talk about it."

"And after Potter got involved?"

"Well, he found a local healer and managed to get the Grangers stable, and everyone started to get the sense of the damage done. But they needed to come back to England for a full investigation and to start any treatments. Which led to the next disaster; how to get them home. You can't just put spell-damaged muggles on an economy flight and hope for the best. And no one was sure what magical travel would do to their brains. So, the healers came up with a solution but it was expensive. Horrendously so. And Hermione had no access to her

parent's money or assets; according to their new identities, in which everything was under, she was no one. Her own money had been exhausted in the war and then immediately afterwards, she was sleeping in friend's guest rooms, cobbling enough for her initial flights to find them."

"And none of you thought to help?" he asked angrily. For some reason imagining his wife without a galleon to her name, no home of her own, made him more panicked than the vision of her scrambling to keep her parents alive. Never again. She would want for nothing for the rest of her days.

"Look Moneybags, none of us could afford what they were proposing. Anyway, in the end, Potter threw his weight around, threatened to go to the press and the ministry eventually took care of it."

Draco swallowed and looked away.

"She's okay now you know, financially," Tonks said cautiously.

"I know she's bloody ok now, she has access to the Malfoy vaults."

"Ha," Tonks laughed darkly. I would wager she hasn't touched a knut of your money. I mean, she's okay independently of that. Has been for a long time. She makes a good salary, and the ministry pulled a few strings and had her parents' house in Hamstead Heath signed over to her."

Draco nodded. He knew, on some level, that the house they had gone to had been her family home. He just hadn't realised how complicated a place that made it for her. He went through Tonk's story in his head, and something snagged.

"Why didn't I read about any of this in the newspaper? Even if Potter didn't follow through on his threat, I can imagine the headline; *War Heroine's Tragic Family Tale*? Everyone would have been salivating."

"Oh, that. Hermione blackmailed Rita Skeeter. The woman is terrified of your wife," Tonks said, draining her cup, "Hermione figured out she was an unregistered animagus in fourth year and kept her in a jar for the summer."

Draco winced. While part of him couldn't help but be impressed by the brutal efficacy, he also knew that she no doubt used the incident as fuel for self-flagellation. Proof that she was dangerous. Proof her judgement wasn't sound.

This was the other part of the story that didn't make sense to Draco. This had happened eight years ago. She'd had a career at the Ministry. He'd seen that in the paper. Had stood arm in arm with that red-headed prat in that one photo at a society event.

"So what happened after then? Once they were back here?" more questions, looking for more information.

"To start with everyone was optimistic, they spent a while ensuring the Grangers were stable and then started to try and figure out what had gone wrong. Hermione finished her NEWTs and honestly, being away at Hogwarts was probably best, then she went to the ministry and started working the way she always planned to. Dated Ron," Tonks tacked on as an afterthought, "All the while finding different healers, different treatments, each one promising that they could solve it."

Draco decided not to take the bait and ask about Ron. As much as he wanted to know.

"And then?" he asked, wanting the end of the story.

"And then everyone got to the point where there wasn't anything left to try. She didn't last long at the ministry after that. Switched to academia."

Where she devoted herself to making sure those whose memories were lost were still remembered in history, Draco thought, rubbing his forehead. Wasn't that fucking poetic. Trust a Gryffindor. Self-sacrificing heroic bullshit.

"Draco?" a little voice asked around the doorframe. Teddy stood, his hair a mussed facsimile of his mother's. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, just came to have a cup of tea with your Mum," he said, eyes flicking to the clock on the wall.

"Are you staying for breakfast?" asked Teddy, coming over to crawl onto his mum's lap. Tonks reflexively reached to stroke his hair.

"Another day," Draco said, standing and taking his cup to the sink to wash before he left, "I promise Hermione I would have breakfast with her."

It wasn't a lie. Not really. He'd promised that he would be whatever she needed him to be and right now, she needed someone to just be there.

Draco approached having breakfast with Hermione, the way he would approach spending a Care of Magical Creatures lesson with a Hippogriff (post third year). That is, he took it very seriously and followed all the same etiquette, less than he suffered bodily harm.

He made careful eye contact before he approached, gave a courteous bow and upon seeing that Hermione was not comfortable maintaining the eye level, he did not try to touch. Just strode to his seat and started silently preparing his plate.

"How's your book?" he asked, trying to get her to look at him. Polite. Safe Topic. Careful invitation for more.

He hadn't been so naive to think that they would have a heartfelt conversation about their future over scrambled eggs but he had hoped there would be something. Something other than distance anyway.

"It's good," she said, not looking at him this time.

If she was hippogriff, this is where he should have backed away. Merlin only knew what it was about her that made him so reckless.

"Fiction or non-fiction?" he tried again.

"Non-fiction. I think it's best if I stay rooted in reality at the moment," Hermione said, looking up at him as she finished speaking, "Do you have classes today?"

Draco shook his head and internally smiled. He had achieved eye contact. Could he just approach? Offer to take her for a coffee at one of the little cafes in the covered market. There was no protocol for suggesting a date with a hippogriff that he could draw on. Gripping the butter knife much tighter than he needed to, he cleared his throat.

"But, I could come later, take you out for a coffee? Or that glass of wine we never got to yesterday?" he said, feeling the heat in his face. Merlin, did he really have to blush like a prepubescent girl?

Hermione looked back down, eye contact gone, "I have a rather busy day today."

"Oh, of course," Draco reached to refill their tea cups, just for something to do. At least she hadn't taken off an arm. It wasn't all lost.

"But if you wanted to be *friendly* I could meet you in your study after dinner?" she asked, and Draco whipped his eyes up to study her face.

All metaphors disappeared when he looked at her. The face he had spent an inordinate amount of time admiring was shuttered, controlled, deliberate. He would have preferred she took his arm. She had no plans of going on coffee dates or dinner dates ever. Hermione had no plans to change anything. No matter what he'd learnt yesterday, no matter how much he thought they had connected; they were still just friend who fuck. At least in her mind. His eyes sought out her necklace, proof that she wasn't able to keep him completely in his nice little box, but found no glint of gold. Not around her neck and not in her eyes which were studying him carefully.

"Um, yes... sounds good," he managed to stutter out and watched as her shoulders visibly relaxed.

What was he saying? It wasn't good. It was infuriating. She was infuriating. Stubborn. Ridiculous. She was still watching him instead of looking back to her book. Fuck. The tension was back in her shoulders.

Draco forced his hands to go about the business of eating and brought his face back to neutral, concentrating on trying to pretend nothing had happened while Hermione finished her tea. He needed to just keep it together until she left. Then he could process things without making anything worse.

Predictably, she spent the rest of the meal in silence, save the rustle of a paper whenever she turned a page. Draco tried to read the paper, but none of the stories seemed to matter. Finally, she wished him a good day and got up to leave but when she got to the door she turned back and looked at him, her head tilted, chewing on her bottom lip.

“You don’t have to worry about yesterday,” she said, “it can just be another thing we pretend never happened. If you like?”

The second bombarda of the meal. Draco couldn’t speak. It was taking all of his control not to yell. What was he meant to say to that? What did she want him to say to that? He looked up to the ceiling for wisdom and by the time his eyes returned to the doorway, she was gone. Apparently, she didn’t want him to say anything.

He had, for a blissfully brief period between delivering Hermione to her room last night and arriving at breakfast, assumed that the secret about her parents was the last barrier between them. Secrets and relationships do not mix; without them, they would surely stand a chance. Plus the way she had sat beside him on the bench and bared her soul. The way she hadn’t chastised him for following her. The way the door to the ward had opened when he inserted his wand. But it wasn’t enough it seemed. What more was it going to take so that she would see? Did she expect him to run now he knew? Was that what was happening?

He wasn’t running and he wasn’t going to let her run either. Merlin, she was an infuriating witch. A stubborn and ridiculous witch. A sad and broken witch. Most importantly, his witch. He was not going to run from this. He was going to make sure he knew everything he needed to and then he would show her how they could face it together.

He was more purposeful this time when he landed at St Mungo’s, going straight to the lift, calling it without delay. The fourth floor looked exactly as it had the day before, and as he fed his wand into the reader, it dawned on him that his magical signature claimed Mr and Mrs Granger to be his family, not just Hermione. He grinned at that. Muggles in the Malfoy family tree. He couldn’t imagine anything more fitting.

“Draco,” Susan said, sitting behind the nurse’s station, her eyebrows raising in surprise when she saw him.

“Miss Bones,” Draco replied, putting on his manners like a stiff overcoat.

“Susan, please, if you call me Miss Bones it makes me think that you’ve forgotten my first name. Anyhow, if we want to get particular it should be Mrs Jordan.”

“You married Lee Jordan?” Draco asked, momentarily distracted from his mission by surprise; it was a name he knew well, it was constantly in the entertainment section of the paper.

“Ministry mandated but... turns out they seemed to know what they were doing,” she said with a pointed wink and conjured a chair so he could sit opposite her.

“But your name badge,” he said, sitting, sure he’d read her maiden name yesterday when he’d tried to place her face.

“Yes, well, when you are forced into a marriage you don’t want, you try to make it as simple as possible to leave. I’ve been persuaded and there’s a name change forthcoming,” she said.

Merlin, was this some kind of healing magic, because her word buoyed and mended his spirits.

“So, are you here to see your in-laws?” she asked because he’d been standing there like an idiot comprehending her previous declaration.

He wasn’t. He’d simply come on a fact-finding mission, specifically, ways he could help. Ways he could prove to Hermione that he wasn’t going anywhere. He hadn’t considered actually seeing the Grangers while he was here but perhaps that would help?

“They like visitors,” she continued, “particularly if you bring something for them to do. They get a little bored, poor mites. Honestly, a long-term care facility would probably be better for them, offer more stimulation but Hermione isn’t quite ready to move them there yet.”

Draco felt his mouth go dry. This was exactly the type of information he had come to find out but as he heard it, he suspected that Hermione would hate him knowing any of it. She had forgiven him for crossing their boundary once, twice was surely possible.

“This isn’t a long-term care ward?” he asked, his voice croaky.

Susan smiled, “No, well, sort of. We’re the ward for Curse Damage as perpetrated on Muggles. Most of our guests were cursed by Death Eaters in the war, and those curses need specific healing knowledge and treatment to prevent, you know, death. The Grangers aren’t going to die without healer intervention; they just need care in a safe space. From someone other than Hermione because, well, you know.”

He did know. He’d seen it yesterday and then listened to her explain it with silent tears.

“Did she let you take her for that glass of wine?” Susan asked, changing the subject yet again, it was as if she too knew that Hermione might not be entirely happy with this information being shared so was keeping just enough back to save herself..

Draco shook his head and Susan didn’t look surprised.

“She never used to let Ron take her either,” she said and Draco latched onto the Weasel’s name; was everyone baiting him with it today? He wasn’t a good enough man to resist the temptation twice.

“Weasley came with her?” he asked, and Susan’s responding grin was smug.

“Tried to,” she replied with a little smile, “But you know Hermione, would rather slice off her arm than admit she needs some help. Especially in this.”

Didn’t he know it? Unlike Weasley, he wasn’t going to simply give up though.

“So, would you like to stop in and say hello?” Susan asked, standing up and letting him know the conversation was over. “While you’re in there, I can prepare some information so you have a better idea of their condition.”

It was an invitation. Susan was trying to get him involved. Take some of the weight that landed solely on Hermione’s shoulder and give him a chance to hold it. He nodded, immensely grateful and followed her down the hall.

“Don’t suppose you have any Lego on you? It will make this go more smoothly,” she joked as they reached the Grangers’ door.

“What’s Lego?” he asked, and Susan laughed, “Ask David to explain it to you, he’ll love it.”

That evening, after a normal dinner (Draco so hated that there was a normal in which he and Hermione sat opposite each other and pretended they were nothing more than friends), he went to his study. On his desk, there were two shiny new Lego kits; after spending quite some time sitting cross-legged on the floor with his father-in-law learning all about the building blocks, he walked straight to a Muggle toy shop and purchased some new sets. He thought he and Hermione could take the toys next Sunday. A way to ensure the visit went well.

Along with the Lego, there were a few books for Jean. Even with the spell damage, the Granger love of books was intact. Watching Jean curl up with a stack of obviously well-loved picture books, her expressive face showing every surprise, every joy, Draco felt like he could see into both the future and the past; Jean’s lined face an older version of his wife’s, yet her childish enthusiasm something he was sure a young Hermione once embodied.

There were also Susan’s handwritten notes on the Grangers’ condition and after reading through them, he had drafted some letters to send to different healers to learn more. Digging out his father’s old contact book, he looked through lists of witches and wizards around the world with access to both ancient magic and ancient libraries. Perhaps he might be able to find something to help. Maybe ideas of how to structure their care in a more appropriate place than St Mungoe’s, somewhere close to a park. In his fantasies, he would be able to find the healer who could restore them, but he wasn’t so naive. If all he could do was find a treatment that would allow Hermione to see them more, it would be enough.

Hermione snuck up on him when she finally slipped into the room. Her bare feet making no sounds on the parquet flooring and he was lost to his notes.

“Are you studying?” she asked, flashing him a tentative smile, “I can leave you to it?”

“No, come in,” he said, getting up from his chair and walking over to the small settee in front of the fire, gesturing at her to come and sit with him.

Hermione’s eyes were fixed on the Lego boxes on his desk.

“I got them for your Dad,” Draco said, unsure. He hadn’t planned on keeping it a secret, it just wasn’t going to be the first thing he shared that evening.

“After yesterday?” Hermione asked, the little crease appearing between her eyebrows.

“Come and sit down with me,” Draco said, not answering her question.

Hermione hesitated but did as he asked, walking to sit not on the settee with him, but on the armchair across.

“I went to visit them today,” Draco confessed, leaning forward trying to get just a tiny bit closer.

“My parents?” Hermione looked concerned.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She sounded hurt and suspicious. Like Draco’s visit was something to be worried about. It was the opposite of what he’d hoped.

“I wanted to understand more. Because they are important to you,” said Draco, he thought about adding that she was important to him but the hardening of her expression told him it would be a bad idea.

He waited to see if she was going to say anything to that but she just looked at him, face blank, eyes dull.

“I think your mother likes books as much as you do, which is saying something. And your father, well, don’t tell Teddy but I think I prefer Lego to robots although there is some crossover in skills and your father is quite skilled.”

He was rambling. He knew it, but he wanted her to see what he liked them. That he wanted to get to know them and he wasn’t scared by the whole situation.

“You... I don’t...” Hermione seemed speechless. Draco hoped it was for all the right reasons.

“And Susan gave me some information. I’ve been reading over it and I know you have looked into so many things, but there are some contacts from my father and perhaps if we write to them, there might be avenues you haven’t considered or had access to. I’ve drafted some letters if you would like to -”

“Stop!” Hermione interrupted him sharply, “What are you doing?”

Draco didn’t know how to respond to that. He thought it was obvious. He was trying to help.

“They aren’t your family,” she said, not waiting for him to say anything.

“Are they not?” he asked, thinking of the door to the ward and the way it slid open for him. It knew, even if she refused to acknowledge it.

"You had no right to visit them. You had no right to ask about their condition. You're acting like you're my husband," Hermione's voice was raised and the derision with which she said husband made fire flash in Draco's belly.

"I am your husband," he snapped, as much as she wanted to deny it and as much as he had let her pretend, she couldn't deny the truth after yesterday. As much as she wanted to pretend, surely it was time to look at it realistically.

"Only on paper!" she retorted, throwing her hands into the air in frustration.

"No! Not only on paper, in our dining room, in our library, in our garden" he wanted to add 'in our bed' but he couldn't. She'd never allowed him that privilege. Of sleeping wrapped around her.

"That was just fucking," she said, looking away from him.

"It hasn't been just fucking for a while now," he said, keeping his voice deliberately low and even.

He was not going to let this devolve into yelling. He did not want to fight with her. He wanted to fight for her. He moved to kneel before her, wanting to take her hand and when she didn't offer them to him, rested his hands on her knees, desperate to make her look at him.

"It still was for me," she said, through gritted teeth, not looking at him. There was no authenticity in her words.

"I thought we'd already established you were a shit liar, Granger," Draco said softly, trying to coax her to him. Trying to remind her that he knew her. She'd shared little bits of herself before.

It worked. Hermione finally looked at him and he was horrified to see her eyes full of tears.

"You promised me. You promised that it could just be sex," she whispered and Draco took the chance to take her face in his hand and swipe at the tears that had fallen to her cheeks.

"Would it be so bad if it was more?" he whispered back and when she said nothing he leaned his forehead against her. So close.

"I can't handle anything more. I was doing okay before all of this. It may not have been some ambitious life or sparkling one, but I didn't feel like I was suffocating. I didn't wake up expecting the worst every day," her words came out on a breath that mingled between them and by the flex of her muscles under his hands, Draco could tell she was preparing to pull away.

He gripped her legs tighter to try and stop her.

"I was coping before Draco, for the first time in years I was coping. I'm not willing to jeopardise that."

It stung, hearing it said out loud. Hearing he wasn't worth the risk or the chance.

“Coping?” he asked, wondering how she could be so deluded and use it as an excuse, “Is that what you call needing Dreamless Sleep every night and hiding from everyone in my house.”

Hermione pulled back sharply, his fingers falling from her face. Her expression was harder now.

“Yes. Judge all you want. But for me, that was coping.”

Hermione rubbed her forehead and swallowed. Draco wanted to touch her again, bring her back to the place there were just seconds earlier before he had spoken and fucked the whole thing up. If only he knew what to say to make that happen. If only he could think of what lever to pull or what flower to give.

“I could help you, you know. You don’t have just to cope. I have already started the letters, and I can go with you to the hospital,” Draco tried to make himself seem like the logical choice. She was the Smartest Witch of her Age; surely she could appreciate a logical choice, but instead, she just let out a cold laugh.

“I’m the Golden Freaking Girl, Draco. Who stood asking for help with the saviour of the Wizarding World at my side. What help do you think you can find that I wasn’t already offered? What book do you think exists that I haven’t already read?”

Draco knew he had nothing to gain by pointing out the entire sector of society that he had access to because of his blood—not in a world where he wanted to make her love him.

“You could at least let me try,” he begged instead.

The plea just twisted her face in pity.

“And when it fails? When you run out of things to try and realise nothing can fix this? How will you help me when you decide you want to go on holiday to somewhere beautiful and fabulous, and I won’t go with you because I won’t go a week without seeing them?”

“We’ll floo home,” he responded simply. Good, let her throw all her hesitations at him and let him refute each one.

“What about when you want to go out and see friends and laugh and play, and I won’t go because those situations make me feel so retched I can’t stand myself?” her voice was a little louder, a little more strained.

“We’ll stay home and read in our window seat with Glitter at our feet, and it will be more than I could have ever dreamed possible.”

“And when you want a little blonde heir, and I won’t carry him because I can not bring myself to be responsible for another person,” she was crying now as she yelled at him.

“Bold of you to assume I want to try my hand at parenting after watching Narcissa and Lucius give it a crack,” he said, possibly too flippantly, but honestly, did the woman expect him to give her up for a person he’d never met?

“Then what about when you want to get married and I can’t because I don’t want to face a world where my Dad can’t walk me down the aisle!” she yelled.

“We are already married!” he yelled back at her.

“Well, I don’t want to be!”

Silence. There was no rebuttal to that.

“I have never lied to you about that. Marriage, a husband. It’s too big for me. Whatever this thing between us has become. It’s too big for me,” her voice was softer again.

She’d acknowledge there was something between them, but Draco felt like he’d lost in the most devastating way.

“We can’t sleep together anymore,” she said her tone so final, “I don’t know if breakfasts are the best idea either.”

So there would be no more discussion then. She’d filled the silence he was using to organise his thoughts and decided for them. No one else got a vote.

“You have to eat,” Draco tried a final time to be a rational voice, but his mind and body were numb, tone as cold as hers.

“Don’t go near my parents again, please,” she said, looking at the two boxes of Lego on his desk.

“So what now? You’re going to go back to pretending I don’t exist,” Draco felt the numbness give way to anger as he realised that was exactly what she planned to do. And once Hermione Granger decided to do something, she would no doubt execute it to the best of her ability. Whether that was mastering a branch of magic or punishing herself and him.

And for what? Surviving? Doing the best they could with the circumstances handed to them? He wanted to hurt her the way she was hurting him. He could feel the crackle of magic under his skin, ready to lash out.

“You can hate me if you like,” she said, her detached tone breaking into his internal turmoil, “It would be deserved. I should have stopped myself long before that night in the library.”

She went to reach for her necklace only to brush the collar of her blouse when she realised she wasn’t wearing it. With his eyes unfocused he watched as she pretended she’d been reaching to smooth her clothing all along, before standing and starting to leave.

“Why didn’t you?” Draco asked, wanting something he could hold on to. Something he could use to soothe the ache in his chest.

Hermione turned back to look at him and gave him a sad smile. Then she raised her hand and tapped her chest twice, over her heart, the same place she tapped to remind him of the bond between them. As if awoken by the gestures, he felt the corresponding tug in his gut and with it all their shared pain exploded inside him in a noisy cacophony.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! Thank you for your patience while I've been busy being a grown up. And I am publishing two days early because I promised over on [Instagram](#) that I would publish as soon as it was ready. By the by, I am not super active but Instagram is where I will post updates about publishing, sometimes snippets from future chapters or Hermione's POV.

Huge thank you to [Orolin](#) for all her amazing Alpha work on this chapter. It has been the hardest to write in the whole fic, and without Orolin it would still be a partial draft in my docs. She is also an amazing writer as well as Alpha Queen, so you should go read her stuff!

I know, this one hurts, but you didn't think it was going to be 8 final chapters of smooth sailing and smut right? I promise this is a HEA. We're just going to work a little harder for it first.

Strawberry Roses and Fallen Eucalyptus

Chapter Notes

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

The following day, Draco decided to let Hermione have the dining room. She needed to eat and if his presence was going to deter her from that, well, he would stay away. So instead of going to breakfast, he lay on his back, searching the patterns in the bed canopy until he felt the familiar buzz that let him know she had left. Maybe that was why his ancestors had insisted on that particular quirk of the bonding; made it easier to avoid one's spouse.

Draco got dressed quickly once she had gone, something he possibly could have done while Hermione was in the house but it felt more fitting to keep himself completely stalled until she had left. He opened the door, trying not to think of Hermione only to be greeted by Bobsy, leaning against the wall opposite his room.

"I was wondering when Master Draco would emerge. I see we are back to wasting food again," Bobsy drawled, "A beautiful breakfast spread prepared by Vim. She even cut the strawberries into little roses to see whether you pair would take a hint but no, all wasted."

"Relax, I am going to eat now," Draco groaned, striding off down the hall. A lecture from Bobsy was the last thing he needed.

"I shouldn't have to tell you that the strawberry roses are wasted if you are going to eat them alone," Bobsy said, taking three steps to every single one of Draco's.

"I'm sure Granger enjoyed them too when she saw them," Draco lied; Granger would have loathed them. He increased his pace and it seemed to work, Bobsy fell further behind and Draco felt the weight lift as he rounded the dining room and took a seat.

Until there was a loud crack and Bobsy apparated directly into Granger's chair.

"Miss Hermione didn't come down for breakfast either," he said pointedly and Draco just sighed, taking in the untouched breakfast complete with an arrangement of balsam and bachelor buttons (impatience and hope in misery). How fitting.

"Right," said Draco with a sigh and then lifted the teapot to Bobsy, a silent question if he would like a cup.

Bobsy's eyes widened and eyebrows lifted, but he nodded. Draco prepared the cup, making it the way he'd observed Hermione do dozens of times after dinner.

"I thought if I didn't come to breakfast, then she would," Draco admitted, "she needs to eat."

"She does," Bobsy agreed, looking thoughtful before adding, "Vim caught her on the way to the floo and sent her to work with a thermos and a scone."

"Thank you," Draco let out a breath; she'd eaten food. Basic needs and all that.

“So you aren’t speaking then?” Bobsy inquired, his tone far more tentative than anything Draco had heard him use before.

“I don’t know,” Draco said, “Maybe.”

“Clear as mud,” Bobsy muttered, “I’ll try something easier then, so you aren’t befouling the halls of the Manor with your marital congress anymore?”

Draco spat out his tea.

“Charming,” Bobsy drawled, “You can hardly blame me for noticing; a herd of hippogriffs in the foyer would have been more subtle.”

He looked at Bobsy, the elf sipping his tea with a smug smile and found he had absolutely zero words.

“I trust whatever it is can’t be cleared up by a simple apology. Otherwise, you would have done it already. It took you a while, but you seem to have gotten the hang of those as of late,” Bobsy continued. Draco felt warmth at Bobsy’s confidence in him and a little terrified awe about the fact the elf seemed to know everything.

“Which just begs the question if your response is going to be taking to your bed like a Victorian lady or whether you’ll use any of those much healthier coping strategies you’ve picked up along with the ability to say ‘*I’m sorry*’,” Bobsy finished, reaching across for one the strawberry rose garnishes and popping it in his mouth.

It was a casual gesture that belied greater concern. When Draco really looked at the little elf, he couldn’t help but observe that he looked old. Well, older than he had previously. And he may have packed Hermione a to-go breakfast to ensure all her needs were taken care of but he hadn’t sought him out to complain about wasted food either. Bobsy was still tending the nest despite all the ducklings being grown.

“I know where to go if I need to,” assured Draco, feeling a little calmer as he started to eat.

He made a point of trying to savour the food. To appreciate the flavours and the time that had gone into preparing it.

“That said, I think it best if I started eating dinner in the dining room again,” he said with a sigh, knowing that Hermione would be happiest if he gave her some space, at least for a little while.

“No,” said Bobsy, any softness he’d displayed previously vanishing in an instant.

“I really don’t want to make-” Draco tried to make his case and was cut off.

“No, Master Draco. I am not going back to serving two dinners in this house for this *family*,” Bobsy insisted, “If you are not going to come down and eat with us in the kitchen, then I suggest you find nourishment elsewhere. Master Theo told me something about a *cheeky Nandos*? Perhaps you could try there?”

"Hermione will be more comfortable if I am somewhere else, Bobsy," Draco tried again to make Bobsy see sense.

"Hmm, perhaps she might want to try *Cheeky Nandos*?" Bobsy replied with a meaningful look in his eye. It was... protectiveness?

"It's a family table, Draco. We live by a family table now, and no matter how angry we are at each other, everyone has a seat at it."

The Crusades were an infuriation when he wanted to focus on a beautiful witch on a picnic blanket, but a welcome diversion when he needed to think about anything but. Bobsy was correct; he had coping strategies now. Things he could do, people he could see. They didn't fill the Granger-shaped hole in his life, but they filled the spaces around it.

Dinners were exactly as Bobsy had insisted, the four of them sitting down over a meal like a family. Turns out there were two things Granger's stubbornness couldn't override; the door at St Mungo's and Bobsy.

At dinner, everyone spoke about their day and Draco hung on every detail that fell from Hermione's lips. He was listening for clues, evidence of how she was feeling, if she was coping. Her descriptions and stories seemed to suggest so. But her person...

Her person reminded him of the woman he'd first married, and in the worst possible way. The colour had gone from her cheeks, and the gold had disappeared from her eyes. If he didn't love her, he might have been pleased. Proof she was suffering at least as much as him. Yet, he couldn't take joy in it, not when all he wanted was to put it right. Not when they were glaring down the wand length of the first Sunday where he would not go to her in the evenings.

Sundays had never been about sex; they had always been about connection. He played, she talked, they existed in a bubble together where nothing from the outside world could breach. She wouldn't eat; this Sunday he had lost his ability even to ensure that.

It was a weight so insurmountable that it couldn't be soothed or lessened by Friday night drinks or Saturday mornings with Teddy. So, with just a day to go until he faced his new reality, he took a journey to the New Forest.

The greenhouse at Nitmulik Cottage was waiting for him. As it always was. It was far warmer inside than outside; the last of summer had slipped away while Draco was busy and focused on other things. Marvolo was wandering the aisle with a bucket of fertiliser, randomly tossing handfuls on specific plants and bending to fuss with others.

"Just take a seat by the potting bench; I'll be there shortly," Higgs called over his shoulder, and Draco thought for an unplanned visit, he didn't seem particularly surprised to see him.

Nothing was sitting on the potting bench when he got there, a first. Where it was usually strewn with dirt and terracotta pots, stray leaves and seeds, Draco could see the rough-hewn

timber for the first time. The colour and texture weren't a wood he recognised, and he'd had seven years cataloguing furniture and antiques; his references were vast.

"Eucalyptus," Marvolo said, coming over to join him. The bucket abandoned, and in its place, a large copper kettle. "Tea?"

Draco nodded, and Marvolo summoned two tea cups from somewhere inside his house. Enamel mugs. The sight of them made Draco's chest hurt.

"I got the wood when I lived in the Northern Territory—massive tropical storms there, frequently in the stormy season. There was a big gum right out the front of my house that came down in a particularly violent one. Squashed my shed and all my tools, so I figured the least I could do was make some furniture out of it. Took ages. It's called Australian hardwood for a reason."

Draco nodded and stroked the tabletop again. He liked things with stories attached. A little piece of history made tangible. He thought Hermione would like it too.

"So what brings you here today, Draco?" Marvolo said, studying him over the rim of his teacup and for the first time, Draco felt like he was in the office of a mind healer, not the greenhouse of Herbologist who just happened to give incredible insight. With sweaty palms and shaky breath, he started to speak.

"How do you help someone get better?" he asked, and Marvolo just looked at him, waiting for context.

"It's clear that the war fucked us all up in our own way but you've helped me cope with it," he said, this mouth getting stuck around the keyword in the sentence, "How do you do that? Could you teach me how to do it?"

Marvolo reached up to rub his chin, and Draco felt his skin prickle uncomfortably in the silence.

"Are you asking me how to train to become a mind healer, Draco?" he finally asked.

"No, it's just if I knew someone who wasn't coping and I wanted them to get better, what could I do? To help them?"

Again, there was silence as Marvolo processed.

"There are always ways we can support people around us who are struggling. We can be there to listen; we can validate what they are experiencing if they choose to share; we can try to offer practical support like meals or cleaning, help in the garden," he said, "But I get the sense that's not what you're asking. I think it might help if you were to tell me what you want to know specifically."

Draco rubbed the top of the potting bench again, letting the feel of the woodgrain ground him, letting the familiar smells of the humid greenhouse soothe him, and explained. He talked about Hermione and the ring and her parents. Described their quiet moments and their

loud ones. Told him about Sundays, especially the one coming. The tea cups were empty and long cold by the time he finished, and throughout it all, Marvolo listened, occasionally nodding but never interrupting.

“It is a complicated situation you have found yourself in,” he said once Draco had finished “, and you’ve handled it with skill, maturity and kindness.”

“So, how do I help now? How can I fix this?” he asked, both appreciating the acknowledgement that he was facing an impossible situation and frustrated that Marvolo did not have an answer for him yet.

“Fixing and healing are two different things and from what you have described, I doubt there is any way to “fix” this, even if you found a potion that restored the Grangers’ memories tomorrow. There is only healing; my boy, you can’t force someone to heal. Or do it for them. Healing only works if they seek it out and are willing to participate in the process,” Marvolo said gently.

“But surely you have worked with people who have been reluctant or sceptical. Merlin, I was sceptical enough the first time I came here,” Draco argued.

“But you did come here, and you kept coming back. And it’s not just that Draco. I don’t doubt that seeing the challenges Miss Granger is facing and the manner in which she is facing them is difficult for you. The vulnerability you had to express to let yourself get as close to her as you did takes courage. And I don’t doubt the depth and authenticity of your feelings for her.”

“But?” Draco prodded because, as lovely as the words were, they were just a prelude to the ‘but’.

“But you can’t decide what healed looks like for her. Or decide what goals she wants to work towards. You don’t know how much work she’s had to do to get to the place she is right now. All you know are the boundaries that she’s expressed to you.”

“So what? I’m just meant to leave her alone?” he spat, thinking Higgs was, for the first time, giving him terrible advice.

“You’re meant to respect her wishes. Believe her when she tells you what she wants and needs,” said Higgs.

Draco stared out the grimy greenhouse panels. The grime distorted the woods outside, warped trees and distorted shadows.

“But I could love her,” he said, gripping the table’s edge and imagining all the ways he would care for her, all the burdens he would carry, “I could love her so well.”

Marvolo smiled at him, and though it was kind, there was no pity in it. No, it reminded Draco of how Tonks sometimes looked at Teddy when it was clear that time was moving forward and some things were inevitable. A kind of sad nostalgia for something that wasn’t missing yet.

“You can still love her, Draco. It just might not look the way you want it to.”

Marvolo let him sit with that thought before he continued speaking. Let the words fill up the space around them.

“Love can take on many forms, and the act of loving can change us in many ways. However, the act of love should never be dependent on another person, nor should it seek to dictate to the other person. You can still choose to love and expect nothing in return.”

Draco went home feeling no lighter, no more prepared. Marvolo had made them another cup of tea, a herbal concoction from the plants surrounding them, and refocused the conversation on Draco. What he wanted, how he might need to care for himself, what possible feelings could come from the situation and healthy ways to process them. Then, because it wouldn’t have been a visit to Marvolo Higgs’ house without some form of manual labour, he had asked Draco to spilt a pile of logs to store by the fire, ready for the approaching chill.

They both knew that Draco could have raised his wand and the entire stack would have been not only spilt but effortlessly moved to a neat pile beside the fireplace. Yet when Marvolo offered him the axe, Draco reached for it without hesitation. In silence, he moved to the wood stack and gave himself over entirely the weight of the tool in his hands. The pull of his muscles in his back as he lifted the blade above his head and the jolt in his shoulders as it collided with the wood. Over and over until the repetitive motion quieted his thoughts and the steady beat of steel on wood matched his heart rate.

By the time he got back to the manor, the hurt was tangible; a constant burning in his back and shoulders that he planned to soothe in a bath with a muscle-soothing potion before dinner. He welcomed it, both because it reminded him he existed and because it was pain he could do something about.

Walking past the double doors of the library, he almost collided with Hermione, who was slipping out with a stack of books looking sheepish.

“Finished reading for the day?” he asked, even though he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to talk to her when they crossed paths in the halls. That had never been cleared up when she’d first moved in.

“I felt you come home and thought I’d read in my room, so you could use the library if you wanted,” Hermione said with a blush. Her voice was meek. He hated her meek.

Draco sighed and ran a hand through his hair. The movement made the tight muscles in his shoulders protest.

“Granger, you can use the library whenever you want,” he said, searching her face for the right thing to say next. “Look, I heard what you said, ok? You just want to be friendly acquaintances. I will respect that and you don’t need to hide in your room whenever we’re here at the same time in case I want to use the library.”

Hermione swallowed and looked up at him.

“Are you sure?” she asked, and through the bond there was a wobble of relief.

“Yes, and you should come back to breakfast too. You need to eat and Bobsy will start moaning to me if he has to keep chasing you to the floo with a to-go cup of tea each day.”

He thought about adding a comment that they had technically eaten breakfast together for six years without either of them falling in love but he knew it would hurt more than help.

“Just to eat. No flirting, no leading conversations?” she asked.

“I promise not to speak to you if it will make you more comfortable, Granger,” he said, hating every word that came out of his mouth but knowing he would hate himself more if her forced her to hide from him in their home.

“Ok,” she said, turning back towards the library with her books and it was a very quiet victory for Draco.

She paused and looked back over her shoulder, “Were you going to the library?”

“No, bath,” he replied and she nodded and shut the door behind her.

Draco raked a hand through his hair again and revelled in the burn before turning to go back to his study. There were too many things he wanted to say but couldn’t. Too many thoughts that were throwing his mind into chaos. Bobsy would be proud, though, he wasn’t hiding from them. He would process in a healthy way. It seemed he was going back to writing letters he would never send.

Chapter End Notes

So, I know I was posting on Sundays and then I had a break and posted again on a Saturday (I think?) and so now I am just rejigging this whole thing completely and will post on a Friday/Saturday depending where in the world you are.

I know last chapter was rough (and we are all earning that angst tag) but I promise there is a plan. Trust me. I also recognise this chapter is also tough, but that's why I gave you lumberjack Draco. We can all appreciate that man wield an axe while we cry a little. Plus Bobsy!

Huge thank you to every one who commented last week; especially with the AO3 glitch that was making it so hard for people to comment. I appreciate your tenacity and

honestly, the comments give me such a boost. Thank you again to Orolin who is a fab cheer reader. The Cheeky Nandos reference in this chapter is for her.

Until next week :)

Dear Granger

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 42

Dear Granger,

We've had 17 breakfasts together, and the only thing I've said to you is, "Would you like some more tea?" and "Have a good day at work". I was worried that last one might have crossed a line but you didn't seem upset. You're going to think I'm a pathetic bastard for admitting it, but the smile you gave me when you replied 'thank you' made me feel happier than I had all week.

I miss you, Granger. Merlin, there are so many things I'd like to tell you about. Some of them you've heard about at dinner, but it's not the same having you listen while I tell someone else. I try not to look at you while I speak. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I would love to see if anything I say breaks that shell of cool composure. It would become a personal challenge if I let it. How many times could I see a sliver of the real Hermione in one meal? It's better if I just don't look.

Something I haven't told you at dinner is I'm learning how to cook. Something other than poorly constructed sandwiches. It all started because I went over to lunch at Dennis and Daisy's, and I got there a little early. Daisy shoved a weird contraption into my hand and asked if I would mind mashing the potatoes; she was running behind. Well, I had no idea what to do with it and stood there like an idiot until she noticed. When she found out I could barely make toast, she just shook her head and insisted I learn. Told me it was an embarrassment that a fully grown man relied on house elves to eat. She's not wrong. So, I go there once a week now. She teaches me how to cook, and then we either eat what I prepare or order takeaway because, I have to be honest, I'm not very good at cooking.

I haven't told Bobsy or Vim yet. For two reasons; the first being I don't want them to think I don't appreciate their cooking. The second, I don't want Bobsy to insist I take over a meal a week until I'm sure I won't poison you all. When I can cook, I'd like to cook for you Granger. Chicken Korma and Naan. Trust me. Nothing tastes better.

Love, Draco

Dear Granger,

I finished my NEWTs and my A-Levels. I can legitimately go to Muggle University now and am no longer an unqualified layabout. I don't know how many NEWTs you got (I'm assuming it's more than me), but I got a very respectable five. Outstanding in all but Arithmancy, and I

have to admit that's mainly because I started studying that one a bit late. I was counting on your help, given your expertise in the area.

Fuck, writing that down made me realise I am no better than fucking Weasley. Expecting your assistance just because you're brilliant. Even when I think I'm asking for nothing from you, I still expect it. I promise you I'm working on it.

Love, Draco

Dear Hermione,

I don't want to call you Granger anymore—not in a letter you will never see. I don't want to call you Granger in real life either, but I don't think you'd be comfortable with Hermione over tea and toast. Plus love, sweetheart, darling, all the names I would use without hesitation are off the table too. Everywhere but here, I guess. So on that, Happy Birthday, Darling.

I promised myself at the start of the day that I wouldn't spend it wishing for what might have been. I promised myself that that wasn't fair to either of us. But I just watched you blow out the candles on your cake without a single glimmer of gold in your eyes, and I just can't. I can't not imagine what could be different.

I want to show you the Malfoy orb. You'd be fascinated. You would ignore the cake entirely and spend the entirety of dessert making mental notes of books you needed to find in the library to understand it more. I could take you to the library after and hold you with your back against my chest as we sat in our window seat and see how many kisses I could graze your neck with before you accused me of distracting you.

I'd be able to get you a gift. I have put a lot of thought into what I would give you. Now, books seem like the obvious answer, but I have to guess that everyone gives you books. Also, you are mistress to the second largest library in all of Britain. You don't need more books. Jewellery is the preferred gift of Malfoy men, but you don't wear it, and I refuse to present you with a ring under the guise of a birthday gift. If I ever got the chance to offer you a ring I chose because I was promising to love, cherish and protect you, it wouldn't be as a piggyback on your birthday. It would be its own special occasion. But that's another line of daydreaming I promised myself I wouldn't indulge in.

No, if I were allowed to give you a gift, it would be a memory. Did you know you can buy historical memories? It's a fairly obscure practice, performed by only the oldest purebloods, but they cultivate them. Keep them to view in a pensive when teaching family history. The Malfoys used to have some, but we released them all before Voldemort moved in. My father was a little concerned about what he might see if he chose to view them, which, in hindsight, should have been my first clue that Malfoys weren't always paragons of pureblood virtue. But I digress.

Other families still have them. I would let you pick a moment in history, and search to find a memory from someone who was there. Do you want to see the coronation of Mary the First?

Be in the room when Empress Matilda decided she would overthrow King Stephen? Or maybe a magical moment? Visit Ancient Greece and see how society worked when the line between magical and muggle was a little more fluid. I would adore it. To hold your hand and watch your face as you experience history. It's a fantasy a man would go mad trying to achieve. Fuck, this is why I promised myself that I wouldn't spend the day lost in my imaginings. I knew I would never want to leave.

I hope you enjoyed your cake, Granger. I made it for you.

Love, Draco.

Dear Hermione,

I can hear you. It's Sunday, and I can hear you playing the piano. The music is filtering through the house and the sound of it has made my chest feel too big and too small all at once. You aren't very good. Not yet, anyway. Hitting almost as many wrong notes as right ones but it's still the most beautiful sound I've heard since I first heard you laugh. Or say my name.

I'm so proud of you for playing. These past months, Sundays have been the worst. I can still feel it, your pain. Now, it comes with questions. I have started wondering how your visit went, what your parents were like, and whether Susan was there to make you smile before you left. I wonder if you came straight home or went and sat alone on a park bench until it got dark. I wonder if you think of me and our Sundays together.

I asked Bobsy to leave biscuits in your room on Sundays. I'm unsure if you noticed the crystal biscuit jar he picked out for you. Please note the Jammy Dodgers in it were from me. Teddy helped me pick them out in the village. We've been sampling Muggle biscuits as part of a not-very-scientific science project he's doing for school. It's not dinner, but I want you to eat something on Sundays, sweetheart. You have no idea how much it irritates me that I can't make sure you eat anymore. I feel like I'm failing the most basic task of being a husband. Not that you want one of those.

If you're not eating, at least you are playing. I'm drinking wine from an enamel mug and listening. Maybe your music can soothe both our dreams tonight.

Love, Draco.

Dear Hermione

I wish I could ask you more about your parents. I feel like I was given a tiny glimpse before the door was slammed. And I don't just mean about their condition now. I would love to know more about them from before. Before you even knew you were a witch and they were just two people raising an extraordinarily bright girl who liked books. How did they look after you

when you were sick? Were they home a lot or did you have a nanny? Did they read to you every night before bed?

I'd also like to know more about their introduction to the magical world. They never knew you would go on to make things fly or transfigure tea cups into animals when you were a baby. How did they find out you were a witch? Did they tell you or did you tell them? What was the first bit of magic you all saw?

I know it's not remotely the same thing, but the first time I went to Diagon Alley after I was released, it was so overwhelming and nerve-wracking. Was it the same for you the first time you went there?

And then the darker thoughts; the first time I returned I learnt people hated me, though for good reason. How long was it before you realised some people hated you because of your parentage? How often did someone call you a slur? Please tell me no one spat at you. Did anyone ever curse at your parents, and did they ever realise they were handing their daughter to a world that would always be a little hostile to her? Would they have let you go if they knew? Did you ever feel angry that they didn't protect you from it? Did you ever want to go home?

We never really talked about that part, did we? What it was like for you? We only talked about it from my point of view, the bigot who had learnt the errors of his ways, and you just accepted that I had changed. Somehow, despite what you had been through, you showed me forgiveness and empathy. Which leads me back to wanting to ask you more about your parents. What they did to raise you to be like that.

Sorry, I'm being a bit of a maudlin bastard today. You stood close enough to me this morning that could smell your perfume and it reminded me of so many things that I can't have. David and Jean raised you to be strong and kind and forgiving. Lucius and Narcissa raised me to be a spoilt selfish man and right now this spoilt selfish man wants you.

Love, Draco

Dear Hermione,

I still fucking miss you. Maybe I'm just a slow learner, but distance and time have not helped. Then again, you were also the first person to agree with me that the adage 'time heals all wounds' is bullshit, so maybe you'll give me a pass. I'm not brooding. Well, not so much that Bobsy will punish me with excess manual labour in the garden anyway. I don't want you to see me being sad and feel responsible. I won't be another burden for you to carry.

I have a new hobby—this one you can entirely blame on your Dad—Lego. I had the kits, and I got sick of looking at them, so one night after you'd gone to bed, I took them both to Zabini Manor, and Blaise and I sat up drinking and figuring out the instructions. They are not easy—especially not after half a bottle of firewhiskey.

Blaise liked them though, so after we'd finished my two kits, he bought a really, really big one of something called a "death star"? Looks like no constellation I've ever seen and is ridiculously difficult. Luna tries to help, but she doesn't really believe in following instructions, so ends up making models of made-up creatures from the pieces that we have to take apart later. Blaise lets her do whatever she wants, and I can't say I blame him. If you were there, I would let you do whatever made you happy. Unfortunately, what makes you happy is being away from me.

Fine, maybe I am brooding a little. I'm working on it.

Love, Draco.

Dear Hermione,

Bobsy and Vim officially know I can cook. They'd suspected, since your birthday, that I was learning, but I made them dinner on Sunday. Not chicken korma; I'm saving that for you. But mushroom ravioli. Far from being offended, Vim immediately declared I was welcome to cook every Sunday, and Bobsy started naming all the other things he thought I should learn. Quite the list of household tasks. Honestly, seeing it makes me wonder if one day we should move somewhere smaller. He decided to start with "window cleaning." Do you know how many windows there are in the Manor? Even if I used magic (which Bobsy is against while I am learning), it would take days.

Don't worry, I won't ask you to leave the library. I couldn't bring myself to separate you from anything that brought you joy. It was just a thought—an interesting one. I never imagined living anywhere but the manor. I don't even know what type of house I would like. I don't think it would be a neoclassical palace; too many rooms and not enough filling them. Where did you imagine you would live when you were a child?

The unexpected benefit of being enlisted in the Bobsy School of General Household Tasks is he is talking to me more. Still ever your champion, he's been telling me about your career at the ministry. Well, more he's been telling me about the legislative path to freedom for house elves and, me, being the pathetically obsessed sod that I am, have read between the line to create an abridged history of your career at the Ministry. At least the House Elf part of it. Merlin knows you probably also had files and campaigns for other creatures. If it wasn't borderline stalking, I would look it up.

Even if it was just the house elves, it's an impressive resume, the bills you had passed. I have to wonder when you found time to sleep, to eat, to date, to rest. Although knowing you the way I think I do, I would wager you didn't do those things nearly as often as you should have. Infuriating witch.

He also told me about the amendments that didn't pass and the loopholes that were written in by less willing members of the department. I bet you carry each one of those like a millstone, don't you, love?

You asked me once if I had ever felt the weight of a fight. I haven't—not truly. I can see what the weight of all those fights has done to you, though, and if I could carry some of it for you, I would. I would fight for you if you let me. Fight for a future that you deserve. You've fought for everyone else; I wish you'd let me fight for you.

Love Draco.

Dear Hermione,

Luna asked after you. I don't know whether to tell you that directly or not. I think I see her more regularly than you do now. We see each other quite a bit. When I go to Zabini Manor for lunch or Lego. I'm flying with Blaise and Theo often, and she's there as much as not.

I quite like her. She's ridiculously clever— if you can see past the riddles she prefers to talk in. Pansy asked me once how I would fare sitting across from her at Family Dinner, and the answer is much better than sitting across from Theo. She's far less infuriating and much better read. That's where I was tonight, by the way. Family Dinner at Nott Abbey. I think they will be every Monday night from now on. You won't want to go, but you are always welcome to join me. Fanciful, yes, but I had to say it one time. ~~You could sit next to me and I could rest my hand on your thigh under the table.~~

I hated missing dinner with you. I have precisely two opportunities to see you every day and only one where you really speak. There is a huge part of me that wants to live in those moments. Use them to get the happiness I need to continue in life. But that's not what I promised you, is it love? I won't make you responsible for that, and as such, I can't hide from life. The other things that will bring me joy. I told you I was working on it. Marvolo will be so fucking proud.

Love, Draco

Dear Hermione,

Am I allowed to tell you I'm worried about you? I thought we'd reached a plateau after it all fell apart. You told me yourself that you were coping. But you don't look like a woman who is keeping her head above water at the moment, Granger. You look more than tired; you look wrecked.

I can't help but wonder what your life was like before this law threw us together. I know you lived in the house at Hamstead Heath and you worked at Oxford. But what did you do with your free time? Did you spend more time in Muggle London? Did you have Muggle friends? Ones from before you knew you were a witch and were a safe haven to go back to after the war. Did you go out to eat, or did you cook? I bet you know how to clean without magic. I bet you even found it soothing. Did you go on walks in the evening? Did you spend time with the Potters?

I saw in the paper that Weaslette had their second baby a few months ago, and I doubt you have seen Albus Severus (expect another letter forthcoming about the ridiculousness of that name) since his birth. Were you named the Godmother of the second child? What about the first, the preschooler? Would you even want to be named Godmother? The responsibility of it and all. Regardless, spending time with the Spawn of Potter might be a good thing. I know from spending time with Teddy that children have a unique ability to force you to see the good in the world. Did I take you away from that when I brought you to the Manor?

If you were anywhere else, I can't imagine Potter and Weaslette would let you hide yourself away as you have. I bet your floo connected to theirs when you lived at Hamstead Heath. They would have invited themselves over, I'm sure. Not an etiquette class between them. Maybe you need that, though. You haven't had one guest to the Manor and you've been here for over a year. Did other people visit you? Luna, the Weasleys? At school you seemed to have people. Did I scare them all away?

Granger, I have to be honest with you. Getting married to you was the single best thing that ever happened to me. No competition. The day you entered the Manor was the day I had a chance to rebuild a life that was worth living. That said, I need to follow it up with this. As I watch you, I don't believe it was a good thing for you. In fact, maybe it made your life a little bit worse.

I've taken a really long time to listen to you, properly listen to you. Plus, I'm not going to lie; there has been a whole lot of creepy watching you, too. I've taken a really long time to listen to you; properly listen to you. Plus, I'm not going to lie; there has been a whole lot of creepy watching you too. I think I understand more now what you've been trying to tell me this entire time. And for the record, I don't fucking like it and I really don't want to accept it but Marvolo was fucking right too. Loving you is not going to look the way I want to it to, but I am going to do it anyway.

Love, Draco.

Chapter End Notes

So, this chapter has lived rent-free in my head since April. It is probably my favourite chapter of the whole fic and writing it was the most fun I've had writing possibly ever. I hope you like it just as much as I do.

Thank you to the lovely Orolin for cheer reading this one for me. And thank you for all the beautiful comments leading up to this moment.

Enjoy :)

The Minimalist Townhouse and The Savoy

Chapter Notes

TW for this chapter: going no contact with a parent. I will put a summary at the end so you can skip if you would like to. To skip, stop reading at "The Savoy, London" until the end of the chapter.

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

It was the last door in London he'd ever thought he'd be knocking on. It also looked nothing like he'd expected. For some reason, he expected to be pounding on the door of a little country hovel, not a sleek white townhouse in London. Perhaps that was Chang's influence. As if the thought summoned her, the small woman opened the door. She didn't smile but as she knew he was coming, invited him inside all the same.

"Ron's in the sitting room. We can all talk in there," she said, leading him through a tidy hall with minimal furniture or decoration.

When he'd gone to Zabini Manor with a bottle of Fire Whiskey and a rough outline of what he wanted to do, Blaise had listened intently before pouring them both a shot and calling for Luna. His friend may have cultivated gossip like currency, but it was Luna who could look at the problem Draco put forward and provide solutions. Names had been thrown back and forth, more drinks had been poured and taken, and finally, they settled on a pair: Ron Weasley and Cho Chang—the perfect face for a campaign to bring down the Marriage and Repopulation Act.

Luna had assured him she would write, and they would meet with Draco. She acted as a middleman until there was a date, time, and address. All Draco had to do was show up, and she promised that they would hear him out.

Which is how he found himself in a sitting room as sparsely furnished as the hall; minimalism was the fashion de jour it seemed. Weasley wasn't sitting but standing, looking out the window with his back to them. Draco wondered if it was some weird power play to appear disinterested in their guest or if he was genuinely that bad-mannered. Cho sat down on the light grey lounge and invited Draco to join her. He did, noting there were no refreshments laid out. Again, it begged the question, power play or bad manners.

"Ron?" Cho said, and Weasley spun to face her. There was no affection in his expression.

So that part of the rumour was true then; theirs was not a happy marriage.

"Right," the gangly redhead said, turning to look at Draco, "I'm not in the habit of asking Death Eaters round for tea. Let's get this over with."

He crossed the room in two long strides and plunked himself next to his wife. Draco wanted to point out that not only was he no longer a Death Eater, but there wasn't any tea. However, he bit his tongue. He wasn't here to trade insults; he was here for one purpose. If he kept the image of her from breakfast that morning, picking at her toast with her once well-fitting jumper swimming on her frame in his mind, he might make it through this.

"Thank you for meeting with me," Draco began stiffly, looking away from Ron's set jaw to Cho's face, hoping to find it more welcoming, only to be disappointed.

"I will be blunt; I'm looking to fund a lobby to dismantle the Marriage and Reproduction Act. I need a couple to be the face of it. Luna suggested that you both might be a good fit."

Cho's lips parted with an intake of breath and her eyebrows darted up. Surprise. Whatever the two of them had thought this meeting was about, it wasn't that.

"Typical," snorted Ron, pulling Draco's attention, "Using Daddy's money to buy your way out of something unpleasant."

Draco bit the inside of his cheek. He could not lose his temper. Hermione needed him to do this. Gold eyes, chestnut curls. He'd keep the image of her and not hex the git.

"Ronald," Cho chided him before turning to Draco, "tell us more about the lobby."

"Honestly, Cho, you can't be serious. You're going to listen to a half-baked plan devised by him?" Weasley's ire was turned on his wife.

"Honestly," Cho answered in the same biting tone, "Are you going to not even listen to something that might get us out of this?"

The couple sat across from each other in a stare-off, leaving Draco to shift uncomfortably in his seat. The Ministry may have got some matches right, but this was the first time seeing where they got it wrong. Weasley and Cho's undisguised disdain was for each other in this moment. Not him.

"Please, continue Malfoy," Cho said finally and beside her, Ron shifted begrudgingly to give him attention.

"It would be a staged campaign, starting with media coverage of the failures of the act, followed by media pressure to have it overturned in favour of more effective measures. Political pressure would follow soon after and a vote in the Wizengamot. There would be an organisation behind you, but you would be the nominal heads, and to the rest of the world, it would look like your idea. Malfoy money would pay for it, and there are some people I'd put in place to help or do it all if you only desire to show up for the photos. A wide range of scholars and strategists. Other interested parties. You'd have freedom to be involved in its running as much or as little as you'd like."

"What? You want me to take orders from you, Malfoy?" Weasley spat.

Gold eyes. Chesnut curls. Deep breath.

"No, Blaise and Luna would act as an intermediary when I need to get in touch and the lobby group would have an independent CEO. I'm not a fool; I'm aware that if my name is anywhere on this, there is no chance of it being successful. My work will be behind the scenes and anonymous."

"Why us?" Cho asked.

"Because you are both respected and Cho, I understand you can be quite clever and charming. I need a couple to be the key speakers at events, be in the photos on the front page, and, when the time is right, address the Wizengamot," Draco swallowed and prepared himself for the uncomfortable part, "And I was told that it's common knowledge that neither of you are happy with your ministry match."

Both Ron and Cho looked away uncomfortably at that. The silence settled, and Draco gave them both time to process.

"I'll help you," said Cho, not bothering to confer with Ron before speaking. Not even a meaningful look.

"Thank you," said Draco, relief flooding through his body. Though he didn't want to, he turned to look at Ron. "I can give you some more time to consider, come back at another date, or send an owl for your answer."

"Bloody hell, I don't want to have to interact with you more than I already am," Ron looked away, and Draco got the sense he was about to hear the word 'no'.

"Please, Ron," he said, the man's name tasting sour in his throat.

He needed to do this for Hermione, and having one of the Golden Trio as the face of this thing would make it all the more powerful. His pride, his ego, it was all meaningless really - while she was withering away in the manor.

"This lobby, it's too important for schoolyard issues or even war divisions. This law- it's ruined too many people. You won't have to see or speak to me. I promise you. But please, consider giving your face and name to this fight."

There was silence, and Draco stayed calm. He looked Weasley right in the eye, trying to convey exactly what this project meant to him. Pride be damned. If seeing Draco desperate was what it took, he would give it.

"Fine, I'll do it too. So long as all I see of you are your galleons funding the whole thing, and you can assure me your name will never be linked to mine in all of this," Weasley grumbled, and far from wanting to lash out, Draco let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, both of you," he said, trying to convey his appreciation. He might hate Weasley with every fibre of his being, but his involvement was the best chance he had of winning this battle.

The three stood, and Draco started to get ready to leave.

"Makes sense, I suppose," Ron said to no one in particular, "that eventually you'd try and buy your way out of being married to 'Mione. Can't imagine you like have her flithying up the Manor."

Draco's blood ran cold, and he felt his hand twitch on his wand. Putting aside his pride to get what he needed was one thing; standing silent while implied insults flew about his wife was another. With a centring breath, he turned to face the abysmal excuse for a wizard.

"Let's make one thing very clear, Weasley, she isn't to be connected in any way to this whole project. You will not speak her name. You will not intimate that you know anything about our marriage. There will not even be a whisper that she has been found lacking in any way by anyone. My wife stays above reproach and will face no scrutiny. Do you understand?"

Weasley squared his shoulders, his blue eye turning malicious.

"I find it hard to believe that Draco Malfoy, the first person ever to call her a mudblood, would actually care. Can you honestly tell me you aren't funding all of this just to get rid of her?"

Draco took a beat. He owed this man nothing. He could wave him off with a flippant remark and be done with it. Except... Except the selfish part of him wanted the chance to publicly claim his wife. Wanted Weasley to know. And how could it hurt? This once?

"Unlike you, I'm intelligent enough to realise exactly how extraordinary that witch is. If she wishes it, I will spend the rest of my life ensuring she has everything she could possibly want. Regardless of the cost to me."

Far from looking chastised, Ron looked bemused.

"So she wouldn't have you either," he said with a sneer, "You're no better than me, Malfoy."

Draco felt a ripple through his magic. One that let him know that he was doing the right thing and would make it through this conversation without losing his cool.

"Am I not? At least I'm trying to help her. Unlike you, I'm not just going to leave her to suffer the circumstances. Did you ever think there might be a way to save her from the big Bad Death Eater at the start of all of this?"

"Of course I did!" Ron's temper splashed red across his face, "I was ready to marry her so she wouldn't have to be tied to you! Defy the ministry so we could be happy together. Like we used to be."

Draco wondered what time period was covered in "used to be". Beside him, Cho flinched at the words. Draco felt a dash of pity for the woman. She'd had no chance. Not when her husband was clearly pining for a woman that possibly didn't even exist anymore.

"But she doesn't want to be married," Draco calmly repeated the words she'd yelled at him, their meaning expanding in the context of Ron's longing, "You did. But because she wouldn't give you what you wanted, you just turned away. Left her alone. With me. Luckily, I won't

abandon her because what she wants isn't the same as what I do. That's how I know, at least where Hermione is concerned, I am indeed better than you."

By the time Draco got back to Zabini Manor, the bubble of hope that formed when he realised, at the very least, he was better for Hermione than Ronald Weasley had popped. Being better for her meant he'd started the process of removing himself from her life. It was painful.

Thankfully, Blaise seemed to have already known the state of Draco's head and, as soon as he came through the floo, clapped a warm hand on his shoulder and guided him to the library, where he, Luna and Draco lounged in front of the fire and drank in silence, staring at the flames.

"I'll need a staff," Draco said as he saw the bottom of his glass. One drink down. Pain still present but softened by the whiskey.

"I have names ready for you: some local, some from America. Mainland Europe is laughing at us with this law, so there are experts there ready for whatever we need," Blaise answered.

Draco nodded and tried not to look at his friend. Blaise and Luna were sharing a settee, as Ron and Cho had earlier in the day. Unlike Ron and Cho, who would barely look at each other, Luna was lying across it, her blonde hair tossed over the fuschia fabric of the chair's arm and her blue stocking feet propped on Blaise's lap—a portrait of contentment in vivid colour.

"You'll need to address the birth rates early on," Luna piped up, her dreamy voice juxtaposed against her strategic words, "there will be no broad support unless we can prove they haven't been made any better by the law. Unfortunately, St Mungo's and Hogwarts remain tight-lipped about their data."

"I might know someone who can help with that," Draco admitted, earning a quirked eyebrow from Blaise.

"Look at you, making friends," he said.

Draco didn't think he could count the people at St Mungo's as his friends, but he had a sneaking suspicion that if he could convince them that he was doing this for Hermione, they would be keen to help. He didn't think it would take much to convince them that being allowed to leave him would be better for her in the long run.

More whiskey. He wanted more whiskey. Hauling himself to his feet, he took the decanter and refreshed everyone's glasses. The conversation lulled once more.

"This is good," he said, taking a sip once back in his chair.

"It's Muggle," Luna said, swirling her drink.

Draco smiled and shook his head. Of course it was. So many pleasures on this earth and he almost missed half of them because he was blinded by hate. He examined the blonde witch; he'd known her for years at school, and yet their first conversation was the day she brought Blaise to the Manor. Another joy he'd almost missed. Another joy Blaise almost missed.

"Luna, why did you tell me about rocks that day in the Manor?" he asked, thinking back to her cryptic words.

Luna smiled and turned her face to him.

"Still haven't figured it out?" she asked, "And I was led to believe that if it weren't for family allegiance, you would have made an excellent Ravenclaw. Let your mind explore it, Draco, make connections without preconceived notions clouding your ideas."

At her bidding, he thought back over the words. He thought of the description of the stone, the water and the trees. Of gradual wearing down and inextricable joining. Of himself and Hermione and a bond made in blood. Of a war followed by thousands of tiny battles. Of pianos and flowers and naan bread.

"Maybe I know," he said, "I'm just not sure if you meant for me to be the rocks, the water or the tree?"

Luna giggled, "Who said you can't be all three?"

All three. Draco took in a deep breath, focusing on the feeling of his lungs pressing against his ribs. He could be all three. If the day had proved anything, it was that, for her, he could be anything she needed him to be.

"You know, as supportive as I am of all this, there is one thing I feel like you're overlooking," Blaise said, changing the subject. Both Draco and Luna looked at him.

"Malfoy Marriage Rites. One would argue they are more complicated than a law to undo. If it's possible at all."

"Yes, well, I'll need to seek outside help for that as well," Draco said, thinking of the favours he would need to call in, "But that is for me to handle."

The gentle boundary was met with grace from his friend, and on an exhale, the three of them turned back to watch the flames.

Draco was grateful that Hermione didn't read the paper because, from the moment he had hired the media specialists and lobbyists Blaise had suggested, the fight to repeal the marriage law had occupied the front page most mornings. Photos of Ron and Cho were the drawing feature more often than not, and while Chang had the class to appear introspective and serious, there was a glint in Weasley's eye that made it seem as though it absolutely loved the attention. Predictable.

Draco couldn't complain too much, though. Weasley and Chang were achieving what they were meant to. The swell of public support to reexamine the law swiftly followed the media attention. It helped that after a tense visit to St Mungo's where the slide of that door seemed to mock him more than buoy him, Susan was able to slip birth figures to him. They confirmed what he and Blaise had suspected; in 18 months, the marriage law hadn't really made a difference in birth figures. Soon, the tense photos of Cho and Ron were followed up with letters from experts explaining what Britain was ignoring about magical births and why they alone were suffering problems. To say the Lobby was happy was an understatement. One could even say they were optimistic.

"Good morning," Hermione said, announcing her arrival.

Draco hurried to fold the paper and tuck it under a plate to the side. The last thing he needed was for Hermione to see her ex's smiling face to inspire her to pick up the paper again.

"Good morning," he said, moving the teapot so the handle was pointing towards her.

He tried not to stare as she made her breakfast. Tried not to catalogue the subtle changes between days. Longing and pining was not the way to help her. Not when he occasionally caught her looking at him as if she was trying to assess the damage. His looking at her like a love-sick fool would just be something else she'd feel guilty about.

"I have classes at Oxford today," he said, trying to sound offhand.

He always made sure he gave her warning on the days he would be there. Not that he used her private floo anymore but if she saw him around the campus, he didn't want her to be surprised.

"Oh? Muggle or Magical?"

It was always the same question. It would be the only one she'd allow herself.

"Muggle," he replied, "and then I might go study at one of the libraries, get some dinner somewhere local."

It was a lie. He had another appointment that afternoon, one he couldn't exactly tell her about, and he didn't want her to wonder where he was at dinner. She did care, no matter how much she pretended she didn't, and he wouldn't leave her wondering.

"Ok," she replied. Then she reached into the little beaded bag she carried everywhere and pulled out a novel—still nonfiction.

Draco closed his eyes and paid attention to the bond between them, trying to decipher anything else through her overwhelming sadness. He thanked his ancestors for the bond these days. As much as it hurt. It told him when he crossed a line; it let him know when she was calm. Most significantly, it told him that she did care about him. He could feel it.

The Savoy, London. It was the chosen middle ground. When he had reached out to Potter via Tonks to arrange this, it seemed like choosing a place might be the undoing of it all. Potter wanted the Ministry. Narcissa wanted the Manor. Draco wanted no chance of his mother getting within 100 yards of Hermione. It couldn't be in public and while both Tonks and Andromeda volunteered their houses, Draco wouldn't ask that of them.

In the end, it was the Muggle world that provided the answer, which Draco thought was quite fitting. It was a theme in his life it seemed. He would have one hour with his mother among the silverware and luxury linens. One hour under the watchful eye of Tonks and Potter. He wasn't wearing one of his father's robes this time; his slim-fitting charcoal suit had been sourced from a Muggle tailor for just this occasion.

The knock was hesitant. Two breaths and a nod to Potter, and the *Boy who Lived to Grant his Schoolyard Enemy More Favours than he Likely Deserved* walked to the entrance of the suite and opened the door.

"Mrs Malfoy," Potter said courteously with an incline of the head.

Draco laid eyes on his mother for the first time in over a year. Through his nerves, his heart lept.

"Mother," he said, crossing the room to be wrapped in her arms.

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as he breathed in the perfume that reminded him of childhood. He knew all her flaws. He knew all the ways she had failed him, harmed him even. He'd gone over them with Marvolo in preparation for this moment. Yet, that perfume, that embrace. She was his mother, and she was here.

"Oh my dragon," she said, letting him stay as they were for as long as he needed, making no comment on Draco's undignified sniff.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked, straightening and remembering his manners. Offering his mother his arm to escort her to the seating area where Tonks sat waiting.

"Please, although I am not sure of the quality in a place like this. I see the ministry still thinks I'm a threat if I am able to use my own china," she said, sitting daintily.

Tonks snorted, and Draco shot her a warning look. Far from looking chastised, she just glared right back at him. She expected more this time. It gave him courage.

"Actually, Mother, it was I who chose our meeting place. You can be assured, though, that it's one of the most luxurious establishments in London."

Narcissa sniffed and looked sideways at Tonks and then Potter.

"Indeed," she said, "You're able to request a location then?"

Draco sighed. Forever looking for the source of power. Some things didn't change.

"In this case," he replied, busying himself with the action of serving everyone so he could put off the conversation a minute longer. So he could enjoy just being with his mother for one more minute.

Narcissa waited patiently, but as soon as the teacup was in her hand, she turned on him.

"So what is this about, Draco?" the warmth had bled from her tone, "How is it you have convince the Ministry to overturn their edict... in this location."

"I want to know about the Malfoy Marriage Rites," he said, pulling up the mandrake. It was time to face the truth.

Narcissa looked surreptitiously at Potter and Tonks. Naturally, she would not want to share family magic with outsiders.

"As you are already bound by them, my dragon, I imagine you're well-informed about their idiosyncrasies and strengths," she said.

"More specifically, I need to know how to break them," he continued.

Narcissa looked more deliberately at the others in the room. For a tiny moment, she showed fear.

"I'm sure Miss Granger has not been an easy woman to live with. However, there are other ways. You don't need to do anything so drastic. And besides the law-"

"-the law may not be an obstacle for much longer."

Draco cut her off, looking at her white knuckles kneading themselves in her lap rather than her face.

Silence. Draco felt the prickle of his mother's inspections.

"It's you," she said after a while, "You're funding and orchestrating the campaign against it."

Draco tried to ignore Potter, clearing his throat. He hadn't told him that bit. Obviously, the freckle-faced git hadn't either. True to his word, then. It wasn't unexpected, given his Gryffindor sensibilities, but still a pleasant surprise.

"You will speak of it to no one," Draco warned, knowing his mother and knowing the instant she was back in friendly ballrooms, she would live to boast about her pureblood son. Fighting a blood traitor ministry and a mudblood bride. "Any association would immediately harm-"

"- I'd speak of it to no one who wouldn't appreciate your efforts," she said, confirming his thoughts.

"No one at all, Mother. I mean it."

"But there are those who would understand completely that you are unhappy in your marriage-"

"- I'm not. And before I tell you this, please, for the love of me, think before you speak, but I am not unhappy in my marriage. She is spectacular. She is everything. I would keep her close for the rest of our lives if it were not like keeping a phoenix against its will."

Narcissa said nothing, just blinked her blue eyes at him, taking him in.

"That's the Marriage Bond speaking," she said finally.

"Is it Mother? You tell me? You condemned me to it without clear instructions about what the magic can and can not do. Can the Marriage Bond create something from nothing?" Draco struck back.

It was a tender point. Draco, the unknowing lamb. How many times had he been set up for the slaughter? Rather than answer him, she took a sip of tea, eyes averted. No answer was an answer; the bond could not create something from nothing.

"So the Ministry has succeeded then. In turning you against your family? Used that little witch to do it?" Narcissa changed tact.

"That wholly depends on what your definition of your family is, Mother. If you mean those with whom I share blood, then no, I have many family members with whom I have a strong relationship."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tonks smile. Saw her sway towards him, ready to stand with him if needed.

"But if you mean the family that let absurd beliefs take precedence over all else..."

"I did everything I could to protect you, Draco. You can't suggest that Malfoys didn't strive to protect our own. In the final battle, I put everything on the line to save you," his mother was sharp and quick in her response. Well-worn lines he'd heard before.

So they were going to have this conversation. Draco knew it was a possibility.

"At the end, yes. And I will be forever grateful for it," Draco stood and removed his jacket, dropping it elegantly on the back of the chair. He sat back down and rolled up his sleeve, his Dark Mark grey and sad on his skin. Tonks and Potter averted their eyes.

"But does this look like protection? I was barely 16. You had a sister on the other side. We had relatives on the continent. Did you think of trying to get me out at any point? At any point, did you think of offering me the same protection before I found myself on a battlefield?"

His mother refused to look at his arm as he spoke.

"If we'd sent you away, your father would have been shamed. Ostracised," she started.

"But **I** was branded. Punished," Draco shook his head.

“Once we had won, you would have been rewarded,” Narcissa moved to touch his unmarked arm, and Draco pulled it away.

“Even if we’d won, I’d have been broken. The things I had to see and do. Did you ever consider that even if we’d won, it would have been impossible to put me back together?”

Unbidden, he thought of Hermione. How she looked. How deprived her version of peace was. Even her highest ambitions were hollow and dull versions of living.

“There’s no winning for children in a war, Mother. It had to be clear to you at some point. So why didn’t you protect me?”

Narcissa didn’t answer right away. Her face was like stone. With a long breath through her nose, she unpursed her lips.

“I hardly think this is the right place to have this conversation. Perhaps if we can meet alone, at more suitable location like the Manor, we could continue-”

“- until we’ve had this conversation and I am satisfied that you understand the ramifications of your beliefs, you won’t be allowed anywhere near my home with Mrs Malfoy,” Draco interrupted.

He needed to do this. Lay down his boundary. His uncrossable line. Hermione.

“And until we have this conversation and you can admit some responsibility to me, I don’t think you and I can talk at all,” Draco added. He needed an uncrossable line around himself, too.

Again, Narcissa was stunned to silence. Her hands didn’t seem to know what to do, smoothing creases that didn’t exist on the skirt of her pale green suit. The same suit she wore when she came to help him choose a ring.

“Well, I suppose we’re done here then,” she said. Her chin coming up infinitemissaly. Proud to the last.

Draco let out the breath he’d been holding and nodded. He’d prepared himself for this moment, but it hurt all the same. He bit the inside of his cheek to stop tears from forming. Let the manners she’d ingrained into him haul him to his feet when she stood. Followed her to the door the way he’d once followed her around the greenhouses. At the door, she paused, and Draco took the time to drink in the sight of her. It might be the last time he ever got to look at her. Not because the ministry dictated it but because she would never waver in her beliefs. Perfect chignon, muggle suit, delicate hands.

“There’s a book,” she said, her voice strained though her expression wasn’t, “in the Library at Grimmauld Place. My grandfather wouldn’t allow a Black to enter into the Malfoy family without a way to entangle things if it was no longer advantageous. He researched, ensured there was backup. Look for the book, the spell to break the bond is in there.”

She looked at Draco, reached forward to hold his cheek in the palm of her hand for a spilt second, and without another word, let herself out of the room. Tonks was beside him before the first tear blazed a hot path down his cheek. Her arm around him and head resting on his shoulder. Letting him know that he was not alone.

“Give it time,” Draco said on shaky breath, as much to himself as her and Tonks snorted.

“What, time heals all wounds?” she asked.

“No,” said Draco, thinking of the night he sat with Hermione in the kitchen, feeling like the world was upside down and he would never be able to stand in it, “it just gives us time to adjust. Find a new normal.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok- everyone breath. A few of you guess this might be the direction this was heading in last chapter. But this is a HEA. Trust the process.

I am also publishing a day early because I have an early work thing tomorrow, and I don't know if I will be able to publish then. So you get it now.

A big thank you for Orolin for cheer reading this for me and to everyone who has commented, shared and generally supported my work. It means so much and this fic would not have been written without every person who has found their way into my comments.

For those who skipped the section with going parent no-contact Draco met with Narcissa supervised by Harry and Tonks. Draco asked about the marriage rites and confirmed that the marriage bond can not create something from nothing. He has a frank conversation with his mother in which he defends Hermione and questions why he wasn't protected from Voldemort and the war. When Narcissa refuses to engage in the conversation he decides that they can not talk anymore until she will. Just before she leaves, Narcissa informs him her Grandfather had found a way to break the marriage rites and the spell is in a book in Grimmauld Place.

Whiskey Wholesale and A Quidditch Jersey

Chapter Notes

T/W - Parents with Alzheimers-like symptoms and the subsequent emotional aftermath of that.

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

“Um, so I suppose this means you’re going to ask me another favour, this time to see my library,” Potter’s annoying as fuck voice broke the moment Draco and Tonks were suspended in.

And he couldn’t even point out that the man had the tact of an erumpent herd because he was correct. He did need to ask the man for another favour. Was this the Karma thing that Muggles were on about? He’d tormented the man through childhood, and now he was destined to be indebted to him for all of adulthood. That probably explains why he had to spend his adulthood desperately in love with Hermione. Karma was a twisted bitch. She and Pansy would probably get along magnificently.

Sniffing and sending a wandless charm to clean up his face, Draco turned back to Potter.

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, Potter,” he said, with as much contrition as he could muster.

Harry just shrugged, sat down and started helping himself to the untouched tea service.

“You can knock yourself out, but I have to warn you, there are a couple thousand books in there, and I have no idea which one she could have been talking about.”

Draco took a deep breath in through his nose and looked up at the ceiling for some sort of guidance or calm.

“FUUUUCCCCKKKK!” he yelled, letting the pain and frustration of the day out in one raging curse word.

Of course, his mother would tell him just enough that he wouldn’t be able to remember the meeting with pure anger, hurt and frustration, but not actually enough to be useful. Of course, he would have to subject himself to hours of searching in the home of a man who hated him to break a bond he actually wanted because it wasn’t enough that he had to put his wants to the side; the process had to flay him alive. Screaming profanity was the action of a rational man, given the circumstances.

When he looked back to Potter, he was surprised to see that he and Tonks were ignoring him. Focused instead on the food and each other, letting Draco have his moment. *Mother fucking*

arseholes. He wanted one of them to call him out on being ridiculous or dramatic so he would have an excuse to pick a fight. But, no. The Chosen One and his Hufflepuff cousin were being respectful. Where was Theo when you needed him?

Accepting the situation, Draco gathered himself and went to join them, where without a word, Tonks handed him a cup.

“I’ve added something a little extra to take the edge off,” she said before waving a plate of sandwiches in his face, “Egg and Watercress?”

Draco shook his head at the food in favour of the tea, which tasted like it had a generous pour of whiskey.

“You know, Hermione was the one who organised the library at Grimmauld. You could ask her for help?” Potter offered.

Draco stared at him blankly, briefly forgetting that he was meant to be nice to the man.

“Hermione really did all the heavy lifting when it came to thinking in the Golden Trio, didn’t she?” Draco sneered.

“Maybe, but I had the instincts,” Potter said, taking no offence at all, “For instance, my instincts now tell me that Hermione has absolutely no idea about your little plan. Both the one you need that book for and the one you are apparently funding to undermine a government?”

Draco scowled. He was too tired for his shit.

“Potter, it’s not instincts that helped you figure that out, but basic listening comprehension skills.”

“Touchy,” Harry said, raising his eyebrows, “I mean, if you want to discuss other things that I picked up with my excellent listening skills, we can talk about what you said about Hermione. Interesting word choice; “spectacular” was it?”

Draco gripped his cup so tight he was worried he might crack the porcelain. Of all the people to bring this up. Tonks was no help, just looking at Draco with a smirk on her face that really highlighted the family resemblance.

“You know what Potter, good idea, let’s talk about Hermione,” Draco put down the tea in favour of searching for the whiskey wholesale.

Excellent, luxury Muggle Hotels included a bar cart just as Wizarding ones did. One shot. Two Shots. Back to his seat.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Draco asked, the alcohol and anger burning through his veins.

“Sorry?” Potter’s demeanour changed, and Tonks lost her smirk.

“She’s your friend and she’s needed you and you’ve been nowhere to be found,” Draco said, “You left her with me to help, and well, come on!”

“Hermione’s always needed space to work things out. When she’s done that Malfoy-” Potter answered.

“Which goes to show how little you know. She’s not working through anything right now. She’s settling into the life she intends to lead. And you’re just letting that be a life where she’s completely alone,” Draco pressed.

“Well, I mean, you’re going through a lot of effort to divorce her, so...” Harry deflected.

“Because she doesn’t want to be married. Salazar Slytherin, what is it with you and that red-headed prick? Do you honestly think alone or married are her only two options? She still needs friends. Would probably do her well to see those kids of yours. Remind her she’s got family that still knows who she is.”

Draco shook his head. The Snake Pit had its flaws and had made a few questionable decisions but they’d never abandoned him, even when armed guards were standing between him and them.

Potter cleared his throat, “It’s been difficult since she’s been at the Manor.”

Draco nodded. That was fair. He knew his presence was a barrier. She had counted on it.

“You are welcome to visit whenever you want, Potter. Don’t even need to announce yourself. Don’t need to see or talk to me. I’ll connect the floos, adjust the wards. Whenever you get the fancy to pop round, do it. Bring whoever you want. Hold a Potter/Weasley reunion in the ballroom for all I care. Just don’t abandon her there,” Draco said, and Harry stared at him for a while before giving him a curt nod and going to the bar cart to pour and take his own shot.

Tonks leaned back in her chair, relaxing. She looked equal parts bemused and proud.

“You could come and see her too, you know,” Draco said, wanting to rally as many people for Hermione as possible and wanting his cousin to know that although he liked her, she was not off the hook. No matter who it was, when it came to Hermione, he would say what needed to be said. Tonks didn’t speak, didn’t need to, just nodded, and Draco trusted that she had taken what she needed from his little outburst and would act accordingly.

“But you still want to come and search the library, right?” Potter came back, drinks in hand for the three of them.

Apparently, adult Potter did not hold a grudge. Maybe that part of him had been killed by the Avada.

“Yes. *Please*,” the last word came out through gritted teeth. Potter may not hold a grudge, but Draco was still going to use his manners—just to prove he could.

“Brilliant,” Harry replied with a smile that was far too broad considering their history, “I can tell you now, Ginny is dying to chat with you, and she’ll have so many questions about the

word ‘spectacular’.”

One thing that neither Draco nor Hermione had considered when he started his double degree in Magical and Muggle history was that he would be joining her department. Or rather, they hadn’t considered how it could become a bit awkward if he had to work with her. She rarely taught classes, so that wasn’t a concern, but she did supervise projects and materials. He tried to avoid going to her office, but it didn’t always work. That’s why he was there to witness Harry Potter, accompanied by his look-alike 3-year-old, visiting Aunty Mione and asking to take her to lunch.

“I don’t know,” she said, as Little James Potter sat twirling on her desk chair, touching things that a three-year-old with undoubtedly sticky fingers should not touch, “Malfoy needs to get a manuscript and-”

“Go, Granger,” Draco interrupted her, feeling the hum of nerves through the bond. “It’s not urgent, and I’ll see if any of the librarians can help me instead.”

“Yes, Mione, let Malfoy go and annoy some librarians while you come and have lunch with us. I’ll even let you take James to a bookstore afterwards, and you can help him choose a bunch of Muggle fairytales that will confuse his mother,” Potter added.

“Oh, okay,” the witch acquiesced.

As she gathered her things, Potter looked at Draco. Draco nodded begrudging approval; Potter had followed through.

It was hard to watch as Hermione walked away from him, back to a life that did not have room for a “them”, but when James reached for her fingers, and he felt her frisson of joy through the bond, he also felt a little proud. He’d done that for her; he had the right to be a smug bastard that afternoon.

Sunday. Draco was in his room, dinner long finished, reading on his bed when the buzzing stopped. She was late tonight. He wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or not. The grief he felt through the bond was different, too. Still there, but more agitated, on the precipice of becoming something else. The words on the page before him no longer made sense, so he closed the book; Draco was just waiting now. Would there be music tonight? There was indecision. He could feel that. Anxiety, that was new for a Sunday night. What he wouldn’t give to hear a single note and know she was working through it.

Instead, there was a single knock. Soft. Draco thought he might have imagined it, or it was just a noise from her moving down the hallway. Still, he called out “yes” on the off chance it was intentional, and he stood with a lump in his throat as Hermione slipped into his room.

Her hair was out and wild, her nose and cheeks pink from the cold. She must have gone outside before flooing home. Her hands pulled at the sleeves of her jumper, ensuring the

fabric covered them entirely and making the neckline stretch and bow.

“Hi,” he said, getting to his feet and going to her. Not all the way, just a couple of steps because he couldn’t help himself. Aside from that first day with Glitter, she’d never been in his bedroom before. It hurt how right she looked there.

“Hi,” she replied, a furrow in her brow.

He didn’t say anything but gave her the space to say what she needed to. He knew her; whatever it was, she’d been rehearsing it in her head on the walk to his room. Maybe on a park bench in the cold.

“I’ve been thinking,” she started, and Draco felt his heart rate increase, “I think I should move out of the Manor.”

Her voice and gaze was steady, decisive, and Draco’s heart ached like he’d been hit in the chest with a bludger.

“Oh,” he said, trying not to give away exactly how much he hated that idea.

It was the end goal, he knew that, but for it to happen so soon. Why? Had she finally read the paper? Had she spoken to Weasley?

“It will be tricky, obviously. However, the law states that as long as the couple reside in a residence or residences owned by them, they are abiding by the edict. So I could move back to Hamstead Heath. I own it, or I guess we own it, if magical marriages work like Muggle ones and trigger the legal combinations of assets.”

The casual use of the word “we” doubled the pain. He didn’t say anything; instead, he set his jaw and tried not to let her see what she was doing to him.

“So the more difficult part will be the bond. The separation seems to become unbearable after about 6 hours, so if I still floo back in the morning and then again after work. Or right before I go to sleep. Or I just sit outside one of your lectures. You don’t have to see me; I can just sit in the floo parlour for a little bit for the peace and...”

She was still speaking, but Draco was only half listening; his mind had snagged on one phrase *‘The separation seems to become unbearable after 6 hours’*. Was that truly how she experienced it? For him, it was much longer. With everything he knew about the bonding magic and everything she didn’t, she’d just told him more about the way she felt than even the bond between them could. It made him want to cross the room and cut off her stupid words with his lips and tongue. To wrap his body around hers and cradle her in that warmth, ready to protect, ready to defend. His witch.

But he couldn’t. That wasn’t how she wanted it to go. The only thing he could do was to keep looking for that book, listen to her ideas and give her what she wanted.

“If that’s what you want to do,” he said, realising she was looking at him, waiting for a response.

Hermione shifted a little closer —just a half step, but it was enough to put her within arms' reach.

“Isn’t it what you want to do?” she asked, and Draco wondered how he’d ever been awful enough to deserve this—to not only lose her but orchestrate it, starting with a lie.

“Why would I want to do that? Have you live somewhere else, dropping by just enough that you aren’t in pain?” he decided it was safest to answer her question with a question.

“Because I’m hurting you,” she said, her brown eyes wide and expression open, “I let this get out of control, and now I can feel it when we’re in the same room. Not all the time, but sometimes, you’re hurting, and I did that to you because I was selfish, short-sighted, and foolish. You can’t possibly want to live with me. Eat dinner with me.”

The words tumbled out of her in a cascade of emotion, the pace of them increasing the more she spoke and the frantic energy rolling off her in waves. Her breathing was shallow and jagged, and he recognised enough to see she was reaching a point of no return. The room was slipping away from her; she was slipping away from him.

“Granger,” he said, stepping forward and wrapping his hands around her shoulders. His first touch in months. He could have groaned with the relief and pleasure of it. Only her staccato breathing stopped him.

“Hey, Granger,” he repeated, and she stopped breathing completely. Her eyes were downcast, and her long lashes made shadows on her cheeks. “Look at me.”

When she didn’t move, he tentatively slid his hands to cradle her jaw and forced her to look at him.

“Look at me. I’m okay,” he said, taking long, deliberate breaths, hoping she would match his breathing just by virtue of their closeness.

Her brown eyes were steady, locked on his, and he couldn’t help himself. His thumb brushed gently across her cheek. Because he was still human, and it might be the last time he had ever had the chance. He hadn’t been aware before, hadn’t known the last time he touched her would be the last time. He could appreciate it now.

They stood in silence, he focused on the feel of her cheek against the pad of his thumb, her watching him with a studying gaze. Then her eyes flashed gold, and he couldn’t tell which one moved first. Lips met lips, tongue met tongue, and he was pulled under by the sensation of her.

She tasted so sweet after months of nothing. The unspoken conversation between their warring lips was one that had been shared by lovers for centuries. *I know you. I miss you. I love you.* The magic of their bond confirmed it, pulling taunt and tethering them to each other for a little longer.

The warmth of her face under his palms wasn’t enough; he wanted to touch more of her. Needed more of her. One of his hands went straight for her curls, something so uniquely

Hermione, and revelled in the silky feel of them. The tangle as her hairs wound their way around his fingers, tying them together in the way their magic was trying to. The second hand slid down her neck until it could slip under the hem of her jumper.

Like her taste, the feel of her skin was like coming home. He pulled the tortured jumper over her head. One less layer between them. A thin camisole and the shape of her. She was sharper than before, edges that cut him a little when pressed. However, it was all too easy to ignore them when she was moving against him. Sharing her own desperation. It was almost possible to forget it all, but the way her fingers raked through his hair, and how her little breaths harmonising with his moans to remind him of how good they were together.

Then, he felt moisture. Warm drops on his cheeks that immediately doused the fire that was building in his belly. The sound of Hermione's frantic breaths changed, and he realised that she was crying. Tiny sobs were breaking through the silent tears. With as much gentleness as he could, he pulled away, trying not to give in to the way her lips chased him as he went.

"Hermione," he murmured, his hands coming back to cup her jaw. This time, he used the gentle brush of his thumbs to smooth away her tears.

"I'm sorry," she sniffed, trying to twist in his grasp and free herself, "I'm so sorry, I'll go."

Draco tightened his grip, not to hurt her but to make sure she wasn't going anywhere. Not yet, at least.

"What happened today?" he asked, trying to decipher the whirlwind of actions and reactions, emotions and thoughts that had come home with her that evening.

"It's nothing," she said, her brown eyes pleading with him, "Really, I'm sorry. I should have stopped and thought. I never stop and think."

Her voice cracked on the last word, and Draco couldn't help himself. He pulled her to his chest and let her cry into his cotton T-shirt. Breathing in her basil and geranium perfume, he grounded himself in the present, not the fanciful what if, and prepared himself to be what she needed.

"I can go," Hermione said, pulling back, but again, Draco refused to release her.

"What happened?" he repeated, tucking her closer to him again. Merlin, it would hurt so much tomorrow when he wasn't able to hold her like this, but no part of him was capable of letting her go into the hall and disappear. Not with her cheeks still wet and his mind still reeling.

"It's silly," she said, and Draco would have bet all the gold in his vault that it wasn't.

But he didn't counter her; instead he whispered, "I like silly things."

Hermione pulled back and looked up into his eyes. Her own were ringed with red, but there were flicks of gold. She was there with him. She was feeling something. There was no way he could let her go.

"My mother remembered me," she said, her voice as close to breath as it could be.

"She did?" Draco felt hope roar in his chest. Maybe, if she got them back. Maybe.

"It's happened a couple of times; something just clicks or lifts. It never lasts, just a couple of hours. But she was there today. Had so many questions: why I looked so old, where they were, what had happened. All the questions, they upset my Dad and he got angry," she trailed off.

Draco tightened his hold on her slightly and swallowed. He remembered what happened when one of the Grangers got angry in their altered mental state.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked, hating the question and wishing she would stand long enough to allow him to inspect for bruises.

"No!" she sounded horrified, "No, he didn't touch anyone. Just yelling. But they were worried he might try and hurt Mum or himself, so they stunned him."

She sniffed and dropped her eye contact then as if she couldn't withstand his inspection any longer. With a nod, Draco pulled her back into the sanctuary of his embrace and dotted a kiss on the crown of her head just because he could. And he suspected that just this evening, she needed it.

"He just crumpled after they had done it. He looked so old and so weak. You know how people look when they've been stunned," she sagged against him as she spoke.

He did know. Once stunned, people lost all their colour—a still body with a grey pallor. No one should have to see someone they love stunned.

"Mum didn't want to leave him, so just sat at his bedside with me. Holding his hand."

Draco could picture it. Jean's eyes looking as compassionate and understanding as her daughters. Could imagine Hermione sitting next to her, wanting to hold her mother's hand herself but not daring to reach for it and take something more from her father. He wondered if she'd had a chance to get a hug from her mother at all before the period of lucidity lifted. Maybe that's why she sought his arms now.

"Was your mother angry?" he asked, thinking of the way Narcissa would unleash on him if he'd put her in a similar situation. Or maybe she wouldn't; instead, she would have offered a cold shoulder until he had earned his way back into her good graces.

"No," and on the single word, Hermione started sobbing again in earnest, "Why wasn't she angry? Why didn't she make me apologise or grovel or try and do something to make it up to her? She just sat there, stroking my father's face, holding his hand and asking me question after question about my life. Wanting my life to be..."

She didn't finish her last sentence, though Draco could guess what a woman who raised his wife would want for someone they loved. He groaned and let her cry. Let her grief siphon through the room.

“Stay here tonight,” he said, a statement more than a question.

“What?” Hermione pulled back. She looked horrified. “I’m not, I can’t, This can’t mean-”

“I know, Granger, but I’m not going to sleep if I can feel you breaking apart down the hall. Stay here.”

“But tomorrow,” she started and Draco just shrugged.

“Tomorrow, we can go back to pretending this never happened. This is us, Granger. I know where your lines are. Just do this for me tonight,” he held his breath as he finished speaking. Desperate to be able to do this for her. Wanted for one night, the chance to be that person for her.

She didn’t answer; she just took one step back and nodded. Her face was red and splotchy, eyes swollen; the most breathtaking wreck he’d ever seen. A little shudder ran through her body, and Draco noticed goosebumps across her bare shoulders and arms. It was too cold for her to stand there without something to wrap herself in.

“Stay right there,” he said, and only after she nodded did he rush to his walk-in wardrobe.

He grabbed a pair of grey pyjama bottoms and, in the briefest moment of self-indulgence, his quidditch jersey. The one with Malfoy emblazoned across the back. For the rest of the night, his focus would be entirely on her and what she needed, but he couldn’t stop himself from seeing her wear his name just once.

When he returned, she was standing shivering, her eyes far away. Draco dropped the grey bottoms on the ground and pulled the jersey over her head. She moved just enough to let him slip it on, her mind and gaze elsewhere. With a deep breath, he dropped to his knees and undid the button of her jeans.

“Ok?” he asked, looking up at her, “Just to change.”

Hermione looked down at him, that damn wrinkle back between her brows, and nodded. Draco swiftly removed her jeans and helped her step into the pyjama bottoms. They were too long, so he wound up the legs, and a little loose, so he tightened the drawstring. Returning to his feet, he pushed her unruly curls back off her face, taking his time to drink her in.

There were no words as he took her hand. No words as he pulled back the cover and helped her crawl onto his bed. No words as he filled a glass with a wandless *augamenti* and handed it to her to drink. He was silent still when she handed back the empty glass and settled on the pillows, and finally, there was only the noise of their staggered breaths as he pulled her flush against his front, buried his nose in her hair and waited for her to drift off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! So, a couple of things... the first is that the chapter count is jumping, just by two, and that's it... I think.

Secondly, random bouts of lucidity can and does happen with Alzheimers/dementia. It is often seen as a miracle but can often be very emotionally taxing for carers and family members.

Thirdly, a huge thank you to Orolin for cheer-reading this for me and to all of you for every comment, rec, kudos, etc. They make my day, you have no idea. ❤️

A Nosy Weasley and a Cliffside in Dorset

Chapter Notes

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

He wouldn't sleep. Not when her breathing evened out and her body let go of all the tension she usually held. Not when she whimpered in her sleep and tangled her fingers with his to pull his arms tighter around her. Not when he felt nothing but contentment through the bond. He wanted to savour every moment, unsure if he would ever get this opportunity again. So he would not sleep.

He was still awake when the light outside turned grey with the first rays of morning sun. He felt a shift in Hermione's body, heard a hitch in her breath. She was awake. He closed his eyes for the first time since she had climbed into the bed, so that if she looked, he'd appear to be sleeping, and waited for her to leave.

She didn't. For several long minutes, she lay next to him, her fingers entwined with his and breathed. Long breaths that pushed her back closer to his front and made him feel dizzy with want. Then she released his hand and twisted in his arms so she was facing him. He could feel her gaze on his face, and he did his best to ensure he looked relaxed, even though his mind was racing and his heart was waiting for the pain. It was longest minute of his life before he felt the soft brush of lips on his forehead and before he could exhale, she had slipped from the bed and stolen from the room.

The sheets beside him cooled instantly, but her scent lingered, and without opening his eyes, he rolled to grab her pillow and buried his face in it before letting the sleep he had fought off all night claim him.

She didn't return his jersey. Everything else went back to normal, with stilted conversation over breakfast, duel waves of concern and nerves through the bond, and the topic of Hermione leaving the Manor being (thankfully) abandoned. However, while the pyjama bottoms were left folded outside his door, the jersey remained with her. He wondered if she slept in it. He hoped that she slept in it - the same way he had fallen asleep with his nose buried in what he now thought of as *her* pillow every night.

Draco had been busy the morning after. He'd woken mid-morning and immediately set to work. He sent an owl to Susan to check on the Grangers. Stunning was a temperamental business; he wanted to ensure Mr Granger was recovering well, or Hermione would add it to the list of sins she was punishing herself for. He'd also sent word to Tonks that Hermione might need some company. He wanted to do it. Merlin knew he was desperate to but suspected Tonk's face might be more welcome. The fact she'd allowed him to comfort her the night before was miracle enough. Miracle and, like the missing jersey, enough to spark a tiny glimmer of hope.

And therein lay the main issue: Draco was 99% sure that nothing had changed, 92% sure she was okay(ish), and 96% sure that the best course of action was to keep returning to Grimmauld Place and searching for that gods-forsaken book. He'd been going whenever his schedule allowed, browsing each book in the surprisingly well-stocked library under the watchful eye of Ginny Weasley, who asked him questions like she was a NEWT examiner trying desperately to catch him out.

Most of her questions boiled down to 'What are your intentions?' and "What do you want?". She was relentless, no matter how often he'd answered honestly and confirmed he only wanted the book. It probably didn't help that Potter had definitely relayed his use of the word 'spectacular', and Ginny liked to slip it in conversation wherever possible. '*Would you like a teacake, Malfoy? They are spectacular*'; '*Are you attending the spectacular Oxford Christmas party this year?*'; '*You should sit in the armchair, Malfoy, Hermione picked them out, and you know her taste is spectacular*'.

Between the teasing and the questioning it was impossible to know Ginny's true feelings on the matter. There were times when Draco got the unnerveing sense that she was... rooting for him. Which didn't actually mean much if Hermione's feelings hadn't changed, and he was 98% sure they hadn't. It was just that 2% that bothered him. And without spending time with Hermione, it was impossible to know.

He brooded on the thought for a week. In between, making sure he found himself in a study spot close enough to her office in Oxford that the bond registered their proximity. Six hours. Her work day was 8; how many months had she spent her afternoons hurting? And the bond only amplified what already existed, so was it only 2%? Was he crazy to think the number could be higher?

In the end, it was Bobsy who provided the opportunity. As November came to a close, the elf left boxes of Christmas decorations around the Manor, a subtle yet clear message: '*Sort yourselves out, Christmas is coming, and there will be festive joy*'. It was the box in the middle of the breakfast table, in lieu of a flower arrangement, that did it.

"I think Bobsy wants to start preparing for Christmas," Draco said to her, trying not to feel too awkward as he abandoned the script they'd followed for months.

"Yes," Hermione replied. There was a wobble of nerves in the bond, but despite it, she put down her book and looked at him over her teacup instead.

"I need to start Christmas shopping," he continued.

In truth, he'd been thinking about the gifts he wanted to get people for some time. As a boy, the only gift he'd been responsible for was his Mother's. Narcissa had shopped (or organised the elves to shop) for everyone else- even his friends. The elves had done the wrapping and delivering of gifts. Not this year. This year, he would stroll down the high street and try to find clues about what people wanted, and his list of people to shop for was long.

There was one gift that he'd decided on months ago.

“Hermione,” Draco asked, her name curling through the air like a golden thread. He kicked himself for using her first name out loud; private thoughts did not make public words.

“Yes?” she asked.

She didn’t look annoyed, just curious. 95%. He was now only 95% sure that going to Grimmauld Place and looking for the book was the right thing to do.

“Are you doing anything today?” he asked, knowing it was a Saturday. She would usually be curled up in the library with a book and her cat while he went out to see friends and family.

“No,” she replied, and the curiosity was suddenly doused with apprehension.

“I can’t say much, given there are ears everywhere, but I would like to pick out a Christmas gift for Bobsy and Vim from both of us. Would you like to come with me to choose it?” he asked, trying to ignore how his palms started sweating.

He was not asking her on a date. This was strictly involving her in the running of the Malfoy estate, which, at least for now, she had full rights over. And yes, maybe it was a chance to spend more time with her and solidify those percentages. He wasn’t trying to change them; he was done with that, but maybe just... understand them.

“You don’t have to arrange a gift from both of us,” she started to say, and Draco felt himself deflate.

Well, he’d wanted to know and now, the flicker of hope was extinguished instantly. Didn’t need a day trip anywhere. He tried to smile at her to let her know there were no hard feelings; he knew she already watched him closely to try and decipher his pain.

“Actually, thank you. I would love to help you pick something for Bobsy and Vim,” she said, and the complete change of heart mid-sentence made Draco whip his gaze back to her to see her looking ... well a little pale, if he was honest.

“We’ll have to apparate,” he said, trying not to look too excited, especially in the face of her nerves, but desperate for her not to change her mind again. The smoking remains of his hope had flared back to life.

“Meet me at the front door at nine?”

She nodded and immediately sought sanctuary back in her book. He had no idea what had changed her mind, but he was grateful. He continued to be grateful as he went and dressed. Was grateful when she walked to him in her purple puffer coat and knitted hat. Grateful, as she tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and allowed him to apparate them away to a field near Downton.

A few sheep dotted the landscape and crumbling stone fences were interspersed among the modern steel and wire. He felt the ease of anti-muggle wards and before them a stone cottage shimmered into existence. Hermione still had hold of his arm as she looked around in wonder.

“Are you planning on giving Bobsy a sheep?” she asked, looking up at him, her gold eyes sparkling with humour. God, he loved her. The unbidden thought must have changed the feeling through the bond, and she looked away and disentangled her arm from his.

“No,” he said, trying to recover, “I’m giving them a cottage.”

Hermione looked shocked, “You’re giving them a cottage?”

“Well, technically, we’re giving them a cottage. All the buildings we’re looking at today are already owned by the Malfoy estate or are available for purchase with Malfoy gold, and as you are the mistress of both...” he let the thought finish itself.

He waited to see if she would tell him that they weren’t really married. Waited to see if she would reject the idea but she was silent. Just looking off at the sheep in the distance with a strange expression on her face.

“Unless you think he’d prefer a sheep?” Draco said, and Hermione turned to him and laughed.

It was a bad joke. He knew it was a bad joke. But seeing her laugh...it was like she was waiting for an excuse to release the tension that had wound itself through her and instead of crying, it came out in a joyful giggle, her nose scrunched instead of her brow.

“Shall we go inside?” he asked, wanting to keep the mood light and she nodded, following him to the door.

The cottage had a small mud room, where Hermione and Draco dutifully shucked coats and boots, before walking through to a completely modernised, open-plan kitchen.

“Vim would like this,” Hermione said, walking behind the island and running her hand across the knobs of the stove, “It’s a nice one.”

“You know about stoves along with history and magic?” Draco asked, unsure what to say to keep the lightness. To keep her talking.

“Oh yes, I had to listen as Ginny remodelled the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, and Harry insisted on muggle appliances. Which Ginny knew nothing about and Harry had no interest in helping and then Arthur got involved, and well, I know more about kitchen appliances than I have ever wanted to. This one is good,” she finished with a shrug and continued through the kitchen to the hall.

Draco took a breath and trailed after her. He’d seen the kitchen at Grimmauld. Had a cup of tea there when Ginny insisted he come and hold the baby so she could cook dinner one afternoon. It was a lovely kitchen, and Hermione belonged in it, holding a baby and drinking tea and looking at kitchen appliances with her friends. If he was successful, maybe she would be back there soon.

“It’s good there are three bedrooms,” she called back to him, and Draco quickened his pace to join her in a room that was not the primary bedroom but sizeable nonetheless. It had a large

window looking out over the fields, and Hermione stood in the centre of the room scrutinising it.

“Why?” he asked “Do Bobsy and Vim have children I don’t know about?”

He’d asked in jest, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he wondered if it was possible. He’d never thought to ask. Even now, had never seen their relationship as more than... what? As something less than one like his parents? As something designed just to serve him? Just when he thought he had conquered all the ills of his past, there were still things he’d been blind to. Like the fact that it was entirely possible Bobsy and Vim had children, now grown-up that would want to come and stay with them.

“No children... well, I think they might count you,” Hermione said, smiling, breaking through his spiral. She’d felt the panic and shame. He knew she had.

He exhaled and tried to look grateful, but the sick feeling lingered.

“Vim will want a sewing room,” she continued, “the light in here is good, and there is room for a large worktable just here.”

Hermione held out her arms to indicate where she thought the table would be best suited. Draco nodded, imagining the little elf sitting behind a machine, making the bright party dresses she favoured.

“A sewing room, right,” Draco nodded, focusing on the present. Hermione didn’t say anything more, just walked out past him to see the next room, but as she passed him she reached out and gave his forearm a gentle, comforting squeeze. Oh, he loved her.

There was less conversation at the next house. It wasn’t a home owned by the Malfoys already, so they were accompanied by a lovely witch who kept looking between Hermione and Draco when she thought they weren’t looking, trying to understand why the war heroine and the Death Eater were house-hunting for a small cottage in Kent. Hermione possibly didn’t notice. She asked a couple of questions but mostly wandered through the rooms before giving Draco a subtle shake of her head that the agent couldn’t see. He agreed; the house wasn’t right. The ability to be the man who was househunting with his wife for a small cottage in Kent with an audience, however had been thrilling.

The third cottage was near the seaside. They’d inspected the rooms, judged the kitchen and commented on the light before Draco suggested they take a walk down the sandy beach which was a defining feature of the property. Hermione wouldn’t walk on the sand but insisted he go and enjoy it. He’d done as he was bid but thought about her with every step.

“You don’t like the seaside?” Draco asked, joining her on the front porch, where she had taken up residence in one of the wicker rocking chairs, waiting for him to return.

This cottage was one his mother bought and decorated on a whim one summer when he was eight. She’d wanted to play at being a regular family on a beachside holiday. They’d stayed a

week before she had decided instead to sojourn at the estate near Lyon, where there were elves and French wine.

“Not since the war,” she said, her eyes never leaving the foaming sea.

He had no idea what had happened on a beach in her war experience; he had no memory of any battles or reports. Not that it mattered; it was clear from her eyes that whatever the beach now meant to her was heavy, not joyful. It was his turn to reach out and give her forearm a gentle squeeze.

“Bobsy would hate it anyway; there’s a greenhouse out the back,” he said and then, changing his voice to try and capture Bobsy’s squeaky, indignant tone, he added “*Gardening is not something Bobsy is interested in taking on.*”

Hermione looked at him and tried to fight the smile that twitched at the corner of her lips.

“Unless you think they’d like it regardless, then maybe I could offer to come and take care of the garden for him?” he added, privately thinking that Bobsy having Draco at his service would be a gift far greater than a cottage.

“No, it’s not the right one,” she said, standing, “You’re off the hook. Is there another?”

Draco just nodded, “There is, but I have to confess, I’m starving. Would you mind if we stopped and got some food?”

Hermione shook her head. Draco responded by offering his arm. He liked that when it was just the two of them, words were not always necessary.

She took it without hesitation and let him twist them away into nothing.

He took them to a secluded alley in the town near their next and last viewing. It was quiet, especially for a Saturday and as much as Draco wanted to find somewhere to get a curry, he had to settle for a dingy pub where he found them a booth and ordered himself fish and chips. Hermione ordered the same and watched him puzzled as Draco picked up his knife and fork to cut into his food.

“If you are going to give me a ribbing about being a posh prick for refusing to eat my food with my hands, you can save it, Tonks has already delivered that particular jib multiple times and failed to convince me to eat like a neanderthal,” he said, trying to stop her from looking at him the way Theo looked at his biology textbooks.

“No, it’s not that,” Hermione blushed, looked down at her food and picked up a chip.

“It’s a little bit that,” Draco encouraged good-humouredly.

“You and Tonks have become close,” Hermione observed.

“We have,” Draco considered how much to share.

He worried anything he said on the matter of Tonks and his family would be hurtful given her own situation but he also remembered how, in the long term, his friends avoiding any topic that might upset him had hurt all the more and so with a deep breath continued on.

“It’s nice meeting the part of the family isn’t homicidal. And being an only child, it’s nice having cousins for the first time. There are none on the Malfoy side. Malfoys only ever have one child per generation. No concerns then about competing heirs you see.”

Hermione nodded and seemed to be about to say something before she went back to her chips.

“Do you have cousins?” Draco asked, because he realised he didn’t know. The idea that she had a brood of relatives like the Tonks or Weasleys didn’t match the story he knew of the 11-year-old who joined a new world when she discovered she was a witch and never looked back.

“I do, a couple on Mum’s side and four on Dad’s. We saw them at all the regular times you see family growing up. But with the obliviation, they all think we’re missing, and I can’t very well show up at a family get-together after nine years and not have an explanation for Mum and Dad still being gone, can I? Besides, even if I could think of a good excuse for that, I don’t know how I could explain how I have changed.”

Fuck. This was the opposite of light. Where was a bad joke about a sheep when you needed it? As if she felt his discomfort in the tone change through the bond, she straightened her shoulders and tried to smile.

“Merlin, I am maudlin aren’t I? Sorry. What’s done is done. Tell me about the next cottage we’re looking at.”

Draco bought himself some time by taking a bite of his fish. He couldn’t quite understand what had just flipped. She’d been uncharacteristically open, and he couldn’t understand if her topic change was meant to protect her... or him. As strange as it was, it felt like the latter.

“It’s not far from here,” he answered her question after he swallowed, for no other reason than he didn’t know what else to say, “It’s the last one of the day and already owned by the Malfoy estate. My ancestors used it as a lookout, make sure the French weren’t about to invade.”

Hermione smiled and seemed relieved.

“It’s one of my favourite things about history; no matter Magical or Muggle, we’ve always worried about the French,” she said.

“*Oui, il ne faut pas faire confiance aux Français,*” Draco agreed and let her take the conversation to history and a place they were both comfortable. However, his mind was on their earlier conversation and how she quickly corrected herself.

After lunch, they’d walked to the cliffside cottage. They’d both wanted some exercise after the heavy meal and it wasn’t far. The day was windy but sunny, and Hermione’s woollen hat

did little to control her loose curls as they whipped around her, her own personal hurricane.

“Where are we?” she asked, looking at the ocean.

“On the Jurassic Coast,” he said, wondering if her aversion to the beach extended to their cliffside location.

Far from looking upset, Hermione had her eyes closed and was facing the wind. She let out a sigh so large he watched the rise and fall of her shoulders, and all the tension that held her together disappeared with the wind.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said, allowing her arms to fall next to her, fingers spread wide to weave with the wind.

“It is,” Draco agreed, and for him, the statement had little to do with the location.

The house was a short walk further along the cliff and was the biggest house they had looked at. A two-story, white-washed Georgian affair with a modern sunroom attached and a widow’s walk that might have been out of place with the architecture but a superb place for casting defensive spells. As soon as they entered the sitting room, with its large windows and high ceilings, he felt a crackle of magic. It was like the house knew.

“It’s stunning,” Hermione said, no reserve, no pretence, just gentle awe at the space.

The living room was lightly furnished, with an old couch, an end table, and an entire wall of bookshelves just waiting to be filled. A large stone fireplace at one end of the room, whitewashed walls and wooden floors that were as warm as the parquet at the manor was elegant

Draco walked ahead through double doors that led to a sunroom/conservatory, and he immediately imagined it filled with plants. And more bookcases, because who wouldn’t want to read surrounded by greenery.

When he turned back, Hermione had disappeared into the house, and he went from room to room looking for her. The bedrooms, four in total, were all on the second floor, decently sized and well-lit. The bathrooms were smaller than he was used to, but both had claw-foot tubs. He tried to imagine Bobsy and Vim going about the house, making it their home, but all he could envision was a curly-haired witch reading in the clawfoot tub or drinking tea tucked under a woollen blanket near one of the windows. It was dangerous.

Eventually, he found Hermione in the kitchen, standing over a sink that looked out to the fields behind the house. He was certain that come spring, they would be ablaze with colourful wildflowers.

“I wasn’t sure the perfect house existed, but this one might be it,” she said wistfully, speaking to him without turning around.

“It does have a certain *je ne sais quoi*,” he agreed, thinking how he would give her the keys in an instant if he thought she would accept.

"You really like to remind people you can speak French, don't you?" she said, turning to face him.

He shrugged and enjoyed the way her eyes sparkled at him.

"So far, the only use I've had for it has been impressing English witches," he said.

"Je n'ai jamais dit que j'étais impressionné," she quipped back with a near perfect accent, her chin slightly raised and smile smug.

He wanted to have her look at him like that across this kitchen for the rest of their days.

"The only issue is the stove," she said, gesturing to the decrepit appliance in the corner of the room, "Vim would never."

And like that, the magic was broken. He remembered why they were there and who would be living in this house.

"But other than that?" he asked.

"Other than that, this is the one," she said, stroking the butcher block countertops with a wistful smile.

"I'll find someone to replace the stove tomorrow," he committed.

It would do no good to linger in the fantasy, and as reckless as he had been lately, he still needed to protect himself a little. With one last glance around what could have been, he offered her his arm for a final time, and once more, she took it, allowing them to leave the perfect cottage and return to where they started.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all your comments and support and love as the final chapters come out. I appreciate it more than I can say. A big thank you to Orolin for alpha reading this.

A couple of bits of French this chapter

"Oui, il ne faut pas faire confiance aux Français," - Yes, you can never trust the French.

"Je n'ai jamais dit que j'étais impressionné," - I never said that I was impressed.

I am not a fluent French speaker or even a very good one, so I apologise if I have incorrect French. Happy to be corrected on it.

Last note is please be patient with me if the next chapter isn't delivered in exactly a week's time. I hope it will but honestly, the ending of a fic this long is super difficult to

write. I have a whole new level of respect for my favourite authors because it is hard work guys. I am still writing and working on it though! I hope you enjoy :)

Christmas

Chapter Notes

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

December passed with two moments to break the uncertain haze Draco walked around in. The first came a week in. The Manor had been draped in the same gold and scarlet as the previous year, though this year, Draco found he didn't mind it so much. There were holly and pine boughs and a scent that permeated every room that announced "It's Yule". Then Bobsy placed the box of silver snowflakes on a side table next to the tree in the library. He knew their significance. That was why he was leaving the decision of what to do them with Draco. Unfortunately, Draco had no idea, so he left the box there as an effigy to a relationship lost.

The second was the discovery of the book. After 17 sessions searching through the library, the innocuous silver cloth volume was found in the section dedicated to antidotes and countercurses. Ginny Weasley was sitting in her armchair, holding a sleeping baby as she tended to do most times he came to visit, when she noted Draco's stilled movements.

"Is that it?" she asked, her voice hushed so not to wake the baby.

"I think so," Draco replied, scanning the combination of potion recipe and ritual that would undo the bond.

Ginny came to stand beside him and read over his shoulder.

"I mean, you could always throw it in the fire and claim you never found it?" she said, and Draco turned around to look at her in shock. Her expression was surprisingly earnest.

"Mrs Potter! I thought you were meant to be a Gryffindor. Noble and self-sacrificing and all that?" Draco replied with an arched brow.

Ginny shrugged, "I thought you were meant to be a Slytherin. Unleashing cunning to get what one wants, ignoring rules, no line you won't cross, etc."

"Even without the book, I still wouldn't get what I want," he said, closing the tome and tucking it into his bag.

"Which is?" Ginny asked, and her tone of casual nonchalance caught him before he disclosed anything further.

"Nice try," he said.

"I got closer than I had before," she shrugged.

"Honestly, woman, it was only the red hair that saved you. You're a Slytherin through and through."

"Nah, I asked the hat to put me into Gryffindor. Wanted to be in the same house as Harry. I thought he was fit even at 11. Want a glass of wine before you go? Celebrate or drown your sorrows; still not sure which myself."

Draco stopped to consider it. Part of him thought it could be a good thing. Being friendly with Ginny. If nothing else, once it was all said and done, a connection could give him information on how Hermione was doing. Maybe even offer a chance to see her.

"I shouldn't," he said, knowing that if he inserted himself into Hermione's life, he wouldn't really be giving her the choice he was hoping to. He also knew his presence would be just another thing she'd feel guilty about.

"Want to get home to Hermione?" Ginny prodded, and Draco agreed for expediency's sake.

"Tell her I said hello."

Draco didn't do or say anything in response to that. He couldn't pass on any messages from Ginny because Hermione had no idea he was at Grimmauld Place. Although, now he had the book he would have to decide when to tell her about it.

Not until after the law had been overturned, he decided. There was no point in telling her until then.

Christmas Day. Following a family Christmas Dinner on Christmas Eve, where they had all eaten roast turkey in the formal dining room, and Draco and Hermione had handed over the keys to the Dorset House to a teary Vim and a begrudgingly approving Bobsy, they had all split up for Christmas Day. Bobsy and Vim to their new home to see what needed moving in, Hermione to spend the day with her parents at St Mungos and Draco to Andromeda's house for his first extended family Christmas in his life.

The moment he walked in the door, he was almost bowled over by Teddy, so hyped up that Draco knew without question that someone had given the child some form of sweets for breakfast. He bounced around Draco, describing the presents he'd received from Father Christmas and the way he'd found bootprints next to the fireplace, so he must be real. Draco listened, nodding in all the right places and tried not to feel too motion sick at the continuous bouncing and circling before he unshrunk the collection of presents from his coat pocket and asked for the boy's help to put them under the tree, which had been enough to send him spinning off in a new direction. Andromeda found him soon after, apologising she hadn't met him at the door like a host should.

As expected, she was dressed meticulously in formal robes, although a smudge of something on her forehead let him know she had been in the kitchen preparing the meal herself rather than relying on elves. It was the mix of familiar and new that had come to symbolise his new life.

“Draco! Merry Christmas,” she said, coming forward to wrap him in a warm hug and plant a kiss on his cheek, “Teddy has been waiting for you all morning.”

“Waiting for me or waiting for everyone to arrive so he is allowed to open the presents under the tree?” he asked and Andromeda responded with a knowing incline of the head.

“Yes, well, the rest of the family might be anticipating another Hufflepuff or Gryffindor, but you and I can see the Slytherin qualities in the boy,” she said.

“Whether they be learnt traits or inherited,” Draco agreed, and Andromeda gave him a cheeky wink.

“It’s a grandmother’s prerogative. Come into the kitchen and get something to drink. I think you have about four minutes until Teddy’s hair changes to a shocking shade of red and we are all instructed to sit down for gifts.”

It was only three minutes. Then Draco found himself squeezed in between Tonks and Ted, watching as Teddy delivered gifts in age order and everyone tore the wrapping paper off thoughtful gifts, useful gift, funny gifts, smiling and thanking each other until there was nothing left but piles of crumpled paper and empty cups.

Ted got up to help little Teddy on the floor with a new building set, giving Tonks and Draco room to spread out a little and relax into the soft cushions of the couch.

“So, Ginny told me you found the book?” Tonks said, not even bothering with small talk about the presents or the small boy in front of them.

“Yes,” Draco said, bristling at the mention of it when the morning had been such a lovely distraction.

“Are you going to give it to her then?” Tonks pressed. There was no need to extrapolate who “her” was.

“I was going to wait until the law had been overturned as well. Give her the divorce papers at the same time. Make sure it’s a valid choice and all that.”

Tonks said nothing for a while, although Draco knew her well enough by now not to be fooled by the docile way she turned her eyes back to her son and the crackling fire in the hearth. The witch was about to deliver a statement designed to cripple him.

“Are you going to let her know that you are a valid choice?” Tonks asked, tone brusque.

“Sorry?” said Draco. Whatever he thought Tonks was going to say, it wasn’t that.

“You’re going to all this effort to make sure she has the choice to leave, but you haven’t told her the reasons she should stay.”

Draco didn’t know how to respond to that. Asides from the fact that from his perspective, it was pretty damn clear that he wanted her. He’d told her in flowers, and he’d tried to show her

in everything he did; he could feel how much he wanted her through the bond, and surely she felt it, too.

“Did you know that Remus and I were only married a year before he died, not even, 11 months,” Tonks said, and Draco was surprised but not displeased by the change of topic.

“I did not,” he said.

“We could have had longer, could have had double that amount of time, but he was being an *absolute wanker* who refused to—” she stopped herself mid-sentence and took in a breath, “Okay, that’s not entirely fair; I was also being a stubborn witch, so all the blame can’t be placed entirely... anyway, my point, is we both had our own views of our situation and rather than talking about them and being very clear about what the other one wanted, we had half conversations and made assumptions and got scared and regretted things. I don’t want you to have the same thing with Hermione.”

“So I need to?” Draco asked, unsure what this story meant to his situation but trusting Tonks enough that if she was sharing this with him, it was worth listening to.

“You don’t *need* to do anything if you don’t want to. But, knowing who you are, the person you’ve become, I think you’d be doing both yourself and Hermione a disservice if you don’t make sure she knows exactly what you think, what you feel and why you are a choice.”

Tonks paused only long enough to reach out and take his hand to give it a comforting squeeze.

“For what it’s worth, once you show her all of you and tell her all of it, she’d have to be daft not to see that you are the best choice she could make.”

It was Draco’s turn to look at the fire and pretend he didn’t feel the pressure building behind his eyes. Instead of speaking, he squeezed back.

“Hello Tonks Family!”

In the fireplace, the Potter family materialised in a whoosh of green flames.

“James!” yelled Teddy, getting up from where he was building on the floor to grab the small boy’s hands and drag him to the toys while Ginny and Harry were swept up in hugs and compliments for the tiny bundle in Ginny’s arms.

“What are the Potters doing here?” Draco asked Tonks, surprisingly comfortable with seeing his former rival and his wife dressing in lumpy jumpers over formal wear.

“They like to spend time with Teddy at Christmas,” Tonks replied, and Draco put it all together in his head, remembering Tonks’ Christmas from the year before.

“And usually you spend the evening at the Weasley’s so they can do that,” Draco said.

Tonks shrugged, “Usually, but you’re family, and we thought you might not be comfortable with that, so we decided to host them here instead.”

The prickling pressure was back. No one had ever taken his comfort into such consideration before. Well, no one outside of Bobsy and Hermione, anyway.

“Don’t get too emotional, you prat; we’re giving you one year of amnesty. Next year, you’re going to have to get over yourself because Molly’s turkey and pudding really is too good to miss out on two years in a row.”

Tonks gave him a friendly bump with her shoulder before going to greet Harry and Ginny, and the image of them all together made Draco have the most alarming realisation. Given that he and Tonks were family and Teddy and Harry were family (in a way), had he somehow ended up related, albeit tenuously, to the bespeckled saviour himself? It was ridiculous enough of a thought to make him chortle.

Harry, as if summoned by the laugh, plonked down beside him.

“Malfoy,” he said, leaning back and looking over the children playing amongst the brightly coloured paper.

“Potter,” Draco replied, unable to conjure even a touch of derision.

“There’s Nothing better than children and family at Christmas,” Harry said, and Draco nodded, accepting that, regardless of his involvement, this conversation would proceed.

“Indeed, for all your supposed successes, the greatest might be you have cute children,” Draco drawled, watching as the dark-haired James sat next to Teddy, looking intently as the finer points of some toy were explained to him.

“Thanks, Malfoy,” Harry said, surprised.

“You’re shit at naming them, though. Please, for the love of Godric Gryffindor, let Ginny name the next one,” Draco followed up.

Predictably, Harry just laughed good-naturedly. Bloody wanker. When did he become so easygoing? Again, as if summoned, Ginny came to sit on the other side of Harry.

“Hermione not with you?” she asked, adjusting her clothing to feed the youngest Potter.

The first time she’d done it in the library, Draco almost strained his neck, unsure of where to look, and he got the sense the redhead did it on purpose now to see if she could unsettle him and get him to disclose something he might not otherwise.

“No, she’s with her parents,” he said, wondering if the rest of his life would involve fielding awkward questions about Hermione at family gatherings.

“Shame,” Ginny sighed, “Ron always tried to convince her to take a step away and celebrate with the family that still remembered her, but she never would. Wouldn’t let herself enjoy them.”

Draco suddenly felt very uncomfortable with the premise that he was here wrapped in love and family, and Hermione was where? Wrapped in peach walls in a hospital. But then he

remembered the way she had looked returning the year previous. She didn't look unhappy that evening. Rather, she'd glowed. At least until he had opened his stupid mouth and ruined it all. It was at definite odds with what Ginny was describing.

"And she always insisted on visiting alone. Which I suppose was a blessing. No man would want to spend every Sunday and holiday in a hospital. Ron certainly would have gotten extremely petulant if he had to miss Mum's roast—"

"Excuse me," he said, standing.

With a stiff bow of the head, he passed on his yuletide greetings to a smirking Ginny Weasley and made his way to the kitchen to find his Aunt and apologise. Despite the love and care his family had shown him, at least until the choice had been made, he had somewhere else he needed to be.

"I was wondering if you were going to show up," Susan said, leaning back in her chair. A striped red and green elf hat sat jauntily on her head, and flashing snowman earrings dangled from her ears.

"Yes, well," Draco shifted his feet, unsure how to tell her that he had not been invited and what he was currently doing could be considered borderline stalking.

"I take it Hermione didn't know you were coming?" she asked, eyes wise.

"The last time we talked about her parents and the hospital, I was explicitly instructed to stay away from them," Draco admitted.

"Hmm... Well, we best make sure you're not spotted then," Susan nodded and standing, cast a quick disillusionment charm over him, "Come on."

Without a thorough explanation as to what she had planned, Draco had no choice but to follow her down the hallways, peeking into the sitting rooms, which had all been transformed into seasonal oases.

"You know, working at Christmastime has been much easier this year," Susan said casually, slowing her pace to a stroll.

"Really?" Draco replied.

"Hmm, apparently, there was some posh prat who gave a bunch of money. There are more staff all of a sudden. We've even been able to take residents out and about. To the park and such. A park which, having also been donated by the same posh prat, can be permanently warded against muggles."

Susan turned and raised an eyebrow and though Draco knew she couldn't really see him, he made a point of holding her eye contact until she seemed satisfied.

"I suppose she doesn't know about any of that either?" she asked and shook her head with a sigh when Draco said nothing.

"Good grief, you pair."

They'd reached the door to the Grangers' room and Draco was grateful to the glass that allowed him to peer in on his wife. They were all sitting on the floor in front of a tree decorated with a mismatch of decorations. Some handmade, some gaudy and plastic. Like last year, Hermione was wearing the ugly jumper, and he noted her parents had matching ones. Nestled in her curls was a paper crown, and this year, he recognised the childish scrawl as Jean's. Most significantly, they were all smiling.

"There are moments," Susan said and Draco realised that she had been watching the family too, "It's why I do this job. There are moments that are such undiluted joy they make it worth it. I just wish they came more frequently."

Draco felt his throat get tight and nodded. He knew much about little moments, jumping between them like stepping stones across a wide river of grief and despair when you couldn't see the other bank.

"She talked about you, you know," Susan continued, and this made Draco tear his eyes away from the Grangers back to the mediwitch.

"When her mother was lucid last, Hermione told them about her husband. Told them little stories about you, your garden, that you bought her flowers and played piano. The meals you ate together and the fact you never once complained about her reading."

The tightness gave way to prickling in his eyes now.

"When it comes to moments of joy, Malfoy, you've given her so many. So that you know."

A bell chimed somewhere, and with a final nod, Susan turned to go back to the front desk, leaving Draco to watch his wife and think.

He wasn't so self-deprecating to think he was bad for Hermione. He knew he made her happy far more than he made her sad. He knew he understood her in a way that maybe no one else did. He could accept her just as she was now, not the fabled war hero who solved everything. He didn't need her to do anything or be anything except who she was. Hermione needed to know that in those moments of joy that she used like stepping stones to make it through her life, he wasn't being used like the stone; he was jumping right alongside her.

However, she didn't know, because Tonks had been right earlier in the evening; he hadn't told her. He hadn't said the words he felt every time he looked at her. Hadn't told her what he wanted. While he could stand at the window and come up with all sorts of theories of what Hermione wanted, why she acted in a certain way, and what she would do if he said the three words that burned him from the inside; until he found the courage to say them, they would be just theories.

Draco didn't stand and watch for very long. Maybe fifteen more minutes, before he went back to floo, returned to Andromeda's and sat down to eat with his family after a knowing look between him and Tonks. He enjoyed the meal, toasted the year but didn't linger after Christmas dinner.

It felt good to be back at the Manor. The dark hallways and quiet rooms gave him time to think. He poured himself a drink and took to walking the halls of his home.

In stark contrast to the Dorset House, where walking through the hall made him dream about the future, walking through the Manor connected him with the past. Memories, both good and bad, lingered in the grand estate. Moments he'd regret for the rest of his life and moments he wouldn't give up for the world. Learning to sit with both was difficult, but he felt closer to being able to do it.

When he got to the library, the box of silver snowflakes drew him in. He sat in front of the tree and stared. A memory that he both regretted and wouldn't trade. The first time she said his given name. The way she smiled when she saw him. Stepping stones of joy. The decorations nestled in their boxes represented their first ones together.

He finished his wine and poured another. Then, humming a Christmas song he'd heard many, many times as he'd let himself explore the shops and find something for every person in his life, he took each snowflake from the box and placed them on the tree.

"You liked them, then?" Hermione's soft voice interrupted his humming.

"I love them," he said honestly, turning to face her and seeing the same happy woman that he did last year when she came home. Christmas jumper, paper hat and a smile so beautiful it made all the nerves in his body alight in anticipation.

"Come and have a drink with me?" he asked before he could think better of it.

Hermione agreed and walked to the chair next to him. Draco conjured another enamel mug and poured her some wine. Hermione quirked a brow when he handed it to her in question.

"I've decided wine tastes better this way," Draco said, speaking the truth. The mugs would always remind him of the nights with her by the piano, and that would make whatever was in them taste better.

The silence was easy, and the light was low. It could be the perfect night to talk to her.

"You know, the sheet music you gave me last year was the first non-book present I'd received in quite a while," Hermione said, breaking the silence.

"You got the sheet music?" Draco asked in surprise, wondering why she hadn't said anything but knowing he could hardly judge. He'd never said anything about the snowflakes, either.

"Bobsy brought it to me with a few choice muttered words about you," she laughed at the memory.

"I bet. I have a few choice words about my past self from that night as well," he agreed.

Silence fell again, and Hermione studied him closely enough that all the hairs on his arms stood up.

“You planned a Christmas dinner for us last year, didn’t you?” she asked.

“I did, and then promptly neglected to invite you to it like a prat,” he replied.

More silence. Draco allowed it to wash over him, hopeful that the silence meant she was thinking about it, considering him or even them.

“Did you want me to have Christmas Dinner with you this year?” she asked, her tone curious and Draco, unable to figure out the answer she wanted him to give, decided to go with the honest one.

“No, I think you were exactly where you meant to be,” the answer tumbled from his lips and his eyes didn’t leave the tree, “I would have liked to come with you, though.”

A tiny inhalation of breath and then more silence. Draco felt his heart thud at his admission and waited for Hermione to excuse herself.

“But you did come to check on me, anyway, didn’t you?”

That was enough to draw his gaze. How did she know? In answer to his unspoken question and quizzical gaze, she just held her hand over her chest and gave it two taps. Ah, right.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, “Your visit made my evening much more pleasant.”

Now was the moment. In the quiet solitude, he could tell her. The words would come so naturally now. And yet, he wanted to be a coward for a little longer. A coward could still sit in front of a glimmering Christmas tree and feel hope in the silence.

Chapter End Notes

So close to the end now. Two more chapters and then two epilogues. I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who has been reading along with me since February. I will get all emotional at the last one, but I am learning that writing the end to a fic is an emotional experience.

Thanks to Orolin for cheerreading. Thank you to everyone who has left a comment or a kudos or recc’d my fic somewhere. They all make my day and keep me writing.

Enjoy!

The Weight of a Fight & A New Year's Kiss

Chapter Summary

We're so close! One more chapter to go (and then epilogues)! A massive thank you to everyone who has comments, recc'ed kudos, said a nice thing about this fic to anyone at all. A huge thank you to Orolin for her wonderful cheer reading and the rest of my writer friends in SPEW for keeping me going as I've learnt the lesson that every first time writer has to learn; the ending chapters are the hardest to write, no exception. Seriously, the hardest.

On Boxing Day, Draco was woken by an owl tapping at the window. He was never woken by an owl. The night before had been a late one; he and Hermione had sat by the tree in the library for hours, sometimes silently drinking, sometimes talking about their Christmases. She had told him about her parents and their gifts and day, and he had revealed his epiphany that he was tenuously related to Harry Potter. She'd laughed at that. Claimed it was a far easier relationship to manage now he didn't have the weight of the wizarding world on his shoulders.

At no point did the conversation feel too heavy, nor did he feel the need to worry about tomorrow. He just enjoyed the hours with her until the bottle of wine was empty, and they had walked silently to their rooms.

Now, however, tomorrow was pecking at his window with a furious urgency.

"Just hold on a minute," Draco grumbled at the impatient owl as he rolled out of his bed and reached for a robe to protect himself from the chill.

His door flew open before he could reach the window, and Blaise strode into the room.

"Oh good, you're up," he said while Draco gave him a look as he took the thick roll of parchment from the owl, who subsequently flew away without so much as waiting for a scratch.

"Yes, I'm up. What are you doing here?" Draco asked, wondering if Hermione was still in bed or whether she would be waiting for him at breakfast.

"The Wizengamot, they're going to start hearings on the Marriage Law appeal tomorrow," Blaise said, and Draco noticed the man looked visibly stressed.

"Tommorrow?" he clarified.

"Tomorrow," Blaise confirmed, "I'm going to guess further details are in that scroll you've just been delivered."

Draco paused to unroll it and confirmed that it was indeed news that the Wizengamot would reconvene tomorrow at 8am.

“I think they were hoping to catch us off guard and count on everyone being distracted by Christmas and New Years. Have some half-baked hearing and do nothing while no one is reading the paper,” Blaise added.

“Are we off-guard?” Draco asked.

“Half the Lobby are away with their families; what do you think?”

“Fuck!” Draco cursed, running his hand through his hair. All their work, everything he had wanted to put together for Hermione and it might not come to fruition because no one had the foresight to see what was a pretty predictable course of action by the arseholes at the ministry.

He took a couple of deep, clarifying breaths.

“What do you need?” he asked Blaise.

There was no point in dwelling. They needed to act.

“I need people,” Blaise said, “I need people to work on travel, I need people to prepare the arguments, I need people working on the press strategy. Naturally, the head of the lobby is off at some unreachable retreat in Norway somewhere, so I might need an international portkey to go and get the man myself.”

Draco nodded. He could help. He could do some of the work himself and go into the office to ensure things were happening while Blaise went off on his mission to retrieve the boss. There was just one little thing that gave him pause.

Last night, he had been so close. They had been so close, and to leave the Manor now, he didn’t want to. Yet, the parchment he was holding, a summons to help with the campaign now in doubt, was heavy and his to pick up. So, no matter how much he wanted to stay, he assured Blaise he would dress and be on his way. They had a fight to win.

In the next few days, Draco realised why generations of Malfoys had avoided hard work. He’d become a glorified clerk of sorts, not important or knowledgable enough to determine things like strategy but competent enough to find precedents and summarise statistics. The lead lawyer would enter the conference room where Draco and a couple of other staff had been working, hand off a request for information and stride off again.

Blaise had been there, but his role seemed to focus squarely on logistics. Ron and Cho also came by the office, meeting eyes with Draco just once through the plate glass wall of the conference room. Ron had given Draco a curt nod before being bundled off into a separate space. They would have a big job, trying to catch everyone’s attention while the public’s bellies were full and their heads merry.

In between it all, Draco made sure to check back into the manor. He was usually gone before Hermione came down to breakfast and back late after dinner. Still, he made excuses to get books from the library throughout the day so he would be close to her, relieve the irritation of the bond, and, if he was lucky, catch a glimpse of her. She hadn't asked what he was doing, but he knew she was curious. Could feel it through the bond. Perhaps that was why he took his paper from the breakfast table each morning, so she couldn't be made aware of the rumblings. There was no need for her to spend any of her energy on it.

"Have you thought about what you'll do if the amendment passes?" one of his coworkers asked one afternoon as they sifted through papers, making notes.

"Hmm?" replied Draco, distracted.

"Will you celebrate, hold a divorce party?" she prodded, and Draco put down his papers to look at her properly.

She was younger than him by several years, probably fresh out of Hogwarts and as such, he had no idea who she was. And while the witch no doubt knew him by name, she had no idea what he was doing volunteering for the Lobby. As he'd insisted, his involvement had stayed anonymous save for this desperate effort now, something that could be passed off as a favour to Blaise.

"No," he said, "I will feel many things should this pass, but I will not be celebrating."

"Oh," the young witch dipped her head and Draco thought that was the end of it until something flashed in her eyes.

"I will be," she said, voice quiet but vicious, glaring at the thin gold band that adorned her left hand.

Then she returned to her stack of papers and Draco to his, suddenly aware of how much bigger this was than him and doing something for the woman he loved. Other people needed this amendment to pass. It was later than usual when he finally crawled into bed that night.

Draco didn't see the victory. Sitting in the gallery while Cho, Ron and the lawyers delivered their arguments would have given himself away, so he had to wait for news in the floo parlour of Zabini Manor with Luna keeping him company not 5 days after Christmas.

"It passed!" Blaise said the moment he came through the floo, throwing the papers onto Draco's chest and sweeping his wife up into a kiss that went a beat too long to be appropriate.

Draco scrambled to sit, flicking through the pages handed to him to try to understand the particulars of "it passed." The documents were a jumble of technical language and half-concocted notes.

"What does that mean, Blaise," he asked when he could make neither hide nor hair of the words before him and Blaise reluctantly pulled away from Luna to come to sit across from

Draco.

"It means there'll be no more mandated marriages. It means those who want to divorce can get divorced. It means we won," Blaise said, and Luna bought over drinks, whiskey, not champagne. She knew.

As satisfying as *finally* putting the ministry in its place was, winning and its implications were heavy. His heart was heavy. He'd won, but now the thing he'd been dreading was possible. He realised that, much like his wedding, he hadn't been quite able to believe it would happen until he was staring down the barrel of it.

"Right," said Draco, swirling the whiskey around in his glass, "Right."

"Weasley and Chang were so overjoyed, I think they left the Wizengamot chamber to go straight to file. The stiff handshake they gave each other when the verdict had been passed down was the perfect illustration as to why it was insane to pair people together and then expect they would suddenly jump to procreating."

"They can do that, file immediately?" Draco asked, less interested in the dynamics between Cho and Weasley and more surprised at the speed with which the process could take place.

"They will need to find a lawyer to prepare the documents, but maybe they did that beforehand on the assumption we'd be successful."

Draco nodded and swirled his drink again, "I suppose I'll need a recommendation for a lawyer to draw up the papers, then."

Everyone stilled.

"Are you sure?" Luna asked, "I mean, I know why this all started, but Blaise and I thought that given a little more time..."

Draco knew the witch was thinking of the way water wore at rocks.

"I'm sure," he said, ready to follow through on all that he had promised.

Blaise agreed to send some owls in the morning, and a pensive mood fell over the group. Draco was grateful for them; he didn't want to be alone, but he didn't want to talk either, and his friends seemed content watching the fire and being with him.

There was no question where Draco would find Hermione on New Year's Eve. He could sense where she was without the pull of the bond to guide him. He put it off, though, waited in his study writing her one last letter. There was a moment before the inevitable. He made the moment last as long as he could because once it was done, there would be no going back.

Like last year, the library was dark when he entered, and her small frame was silhouetted against the starry sky from where she sat on the window seat. Hermione Granger in her natural habitat. She was stunning. Fragile yet impossibly strong, small and yet her presence overwhelmed him.

“Hermione,” he said, coming to sit beside her. When she turned, he was relieved to see that her face was not glistening with tears like the last time they sat together like this.

“Hi,” she said softly, moving her legs to make space for him. He was close enough to smell her perfume and feel her warmth unfurling towards him like her magic.

“Nowhere else to be tonight?” she asked, repositioning her blanket to cover them both.

“Nowhere I wanted to be more than here, no,” he said, palms turned upwards, face open. He had decided that he was going to tell the truth this evening. Even if the truth was scary.

“Draco,” she said in a reproachful tone, looking away and he felt her ready to retreat.

“No, don’t do that,” he said, needing her to stay, “please. Just. I don’t really know where to start but I just need to-”

He hadn’t planned this bit in his head. He hadn’t wanted the time to cast a critical eye over his speech and tweak it to try and engineer a particular answer.

“Look, I have these for you,” he gripped the divorce papers that Blaise’s lawyer had drawn up at record pace and the front page of The Prophet from the day after they had won against the Wizangamot and pushed them into her hands.

Her eyes grew wide as she took them in. Understanding dawning as she made the connection between the two documents.

“I heard you, when you said you didn’t want to be married, Hermione.”

He couldn’t help it, he reached for her hand and held it between both of his, hoping the contact would give him the strength to do what he needed to do next.

“I will always listen to you and believe you when you tell me you need something. So if you don’t want to be married, I’ve already signed those for you.”

Hermione didn’t pull her hand away, just looked between their entwined fingers and the papers.

“But the bond,” she whispered, and Draco shook his head.

“I know how to break the bond. We can thank the Black family for that; they never enter into anything without an escape plan. The book with the ritual is in my room. If you say the word, I will start brewing the potion for it tonight.”

“I....” Hermione trailed off, and Draco took great liberty in reaching up and pushing a curl behind her ear.

"You always deserved the choice, Hermione. If there was ever anyone who had earned the right to live life on their own terms, it's you," he whispered, trying to memorise the feel of her jaw under his fingertips. He watched her swallow, her eyes locked with his.

"However, in the interest of honesty and choice, I have something else for you too."

He removed both his hands from her person to reach into his pocket and pull out a small velvet box. Slytherin green. He was still a Malfoy and wanted to give her this as a Malfoy, complete with his checkered history, best intentions and hopes for the future. With a flick of his thumb, he opened the box and the pale purple stone glittered in the low light.

"This was the ring I should have chosen for you the day my Mother came with the options. This was the ring that made me think of you even then," he said, "But I was in denial. I never thought you would choose to marry me. Which was laughable because we didn't have a choice. Neither of us did."

"But now we have the choice and I need you to know, I choose you," he said.

There was a time and place for fancy words, but this was not one of them. He wanted so badly to put the ring on her. He barely stopped himself from plucking it from its velvet nest and slipping it onto her finger. He couldn't yet, not until he said the rest. Not until she had confirmed it was what she wanted.

"I choose you because I love you. Every part. Exactly as you are. And because I love you, I want you to be happy. So, I've signed those papers because if you don't want to be married, I will respect that."

He paused letting her consider his words. Watching her face for signs that she understood what he was saying. When the telltale tickle of understanding came down the bond, he continued.

"However, I would be a fool not to also tell you, that I think we are spectacular together. I think we deserve a life together, complete with everything that entails. I think that maybe, you might love me the way I love you."

He put voice to the thought that had been crowding his mind for weeks. The idea that despite everything, she felt the same. Which led to the crux of it; what he wanted from her. The thing Ginny Weasley had been trying to weasel out of him.

"I'm giving you the choice, Hermione, and I want you to choose me too."

His declaration hung in the air, far more potent than the wedding rites had been that day in the garden. He hadn't appreciated what he was entering into that day. A whole year and a half later, he knew.

She didn't move; her eyes were locked on him, gold flickering in the light. She hadn't run. The bond writhed between them, almost tangible, as if it knew something was about to happen. Then, somewhere in the manor, a clock chimed. Midnight.

Like the year before, he heard a stupid, reckless inner voice reminding him that he could kiss her. This year, he listened to it. Draco leaned forward and brushed her lips in a chaste kiss—barely a touch but enough to create a frisson of electricity between them—enough to convey his desperate, selfish hope.

“On the off chance that means I get to spend the New Year with you,” he whispered against her mouth before slowly pulling away.

Hermione was still, the flashes of light from the Muggle fireworks on the horizon painting her face a myriad of colours. Still without speaking, she raised her fingers to her lips, and the gentle brush seemed to break her from her stupor.

“I-” she tried to start again, but before she finished the sentence, she stood, the ring and the papers tumbling from her lap and fled the room.

A Drawer Full of Letters and a New Normal

Chapter Notes

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

“Now you see, *that’s* the ring you should have given her at the start of all this, and maybe it wouldn’t have turned into such a long-drawn-out affair.” Bobsy’s scathing tone dragged Draco from his restless sleep and forced him to open his eyes to the glaring light of day.

“Didn’t I give you a cottage recently? In an effort to stop this delightful overstepping you seem to favour?” Draco groaned, sitting up and snapping the ring box closed so the purple stone couldn’t twinkle at him accusingly anymore.

Merlin, his back hurt and this year, no one had thought to tuck a blanket over him. Sleeping on the window seat was not something he wanted to do regularly.

“I believe when you gave me the key, you said the floo was always open or something to that effect,” said Bobsy, pointedly looking at the divorce papers as he climbed up on the window seat next to Draco, “You know, it’s almost insulting. Generally, the child flies the nest when the time is right. Doesn’t kick out the Mama Bird under the guise of giving them a house that, in all honesty, is far too windy.”

“You don’t like it?” Draco asked, although his mind was trying to figure out how to tease the elf about referring to himself as a ‘Mama Bird’.

“Wind is the enemy to the house elf’s ears, Draco. Aside from the fact our hearing is better than yours so it sounds like a jet plane, it’s cold. And when an elf’s ears get cold, they hurt. It’s fairly common knowledge, which makes the choice of house curious when I consider a cottage in Downton that would have been better suited. It’s almost as though two idiots went house hunting and picked out a property that seems more to the taste of a recluse and a bookworm. Ones who might one day give me some babies to dote on and hopefully raise to be less angst than their parents. If they’d thought about keeping the house for themselves, of course, instead of giving it to me,” Bobsy said leadingly.

Draco groaned again.

“I am still in possession of the ring Bobsy. I don’t think a house would be well received.”

“Hmm” Bobsy was noncommittal, “You’re also still in possession of unsigned divorce papers, so not all is lost. You should put them somewhere safe Master Draco. Your study, perhaps?”

Draco was about to point out that he had signed them and therefore they needed to go to Hermione’s room to await the day when she would no doubt add her own signature before he stopped and narrowed his eyes.

“You think they belong in my study?” he asked.

"Hmm, you certainly have room, what with a magically extended drawer and all," Bobsy looked down to examine his nails.

Draco felt his chest seize violently. The drawer. All those letters. Surely Bobsy wouldn't have... he pushed off the window seat, ready to run to his study, both needing to see what mess awaited him and dreading all the secrets that could have been revealed. Or more alarmingly, all the ugly parts of himself that had been transformed into ink and parchment and preserved for all time.

"Wait!" Bobsy yelled, and Draco froze and turned back to face him.

"Take this," Bobsy tossed him the ring box which Draco caught, "And pray that you need it because Bobsy is not paid enough to deal with his level of stress."

Draco knew, intellectually, what he would be walking into when he entered his study. To see it though, that was another thing entirely.

Hermione sat on the floor surrounded by thousands of pieces of parchment. The ones closest to her all bore the salutations 'Dear Granger', 'Dear Hermione', 'Love', but on the outer reaches, he could see his angry scrawl to Potter, long letters to his mother, actual correspondence between him and the Lobby and him and the hospital. Every letter he'd ever written was cast around her like a halo. The witch herself looked overwrought. Dried tears crusted her face, and her unkept hair and heavy expression belied the absence of sleep.

Draco dared not approach, just stood, leaning in the doorway watching as she held certain letters in her hands, her eyes devouring the words before putting one paper down just to pick up another. Some had clearly been read many times before if the tear-marked ink was anything to go by. The dread that had forced him into action in the library changed now he could see the aftermath. It was a kind of hollow acceptance. He'd wanted her to know it all; well, she did now.

"How did you know I wanted to get married in a church in Scotland when I was a girl," she said, fresh tears breaking through as she turned to look at him.

Draco couldn't help but smile. Of all the things that he wrote.

"I didn't. It was just a hunch," he said.

"I'm never going to have that wedding now," she said, tears flowing freely and Draco fought every instinct to go to her and wrap her in his arms. Just as he had needed to do some things on his own, she needed the same, "Even if there had never been a law, my Dad can't... it's something I can't do."

"I know, love," he said and watched as she shuffled through the papers again.

"You made my birthday cake?" she asked, reaching for another letter, and he nodded.

“And I’d still love to cook you dinner,” he confirmed, “Although, I can not for the life of me make a curry that tastes as good as takeaway.”

“They use more butter and salt; that’s why it tastes so good,” Hermione said, the facts spilling from her lips as if she couldn’t help herself, and Draco smiled. His witch.

“No one ever spat on me,” she changed the topic again, and though what she said was good, the reminder of all the heavy topics they’d avoided, all the trauma they both carried, was a punch to the gut.

“Good,” he said, watching as she almost frantically searched for another letter.

She had to search further afield this time, and she shifted endless papers until she found a typed one. Ah, so they would be talking about that next.

“You were the one who fought the Marriage Law,” she sniffed.

“Not by myself. I merely started the process, made sure it had funds,” he could not take all the credit.

“But why?” she asked, grasping around for different letters, these he recognised as recent, from the month of December, post the Dorset house, where he mostly filled the parchment with terms of endearment and the fantasies he had for their future, “You want- and last night you said that-”

It was like she couldn’t finish the sentences, not when it put her front and centre as the person who held his heart completely.

“I said that I loved you desperately?” he finished for her, “I do. That’s why I did it. You didn’t want to be married. You didn’t want to have to fight the injustices of the world anymore, but that doesn’t mean you should have to live with them.”

She looked at him, eyes completely awash with emotion.

“And the hospital...” she said, looking for another letter, this one no doubt detailing the money he’d donated and his directions on how it was to be spent.

“Yes, well you said I wasn’t allowed to visit your parents, you at no point told me I wasn’t allowed to meddle in their care. It was a loophole, my love, and I will not apologise for exploiting it.”

“But why?” she asked.

“Why won’t I apologise?”

“Why would you do that?” she followed up.

“Hermione, I think it would be much easier if you would just accept that I will do anything if it makes your life easier or brings you any sort of joy. It will be the case from now until one of us departs this earth, although I make no promises to stop then either.”

She sat staring at him from her pile of letters, and Draco took the chance to get closer.

"I don't need you to worry about me, Hermione, what I feel for you is not conditional on anything you say or do. Trust that. I just want you to think about what you want. If there is even the slightest chance that it might be me..." he trailed off and came to kneel at the edge of the letters.

There was another pause. A long one. A pause he now recognised as Hermione thinking, questioning her ideas and answers; so scarred by the consequences of past actions that she may never act without doubt again. Draco found he didn't mind. He didn't need her to know the answer instantly; he certainly didn't. There could be so many stops and starts and detours and reroutes, and it wouldn't matter as long as they were going on the journey together.

"I'm scared," she said softly, "It's a ring or divorce papers. The choice is- and if I don't know how to make the right one. I don't know if what I chose will work, or if it will end up hurting you."

"Then don't look at the ring, don't look at the divorce papers, look at me, Hermione. The big choices can wait until you're ready," he said, inching forward ever closer until his knees brushed against hers, "you just need to tell me if you want me."

Hermione's eyes locked with his, and he could see the moment she broke. Her forehead came to rest against his, and she nodded with a whispered yes. He didn't wait; he just pulled her onto his lap and let her cry the last of her tears among the letters, kissing the top of her head and letting relief wash over every single part of him.

"I'm going to make mistakes with this," she said, leaning against him once the tears had stopped and the room was quiet again.

"You will," he replied, "and so will I. But then we'll figure it out. OK?"

Hermione hesitated only briefly before she nodded, and the trust he felt flowing through the bond was possibly the greatest feeling of his life.

They didn't stay on the study floor. Draco helped her to her feet before tucking her under his arm and walking them to his room. She didn't protest when he maneuvered her inside, though she raised an eyebrow when he took them to his bathroom and started filling the tub with steaming water and fragrant oils.

"Say nothing, witch," he teased, "I slept on a window seat last night; I smell awful, and my back hurts. But if you think I am letting you go just now."

He hoped the look on his face expressed how ludicrous of an idea it was. It must have, as she didn't say anything more. Just let him undress her and lower her into the tub, and watched while he shucked his own clothes and lowered himself in behind her.

The water soothed him, not as much as the witch in his arms, who leaned against him so still he wondered if she had drifted off. He indulged in languid strokes of her arms, her sides, and her stomach—not to provoke, just to feel her and convince himself she was there.

“Draco,” her voice punctured the steam as he buried his nose into his curls and breathed deeply.

“Yes, love,” he asked, letting the diminutive flow freely from his tongue and waiting to see how she would respond. There was an infinitesimal tensing, but Hermione let out a breath soon after, and the relaxation of her muscles followed.

“What happens now?” she asked, her hand coming to catch the one of his splayed across her stomach possessively.

“Now,” he said, not thinking much, just threading their fingers together, “Now, we’re going to brush our teeth, go back into my room, draw the curtains, hop into my bed, and sleep.”

Hermione twisted in his arms until she was looking at him in shock.

“I meant—” she started, but Draco cut her off with his second chaste kiss of the day.

“I know what you meant,” he said, holding back on kissing her again, the same way he’d refrained from calling it their room and their bed, “But you haven’t slept, and I haven’t slept well. We’re both tired. We’re going to sleep.”

“And that’s what you want?” she asked, her voice small and sceptical.

“That’s what I want,” he assured.

They settled back into silence after that, although Draco’s hands weren’t the only ones cautiously exploring this time. Hermione played with his fingers and stroked up his forearms. She even brought the back of his hand to her mouth and kissed it. However, before either of them could get too carried away (which was hard, after so many months and finally having his witch naked in his arms), he hauled them from the tub and wrapped them in fuzzy towels.

A new toothbrush was ready for her in his drawer, and Draco could only shake his head and mutter Bobsy’s name when he saw it. It had been enough to make Hermione laugh, and after a morning with such heaviness, the sound was magic in itself.

Once Hermione was cosily buttoned into his flannel pyjama top, and he was wearing the corresponding bottoms, he used his wand to close the blinds, pull her into his arms, and they both drifted off to sleep.

Not enough hours later, Draco woke to feel eyes on him. His bed was still warm, and he could feel feet pressed against his calves.

“Hello,” he said, not wanting to open his eyes. The image he had in his mind of a sleep-mussed Hermione lying next to him was far too good to be real.

"Good morning," Hermione replied, her voice bright enough that Draco could guess she'd been awake for a little while.

And yet she hadn't disappeared. She was still there. He opened his eyes to see her brown ones studying him from the pillow beside his.

"Someone delivered some food," she said.

Draco twisted to observe the cart and noted the bowls of steaming soup under a stasis charm and basket of fresh bread.

"Bobsy," he muttered again, shaking his head. He lay back down on the pillow and looked at Hermione. The shadows under her eyes were lighter but still present, and he raised his hand to trace them.

"Did you sleep?" he asked, and Hermione nodded.

"A little," she said, "I was thinking."

"Hmm," he moved his hand to explore her curls, wondering how many times she had second-guessed her decision while he slept.

"What happens now?" she asked again, and Draco couldn't help himself; he leaned across and kissed her softly.

Less chaste this time. A lazy kiss, where he nibbled on her bottom lip and sunk his hand deep into her hair. The whimper that came in response sent a jolt of desire through him. It was not the time. Yet.

"Now," he said, pulling away before the kiss could transform into something more heated, more needy, "Now, we're going to have something to eat."

"Have something to eat?" she repeated.

"Yes, we haven't eaten today. I'm hungry. We're going to eat something," he replied, disentangling himself from her and going to look more closely at the tray, "Do you want to eat in the bed or at the table?"

He motioned to the small table he had set up by the window and waited for her to respond.

"I know what you're doing," she said, sitting on her knees and looking at him. His pyjama top covered very little of her thighs, and it was a mammoth effort to bring his eyes back to her face.

"Do you?" replied Draco, deciding that eating with her in bed might be a little too tempting.

He picked up the tray and carried it to the table, where he laid the settings for both of them.

"You're pretending like this is normal now," she trailed after him, her brown eyes accusing as she sank into the chair he'd pulled out for her.

He looked down at her as he tucked the chair in and leaned to kiss her lightly on the cheek.

“No, love, I’m not pretending,” he said, going to sit on his side of the table.

“But it can’t be normal. We can’t just... why aren’t we talking about it or trying to figure out what it means and how we’re going to manage this and what exactly you expect from me?” she asked, ignoring the food in front of her.

“You said you wanted me, would choose me, yes?” Draco sighed, and Hermione nodded.

“Well then, I expect you to eat,” he said, “To talk, about whatever you want to. If that is genuinely the logistics and next steps then I’m ready, or if you’d prefer to discuss poetry and gardening, that sounds delightful too. I’m open to it all. So long as it’s not the Crusades. I am done with the Crusades.”

“But,” Hermione protested, and Draco picked up her spoon and held it out for her.

“Yes?” he questioned.

Hermione stared at him before taking the spoon and tasting the soup. Her face transformed as she registered the flavours of the sip. There really was nothing better than Vim’s chicken soup. After her first mouthful, she took another, and he could watch the internal debate play out on her face. After a minute, a new calm rested over them.

“Do you and Blaise really like building Lego?” she asked, and Draco bit the inside of his cheeks to stop himself from smiling too broadly.

“Yes, although the Death Star has us beaten. It’s still unfinished; we reverted to something a little easier until our skills improve. Although, seeing how you’ve brought it up, can you tell me exactly how it’s related to astronomy.”

The conversation came easier after that. They talked about nothing important but everything they wanted to until the bowls were empty and they were both just nibbling on bread because it was so good. The light in the room changed, and before long, Hermione kept looking at him with furtive glances. Draco could practically hear her thinking, *“What happens now?”*

“Come with me,” Draco said, standing up and holding out his hand, which Hermione took without hesitation.

He brought them back to the bed and pulled her down next to him so he could hold her while in the stillness. He would never get over the luxury of being able to hold her.

“So we just lie here,” she asked after a while, and Draco felt himself sigh.

“Unless there is something else you want to do, but in all honesty, witch, I’ve wanted to do this for months, so lying here, holding you is my plan, yes.”

Draco felt lazy and content. His lids grew heavy, and he thought it might be late enough in the day to sleep. The only thing stopping him was how Hermione fidgeted beside him; he smiled and waited for her speak.

“Draco, what happens next?” she said finally.

“Well, I have no idea what time of day it is, but I think we should nap some more, then we should have sex because I’ve missed it a lot, and then we’re going to figure out how to order a takeaway to the Manor. Admittedly, that last one is very ambitious, but if anyone can figure it out...”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, digging her fingers into his ribs to tickle him a little. He grabbed her hand to protect himself and also just because he could hold it. *Merlin*, he could just hold her hand.

“What did you mean, love?” he asked, knowing she would have no peace until she asked.

“I meant, do I sleep in here tonight? Should I move my things in here now because we’re together, or do I wait?”

The words came out in a tumble.

“Do you want to sleep in here? Do you want to move your things?” he asked.

Hermione stilled.

“I don’t know,” she said, and Draco recognised the hesitation in her voice, the pause as if she was waiting for his disappointment, all because she didn’t know the answer.

He just shrugged.

“Then we’ll wait while we figure it out. It really is that simple,” he leaned down and kissed the crown of her head, “Do you still want me?”

“Yes,” her response was quicker now, stronger.

“Then, it’s back to my plan. Nap, sex, takeaway.”

Hermione gave him a look from the corner of her eye before lying back down in the crook of his arm and resuming the tracing of patterns.

“So,” she said after a few minutes, propping herself up on her elbow and looking down at him, “Were you quite sure on the order of nap then sex or would you be flexible to changes?”

Draco grinned and pulled her down, their lips meeting with intent this time. It was a far better use of their mouths than conversation.

Hermione’s hands were threaded in his hair, and her leg was thrown casually across him. It was all too easy to knead her bare thigh in his palm, to move his hips ever so slightly and feel the delicious friction as his hardening cock was caught between her flesh and his.

While the hand on her thigh kept firm pressure, the one wrapped around her played ever so delicately with her hair, twisting the curls in individual spirals, watching as they bounced back again and again. *Merlin*, he loved her hair.

Hermione made a little whimper and moved as if to roll above him, but he changed his grip to stop her. He didn't want her fast and furiously today; there would be time for that later. Today, he wanted to spend hours lightly running his fingers over her body and caressing her lips with his.

"Patience, sweetheart, we've got time," he whispered, and Hermione tugged at his hair to share her displeasure.

He couldn't help but chuckle, and even though his intentions hadn't changed, the hand that had been patiently massaging her thigh started exploring upwards. It only seemed fair, given his subtle hip movements had become unhurried thrusts, just enough to provide pleasure, not enough to provide relief. Finding the hem of his pyjama shirt, he remembered with a devastating jolt that underwear had not been part of the ensemble when they had both redressed earlier.

It was Draco's turn to roll them and Hermione's turn to chuckle as he groaned into her neck when his fingers brushed ever so slowly against her cunt and felt the moisture forming there.

Not to be dissuaded from his initial course of action, Draco removed his hand and lowered her leg, rolling her onto her back and leaning over her.

"I have to say, Granger, you look positively edible wearing my clothes," he said, using the break in the touches and the kisses to bring his body back under control.

He ran his fingertips around the neckline of the shirt, barely skimming her skin, noting the way her pupils widened and her breath caught at the light touch.

"Do you still have my jersey?" he whispered, another question that had been plaguing him finally spoken.

"Yes," she replied, and he took great pleasure in how breathless she sounded.

"And did you wear it to sleep?" he asked, leaning closer so his lips could ghost the planes of her face.

"Yes," she repeated, pulling on the back of his neck until his lips met hers again. He had wished for it; he had imagined it. And now...

"Can I see it?" he asked, and again Hermione laughed. That beautiful sound filling both the room and his chest.

"Right now? Shall I pop to my room and-" she started to get off the bed and Draco all but growled. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and tugged her back to him.

"Not now," he said, coming back to run his hands along the end of the pyjama shirt, "I have plans for you now, and besides-"

With one hand, he popped a button open, then another, and another, pushing the sides of the shirt apart as he went, revealing more and more of her soft skin.

“- this shirt has its advantages.”

He paused to press a kiss between her breasts.

“-It’s like unwrapping my favourite present.”

With a final sweep, he pushed all the fabric clear and took her in. Her nipples stood to attention, and he grinned devilishly, lowering his head to take one in his mouth. Hermione groaned, her back arched off the bed, but he was not distracted. He lavished attention on one breast before switching sides and repeating the same treatment of the other. He wanted her desperate for him before it was time. A writhing mess who could think of nothing but him, want nothing but them together.

There was something different about this time; he knew it and suspected she knew it, too. Aside from the long absence where he’d been forced to watch her from afar, this time, when they came together, it would be with everything laid bare between them. He knew who she was, she had seen every part of him, and they were choosing each other still. A new chapter for them—a new type of magic.

He let his mouth drift down, grazing her belly button and hip, a specific destination in mind. He’d only done this once before. in her office at Oxford. It had been brief. He had kneeled before her desk chair and tentatively tried to please her, but she had never seemed to relax. Her eyes watched him nervously the entire time until, after a few minutes, she had reached for him and dragged him back up her body.

This time, he splayed his hand on her belly to keep her flat against the mattress as he took his time, easing himself between her thighs and kissing a path down the line of her hip. She whimpered, and her hand came up to grasp his, not to push it away, at least not yet, and he entwined their fingers together.

As he reached the apex of her thighs, he ran his fingers lightly across her ankle to her knee and pushed her legs apart so she was spread for him. He could see her glistening cunt and wanted to taste her. Yet before he did, he looked further to see her eyes, wide and nervous, watching him. Without dropping eye contact, he placed an open mouth kiss against her. She let out a strangled little sigh and wriggled under his grasp. Draco responded by kissing her cunt again, slower this time, his tongue easing between her folds and tasting her. Her eyes flashed, and he could see she was wrestling with something.

“Let me do this, Hermione,” he murmured, his words vibrating in the small space between his lips and her cunt.

She didn’t say no but didn’t say yes either. Just watched, measured, considered. While she continued her internal battle, he used the tip of his tongue to gently tease her. Tiny licks across her most sensitive part. Was it playing fair? No. Was it worth it when she dropped his gaze and threw her head back against the cushions with a sigh, her arms reaching above her head to grab the headboard? Absolutely.

With new vigour, he returned to his task. He licked her, long and slow, watching as her body tensed when he brushed just the right spot. His hand, which had been splayed across her

belly, moved to grip her hip, his fingers sinking into the soft flesh. The other hand pushed her thigh open, to give him more room. And she was pliable. She was relaxed. She was giving herself over to him. Trusting him to look after her while she lost herself in the pleasure that he was providing. It made him feel like a fucking champion. Her fucking champion. The only one to be let in like this. He would earn his place there every single day.

His licks intensified, and using the hand that had been stroking her inner thigh, he eased first one finger inside of her and then a second. Her breathing changed then, coming in faster pants, and he could feel her twitching around him. She was almost there but not quite ready to let go.

He knew his witch. Knew what she liked. He didn't change, not the pressure, the pace, the intensity. She just needed time, and he would give her as long as she needed, regardless of how hard he had grown or how painfully he throbbed.

With a jerk, one of her hands let go of the headboard and came to run through his hair tenderly. She was hovering on the edge, unable to resist his steady ministrations. With a second jerk of her hip, he felt her clench around his fingers, and she let out a low whine as she came. Her orgasm was long and strong. The release she needed and he lapped at her slowly, letting her ride it, enjoying the way her fingers in his hair kept her tethered to him, soft and loving, during the comedown.

He waited until she tugged him up, hovered over her, and she surged up to meet and kiss him.

“Good?” he asked softly.

“Spectacular,” she confirmed with a cheeky smile, and he couldn’t help but kiss her until the smug smile morphed into undisguised desire.

“More?” he asked.

“More,” she confirmed.

He held himself above her, the head of his cock notched in her entrance, his eyes trapped in hers.

“Draco?” she asked suddenly, her voice a little strained.

“Yes, love?” he said, the muscles in his neck and arms twitching from the strain of holding himself so close to where he wanted to be.

“This time, we’re not just friends who fuck,” she stated. It wasn’t a question, and Draco had to stop himself from laughing. Always worried about the definitions.

“No, you’re not just my friend that I fuck,” he leaned down to kiss her forehead.

“What am I, then?” she asked, and the spectre of the ring hung over them for a second.

“You’re just mine, love,” he said, and with a kiss so ordinary, he hoped they would share millions like it, he eased himself into her.

Draco was correct. It was different this time. He could feel it as he started to rock into her, feel it as her fingers scraped at her back and her legs wrapped around him, pulling him closer. She was no longer in a hurry, and she matched his languid pace, filling the gaps with kisses and sighs.

They moved together, hitting all the right spots, corresponding with all the right sounds. Not once did Hermione look away and the gold in her eyes shined brightly. When she came with him, it was with his name on her lips.

After a minute, Draco rolled to the side so his weight wasn't resting on Hermione, but he didn't let her go. He held her close while their breathing slowed and skin cooled, the bond between them humming, satisfied. Hermione happily curled into his side, her fingers tracing patterns across his chest.

"I love you too, you know," she said, and Draco felt his heart stutter in his chest.

He'd suspected it. She'd told him that she wanted him, and had stayed with him throughout the day even though he knew her mind was probably screaming at her to leave. But to hear her say it, unprompted. He could barely keep that feeling contained in his chest. It wasn't; it was running through him and between them so that he wouldn't have been surprised if the bond magic became visible.

"I know," he replied, "but I'm not going to lie, I don't think I will ever tire of hearing it."

Hermione snuggled closer and kissed his chest, "I'll make sure I keep saying it then."

"I will too," he replied, "And everything else, we take it one day at a time."

Time didn't heal all wounds, and regardless of the quagmire that lay before them, they would jump in between the pockets of joy together—finding their new normal.

Chapter End Notes

We made it! I know I am posting this a day early, but I have house guests tomorrow, so it's either early or late, and I had a sneaking suspicion, which you'd prefer. 😊

I am so proud of these two for finally getting here and all of those moments from the past 47 chapters coming home to roost. Um what else to say...If you are confused about the "church in Scotland" comment, go back to Chapter 4.

Thank you so much to the incredible Orolin, for cheer reading this and to every single person who has commented, kudos, enthusiastically read and recommended this fic. It means so much and I am so glad there are people out there who are as interested in these two idiots in my version of their lives.

There are two chapters left on the chapter count; these are both epilogues and both will be posted next week at the same time. So until then, enjoy!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

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

Bobsy was correct. The wind at the Dorset house was loud. Easily managed though with some well-placed silencing charms, a type of magic house elves were exceptionally proficient in, so Bobsy's initial complaints were poppycock. It was loud nonetheless. Most of the time, there were charms on the cottage, but in the morning, while Draco moved around their little kitchen, making tea and toast for them both, he liked to hear the roar of the wind.

"Good Morning," Hermione said, slipping through the kitchen door, her face flushed from her walk.

It had been something she started at the behest of her mindhealer. Not Marvolo, they had both felt a little strange about sharing one, but a colleague that Marvolo had suggested. To start her day with a walk outside. Draco had gone with her in the beginning. She had needed someone to hold her hand as she had strolled through the Manor gardens with her thoughts. All of them fresh and raw now she was discussing them with someone. Unpacking them as opposed to trying to forget. That was months ago now. Since they had moved into the Dorset cottage, she preferred to go alone.

"Hi," Draco replied and Hermione came straight to him, close enough that her chest touched his and when she tilted her face up, her lips were right there ready for a kiss.

Draco was never one to pass an easy opportunity. He lowered his lips and said good morning in the slow, gentle way he favoured. Her skin was frosty to the touch after a walk in the late autumn air and he adored the way she heated beneath his palms each morning.

"Hi," he said again, as their lips parted and Hermione smiled at him. Between them, the bond hummed, "Breakfast?"

She pulled away and nodded, so Draco led her to the table, pulled out her chair for her, and tucked her in with a kiss on the cheek. Their normal. Hermione poured the tea, Draco brought the toast over to the table. She read her book. He read the paper. The wind roared outside.

"Are you in Oxford today?" Hermione asked, putting her book to the side and turning her full attention to Draco. It was still thrilling.

He'd spent a long time going to Oxford every day. The bond, though welcomed, was unwieldy. The discomfort she felt when they were apart lasted long after they had moved to Dorset. It was another thing she was working on with her mind healer. They both were. Draco spent the first 6 months of their new chapter waiting for her to change her mind. They had finally gotten to a place where they could take the day apart, anxiety contained so that there was no pain just a welcome hum of anticipation when they did meet again.

"No, not today, but I am going to Dennis's to study," he replied.

“Crusades?” she asked with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. It had become a running joke between them.

“No love, you’re the only one who is allowed to help me study the crusades,” he smirked back at her.

“Good,” she replied and for a moment Draco thought she might have been contemplating running late to work. It wouldn’t have been the first time. Instead, with wry smile, she stood.

“Say hello to Daisy for me?” she asked, coming over to kiss him goodbye; a sign of affection. A loving gesture between two people in a relationship.

Draco nodded and watched as she stood and made her way to the stairs, where she would go to *their* room and dress for the day. She’d never officially moved into his room in the Manor, even when she was sleeping there every night. However, with the new start in a new house, there hadn’t been a question. She had walked into the largest room, which had windows that looked over the sea and said ‘this one should be ours’. Two smaller rooms had been converted into studies, one each and the fourth bedroom was left empty. Neither of them said anything about it. It wasn’t a question either were ready to address, but the room was left empty—a promise to have the conversation when they finally got there.

Draco cleaned up the breakfast dishes with a flick of his wand and took his paper to the sunroom. The previously bare room was a verdant haven now. While Draco maintained the greenhouse at the Manor, he had bought all his favourites with him. All the flowers to say the things he wanted to, day in and day out, even though he still had no idea if Hermione had ever read the book Bobsy had left for her. He could ask, but he liked the mystery of it. He wanted the romance.

“Draco! Draco! Draco!” Theo’s frantic voice came through the halls of the Creevy house to where Draco was hunched studying at the kitchen table.

Draco pushed himself back and stood at the urgency in Theo’s voice. His hands curled into fists, and his jaw tensed.

“Draco! Draco!” Theo burst into the kitchen, followed by a bemused Dennis. “It finally happened!”

Draco looked over at his friend. His hair was tousled, and he was a little breathless, but his eyes sparkled, and his grin was wide.

“What happened?” Draco asked, releasing the tension in his jaw and sitting down again.

“They finally let me cut open a body to find out what was wrong with it, and Draco, Dennis, it was as magical as I always thought it would be!”

Both Dennis and Draco groaned as Theo pulled out a chair and joined them.

"I have to tell you about it. First, we learnt all about the types of cuts you need to open up the torso. Now, there are a couple of options..." and Theo was off, ready to explain in excruciating detail the steps of what Muggles called an autopsy.

"Honestly, Theo, do we need to hear all of this?" Dennis interrupted, as the man got to a particular gruesome section about the use of a chest spreader.

"Yes," Theo was instant in his response, "I have to tell someone, and Pansy said she'll hex me if I bring up dead bodies in our home."

"You're genuinely not going to tell Pansy about this?" Draco asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Of course I am going to tell Pansy about this, in exquisite detail. It just might be nice to share without being hexed as well," he said, looking at them like an overexcited golden retriever.

Dennis and Draco shared a glance across the table and in a silent agreement turned back to Theo and gave him a nod.

"Excellent, so when you remove the lungs..."

The lights welcomed him home. Draco had stopped into the village and picked up a takeaway curry before making his way home to see his Hermione. He let himself in via the kitchen, his keys and other accoutrements landing in the small mishapen ceramic bowl by the door. Jean had made it for him for his birthday. He placed the food under a statis charm on the bench and went into the living room where he found Hermione curled in front of the fire with a book, Glitter lying on the back of the safe near her hair.

They didn't need to speak. As he met her eyes, she put her book to the side, and he sank down next to her, resting his head in her lap, content as she ran her fingers through his hair.

"Long day?" she asked, her fingers moving to trace the planes of his face. How he loved being touched by her.

"You could say that," he said, "Theo."

It was the only explanation she needed. Hermione giggled just a little.

"I know," she said, "I got an owl to my office to let me know the momentous occassion had arrived."

"That's your own fault for telling him he was welcome to come by and say hello whenever. He took it to mean you wanted detailed updates on his life," he said, closing his eyes and letting the soft touch overwhelm him, "How was your day?"

"Hmm, good. I was at work, then had my weekly appointment, and then went to see Bobsy at the Manor," she said, her breath caught on the last.

Draco sat up to look at her. Her going to the manor wasn't unusual. Bobsy and Vim lived there full-time now. Her weekly appointment with her mind healer was also not unusual, although occasionally it brought up things that had her reaching for the Dreamless Sleep again for a few days.

"How was that?" he asked, being deliberately vague.

"I wanted to get a few things from the Manor," she said, summoning a vase from the mantle he hadn't noticed when he first came in, "For you."

She took the first flower from the vase and handed it to him. A blue hydrangea. Her favourites. *Gratitude in being understood*. Did she know what it meant? He looked up to study her face. It was patient and steady.

She handed him the second flower. A red rose. *Love*. The saturation of the rose was such that the edge of the petals looked almost black. The deeper the colour, the stronger the feelings. But did she know that? He looked up at her, and she smiled a little. Then her eyes glanced around the room and his eyes followed her. More roses were tucked away in other arrangements and places. Just as he'd done for her all those months ago. A hidden declaration.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, she pushed the final bloom into his hands. Jasmine—fragrant and delicate—*happiness in Marriage*. This time, when he looked at her, he knew. She was completely aware of what she was saying and was doing it deliberately. Proving him correct, in her hands waiting were two items he hadn't seen since the day he'd helped her off the study floor and told her they could wait.

"I had to get these from the Manor too," she said, her fingers fiddling with the edge of the divorce papers, "I know it's been an ungodly amount of time, but I am ready to make a decision."

Draco couldn't speak, just kept looking between her calm, determined face, and the two items he'd accepted would always be in the background of their lives; something Hermione needed to feel safe and, therefore, something he was all too willing to give.

She put the ring box on the chair between them and stood, walking the divorce papers to the fire. Without pausing, she tossed them into the flames, watching for just a second until they caught fire.

"Whatever the consequence, I want to face them with you until one of us departs this earth," she said seriously before a smile appeared at the corner of her mouth, "although I make no promises to stop then either."

Draco was stunned into silence. She just... gave him that. On a random Tuesday. With no warning. He was married to a crazy woman. He was *married* to a crazy woman. And they were staying that way. A prickle of joy ran over his body like a shiver.

She walked back to the couch and sat again, picking up the ring box, flicking it open and touching the ring that lay within. Her pointer finger delicately stroked the band before her

fingers curled to pull the ring from its nest.

“I thought I might wear this if you -”

“Wait!” Draco finally found his voice and cut her off. Hermione gave a little jerk and hurried to put the ring box back on the lounge between them.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice strained and cheeks flushed, “I should have-”

“No, you silly witch,” Draco said, immediately taking her hand in one of his and retrieving the ring with the other. “I have dreamt of being able to put this on to your finger. I want you to wear it, but I want to be the one who puts it there.”

She immediately relaxed, and Draco even thought he saw her roll her eyes. Oh, that was rich.

“You can’t say anything against me wanting a romantic moment. Not when I’m the one holding a bouquet of hydrangeas, roses and jasmine,” he added, and Hermione laughed.

“Fine, have your moment,” she acquiesced.

“I plan to,” he murmured, taking a deep breath, ready to memorise every second.

His eyes did not leave hers, and while he said nothing, there was no need. It was a moment beyond words. Understanding and love flooded through the bond; he slide the ring into place. It glittered as the light from the fire reflected off it, and Draco lowered his head to kiss the fingers it adorned.

“Perfect,” he said, looking back at his wife. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his—a slow kiss, sealing another promise in a long line they had made and would continue to make.

“I love you,” she said, twisting them so Draco lay reclined on the sofa, and she was snuggled next to him, her head and newly adorned hand lying on his chest.

“I love you too, *wife*,” the final term of endearment he’d been holding back. It sounded so good. So right. He ducked his chin to kiss the crown of her head.

“You’re going to be insufferable now with that word, aren’t you?” she asked.

“You’re the one who was always so keen on definitions,” he teased, his hands sweeping across her body and bundling her closer.

She didn’t reply, just made a soft, wistful noise and snuggled in closer. She was so comfortable there now. In his arms. He knew if he stayed still long enough, she would drift off to sleep and sleep soundly. It was a fact that filled him with great pride. He couldn’t do that tonight, though, not when he felt fidgety

“So, what happens now?” he asked before he could help himself. He felt a vibration as Hermione giggled again next to him.

"I believe that is my line," she said, and Draco poked her in the ribs. She squirmed and poked him back, and before all-out war could break out, she settled and sighed.

"Well, I was actually in the middle of a chapter when you got home, so I was thinking I'd finish that while I lie right here, and then I can smell something delicious from the kitchen so I suppose we should eat dinner, then, if you are amiable, I thought sex before bed?"

Draco felt his cock twitch at the mention of sex. Sex with his wife. Who he could call wife, whisper it in her ear as he entered her. But he was getting distracted.

"That's not what I meant, wife," he hissed; it wasn't the exact use he'd been imagining but satisfying all the same.

"What did you mean then, *husband*," she retorted, twisting to look at him and quirk her brow. If he thought the word wife did things to him, he had no idea what her using the word husband could do. He took a moment to gather his wits.

"I meant," he said, moving them so she was underneath him and he was resting on his forearms that bracketed her head, "Should we announce it? Have a party to celebrate or something. I am not suggesting a wedding."

He knew that a wedding was still a sensitive topic for her. She had grieved the loss of too many things. The loss of that wedding in Scotland would never be wasn't something he wanted her to face.

"Do you want to announce it? Have a party?" she asked.

It was a pretty thought. All their friends in the manor ballroom. His wife on his arm in front of all of them, in a dress designed by Pansy. Everything he had imagined for himself as a boy. But then there would be some glaring differences, the absence of his mother for one. The fact that he still had moments when he questioned if what he wanted as a boy was worthy.

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

"Then we wait, revert to my plan until you decide," she said, reaching up to push his hair back.

Draco lowered himself, thrilled when Hermione's leg moved to hook around his hip and draw him closer. Their kiss was slow and building. It reminded him of something.

"I do want to take you on a honeymoon. To Italy, I think. Don't bother packing any clothes. I don't plan to see you in anything but draped in the finest sheets."

He moved his lips to her neck, sucking and biting lightly to let her know exactly his intentions.

"We could just spend the time naked in bed here," she sighed, tilting her head to give him better access, rolling her hips against his.

"No, I need to see you in hotel sheets and Italian light. It's a dream of mine. Don't ruin this for me," he murmured against her skin.

Then, his mind caught; leaving the country, leaving her parents. He pulled back to look at her.

"I'd make sure you were home for Sunday," he said, needing her to know. Never asking for more than she was willing to give.

"I know you would," she said, lifting to kiss him sweetly, "although..."

She took a deep breath and a moment to gather her thoughts.

"I think my parents would probably want me to go on a honeymoon," she said finally, and Draco froze.

This moment, for her, was possibly more significant than what had occurred with the ring and flames and the flowers.

"I mean, they would probably frown on me going to another country to see nothing but the inside of a hotel room, especially Italy. There is so much to learn in Italy..." she trailed off before smiling, "but my mother would have sent me off with a hug and the instruction to have fun, so..."

She looked up at him in question.

"So, we should go to Italy," Draco finished, wondering if he could somehow scope her up and leave immediately.

"Not right now," Hermione laughed as if she could read his thoughts. She pulled him back to her. Another kiss distracted him from plans of portkeys and hotel bookings.

"Right," he said, meeting her lips and tongue with his own fever, "tonight we follow your plan."

His hands danced across her body, sliding under her blouse, his lips once again returning to his favourite spot near her ear. The spot that always made her sigh for him.

"Now, were you quite sure about the order for the evening?" he asked, his hands already finding the fastenings of her clothes to remove them, "Reading, Dinner, then sex?"

"I'm not sure about the order at all," she said with a sigh, her hands finding his buttons.

"Excellent," he paused to look at her, and kiss her once more, "we'll figure it out together."

Chapter End Notes

A/N will be more in depth at the end of the next epilogue but I hope you all enjoy Theo getting his happy ending as well.

Epilogue Two: Dear Malfoy

Chapter Notes

Make sure you read the first Epilogue before this one. They were posted at the same time.

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

Dear Malfoy,

Your mother says I can't call you that because that is what she calls me when she is particularly peeved but I don't know if you're a girl or a boy yet and therefore don't know your name, so I feel Malfoy is the most logical choice. Your mother just calls you baby, in a particularly loving tone.

Black Family tradition insists that you be named after a constellation. Your great Aunt Andromeda is quite set that you should continue the tradition, even though she didn't live with her own daughter. Your Aunt Tonks likes to point out that with all the names available to her, Andromeda chose Nymphadora and, therefore shouldn't be allowed to make suggestions. I believe her exact words were, "When someone fumbles the quaffle, you don't give them a second chance in the World Cup". In some ways, I would like to carry on the Black Family tradition. It's more interesting than the Malfoy tradition, which insists that a) you are a boy and b) will be named with one of a short list of preapproved names. Dastardly boring, and you my child, will be many things but never boring. That said, your mother has taken to reading Shakespeare over breakfast. It's not because she enjoys the plays (she is 50/50 on the Bard most of the time); she's searching for your name. She has her own traditions to continue, and honestly, I wouldn't deny her that nor do I want to. Our family will be better for some new ideas and traditions.

I wasn't sure when to tell your paternal grandmother about your existence, if at all. As a general rule, I have done away with writing letters I never intend to send (obvious company excluded, though I am sure one day I will give you this... or Bobsy will leave a light on in my study and both the drawer and door open). However, I wrote a letter telling her about you because I needed to say it and then I talked with both Marvolo and Hermione about whether it should be sent. It was not an easy decision, but in the end, I chose to send it. Because without having ever met you, I know I will spend the rest of my life worrying about your health, safety and happiness. My mother made some terrible choices, but I do believe she worries about those things still. You and your mother have brought me great happiness; she can know that. I hope she may choose to do something with that, but like many things, it is beyond my control.

It's not as though you will be lacking for family. You have Teddy, although he's quite a bit older than you. Happy at Hogwarts. Aunt Tonks has a daughter who will only be a couple of

years older than you, not with your Uncle Lysander. He finally remarried in Spring to a Muggle engineer. (You are not allowed into their shed unsupervised.) No, Aunt Tonks managed quite nicely by herself until Teddy got into a spot of trouble in his first year at Hogwarts and she was called to a meeting with the new head of Slytherin house. Turns out, Aunt Tonks has a thing for beaten down professors. Not that Uncle Oskar was beaten down until after Aunt Tonks took that meeting with him. She tore strips off him for a good 45 minutes. He was smitten.

Then there are the Potters. Your Aunt Ginerva and the bespeckled git she calls her husband are undoubtedly going to petition for the role of your God Parents. Ever since that woman had her third (which she also let her husband name; she will never learn), she has been adamant that she needs other people to start procreating so she can get her baby fix without doing any more damage to her fanny. Her words, not mine. Just as you aren't allowed to go into Uncle Lysander's shed unsupervised, you are not allowed to learn etiquette from your Aunt Ginerva. Quidditch maybe.

Anyway, they are going to be sorely disappointed re: the godparental duties. In this, your mother and I are in complete agreement; the couple most suitable for the role is made up of the woman who made me pay attention to rocks and the man who told me to find him when everything blew up in my face. Besides they have 5 children and counting so they should be half decent at the kid thing by now.

I mustn't forget Aunt Pansy and Uncle Theo, and well, there are probably a whole list of things I should give you titled "Things you can not do unsupervised with Aunt Pansy and Uncle Theo" but also, given everything they have done for me over the years, it would be hypocritical. That and your Uncle Theo probably knows you best at this point as he's been looking after you while you are in your mother's tummy. She was not altogether comfortable with completely magical prenatal care but you've been causing some havoc with accidental magic, so taking you to a Muggle clinic was out of the question. Uncle Theo came through and set up his own muggle clinic at Nott Abbey just to look after you. I don't think he stole everything in there from the Muggle Hospital he works at, but enough that it's a good thing Pansy has no issue casting Confundus charms to protect him. And then a whole range of hexes to punish him.

Bobsy and Vim are quite determined to fulfil a grandparental role, although Bobsy calls it "a chance to raise a Malfoy without outside influences bollocksing everything up." They have prepared the nursery in the Manor and keep inviting your mother and me to "move back home" while you are young. Well, they were, until I remarked how the Mama Bird wasn't meant to try and lure the chicks back to the nest and Bobsy told me to be quiet and go tend to the pumpkins so he could make your mother her favourite pumpkin pastries. You won't recognise it when you meet him, but he does love me. Well, I am 98% sure he does anyway.

You'll love your maternal grandparents. They are a lot of fun. They read books, enjoy the park, build Lego and draw. One day, we'll have to talk about why they are a little different from other grandparents, which will no doubt lead to questions about other things that will be hard for your mother and me to talk about. You must know about the past, though. So much can be improved upon if we all commit to learning the lessons from history. It's why

I've taken to teaching it at the school in the village. The same school you one day will attend. Just one of the gifts we hope to give you, little one.

Most importantly, you will have your Mother. She is spectacular. In so many ways, and having her in my life has made it better in too many ways to count. She wants you desperately, you know. It took her time to think about it; time to make sure she was ready. I doubt there is a child alive who has been more considered and prepared for. And she will be a wonderful mother; I can't wait to see it. I don't know what kind of father I will be. I didn't have a very good example of one, but the benefit of that, I suppose, is I know what not to do. I just hope I'm not completely rubbish.

Marvolo says it's a normal fear, even for those who haven't had the journey to parenthood that I have done. Who knows, maybe I'll give you this letter when you tell me you are expecting your own child, and you can either confirm or deny that for me. I can tell you this: I don't know many things at the moment, but I know I will figure them out. Especially while I have your mother and the rest of our family by my side. I can't wait to meet you, Little Malfoy. You are already more loved than you know.

Love Daddy.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh. And with that, she is done! One day shy of exactly nine months, and what a crazy nine months of writing it has been. When I sat down to plan this fic, it was meant to be a 75,000-word story. When I started posting, I thought, maybe if a couple of people read it, that would be amazing.

Well, it's 188K words later, and there have been so many of you who have read, commented, reached out on social media, and recommended this fic to their friends. It's been a bit mind-blowing, really. I've found a wonderful community of people who love reading and writing about these two idiots as much as I do, and that's incredible.

I will also say, that when I started posting I had no idea how much support it actually takes to finish a fic this size. So, a few thank yous. The first is to [the amazing Orolin](#). She has been a phenomenal cheer reader/alpha reader/friend. She's also an amazing writer and you should go and read her stuff.

Also, thank you to all the fabulous people in SPEW. You guys are inspirational, hilarious, supportive, stupidly talented and, as far as I am concerned, the best part of the fandom.

The amazingly talented Anna Gaw- thank you for your beautiful art (and amazing comments). If you haven't seen her stunning drawing of Hermione post-wedding, you need to. It's like she looked into my brain and drew what I imagined. [See it here](#)

And thank you to everyone who has read and commented and kudos and joined me on this journey. Thank you for letting me tell you this story and for showing such empathy, compassion and interest in these characters. Thank you to every person who let me know that this story resonated with them. I started writing this purely because I wanted to read it, but as time went on and more of you shared parts of your lives and thoughts and experiences you've had that mirrored the character, I started writing for you as well. I hope you've found this ending satisfying.

End Notes

This is the start of my first fic. Please be gentle. If I am missing any massive etiquette please reach out. Also I am new with tags, so if there is anything I haven't tagged that you think should be tagged, please let me know.

Obviously, HP and the world belongs to JKR. All angst and inappropriate touches come directly from me.

Now for a few policies

Please do not add my works to Goodreads.

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