

D R A C O
M A L F O Y

H E R M I O N E
G R A N G E R

"RIFE WITH
HISTORICAL
INACCURACIES."
— S. SNAPE



"PURE SHIT."
— T. RIDDLE

Draco Malfoy
& THE MORTIFYING
ORDEAL OF BEING
IN LOVE

BY ISTHISSELF CARE
ART BY CATHERINE7MK

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Draco Malfoy and the Mortifying Ordeal of Being in Love

by isthisselfcare

Summary

Hermione straddles the Muggle and Magical worlds as a medical researcher and Healer about to make a big discovery. Draco is an Auror assigned to protect her from forces unknown – to both of their displeasure.

Features hyper-competent, fiery Hermione and lazy, yet dangerous, Draco. Slow burn.

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Chapter 1

An Unsporting Attack

As a man of means, Draco Malfoy could have chosen to live a life of leisure, political meddling, and casual blackmail, like his father before him. However, his acquittal by the Wizengamot was accompanied by strong recommendations that young Mr. Malfoy strive for such laudable pursuits as the Common Good, Altruism, and Redemption in the Public Eye.

And so, after a few years of sowing his wild oats (and a great many curses) on the Continent, Draco had returned to London, where he made short work of the Auror training programme – three years down to one and a half, if you please – and joined that noble Office. Draco had been strategic in his choice of career, of course: being an Auror offered just enough heroics for positive coverage in the news and just enough Ministry-sanctioned murders to keep him interested in the job.

Draco was an excellent Auror – something about very nearly becoming a Dark wizard himself gave him rather useful insights

into the minds of naughty wizards and witches. The problem with competence, however, was that it was rewarded with increasingly complex cases by the Head of the Auror Office, a certain Madam Nymphadora Tonks.

And so, our opening scene: a Monday morning, sometime in January. Amidst the greying cubicles of the Auror Office, Tonks was doling out the month's Class A assignments to her top Aurors like a vindictive Father Christmas.

"Montjoy – you're off to Hethpool. Three Muggle children found dead with their livers removed. That hag coven from Stow may have regrouped." A folder containing the case material was slapped onto Montjoy's desk.

"Buckley – suspected necromancy and other foul play, Isle of Man." Buckley accepted the proffered casefile with a grimace. "You're to take Humphreys with you. Mind you be a good mentor and don't traumatisise her too much."

Tonks rounded the corner to the next cubicles. "Potter, Weasley – you're to continue with the vampires in the Dales, but if you don't make further headway, I will get personally involved. Half of Yorkshire will be sucked dry at this rate. Goggin – some idiot is experimenting with Transmogrifian Torture on Muggle

prostitutes in Glenluce. I won't notice if you bring him in with a few missing appendages."

Tonks now came to a halt in front of Draco's desk. "Malfoy. Since you did so well with the Lanark Lunatic last week, I'll let you pick your poison."

Draco eyed Tonks guardedly – poison was unlikely to be an exaggeration. "What are my options?"

Tonks dropped two files onto Draco's desk. "Option one, a wizard accused of inappropriate acts with trolls – a real delight for the senses, that one. Or, option two – a request from the Minister for Auror protection of a high-profile target."

"Inappropriate acts?" repeated Draco, pulling the folders towards himself.

"I don't know about your tolerance level, but I've quite lost my appetite." Tonks jutted her chin towards the rightmost folder. "There are photographs for your edification."

Draco made the mistake of opening the troll folder. He closed it again with a strangled sound of disgust. "I'll take the protection assignment."

“Right-o,” said Tonks, swiping the troll folder and its hideous contents from Draco’s desk. “The troll-buggerer will go to Fernsby. Fernsby! Come here.”

Fernsby emerged from a distant cubicle. Tonks slapped the folder into his chest. “You are off to Morpeth. I hear the North Sea is lovely this time of year.”

If Fernsby had reservations about the loveliness of a January sojourn by the North Sea, he kept them to himself. Tonks was rarely worth arguing with.

“Progress reports on my desk by Monday morning,” called Tonks to the office at large. A grumble of assent from the Aurors followed the request.

Tonks gave Draco a sharp look. “Looking forward to yours, Malfoy. I’ve a degree of curiosity about that one – the target is working on some top secret project. They wouldn’t even tell me what it’s about.”

Tonks made her way back to her office, managing to tread on an unsuspecting colleague’s foot only once.

Draco, now rather curious, pulled the folder towards himself. The protection request came straight from the Minister's Office and Shacklebolt had requested a security audit, defensive warding, every confidentiality-enhancing measure known to wizardkind, escorting, if you please, and protective surveillance – in sum, the bloody works.

Draco was preemptively irritated – this sounded rather a lot like effort. And who, pray, merited this extravagant treatment?

He flipped over a few more pages of Ministerial demands to find, finally, the Principal. And it was Hermione. Bloody. Granger.

Her photograph was pinned to the top of a brief biographical note – as though anyone alive today didn't know her and her hair. She looked seriously at Draco, blinked at him once, then left the frame.

Draco seized the folder and headed for Tonks' office. She was rarely worth arguing with, but this casfile merited an especial attempt.

"Tonks – I can't take this one. You'll have to give it to someone else."

Tonks looked up from the parchment she'd been attacking with a quill. Her hair turned a quizzical mauve. "Whyever not?"

“It’s Granger. That’s the Principal. Hadn’t you seen?” “And?”

“We don’t exactly get along,” said Draco in a vast understatement.

“Are you telling me that some school-time unpleasantness from fifteen years ago will interfere with your ability to carry out this assignment?” asked Tonks.

In the Foe Glass behind her, shadowy silhouettes clustered about, as though keen to eavesdrop on the drama.

“We have a rather unhappy history,” said Draco. “Worse than you and Potter?”

This, Draco considered for a moment. Finally, he answered, “In some ways.”

“Fine,” sniffed Tonks. “Swap with Fernsby. I’m sure he’ll only be too happy to change out a cushy protection jobbie for the troll aficionado.”

“...Isn’t there anything else I could take?”

Tonks gave him a quelling look, emphasised by her eyes turning a dangerous, hawkish kind of yellow. “I’ve just assigned the month’s missions, Malfoy, and I won’t have your complex about Granger domino its way through the entirety of it.”

“I don’t have a complex about Granger.” “Good. Then you’ll do fine. Off you go.”

Tonks waved her hand and her office door closed slowly, squeezing Draco out.

Draco strode back to his desk, half intending to ask Fernsby for the swap – however, the gurgle of horror emanating from Fernsby’s cubicle was sufficient to change his mind.

Fine. He’d do the Granger thing. It was, at any rate, not troll pornography.

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Draco sent Granger a coldly professional note stating that he would be pleased to meet with her at her earliest convenience to discuss the Minister’s protection request.

Granger sent back an equally cold note indicating that the Minister's request was an overblown reaction on the Minister's part and that she would be dealing with it shortly, and to please disregard it.

Draco did not respond, but enjoyed an afternoon off instead of informing Tonks of this fortunate development immediately.

Then Granger ruined everything by writing again, indicating that, to her disappointment, the Minister had not changed his mind, and was forging ahead with this (disproportionate and illogical, in her opinion) plan of action. Would Draco be available to meet at nine o'clock this Thursday?

The Granger Laboratory. Trinity College, Cambridge.

As he tossed the missive into the fire, Draco thought, Cambridge, of course. How could we expect anything less from Hermione Granger?

~

That Thursday, Draco arrived at Trinity College at the beastly hour of nine o'clock. The porter at the gate didn't glance twice at

his robes – many of the Muggles wandering about were wearing long black gowns – but he did give Draco a sharp look when he said he was there to see Granger.

“Doctor Granger,” said the porter. “Have you got an appointment, sir?” “Yes.”

“Name?”

“Malfoy,” said Draco.

The porter consulted a chart. He found whatever he was looking for, apparently, because Draco was waved in towards the verdant quad at Trinity College. (“It’s not a quad, we call them courts at Cambridge,” said the porter to some tourists, but Draco paid him no mind – he knew a quad when he saw one.)

Granger’s note had included a few directions on how to enter the wizarding part of the College, which brought Draco to a magically concealed door at the south end of the quad. A Muggle plaque indicated that King’s Hall had once stood here, but that it had been destroyed in the sixteenth century. Draco tapped the bronze plaque with his wand, as instructed by Granger, and the ostensibly destroyed King’s Hall appeared before him. Draco decided that Granger earned a two out of ten in his initial security assessment – at least rogue Muggles wouldn’t immediately be

able to find her. And, with that generous thought, he strode into Magical Cambridge.

At nine o'clock on a weekday, King's Hall was a roiling bustle of scholarly witches and wizards, off to advance magical knowledge. Draco had spent years at the Université de Paris to earn his Bachelor's in Alchemy and his Mastery in Martial Magic (Duelling), but he'd never set foot in an institution of higher learning in the UK. King's Hall retained its sixteenth century ambience – dark, an excess of over-carved wood, and candlelight – and vacillated somewhere between pure Gothic and early Renaissance in décor.

As he surveyed the crowd before him (varyingly studious or eccentric-looking), Draco wondered how much of wizarding Britain's brain power was located within these hallowed halls. At any rate, there was at least one big brain on the premises. Quite lost amongst five staircases on the first floor, he decided to enquire for directions towards that brain.

"You there," said Draco, jutting his chin towards a spotty youth. The boy looked about twenty- two, serious, and clutched a text on Advanced Theoretical Arithmancy to his chest.

"Yes?" asked the youth.

“I’m looking for Granger,” said Draco.

The boy frowned at him. “Professor Granger. Her offices are on the third floor, with the other Fellows.”

“Cheers,” said Draco, wondering how many more times he was going to be corrected regarding precious Granger’s title today.

He climbed the stairs and passed corridors where he spotted a variety of interesting things: classrooms, lounges, reading rooms, offices, an apothecary, a café, and what appeared to be a small zoo. Finally, he came to a door which simply said, “GRANGER. Ring for attention.”

See? There. No overzealous titles. Draco rang for attention.

Then he peered into the narrow window that flanked the door and almost turned around to leave again, because the laboratory beyond seemed decidedly Muggle and he must’ve taken a wrong turn somewhere, only it said “GRANGER,” right there.

His ring was answered by a Being in a bright white coat and strange translucent face-coverings. “Can I help you?” asked the Being.

“I’m looking for Granger,” answered Draco.

“Healer Granger doesn’t take walk-ins,” said the Being, with a rather stiffened back. “Is she expecting you?”

“She is,” said Draco, adding this new title to the increasingly ridiculous running list.

“All right,” said the Being, with what was probably a suspicious look, but Draco couldn’t tell behind the goggle-things. “Her office is down to the right.”

The Being moved out of the way. From the voice, Draco, was now relatively certain it was a human female, but the accoutrements made it difficult to say. In any case, Draco was in. His initial assessment of Granger’s security measures plummeted to a strong one out of ten.

It pleased him to give Granger a well-deserved horrid mark; it didn’t please him to think of the work that would be involved bringing this place up to snuff.

He knocked on the office door.

“Come in,” said Granger’s voice. A blast from the past – crisp, prissy, impatient. Draco entered the office. Granger was sitting

behind a tidy, if over-stacked, desk.

They stared at one another in a decidedly Awkward Moment, something that Draco, now a fully qualified and rather dangerous Auror, was not used to anymore – and perhaps, judging by the unhappy set of her mouth, neither was Granger.

Time heals all wounds, but between himself and Granger, there were a great many to heal, and right now, fifteen years felt like a rather short time since they'd been children fighting each other on opposite sides of a war. Draco couldn't recall when he had last spoken to her directly, and he certainly knew he'd never been alone in a room with her.

Granger rose to greet him with the following display of eloquence: “Malfoy.” “Granger,” said Draco, with equal eloquence.

She gestured to a chair across the desk. As he stepped towards it, Draco found himself being assessed by her. Her gaze flitted from his hair to his face, to the Auror insignia on his chest, and down his black robes to his boots.

Seeing that they were dispensing with the niceties, Draco shamelessly assessed her in return: the hair (a curling pile coiled high at her crown), the face (thinner, more severe than he

remembered), the same strange white cloak as the Being, the black jeans (so Muggle), the casual trainers.

Draco opened his mouth to make a few vague opening remarks – some chatter about Cambridge, or Potter and Weasley, or other such fluff – but Granger jumped straight to the point.

“This is an absolute waste of Auror resources.”

The lack of finesse was quite typey for Granger. Some things didn’t change.

Draco settled himself into his chair. “Give me a bit more to go on and I can make a case to Shacklebolt to withdraw the request. I’ve no more desire to be here than you.”

Granger pursed her lips at him. Draco wondered when McGonagall had Apparated into Granger’s chair, and where Granger had got to.

“All right,” said Granger at length. “A fortnight ago, I updated Shacklebolt on the progress of a certain research project. A research project which is not under the Ministry’s purview, nor funded by it, by the by. I was sharing what I thought was a bit of

good news with a long-time friend and mentor – who happens to be the Minister of Magic. Apparently, the news was too good. Shacklebolt fears repercussions, as the project will have implications for a certain segment of the population.”

“What implications?” asked Draco. “Which segment?”

“I’d rather not say, as my hope is that you won’t be involved any further than this meeting. Shacklebolt is overreacting. I shall speak with him again this week and convince him that putting me under Auror surveillance is utterly unnecessary.”

“Auror protection,” corrected Draco. Aurors of his calibre weren’t assigned to two-bit surveillance jobs, thank you.

“Call it what you will,” said Granger.

“Shacklebolt has his flaws, but a propensity for overreaction isn’t one of them,” said Draco. (There wasn’t much love lost between himself and the Minister, but there was a certain respect.)

“No, it isn’t one of his propensities. Which is why I was rather surprised – dismayed, really – by his decision to involve your office.”

“Is it possible that he isn’t overreacting?”

The look Granger levelled at him was decidedly unfriendly.

“No.”

“You don’t think that this – breakthrough, or discovery – of yours is putting you at any new risk whatsoever?”

“Not at the moment. First, no one knows about this development, other than Shacklebolt himself and – to varying degrees – my staff, all of whom I trust implicitly. And, secondly, though I’ve made a breakthrough, I haven’t quite solved the issue yet. That will be the work of at least another year. I won’t be on the front page of *The Prophet* asking to be murdered tomorrow.”

Draco’s eyebrow twitched upwards. “Shacklebolt thinks you’re going to be murdered?”

“He thinks – probably rightly – that some people won’t be pleased about my breakthrough.”

Draco decided that he needed to speak to Shacklebolt. Perhaps he’d be less cagey than Granger and disclose something useful to the Auror assigned to her. He found himself truly curious, now, about the nature of this Good Discovery.

His next question was carefully phrased. He didn't want to cast aspersions on Granger's heritage (gods forbid; he was already on thin ice everywhere on that front), but there were things she mightn't know, as a Muggle-born. "Might Shacklebolt be aware of certain wizarding predilections or biases that you aren't, that would be a cause for concern?"

Granger took a breath, as one might if one was summoning one's remaining patience. "If I told you I'd solved world famine, or something equally wonderful, would you pause to worry about the actions of a few naysayers?"

"One naysayer would be enough to dispatch a do-gooding researcher, especially one who keeps her laboratory secured with a third-rate locking charm and some chicken wire."

One of Granger's knees began to bounce. It brought to mind a cat twitching its tail in annoyance. "So have you?" asked Draco.

"Have I what?" "Solved world famine."

"Nothing so grand. That was an example." "Where do you keep your findings?" asked Draco.

Now it was Granger's turn to raise an eyebrow, which was the entirety of her response.

Draco gestured to the office around him and the laboratory on the other side of the door. “I’ve identified a dozen vulnerabilities already – and that’s only what I saw in the five minutes it took to walk up here. If I wanted to work it out, I rather think I could.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

Seeing Granger smirk was... something. However, it rapidly disappeared. “If we’re talking of physical security, I haven’t exactly had a reason to increase it beyond the usual measures until recently. I can assure you that I’m capable of warding my laboratory beyond a locking charm – and keeping my data safe.”

“Perfect,” said Draco. “Proceed with that. I’ll be back in a few days to do a penetration test. If you satisfy that – and implement any additional measures I recommend – we may be able to convince Shacklebolt that you and your research are safe, and we’ll be able to put this behind us.”

This challenge was dolled out with a – quite laudable, Draco thought – minimum of arrogance on his part.

Granger's eyes grew hard: the challenge was recognised and accepted. "Fine. And when will this penetration test take place?"

"I'm not giving you a warning," said Draco, rising. "Do you think a real-world threat would?"

"Brilliant," said Granger, rising too. Sarcasm roughened the edge of her words. "I do love surprises."

They did not shake hands and she did not see him out.

~

Draco scheduled a visit with the Minister of Magic later that week. He sauntered past the Minister's sour-faced assistant on the designated day, wondering who had pissed in her Pixie Puffs.

Shacklebolt was as reticent with the details as Granger had been, but impressed upon Draco the importance of keeping Granger safe to complete her project, for the benefit of all wizardkind. It was all very grand and extremely vague.

The only positive was Shacklebolt's evident pleasure that it was Draco who had ended up with the assignment. "I know you won't hesitate to get nasty, Malfoy, if any malicious individuals were to make a move against her."

Draco accepted the backhanded compliment with a mock bow.
"You're warming the cockles of my heart, Minister."

Shacklebolt returned the bow with an inclination of his head. Then he grew sombre. "She could change the lives of hundreds – thousands – for the better."

"And yet, neither she nor you will tell me what the project entails. Did she make you take a bloody Vow of Secrecy before she disclosed anything?"

Shacklebolt raised his hands, not responding one way or another, and thus gave Draco his answer.

"She would have the foresight," said Draco, throwing a fistful of Floo powder into Shacklebolt's fireplace. "Cambridge."

This was it. He'd given her long enough to prepare.

~

It was late on Monday evening. King's Hall was quiet. Draco supposed that Granger was off having dinner or browbeating innocent undergraduates. He stood at the door of her laboratory, tapping his wand to his chin thoughtfully. However, before he had cast any kind of revelation charm or begun any sort of snooping, Granger rounded the corner.

“Malfoy,” she said, looking a little dishevelled and out of breath. Draco filed her timely arrival away for future analysis. She was too clever for it to be coincidence – and yet, he hadn’t cast a single spell that would’ve made his presence known.

Granger had forsaken her Muggle clothing for green Healer robes. She looked both irritable and impatient, and quickly confirmed both of those conditions by asking: “Time for your vaunted test, is it? How long will it take?”

Draco did not appreciate her tone, which suggested that this might be an affair of several hours. “That depends on your warding – I’m thinking a quarter of an hour at the upper end.”

Granger's eyebrow rose at the cockiness of this rejoinder. "Good. Just did a shift at A&E and I'm positively knackered."

She waved her wand and, with a rather impressive display of Transfiguration (not that Draco gave any sign that he was impressed), she transformed one of her hairpins into a glossy wooden chair, upon which she perched herself to observe him.

Draco didn't mind an audience, especially when he was going to systematically dismantle the audience's attempts to keep him out, and teach her some humility.

Draco turned his attention back to the door. "A&E? I thought you were a researcher."

"The MNHS is chronically understaffed. I take shifts at St. Mungo's to help out. Keeps my Healing skills sharp."

"Good of you." "Mm."

After a few revelation spells, Draco had to hand it to Granger – she'd done her homework. Not a surprise, really. The protective enchantments that now warded the door to her laboratory were many, quite complex, and well-cast.

Draco got to work, but not without taking the piss just a little. “Caterwauling Charm? Insulting.” “I’ve learned to work from the lowest common denominator up,” was the dry response.

The basic intruder charms that followed were dismissed with a few wand waves. The Salvio Hexia was a good warmup. Then Draco got into the good stuff: Foribus Ignis, Custos Portae, a hair-trigger Confundus aimed directly at his head, revealed only when he’d peeled away the other two wards, a sneaky Blinding Hex that just seemed mean, a Balding Jinx that was decidedly unsportsmanlike, and a concealed Confringo on the door handle itself for anyone stupid enough to touch it.

Draco disarmed the latter – a little touch and go, admittedly, and he did break a sweat – telling himself that at least if his face was blown off, there was a Healer nearby who would be able to assist.

The door unlocked. It had taken all of four minutes. And yet, Granger looked unimpressed. Draco swung open the door to reveal – a stone wall.

“Funny,” said Draco.

His face showed none of his disquiet, but he’d been wasting his time on an absolutely impeccable decoy. He waved his wand a

metre further down the wall and the real door to the laboratory appeared.

Granger shrugged. "I needed my staff able to get in. They aren't experts at disarming wards, but they can handle a Finite Incantatem."

Draco entered the laboratory to continue his assessment, his neck rather stiff. His audience waved her chair back into a hairpin and followed.

"Normally I would insist upon us donning the proper PPE, per Trinity's wet laboratory protocols," said Granger. "But we've tidied for the day. I don't think you can hurt yourself on anything."

Once again, Draco didn't care for her tone, which, this time, suggested that he might otherwise off himself by accident.

He ignored the sterile white and steel surfaces that made up most of the space and moved to the shelves and cupboards at one end of the laboratory, which looked like a likely place for an active laboratory to store data. However, the well-organised contents were useless – it was mostly Muggle scientific literature, including some of Granger's own publications. Words jumped

out at Draco without meaning: cytokines, monoclonal antibodies, chimeric antigen receptors, T-cells...

“I realise the purpose of this test is to see how far you’d get and what you can discover about my research – but do put things back in an orderly fashion,” came Granger’s voice, irritation lacing her words.

Draco, his back to her, permitted himself a healthy roll of his eyes – one text was half an inch out of place. He pushed it back in. He waved his wand at the entirety of the collection to uncover Transfigurations or concealment spells, but there were none. Then he systematically did the same with the rest of the laboratory, seeking any hidey holes or caches or – as he grew annoyed – any magical trace whatsoever. There was nothing magical except the contents of the various vials and test tubes clustered in tidy groups along the laboratory’s workbenches.

“If I stole these and had them analysed, what would I discover?” asked Draco.

The glow of his spell illuminated the vials of interest. Granger walked towards them and pointed. “Gamma delta T cells. Antigens: MART-1, Tyrosinase, GP100, Survivin. All of magical provenance, which is why your spell is revealing them, but not otherwise noteworthy.”

“I see,” said Draco, who did not see at all.

“I don’t know who your hypothetical analysis would be conducted by, in the event that these were to be stolen to uncover what I’m working on, but I should tell you that very few people in the UK would be able to pull meaningful conclusions out of this.”

Draco felt the false modesty in the words; by very few, she meant none at all – I’m surrounded by idiots and I’m the only one who can make sense of any of these horrifically named extracts.

“And those?” asked Draco, pointing to larger, rather more familiar looking vials along the back row.

“Your hypothetical analysts would discover perfectly brewed Sanitatem,” said Granger. “That’s a healing potion,” she added, quite unnecessarily.

“A find of critical importance, in the laboratory of a Healer,” said Draco, his annoyance lapsing into sarcasm.

There was the tiniest quirk at the corner of Granger’s mouth – amusement, rapidly stifled.

Draco was doing his own stifling, but in his case, it was exasperation. She had wasted his time on a wild goose chase with those door wards, knowing that there was nothing of real use in the laboratory itself, unless one was in possession of about twelve doctorates to put it all together.

But she had to be recording findings – she was too methodological and meticulous not to.

Now Draco turned to a corner of the laboratory that he’d ignored as a matter of course. It was the most Muggleish area of the entire place – a corner desk cluttered with glowing boxes of light. Granger might as well have cast a Notice-Me-Not on the lot. Had she? No, his detection spells showed nothing. That had been a feature of his own built-in habits – his eyes almost naturally

averted themselves from the unmagical, the Utterly Mundane, the Terribly Muggle. He'd have to watch that – clearly, a weakness.

He walked towards the desk. And, for the first time since Draco had entered the laboratory, Granger actually perked up and looked interested in the proceedings. Now he was getting somewhere.

“Computers,” said Draco, pulling up some distant memory from Muggle Studies.

“Well done,” said Granger, with the tone one would take to praise an especially slow child who had correctly identified a barn animal.

Draco favoured her with a dark look. Her face was impassive, but her eyes betrayed her – she was curious about what he was going to do next.

And, of course, he hadn't the faintest sodding clue where to go from here, other than jinxing the computers into submission – but from what he recalled, these devices weren't sentient. He stood before the glowing boxes, upon which slow lines were moving in random patterns.

“...I’d need to bring in a Muggle-born,” said Draco at length.

“O, yes, that would be a start,” said Granger. She looked at her nails. “You’d want to find one who is a decent hacker, too. I’m not sure many of those exist amongst wizardkind, but perhaps one or two in the UK.”

“A Hacker.”

“Yes,” said Granger, offering no further explanation of the violent term.

“If – as I suspect – your findings are in these things – what’s to stop me, a baddie, from destroying the lot, and stopping your research in its tracks?” asked Draco.

Granger shrugged. “It wouldn’t matter. It’s all in the cloud.” “The cloud.”

“Yes. I’d be out the cost of the equipment, that’s all.”

“So your bog standard Dark wizard, up to no good, wouldn’t have much to discover here.” “I’m afraid not,” said Granger.

“The wards at the door were an amusing puzzle. Thank you for wasting my time.” “I wanted to see if you’re as good as they say.”

Draco gave her a quick look, wanting to know who they was, because he did like to hear how good he was.

Granger did not indulge him.

“I had a few other ideas for other hexes and things,” she said, gesturing to the door, “but I hadn’t the time.”

“So, no evidence of concealment, no written findings, computers, clouds...” Draco looked at Granger. “If I’m a baddie who needs information, what do I do next?”

Granger looked at him inquiringly. “What do you do?” “I go after you,” said Draco.

He raised his wand and, a split second later, his spell hit her in the chest.

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Chapter 2

Draco Malfoy, Genius Inventor



The Lumos dissipated harmlessly into Granger's robes, but her shock was nevertheless evident. "That was unnecessary," she gasped, a hand at her breast.

Draco made his way towards Granger's office with a bit of a saunter. "I promise you other spells wouldn't be so friendly."

“No one’s going to be casting unfriendly spells at me for no reason,” said Granger, following him.

“They don’t have a reason now, but if your Big Breakthrough is as significant as Shacklebolt thinks, and if – when – it gets out, then...” He turned to her again, his wand raised.

She was readier this time and spat out a Protego.

“Better,” said Draco. “How’s your resistance to the Imperius Curse?”

Granger grew still, her hand gripping her wand. “If you cast that on me in my own laboratory, I shall drown you in Sanitatem and enjoy the irony.”

Draco glanced above him. Every vial of Sanitatem had levitated off the benches and was hovering over his head. In a real situation, he’d Vanish the lot and blast Granger through two walls for the cheek. But, nevertheless – it was an impressive bit of nonverbal magic.

“I’ll concede that your research is more-or-less safe, physically, from most wizarding intruders,” said Draco. The vials settled

back into place. “But it all lives in your head and can therefore be read – or tortured – out of you, or any of your staff.”

“I’m the PI on the project in question. My staff consists of five undergraduates and eight graduate students whose combined understanding of the project is probably fifteen percent, scattered through thirteen minds. They aren’t much of a vulnerability.”

Draco gave her a hard look. “Then you’re the vulnerability.” She, predictably, looked offended.

“How’s your Occlumency?” asked Draco. The question was accompanied, of course, by a friendly bit of Legilimency.

Draco was granted a clear view of Granger’s perception of him at that precise moment – tall, arrogant ponce with good hair – and then he was mentally slapped out of her mind.

He pressed a finger to the centre of his forehead; this witch was making his brain sting. Meanwhile, Granger looked like she wished to double down and slap him in the material world for good measure – and wouldn’t that just be a lovely throwback to their school days?

“I thought we were assessing my laboratory, not me,” said Granger, her eyes flashing at him.

‘We’re assessing risk exposures,’ said Draco. ‘And it’s quickly becoming obvious that you’re a significant one. Is your home warded?’

“Moderately. I can enhance it.”

“I’ll enhance it,” said Draco. “How do you travel?” “Floo, Apparition...”

“Those are trackable, you know. Broom?” “I detest flying,” said Granger.

Draco made a valiant effort not to curl his lip. What a terrible position to take. What a dreadful thing to hate. What a sad circumvention of one of the greatest joys of being Magical. Granger fell in his esteem quite irredeemably.

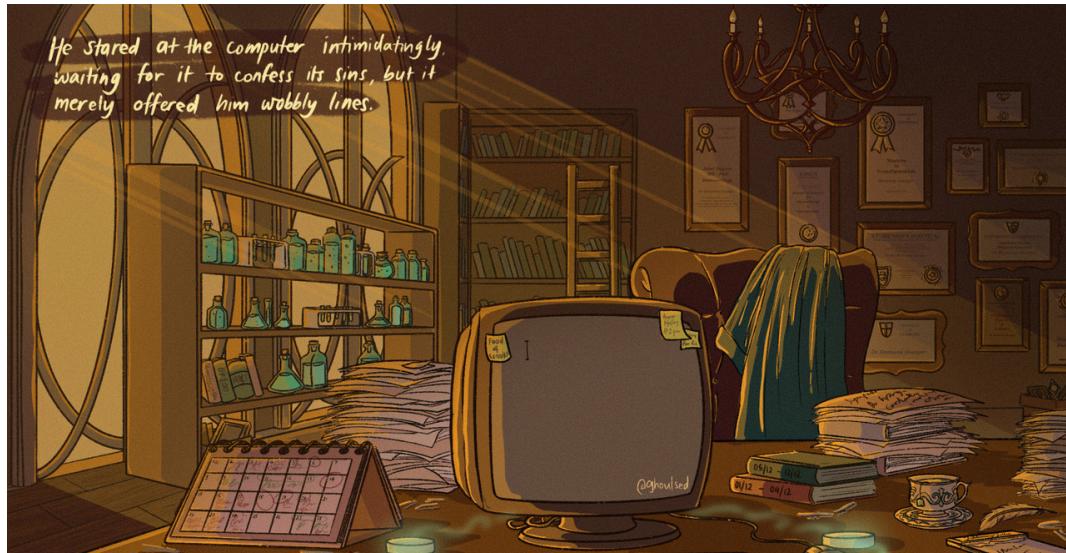
“Since when is Apparition trackable, other than the Trace?” asked Granger.

“Top secret,” said Draco, now in Granger’s office. He riffled through the various stacks of paperwork and books, encountering, again, nothing but that highly specialised, utterly incomprehensible Muggle jargon, and no sign of recent developments, note-taking, record- keeping, or anything of a

useful nature that might point him to Granger's precious findings.

There was another computer in the office, which Draco eyed with a resigned kind of vexation. How stupid to be flummoxed by a device that any Muggle off the street could probably operate. Perhaps he should've kidnapped the porter at the gate and brought him in to assist – Statute of Secrecy notwithstanding.

He stared at the computer intimidatingly, waiting for it to confess its sins, but it merely offered him wobbly lines.



As Draco snooped, scanned and searched for interesting magical giveaways in the rest of the office, Granger pulled off her Healer

robes and dropped into the chair that Draco had occupied upon his first visit. She let out a sigh of unadulterated fatigue.

Draco glanced at her. Muggle clothing again, underneath. This time a long-sleeved top and some trousers that barely merited the name, more like opaque black tights, really. Was this decent public attire by Muggle standards? Shocking. He could see the precise outline of her calf and the exact shape of her knee.

He didn't spend too long musing upon the foibles of Muggle fashion, however, as the witch herself was a bit of a concern. He could see now how thin she was, how her collarbones shadowed, how her neck seemed too dainty to hold the mass of hair pinned upon her head. She was pale, peaky, and generally looked overdrawn.

"What's your schedule like, Granger?" Draco asked, as though continuing his querying about her travel patterns, but really wanting to get a sense of what exactly this woman did with herself, day in and day out.

Typically, Granger had a schedule ready – colour-coded and planned to the hour. She waved her wand in the direction of her desk and the schedule floated to Draco and deposited itself into his hands. Using his wand as a makeshift quill, Draco drew

circles around her moments of exposure, when she'd move between places and be most vulnerable to attack.

And there were many – Granger was everywhere and did everything. She had dedicated laboratory hours, clinic hours, teaching hours, volunteering for a horrid amount of Good Causes, tutoring sessions, mentoring sessions, Healing at St. Mungo's and what sounded like a local Muggle surgery, one (1) pub night every fortnight with Potter and Friends, College dinners, something called “yoga” at unholy hours in the morning, something called “Crooks Vet” that recurred every three months, and then occasional days, here and there, marked only with an asterisk.

“What are these?” asked Draco, pointing at one of the blocks with an asterisk. “...Holidays,” said Granger.

“Your Occlumency might be passable, but your lying isn’t.”

“They’re days off.” Granger grew snippy. “And I shan’t be divulging more details of my personal life than I already have, thank you.”

Draco dropped the subject – and the schedule, back onto her desk. Overdrawn wasn’t even the right word for Granger:

exhausted, or depleted, maybe. Draco recalled some vague rumour that young Granger had been granted a Time-Turner during their Hogwarts years, to squeeze more classes into her school days. Potter and Weasley had quickly dismissed that bit of Auror lunch-hour chatter.

Looking at the overzealous, overachieving, overtired witch before him, Draco found himself rather inclined to believe the tale.

He continued his search, though he doubted there would be much else to find. The wall at the rear of the office was covered in frames of various sizes, certificates, diplomas, awards...

“Nice mosaic,” said Draco.

Granger gave him a look. Well, he found himself funny, even if Granger didn’t.

The mosaic informed Draco that Granger didn’t quite have twelve doctorates, but her combination of Muggle and Magical diplomas probably approached that number. Again, the Muggle ones were a mystery, awarded by Muggle universities he hadn’t heard of: Bachelor’s in Biomedical Sciences, Master’s in Microbiology and Immunology, joint M.D.-PhD in Oncology,

some minor certificate in Genetics. He recognised the Healer's Seal, at least (Cambridge, specialising in Magical Diseases). Her other magical certifications were a Master's in Transfiguration (Edinburgh; an earlier degree, just after the War, probably) and a Specialised Study in Healing (Blood Magicks) from the Sorbonne.

A smattering of other certificates and qualifications completed Granger's educational oeuvre. A box on a low shelf revealed a few dusty older frames. The things he knew her for in her brilliant Hogwarts days – the record-breaking O.W.L.s, the absurd amount of N.E.W.T.s – didn't merit a place upon her wall of adult achievements. He spotted an Order of Merlin, First Class. Potter had similar, proudly hung upon his cubicle wall, but Granger hadn't the room, apparently.

Granger excused herself to make tea, and, in a show of civility that appeared moderately challenging to verbalise, asked if he'd like a cup. Draco said no. Granger looked relieved.

After she'd left, Draco, being a pragmatic and sneakish kind of person, took advantage of the moment to cast a few discreet tracking spells upon a handful of her personal items: the trainers under the desk, hairpins (the blarmed things were everywhere), a half-finished mug of tea. He rifled through the paperwork on her

desk and found nothing of interest (conference invitations, Muggle grant application results, notes from students. Useless tat).

The computer made a sound like a small ping. Draco turned to it. Its dark surface and wiggling lines challenged him to touch it and die of Elektik Shocks. Then Draco gasped and said, “Hang on!” “What?” asked Granger, who had just reentered the room.

“This whole place is so Muggleish that I hadn’t even thought to ask, but – how are these computers working? We’re in a magical building.”

“Oh, that,” said Granger. She made what Draco presumed was meant to be a casual shrug (it wasn’t very casual). “I found ways to circumvent the issue.”

“How?”

“Ways,” said Granger. “What ways?” asked Draco.

She stared at him as though assessing his worthiness for this knowledge. In the face of her open eye-contact, Draco was sorely tempted to attempt Legilimency again. Just as the thought passed his mind, her eyes lost some of their sparkle. She was Occluding.

“I found a solution,” said Granger with another vague gesture. “I couldn’t possibly work with only quills and parchment; that’s positively archaic. Not to mention the hundreds of thousands of calculations and projections I’ve needed to do... Anyway, you needn’t preoccupy yourself with it. I can assure you that it’s nothing dangerous.”

Draco stepped closer to the computer, observing the various gadgets connected to its periphery by long smooth fibres. Only a few things weren’t connected to the Principal Organ (as he named the glowing box part), including three smallish metallic pucks set around the thing.

Rather how one might set up a perimeter, really. To keep things in or out.

He strode to the collection of computers in the laboratory proper, Granger following with a kind of polite curiosity.

There, too, were the metallic pucks. Six of them, this time, creating a jagged circle. “I’d be careful handling those,” said Granger.

Draco, whose hand had been hovering above one of the pucks, pulled back.

“It’s not dangerous, but you won’t like the feeling.” She came beside him and held one up. “I’m calling it an Anti-Magical Forcefield, for lack of a better term. Rather challenging to create, but it serves my purposes.”

Draco stared at her. Blocking magic was a tricky bit of work – a thing mostly relegated to abstruse theoretical discussions. The handful of magic-inhibiting artefacts he’d heard of were things of distant legend, lost to the passage of time. And yet...

“I got the idea from wifi hotspots in cafés and airports, only, of course, this is the contrary,” said Granger. Then, seeing from his face that that explained nothing, she said: “Never mind.”

“I’m not entirely certain that those are legal,” said Draco, looking at the pucks. “Better report me to Shacklebolt,” said Granger.

Her eyes met his, unfriendly, unafraid. Draco decided that Granger had balls, possibly rivalling Tonks’ enormous pair.

The beginnings of a Plan were germinating in his head.

“I need a copy of your schedule,” he said, leading the way back to Granger’s office.

A quick Duplicatus sorted that, paired with a Protean Charm to ensure that changes to her version would be reflected on his.

“Right. I shall prepare a tidy little report with some recommendations to ensure Healer Granger’s continued safety and well-being,” said Draco, scribbling out a few notes. “I’m also going to see what I can do to reassure Shacklebolt that you’re not going to be murdered tomorrow, and that I needn’t be your minder on a daily basis.”

“A relief for all parties,” said Granger.

“Watch for my owl in a few days. Also, please stop giving him treacle tart, it makes him unruly.” “Understood,” said Granger, looking only slightly abashed. “Is the test over, then?”

“Yes.”

“Finally,” said Granger. Then, because she was a normal, well-adjusted individual, she sat down at her desk to work some more.

Draco saw that he had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist, and decided to show himself out without further ceremony.

“Mind the tile just in front of the door – Quicksand Curse,” said Granger absently. “It was to catch the baddies on the way out.”

“Saw it, Granger.” “Of course you did.”

~

A few exchanges with Shacklebolt ensued, during which Draco outlined his Plan and convinced the Minister that it was the correct approach, and that, moreover, no other approach would do because the Principal would be too uncooperative.

Draco studied Granger’s schedule in quiet moments, puzzling over the asterisk “holidays.” His first thought was that the days were a personal indicator of some private thing. They were too scattered to be a reminder for her period. The pattern wasn’t lunar, either – good to know Granger wasn’t a secret werewolf.

Dates for some romantic entanglement, perhaps? Was that why she hadn’t marked down details? Was he looking at Granger’s sex schedule? Would she really take entire days off? Draco felt that he ought to shake the hand of the man responsible.

He also surreptitiously checked the off-day requests book at the Auror Office, and neither the Weasel’s nor Pothead’s upcoming

holidays coincided. The mystery endured.

Draco spent a few days tinkering with the key element of his Plan. And by ‘tinkering,’ we do mean, of course, mucking about with ancient magicks best left untouched.

~

“Recommendations,” said Draco, slapping a roll of parchment onto Granger’s desk. “Fairly standard stuff for fairly obvious vulnerabilities. I’ve run them past Shacklebolt. He’s agreed to withdraw the protection request if you comply with them.”

Granger unrolled the parchment and found that it reached the floor. She gave him a slow blink. “Anything you’d like to draw my particular attention to, in the interest of saving time?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “Item fifty-six.”

Granger ran down the list to the line in question. “The Principal must agree to wear the Ring at all times, until completion of the Project.”

“That’s the one,” said Draco. “What ring?” asked Granger.

“This one,” said Draco, tossing a ring towards her. The small silver band landed on the parchment, spun once, and was still. “I don’t care to train you on Imperius and Veritaserum resistance, or personal protection magicks, or Advanced Occlumency, or drill you on physical self-defence (gods forbid; you look like your punches might concuss a gnat, at best) – and nor, I think, do you want to endure these things.”

“Correct,” said Granger, her suspicious look moving from the ring to Draco.

“Nor do I want to stand sentry at your door like some glorified bodyguard, waiting for whatever Shacklebolt expects to happen, to happen.”

“Yes,” said Granger with enthusiasm. “Continue.”

“So I presented Shacklebolt with this option, which will allow me to – in essence – be alerted if anything were to happen to you, and Apparate to you instantly. I can find better uses for my time, and you can carry on with your – distressingly full, by the way – schedule, unimpeded.”

Draco waited to be praised for the simple elegance of this brilliant solution. Instead, Granger poked the ring with her wand.

“It isn’t going to kill you,” said Draco.

Granger met his eyes seriously. “My dataset is, admittedly, rather small, but I saw the aftermath of the last piece of jewellery that Draco Malfoy handed out, and it was – alarming. You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t immediately put this on. I’d like to analyse it.”

Ah, yes. The Katie Bell Incident. If Draco had any feelings, they would’ve been a little hurt, probably, by this display of mistrust stemming from the actions of an idiot boy being manipulated by the Darkest wizard of the century, a decade and a half ago. But he didn’t, so the point was moot.

“I’m happy to see that you’ve got some self-preservation instincts,” said Draco. He swept his hand towards the ring. “Analyse away.”

Granger cast a few revelation spells, which set the ring aglow with slow-rotating, translucent spellwork. “So – what’s all this?”

“Telling you would rather spoil the fun, wouldn’t it? You tell me,” said Draco. And with that, he settled back into his chair into

a relaxed pose. Now it was his turn to watch her unpuzzle a thing.

She flicked through the spells with some adeptness, quickly picking out the more critical ones. Draco supposed that diagnostic magic would come easily to her as a Healer.

She listed her findings. “A Locator Charm, miscellaneous protective runes (thoughtful, thank you), a distress beacon, heart rate monitoring...”

Now her lips quirked. “What’s funny?” asked Draco.

“You’ve invented a Wizarding FitBit.” “I beg your pardon?”

Unless he was misunderstanding, Granger was suggesting that his exceptional creation was a knock-off of a Muggle thing? What?

“Never mind. What’s this unfinished mess here?” asked Granger, holding her wand-point to a ghostly green knot of Arithmantic calculations.

Draco felt his nostrils pinch: that unfinished mess was the result of many frustrating hours of work. “I haven’t got round to finishing that yet.”

“What was it meant to be?”

“Portkey. For moments when you couldn’t Apparate, or if you were trapped in an Anti-Apparition Ward. I haven’t worked out the calculations.”

Granger looked mildly impressed. Draco supposed that she was surrounded by the nation’s greatest magical brains on the daily, and that he ought to be pleased that she was mildly impressed by a mere Auror’s paltry creation.

“An on-demand Portkey would be something,” said Granger.

“Portus is a pain in the arse of an enchantment,” said Draco, trying to sound resigned, rather than sullen.

“Have you ever thought of making more of these rings? You could monetise these easily,” said Granger, holding the ring aloft.

“Do I look like I need money?” asked Draco.

Granger levelled a stare at him. Her back straightened. They had been dangerously close to lapsing into a civil conversation and she seemed to have forgotten who she was talking to. She sniffed in lieu of responding.

“Anyway, I can’t mass-produce the ring.”

“Right.” Granger was weighing the ring in the palm of her hand.
“Because this isn’t just some trinket you put a few neat charms
on.”

“No.”

“This is an Artefact.”

“Indeed.”

“A family heirloom, if I were to hazard a guess.” “Yes.”

Of course she’d spotted the concealment charm that made the ring look like a plain silver band. Now she tapped her wand to reveal the ring’s true appearance – an ornate silver ouroboros, ever eating its own tail. And on the inside, the family motto: Sanctimonia Vincet Semper. Purity will always conquer.

“You’re certain this ring won’t immediately attempt to amputate my finger? I’m not Pure, after all,” said Granger.

Draco felt that the temperature in Granger’s office had dropped rather suddenly.

“Did you see a sign of Dark magic?” asked Draco. Too quickly – he’d sounded defensive. Blast. “If there was Dark magic, it’s gone now,” said Granger.

She tapped the ring again, reverting it back to the plain silver band. She looked thoughtful.

“I’ll need some time to go through this extremely comprehensive list of recommendations,” she said at length.

“Take the time you need,” said Draco. “But know that the alternative is Shacklebolt setting up a camp bed for me, for overnights in your laboratory.”

She eyed him, then seemed to decide that he must be joking. “I’ll need to think about item fifty-six in particular. Do you want the ring back in the meantime?”

“Keep it,” said Draco. “Have your friends analyse it – isn’t one of the Weasley brothers meant to be good at that stuff? – and when you’ve quite settled any doubts, owl me, and we can get on with our lives.”

Granger perked up, as though getting on with her life without a Draco-shaped barnacle attached to her was the kindest hope he

could've offered her.

"I will," she said.

Two of her students, kitted up in their strange white cloaks and goggles, knocked at the door, excited to share some new development with dear Professor Granger.

Draco rose to leave as Granger donned her own white coat to join the students in the laboratory. There was an awkward, conflicted look on her face.

Draco, never one to make things easy, merely raised an eyebrow at her.

"I suppose I want to say thank you. For working through this as you are. I haven't exactly been pulling my weight trying to find a solution to Shacklebolt's request. The ring is a good idea."

"I think you're more than pulling your weight elsewhere," said Draco. He left; she muttered something that might've been a goodbye.

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Chapter 3

House Call by Genius Inventor

Draco's eagle owl was given a decent workout in the coming days as Draco and Granger negotiated back and forth on a few of the recommendations that he'd made. She suggested that some of the measures were positively draconian ("pun intended; do forgive me") and tried to push back on them, with an especial focus on the home visit for personalised warding.

Eventually, Draco pulled out his most severe quill, and composed the following:

Granger – Shacklebolt's orders on the warding of the Granger domicile aren't up for negotiation. Do let me know when would be convenient to come by this week for the warding. If you don't, I shall drop by at an inconvenient time by default. - D (for Draconian)

Malfoy – Unsure if you heard my sigh of exasperation from London, so I am recording its occurrence here for your

information. I am more than capable of improving the warding on my own property, or of hiring a warding firm. But, if Shacklebolt is insisting on your particular expertise, so be it. See my schedule for options, I have just updated it. N.B.: they are very few; Tuesday evening looks the most promising, but I will be the doctor (Muggle Healer) on call at the local surgery and may have to leave in the middle. - H

Granger – I know what a doctor is. - D

~

So, what did the home of a nationally famous scholar / war heroine / Healer / Champion of Just Causes / Researcher-In-Danger look like?

A modest sort of cottage in Cambridgeshire, as it happened. Three bedrooms, at Draco's best guess. Granger stood at the gate. As he approached from his Apparition point, she waved her wand to allow him to pass whatever preliminary wards she had set up.

“What’s wrong with your face?” she asked as Draco neared the gate. Always to the point, was Granger.

“Bludger,” said Draco. “Oh. It looks bad.”

(It probably did, too; Zabini had a mean swing.)

As he neared the gate, Draco saw Granger scrutinising the injury with a well-practised eye. She vacillated for a moment, then, apparently unable to resist Do-Gooding, blurted out, “Do you want me to have a look at it?”

“No. I’ve already put a salve on,” said Draco, brushing his fingers against his slowly bruising jaw. “That’s going to make a lovely hematoma.”

“I’m fine. I came here to ward your house, not for a consult.”
Granger’s mouth pressed into a thin line.

“Are you going to invite me in?” asked Draco, irked by her standing there, watching him with something like concern. Now he felt like some kind of vampire angling for an invitation over the threshold.

“Come in, then,” said Granger, a little snappish, pulling the gate open.

Draco saw that she was dressed in another version of the white coat, this time accessorised with a dangling contraption wrapped around her neck.

“You’ve left your auto-asphyxiation device on,” said Draco, pointing to it.

“It’s a stethoscope,” said Granger, with an unspoken, you cretin, attached to the end of the sentence.

“Right,” said Draco, not deigning to request clarification. “Give us a tour and let’s crack on.”

She brought him through to the cottage’s front room, which might’ve been a living room, except that it was an explosion of books.

“You scolded me for placing a book half an inch out of place. Look at this disaster,” said Draco, piqued by the injustice.

“It’s my digitising project,” said Granger. “It’s a temporary disaster.” She gestured to a Muggle machine in the centre of it all, connected to a flattish version of a computer.

“Digitising?”

“Yes. Preserving magical knowledge through Muggle means, as I’m growing tired of lugging enormous books about, of finding irreparably damaged or lost material because some idiot spilled

tea on a page twenty years ago, and of having to search for things through ancient record cards like it's 1855. It's a pet project for my rarest volumes. Unfortunately, I haven't as much time to dedicate to it as I'd like..."

She brought Draco through to the kitchen, a rather Muggle space, save for the variety of magical plants explosively taking over her window ledges and various potions aglow here and there. There might've been something magical slowly brewing in a cauldron at the hearth, but she swept him past it.

"Conservatory?" asked Draco as they moved to the next room.

Granger looked at him as though he had just confirmed what a posh twat he was. "A conservatory? This isn't Ascott House. The letting agent called it a sun-room."

That seemed an optimistic appellation to Draco, who watched January sleet begin to drizzle against the glass ceiling with scepticism.

Then an odd, orange, squash-faced creature appeared, and wound its way around Granger's ankles. In another moment of wild optimism, Granger referred to it as a cat.

“What’s wrong with your cat?” asked Draco, bending over to regard the creature with concern.

“Nothing’s wrong with him,” said Granger. Both she and the creature looked at Draco with great offence. “He’s part Kneazle, and very intelligent. Aren’t you, my darling? My sweetums? My angel boy?”

As its ears were massaged by Granger, the cat regarded Draco with an expression of utmost disdain.

Then it decided that it had had enough of Granger’s attention and turned to leave, its absurd tail held high, so that Draco got a full view of its bumhole.

“Charming,” said Draco.

The tour continued to the cramped upstairs space. Three small bedrooms, as Draco had guessed, with predictable points of entry that he would have to ward.

The first bedroom appeared to be used as a study. Draco noted a kind of plinth in the middle of the space. On it rested a grimoire, very old and damaged, surrounded by the glow of stasis charms.

Granger saw what had caught his attention. “A tragedy. Don’t ask me about it or I shall cry.”

Draco did not wish to deal with bookish snivelling and did not pursue the subject, but he made a mental note of the object, for future prying.

The second bedroom was quite bare, save for a long mat on the floor, candles, and a cluster of orchids. What ritual was Granger preparing to cast here? He tried to make sense of the candle arrangement, but it didn’t match the geometry of anything he recognised.

Finally, they came to Granger’s bedroom, which she permitted him a glance into with evident unease. Draco couldn’t find a civil way to say, stop bloody fidgeting, I only need to see how the baddies might try to kidnap you; I’m not here to rifle through your knickers, so he said nothing.

An obnoxious jingle began to play somewhere in Granger’s vicinity. She pulled a palm-sized Muggle thingie out of her pocket and spoke into it. From what Draco understood, she was being summoned to the surgery by the means of this device.

She confirmed this by rushing past Draco to the stairs. “I have to go. I think you’ve seen enough to orient yourself – please set the wards to let Crookshanks in and out. He likes to roam. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Crookshanks?” called Draco as Granger tripped down the stairs.

“The cat!” said Granger.

She disappeared outside, but instead of the crack of Disapparition, Draco heard the sound of a motor. Granger was driving. A Muggle car.

The absolute weirdo.

Or perhaps not, he thought upon reflection, as he made his way back to the garden. If she was going to a Muggle surgery, she’d have to show up by Muggle means; an instantaneous Apparition at the door would raise questions.

As he pondered the overfilled dual life that Granger led, Draco began to ward.

~

After about two hours of work, Draco pronounced himself satisfied. The wards would need to be recast every week or so, but no one would be able to waltz in sans Granger's permission. Points of entry and egress were all reinforced with the Auror's standard kit and a few of Draco's own inventions; underground approaches would be flummoxed by a robust Depellens Penetrationem and aerial attacks would be rebuffed by a Caeli Praesidium. The usual assortment of intruder alarms was scattered about.

Frankly, for a witch of Granger's relative fame, whose two closest chums were now Aurors, her protection measures had been paltry. But then, it was peacetime, and she was a scholar, now – not a child chasing Dark Objects to murder an evil wizard seven times over.

The half-Kneazle stared balefully at Draco through the sleet from the shelter of the stoop. Draco added the creature's magical signature to the wards and told him so. The creature blinked at him. Draco was unnerved.

Just as the rain began to lessen, a car made its way up the drive and behind the cottage. Granger rounded the corner a moment later. "Still here, are you?"

“I've just finished,” panted Draco. Warding was a magically exhausting task.

The half-Kneazle was given a great many kisses on his ugly head as Draco stood by and tried not to look wet and sweaty. And

where was his thank you, if you please?



“I shall have to ward your car,” said Draco. “If you use it to get around a lot. And the Muggle surgery, if you’re there regularly.”

Granger frowned at him. “My car is brand new. You can’t ward it; you’ll muck something up.”

In the face of Draco’s confused offence, she added, “Cars have electrical components in them, now. Maybe they didn’t when you were in Muggle Studies.”

This was said as though Draco was approximately 120 years old and had last taken Muggle Studies when cars were called horseless carriages.

“I’ll bung a Sneakoscope into the glovebox,” said Granger. For someone so clever, she certainly was an idiot.

“Excellent,” said Draco. “That’ll definitely ward off a Bombarda Maxima from twenty metres out. I’ll be able to tell Shacklebolt that we’d taken all necessary measures to protect you, when we pull your charred remains out of the wreckage.”

The violent imagery was successful. Granger gave in. “Fine. You can ward it. But do try to stay away from the – the centre bits, with all the buttons. Next to the steering wheel.”

Draco’s moment of triumph was ruined by a long and echoing hungry growl, unmistakably from his stomach (unfortunate – he was prepared to blame the cat).

There was a pause. Granger's eyes flitted to Draco's midriff. She appeared to be struggling between her natural feelings for him and her manners. Then, finally: "You must be famished. Do you want to come in? I've a few snacks. We can go over the recommendations – and the ring."

Why yes, Draco was starving. Two hours of warding really did take it out of a man. However: there was a five course meal waiting for him at the Manor. However (bis): he wanted to wrap up this affair and have his next communication with Granger be regarding the return of the ring, however- many months hence.

"All right," said Draco.

Draco popped into the loo to refresh himself, which mainly involved Scourgifying his armpits (the height of class; mother would be proud) and attempting some drying charms on his robes. His hair he deemed a lost cause tonight. Not that he had anyone to impress here. And besides, in this cottage, with Granger the Human Anemone and her orange toilet brush of a familiar, his hair still easily won best-in-show.

His entire look was complemented by the magnificent bruise starting to develop along his jaw. He pressed more of the salve

into it, annoyed that Granger had been right about how bad it was going to get.

He trudged to the kitchen, where Granger had the scroll of recommendations and the ring set out upon the kitchen table. She removed her white coat and stuffed it into a Muggle machine at the end of the worktop (judging by the folded piles around it, a washing apparatus). Another long-sleeved top underneath – who knew that Granger had such an aversion to exposing her elbows?

The kitchen table was pushed into a corner. Draco therefore took a chair next to Granger. From this vantage – far closer than he'd been to her at any point previously – he noted that she was in possession of a decent pair of tits.

However, Granger chose that moment to unravel the scroll, now liberally scribbled with question marks and counter-suggestions, and Draco was unable to feel attracted because he was being suffocated by waves of Swot.

“Some of my principal concerns,” said Granger, nodding her chin towards the parchment, which promised a long and arduous evening of argument. “But first, let’s eat something.”

She rummaged about in a pathetically empty cupboard and popped some options onto the table.

As far as Draco was concerned, the principal article of diet was cat hair. He pulled a few orangey strands from his mouth as the cat (damn the creature) wound its way around his chair's legs, looking smugly at him.

Granger did him the courtesy of looking abashed when she noticed.

“Sorry!” She waved her wand in Draco’s direction, Vanishing most of the fur. “It does get everywhere. Sometimes I think he can actually will it into existence – into unspeakable places.”

Draco, pulling at a hair, said “Pht” in response, but what he really wanted to say was, If I find orange fur on my balls tonight, I shall skin that animal with my bare hands.

Granger tore open a package of something and passed it to him. “What is this?” asked Draco, holding up one of the things. “Cheesy Wotsits.”

Which explained everything, obviously.

For her part, Granger ate tuna, directly from the tin. “Grim, Granger,” said Draco.

“It’s protein,” said Granger. She looked at the mediocre spread that Draco was scowling at and got a bit defensive. “I haven’t had time to go to the shops.”

“Why don’t you send a house-elf—”

As the words came out of his mouth, Draco cut himself off, but it was too late. Granger was looking at him like he’d just confirmed, for the second time that evening, what an overprivileged wanker he was.

She rose, tight-jawed, to make tea. It seemed an excuse to get away from his immediate vicinity. But, whatever – Draco wasn’t here to make friends.

Granger banged about with the kettle. She looked like she was holding back a certain quantity of Draco-oriented vitriol. He surreptitiously checked his pockets. He did have a bezoar on him, in case his tea had any special additives courtesy of the House-Elf Vigilante.

Granger set their mugs on the table with rather more firmness than was necessary. There was no immediate evidence of poison.

She had found a packet of biscuits to go with the tea. Draco ate two thirds of it like a famished thing, and if they were poisoned, then so be it.

Then Granger straightened out the parchment, seemed to – with an effort – compartmentalise her feelings about Draco the Wanker, and became all business.

She queried him on the recommendations as though he were an apprentice Auror who had submitted this for review, and ought to be grateful for the feedback. And so they argued through the list: on item 14, whether he would add caretaking staff to the laboratory's wards (he conceded); on item 26, whether she really needed to give him notice when she was leaving town (yes) and if so, how much notice (24 hours); on item 33, what constituted a 'public event' (over 40 people); on item 34, why did she have to advise him of her attendance at Muggle ones? (because he said so); could he not make her home Unplottable, she had Muggle friends who might want to visit? (no); and so on and so forth until they came to item 56.

Granger refilled their tea and pulled out another packet of biscuits, given that Draco had stress- eaten the entirety of the first one.

“So. The ring,” said Granger.

“The ring,” repeated Draco. The crux of the thing – the object that meant he could continue his life in happy, Granger-less freedom and still satisfy the Minister and Tonks.

“I’ve had it looked at by a few experts. It does seem quite safe. They were rather impressed by it, actually.”

Draco wanted to say, Naturally; I’m a genius. Where is your FitZit now?

He sipped his tea self-righteously instead.

“I’ve also had a chat with Tonks,” continued Granger. “She probably told you how much she likes the idea, too. Means you’ll be able to take on other assignments while monitoring me at a distance. So – all told, glowing reviews all around, with minimal cons, and I am willing to proceed. I do have a question for you, however.”

“Yes?” said Draco, even though he had a fair guess about the question. In fact, he was surprised she hadn’t asked earlier.

“How does the information tracked by the ring come to you?”

Draco held up his hand and waved his wand at it, cancelling the Notice-Me-Not Charm there. “Ah,” said Granger, as the silver ring on Draco’s finger came into view.

Her gaze flicked from Draco’s ring to the one on the table. Then, after some private deliberations in that overlarge brain of hers, she said, quite intelligently in Draco’s opinion: “I shan’t ask more questions about the original use of these things. I feel that further details might put me off the whole affair.”

“Good shout,” said Draco.

Because, yes, these ancient rings had long been worn by married couples in the Malfoy family. His mother had removed hers many years ago, following Lucius Malfoy’s death in Azkaban – the ring’s silence was a constant reminder of the loss and she could no longer bear to wear it.

Draco had modified the rings so that there would only be one-way communication between Granger’s and his. He certainly didn’t need her being alerted every time his heart rate spiked when he was having a morning wank, thanks.

Living on in happy ignorance of these thoughts, Granger asked, “Is anything special required or do I just – just put it on?”

“I’ll do it,” said Draco. “It needs to be done by the person wearing the ring’s – er, mate.”

He tried to be gruff and businesslike about it, but there are very few things in the world as un-businesslike as a man putting a ring on a woman’s finger, and it was awkward despite his best attempts. He wondered if Granger found it as awkward as he did. She was studying the kitchen wallpaper, a tint of pink high on her cheeks.

Her hand was small in his, and delicate. The ring went on effortlessly. He felt a kind of enlivening in the ring on his own hand – it had someone to talk to, now.

“The distress beacon is activated by twisting it three times around your finger,” said Draco to break the silence. “Do that and I’ll Apparate to you immediately.”

Granger snapped away from her fascination with the wallpaper.
“All right.”

“Do reserve it for critical situations, Granger – not because you’ve found tea spilled on a book.”

“I’m very much hoping I’ll never have to use it at all.” She looked at the ring glinting on her hand. “At least the thing didn’t immediately try to kill me.”

“Don’t get too comfortable. It could be playing a long game.”

Draco tapped the scroll they had discussed ad nauseum, integrating the scribbled results of their back-and-forth into a clean version. Then he created a duplicate for her.

“Now that we’ve finalised this, you must stick with it. We’ve established a duty of care and I’d rather not be dragged in front of the Wizengamot for professional negligence resulting in the death of the great Hermione Granger.”

“I understand,” came the great Hermione Granger’s serious reply.

“Good. Now, before I go, one last thing.” Draco dug a hand into his pocket. “My owl’s lost half a pound of weight since we’ve been communicating, so I—”

“Feed him more treacle tart,” interjected Granger. Her cat was on her lap, finishing the tin of tuna.

“I’ve decided to give in to the trend and buy these things,” finished Draco. He placed a pair of Weasleys’ Jabbering Jotters on the table. “You’ve probably heard of them – all the rage amongst the younger generation. Owls aren’t quite the thing anymore. Not immediate enough.”

In Draco’s opinion, a sad end to a long Wizarding tradition. One couldn’t write a strongly worded letter on a Jabbering Jotter – one simply couldn’t.

“I am familiar with those,” said Granger. She was very obviously holding back a smile. Draco weighed the pros and cons of asking for the reason behind the smile. He decided against: between her and the cat, the levels of smugness in the room would soon asphyxiate him.

“So you know how they work?” asked Draco, passing her the small magical notepad. “O, yes,” said Granger, accepting the object. “Thank you. I feel bad about your owl.” “He’ll recover and soon grow fat from lack of exercise.”

His job here done, Draco rose with a general mutter of thanks for the tea. Granger replied with some inaudible words of gratitude for the warding.

The cat attempted to trip him and break his neck on his way out of the kitchen. Draco decided that that was a suitable end to an unpleasant evening.

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Chapter 4

Imbolc

In his handful of years working with Potter and Weasley, Draco had developed a cool, professional kind of rapport with them, which Weasley demonstrated the next morning by calling, “Oi! Dickhead!” and hanging over Draco’s cubicle wall like a disjointed ginger muppet. “What do you want, Weasel?”

“We heard Hermione’s been assigned Auror protection – and that the bloke’s a tosser,” said Weasley.

“Was that her description, or yours?”

Potter, whose disastrous hair and vivid green eyes now popped up over the cubicle wall, said, “Ours. She says you’ve been quite professional. We know the truth.”

“Lucky bugger,” said Weasley. “How come Tonks gives us the vampires, and you the Hermione- minding? You don’t even like her.”

“I understand that it was a question of competence,” said Draco.
“Tonks said she needed to assign the finest Auror to protect the
finest mind in the UK—”

Weasley scoffed; Potter laughed.

“—And the nuisance Aurors to deal with the nuisance vampires,”
finished Draco.

“I said no such thing,” said Tonks, waddling by in the form of a
short, overweight man. “Shouldn’t you all be off working, you
blatherskites? You’re all nuisance Aurors, as far as I’m
concerned.”

Potter and Weasley chortled. Draco was offended.

“What’s Hermione working on, anyway, that’s got old Shack so
worked up?” asked Weasley. “She won’t tell us.”

“That information’s on a need-to-know basis,” said Draco,
tapping his nose.

He hadn’t a clue either, but winding up the Nuisance Duo was
always a good time. The two of them looked suitably annoyed

that Draco seemed to know something they didn't.

"Work!" shouted Tonks from her office. "Yes, boss," replied Weasley.

"Word to the wise, Malfoy," said Potter as they left. "Don't insult Hermione's cat." "Too late," said Draco.

~

Two weeks passed, during which all was quiet on the Granger front. Her ring had been calibrated to alert Draco to extreme physiological or emotional shifts that might indicate immediate danger: significant spikes of fear, panic, pain, or an unusually high heart rate.

In general, Granger seemed to be miraculously even-tempered. There was one day when Draco's ring tingled at him throughout the morning, signalling that Granger's pulse was elevated at various points – but not quite at the threshold signalling a wild panic.

He set it out of his mind and joined Goggin and a few junior Aurors for a hand-to-hand combat session. Tonks insisted that

her Aurors not only maintained their Duelling expertise through rigorous practice, but also their abilities as physical fighters. Many had moaned about having to learn to fight like Muggles. Tonks had set them straight. A disarmed Auror with hand-to-hand training could still outmanoeuvre, disarm, or maim an opponent, if he kept his wits about him. A wandless Auror without those things was a very dead Auror.

Granger's elevated pulse – the fourth such incident that morning – interrupted Draco's spar. His momentary distraction earned him a solid uppercut from Goggin.

He called for a pause, clutching at his jaw, and used the Jotter to send Granger an annoyed message, consisting solely of punctuation: ???

She responded with a brief note: Losing a patient.

Draco didn't respond, mostly because he didn't know what to say, but also because Goggin had decided that the break was over and was now attempting to concuss him.

A while later he received the following missive from Granger:
By the way – going out of town tomorrow morning, just for the

day. I know our agreement said 24 hours notice for departures and this is more like 12. Sorry, it's been hellish.

Where? was Draco's response.

Somerset, was Granger's.

Why? Holiday.

One of those asterisk holidays?

Granger didn't respond. So, yes.

That evening, while Draco was at dinner, his ring signalled pain. But it wasn't physical pain. It was the heart-pain of grief, from somewhere in Cambridgeshire. The poignancy of the feeling surprised him. The sincerity of it. Granger truly was a Do-Gooder to the core. He supposed that she had got home and was giving way to the loss of her patient.

“Draco? Is everything all right?”

Draco found himself being observed by the thoughtful blue eyes of Narcissa Malfoy. He realised he'd stopped eating when the

ghostly grief had suffused his senses.

“I’m fine,” said Draco. “Just thinking about work.”

Draco hadn’t told his mother that he’d requisitioned the Malfoy rings. He was certain that she wouldn’t agree with his repurposing, nor with his choice of recipient.

He cast about for a safe subject for discussion and remarked on the nicer-than-usual flower arrangement in the centre of the table. Floristry was one of his mother’s hobbies.

“Do you like it?” asked his mother, leaning over to touch a few delicate petals. She seemed in a pensive mood. “It’s Imbolc tomorrow.”

“Imbolc?” The word was vaguely familiar to Draco – some Pagan festival or other.

Narcissa pulled up an already perfectly placed blossom and replaced it even more perfectly in the bouquet. “Yes – it marks the end of winter. Your grandmother used to observe those old traditions when I was a little girl. The house would be decorated with snowdrops and daffodils on every surface, we’d have a feast

– and we'd feel hopeful, knowing that spring was finally on its way.”

Draco made some polite reply. His mother watched him eat, her own hands folded onto her lap. She had something else to say.

“What is it?” asked Draco.

“Are you going to be home tomorrow? I've got some friends coming for tea.”

Draco made a few quick calculations. Those few friends would most certainly happen to have lovely and accomplished daughters, who would no doubt come too. His mother had grown rather less subtle about her matchmaking since he'd turned thirty.

Unfortunately for Narcissa (and the eligible young ladies), Draco's own interest in anything longer term than dirty weekend escapades in Paris was nil. He'd done the longer term thing once – a two- year engagement to Astoria – and it had been sufficient to confirm that, no matter how Pure- blooded and well-bred the witch, he wasn't ready for marriage.

Granger's note earlier that day offered a convenient lifeline. Draco grimaced and said, “I'll be working. Business in Somerset

tomorrow.”

Granger herself didn’t know she’d have company, but too bad for her. He’d call it a spot check. Her safety against threats – real or imagined by Shacklebolt – was his highest priority, after all.

Narcissa seemed unsurprised at the ready excuse. “A pity. Next time, then.”

Dinner concluded. Draco retreated to his chambers, where he took a long bath and nursed his training wounds.

His Jotter buzzed. He summoned it to find a note from Granger, a delayed response to his earlier question. Yes, one of the asterisk holidays. A spot of sightseeing. I’ll turn the ring if I need you.

That last sentence was Granger-speak for “I don’t need you, do not come, you are not invited.”

No doubt she would get shirty when he turned up. The thought elicited an unexpected tingle of amusement.

Then something that had been percolating in the back of Draco’s mind since dinner clicked into place. He got out of the tub, dried

himself off with a few waves of his wand, and summoned Granger's schedule.

Tomorrow was – what had his mother said? Imbolc? And that coincided with one of Granger's asterisks.

Were there other such interesting coincidences? He ran through the rest of the dates. The next asterisk was a weekend in late March. Then one at the beginning of May. Then June. Then early August.

Abuzz with anticipatory triumph, Draco descended to the Manor's library, where he pulled out a few volumes on Celtic and Germanic Pagan traditions.

He was right. Granger's dates matched the old calendars. Draco rolled the old words out on his tongue. Imbolc. Ostara. Beltane. Litha. Lughnasadh. Mabon. Samhain.

What was Granger up to? Draco was officially intrigued.

~

Draco gave Granger the morning to set out on her Somerset adventure before he joined her. That permitted him an exquisite lie-in, some invigorating flying in the February wind, and the opportunity for a luxurious brunch. He kissed his mother's cheek with insincere regrets about missing tea.

Somerset was just far enough from Wiltshire that Draco had to Floo into a wizarding pub in Cannington before Apparating to Granger's ring.

The Apparition took a moment longer than usual, with an odd sort of stretch in the final half-second, like it was trying to keep up with the destination. When he arrived, Draco understood why. Granger had been moving at a rather rapid pace, given that she was belting down a country lane in her car.

Granger shrieked as Draco materialised in the seat beside her. His head was in the passenger footwell and his boots were, by the feel of it, in Granger's face. It was altogether not his most graceful arrival.

Granger swerved onto a verge and brought the car to a halt. Draco turned himself the right way up with difficulty as a barrage of questions came his way, including what the hell he thought he

was doing, who did he think he was, how dare he, and whether or not he was actually insane?

Granger's voice could be quite shrill. Penetrating, really.

"You just Apparated to a moving target! Have you completely lost the plot? You could've been Splinched into a hundred different pieces, scattered about the A37!"

"I didn't expect it to be a moving target," said Draco, feeling dishevelled and a bit sick. "Why are you driving?"

"Because you told me Apparition and Floo were traceable."

"Who cares if they're traceable? You're allowed to be on holiday. Nice morning for it, by the by," he added, as rain pelted the car. "Unless your holiday has something to do with your project?"

Granger glared at him. "Aha," said Draco.

Seeing that the worst of the fracas had abated, Draco, having spotted a mirror just above Granger's head, swivelled it towards himself. It was the perfect height to check one's hair. Good sorts, Muggles, really – they had their priorities straight.

Granger sputtered. “Did you just commandeer my rearview mirror to fix your hair?”

“You can have it back in a moment,” said Draco.

Granger was staring at him with an expression of dislike strong enough to unnerve a lesser man.

She swivelled the mirror back towards herself. “I need that. And get your overlarge feet off my dash.”

“It’s not my fault your car is so cramped,” said Draco, attempting to bring his legs in.

“It’s not my fault you’re a gangly marionette of a man who decided to Apparate into my Mini.”

Before Draco had time to register his offence at this unfair comparison, she got to the crux of the issue: “And why are you here?”

“I’m conducting a spot check,” said Draco.

“A spot check,” repeated Granger, looking thoroughly unconvinced. “Yes.”

“And? Have you established that I’m sound of mind and body?”

Draco examined her critically. She seemed sound of body, from what he could see under the hat, anorak, scarf, and Muggle walking boots. Soundness of mind was less easy to gauge – there was a sparkle of something dangerous in her eye.

“Well?” she pushed. “I’m fine, as you can see. You can go away now.”

Draco decided to take the high road and attempt some honesty.
“I’m also using this as a pretext.” “A pretext for what?”
“Avoiding some unpleasantness at home.” “What sort of unpleasantness?”

Relentless sort of witch. “My mother is having ladies over for tea.”

Whatever Granger was expecting, it hadn’t been that. A queer expression flashed across her face, as of one holding back a laugh. “Ladies over for tea?” she repeated.

“Yes. What is so funny?”

“I thought it’d be something more – more fearsome.” The held-back laughter faded. “Anyway, I don’t want to suffer because

you're afraid of some ladies. I don't need, nor want, you hanging about today. I have things to do."

"It's Imbolc today," said Draco conversationally. "Did you know?" Granger said nothing, but looked freshly annoyed.

"What're you up to in Somerset at Imbolc?" asked Draco. "I didn't know you kept the Old Ways. You don't seem the type for flowers and dancing about poles."

When Granger didn't answer him again, Draco settled himself into his seat. "I've assessed the situation and – since it's obviously to do with your dangerous project – I will be monitoring you today, for your own safety. Per item eleven of my recommendations. Don't argue."

"I will eject you from this car," said Granger.

"You can't do that."

"I can. This button, here," said Granger, pointing to a round thing on the dashboard. "It's a safety feature Muggles invented."

A whining whistle began to wail through the car. Granger jumped. "What is that?"

"Oh, that," said Draco. "A safety feature wizards invented. I put a Sneakoscope in your glovebox, as you suggested. You lied to me

about the eject button and I'm hurt.”

Granger leaned over him and popped open the glovebox (“Ow – my knees!”) to see that there was indeed a Sneakoscope therein. It whistled and flashed for a few moments more, then, given that there was no more lying going on, it stilled.

There was a long silence. Granger pulled back into her seat, leaned her forehead on the steering wheel, and appeared to be collecting herself.

“Fine,” she said at length. “You can stay for the duration of this distressing tea of your mother’s. Just don’t get in my way.”

She turned the key and the car’s engine kicked into life. “Put on your seatbelt. Or don’t. I suppose I don’t care if you die a gruesome death.”

The Sneakoscope wailed again. Granger swore at it quite colourfully. “What does that button really do?” asked Draco when the row had faded.

This innocent question seemed to set Granger off anew. “It used to be the stereo system – until

someone's warding messed it up. Now it only plays Austrian folk songs.” Draco pressed the button. Austrian folk songs began to play.

Granger’s hands were tight on the steering wheel as she pulled back onto the road. It was clear that, in her opinion, Draco was the real Nuisance Auror.

~

Muggle signposting was excellent. As they made their way down progressively windier country lanes, Draco was able to guess at their final destination with a degree of certainty.

“Glastonbury,” he said. “Interesting.”

Granger said nothing. Her displeasure at his presence continued and she was not hiding it. It mattered little to Draco – a rainy drive through the English countryside with an angry Granger was a refreshing change from the usual too-small sandwiches and coquettish fortune-hunters.

Honestly, the winding drive, the Austrian music, the fuming witch – it was absurd, it was amusing, it was fun.

Draco reached to press another button on the car's central panel, out of curiosity. Granger slapped his hand away.

She had decent reflexes, reflected Draco as he sucked on his stinging knuckle.

Instead of driving down the street that led into the town of Glastonbury proper, Granger made a detour to a car park at the edge of a forest.

There, a footpath wound into a woodland, rather soaked and frosty-looking at this time of year. “What’s this?” asked Draco.

“The Mendip Way,” replied Granger, in that way she had of answering his questions without actually answering his questions. She got out of the car. “I’m going for a walk. You may wait in the car.”

May he? So generous. Draco – after a brief struggle with the handle – let himself out of the vehicle. He withheld groans as he stamped some feeling back into his legs.

Granger observed his emergence from the Mini with her hands on her hips. He felt her observing his choice of clothing (his Auror robes over his perennial suit) and footwear (perfectly functional dragonhide boots). She must've concluded that it would have to do – or otherwise, that it wouldn't do, and would put him in peril, and that that was perfect.

At any rate, she turned around and began to walk towards the woods.

Draco saw her cast some rain-repelling and warming charms on herself. He imitated her; it seemed a good idea.

As they entered the Mendip Way, Draco cast a few detection spells, looking for evidence of other beings, magical or Muggle. However, it seemed that only he and Granger were mad enough to go for a ramble on a day like this. Save some roe deer in a nearby clearing, they were alone.

Satisfied that no madmen were about to vault out and attack Granger, Draco caught up to her in a few long strides.

It quickly became obvious that this wasn't just a walk for Granger's health. She was looking for something. Or several somethings. She peered into the underbrush, touched the trunks

of trees, gently caught the fronds of ferns in her palm and studied them. She took nothing, however, and so quashed any theories about ingredient gathering that Draco might have been entertaining.

They progressed in this manner for a good half hour, marked by a pause to refresh their fading Impervius charms.

Finally, Granger stopped, and pulled out a list. Draco unashamedly peeked over her shoulder. Singing Sedge

Greater Bladderwort

Royal Fern Ophioglossum vulgatum Wood-sorrel Mellifluous Honewort

Helianthemum apenninum Helianthemum nummularium Spiny Restarrow

Tassel Moss

Granger used her wand to cross out the majority of the list. Only the Tassel Moss remained. “What’s Tassel Moss?” asked Draco.

Granger flinched away from him. Apparently, she’d been so much in her own head that she’d quite forgotten that Draco was there, much less noticed that he was skulking over her shoulder.

Her hand flew to her fast-beating heart (Draco felt faint echoes of it through the ring). He expected to be told off. However, her bad mood seemed to have been replaced by tentative excitement related to this list.

“One of the rarer mosses in this part of England,” said Granger.

“Why are you looking for it?”

Granger began to walk again, her attention focused, this time, on dead logs, old stumps, and other likely habitats. “Because it will confirm that I’m in the right place.”

“The right place for what?”

Granger waved the question away. “I’m merely confirming a theory.”

“What theory?”

(Draco, too, could be relentless.)

“Something related to my project,” said Granger with irritating ambiguity. “What’s moss got to do with your Chimaera cells, or whatever?”

“Nothing – at least, not directly.” She turned to look at him through the rain, as though to gauge what was worth telling him. “I’m retracing the steps of an old, long-forgotten witch whose

work included – amongst many things – descriptions of certain sacred sites in the British Isles.”

“So, the Vale of Avalon?”

“Specifically, Glastonbury’s wells. Or at least, that’s my educated guess. Not much of her work is still extant today. All we have are fragments. She tended to wax lyrically on flora, which helps me narrow down possible locations by cross-referencing the rarer plants. Of course, she was writing hundreds of years ago, so things may have changed. But few places on the island will support both Singing Sedge and Mellifluous Honewart. They typically thrive in radically different ecosystems, as you no doubt know...”

No, Draco didn’t know – in fact, he’d never even heard of these plants – but he nodded instead of admitting it.

When Draco next looked up, for a heart-stopping moment, Granger had disappeared – he snatched his wand – then he saw her backside poking over the edge of the path. She was on her hands and knees, examining a rather wet ditch.

Whatever had caught her eye, it wasn’t what she was looking for. She regained her feet. She didn’t look disappointed, however –

she looked determined. And muddy.

“Tassel Moss looks as you’d imagine,” said Granger. “Tiny tassels across the top. It’s the sporangia – unusually big in the genus. They turn pink in the summer – of course, we’re a little too early for that.”

Was this woman a genius at Herbology, on top of everything else? Draco wondered how much of Potter and Weasley’s limited scholarly success was due to absorbing her knowledge by intellectual osmosis.

She was, frankly, overwhelming.

Granger carried on along the path, squatting down occasionally to observe things. It was altogether rather a peaceful ramble, with the charms keeping him dry, the sound of the rain and the occasional brave songbird, and verbalisations from Granger telling off various mosses because they weren’t the right one.

For the first time since he’d taken the Granger casfile from Tonks’ hands, Draco felt glad of the decision. This was certainly more pleasant than most of his work as an Auror – fewer hexes and eviscerations coming his way, for a start.

And, bonus, it got him out of tea with the ladies, and promised many more opportunities to do so. That set would be tut-tutting at Granger over their teacups – Granger with her hat askew, her face smeared with dirt, clambering about in ditches instead of finding herself a rich husband. But she was apparently doing something great for wizardkind, and what, pray, had they achieved?

“I think I found it!” called Granger.

Draco pushed through some brambles to be, once again, presented with a view of Granger’s bum. Familiarity breeds fondness – he was rather developing an appreciation for it.

For reasons known only to herself, Granger had all but pressed her face into a patch of moss and was breathing deeply into it.

“Granger, what—”

“It’s meant to smell like candy-floss. And it does!” said Granger, rising with a leap.

There was dirt on the tip of her nose. In the shadows of the great oaks around them, her dark eyes shone with excitement. A curl of

hair clung damply to her lip. Her cheeks were pinched pink by the February wind. Her smile flashed at him, a brief, rare thing.

Draco realised with a shock that Granger was pretty.

She clapped her hands together and squealed at the clump of moss, as though it was a treasure worth thousands upon thousands of Galleons.

Before Draco could process his realisation, a hoarse scream echoed from some distant corner of the woods. To his amusement, Granger leapt to his side immediately, her wand raised.

The queer screaming continued. When Granger saw that he hadn't reacted and didn't seem alarmed, she asked, "What is that horrid racket?"

"That's a fox," said Draco. "Oh."

"Some slag of a vixen's asking to get her back blown out." "I see," said Granger.

Another scream. Draco wanted to laugh – Granger's expression had gone rather prim.

She pulled out her list of plants and crossed the final line out.
“This is an excellent development. The moss, I mean, not the
slaggy fox. Let’s go back to the car.”

“That’s it?” asked Draco. It had seemed rather easy.

“Oh, no,” said Granger. “If only. I have about three thousand
other things to do before that’s it.”

Knowing her, that was probably not an exaggeration. They
walked back to the car. Without Granger’s constant hops into the
vegetation, it was rather quicker than the way in.

“Why did you have to do this on Imbolc?” asked Draco. In his
opinion, this would’ve been better planned for Beltane, for more
congenial weather.

She ignored the question in favour of posing one of her own. “Do
you think your mother’s guests have left?”

Draco conjured a pocket-watch. “No,” he lied. “Are you sure?
Rather a long tea, isn’t it?”

“Society teas are multiple hour affairs. My mother’s favourites
will probably stay for dinner and drinks.”

Granger's moment of smiling amongst the oak trees was fading and being replaced by the annoyance that seemed a chronic condition in Draco's presence. "Why don't you go somewhere else? She won't know that you aren't strictly working."

"I'm not leaving," said Draco. "If you were to be attacked while out and about on project work, Shacklebolt would have my hide."

"What are you protecting me from?" asked Granger with a sweeping gesture at the nothingness around them. "Randy foxes?"

"If you'd tell me what you were doing, I'd be better able to establish potential threats."

"If there's one thing I've learned from the enormous mistake I made telling Shacklebolt, it's that I'm not sharing another word on my work." Granger crossed her arms. Her posturing was rather undermined by the single leaf stuck in her hat, waving in the wind.

"Brilliant. I'll just continue to wave my wand about, waiting for the nameless baddies, shall I?"

“No. You can Apparate to the nearest pub, have a cosy drink, and go home when you’re safe from the ladies.”

“I’m not the one who needs to stay safe,” said Draco.

Granger made a sound of frustration. “You can’t come. You complicate things.” “Complicate things how? I can stay out of the way – didn’t I just stay out of the way?”

“I’m visiting the Chalice Well Gardens next. That involves passing as a Muggle. Which you don’t.”

“I can very well pass as a Muggle,” said Draco, indignant. “The Auror programme includes a substantial unit on concealment and disguise, and I passed with a distinction, thank you.”

Had he just been thinking that Granger-minding had ended up being a good decision? Why must she fight him on everything?

Granger rubbed at her temples. “We’re wasting time – time I haven’t got.” “Then let’s go,” said Draco.

“Show me your best attempt at a Muggle disguise,” said Granger. There was a desperate kind of hope in her eyes, as though she knew it was going to be rubbish, but wanted to see, just in case.

Draco shrank his Auror robes into a handkerchief, which he pocketed. Then he modified his suit to fit the current Muggle fashion, a little more relaxed in its tailoring. His boots he made into shiny men's dress shoes. His wand was concealed in a holster at his wrist. His hair he didn't touch: it was the height of perfection, magical or Muggle.

"And?" he asked, rotating slowly under Granger's critical gaze.

"It'd be ideal if we were going to the Dorchester for dinner," said Granger. She sighed. "But – I'll take it. Maybe we can make you look like a spiffy young professor, rather than a banker who's lost his way..."

She approached and made her own modifications, removing his tie and Transfiguring his shoes into Muggle trainers. Then she reached up and undid the top button of his shirt. (Queer sensation, to have Granger do that. Draco filed it away for further analysis later.)

"That'll have to do," said Granger, though she looked cynical.

"If we're critiquing each others' appearances, you're in need of a Scourgify," said Draco.

Granger Transfigured her car window into a mirror to discover, with an “oh, my,” quite how mud- caked she was. She made quick work of the stray leaf and the dirt, then gave Draco an odd look.

“What?” asked Draco. “Nothing,” said Granger. “Tell me,” said Draco. “No.”

“Yes.”

“I just – I might’ve expected some joke about the mud, from you,” said Granger. Draco stilled. “Those days are long past.”

Granger arranged her hat and shrugged.

Draco frowned. This wasn’t the time for this conversation, but one day she would need to know how he had seen, firsthand, the horrors of those hideous attitudes, and how they still lived in his head in the dead of night, and how much he wished he could take back.

“I’m not that person anymore,” said Draco.

Seeing that he was so solemn, Granger, too, grew serious. “All right. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“I shouldn’t have insisted,” conceded Draco.

“That too.” Granger waved her wand and her erstwhile mirror became a car window again. She grew brisk in her movements. “Shall we?”

“Let’s,” said Draco.

Then he ruined the serious moment by needing help with opening the car door. Granger came round to help him with saintly patience.

She did not, to her credit, cast any aspersions on his ability to behave like a Muggle.

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Chapter 5

The Keepers

They drove in silence for a little while. Granger looked preoccupied. Her thumb tapped at the steering wheel and she was worrying her lip.

“It’s going to be busy this afternoon,” said Granger at length. “At the Gardens, I mean. Let’s try to keep a low profile. We have to go through the gift shop to buy tickets to go in, but after that we’ll be able to go into the gardens themselves and avoid the worst of the crowds.”

“I can keep a low profile,” said Draco.

Granger gave him a side-eye in lieu of response.

“Does the water have magical properties?” asked Draco. “Why do the Muggles even know about it?”

Granger sat up straighter and took a breath, and Draco realised that had activated Swot Mode.

“The wellsprings in this area have been in use by both Muggles and magical folk for millennia,” said Granger. “It would’ve been too difficult to wipe the entire thing from so many minds after the Statute of Secrecy, I suppose. But, to answer your question, Muggles only know of two water sources in Glastonbury: one they call the White Spring, and one they call the Red Well. No real magical properties in either, though Muggles have ascribed their own spiritual and mythological significance to both. They have stories linking them to the Holy Grail, and King Arthur (he’s meant to be buried in Glastonbury Abbey), and other bits of legend.”

They were now approaching the outskirts of town. Granger turned at a sign pointing to the Chalice Well Gardens.

“But,” she continued, “there’s a third wellspring, one that you won’t find in the Muggle brochures. It’s called the Green Well. That one has bona fide magical properties. I need—” here Granger hesitated, but seemed to decide that Draco would work it out anyway “—I need a sample from it.”

“For your project.”

“Yes.”

“And why at Imbolc, specifically?”

“You’re being rather too inquisitive,” said Granger. Draco felt that she meant meddlesome, but had chosen the more polite option.

“I suppose the well reaches its highest magical potency at Imbolc,” said Draco. Granger made no answer.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

He saw her glance at the glovebox, wherein lay the Sneakoscope, promising to give away blatant lies.

“Stop being so curious,” said Granger. “That’s a bit rich, coming from you.”

She scoffed. “Being curious is literally my job. I’m a researcher. Your job is to protect me from Forces Unknown, not interrogate me on a highly confidential, proprietary project.”

Granger pulled into a parking spot, turned off the car, and waited for his retort.

This witch was – something. Draco had never endured such unrelenting points and counterpoints. He rather felt that, if he'd been keeping track of the score, he'd be the losing party.

"I'm not a bodyguard. I wasn't assigned to you to clomp along brainlessly behind you," said Draco.

"No. You're a highly trained, highly competent Auror and this is an utter waste of your time." Granger took a breath, visibly suppressing her irritation at the entire situation.

The opening compliment elicited a tiny spark of delight, quickly suppressed by Draco. He didn't care what Granger thought of him.

A group of Muggles passed the car, distracting the both of them. Mutually deciding on an unspoken truce – very temporary, Draco was sure – they climbed out of the car.

The car park was busy. Muggles in families, Muggles pushing prams, Muggles in outfits that seemed exceptionally outlandish, even for Muggles.

"I'll warn you now, there are a lot of New Agey types here," said Granger as they joined the crowd headed towards the entrance.

“New Agey?”

“Hippies. Wiccans. Pagans. Woo-woo types.” Granger seemed to be struggling for a definition. “Muggles who are very spiritual and believe in magic – or greater powers, anyway – to some extent. Some of them even call themselves witches. They don’t realise that there are actual witches and wizards, of course, and actual magic. They collect crystals and things, and perform rituals they read about in old books.”

“Ah,” said Draco, though he didn’t really understand. “I thought Muggles were meant to be relentlessly logical.”

“Some are,” said Granger. “Some are – rather less than logical. Or perhaps some part of them remembers magic. Or subconsciously knows it exists. Or maybe they just want to believe in something...”

They entered the busy gift shop – bustling, cloyingly over-scented.

Granger saw Draco wrinkle his nose and said: “That’ll be the essential oils. The New Agers love those.”

Draco examined some offensively perfumed candles, labelled ‘For Relaxation.’ “Why doesn’t someone tell them they’ve over-synthesised these things to the point where any minor magical property is utterly lost?”

Draco now found himself being steered by Granger and parked in a corner of the shop, like a Draco-shaped Mini Cooper.

“Stay here,” she said. “I’ll get us tickets. Don’t break anything.”

Thank goodness for that last tip; he might’ve begun to pulverise things out of sheer excess of spirit, otherwise. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Draco stood in the corner and watched Granger go. The crowd around her didn’t look at her twice. She really did blend in. As for him, he was the subject of more than a few upward glances – his height, his white-blond hair, his ‘spiffy’ suit.

Granger had now joined the slow-moving queue for tickets. Having his Principal away from him in a busy spot was not something that Draco was keen on, from a purely professional standpoint. He performed some surreptitious Legilimency on a random sampling of the people in the shop. The crowd was comprised mostly of Muggles. There was one wizarding couple, but they had no ill- intent – nor any idea that Granger was here.

Would they recognise her if they saw her? Maybe – but Draco couldn't delve into their minds so precisely from this distance.

Granger's instructions to keep a low profile were rather hypocritical, given that she had just struck up a conversation with the Muggles in the queue behind her. Draco, annoyed, cast a surface-level Legilimency on the family to check for sinister intentions. Nothing of interest – they were just friendly tourists.

He grew aware of a presence lurking about him, peeking at him from around one shelf, then around the other. He pretended to be interested in the smelly candles.

Eventually, she showed herself. She was a shop assistant, heavily draped in diaphanous scarves, observing Draco with bulbous eyes. A name-tag was pinned to her jumper: Eunice.

“Hello,” she said to Draco. “Might I help you find something?”

Draco caught her gaze and read her immediate thoughts. Nothing ominous, save for the fact that she thought him dreadfully handsome.

“No, thanks,” said Draco, turning back to watch Granger between candles. She was finally nearing the front of the queue.

Instead of taking this as the firm dismissal it was, Eunice fluttered closer to Draco, her eyes glued to his face.

“Your aura is... disturbed,” she said.

Draco felt like he was being addressed by a Muggle incarnation of Trelawney crossed with a large moth.

“I don’t think these candles will do you good,” said Eunice. “I agree with you there,” said Draco.

The sarcasm was lost on her. She nodded to herself and palpated the air around Draco, as though grasping at something.

“I’d suggest something stronger, like one of our cleansing incenses,” said Eunice, drifting down to point at a different shelf.

Draco watched Granger make a beeline to the café-bar. Would she kindly hurry up and save him from the moth?

Eunice was now holding her hand towards him with her eyes closed. She shook her head gravely. “Your heart chakra is underactive.”

“Is it?”

“The Venus Incense, I think,” said Eunice. She grasped a packet and waved the pungent thing under Draco’s nose. “Although, with your need for grounding, perhaps the Saturn...”

She rummaged around the shelf and said things about transmuting energy and ascending to the celestial plane. Draco spied Granger’s hat bobbing in his direction through the crowd.

“I have to go,” he said, making his escape.

“Oh, do you?” Eunice seemed put out. She slipped something into Draco’s hand. “My card. I do chakra realignments. Do reach out – our energies are quite compatible...”

Eunice floated away just as Granger arrived, bearing coffees.

“Who was that?” asked Granger, observing the retreating flutter of scarves. “Eunice,” said Draco. “She gave me this. Do you need your chakras realigned?”

Granger exchanged one of her coffees for the proffered card. Something had been scribbled hastily on it.

“Ooh, she gave you her number.” “What’s that mean?”

“That Eunice fancies you,” said Granger, looking amused. “Most women do.”

Granger snorted, like this was a wickedly funny joke instead of a universal truth. She caught herself, sobered up, and looked at him with fresh wonder. “You’re funny, Malfoy.”

“I live to serve,” said Draco, to cover his vexation.

Granger returned the card to him. “Too bad you don’t even know what a mobile is. Poor Eunice was quite barking up the wrong tree.”

“She thought me dreadfully handsome.”

“She also thinks your chakras need realigning. Let’s not get too wrapped up in the soundness of Eunice’s judgements,” said Granger crisply.

Let it be known that if any man needed his ego checked, a simple exchange with Granger would quite set him to rights.

Draco sipped at the coffee Granger had brought. It was, remarkably, not terrible. “How did you know I like double espressos?”

Granger shrugged. “It seemed your style.”

“Bold? Bitter?”

“Overpriced.”

Draco hid his scoff in the cup.

Granger set them on a course towards the gardens. The rain began to let up and make way for tentative sunlight. The gardens were unexpectedly lovely, even if the Muggles in charge didn’t have access to the warming charms and magical additives that made wizarding gardens such a spectacle through winter. Draco thought his mother might even appreciate the place. Though it was February, there was colour about, thanks to careful plant selections. Musical gurgles of water from wellsprings everywhere added auditory interest and the whole thing was gently illuminated by hundreds upon hundreds of candles tucked away in stony recesses.

Signposts here and there asked visitors to maintain silence, out of respect for those meditating. Granger cast a silencing charm around the two of them so that they could talk.



They came upon the Red Well – aptly named, with its rust-coloured water. Draco read the plaque with passing interest. As Granger had noted earlier, the Muggles had fabricated some fanciful bit of Christian mythology suggesting the Holy Grail was buried here. There were also a few references to Arthurian legend.

“The Muggles know about Morgan le Fay?” asked Draco, an eyebrow rising at the sight of such a famous witch’s name on a Muggle placard.

“Yes – but she’s a figure of myth,” said Granger. “Most of them don’t think she really existed.” Draco tutted. Imagine.

Next, they strolled through the well house that contained the White Spring – a dark, wet-smelling place, where Muggles had decorated the rough stone walls with candles and small shrines to deities real and imagined: Saint Brigid, the Lady of Avalon, the King of the Faeries...

“Here we are,” said Granger, as they made their way down a quieter, less-used path round the back of the well house. “There should be a sort of platform to take us down to the Green Well. We’ll have to use our wands to get in – let’s Disillusion ourselves in case any Muggles pass by.”

Granger was now a Granger-shaped patch of garden in front of Draco, glimmering in the weak February sun.

They stopped (well, Granger stopped, and Draco ran into her) at what looked like a manhole cover, tucked halfway under a bush. Across its weathered, cast-iron surface, were two large circles, intersecting under dead leaves and moss.

“That symbolises the interplay between the physical and spiritual worlds,” said Granger. Draco could make out her ghostly wand gesturing at it. “You might recognise the shape – the Red Well is constructed the same way. Let’s get on. It’s the platform down.”

They stood together on the manhole cover, rather squished.

“Incantation?” asked Draco, getting a mouthful of Granger’s invisible hair for the trouble. “Vesica piscis,” said Granger, mimicking the circular symbol with a wand-wave.

The manhole cover shuddered. Granger crept closer to him. She smelled like a gorgeous combination of rain, wet forest, cappuccino, and soap.

Then, without a by-your-leave, the platform dropped out from under them.

The gorgeous-smelling witch clung to Draco and pierced both of his eardrums with her shriek. Thank the heavens for those silencing charms, thought Draco as they fell.

A thick cushioning spell met them at the bottom of the drop. Which was excellent, as Draco hadn’t intended to break both of his ankles today.

He and Granger landed, bounced painfully into each other – he was quite certain he elbowed her in the tit; she narrowly avoided his groin with her knee – and collapsed, spread-eagled, on a thick bed of glowing fungi.

“Wow. A first class voyage,” drawled Draco in the dark.

“Gah,” responded Granger with something less than her usual acumen.

Draco rose. Granger was somewhere on his left. She didn’t seem to be making out quite as well as he was – she was rather shocked.

“C-couldn’t they set up a levitation charm?” she asked weakly. “I thought that thing was a lift. I didn’t expect a h-harrowing plummet to my death.”

Draco groped about in the dimness to find that his coffee was a lost cause. A pity.

They dismissed their Disillusionments and, when Granger managed to find her feet, began to walk down a passage illuminated by large, bioluminescent mushrooms. The sound of trickling water echoed throughout. Draco saw that even the walls were wet with a constant stream of moisture.

As they entered a kind of long, low-ceilinged cave, Draco saw that there were other witches and wizards about. In a corner was what looked like a kind of bookshop, which Granger eyed longingly. There was also a counter that served as an apothecary.

The entire place was lit solely by the glow of the mushrooms, which were everywhere – the floor, the walls, dangling from the ceiling.

“*Omphalotus luxaeterna*,” said Granger. “Pretty, in a slimy sort of way.”

If she added a “Like you,” Draco was going to hex her – his ego had taken enough abuse today. She didn’t. (It was almost disappointing that she’d let the occasion slip.)

They came at last to the Green Well – a bubbling green-lit wellspring, flanked by two statues in the penumbra. At least, Draco had thought they were statues – until they moved.

“The Keepers of the Well,” said Granger, who seemed unsurprised at the sight. “Right. You stay here. I need to do the talking. They have to be dealt with politely. And respectfully.”

Ignoring the insinuation that he couldn’t be polite or respectful, Draco said, “I think I’d rather come.”

His eyes strained to get a sense of what, exactly, lurked in the mushroom-speckled darkness.

Granger's irritation flared immediately. "You said you wouldn't get in the way. You're not even meant to be here. This is delicate. And critically important."

"Fine," hissed Draco. "I'll stay here." He was within hexing range, anyway.

Granger advanced. Draco peered at the two black-draped, hunch-backed forms. Were they witches? It was hard to tell in the dark. If they were witches, they most certainly had Hag blood, somewhere up the family tree. As well as a few other things, no doubt.

Their twin pale stares, as luminescent as the mushrooms around them, disconcerted him. He found himself gripping his wand as Granger stepped up to the nearest of the Keepers.

His first thought, as he processed this situation, was that Granger was either stupidly brave, or absolutely fucking reckless. Secondly, he didn't like this at all. These beings felt Dark. Old. Dangerous.

Yes, Tonks, she was killed by a Hag. Yes, I was right there. Yes, I let her walk right up to it. Yes, she was disembowelled right in front of me. She wanted to pop by for some fancy water from this well, you know; nothing else would do.

“Here for a fill, dearie?” croaked the Keeper to Granger. The husky, dry voice echoed eerily.

“Yes – if I might? I have an offering,” said Granger. Her figure was a slight silhouette, backlit by the luminescence of the Green Well.

“Show me,” said the Keeper.

The creature leaned towards Granger. There was something hungry in her movements. Draco’s wand-hand twitched. If the thing moved any closer to Granger, he had a decapitation curse ready to be unleashed.

Granger, as always, was well-prepared. From somewhere in her anorak (where?!) she produced three large satchels, which she passed into the claws of the creature. “Grain, offal, gold.”

The second Keeper shuffled over, stuck her talon-like fingers into one of the bags, and pulled out a handful of glinting Galleons. (And where had Granger come by an entire sack of Galleons, by the by?)

The gold's provenance did not seem to worry the second Keeper, at any rate. She crooned her satisfaction. "Very nice. Lovely. Let the good girl through."

The first Keeper gestured Granger forward. "Haven't you got a vessel, child?"

Granger produced a large flask, whose golden stopper shone in the dim light. "Yes – will this do?"

The thing wheezed in assent. At a gesture from the Keeper, Granger plunged the flask into the Green Well.

The second Keeper stared at Draco, as though aware of his tightly gripped wand and the well-practised curses that awaited on his tongue. She sniffed the air in his direction.

"Put the wand away, little boy. This girl won't be meeting her demise here."

The first Keeper looked up from where she stood beside Granger. "The wizard is worried, is it?" "It is."

The first Keeper's white eyes caught Draco's. There was ancient magic in them. He dared not perform Legilimency on this old mind.

She cackled as though he had spoken aloud. “That’s right, you won’t. Silly boy. I’d make your brain soup and drink it while it’s still warm, wouldn’t I?”

“But look at his eyes,” sighed the other Keeper. “Eyes like the rain-troubled skies...”

Cold dread trickled down Draco’s spine, though the creature hadn’t spoken a direct threat. He wondered whether his Darker curses would even be of use against these things – perhaps he should be thinking Light.

“Don’t you start with the rhyming,” said the first Keeper to her sister. “We don’t want to mess with his melon.”

“Er – I’m finished,” said Granger, who was now holding up her dripping flask.

It was a blessed interjection. Draco was genuinely beginning to feel spooked and trigger-happy. “Good girl,” said the first Keeper. “Mind you use it wisely.”

“I will,” said Granger, stepping away from the two of them. “Thank you.” “Love and light, my girl,” said the first Keeper.

She and her sister cackled, as though that was the most riotous thing they had ever heard.

Granger gave them a kind of bow and came back to Draco's side. He kept his grip on his wand until they'd walked well out of the Keepers' line of sight. Even then, he felt the twin pairs of white eyes touching at the back of his head.

"No," he said, holding Granger to him when she darted towards the underground book shop. "But I wanted to—"

"No," said Draco, his grip on her elbow unyielding. "Let's go."

Granger seemed to sense Draco's anxious anger and did not argue further. They walked back to the low passage that led to the platform, Granger taking two steps for every one of his.

When they were finally out of the central cave, Draco turned her to him. "What the fuck was that? You might've told me you were off to barter with Dark creatures!"

Granger's face was pale in the phosphorescence. "I didn't know they'd be so – so—"

"Haggish? Cadaverous? Lethal? The way the first one was eyeing you, she looked like she wanted to pluck your bloody

liver out! And you walked right up to her! No wand!”

“Stop manhandling me,” said Granger, shaking off his hands. “She was not going to pluck out my liver. They were nice to me. And they’re certainly not hags.”

“Not hags?!” sputtered Draco. “You presented them with offal.”

“That’s a traditional gift – it’s what you’re meant to bring to the Keepers of the Well.”

“Who look like hags, and smell like hags, and eat like hags,” enumerated Draco, with irritated vigour.

“They don’t eat like hags!”

“You’ve just given them the ingredients for offal couscous! If those weren’t hags, then what the hell were they?”

“I don’t know! They – or successive incarnations of them, anyway – have recurred in texts about the Green Well for centuries. They’re usually described as crone figures. They aren’t evil. They’re ancient.”

“They were bloody She-Dementors, and you’re never to deal with that kind of creature again, without telling me first. I need you to understand that if anything happens to you, Shacklebolt will have my head, then Tonks will have my balls, then Potter and Weasley will scavenge the rest. My mother would bury me in a Marmite jar. Do you understand?”

“Fine. But you’re overreacting.” Granger shook her flask of water at him. “I got what I came for. I was prepared. I said the right things and brought the right gifts.” Now she hit her stride and went on the offence. “You almost threw a wrench in the works, getting so bloody hostile that they started taunting you. They could’ve told you things that would’ve tormented you for years—”

“What things? What do you mean?” interrupted Draco, freshly disturbed.

“Nothing,” said Granger. Seeing how intensely he was looking at her, she stepped back. “It’s stupid.”

“What things, Granger?” repeated Draco, looming over her now.

She hesitated, but, in the face of his agitation, gave in. “It’s just – part of the legendarium surrounding the Keepers suggests that –

it's silly, and obviously made up – suggests that they are Seers.”

“Seers,” repeated Draco.

“One of them knows when you die, and the other knows how you die.” Draco shuddered in spite of himself.

Granger tucked a curl behind her ear and began to babble. “It’s all speculation, of course. Storytelling. It’s such a common conceit in old magical texts. They love giving guardian figures added mystique with alleged powers. I don’t put much stock in stories involving precognition, of course—”

Draco cut into her ramble. “How can you be so cavalier about that kind of legend? You’re literally best friends with the most precognitioned, prophesied, prognosticated, Bollocksing Boy Who Fucking Lived!”

Granger straightened and looked ready to sink her teeth into this new argument. “That was a highly unusual occurrence.”

Draco stared into space, running a hand through his hair. “I think one of those hags was about to say something, too. She started talking in rhymes. Fuck me. I wonder which she knew, the how or the when—”

“The tales are utterly unsubstantiated,” cut in Granger like the Chief Swot she was. “They don’t know anything. Don’t start thinking about it.”

“Too late. I am thinking about it. What rhymes with skies?” asked Draco. “Flies? Spies?”

Somehow, Granger was squeezing her large flask of well water into a pocket of her anorak. The impossibility of it distracted Draco from his morbid suppositions.

“What the—?! What is this, the Anorak of a Thousand Pockets? How did that fit in there? You didn’t even shrink it.”

“I’m a dab hand at Extension Charms,” said Granger, rather too lightly. “Can we—”

“So that’s how you were carrying around those unholy offerings for the Voodoo Twins,” said Draco. Finally, one Granger mystery solved. “You do know that those Charms are heavily regulated by the Ministry, don’t you?”

“I’m aware, thank you,” said Granger, snippy. “If I’m reported by anyone – hopefully not present company, if he knows what’s

good for him – I’m prepared to pay fines in exchange for the convenience.”

“Oh, I see. Is that why you haul enormous sacks of Galleons about? For fines?” “No. I carry those for ballast.”

Granger fished about in her pocket and, for a wild moment, Draco thought she was going to pull a sack of Galleons out to swing at his head. But no. She merely produced her wand and waved it to tell the time.

“Ugh – I’m late! I had one other thing to do, but you’ve put me so far behind schedule...” Draco raised his eyes to the mushroomy ceiling. Of course it was his fault. “What thing?” He and Granger squelched their way towards the manhole cover nestled amongst the fungi.

“A moment of pure self-indulgence,” said Granger. “I’ve wanted to go for ages and now I’m in the area, but...”

“But what?”

“You’re here,” said Granger. “And I don’t want you to be.”

“Too bad,” said Draco. “Any trust I might’ve had in your judgement has just been obliterated by your decision to haggle

with hags, without a single sodding contingency plan if they got peckish.”

Granger made a sound that was more growl than anything else. “Anyway – what self-indulgence? What’s your vice, Granger?” “None of your bloody business.”

“I promise I’ve seen worse, whatever it is.”

Granger ignored him, Disillusioning the two of them while Draco made guesses at her secret peccadillo. A brothel? Getting detention? Offal couscous?

They stepped onto the platform. Draco heard the invisible Granger take a deep, steady breath. It served her well for the long scream that accompanied their expulsion to the surface.

And just like that, they were back in the Chalice Well Gardens, blinking in the sunshine. Draco couldn’t immediately step off the platform – Granger was holding onto him like a drowning creature clinging to a lifeline. An echo of her heartbeat and fear thundered through his ring. Her grip shook. She was terrified.

She made to step away, but her knees buckled, and she swung back into Draco instead. “Fucking – damned – sodding – gah!” said Granger into Draco’s chest.

“A brilliant observation,” said Draco.

His voice seemed to bring her back to herself. She held him for a moment longer, then took a shaky breath and stepped away with a muttered apology. Draco glanced about for Muggles and, seeing none, he cancelled their Disillusionment.

Back in the realm of the visible, Granger looked bloodless. “That was awful,” she said.

“I thought it was rather fun.”

“Yes, well – you’re also one of that diverse cohort of lunatics who enjoys Quidditch.” “Oi.”

They followed the meandering path back to the entrance of the Gardens. Draco could see that Granger’s hands – well, her fingertips where they peeped out of her anorak – were still trembling.

She ran her hands down her arms a few times. “Right. You needn’t worry about me ever coming back to barter with the Voodoo Twins. I never want to use that death trap again. If I need another sample, I’ll just send you.”

“Me?” said Draco. “Not a bloody chance – one of them wanted to sip my brain out of my skull, or didn’t you hear that part?”

“She’d need a rather thick straw,” mused Granger. “Funny.”

“You could land head-first on your way down, next time, make a bit of a milkshake for her...”

Draco stared at Granger. Perhaps it was Healer humour, but she could be grisly when she worked off her adrenaline. Maybe it was a good thing she didn’t play Quidditch. Then again, pondered Draco, she might make an exceptional Beater. No bludgers needed, Danger Granger could collapse psyches with a few syllables.

They passed through the gift shop (Eunice gave Draco a lovelorn look) and through the car park back to Granger’s Mini.

“Is there anything I can say that will make you go away?” asked Granger. “No,” said Draco.

“What if I ask nicely?” “No.”

“I’m not going to go interact with anything Dark – or anyone at all. It doesn’t even have anything to do with my project.”

Draco studied her. She looked genuinely crestfallen that he was going to ruin a third activity on today’s list. He decided to be charitable. “Tell me what it is and I’ll decide if it’s dangerous or not. Perhaps I’ll wait in the car.”

Granger checked her Muggle pocket device. Apparently, it gave the time, amongst other things. “Damn it. They’re closing in an hour. Get in. I’ll tell you on the way.”

They got in without mishap, Draco having now developed an expertise in opening Muggle car doors.

“One thing before we go, Miss Dab Hand at Extension Charms,” said Draco. “Extend this footwell before I behead myself with my own knees.”

~

As it turned out, Granger’s moment of pure self-indulgence? Her terrible indiscretion? Her vice? Visiting a library.

“A library?” repeated Draco. “Yes. At Tynstesfield.”

Draco wanted to scream with laughter, but felt that would be unprofessional. He settled for gasping out, “The decadence.”

“I wish you’d go away,” said Granger with cutting sincerity. “The absolute sin of it all,” said Draco.

“Please Apparate home to your mother—” “A library. I shall have to report it.”

“—As you can see, I’m quite safe here; the only remotely bad things are your attempts at humour.” “What other naughty habits have you got? Churchgoing? Baking?”

“It’s a remarkable library.” “Of course. It must be.”

“And I don’t know when I’ll be back in Somerset.” “Yes.”

“It’s one of the largest libraries owned by the National Trust.”

“Mm.”

“The estate also has a beautiful orangery – a rare surviving example from the late Victorian period.”

“A thrill, to be sure.”

“All of these are things I wish to enjoy without you.”

Draco spotted the clenched jaw that signalled Granger reaching a breaking point – either a jinx, or a painfully incisive remark was forthcoming. He backed off.

“Fine. You can visit your blessed Titsfield—” “Tynstesfield.”

“—And I shall wait in the car. I can sincerely say I haven’t the slightest desire to join you—”

The rest of his sentence was overpowered by a sudden wail. Draco swore. The sodding Sneakoscope.

Granger took her eyes off the road to give him a look of absolute surprise. “It’s malfunctioning, clearly,” said Draco.

“Clearly,” repeated Granger somberly. Draco gave the glovebox a harrowing glare. “Hoisted by your own petard,” said Granger. All of her previous annoyance had dissipated. She was most definitely holding back a grin. The wail faded.

“I’m going to throw that blasted thing out of the window,” said Draco. “Don’t. I’ve grown rather fond of it.”

Thanks to some rather zippy driving on Granger’s part (“Speed limits? A suggestion, really,” as the Sneakoscope sang) they made it to Tynstesfield half an hour before closing.

Granger was able to partake in the library and the orangery, and Draco enjoyed a poppyseed cake from the café, and they watched the sunset together, and only quarrelled four times.

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Chapter 6

Finding Serenity

After their Imbolc outing, Granger all but disappeared from Draco's life. He visited her laboratory and home once a week to recast the wards, but their schedules rarely coincided, and he saw her cat more often than he saw her.

Occasionally, his Jotter would buzz, and inform him that Granger was attending X public event at Y location. As her assigned Auror, she left his attendance to his discretion, though she made it clear his presence would be superfluous at best and bothersome at worst.

Most of the events took place in secure magical locations – panels at St. Mungos or Huntercombe, symposia at magical universities – so Draco had rarely seen a need to exert himself and attend. In the unlikely event of a research panel devolving into a Situation, they had the rings.

Tonks, seeing that Draco's reports had become rather rote and that the Granger assignment was taking up only a little of his time, gleefully piled on additional missions. The cruel reward for competence was More Work and Draco wondered whether Potter and Weasel and their general bumbling wasn't the better plan, after all.

And so, Draco found himself bunking with Buckley in a dingy hotel in Manchester, where they were gathering intelligence on a group of Dark artefact smugglers.

Buckley was a good sort. He was a newish Auror, over-eager and keen to prove himself, which meant that Draco could take on a more – well, he would call it managerial – role, and delegate the majority of his surveillance shifts to the lad. This would, as Draco nobly explained to Buckley, permit him to garner more hands-on experience. Buckley nodded with enthusiasm and put Draco in mind of a puppy.

He thus foisted off the three A.M. watch onto his zealous young colleague and went to bed.

Draco felt as though he had just fallen asleep when his ring burnt him awake: pain and an elevated heart rate, reverberating from Cambridgeshire.

It was half four. Nothing good ever happened at half four. Draco leapt out of bed and pulled his cloak over his pyjamas.

He was too far across the country for a direct Apparition to Granger. He blasted a fire into the hotel foyer's dusty grate and Flooed to a Cambridge pub, and from there Apparated to Granger's ring.

Draco materialised in Granger's spare bedroom, the one he called the ritual room.

Granger was contorted into a dreadful, sweaty knot on the floor. Draco cast a flurry of Homenum Revelio and Finite Incantatem, looking for the invisible assailant who was obviously casting Crucio on her.

“Malfoy?” came Granger’s strangled voice from the floor. Draco’s revelation spells showed absolutely nothing. “What the bloody hell are you doing?” asked Draco.

Granger collapsed out of the horrid tangle and found her knees.
“Yoga. What the bloody hell are
you doing?”

Draco had seen this mysterious term on Granger's schedule.
“That’s yoga? What kind of self- inflicted martyrdom—?”

Now that he had ascertained that there was no immediate threat, Draco could take in the scene. There were candles flickering in a corner and soft music was playing. Granger was outfitted in those ridiculously form-fitting Muggle clothes, khaki green this time. Her hair was pulled into a French braid, thick as Draco’s wrist.

Granger was looking at him like he was an absolute bellend. “I was trying a Taraksvasana—”

“A what?”

“A scorpion handstand – I’ve been working towards it for weeks, and I almost had it, until you came in like a bolt from the blue and frightened me out of my wits!”

Draco was feeling increasingly foolish. He pulled his cloak closed to cover his pyjamas. There was little he could do about his bare feet. “What, pray, is the point of yoga?”

“Flexibility. Strength. Balance. Finding serenity.”

Draco eyed Granger with cynicism at the last bit. “Have you found it?”

“No,” said Granger. She got to her feet with evident irritation. “Kindly recalibrate your ring so you only show up in a real crisis.”

She flicked the Elektik lights on. Her cheeks were flushed. A trickle of perspiration was running down her neck. Her chest still heaved from her exertion. Draco could smell salt, female sweat, and the burnt wick of a candle.

His idiot brain took this image and immediately created several new neural pathways that had never existed previously, connecting the idea of Granger with the concept of sexy.

It was an extremely unwelcome development and Draco wondered whether he should lobotomise himself on the spot.

A gravelly meow interrupted his thoughts. The bandy-legged cat had wandered in. It trotted up to Granger and then, upon noticing Draco, favoured him with a hiss.

Draco did not hiss back, but it was a near thing. “I’ll just leave then, shall I?” said Draco.

“Do,” said Granger. “Goodbye.” Draco Disapparated out.

~

Draco had expected (and rather desired) nothing but annoyed silence from Granger after he'd barged in on her like an unhinged maniac. However, he was surprised to receive a message from her the next day – and not just a message, a bona fide apology.

Malfoy: I'm sorry about my behaviour yesterday. I should've been more appreciative that you arrived so fast when you thought something was the matter. Will warn you next time I try a Taraksvasana. -Hermione

Apologies weren't part of Draco's natural lexicon. His upbringing, both at home and at school, didn't encourage the practise. Sorry was an admission of wrongdoing, a sign of guilt, an obvious weakness.

There was something nice about receiving one, however. It warmed the soul, really. He wasn't sure which part he liked the most – Granger mulling this over for a day and then apologising, or Granger admitting she'd been wrong, or Granger appreciating him.

Instead of dismissing her note from the Jotter, Draco saved it in one of the back pages. He'd have to ask Potter how rare Granger apologies were, and whether he ought to have it framed.

“Draco, darling, you’re distracted.”

His mother’s voice, with an undertone of reproach, called him back to reality.

Reality was an unfortunate place – tea in the stuffiest parlour at the Manor, with his mother, her friend Madame Delphine Delacroix, and Madame Delacroix’s daughter.

Today’s debutante was Rosalie Delacroix. Beauxbatons educated, Pure-blood, objectively beautiful.

Draco put the Jotter away. “Pardonnez-moi, mesdames. Que disiez-vous?”

“Vous avez un Jabbering Jotter!” exclaimed Rosalie. “Those have only just begun to cross the Channel to us in France. We can’t get enough of them. Even my mother, who is so traditional, adores hers.”

“Indeed,” nodded Madame Delacroix. “I couldn’t get my husband to reply to an owl, not for love nor money – but these make it so easy. A true innovation. England should be proud of these – Weasleys, was it? These Frères Belette?”

When the conversation drifted away from him, Draco sent a response to Granger: Do advise of future scorpion pushups. P.S. Apologies from you may become my new drug of choice. -D

Draco looked up, a vague smile on his face, to find Rosalie chattering about an upcoming gala that her father was going to host. Draco had missed the beginning of it. In support of orphans, or something, probably.

“We would be so delighted to see the two of you there,” said Rosalie, her hands clasped into a knot of entreaty. “It’s such a good cause. They helped Father so very much, you know.”

The orphans helped Augustin Delacroix? Draco didn’t care enough to seek clarification. His Jotter buzzed. He checked it under the table to see a note from Granger: You do realise that I’d have to do bad things that warrant apologising for.

You do a great deal of bad things. I’ve compiled quite a list of your illicit activities, responded Draco.

“...Qu’en pensez-vous, Draco? Would that suit you?”

Draco raised his head. Madame Delacroix had asked him a question that he’d only partially heard, something about his schedule in March. He answered in the affirmative – of course, yes, he’d be happy to clear his calendar for such a noble cause. His mother beamed at his easy acceptance and indicated that she, too, would be delighted to come.

Granger answered, If only illegal extension charms were the worst of my sins. No, responded Draco, I know the real extent of your depravity.

She anticipated him. I see that the library visit will haunt me.

Draco grinned into his teacup. His mother saw the smile and, encouraged by what seemed like his good mood, asked the ladies if they’d like to see the gardens. Rosalie declined, claiming to have caught a bit of a chill. Madame Delacroix and Narcissa left for the gardens.

Draco sobered up as he found himself in a forced tête-à-tête with Rosalie.

The pretty witch spoke charmingly of anything she thought might catch his attention – Quidditch, his job, the weather. Draco listened with only one ear, because it wasn't about hags wanting to use his skull as a sippy cup and it was therefore rather dull.

He found himself wishing to be continuing a conversation with another witch, one whose newest message had just buzzed in his pocket.

The talk turned to mutual friends, to upcoming dinners, to other frivolities. Rosalie agreed enthusiastically with every point Draco made, no matter how inane, instead of whipping counter-arguments back at him. She laughed at his mildest jokes instead of retorting with something snappy. She clung to his every word – uncritical, eager – instead of challenging him. She complimented him to excess.

It made for rather weak conversation.

When Draco realised who he had unconsciously made into Rosalie's foil, he was taken aback. Since when had Granger become the yardstick by which he measured female company?

The conversation – such as it was – lasted twenty minutes. Eventually, Rosalie convinced Draco to add a page to his Jotter

for her, under the pretext of sending more details for the gala. Draco shrugged in absent-minded agreement. (It was a careless moment he would later regret, as Rosalie was a proficient Jotter and wrote to him incessantly thereafter.)

The ladies returned from their tour. Smiles were smiled, goodbyes were said, and Draco sighed in relief when Henriette the house-elf escorted their visitors back to the Floo parlour.

Later that night, Narcissa drifted into Draco's study to probe. "Rosalie is a sweet girl, isn't she? You seemed like you were getting along."

There was such a quiet optimism in her voice, Draco wondered if it wouldn't be kinder to lie. But that would give his mother hopes, and dashing them later would be all the crueler.

"I suppose we got along well enough," he said.

She detected the lack of enthusiasm immediately. "But?" "Rather a milquetoast kind of girl."

Narcissa's thin hands clutched before her in disappointment. "Oh."

Quarrelling with his pale, sad mother was never high on Draco's to-do list. He tried to be gentle as he admonished her. "We've had this conversation before. I don't need, nor want, you to hand-pick witches for me."

"I only want to help you." Narcissa's thin fingers clasped at each other. "I want you to find someone who is educated, and lovely, and who will be a devoted companion, and give you children, and fill this great empty house with laughter again. Rosalie would be all those things. Any number of the witches I've introduced you to would be all these things." She paused, then added, "I only want you to be happy, Draco."

"I am happy."

Another sigh from Narcissa. "At your age, your father was married, you know – and had you – you were four or five by then..."

"I am not my father."

Narcissa, seeing that she would make no further headway here, glided towards the door. "I don't think she exists," she said over her shoulder as she left.

"Who?"

“The perfect witch you’re apparently waiting for.”

~

Granger wrote to Draco about a week later, advising him that she was speaking at a Muggle conference that Thursday.

Where? he asked.

Magdalen College, Oxford, said Granger. Thurs 2-5pm. I’m on at 2.30. I doubt I shall be murdered but leave your attendance to your expert judgement.

Yes, Granger, thank you for the cheek: he would use his expert judgement.

Audience? he asked.

Muggle doctors, said Granger.

How many? asked Draco.

150, said Granger.

Draco's eyebrows rose. He sometimes forgot quite how small the wizarding world was. There were probably less than a hundred fully fledged Healers in the entirety of the UK. Maybe three or four hundred if you included Mediwitches and other field medics.

I'll look in, said Draco.

Spiffy prof. look please, said Granger. Don't embarrass me.

Draco didn't deign to answer her.

The day of the conference came around. Draco Apparated a small distance away from Magdalen College and walked to the auditorium Granger had specified, at the time she specified, wearing the clothing that she had specified.

Bossy sort of witch, was Granger.

The volunteer at the registration table was gently Confunded into thinking that Draco was a registered participant, and he was let in with a name badge and a programme. He took stock of the

building, discreetly casting revelation spells when Muggles weren't looking. The foyer, cloak room, and toilets were free of any naughtiness, as were the back rooms. The handful of people he covertly cast Legilimency on were who they were meant to be – brainy Muggles, here to become even more brainy.

Draco found a shadowy alcove near the front of the auditorium from which to survey the place. He was about twenty metres away from the stage, from which vantage he could see Granger seated at a long table, along with three of her fellow experts. They were chatting amongst themselves as the crowd filed into the auditorium.

From a risk assessment standpoint, Granger couldn't have been more exposed, sitting as she was under a literal spotlight. Draco pried through the minds of the people in the front row and found nothing but eagerness to begin and high levels of admiration directed towards the doctors on the stage. Then he peeked through the minds of the unseated people idling on the stairs at the edge of the auditorium, as he was, and found only volunteers, students sneaking in, and a bearded gentleman wearing large ear-coverings, whose chief role seemed to be managing blinky boxes with wires coming out. There wasn't a single witch or wizard present, as far as he could tell.

Satisfied that there were no immediate threats, Draco cast precautionary wards across the front of the stage and settled into his alcove. As the conference began, he flipped open the programme. It informed him that today's panel would feature international leaders in immune cell engineering and immunotherapy.

This told Draco very little, of course. Cancer was a decidedly Muggle ailment. Wizarding folk were rarely afflicted with it, and when they were, it was quickly resolved. However, it seemed that this was not the case with Muggles, for whom it was a serious condition, and nigh incurable in some forms.

Enter Granger and her cohort of fellow brains. Their talks today included such thrilling questions as FL and CLL: A New Care Paradigm and Hodgkin's Lymphoma: Mitigating Toxicity while Preserving Cure.

Draco decided that it would be quite safe to leave Granger to her CLL's. The only threat in this room was death by obscure acronym. Just as he was about to leave – he rather fancied a nap – the mediator announced that Dr. Granger's presentation was next.

Draco watched her walk across the stage and decided to stay.

She was a small figure on the stage, by far the shortest amongst the panellists. She smiled at the audience as she approached the Muggle voice-amplification device on the podium. Her movements were confident and poised. She didn't have notes, but the large screens behind her projected diagrams and bullet points.

She made a few opening remarks that included a joke that went completely over Draco's head, but the auditorium filled with laughter. Her presentation focused on the advancements of something called CAR T cell therapies in B-cell malignancies. She made eye contact with everyone, took questions throughout, was challenged, counter-challenged the challengers, and defended her position without skipping a beat.

She was confident, she was clever, and in this room, she was important. Granger in her element was a rather impressive thing. After finishing her presentation, Granger returned to the table and her fellow panellists discussed her talk. At some point, Draco wasn't even certain that Granger and her interlocutors were even speaking English anymore, as they cross-examined each other on EBV and TNK-cell lymphomas and their diagnostic challenges, and the architecture of liquid biopsy research. Granger made a

pun about MALT1 degradation which was, apparently, uproariously funny.

Draco entertained himself by performing Legilimency on the panellists. Not a single one thought that Granger was an insufferable swot. He found only respect, admiration, and a surprise crush from the male doctor on her left.

Draco learned that something called quantitative radiomics analytics existed. Their predictive values were discussed at length. These Muggle doctors were another thing entirely, brilliantly working through the impossible, dedicating their entire lives to it. How had he ever thought Muggles base and ignorant? Draco shook his head.

Granger must've caught the movement of his white-blond hair in the shadows. When saw that it was Draco, she gave him a brief smile of acknowledgement – bizarre feeling, that – and carried on with her current dissertation, her hands making wide arcs as she explained something.

At length, conclusions were drawn, closing remarks were made, and the conference ended with much applause. The participants milled about, with Granger and the panel at the centre of the crowd.

Draco, feeling rather mushy in the brain from all the new words and Legilimency he had performed (perhaps the Keeper wouldn't need such a thick straw after all), decided that he was no longer needed here.

He made for the exit, but Granger caught him as he passed the stage.

As usual, small talk was dispensed with. Instead, he found his Muggle disguise being assessed by her, her gaze accented by a raised eyebrow.

"Passable," was the pronouncement on the outfit. "Why the eyebrow?" asked Draco.

Granger pointed at the name tag that the Confunded volunteer had affixed to Draco's lapel. "Hello, Professor Takahashi."

"Ah," said Draco. "Yes. That's me." "And how is Tokyo at this time of year?" "Very nice," said Draco.

"Professor Takahashi is from Kyoto," said Granger. Her arms were crossed, but there was amusement in her eyes. "Rather ballsy to pose as one of Japan's most renowned clinical oncologists."

“I am nothing if not ballsy,” said Draco, flipping his hair. “Did you know that the good Dr. Driessen fancies you?”

Now Granger’s second eyebrow joined the first, at her hairline.
“What?” “He’s going to ask you out for drinks tonight.”
“No.”

“Yes. He also liked the skirt,” said Draco, gesturing to the high-waisted, close-fitting garment in question. (He also quite liked it, incidentally; Muggle fashion and its emphasis on bums was growing on him.)

“Ugh – I mean, he’s very nice, but – wait – how do you know this?” Granger’s hand flew to her mouth. “You did not perform Legilimency on innocent Muggles.”

“Part of my risk assessment protocol.”

“Is that allowed? Bit of a violation of privacy, isn’t it?”

“Aurors have privileges,” said Draco. “Anyway, Shacklebolt gave me carte blanche to use whatever means necessary to keep you safe. Except for murder – I’ve got to get permission for that. There’s a form and everything.”

Granger seemed ninety percent sure he was joking, but she was nevertheless eyeing him like he was the most unprincipled, depraved Auror ever produced by the Ministry, and it was just her luck that she'd been saddled with him.

Dr. Driessen popped by and, to Granger's evident dismay, asked her if she'd join him for drinks that night. Draco appreciated the guts, if not the subtlety of the approach.

A few things happened very quickly. Granger moved to Draco's side, her hand found his chest in a gesture of affection, which conveniently hid his ridiculous nametag, and she announced that, unfortunately, she was already spoken for that night, but perhaps another time?

Dr. Driessen looked up at Draco, at his hair (perfect), his jawline (also perfect), his eyes (perfect, and icy, and perfect) and decided that he was quite outranked.

Smart man.

“Of course,” he said, backing off and looking flustered. “So sorry – I didn’t realise. Where are you two going?”

“Er–” said Granger.

“The Turf Tavern,” supplied Draco.

“Classic!” said Dr. Driessen. Then, with a wag of his eyebrows to Draco, he said, “Just across from the Bodleian. You’ll have to keep Hermione on a tight leash.”

“Oh yes,” said Draco, wrapping his arm around Granger’s waist.
“I always do.”

He felt Granger’s hand on his chest twitch.

“Well – lovely to see you, as always, Hermione,” said Dr. Driessen. “Goodbye, Johann,” said Granger with a rather fixed smile.

Granger was tense as the man walked away – her body felt coiled and ready to leap away from Draco.

“Don’t jump away like you’ve been burnt,” muttered Draco.
“He’s watching. Act natural.”

Granger cleared her throat and let her hand slide down Draco’s chest, taking the nametag with it. She stepped away from him slowly and tried to make it look natural. (It did not.)

Draco himself vacillated between amusement at her discomfiture and alarm at how nice the curve of her hip had felt against him, and how good she smelled (again).

Granger peeled the Japanese professor's name off her palm. She looked discombobulated, which mirrored Draco's sentiments nicely.

"Sorry," she said. "I had to come up with something, and you were conveniently – there." "Use me as a prop anytime," said Draco, scanning the crowd instead of looking at her.

Granger was accosted by other colleagues, who had heard that she was going to the Turf, and they were going too, so they'd see her tonight, and her first G&T was on them, pip pip, etc.! Granger smiled faintly and waved them off.

"This may have been a mistake," was her sombre conclusion.
"You can leave. I'll make up an excuse for you."

This was a fine suggestion, except for one small problem: upon a meticulous reflection lasting eight seconds, Draco had decided that he rather wanted to go.

"But I want a G&T," said Draco.

Granger was still muttering to herself and not listening. “I’ll tell them you felt sick, or something.” “Sick? I’m the picture of health.”

“I’ll say you ate something funny.”

“I think not. There are hundreds of Muggle doctors here – if I say I’m sick, they’ll all descend on me and try to cure me. I don’t want anyone sticking a stethoscope up my bum.”

“No one sticks stethoscopes up anyone’s bums,” said Granger in loud exasperation. Two conference participants who had been passing by gave Granger a shocked look. Granger watched them go, aghast.

“Oops,” said Draco.

Granger’s jaw was tight. “You are positively the worst.” She turned and walked briskly away.

Draco found himself grinning.

And, speaking of bums, let it be known that Draco absolutely did not check hers out, nor did he find the view pleasing at all, nor did he slow down on purpose to watch her.

Separately, with no connection whatsoever to Granger's bum, Draco concluded that robes were overrated.

The Turf Tavern was a stupidly busy place, especially so when the conference had disgorged hundreds of thirsty participants into Oxford's streets. Draco found a table while Granger got them drinks (G&Ts all around) and they found themselves crammed on a bench amongst a dozen of the finest immunologists and oncologists in the world, getting progressively more drunk.

Draco was asked what he did for a living. Granger had gone rather worried-looking when the question was posed (tch – had she no faith?) but Draco had a well-practised cover story at the ready. Tonks insisted on every Auror developing a few Muggle biographies, and some backup wizarding ones, and she quizzed them on their covers routinely to keep them on their toes.

Draco shared his favourite. This evening, he was a pilot. Few Muggles knew very much about the technicalities of flying, so, unless he encountered a real pilot – unlikely, surrounded by tipsy doctors – he was safe. And, of course, he had a genuine passion for wizarding flying, which lent a certain veracity to his tales of aeroplane heroics.

“Flying isn’t that hard, you know,” he said to the table. “Keep the blue side up.”

Laughter. The doctor beside him indicated that such simple principles applied in medicine, too: keep the guts in. More laughter.

Draco caught a wonder-filled glance from Granger, a mixture of pleasant surprise, and who the fuck are you. He twitched an eyebrow at her. She looked away, nonplussed.

When asked when he’d arrived in Oxford, Draco said, “This morning.” When asked what he was doing in Oxford, he said “Doctor Granger.”

Granger choked on her drink. More laughter. When Draco next stole a glance at her, Granger looked like she was going to lure him into a lonely alley and, there in the darkness, strangle him.

Who knew that teasing the swot of the century could be such a glee-filled activity.

Someone else joined their table to raucous cries of welcome – the real Professor Takahashi. Granger shuffled closer to Draco along the bench to make room.

Draco bent over and whispered, “Ask him if he had any troubles with his registration.” Granger kicked him.

She spoke politely with the professor – Draco heard snippets of their conversation about Kyoto – but his focus kept drifting to the feeling of Granger’s shoulder pressing into his arm, and her leg touching his under the table.

A waiter arrived bearing more food and drink. Someone had ordered an enormous platter of cheese toasties – oily, salty, and served with onion chutney. Narcissa Malfoy would’ve had a heart attack just looking at the greasy things, oozing with three different kinds of cheese.

Granger passed Draco the platter in an ambivalent kind of way, as though she expected him to turn his nose up at Muggle pub food.

Draco took one. It was the best filth he’d ever eaten.

Someone, somewhere, rang a triangular instrument, and called for those who wanted to join tonight’s pub quiz to form teams.

Some of the doctors at the table took this as a sign to depart. Others appeared amused at the timing, and eager to join in.

“I love pub quizzes,” said the grey-haired woman on Draco’s right. “Half the fun is learning you’re a colossal moron.”

“Bet we get trounced by some freshers,” said the doctor across from him.

“Nonsense,” said a third. “With Hermione here, this’ll be a doddle. You are staying, aren’t you, Hermione?”

Granger glanced at Draco. “What do you think? If you’re tired, you can go back to – back to our hotel.”

Draco appreciated the attempt at providing him an escape, but he didn’t take it. He had rather an excellent buzz going, and he wanted to try this pub quiz thing, and there was the warmth of a woman at his side, and it was all rather nice. “Pish tosh – of course I’ll be staying.”

There were cries of “Brilliant!” and then there was a general kerfuffle as everyone looked for paper and pens.

Draco was of absolutely no use for the first handful of questions, which focused on Muggle politics and sports. However, he did know how many keys a baby grand piano has (88), and what year

Cessna was founded (1927), and which country's national anthem had 158 verses (Greece; all 158 had been sung at the last Quidditch World Cup).

There were a few biology and science questions which the doctors hammered into the ground with an unnecessary level of detail. Draco learned that Picolax was used for something called colonoscopy preparation; one of the doctors nodded grimly and said, “Night of a thousand waterfalls,” and Draco was too frightened to ask for clarification. Then they quibbled with the host over the definition of “subcutaneous” and quite intimidated the poor lad until he gave them the point.

The history and art questions would've sideswiped the whole team, but for Granger, who pulled them through. Then – to general groaning – they were hit by mathematics exercises, and the team of youngsters beside them whizzed through the lot and left the doctors sweating in the dust.

“Engineers,” said one of the doctors. “We never stood a chance.” Granger, still stuck on a problem, looked vexed.

Then geography, then music, then zoology, which Granger was solidly capable of handling with occasional assistance from her colleagues. Draco didn’t even attempt to help; he was on his

fourth drink, and working out what monotreme meant was too deep a philosophy for him to pursue at the moment.

In the end, their team won – largely thanks to Granger.

“We’ll have Hermione registered with English Heritage as a national treasure,” said one of the doctors, giving Granger a pat on the shoulder.

Granger smiled, but her gaze quickly returned to the maths problem that had tripped her up, scrawled out on a napkin.

The winning team received vouchers with some kind of monetary value. The doctors handed over theirs to the young engineers who had come in second, saying it hadn’t been a fair fight, since their combined years at uni were greater than the poor engineers’ years alive in the first place.

The evening wound down. The place grew quieter as most of the crowd left after the quiz, except for Draco, who was rather enjoying the drinks, and Granger, who was still working on the maths thing.

Eventually, she poked one of the youths at the table next door and asked for an explanation. “It’s Borel’s paradox,” said the boy.

“Oh!” said Granger. “Obviously...”

The mystery was unlocked and she scribbled out the solution on her napkin. Then she threw down her pen with finality and stood up.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Draco rose to his feet with care, waiting to see how much the drinks were going to catch up with him. It wasn’t too bad, considering. The cheese toasties turned out to be rather absorbent.

“Have a nice night, you two,” said the barkeep with a wink at Granger. Granger gave him a rather sickly smile and all but ran for the door.

Outside, neither of them was quite walking with their usual level of booze-free confidence, though Granger was certainly getting on better than Draco. At one point, she pulled him to her, just as he had been about to collide into a lamp post.

“You’re meant to be watching over me,” she said. “Not the other way round.” “That pole came out of bloody nowhere,” said Draco into Granger’s hair.

She stepped away from him until he was firmly at arm's length.
“How are you getting home? And don't say Apparition. I'll Stun
you if you try.”

Draco was quite certain that, even in his giggly state, he'd be
quicker on the draw than her, but, nevertheless. “Floo, I s'pose.”

“There's a connected hearth at my hotel. This way.”

Draco followed her through Oxford's storied streets. The booze
was settling and the philosophy began to flow. He felt generous
and at ease with the world. “Those Muggles today – they were all
rather clever.”

“Yes,” said Granger.

“You're rather clever. With all the – the diagrams, and the malts,
and carts, and things,” said Draco. It felt important that she know
this.

She gave him a sideways glance in the dark. “Thank you. And
please stop, you're frightening when you're nice.”

“I'm frightening?”

“Go back to making fun of my hair.” “Fine. It’s horrid. You should shave it off.” “Better,” said Granger.

“Don’t actually, though,” said Draco. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Here we are,” said Granger. She pushed open the door of a small wizarding inn. The reception desk was empty and the fire in the hearth was low.

Granger waved her wand at the embers and they blazed back to life as though she’d cast a full Incendio.

“Are you a dab hand at fires, on top of the extension charms?” asked Draco in the face of this demonstration.

“A bit,” said Granger, with unconvincing false modesty.

“I heard you set fire to Snape in first year,” said Draco, “but I didn’t believe it.” “Good – that’s utter bollocks,” said Granger, not meeting his eye.

“You’re a bad liar.”

“Off you go,” said Granger, sidestepping the remark and gesturing him towards the fireplace. “I’m shattered and need my

bed.”

“But I want the story about setting fire to Snape,” said Draco.

“Go home, Malfoy.”

Seeing that he was getting nowhere, Draco threw Floo powder into the fireplace. “You’re positively no fun. Malfoy Manor.”

The flames glowed green. His last sight, as he looked back, was of Granger, her arms crossed, her hip cocked to one side. Her dark eyes observed him like he was a fresh maths theorem to unpuzzle.

On one hand, it flattered his ego to have intrigued the Great Brain. On the other, given her propensity for solving things, it rather frightened him. He didn’t want to be solved.

“Good night, Malfoy.” Draco stepped into the fire.

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Chapter 7

Ostara; Contrariness of Granger

Draco's next warding visit to Granger's house was marred by what was, in retrospect, a slight lapse in judgement. As weeks had gone by and he had made little further headway on discovering the nature of her research project, his mind turned to a certain Object of Interest in her study: the tattered grimoire on the plinth. The one that she had threatened to cry about.

And so, one morning in early March, when Draco was preparing for his perennial visit to Granger's cottage, he sent her a note indicating that he'd be going into her house, if that was all right, because he hadn't warded the windows individually, and it was bothering him.

Granger acquiesced with a dry, If you really find it necessary.

Yes, he did.

Draco timed his visit to coincide with one of Granger's lessons at Trinity, to ensure that he wouldn't be disturbed as he snooped. When he arrived, her cat – perhaps sensing something nefarious afoot – took up a position of power on the roof, and stared at him as he recast the outside wards.

"Only doing my job, cat," said Draco, making a great show of it. The cat regarded him with cynicism.

He entered the cottage and warded the first floor windows with alacrity, then bounded upstairs to do the others. Granger's bedroom was done first, with minimal looking about, because the cat was at the door, and watching him. Then the yoga room. Then, finally, he came to the study.

The grimoire was still on its plinth, open in the middle, still surrounded by the green glow of stasis charms. Draco warded the window under the watchful eye of the cat and drifted towards the tome.

The cat's stare grew more penetrating.

Draco peered at the visible pages. Through the stasis charm, the words were blurred and seemed to dance. The script was laboured and heavy. It wasn't English – in fact, bits of it looked

French – Anglo-Norman, perhaps? In that case, this was an old book – five centuries, at least.

From the bits that he could understand, he was looking at an elaborate description of a landscape: a green hill under dancing bluebells, and gleaming thistle-down, and the velvet-soft leaves of Fali's Gossamer.

That was all that Draco could make out, the rest was too damaged. He remembered Granger's moment of volubility at the Mendip Way, something about descriptions of flora giving her clues for her mysterious pursuit. None of the plants mentioned here had featured on her list, however. This must be a different site.

He dearly wanted to see the book's cover.

He glanced at the cat. The cat all but shook its head.

“Just a quick look,” said Draco to the cat. “I might be able to help her, you know.” The cat whisked its tail in disapproval.

Draco did it anyway. Using his wand as a lever, so that he didn't touch the book at all, he lifted the cover enough to peek at the front.

It was entitled, Revelations.

The cat meowed a wrathful meow.

Draco let the cover fall back into place and left the cottage rather quickly.

~

Draco didn't know how, but Granger suspected something. First his Jotter went off with a series of messages, questioning him about whether he had touched the book. Draco denied, denied some more, and then Stunned the Jotter so it would stop buzzing.

Then Granger somehow got hold of Boethius, and used Draco's own owl to send him increasingly heated queries. Draco sent Boethius off with a missive to a friend in Italy, which would keep him out of Granger's hands for at least a week.

Then a Howler landed on his lap in the middle of a briefing with Tonks. It got as far as, "MALFOY, DID YOU—" before Draco incinerated it.

Tonks' eyebrows rose. "Was that Hermione?" "Yes," said Draco. "That explains that," said Tonks. She gestured to the Foe Glass behind her. One of the shadows looked rather familiar in form: a slender woman, a pile of curls on her head, her hands on her hips, silhouetted against the grey.

"I suppose she's having violent thoughts about me by proximity to you," said Tonks. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," said Draco, which was essentially true.

Tonks stared at him for a long time, her fingers tapping against her desk. "I will assume that whatever you did was done in your professional capacity as an Auror, to ensure her continued protection."

"That is always my primary objective," said Draco.

Tonks gave him another long look, then turned back to his report on the Dark artefact smugglers. "Be careful, Malfoy."

Thus dismissed, Draco returned to his cubicle.

He had barely sat down when a silver otter dove at him out of nowhere. It called him a nosey prat and a bloody liar, and advised him to jump off a bridge.

Draco sent his own Patronus back with a request to Granger to kindly keep her loud otters to herself: he was working.

For a short while, that was that.

Draco kept an eye on Granger's schedule to spot breaks in her calendar during which she might decide to come and find him in person. She did not, possibly because she was saving lives or other such tomfoolery.

That was when he noticed that another of her asterisk holidays was coming up rather soon – that weekend, in fact.

So – Ostara is coming up, he Jotted casually that evening.

Her response was instantaneous, if off-topic. That book was NOT yours to touch. Where are you going at Ostara? asked Draco.

You are NOT invited, said Granger.

Don't need an invitation, said Draco.

I do not need supervision by prying nitwits, said Granger.

See you soon, said Draco. She didn't respond.

Bit pouty, sometimes, was Granger.

~

The Not-Invited Prying Nitwit had a lovely lie-in on Saturday before getting ready to Apparate to Granger.

Frankly, after her hijinks with the Keepers of the Well, she had lost any privileges she might've had to make calls about whether or not she needed Auror supervision. Draco had no faith that Granger wasn't about to throw herself into a den of vampires to get her hands on some other obscure flask.

Those virtuous reasons aside, the timing of Granger's weekend escapades continued to serve Draco's purposes. Today, Granger's frolic, whatever it was, coincided with one of his mother's luncheons. Draco was glad of the excuse to be away, even if his mother promised that she had no ulterior motives and that the presence of any young, eligible witches would be coincidental.

Draco Flooed to the Mitre, the usual Cambridge pub, and from there he Apparated to Granger's ring, which brought him to her kitchen.

And, lo and behold, there was the ring, but there was no Granger. "You're bloody joking," said Draco to the ring on the kitchen table. Only the cat responded – a pitiful meow at his mistress' absence. "Your witch is a pain in my arse, you know that?"

The cat curled itself into a sad orange loaf at Draco's feet.

Draco pocketed Granger's ring with a mutter. Then he pulled out his wand and cast his tracking charm. Good thing he made contingency plans.

In front of him glowed a map, and on that map were points of light brighter than the rest.

Granger's old trainers remained, it seemed, in her laboratory at Trinity College. The tea mug was somewhere in this cottage. The handful of her hairpins that Draco had charmed were rather scattered – some at the laboratory, some at St. Mungo's.

A single hairpin was currently gambolling through Uffington, for reasons unknown. Reasons that Draco was rather eager to discover.

Draco Apparated to the hairpin.

“Surprise,” he said as he materialised before Granger.

She jumped a metre into the air, which was satisfying, and then swore at him, which was even more satisfying.

Draco looked around to find himself at the top of a green, wind-swept hill. It was a strange kind of formation: tall, but flat across the top. The turf below his feet was rich, green, and deliciously springy, except where it was interrupted by large splotches of chalky white. All around him undulated a lovely vista of rich pasture-lands, meandering hedgerows, and wandering sheep-paths.



Now Draco turned his attention to Granger herself, who was all kitted up in her Muggle walking gear. Her hair was in a high ponytail, which lent her a sporty kind of air over her usual scholarly bun. Her nose was pinkened by the March wind.

Her brow, of course, was marred by a frown.

“How the bloody hell are you here?” asked Granger.

“Where are we?” asked Draco. “How did you find me?”

“What’s in your anorak?” asked Draco, because it looked suspiciously puffy.

Granger zipped the anorak a little tighter. Her bright eyes grew dull with a sudden veil of Occlusion. “Nothing. There – I’ve answered one of your questions, now you answer mine.”

“That was a lie, though.”

“Well, that’s all you’re getting from me,” said Granger. She began to make her way down the hill and away from Draco. “I don’t want to speak to you.”

“Don’t you? Because you exploded my Jotter, commandeered my owl, and then sent me a Howler and an angry otter. Oi – where are you going?”

“Away from you,” said Granger.

Draco was annoyed – had he missed whatever she’d come here for? Her Ostara thing?

He must’ve. She was hippity-hoppiting her way away from him, looking altogether too pleased. He shouldn’t have had quite such a luxurious lie-in.

“Granger! Get back here. We’re not done,” said Draco, hippity-hoppiting behind her down the hill.

“I’m done here,” said Granger with an exaggerated lightness of spirit. “I wouldn’t know about you.”

“You need to wear the bloody ring,” called Draco to Granger’s bouncing ponytail.

She clambered on, ignoring him. Then, without an iota of warning, she bent over. Draco narrowly avoided ramming into her with what would have been full pelvic contact.

Yes, Tonks. She broke her neck falling down a hill. I thrusted into her too hard. Yes, it was an accident. Yes, she’s dead. Please return my body to my mother in the fewest pieces possible.

Granger sprang up again, holding a sprig of something aloft.
“What’s this?” she asked.

Draco stared at the thing. “A plant.”

“Specifically, gossamer. Do you know what kind of gossamer?”

“F–” began Draco, remembering the old tome. He caught himself. “F-frankly, I’ve no idea.” “Fali’s. It’s Fali’s Gossamer.”
“Good for Fali.”

“But you knew that, because you read the book.” Granger’s façade was cracking. She looked slightly manic under it.

Draco waved the plant away. “Taking the ring off wasn’t in our agreement. You’re to keep it on at all times. That’s the entire point.”

Granger, who had turned to continue her descent, whipped back around. Her ponytail slapped Draco in the face, a severe injury for which she did not even remotely apologise.

“D’you know what else wasn’t in our agreement? You breaching my trust and touching my things!” Ah, there it was: the shrieking.
“I didn’t do anything to your book.”

“You weren’t to touch it in the first place! That book is beyond price!”

Whipping around again (and hitting him in the face with her hair again), Granger stormed down the hill.

“Put the damned ring back on, Granger,” said Draco. “No. I’m through with your surveillance device.”

“Fine,” called Draco to her retreating back. “I’ll tell Shacklebolt that I’m through and he’ll have you actually put under

surveillance. With Aurors who will literally watch you round the clock. Every move, every fucking vial of whatsits you pour in your laboratory, and every word you plonk into your computers!”

Granger stopped. She made a strangled noise. Draco took that as agreement.

He stomped towards her. “Hand,” he said.

Granger stuck out her hand.

Draco grabbed it roughly. He wanted to put the ring on equally roughly, to show her how cross he was, but he didn’t, out of fear of breaking her finger. There was a moment of blessed shriek-free silence while he slipped the ring back on.

“Oh!” came a voice.

Some Muggle walkers had just popped around the side of the hill.

Cries of delight followed: “An engagement!” and “What a lovely couple!” and “Congratulations!” and “What a beautiful spot for it!”

Anyway, Draco hadn’t known that Avada Kedavra could be cast using only one’s eyes, but Granger was doing it quite

competently.

Then she turned to the Muggles and made some sounds of agreement and false joy to move them along. Draco did not join in because he was dead.

The walkers eventually bimbed off, having wished them well in their wedded life and provided inane advice to Draco.

Granger was grasping her sprig of gossamer destructively. As soon as the Muggles left, she flung it at the ground and asked why this was her life?

Draco assumed that the question was rhetorical and so did not respond. He pulled out his wand and walked to where the Muggles had rounded the corner.

“What are you doing?” asked Granger.

“I’m going to Obliviate them all,” said Draco.

“Don’t,” said Granger with unexpected vehemence. “Memory charms are not to be used lightly.” “But—”

Now Granger was beside him. She snatched his wand hand and pulled it down. “Don’t. It doesn’t matter. I promise you that those

Muggles won't be tarnishing your reputation or going to the Prophet with this – this supposed development."

"I don't care," said Draco, because he didn't. "I thought you cared. You just garroted me with your eyes."

"You don't care?" Granger looked, for once in her life, perplexed. "I thought you'd care." "Why would I care? They're Muggles."

"I don't know. Never mind. Are we done here?" "Are you done here?"

"Yes," said Granger.

"Then so am I," said Draco.

Granger stamped off through a kissing gate to a car park.

Draco lingered long enough to watch her manoeuvre the car off the grassy verge and onto the winding country road.

She drove off without a backwards glance. Her registration plate said CRKSHNKS. Draco Disapparated with an irritated crack.

~

A few days later, Draco got ready for Wednesday night Quidditch, which he hosted on the Manor's well-manicured pitch.

Kitted up and ready to go, he flew towards the pitch, where the usual miscreants were waiting: Zabini, Davies, Flint, Doyle, and other old school mates, and a handful of whatever players they'd rounded up for tonight's game.

“Oi oi,” waved Flint.

“The Chief Toff has arrived,” announced Doyle.

“Wind your neck in, Doyle, or I shall do it for you,” said Draco, angling his broom down to their altitude.

Doyle raised his Beater's bat at Draco in mock threat. “I'm more equipped to be bashing heads in.” “Five on five?” asked Davies, edging his broom between them and obviously eager to get started. “Let's do it.”

They played. It was after eight when they started, but the pitch was magically illuminated, and permitted a long game full of

questionable rule interpretations and feats of near death. The Snitch was an elusive thing that night: neither Draco nor the opposing Seeker had much luck, and they were both subject to taunting by their teams as a result.

Midnight came around and Davies said shit, the missus was going to have his head for staying out so late. They agreed to call it a draw, given the uselessness of their Seekers and the otherwise even score, and to carry on next week, and celebrate the eventual winner with too much drink.

Pops and cracks reverberated across the pitch as the players Disapparated home, leaving Draco with the whole thing to himself.

Now he could have some fun.

He flew lazily upward in long loops, farther and farther up, until the pitch was a green rectangle far below, and the Manor was a doll's house, softly glowing in the night.

Then he angled his broom down and plummeted into a Wronski Feint. He pulled up at the last minute, barely holding in the whoop of joy that wanted to burst through his lips, and spiralled his broom back towards the black sky.

Once again, the pitch was a small green rectangle below, but Draco flew up even higher, until he fancied there might've been wisps of clouds between him and the earth.

He dropped again, relishing the wind on his face, the paralysing sensation of the plummet, the adrenaline bursting in his veins. It was glorious. It was freedom.

He pulled out of the dive at the last moment possible, his heart singing in his ears, his toes clipping the grass.

The soft, but distinctive, pop of an Apparition echoed across the pitch. He looked about for who it was, ready to tease Davies for running away from his wife.

But it was not Davies. It was Granger.

Had she come to berate him about that damned book? Draco flew in low and drew his broom to a hovering halt in front of her.
“What the hell are you doing here?”

But Granger didn’t look angry. She looked confused. Her wand was held aloft, sparkling green Healing sparks.

In fact, she looked as though she'd just rolled out of bed. Her hair was in a long plait rife with escaping curls. She wore Muggle shorts and a large, well-worn University of Edinburgh jumper. Her legs and feet were bare.

"I – I felt you—" she stammered, gazing about at her new surroundings in bewilderment. "Your heart rate was through the roof, and your adrenaline spiked, and it was horrid, I—"

"No, it was wicked," corrected Draco, still catching his breath. "— I thought you were about to die!"

"Hang on – how did you feel it? How the hell are you even here?"

"The bloody ring!" said Granger, waving the hand with the ring in question in his face. "Impossible," scoffed Draco. "It's only one way."

"Then how am I here, you utter crumpet?!"

This was a fair point and Draco was forced to consider that he might have to revisit his charms. His ire rose, however, because the malfunction was most certainly her fault. "The only crumpet here is the one who took off the ring when she wasn't meant to and damaged something. That spellwork is delicate."

Granger held her hands aloft, as though she couldn't believe the absurd turn of the conversation. "I didn't come here to argue about who is the bigger crumpet!"

"It's you," said Draco. "And since you came barreling here in your pyjamas to ascertain my wellbeing, I can confirm that I'm fine. You can go. I'm sure you have better things to do."

This statement of fact was, apparently, the wrong thing to say. Granger's shriekiness increased. "Better things to do? Me? O, no. My life is a lovely plinky plonky time!"

"Granger—"

"I love nipping down to the Quidditch pitch in the middle of the night! In March! Barefoot! To trade insults with Draco Fucking Malfoy! Positively adore it! I've so little to do, I've been thinking of taking up lawn bowling! Ships in bottles—!"

She cut herself off, having mercifully been interrupted by something touching her neck. She flinched away. "What is—"

At the nape of her neck, glinting teasingly at Draco, was the Snitch.

Draco glided closer and plucked it away. “Been looking for this bugger all night.” “Wonderful. S-so glad I could help,” said Granger.

Her teeth were clenched – but it wasn’t out of anger, Draco belatedly realised – it was from the cold.

She took a breath and appeared to be assembling what remained of her dignity. “Since you’re quite all right, might you take me to the nearest Floo?”

Why the hell did she need him to take her anywhere? Draco landed beside her, realising at last that Granger did not look well. She was white-lipped, pale, and shivering.

“Did you Apparate from bloody Cambridgeshire?” asked Draco with dawning comprehension. “It took a few s-sets,” said Granger through her clenched teeth. “I d-did a double shift at St. Mungo’s this morning – so between that and long-distance Apparition, I am rather drained.”

Draco cast a warming charm on her, his irritation at the situation now giving way to anger. She had depleted herself of far too much magic on his account, the reckless idiot. “What, exactly, was the plan when you arrived to save my life with almost no magical reserves?”

"I was going to put a plaster on the injury," said Granger, but the sarcasm was blunted by the violent tremble that shook her shoulders. "S-sod off with the lecturing – I wasn't thinking. I was asleep and the next thing I knew, this damned ring was screaming at me that you were about to die."

Draco felt that he should be touched, though his displeasure at her imprudence rather overshadowed it.

"Right. So I might've been in the middle of a duel with a gang of Dark wizards and you decided to pop along barefoot, magicless, in your jimjams. Bloody brilliant."

"It was a reaction!" hissed Granger. "I'm sorry I didn't pause to evaluate my options when I thought you were in the midst of dying! I'm a Healer; odds were strong I'd have been able to do something about your – your –"

"My non-existent grievous injury. Right." Draco hopped back onto his broom and drew near her. "Get on. I'll fly you to the Manor. You can Floo home from there."

"No," said Granger, backing away.

Draco assumed, with no small degree of exasperation, that her objection was the flying.

“Fine.” He jumped back off his broom and held out his elbow to her instead. “I’ll Apparate us to the Manor. Let’s go. You look about to faint.”

Granger backed away again. She looked even paler. “No – not the Manor. Please. Apparate me to the Swan. I’ll Floo from there.”

“What’s wrong with my bloody Floo?” asked Draco, close to losing his patience and snatching her arm to force a Side-Along. “My mother’s in France this week, if that’s what you’re—”

“No. It’s not your mother. I just – I just don’t want to go back there. All right?”

She wrapped her arms around herself. At this moment, the formidable Hermione Granger looked small, pale, and afraid.

Draco realised, horridly late, that it was his home she was objecting to. That the Manor still held the horrors of the War.

He was an idiot.

He offered his elbow again. “The Swan, then.”

She took it. Her hand was light on his arm and, against his sweat-soaked Quidditch kit, it felt cold.

They Apparated into the cloak room of the Swan, the boisterous wizarding pub that served as a waypoint for Wiltshire Floo travel. The voices of the pub’s patrons rumbled cheerfully through the walls. Draco cast a Notice-Me-Not on himself and Granger, which served to avert gazes from them as they exited the cloak room and made their way to the hearth.

Draco noted that Granger was still holding his elbow – in fact, she had begun to lean on him.

He tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fire and Granger gave the name of the wizarding pub nearest her cottage, the Mitre.

“You haven’t enough in you to Apparate home from there,” said Draco.

“My cottage isn’t on the Floo network. I was going to walk – it’s only a few minutes,” said Granger.

Draco made a sound of disbelief. “You’ve proven that you’re an idiot once tonight, but I see you’re doubling down. I’m coming with you.”

It was evidence of the true level of Granger’s fatigue that she did not argue the point. They stepped into the hearth together and were spun and jostled along two dozen fireplaces until they were spat out at the Mitre.

Draco was quicker to find his footing than the exhausted idiot of a witch, who made a brave attempt at standing that was more of a sideways collapse into him. He snaked an arm around her waist and Apparated them to her kitchen.

An orange blur whizzed into the room as the crack of Draco’s Apparition echoed. There was an immediate meow of concern as the cat noted the sagging form of his mistress against Draco’s side.

“Are you still with us?” asked Draco, giving Granger a jostle. “Should I call someone? Should I take you to St. Mungo’s? Say something, or I shall send my Patronus to Potter and launch a wholescale panic.”

“Don’t.” Granger’s grip on his arm tightened. “It’s just – just magical exhaustion. I spent all day Healing. The long-distance Apparitions were – stupid. Give me a replenishing potion – the reddish vial on the worktop, there.”

Draco propped Granger up on a chair, where she sat back with a sigh. He floated the vial in question towards them and snapped off its waxy stopper.

“I’m the utter crumpet,” said Granger, before downing the entire thing. Draco felt that he ought to get that in writing.

The cat was winding its way about Granger’s feet with a chorus of anxious meows. “I agree,” said Draco. “She needs rest.”

“You don’t understand him,” said Granger, dropping the empty vial onto the table with a feeble gesture. “Stop pretending.”

“He said there’s a sofa somewhere under the mess of books in the front room that you should go lie down on.”

“Do not touch those books,” said Granger, combative even through her faintness. The cat made a sustained wail.

“Bed, then. I concur,” said Draco.

Draco didn’t give Granger a chance to object. He slipped one hand into the crook of her elbow and Apparated them both

upstairs, where he deposited her onto her bed.

It was obvious, as he looked around the dim room, that Granger had indeed departed in as much of a hurry as she'd claimed to. The bed was in disarray, as though she had forgotten that she had a blanket over her when she'd leapt to her feet. The bedside lamp was askew as though she'd hit it. Her Muggle mobile device was face-down on the floor.

Draco rearranged these things with a few wand waves. The cat, which had bounded up the stairs after them, leapt onto the bed and joined Granger with a reproachful sound.

The cat settled into Granger's armpit like a furry water bottle. Granger pulled the cover over herself with a weak hand and stroked the cat's head with the other.

Draco, who had been waiting to see if the replenishing potion was having the desired effect – and that Granger wasn't going to die on his account – suddenly felt as though he was intruding.

He took a step towards the door. "Right. I'm going to go now. Mind you don't do that again." "I'm sorry," said Granger. "For being – complicated. About your house."

"I don't care," said Draco. "It doesn't matter."

“I know that the awful things that happened there are ancient history.”

“You don’t need to keep excusing yourself. Go to sleep,” said Draco, taking a bigger step towards the door.

“I know it’s not rational,” said Granger, making an irresolute gesture to the ceiling. “But...”

“Stop thinking, Granger,” said Draco, even though he knew that was an oxymoron of a request. He walked out of the room.
“Bye.”

“It was just to use the Floo,” said Granger, softly, mostly to herself, now. “Bit pathetic, really.”

Draco took a long step back into the room. Somehow, he couldn’t let that one slide. “It’s not pathetic to not want to revisit the place where you were tortured.” (He wanted to add, you idiot, but he felt that he may have maximised his quota on that front, tonight.)

Granger said, “Mm,” in an absent way.

“Anyway,” said Draco, “much of the Manor was destroyed at the end of the war. That entire half is gone. The drawing room is gone.”

“It’s gone?” asked Granger of the ceiling.

“Yes. It’s just gardens now. Greenhouses. Flowers, medicinal herbs...” “What herbs?” asked Granger.

Why did she have to know everything in excruciating bloody detail? She was exhausting.

“I don’t know,” said Draco. “My mother donates the useful stuff to apothecaries. Go to sleep.”

“That’s good.” Granger’s voice had taken on a softer, more absent quality. The replenishing potion was knocking her out to begin its work.

“Yes.”

“I’m happy that something good could come out of such a...”

“Such a terrible place?” supplemented Draco. “Yes.”

She said nothing further for a few moments. The moonlight through the window caught her face in soft light: delicate, wide-

eyed, still pale. Her hair was a dark coil across the pillow, slowly unfurling.

Draco felt as though he were seeing double. In her oversized jumper, tucked up in bed, with her hands over the blanket, she looked like the girl he remembered from school. But that vision dissipated to leave him with this portrait of a lovely, tired witch, who had brought herself to the brink of total magical depletion to get to him, because she thought he was in danger.

She had done this to herself for him. It was a peculiar sensation. Granger's eyelids began to drift downwards. Draco edged towards the door, intending to leave the cottage by foot before Disapparating outside as quietly as he could. She was asleep now, certainly – she'd been quiet too long.

“Malfoy?”

Draco muttered a curse. “You’re meant to be sleeping.”

Now her words were blurred at the edges. She was drifting towards unconsciousness, but still fighting it.

“Your Patronus is lovely,” said Granger. Her eyes were closed.
“Er... thanks.”

“What is it?”

“Go to sleep, Granger.”

“But what is it?”

“Sleep.”

“Is it a kind of dog?”

“Yes. Go to sleep.”

“What kind?”

“A Borzoi.”

“Oh. The Tsars used to have those.”

“They did. Go to sleep. This isn’t a pub quiz.”

“He’s a rude thing, though he’s pretty.”

“I’m leaving now,” said Draco. “His fur looked so soft...”

Finally, silence fell.

Now only the cat was awake, staring at Draco.

Draco noted that the yellow stare was not as hate-filled as it usually was. If anything, it seemed approving.

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Chapter 8

The Party / Orphans, Or Something

March drew to a chill, damp, close, and with it came the day of the Delacroix fête. Draco was reminded of the occasion when his afternoon nap was interrupted by Henriette the house-elf.

As Draco yawned with delicious languor, Henriette began to quiz him on his evening attire.

“This purple would be so becoming on you, Monsieur,” said Henriette, holding a rich robe aloft for Draco’s inspection. “Like a Roman emperor, non?”

“The black robes, please,” said Draco.

“This silver, perhaps? With your eyes, it would be so fetching...”
“The black, Henriette.”

Undeterred, Henriette produced the black dress robes, but also a set of constellation-spangled midnight blue ones. “Or perhaps?”

she asked, holding the blue ones up higher.

“Did my mother put you up to this?” asked Draco, eyeing the insistent elf.

Henriette’s large ears twitched backwards. “Madame suggested that you might be amenable to trying something else. Madame would like you to not look as though you were attending a funeral.”

“I rather fancy looking like an undertaker. The black ones – leave them on the bed.” “As you wish, Monsieur,” sighed Henriette, spreading the robes onto the bed.

She curtseyed and Disapparated.

Henriette was a well-spoken, well-trained French elf, but far pushier and more opinionated than the English elves that Draco had grown accustomed to in childhood. However, his mother loved her, and Draco had to admit that her cooking was a far sight better than the stodgy fare prepared by her UK brethren.

Draco showered, perfected his hair, pulled on the hard-won black robes, perfected his hair again, and observed himself in the mirror to confirm that he was devastatingly good-looking.

He was.

Which was excellent, because tonight, Draco Malfoy was going out on the pull. It had been far too long since his last shag (some witch at Pansy's last birthday party, at his best recollection) and he had been feeling the lack of action in the past weeks.

It was time to rectify the situation. The Delacroix party would make for an excellent opportunity. There would be witches aplenty – perhaps Mademoiselle Rosalie Delacroix herself, if she was interested, mused Draco as he applied his cologne.

Satisfied with his toilette, Draco descended to the Floo parlour.

“Henriette, did my mother leave yet?” he called as he threw Floo powder into the hearth.

“Oui, elle est partie,” said Henriette. “She left about two hours ago, Monsieur. I believe she thought you’d be on your way shortly after.”

Oops, thought Draco. “The Seneca,” he said out loud, and he stepped into the flames.

~

Draco dusted himself off on the Seneca's hearth, assisted by a pretentious-looking youth bearing a charmed feather duster.

A moment later, he found himself accosted by Theodore Nott.

"There's fashionably late, and then there's you," said Theo.
"Bordering on rude, I think: it's half eight and you've missed the speeches."

"Careless of me," said Draco, straightening out his robes.
"Summarise."

"Very pretty words about the True Magic of Gratitude, and also please give money." "I can't believe I missed such a momentous address."

A sniff interrupted them. "Ah. The usual blackguards."

Zabini had spotted Draco and Theo as they made their way into the crowded Rose Room, where canapes were being circulated amongst a beautiful crowd.

“Didn’t know they let riffraff like you lot in here,” said Zabini. His dress robes were impeccably tailored – possibly even more so than Draco’s.

He and Draco stared at each other hard, until Zabini’s face split into a broad grin. “Good to see you two – the few, the brave, who aren’t married and popping out sprogs.”

“Here to join you in the evening’s debaucheries,” said Theo with an elegant bow. “What are our plans tonight, gentlemen? Chaos and mayhem?”

“Drinks, dancing, and finding a lovely lady to cuddle with,” said Zabini, casting his gaze around the crowded room.

“What he’s having, but more fucking and less cuddling,” said Draco, also observing the surrounding crowd.

“Oho,” said Zabini. “Leave me the brunettes.”

“Fine,” said Draco, thinking vaguely of Rosalie and her ilk. “I fancy something blonde anyway.”

“Redheads for me, then.” Theo relieved a waiter of three dirty martinis and passed them around. “Drink up – these’ll put some

hair on your chest. Barkeep is generous with the vodka.”

They drank, they bantered, they drifted in and out of groups of friends and old enemies. Draco learned by the by that the evening’s event was in support of a new ward at St. Mungo’s – something about Delacroix Senior’s life being saved had turned his mercenary mind to more philanthropic pursuits. So, not orphans. Whatever.

The lights were dimmed and, in the centre of the room, space was cleared for a dance floor. Draco found Rosalie and attempted conversation, but Rosalie was giggly and seemed rather attached to the arm of some French Pure-blood or other whose name Draco couldn’t remember. He decided that she was a lost cause and continued his cruising.

Two or three other witches that Draco was acquainted with crossed paths with him as he made his rounds. They were charming, eyelash-fluttering, and obviously willing, but he wasn’t feeling the spark (or, less romantically, the remotest twitch in his trousers).

He divested himself of them one by one, distantly registering that, attractive and willing as they were, he found them clingy and bothersome more than anything else. Miss Luella Clairborne

was particularly tenacious; Draco had to lie that his mother was summoning him to make his escape.

What was wrong with him? Luella would've been willing to give him a quick gob job behind a curtain, probably, but that wasn't what he wanted. Nor did he want to bring her home with him. Nor did he want to have her in one of the Seneca's luxurious rooms. So what did he want, exactly? Not her, anyway. Not any of them.

To make good on his lie, Draco joined his mother amongst a circle of St. Mungo's higher-ups. Narcissa looked pointedly at Rosalie's French companion and pressed her lips together in lieu of saying, There, you see? All the good ones are snapped up and you, my son, will die alone.

Draco was fine with dying alone. At this precise moment, he simply wanted to find a witch who awakened something in him, to bed once or twice and get some of his randiness out of his system.

A slender thing in an open-backed dress kept catching his eye as he made his way around the room. She was chatting with a mixed crowd of former Hufflepuffs and upper echelon Ministry employees, but her figure kept disappearing from view as the

speakers mingled. The lights were so low that all he could really make out was the curve of her back, the graceful movement of a hand holding a glass, the peek of a delicate ankle in a strappy shoe.

“Oi,” said Zabini, materialising at Draco’s side. “I said leave me the brunettes.” “My first choice found some French ponce,” said Draco.

“Spoken as though you weren’t yourself the greatest French ponce in the room.” Draco favoured Zabini with a black look.
“Anyway – sharing is caring.”

“Fine. You can soften her up for me. I shall look positively delicious after you’ve bollocksed your way through an introduction.”

Draco drained his glass and handed it to Zabini. “Watch me.”

He sauntered his way past the group, making a show of greeting a few acquaintances as he walked by, including a quick nod for Potter. (And why was Potter here, pray? Something about orphans, probably.)

Ernie Macmillan, bless him, caught a wave and gestured Draco over in his ostentatious way. The chubby lad of Draco’s Hogwarts days had grown into a stout man, broad-shouldered,

who now headed the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

“Macmillan,” said Draco, shaking his hand. “How are you? Introduce me to your fr—” The lovely woman turned towards Draco as he spoke.

It was bloody. Fucking. Granger.



It was bloody.
 Fucking. *Granger*.

—Draco Malfoy and the Mortifying
Ordeal of Being in Love / Chapter 8

art by avanesco, kindly commissioned by Russian translation team

Draco's shock was such that he almost heaved up his martini.

But it was her. Her unruly hair was caught into an elegant chignon at the base of her neck. Her usual attire was replaced by a long green gown, probably Muggle in provenance, but nevertheless beautifully tailored. Her intense gaze was made even more so by the dark smudges of some cosmetic thing or other around her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” asked Draco, freshly perturbed, because he had been imagining this woman’s back and bum from all kinds of interesting angles for the past quarter hour and it was fucking Granger.

Literally. Fucking. Granger.

His question was rudely put. Macmillan stepped closer to Granger (which, somehow, annoyed Draco further), and said, “Hermione was personally invited by Monsieur Delacroix, along with all the Healers who helped him. Didn’t you hear the speech?”

“Ah,” said Draco, feeling stupid.

Granger raised one eyebrow in enquiry. “I wouldn’t have expected you here, either. I didn’t think health care aligned with your interests.”

Macmillan, who appeared to have taken on the role of mediator between them, now stepped closer to Draco. “I understand that the Malfoys are making a rather substantial contribution to the new ward.” He slapped Draco’s shoulder officially. “Good sorts after all, these Malfoys, aren’t they?”

Granger gave Macmillan one of her fixed smiles.

Meanwhile, Draco was nodding as though he was perfectly aware of this large contribution, which, come to think of it, his mother might’ve mentioned two or three times, if only he’d been paying attention.

“Of course,” continued Macmillan, “we haven’t pieced together the identity of the Anonymous Contributor, who is going to be matching the evening’s proceeds Galleon for Galleon. My money’s on one of those old French blokes in Delacroix’s entourage. Lemaître owns half the vineyards in Burgundy...”

Macmillan interrupted himself at the sight of a tall wizard passing their group. “Ah – I’ve spotted Finbok. Please excuse me. I’ve got to harass him about some new legislation he’s pushing – perhaps if I get him more to drink...”

This left Draco and Granger alone, off to the edge of the larger circle. Granger was still observing Draco with a raised brow, which made him realise that he was gaping at her like a cretin.

However, there was no way to say, Sorry, it's just that I've been fantasising about taking you from behind for the past quarter hour without sounding like an even bigger cretin.

To cover his botheration, Draco said, crossly, "You're meant to inform me when you're attending public events. Now I can't even enjoy myself – I have to mind you."

It was Granger's turn to get testy. "Mind me? Who is going to attack me? My colleagues? The family of the man I helped pull back from the brink of death? Delacroix brought in the best security money can buy, or did you not notice the other Aurors? Have you done anything other than look at bums since you arrived? And I did inform you that I was attending – two weeks ago!"

There were rather a lot of accusations being levelled at him in this tirade. Draco selectively addressed a few. "I came to look at bums – that's the only reason I'm here. And the bum selection is paltry, just so you know, barring a few – er – anyway, it's been a monumental waste of time.

And you most certainly did not tell me you'd be attending. I would've remembered, because I would've been annoyed, because minding you interferes with looking at bums."

Granger crossed her arms. "I most certainly did tell you. Check your Jotter."

Draco pulled out his Jotter under her withering glare, a seed of doubt now in his mind. He was a little slow about doing it. Granger made an impatient sound and leaned in closer to him to turn the pages herself. (Draco noted that she smelled good, again; light whiffs of something sweet and airy tonight.)

They flipped through a few pages of Granger communications, until— "Ah," said Draco.

As it happened, Granger had indeed told him two weeks ago — shortly after he had Stunned the Jotter into silence.

The Jotter closed with a snap.

Granger looked indignant, though she was attempting to keep her body language neutral to not cause a scene.

"See? How dare you scold me like a wayward child," she hissed in a fierce whisper. "I'm meant to be here. I'm a guest of

honour!"

Some angel or other rescued Draco by calling Granger over to meet a cohort of French Healers. She left, but not without a dark backwards glance at Draco that promised that this wasn't over.

Draco made a strategic retreat to Zabini and Theo with something less than his usual swagger in his stride.

Zabini chewed delicately on a quail brochette. "That looked like it went well." "Fuck off," said Draco.

"Poor old boy needs more drink in him," said Theo, gesturing over a waiter to refresh their libations. "Have this, Draco, and stop staring at Granger like a slack-jawed idiot. I don't fancy Potter coming over here to defend her honour."

"I didn't realise it was fucking Granger," said Draco, feeling utterly wrong-footed by the entire affair.

"Neither did I," said Zabini. "She's grown up into something rather nice, hasn't she?"

"I work with her," said Draco. He took a fortifying swig of whatever throat-burning substance Theo had provided.

“Do you?” Theo looked intrigued. “What have Aurors got to do with Healers?” “Top secret, so you can fuck off, too,” said Draco. “Interesting,” said Zabini, studying Draco a little too closely for comfort.

He turned his attention back to Granger, who was now deep in conversation with the French Healers. “Why isn’t she taken and popping out kidlets yet? Wasn’t she engaged to the youngest weasel?”

“I think so,” said Theo. “But let us remember that Granger was snogging international Quidditch players at age fourteen. Menfolk might’ve peaked early for her.”

“It’s all downhill after Krum and his broomstick,” snickered Zabini. “The rest of us oiks haven’t a fucking ice cube’s chance in hell.”

“I like a challenge,” said Zabini. “And I do like brunettes. Brunettes with brains are another thing entirely.”

Draco had fallen silent for the duration of the conversation. The subject matter was irritating him profoundly, though he didn’t know why. He had heard – and participated in – a thousand versions of this banter himself, previously, but tonight...

Narcissa called Draco over to introduce him to some of the Delacroix family's particular friends. A friendly patriarch, his elegant wife, and their two pretty daughters, aged 26 and 28, respectively.

Draco was aware, as he spoke to the women, that he could please his mother by showing an interest in one of the daughters, and also please himself by fulfilling his aim of finding a witch to bring to bed.

However, he found himself uninterested by their conversation and distracted by the crowd around him, where he occasionally saw a glimpse of a dark green gown. He told himself that, now that he knew Granger was here, he was once again seeing her as his Principal and therefore keeping an eye on her.

Draco was asked if he liked to dance, and he said yes absently, and found himself on the dance floor with the younger of the two sisters, still distracted.

Granger was dancing with Potter.

"I didn't know you were the strong silent type," giggled the woman in Draco's arms. What was her name again? Amandine? He'd go with Amandine.

“Mm,” said Draco, still watching Potter and Granger.

“Is that Harry Potter?” asked Amandine, following his line of sight. “I’ve heard a bit about him, I think.”

“Only a bit?” asked Draco. (Bless the French and their utter disinterest in English affairs.) “I think he was involved in your last war, non? A hero.”

“Yeah. Something like that.” “And the woman with him, too?”

“Yes,” said Draco.

“They are rather beautiful together,” said Amandine, watching Potter laugh at something Granger said. “You can see the connection—”

“He’s married,” cut in Draco. “They aren’t together.” “Ah. Well – friendship is an equally strong bond.”

Draco let the Amandine prattle on about her opinions on the bonds of love and friendship. The song was drawing to its end. If he was going to gauge her interest in any nighttime activities, the time was now. He could slide a hand towards her backside, dip his face into her neck, ask her what her plans were after the party.

The steps were clear and the witch, from the way she was pressing herself to him, was interested. However, Draco found that he had no interest in doing so.

The song ended and a slower number began. Draco relinquished his grasp on Amandine's waist. He walked her back to her parents with some polite commentary about the evening and how lovely it had been to meet them all.

He ambled towards the bar, where Theo and some former Slytherins and Ravenclaws had set up camp.

"Zabini's gone," said Theo as Draco neared. "Took the older sister with him. Said he'd leave you the less experienced one. But it doesn't look like that panned out for you either. Losing your touch, mate?"

"No spark," said Draco with a shrug.

"There's always Granger," said Theo. "She looks like she'd like to set you on fire – sparks aplenty."

Draco stole a glance towards where Granger stood amongst other Healers. It was true that her looks in his direction were of the fiery variety.

"But I suppose you don't want to die tonight," said Theo. He made room for Draco at the bar.

“She’s off-limits in about a hundred different ways, even if I did have an inclination towards masochism.”

“How does she get on with your mother?” asked Theo. “No reason.”

Draco’s eyes widened. He looked over his shoulder. Theo chortled. They watched as Narcissa Malfoy’s small group drifted towards the French Healers that Granger had been speaking with.

Draco wasn’t certain that his mother and Granger had ever addressed each other in person since the trials fifteen years ago. Those had been a tense affair, but Granger’s testimony had been of tremendous assistance in clearing up Narcissa Malfoy’s name. Granger had been (terribly) honest in her accounting of her time in the Manor, but had made it clear that Narcissa Malfoy had been an unwilling, powerless onlooker, and that her later actions had ultimately saved Harry Potter’s life.

Granger had, however, been less generous in her testimony on Lucius Malfoy’s wartime acts, and her depositions on that front had added to the substantial pile of evidence that had resulted in the elder Malfoy’s Azkaban sentence.

Draco wasn't certain where Granger fell on his mother's list of people to blame for Lucius' eventual decline and death in Azkaban. Nor did he know how that weighed against Narcissa's own freedom, as well as Draco's, in which Granger had also played a part.

Draco was too far away to make out much of what was said between the two groups. He saw Granger's back straighten at Narcissa's approach, but her expression remained neutral. Likewise, his mother's shoulders were set, but her usual polite smile was firmly in place. They shook each others' fingertips and quickly turned to converse with others.

"Psh." Theo swirled the ice cubes in his glass. "I'd been hoping for something more interesting." "Haven't you got a red-head to chase?" asked Draco, making a shooing motion.

"I do," said Theo. "But first, liquid courage. She's one of the French delegation. And most certainly too good for me."

Theo jutted his chin towards Granger's group of Healers. Narcissa had moved on and a lovely red-haired witch was now beside Granger.

“I’m not even sure she speaks English,” said Theo. “Try voulez-vous coucher avec moi,” said Draco.

Theo repeated the phrase with great sincerity, though his accent was appalling. “Bit forward, I think. But maybe I will. I’ll blame you when it all goes awry. I’ll say you told me it meant she had pretty hair.”

“Do not speak my name in front of Granger. I’d rather she forget that I exist.”

“Too late,” said Theo, pushing away from the bar. “I like this plan. It makes me look like a sweet innocent and you like a dickhead—”

Draco reached out to stop him but Theo’s sleeve slipped through his fingers. “—Which is the natural state of things, anyway,” said Theo over his shoulder.

Draco debated the ethics of a quick Tongue-Tying Jinx to the back of Theo’s head as he neared his red-haired target.

The problem with morals was that they made you waste time. Theo was at the red-haired witch’s side now, having somehow procured two glasses of wine, one of which he offered to her, and the other to Granger, who declined, as she was still nursing her champagne.

Theo said something that made the two Healers laugh. He looked theatrically distressed. Then he turned around and pointed at Draco with an exaggerated gesture. The red-haired witch shook her head at him; Granger looked unimpressed.

Draco rather felt that he had to defend his good name. He snatched up his own drink and stalked over.

“Do not believe a word out of this man’s mouth,” he said as he neared them.

“Draco assured me that it meant that I was admiring your lovely hair,” said Theo, his hand on his chest. “I would never say anything so ungentlemanly, Mademoiselle.”

The red-haired witch looked amused. Meanwhile, Granger was regarding Theo with a healthy dose of scepticism. At least she could see through his charade.

“How do I say, ‘do you want to dance’?” asked Theo.

“Voulez-vous danser avec moi,” said Draco and Granger simultaneously. “What they said,” said Theo.

The red-haired witch regarded Theo for a long time. Finally, she said, “D'accord.”

Theo gallantly held out his arm, said something pretty about strangers in a strange land, and swept his new companion towards the dance floor.

“Suave fuck,” muttered Draco.

“Unctuous, rather,” sniffed Granger. “I can't believe that worked on Solange.” “Perhaps Solange wants some English beef for a change,” said Draco.

“I shall ask her to review of the quality of the beef in the morning,” said Granger with a cynical look at Theo's retreating back.

“You must tell me if it's mediocre,” said Draco. “Why?” asked Granger.

“Ammunition.”

“You are terrible friends to each other.” Granger studied Draco over her glass. Then she seemed to recollect herself. “I'm still angry with you. Go away.”

“Fine,” said Draco. There were a dozen witches in this room who enjoyed his company; he didn’t see why he’d waste time with the one who despised it.

However, before he could plunge back into the crowd, Granger asked, in French, “Since when do you speak French?”

The question was posed in an irritated kind of way, as though he owed her an explanation on that front.

“Since when do you speak French?” replied Draco, also in French, because if anyone owed anyone an explanation, it was her.

“I have family in Haute-Savoie,” said Granger. “The Malfoys are from the Loire region.”

“Hm.” Granger sipped at her champagne, regarding him with narrowed eyes. “What?” asked Draco.

“It explains so much,” said Granger, switching back to English. “So much what?”

“Just—” Here Granger made a gesture towards Draco’s general being “—Everything.”

Draco wasn’t certain of what she was implying but he felt that it was less than complimentary. “Haute-Savoie explains a lot about

you,” was his retort.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Granger, bristling immediately.

Draco gestured towards Granger, as though she were composed entirely of raclette and too much vermouth.

Granger put a hand on her hip. “Do you own a chateau?” “Yes,” said Draco.

“So there,” said Granger, triumphantly, because obviously, that explained everything. “Psh – you probably do that Muggle thing – the thing on those long foot paddles.” Granger regarded Draco with an artificial blankness of expression.

“Stop playing stupid. It doesn’t suit you.”

“But I haven’t any idea what you’re talking about,” said Granger. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Ksiiing? Sciing?”

Granger did her best to look uncomprehending. (It was not an expression that she was used to – she did it terribly.)

“Skiing!” said Draco, pointing sharply at Granger’s face. Granger occupied herself with her drink.

“I knew it,” said Draco. He opened his mouth to cast further aspersions on her character in the form of queries about her gîte

in the Alps and getting guttered on génépi, but a limp hand caressed his forearm for attention.

It was one of the eyelash-fluttering Pure-blood witches from earlier: Luella. “Draco, you’ve hardly danced at all.”

This was very much an invitation, and as a well-mannered wizard, Draco’s response should’ve been to ask Luella to dance. However, the very feel of Luella’s languid hand on his sleeve was aggravating, as was the moon-eyed look in her eyes.

He simply didn’t want to.

Draco’s delay in responding was noted by Luella, who peeked around his shoulder to see Granger. Granger studied Luella with one of her analytical looks.

“Oh,” said Luella with a polite gasp at the sight of Granger. “Unless you were already—” “No,” said Granger, at the same time as Draco said, “Yes – we were just about to.”

“No, no,” said Granger, backing away. “You two dance. Please, enjoy yourselves.”

“O, but I couldn’t take your partner away from you,” said Luella with a colourless smile. “I’m so sorry to have interrupted – so

silly of me, I hadn't seen you..."

"But—"

Luella cut off Granger's protests with a wave and minced away in the direction of the bar.

"What are you doing?" hissed Granger as Draco took her arm and placed it over his. He plucked her half-finished glass of champagne and dropped it onto a floating tray.

"You owe me," said Draco. "Or did you forget me saving you from Dr. Whatsit?"

"If I'd known this would be the payment, I would've taken the drink with Dr. Whatsit." Draco steered Granger towards the dance floor. "One dance to keep me out of her clutches." "Your mother is here," said Granger, looking about in obvious unease.

"And? I'm meant to do goodwill stuff. Building bridges and all that rubbish."

"But – but we're not even on speaking terms, normally – does she even know you're working with me?"

“No. And you’re working with me,” corrected Draco. “You were assigned to me.”

“Exactly.”

Granger made a sound of irritation, as though Draco was the most frustrating creature in the entire world. She was wrong, however – that title went to her.

“Harry is here,” was her next objection as the dance floor came into view.

“Brilliant. I’ll tell Potter I wanted to keep a closer eye on you. Someone was acting suspicious.”

“Who?” asked Granger, because, evidently, she had to interrogate Draco on every aspect of this fabricated plan.

“Theo,” said Draco without hesitation.

Theo was currently snogging the red-haired witch a few metres away. Granger observed this fact, then asked what exactly Nott was doing that was so suspicious?

“That’s a diversion tactic,” said Draco. “Don’t underestimate him.”

“The only thing I underestimated was Solange’s fondness for Lincolnshire sausage,” said Granger, watching Solange grope at Theo’s crotch.

“Will you stop gawping and dance?” asked Draco. He slid his hands to her waist and gave her a squeeze, which served to remind her that her hands should be at his shoulders. With evident reluctance, she placed them there.

“Put some sincerity into it, Granger,” growled Draco under his breath. “I pretended to be a pilot for you for six hours in that pub. This is one bloody dance.”

“You enjoyed pretending to be a pilot!” whispered Granger. “I am not enjoying pretending to be whatever I’m pretending to be, for your friend and whatever game it is you’re playing with her.”

To her credit, she did attempt to lessen the obvious tension in her stance, but Draco could feel the lingering rigidity in her hips.
“Can’t you relax?”

“No. I’m dancing with Draco Malfoy,” snarled Granger. “There is nothing relaxing about this.”

Draco permitted himself a large and dramatic sigh. “Also, it’s not a game. Make it look real. If my mother suspects that I turned down a dance with a Very Eligible Witch for a fictive dance with you, I shan’t hear the end of it.”

Granger manoeuvred him towards the wall at the back of the dance floor, using other couples to screen them from view.

“Why did you turn her down?” she asked. “She seemed your type.” Well, that was presumptuous. “What’s my type, Granger?” “Wealthy (I assume), Pure-blood (I also assume), blonde, stunningly beautiful... probably also owns a few chateaux in the Loire valley...”

It irritated Draco that this list was more or less correct. She had neglected certain other womanly attributes he kept an eye out for, but then, she was rarely vulgar.

Seeing that Draco hadn’t responded to her, Granger gave him an inquisitive look. “Am I wrong? Aren’t you going to tell me I’m making terrible assumptions?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“None of your bloody business,” said Draco, because he owed her no explanation whatsoever. And also because he couldn’t quite put it into words himself.

“Hm,” said Granger.

Once again, Draco found himself the subject of one of her looks of assessment, the same look she gave particularly intriguing problems.

“Stop looking at me like I’m a maths theorem,” said Draco.

To Draco’s surprise, this earned him a smile from Granger. It brightened her eyes and dimpled her left cheek. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Draco blinked – it had felt like a flash of sun.

“Malfoy’s Paradox,” said Granger, more to herself than him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing.”

The witch in his arms grew quiet and thoughtful. Though she was there – the silk at her waist was warm under his hands, her wrists

were a small pressure on his shoulders – she was also not there. Her eyes had grown distant.

Granger was thinking. About him. That was alarming.

There was at least one happy side-effect, which was that, with her mind occupied elsewhere, Granger's body relaxed into him a little more, and he felt less like he was holding up a plank, and more like he was dancing with a woman.

Which was alarming in its own way, as this witch was more pleasing under his hands than any witch that evening had been, and the occasional soupçons of her scent that drifted his way when they moved were more delicious than the potent perfumery that had accompanied Luella and her ilk. Which was all well and good, but this was Granger, for fuck's sake.

Draco straightened his arms out so that Granger was literally at arm's length. She came back to herself with a frown, as though dealing with some disturbing thought.

"Hi," said Potter's voice, making both Draco and Granger jump. A moment later, Potter's dishevelled head was between the two of them. "Excuse me, but what the hell is going on here?"

Draco did not permit Granger time to answer. “Fuck off and let me do my job, Potter.”

Never one to fuck off on demand, Potter persisted. “Why are you keeping her so close? Did you see something?”

“It’s not—” began Granger.

“Exactly – it’s Nott,” said Draco, jutting his chin towards Theo.
“Acting suspicious. Sniffing around.”

Potter turned to observe the wizard in question, whose face was somewhere in the red-haired witch’s neck. He frowned. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Harry, it’s not–” said Granger with fresh frustration. “It’s Nott, yes,” interrupted Draco with benevolence.

“I’m on it, Hermione,” said Potter, retreating to take up what he no doubt considered an inconspicuous position near Theo.

Granger’s grasp on Draco’s shoulders now shifted towards his neck and suggested thoughts of strangulation. “You are the worst,” she said in an exasperated whisper.

“Be quiet – I want to watch this,” said Draco, angling them so that they could both see Potter. “Why Nott?” asked Granger.

“Why not, indeed.”

“I am going to murder you.”

“All right,” said Draco. “But first, let me enjoy my revenge.”

In the next five minutes, Draco was treated to the highly enjoyable sight of Potter glaring at Theo, ‘accidentally’ bumping into him, spilling his drink on him, and generally being a hostile presence within two feet of the man, no matter where he moved. Potter could cut a rather intimidating figure when he wanted to, bolstered by the legends of his feats as a war hero and as an Auror, and Theo soon began to notice his observer and break a sweat about it.

Eventually, Theo relinquished his grasp on Solange and made some excuse to her. Then he tottered drunkenly towards Draco and asked Draco to be honest, as he’d had a lot to drink, but was he actually snogging a French red-head or was it Potter’s wife, the Weasley girl, that he’d been getting off with by accident? And was Potter the type to curse a man when his back was turned, or would he be able to leave the party unscathed?

Draco magnanimously pointed Theo to the exit and said that he would take care of protecting him from the wrathful Potter, not to worry, old chap.

“You are dreadful,” was Granger’s comment, when all was done, and Theo had left, witch-less and nursing blue balls.

Draco said, “Job well done,” to Potter, who gave Draco a thumbs up, and disappeared into the crowd.

“I love Potter,” sighed Draco. “You rile him up and point him in a direction and—” “I do hope you’ll find me less easy to manipulate,” said Granger.

Draco preferred not to answer that precise question. He moved her hips in one direction, and then in the other. “Not too bad,” he said. “A bit stiff; perhaps we need to get another champagne in you.”

“I meant metaphorically, as you very well know,” said Granger, growing even more rigid under Draco’s hands.

“I don’t think you’re quite as gung-ho as Potter,” said Draco. (More was the pity.) “But still overzealous.”

“High-strung,” suggested Draco.

“I am not high-strung,” said Granger in a high-strung voice. After a pause, she amended the statement with, “You make me high-strung. You are infuriating.”

“Load of tosh,” said Draco. “I’m charming and debonair. Magnetic. I can’t even walk across a room without witches falling into my lap.”

“Tss.”

“It’s true. Have a look about.”

Granger glanced around and found that it was indeed true, as Amandine, Rosalie, Luella, and some of the evening’s other witches who were dancing nearby were casting long glances towards Draco.

“Do they want your name, your money, or the inexpressible pleasure of your company?” asked Granger.

“All three. I’m a triple threat.”

“You certainly are,” said Granger. Before Draco could be flattered, however, she counted to three on her fingers: “Tension headaches, heart palpitations and general chaos.”

Draco scoffed. “If you didn’t traipse about with offal in your pockets to deal with hags, I wouldn’t have to be such an imposition. You give me tension headaches. Why can’t your gallivanting take you to safe little teas and meetings about orphans?”

Now it was Granger's turn to scoff. "Safe little teas? You fled your mother's last tea, or have you forgotten?"

"I haven't," grimaced Draco. "From one coven of hags directly into another."

Granger looked pensive. "However – if my next bit of gallivanting involves tea and ladies, it would guarantee your absence, and I can avoid you altogether."

"When is it?" "Beltane," said Granger. "Where?"

"Malfoy Manor. The Tea Parlour." "There isn't a Tea Parlour at the Manor." "No?"

"No."

Granger waved her hand. "Wherever the ladies gather in the greatest numbers with the most orphans. Do you think I should patent this?" "Patent what?"

"My recipe for Malfoy Repellent. I think there could be a market for it."

"That market would consist entirely of you. I rather think there's a greater demand for Malfoy Attractant, but good luck identifying the formula."

Granger cast furtive glances towards the miscellany of witches looking longingly at Draco. “You could be right.”

“I’m always right.” “Bums,” said Granger. “I beg your pardon?”

“For the Attractant formula.” “...Yes,” said Draco.

“Bums and not inviting you. Two key components to ensure that you’ll pop by. And removing tracking devices. And telling you to go away. You are a contrarian of the highest order. I still want to know how you tracked me at Uffington without the ring, by the by.”

“Dowsing rods.”

It amused Draco that Granger did not immediately dismiss the possibility. However, after a moment of reflection, she said, “Liar.”

“Tell me about Beltane,” said Draco.

“You are very, extremely, intensely invited to come. I would give worlds for you to be there. Nothing would make me happier,” said Granger, exercising this new reverse psychology theory.

“Excellent,” said Draco.

“I will be removing my ring to ensure your presence.” Here Draco stilled, but Granger’s eyes sparkled in mirth.

“You think you’re funny,” said Draco. “If you break that one-way spell-work again, I shall be cross, and I shan’t fix it.”

Granger gave him a querying look. “You say that as though it’s a terrible threat.” “It is.”

“How?”

“Do you really want to feel every permutation of my heart rate through that ring?” asked Draco. “You’ve got it calibrated so you only feel dangerous extremes, I thought?”

“Do you know how to calibrate it on your end?”

“No.”

“Exactly. You don’t want to feel my every exertion and wonder what the fuck I’m doing – or who.”

“Eurgh,” said Granger, shrinking away. “Noted.”

The song they had been more-or-less dancing to faded into silence. The magically amplified voice of Augustin Delacroix echoed towards them from somewhere in the middle of the room, thanking all for their attendance.

“What did you cure the bloke of, anyway?” asked Draco.

“Healer-Patient confidentiality,” tutted Granger. “I can’t tell you.”

Draco, who had posed the question out of idle curiosity, was intrigued to find that Granger’s eyes had lost their sparkle. She was Occluding again.

Delacroix continued his speech. He indicated, to raucous applause, that between his family’s own philanthropic contributions and the evening’s proceeds, they had doubled their original objective. The Delacroix Ward was going to become a reality.

Hundreds of champagne glasses materialised at head-height for the guests to pluck out of the air and raise amongst cries of Cheers! and Santé!

Since Granger was conveniently beside him, Draco touched his glass to hers.

A group of Healers swallowed Draco and Granger and there was much clapping, bise-giving, and chinking of glasses. Granger

exclaimed, with other overexcited St. Mungo's Healers, how wonderful this was, how brilliant the new ward was going to be, how many lives this would change for the better, and so on and so forth.

Draco quietly faded out of the group, leaving Granger and her colleagues to their celebration.

His last sight of Granger was her smiling as she clasped hands with another Healer and spun about. She was bright-eyed, joyous, and lovely under the soft lights.

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Chapter 9

Beltane

“I saw you dancing with the Granger girl,” was Narcissa’s opening remark at breakfast the next morning.

Well – for Draco, it was breakfast. More technically speaking, it was lunch, given that it was noon. (Theo was getting the last laugh: whatever drinks he had served Draco had resulted in an enormous hangover.)

“I did,” said Draco.

“Why?” asked Narcissa. Her tone was light. She buttered her toast as though she didn’t actually care about the answer, which meant that she cared very much.

“I was saving her from a dance with someone she didn’t want to dance with,” said Draco. (This was an inverted kind of truth, but it was fine. His mother was no Legilimens.)

“Ah,” said Narcissa. “The gentlemanly thing to do.” “Yes.”

“I think it was a good idea,” said Narcissa. Draco met her eyes in surprise.

Narcissa nodded to herself. “Public perception is so important. Draco Malfoy dancing with Hermione Granger sends the right kind of message. We are progressive and we have moved beyond old prejudices. We are relevant; we aren’t vieux jeu.”

Draco made a muffled sound of acknowledgement around a mouthful of omelette.

Narcissa poured tea. “Miss Granger is making a name for herself far beyond her accomplishments in the War. You heard Monsieur Delacroix talk about her last night – really a remarkable witch.”

“Mff,” said Draco through his omelette, because he hadn’t.

Narcissa gave him a sharp look (she strongly opposed speaking with one’s mouth full). “In any case, you may have given me an opening to invite her to some of my functions, if she owes you a favour for the rescue. I’ve got a few Half-bloods on my lists, but a real dearth of Muggle-borns...”

Narcissa continued in this vein until she was interrupted by a tap at the window. Boethius, Draco's eagle owl, was petitioning for entry, bearing a letter.

"Excellent," said Draco when he opened the letter. "What is it?" asked Narcissa.

"Leverage," said Draco.

He conjured a quill and scrawled out a response.

~

April came and went in a foggy drizzle. Draco saw little of Granger, whose schedule seemed even more impossibly crammed than it had been previously.

He forced an interaction – a wellness check, really – on a Friday evening when she, wonder of wonders, had nothing on the agenda. It seemed a convenient time to pop by and recast her cottage's wards.

It was pouring, as it was wont to do when Draco had to work out of doors. He cast the strongest rain-repellent charms in his

arsenal upon his person and got to work.

The lights were on – Granger was home. He could see her silhouette in the warmly lit cottage, curled on the sofa with a book. Eventually, the shape of the cat appeared at the front room's window to observe Draco. The cat must've made a sound, because Granger's figure followed soon after.

She peered outside and gave Draco a small wave, then came out to stand on the doorstep, wrapped in an overlarge Muggle jumper. Muggles still worshipped the Greek goddess of victory, apparently; Nike's name figured in prominent letters across Granger's chest. Her legs were clad in those Muggley leggings. Her feet were bare.

“Hullo, Malfoy,” called Granger through the rain.

Draco supposed that they had last parted on decent terms – they must've, since her first words weren't go away.

He aimed his wand high and cast a silvery grid of light above Granger's cottage.

“What's that one called?” asked Granger as the geometric filaments spread overhead. “It's beautiful.”

Draco, focused on his casting, did not answer until the ward was set. “Caeli Praesidium,” he gasped at length. “It’s to repel airborne entry.”

“Never heard of it,” said Granger, watching the silvery sheen dissipate into the rainy sky.

“It’s one of mine,” said Draco. “There’s a point of weakness at the apex of most parabolic wards. This one is like armour – based on geodesic polyhedrons. Strong, but a real bugger to cast.”

This was an understatement – the thing was exhausting at this scale, over an entire dwelling, but Draco, being a prideful sort of wizard, didn’t like to admit that.

He wiped at the mixture of sweat and rain that dripped down his brow and eyed Granger. He was satisfied that she was alive and that she had remembered to eat in the last week. He could make a clean report to Tonks in good conscience.

“Right – I’m off,” he said, holding up his wand to Disapparate.

“Wait,” said Granger.

Draco waited.

“You look done in,” said Granger. There was a moment of hesitation, and then she asked, “Can I offer you a cup of tea?”

Draco stared at her. “Now I’ve got to check if you’ve been Imperiused. Where did we get engaged?”

Granger’s fists found her hips somewhere under the Nike jumper’s ample folds. “Uffington, and we didn’t. And forget I asked. Invitation rescinded.”

With that, Granger stamped her way into the cottage and shut the door behind her. Draco reflected, as he climbed the steps after her, that she was correct about him turning up when he explicitly wasn’t invited, like some kind of reverse-vampire.

“Anyone home?” he called as he walked in.

“Go away,” said Granger from somewhere within. “I shall never be nice to you again.” “Good. It unbalances me.”

Draco followed Granger’s voice to the kitchen, which looked positively disastrous. “If you comment on the state of my kitchen—”

“Absolute bedlam, Granger.”

Granger had a cooking mitt in her hand and seemed, briefly, to consider slapping him with it. However, she took a breath and turned away to take something out of the cooker instead.

Draco pushed his hands into his pockets and sauntered in. Globs of cream climbed all the way up the splashback. It looked as though a small dairy had exploded.

“I do like what you’ve done to the place,” said Draco.

“Overzealous mixing spell, if you must know. I’m not bothering to clean up until I’m finished.”

Granger cast a cooling charm on the pan’s contents – a crust of some kind – and began to spoon generous portions of condensed milk, toffee, and cream onto it.

Draco was intrigued. And hungry.

Granger waved her wand towards a bunch of bananas, which peeled themselves somewhat messily. She sliced them with another movement – rather uneven slices, but she nevertheless floated them towards her concoction.

“It’s not the prettiest in the world, but it’s... something,” said Granger, looking doubtfully at her lopsided creation.

“What is it?”

“Banoffee pie. I fancied some but the village bakery closed early today. And, well, I had bananas.”

“Excellent,” said Draco. He pointed his wand in the general direction of Granger’s cabinetry. “Accio spoon.”

A drawer burst open and a large spoon flew towards Draco. It was adorned with cat ears. “Really,” said Draco, as the spoon floated into his hand.

“That was a novelty gift,” said Granger, attempting to snatch the spoon from him.

Draco kept her well out of reach with one arm and stretched towards the pie with the other.

“It’s not ready yet,” protested Granger. “It’s got to set!” “It’s fine,” said Draco. “I’m bloody starving.”

Granger stopped straining for the spoon. “Ugh. Don’t blame me if it’s gooey. Can’t you cut out a piece and put it on a plate? Surely we can be more civilised than this?”

“No. I’m always civilised. Let’s be barbarians.”

Granger pushed a plate into his hand regardless. He laughed when she attempted to serve a “piece” to him, which collapsed into a glob of cream and caramel sauce.

As ugly as it was, the pie was delicious. Draco disregarded the plate and ate directly from the pan, and Granger soon followed his heathenish ways, and they shared a heavenly mess of buttery biscuit crust, condensed milk, whipped cream, and the occasional wonky banana slice. Draco only ate three (3) cat hairs.

Draco had done a great many sinful things in his life, but demolishing a banoffee pie with Granger, with their shoulders brushing and their fingers sticky with toffee, felt so delightfully naughty, it gave him a frisson.



The cat assisted in licking the worktop clean between bursts of Granger's Scourgify.

As Granger put the kettle on, Draco was reminded that he ought to give her a heads-up about Narcissa's plans.

"By the by," he said in a casual sort of way, "You should expect an invitation from my mother. She wants to have you for tea."

"What?" exclaimed Granger, immediately on the alert. "Tea? Me? Why? What did I do?"

“She saw me dancing with you and decided that it was a Good Look to cultivate a rapport with a much-beloved Muggle-born witch.”

“How strategic of her,” said Granger, fetching mugs with evident agitation. “It’s not a punishment.”

“Yes it is. I don’t like society things.”

“Psh, you were just at the Society Thing of the season, and you did very well,” said Draco.

That had been a compliment, by the way, but Granger didn’t clue in. “The Delacroix event was different – it was for Healers. I was amongst my own. Not posh Pure-bloods who will laugh at my every misstep.”

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” said Draco.
“Obviously.”

“I’ll have scheduling conflicts for the next year; tell your mother that, will you?” Draco gave Granger his most unimpressed look.
“What? You’ve seen my schedule – is it not true?”

“You find time to host Kneazle information booths. Surely you can find time for a cup of tea.” “I do not host Kneazle information booths.”

“I promise that the ladies aren’t that frightening.”

“Might I remind you that you nearly Splinched yourself to get away from them?”

“You’d Splinch yourself too, if you were threatened by the bonds of holy matrimony with every lump of sugar.”

Granger grew serious. “I would, at that.”

“I promise my mother won’t be trying to marry you off to the Delacroix daughter.”

Granger placed a mug of tea in front of Draco. “Is that what she’s trying to do with you? Rosalie is a nice girl. I got to know her when I was treating her father.”

Draco waved his hand; this conversation wasn’t meant to be about him. “Anyway, look out for my mother’s owl. Consider attending, at least.”

Granger was not so easily diverted. “Rosalie is sweet. I like her.”

“Then you marry her,” said Draco.

“Maybe I will,” said Granger.

“She was on some French nobleman’s arm last I saw, mind you, so you might’ve missed your chance.”

“Damn it.”

They sipped at their tea. Granger began to watch the clock. Draco felt that whatever time she had allotted for her break and socialising was coming to an end. He could almost see her working out how rude it would be to leave him alone with his tea, versus how much she wanted to return to her reading, versus how little she wanted him to be unsupervised in her house.

Draco was never one to make her life easy – in fact, tormenting her was becoming a preferred amusement and hobby – and he therefore drank his tea with agonising slowness.

Granger’s foot was bouncing under the table. Her mug was empty and had been for some time. “Is it too hot?” she blurted out at length. “Cooling charm?”

“No, I’m enjoying it,” said Draco moralistically, as though he were being virtuous rather than a nuisance. “Have you any

biscuits?”

Granger waved her wand to summon biscuits and placed the package rather forcefully in front of Draco.

He opened it with unsurpassable care and delicacy.

Granger suspected something. Her gaze surveyed Draco with doubt, which turned to mistrust when she saw him smirk.

“You’re doing it on purpose. I knew it.”

She rose, all pretence of politeness gone. “I have things to do that are far more productive than watching you pretend to drink tea. Don’t touch anything. You can see yourself out.”

The gig being up, Draco picked up his half-finished tea and a biscuit, and followed Granger to the front room. He, too, had better things to do than to pretend to drink tea – it was a Friday night, and his mates were all out getting bollocks and waiting for him to join them – but, truth be told, Granger could be an even more stimulating source of entertainment.

In the front room, Granger had resumed her seat on the sofa. There was a large book on her knee and a foldy kind of computer

beside her. A fire purred and flared in the hearth. The cat was stretched out on a fluffy rug, so flat that it wasn't immediately clear where the rug ended and where the cat began.

It was rather a tranquil scene. Granger seemed to have found her peace again.

She sighed. "Reading by the fire when it's raining is the closest thing we have to a cure for the human condition."

Draco crunched his biscuit loudly.

This was not the correct response. Granger glowered at him. Then she returned to her book. Draco slurped at his tea. Granger obstinately kept her eyes on the page.

Draco sauntered over and joined her on the sofa, quite uninvited. Granger's eyes narrowed at the impertinence.

"What are we reading?" asked Draco. "Is it the book?"

Granger shuffled away from him a little. "No, it's not the book. I would never handle that one so casually."

“What’s in the Orkney Isles?” asked Draco. “What?” said Granger, looking up.

Draco pointed at the foldy computer, where a paragraph on those distant Scottish islands glowed on the screen. Granger reached over and slammed it shut.

“None of your business.”

“That’s Beltane sorted, then,” said Draco. “Good. I was wondering where we’d be off to.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Granger, in an utterly transparent lie. “I was looking them up out of – out of simple curiosity.”

Draco was feeling magnanimous. “Try again, but with more eye contact, this time.”

She really did try. Her eyes met his and she held his gaze, and she opened her mouth to lie again, but all that came out was “Ugh.”

Draco tutted.

Granger looked vexed.

“I’ve never been to the Orkney Islands,” said Draco. He attempted to open the computer thing again, but Granger swatted his hand away. “I’m rather looking forward to it.”

“There’s nothing to look forward to. You aren’t coming.” “Is it to do with your project?”

“No,” lied Granger, making strong eye contact with Draco’s left eyebrow. “It’s for a holiday.” “Eyes, Granger, eyes. You need to convince me in my soul.”

She met his eyes again, but only an exasperated truth came out. “Yes, it’s to do with the project.” “Then I’m going with you.”

“No. You can go to Orkney whenever you’d like. You needn’t come with me. This will be an absolutely safe, harmless trip. No offal. No hags.”

“I’m not letting you go to the arse-end of Scotland on project business by yourself. With my luck you’ll be gutted by a kelpie and I’ll be made a martyr amongst wizardkind.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I won’t be near any bodies of water.”

“You are going to the Orkney Islands,” said Draco, enunciating the final word slowly. “I know that, obviously. But my business there is fire, not water.”

“Right. Beltane is one of the fire festivals,” said Draco. “It is. Actually, it—”

Granger cut herself off, seeming to belatedly realise that the more she continued the conversation, the more she was disclosing.

“Have you finished your tea?” she asked in an overt attempt to change the subject, and also kick him out of her house.

Draco checked his mug, which was empty. “Almost.”

Granger, her mistrust evident, reached over, hooked her hand around his wrist, and tilted it towards herself.

“I wish I could lie with a fraction of your brazenness,” said Granger, contemplating the empty mug. She released his wrist. Her fingertips had felt warm against his skin.

“Comes with practise,” said Draco.

Granger rose and tidied up a little, which was a clear signal that Draco was overstaying his welcome.

“How are you getting to Orkney?” asked Draco.

“The Hogwarts Express,” said Granger with a bit of a snarl.

“There’s a wizarding pub in Thurso,” said Draco. “I caught a trafficker there a few years ago. Stop growling at me. I’m being helpful.”

“I thought Floo travel was tracked.” “I thought this was a holiday.”

“It is.”

“Then make it look like one. Use the Floo.” “Fine.”

“Pub’s called The Polished Knob.” “You’re joking.”

“No.” Draco rose. “Thank you for the tea. See you at the Knob.”

~

Granger was late.

Draco paced back and forth across the Knob’s flagstone foyer for ten minutes before caving in to the barkeep’s friendly offer of blackberry mulled wine.

“S’fair jeelit oot,” said the barkeep. Draco nodded, assuming that this incomprehensible statement was a comment on the bollocks-freezing weather.

“It’s the first of May,” he said, cupping the warm wine. “Why does it feel like bloody January?” “Who are ye waitin’ for?”
“A witch,” said Draco.

“Obviously, or ye’d have gone by now. I’ll bottle up some wine for yer lass.”

“A colleague,” specified Draco. “But, thank you.”

He took out his Jotter and sent an impatient series of ?????????? to Granger.

He received no response. Through his ring he felt faint echoes of her heart rate, not panicking, but certainly elevated. Her schedule told him that she was at St. Mungo’s A&E – or at least, that she was meant to be there till 4.30, and Flooing into the Knob at 4.45, and yet, she wasn’t here, and it was now quarter past five.

Another ten minutes passed, during which Draco sat near a window and watched the rain mercifully make way to grey sky. Whatever obscure island amongst the Orkney archipelago that

Granger needed to get to was warded in its entirety against Apparition, so they would be taking a ferry.

Given that dinner time was approaching and Granger was still missing, Draco accepted the barkeep's offer of cured meats and cheese.

If you aren't here in fifteen minutes, I am assuming you have been captured and will be Apparating to you, was Draco's next missive to Granger. Rather more of a threat, really.

After contemplating his empty plate, he asked the barkeep to prepare a second portion as a takeaway. It wasn't in the range of his normal behaviours to be so thoughtful, but, well, Granger clearly wouldn't have had time to eat, and he didn't want to waste a moment on her arrival scurrying about for food.

The last ferry for the Holm of Eynhallow was scheduled for six. It was now five to.

Draco paid the barkeep for the provisions, Jotted to Granger that he'd be at the docks, and made his way there.

5 minutes, came Granger's response.

Draco arrived at the docks just in time to watch the last ferry disappear into the misty sea.

The lad at the dock was interrogated with vigour on why the ferry had left at 5.58 and not 6.00 as indicated on the schedule. He shrugged and said that his father left when he wanted to leave, and ‘sides, there had been no other passengers here. The posh mister should’ve shown up sooner. Come back tomorrow.

“I’m here,” came a breathless squeak.

Draco turned. Granger was running towards them along the docks. Her Healer robes were streaked in something that looked rather like six gallons of blood.

“Merlin’s tits,” said Draco. “You look as though you’ve just murdered someone.” “Crivvens,” said the dock boy, growing pale. “Is that blood?”

“Severed carotid artery – it looks worse than it was – he’s alive,” panted Granger. She waved her wand at herself in an Evanescos. “Where’s the boat?”

“S’gone, miss,” said the lad. Draco noted that he was addressing Granger with far more courtesy than him – looking like a murderer inspired respect. “Ye’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

“Come back tomorrow?” repeated Granger. She was on the verge of getting shrieky, but she was attempting to keep it together. “I can’t come back tomorrow. It has to be today. It’s Beltane.”

The dock boy gestured powerlessly at the empty dock. “Please don’t murder me, miss, it weren’t my doing. We do let brooms, if ye fancy the flight? The rain’s let up, at least?”

Draco took a fresh interest in the conversation. “Show me the brooms.” “Brooms?” repeated Granger, now definitely on the verge of shrieking.

“Don’t let her kill me,” said the lad as he showed Draco to a shed. “Two Knuts to hire one, but we ask for a Sickle for a deposit.”

The brooms were everything that Draco might have hoped for in this remote outpost: weathered, fatigued, and of questionable durability.

“Any two seaters?”

The lad disappeared into a dark corner and pulled out an ancient model. “Old Glory. She looks tired, but she’s weather worthy, sir. My daddy taught me to fly on this one.”

“A formidable endorsement, to be sure. Has she got nav?”

“Rudimentary, sir. But she knows the Holm.” The lad tapped his wand to the broom and said, “Holm of Eynhallow.” The broom tilted herself to a mounting position and pointed steadily northwards.

“Done,” said Draco, handing over a Sickle that was worth fifteen of these brooms.

The boy pocketed the coin and, apparently not daring to face Granger again, scurried away. Draco returned to Granger with the broom.

“No,” said Granger.

Draco propped the broom against the ground and leaned on it with great munificence. “All right. I await your solution.”

“I’m thinking,” said Granger. “Give me a moment.”

Granger thinking apparently involved stripping. Draco looked away. Though she was wearing Muggle clothing under her Healer robes, it felt too intimate to watch. From a minuscule pocket in her Muggle jeans she pulled out her anorak, boots and

scarf. The ensemble was finished off with knobby woollen mittens.

“We're going to conduct a SWOT analysis,” said Granger. “Every conversation with you is a swot analysis,” said Draco. “S.W.O.T.” said Granger.

“I know how it's spelled.”

“No. S.W.O.T. – it's an acronym.” “Funny way to spell Granger.”

Granger took a deep breath and told herself loudly that Draco Malfoy's central ambition in life was to be a perfect nuisance, and she must stop encouraging him.

Draco said that there was no encouragement needed – it was his natural state.

Granger waved her wand and a glowing quadrant came to life before her, with the following labels: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.

Above it glowed "Broom Ride Across the Sea."

Granger populated the quadrant with a rapidity that suggested a familiarity with this technique. Weaknesses and Threats she filled easily, with things like 'Sea-ghast attacks,' 'Hypothermia,' and 'Probable death.'

In Strengths she put 'Not delaying research for another year.' This seemed to have import – she made it glow red.

Draco was pleased to see her also put 'Malfoy' under 'Strengths.' "Because," as she explained, "You can actually fly."

However, she also put 'Malfoy' under 'Threats': "Because you're a maniac who will probably do loops and things and kill us

both.”

In Opportunities, Draco took the liberty of adding ‘Make Granger scream.’ Granger crossed that out and put, ‘Obtain ash.’

“From the Beltane fires?” asked Draco (surreptitiously adding Granger screaming back in again). “Yes. You’d have worked it out eventually.”

“Already had,” scoffed Draco. “But, good – there won’t be anything left but ash by the time we get there, at this rate.”

“Right, well, I hadn’t counted on an idiot wizard attempting to wear a Lebengo Viper as a tie today.”

Granger stood back and studied the glowing quadrant for a few minutes. Then she looked at the 1965 Glorious Glider in Draco’s hand. Then she looked at the stormy sky.

‘Not delaying research for another year’ glowed red. “Fuck,” observed Granger judiciously.

Draco cracked a grin.

“Let’s do it.” This was said very bravely. However, Granger’s face was pale. “You needn’t look so pleased,” she added.

Draco grinned harder. “Front or back?” he asked, holding the broom horizontal. “I’m steering, either way.”

“Which is least horrid?” asked Granger as the broom wobbled before her.

“If you’re on the back, you’re solely responsible for holding on,” said Draco. “But you’re out of the wind and you can’t really see anything, if that helps. If you’re on the front, there’s nothing between you and the wild blue. But you can hold the shaft and I can hold you.”

(There were about sixteen jokes that Draco could’ve made about shafts at that moment, but he was sensible enough not to do so. He thought he should be congratulated for his restraint.)

“I’m not sure I trust myself not to faint away and fall off the back,” said Granger. “You would be holding me at the front?”

“Yes.”

It wasn’t clear whether this was a good or bad thing. Granger wrung her hands. “Haven’t they got any life vests or helmets or things? I should’ve packed a parachute.”

“A what?”

“Never mind. I’ll take the front. Hold me. If I die – I just – I have a lot of things I want to do before I die. Please don’t let me die.”

She looked both deathly serious and ready to cry. “You aren’t going to die, Granger.”

“I hate flying.”

“I know. Get on.”

“Maybe you should Stun me and wake me up when we get there.” “I can’t hold your ragdolling corpse in these winds, Granger.”

“I’ve got it – I’ll take a Calming Draught,” said Granger, riffling through a pocket. “Just half of a dose, mind, to keep the edge off. I don’t want to overdo it on the soporifics and topple over...”

The Calming Draught was drunk and, finally, Granger climbed on. Her seat on the broom was tense and pinched up. Her grasp was white-knuckled through the mittens. Her eyes were closed. The Calming Draught clearly took more than a few seconds to kick in.

“Are you ready?” asked Draco, climbing on behind her. “Just fly,” sputtered Granger through clenched teeth.

Draco flew. He took them on a few low circles around the shed to get acquainted with Old Glory. The broom was a stiff old harridan, but she was doughty enough to make headway through the northern wind, encumbered with the two of them. She was steady in the air, far more so than Draco’s flighty models at home, which twitched away at the touch of a finger. For a voyage over this arm of the North Sea, Old Glory would do well. Slow and steady.

Draco informed Granger of this fact in an attempt at reassurance. A gurgle was his only response.

Given that Granger’s hands were occupied with strangling the broom, Draco cast wind-breaking spells over the two of them, so that they might hear each other talk. He also cast warming charms, which made Granger shudder gratefully against him, which felt interesting.

Draco’s final adjustment was having a passenger, which was a rare occurrence for him. The weighting felt different and the steering trended downward.

The few times he'd doubled up on brooms had been for dates and those flights were succeeded by landings in a secluded location and a good snog. Draco rather doubted that there would be sexy bum wiggles against his groin on this flight: Granger clung to the broom like grim death, unmoving, as though she had been Petrified onto it. Only her hair eluded the stiffness. The few strands that escaped her bun softly touched his face. She smelled like shampoo and antiseptic.

Draco leaned forwards and put his hands on the broom in front of Granger, ready to go. She felt small and fine-boned between his arms.

“Cosy,” said Draco.

“Urk,” said Granger in an eloquent verbalisation of her terror.

Draco turned them northward and began to pick up speed. Granger, eyes closed and all, felt the change, and expressed violent wishes with regard to Draco's fate in this world and the next, which would have made a more delicate man weep.

Draco merely said, “Steady on, Granger,” and slowed them down by 0.01 percent. “To the Holm of Eynhallow, old bird,” said Draco, giving the broom a pat.

Next stop: the sea.

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Chapter 10

The Orkney Isles

Draco had enjoyed a great many flights in his young life, but that trip across the North Sea ranked as one of the most savagely beautiful he'd ever experienced. He was almost glad for the old broom – it forced a level of care in his flying, and attention to the winds, that his newer brooms didn't. The flight was quite technical. The cross-winds were many, and the weather capricious, so Draco chose a low flight path about ten metres above the surge.

The air was salty and cold and splashed across their faces like kisses from ghostly mermaids. As they reached open waters, a Great Skua joined them in their flight. It observed Draco with a beady eye, its wingtip a mere metre from his face. Then it dropped to the sea's surface, skimmed wings with its dark watery double, and soared away again.

As they flew northwards, the skies cleared to reveal a fragile scatter of stars in the sky. Below them, the reflected

constellations spilled and plunged into the waves. The sight was sublime. It made Draco feel small and inconsequential.

The Calming Draught must've kicked in, because Granger felt a hair less tense between his arms, though her mittens were still twisted hard around the broom. As far as Draco could tell, her eyes were still closed and she was missing all of these breathtaking vistas. But, he supposed, whatever got her through it.

Something big broke the water below them.

“Granger – look! There’s a Hippocampus! No, there’s two of them! Hippocampuses! Hippocampi?”

“Oh!” gasped Granger, finally opening her eyes.

She looked down to where the enormous, sleek heads of the horse-like creatures had split the waves. One disappeared again, but the other breached, its huge tail arcing just below them, then vanishing without a splash into the waves.

Draco slowed, wanting to turn back and observe them, but the first Hippocampus had appeared again ahead, closely followed by its mate. He urged the broom to catch up. The creatures

picked up speed and Draco matched them, skimming the waves just at the height of their manes.

They raced.

Draco asked the broom for more. The majestic creatures moved below and beside them with no sign of exertion save the pearling mist that burst out of their wide nostrils.

One, slightly smaller, was sea-glass green, her mane as white as the foam cresting around her. The other was larger, blue as the sea-swallows, and just as swift, keeping close to his mate.

Saltwater soaked them. Draco pressed on, and he was a wave, and the sea-horses were waves, and they flew and crashed and foamed, and they surged on, and now they were the wind, and now they were the brine, and now they were seafoam before the storm.

The wave-riders turned west towards the open ocean. Their pale eyes peered at Draco and Granger, and the male threw back his gorgeous head, as though challenging them to follow towards unknown shores. Draco knew that he could not.

The pair disappeared like swift-finned spirits, a vision fast-fading
against the elusive sea.



Then there was only Draco, breathless, and Granger, shuddering,
and the cloud-foamed waves. Neither of them spoke.

The broom resumed her course.

Now, on their left and right, there loomed the dark forms of
landmasses. They had entered the Orkney Isles.

The wind grew less cutting and the seas less rough.

Ahead of them, a small island glowed like a jewel amongst the dark seas, alight with Beltane fires. The broom, sensing her destination near, put on a fresh burst of speed.

Draco spotted a flattish rock face by starlight and came in for a landing. Granger must've closed her eyes again, because when her toes hit the ground, she squeaked, and would've tumbled off the broom but for Draco's arm around her waist.

Draco dismounted. Granger's activity would've been more accurately described as a kind of sagging tumble into the moss.

"That was brilliant!" Draco spun under the stars, holding his arms aloft. "Exhilarating. Fucking magical."

Granger said nothing. Draco cast a Lumos at her. She appeared to be hugging the earth. "You all right?"

"Just a moment," gasped Granger.

Draco left her to compose herself. He cast a few spells inland, which informed him that there were about a hundred witches and wizards on the island, and almost an equal amount of fires, great and small.

Granger had regained her feet. Draco, seeing how bloodless she still looked, offered her his arm in a kind of gentlemanly automatism. She took it, her own grasp all a-tremble.

They advanced towards the centre of the island with the Beltane fires and the sound of a cheerful fiddler guiding them in. As they walked, Draco began to notice immense shapes on either side of them, only perceivable because they were a black opacity, permitting no light of the stars through them.

“Standing stones,” said Granger.

“There are henges this far north?” asked Draco.

He didn’t actually care whether or not there were henges this far north, but questions of that nature were sure to awaken the swot in Granger and distract her from her jitters.

He was right. Granger began in a weak kind of voice which gained in strength and enthusiasm as she progressed. “Yes – this is one of the oldest stone circles in the UK. The megaliths are thought to date back to about 3200 BCE. They’re around three metres tall – absolutely breathtaking in daylight, I’d imagine. This henge is called the Ring of Eynhallow.”

“We’ll have missed most of the merrymaking, I think,” said Granger as they grew close enough to the crowd to hear voices. “Too bad. I’d hoped to see some of the rituals in person...”

“Which rituals?”

“Oh, old protection magicks. Handfastings. Offerings to the Aos sí. Lots of jumping over fires and other silliness, too. I don’t know why wizards think that’ll impress a witch, but then, wizards do a great deal of things I don’t understand. Like viper neckties.”

Now Granger fell silent, mulling over that particular bout of idiocy. “But, well – at least I’ll have got what I came here for.”

They were near the centre of the ring now, walking amongst many peat fires and carousing witches and wizards. Granger was staring at the fires in restrained excitement. Her grasp on Draco’s arm grew tight.

As Granger’s attention was elsewhere, Draco pointed his wand at a few passersby and cast nonverbal Legilimency. He was satisfied that this was a low risk situation – the general mood was festive and tipsy and no one cared who they were.

The peak of the celebration was over and things were drawing to a jolly close. Tents were being put up here and there on the periphery of the fires, while around others, groups were settling down for some whisky-fueled philosophy.

Draco and Granger were accosted by friendly merry-makers and invited to join their fires. Granger politely declined and steered them to a quieter end of the henge, where a small fire burned low.

“Let’s wait for this one,” she said.

“I suppose it has to go out naturally?” asked Draco. “No dousing charms?” “No dousing charms. Beltane ash at its most primitive.”

Granger Transfigured two stumps into cushy ottomans, which she and Draco pulled towards the fire.

After the bitterly cold flight, the heat was positively magnificent. Draco sat close, but Granger was near enough to roast her knees and set fire to her hair. She pulled off her mittens and held her hands close to the flames.

“Of the thousands and thousands of Beltane fires tonight, why these ones, specifically? In the most desolate corner of the UK?” asked Draco as his face began to thaw.

Granger had a ready answer, of course – and seemed delighted that he'd asked. “Because the fires on this Holm are from a very specific fire – the very one that Cerridwen used for her cauldron. I don't know if you remember her tale...”

“Only whatever was on her Chocolate Frog card,” said Draco, vaguely recollecting a witch with masses of dark hair. “Looked rather like you, come to think of it.”

“Psh,” scoffed Granger. “I can only dream of becoming a fraction of the witch she was. She was a mistress of Transfiguration, amongst many things – she could transform into any creature at will. She makes today's Animagi look jejune. Anyway – I'll spare you the treatise – you might've noticed that these flames look a little redder than normal fire?”

Draco nodded; the flames were indeed ruddier than usual. “I assumed it was the peat.”

“No. They've kept her legendary flame alive, for generation upon generation, in these islands. Isn't it incredible?” Granger's eyes were bright. “What a thing to witness. What a thing to feel, on my own hands. It's surreal. It's extraordinary.”

“What do you need the ash for?” asked Draco, since she was being so voluble. Granger clamped her mouth shut.

Draco shrugged. It had been worth a try.

He dug into the pockets of his cloak to pull out the provisions from Thurso. He passed the cured meats and cheese to Granger and tucked the flask of mulled wine against the fire to warm up again.

Granger looked surprised, though whether it was at the foresight or the unexpected kindness, Draco wasn’t certain. She tore the packet open. “I’m actually starved. Thank you. This was so thoughtful of you, I—”

Draco cut her off to waylay further fluff. “Didn’t bring any Banoffee pie in that anorak?”

“No,” said Granger. She fished about in one of the pockets. “I do have a few protein bars, though. They might be a bit squished...”

Draco didn’t know what a protein bar was, but it tasted like cheap chocolate, which was glorious on his tongue after all the sea salt.

They ate. Granger was mannerly about it, taking small bites interspersed with further commentary on Cerridwen. Draco wondered, for the first time, what her family was like, and whether they were well off Muggles? She had a sense of decorum and a kind of innate dignity that spoke of good breeding.

“Hippocampus would be correctly pluralised as Hippocampuses, I think,” said Granger. “I think Hippocampi would be an incorrect attempt at regularising Latin – Hippocampus is a Greek word. Technically, you could say Hippocampodes, I suppose? Although Hippocampus is now an English word, so really, Hippocampuses is quite correct, too.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said Draco, fetching the warmed mulled wine. “I’m not a linguist, so you shouldn’t.”

Draco proffered the flask to her.

“I’ll make us some goblets,” said Granger, plucking protein bar wrappers from Draco’s lap. “So proper,” said Draco. His mother might actually like Granger.

“This wine has been heated by the flame of Cerridwen. We aren’t sucking it out of a flask like sixteen year olds behind The Hog’s Head.”

Granger Transfigured the wrappers into handsome golden goblets.

Draco would've informed her that she was quite the mistress of Transfiguration herself, but he didn't want her to develop an inflated ego. She nevertheless caught the way he tested the weight of the goblets. She smiled into her scarf.

"Nice sheen on the gold," he admitted.

"A pretty illusion," said Granger, looking pleased. "But thank you." She paused and hesitated before adding, "I heard you've an interest in Alchemy, so your approval means more than the average wizard's."

"My approval should mean more than the average wizard's in all things," said Draco, studying the goblet in the firelight.

Granger raised her eyes to the night sky.



Draco filled their goblets with the mulled wine. “While we’re on the subject of Alchemy – you’d tell me if your project involves the creation of a Panacea, wouldn’t you?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Granger, though she was grinning.

Draco was seized with sudden excitement, because if anyone could, from what he’d learned of this witch over the past five months, it was probably her.

“Are you creating a Panacea?” he asked, leaning towards her. “Is that what Shacklebolt’s so worked up about?”

She met his eyes without hesitation. “No. Don’t be ridiculous.”
“Hm.”

“I’m afraid you’re developing rather too high an opinion of me. I’m a mere Healer, muddling along with my Muggle methods and paltry magical know-how.”

“Paltry,” repeated Draco with a scoff.

“D’you want more cheese? This one’s rather too sharp for me...”

Draco took the cheese and mulled over his mulled wine. Perhaps it wasn’t an outright Panacea that she was working on, but he rather felt the scope was similar. He had a plan to pry the information out of her, however. He simply had to be patient.

The fire crackled on, eating away at its remaining peat. They stared into it, and, as the night wore on, found themselves almost hypnotised by the dance of the flames. The fiddler's song turned mournful and grave.

The fire, the peat smoke, the earth – it smelled like history, like new becoming old, and old becoming new.

Perhaps it was the wine, perhaps the late hour, perhaps the lingering potency of Beltane night, but the moment took on a dreamlike quality to Draco. Granger became a chiaroscuro-painted vision of a witch, her windblown hair melding into the shadows behind her, her eyes catching the red firelight. Her hands were stretched to the fire and it seemed to Draco that the flames were attracted to her, and that she could have stroked them, if she'd wanted to.

Granger yawned and the spell was broken.

Her sleepiness wasn't a surprise. It was edging towards Draco's usual bedtime, which meant that it was far past Granger's.

She put her mittens back on and cast a warming charm around herself and Draco. The fire was low, but still burning.

Peat fires, Draco realised, took a very long time to go out. Granger fell asleep on his shoulder.

Draco, who had himself been growing tired, suddenly found himself alert and ill at ease. This was an entirely new display of vulnerability that he wasn't prepared to deal with. Her breathing was slow and steady, her mittens curled into her lap.

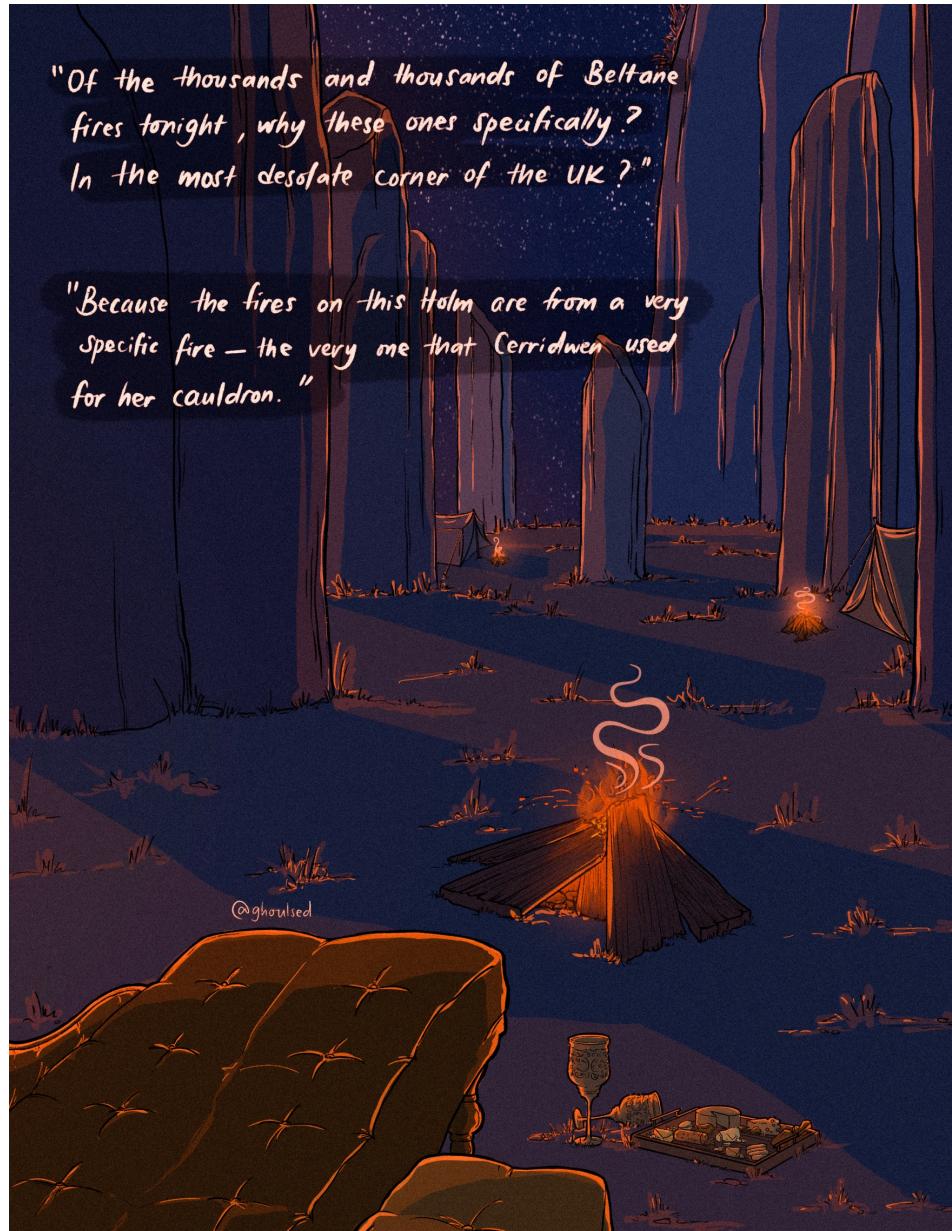
Draco's Transfiguration skills were decent, but not good enough to Transfigure a tent out of the remains of a cured meat packet. He settled for elongating Granger's ottoman into a kind of lopsided chaise longue. She slid into the new configuration without waking.

Then, because she seemed small and even more vulnerable lying supine under the open sky, he threw his cloak over her. He topped this off with another warming charm over the two of them, since the dying fire's warmth was decidedly giving way to the night's chill.

He cast a few wards, in case his own fatigue took over and he, too, fell dead to the world. It was most certainly excessive prudence, as the other celebrants had retreated into their tents, but Draco hadn't survived this long by being careless.

He sat with his back against Granger's chaise longue and watched the last of the flames turn to embers.

After another hour, the edge of the pit had turned to ash. It stirred in the silent breeze, then settled, white upon white.



~

Dawn broke fresh and bright, spilling gold over the Orkney Islands under the cries of wheeling seabirds.

Draco awoke with a crick in his neck and a nose gone numb from the cold.

As for Granger, she looked perfectly comfortable, tucked up in his cloak. Draco wondered when he had become such a virtuous fucking martyr, sacrificing his own comfort for bloody Granger of all people?

He stomped off on frozen feet to take a piss.

When he returned, Granger was up and examining his Transfiguration handiwork. The chaise had held up through the night, which was a pleasant surprise to Draco, anyway.

Granger saw him coming and grew flustered. “You should’ve woken me! You didn’t sign up to be my manservant on top of everything else. You made me a chaise? It’s lovely. Thank you. I

had a wonderful sleep, which is terribly odd, considering. Oh – and your cloak. Here. Thank you for lending it to me. What's it made of? It's so warm. You're moving terribly. Is it your neck? Can I look at it?”

Draco took his cloak, swatted Granger's hands away from his neck, and expressed a curt wish for a hot coffee and a prompt departure.

Granger pulled her hands back into her chest. “I saw someone unfurling an entire kitchenette, a few tents down. You might convince him to spare a cup. I'm going to collect my sample.”

Draco went in search of this salvation, leaving Granger kneeling next to the fire pit, scooping ash into test tubes.

As it turned out, the kitchenette-unfurling wizard was willing to spare two cups and slightly dodgy croissants in exchange for the Sickle that Draco wordlessly offered him.

The hot coffee was worth the ridiculous premium. After the first sip, Draco felt slightly less inclined to murder everyone.

Granger annoyed him afresh by not being where he had left her. After a brief, wand-grippy search, he found her a few fires over,

speaking with a couple dismantling their tent.

She forestalled his lecture with news: the ferry back to Thurso would be here in fifteen minutes. To Draco, this was merely good news, as he didn't fancy another flight in his sleep deprived state. To Granger, it was excellent news. She even asked to carry Old Glory to the dock, wanting to return the broomstick to the ferry master, and rid herself of it forever.

They wandered through the weathered standing stones to the vestigial docks. Granger was lively and bouncy and gave Draco an unasked-for history of Orkney's Neolithic peoples, using the broom to point at areas of interest on the monoliths.

Seeing that Draco did not match her enthusiasm, she gave him her own coffee to pep him up further, and most of her croissant.

The sea breeze picked up as they neared the shore, a beautiful mix of salt and sand and new grass.

They boarded the ferry. Old Glory was reunited with her master. Draco said to keep the deposit. He and Granger had a dispute over whether or not she owed him any money, as she tried to pay him back. He shut her down by threatening to buy the broom

outright and kidnapping her for further flights if she didn't leave off.

Then, as the ferry reached open waters, he kipped down on a bench for a well-deserved nap.

Granger quietly Transfigured the bench's wood top into plush velour when she thought he'd fallen asleep.

~

"Who knew the Knob would offer such an excellent breakfast?" exclaimed Granger, piling scrambled eggs onto a piece of toast.

Draco choked on his coffee and asked her to warn him when she was going to say things like that. Granger looked prim and said it wasn't her fault that he interpreted innocent remarks as boorishly as possible. But she did know a handy charm for trachaeic expulsions, so he could continue to giggle about penises as he pleased – she would save him from choking.

Granger finished eating far before he did, which meant that she had ample time to watch him not quite move properly, because of

his neck. She began a spontaneous lecture on cervical muscle spasms, pondered the health of his spinal accessory nerve, described in detail what she would do to his sterno-cleido-mastoid, if only he would let her, and generally badgered him until he was no longer enjoying his eggs.

“Fine,” snarled Draco, shrugging off his cloak and pulling his robes aside to expose his neck.

You would’ve thought he’d given her a great gift, permitting her to help him. She shuffled closer to him along the bench, eyes alight. “Finally. Don’t move. This won’t take a moment.”

The tip of her wand found the juncture where his neck met his shoulder. That was not a feeling that Draco liked; in fact, it was a real manifestation of his nascent trust in her that he allowed it at all.

The next feeling was much better: a cooling, instant relief, as Granger spoke a Healing spell.

“That’s better, isn’t it? I know it’s a Muggle remedy and you won’t do it, but I would recommend heat therapy if this still feels tender tomorrow. It’d help with blood flow.”

Draco rolled his shoulders. His neck felt wonderfully free.

“You had a horrid night because of me, and I’m sorry,” said Granger. “Let me eat.”

Granger insisted on paying for breakfast and they made their way to the Knob’s hearth to Floo to their respective homes.

Granger reached for the Floo powder pot at the precise moment that Draco did, resulting in a skimming of hands and immediate retraction from both parties. Then they did the idiotic thing where they insisted that the other go first for a long and annoying minute.

Draco, his patience thin, waved his wand at the pot and levitated it firmly into Granger’s chest. “Go.”

“Ugh,” said Granger, hugging the pot to herself before it dropped.

She pried the lid open and looked ready to fling the Floo powder into the fire and leave in a huff. However, she stopped and turned back to Draco instead.

Her expression changed to something uncertain and awkward.

“Malfoy, I – I wouldn’t have been able to collect my sample without you. I would’ve had to put off my project until the next Beltane festival, if it wasn’t for you being there. I would never have made that flight by myself.”

Draco had never been one to shy away from receiving the praise that was his due – in fact, he tended to bask in it – but something about Granger’s guileless sincerity and gratitude made this frightfully awkward.

Plus, it was Granger. Her being nice gave him the heebie-jeebies.
“Go home, Granger,” he said.

Granger threw a fistful of powder into the flames. “Okay. I’m glad you came. I’m goingtogenowthanksagainbye. The Mitre.”

She didn’t meet his eye and turned away into the flames.

A few minutes later, Draco was dusting soot from his cloak, in his own parlour. He was very much looking forward to a bath and bed. Henriette, who had materialised upon his arrival, was sent off to run the bath, as hot as she could make it.

As Draco made his way to his chambers, he wondered whether the bath would count as heat therapy – not that he cared for

Granger's Muggleish treatments, but.

Should he send her a note asking about it?

She would probably answer with a twelve page explanation and suggestions for further reading. His cloak still smelled like Granger and peat smoke.

He sent her the note.

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Chapter 11

Draco Malfoy, Oblivious Idiot

The dissertation on heat therapy notwithstanding, Draco had little contact with Granger through the merry month of May. He and his fellow Aurors were kept occupied by new and exciting criminal behaviours throughout the country (a wizard who had Imperiused the entirety of a Muggle village and lived as their king; werewolves targeting infants; a theft at Gringotts; a few kidnappings for variety).

Mid-May found Draco cleaning up a messy case – a potioneer in Sheffield, posing as something called a “love psychic,” selling love potions to Muggles. Draco was in the midst of confiscating a stash and Obliviating a Muggle when his wand hummed an alarm at him. That specific alarm signaled that someone was setting off Granger’s wards. And not her office or her laboratory: her home.

Draco finished up with the Muggle briskly and Disapparated to the nearest Floo. That took him to the Mitre, followed by an

Apparition to Granger's cottage, wand out and Disillusioned.

Between his wand's alarm and his arrival, Draco estimated that three minutes had passed. But it was three minutes too late; whoever had been poking about had left. Draco's revelation spells indicated no human presence nearby save for Granger's Muggle next door neighbour, who was napping.

Draco cast a delicate magic detection spell. His warding around the property glowed brightly under it, but he ignored that in favour of examining the ground around Granger's cottage. He held his wand aloft until he found what he sought: a faintly visible trace in the air, left by a being who had used magic here moments earlier.

The faintly glowing trail ended suddenly in the middle of the field behind Granger's cottage: a Disapparition or Portkey, perhaps.

Draco did not like this. It might only have been a curious wizard, or even a thief – that was the best case scenario. It might also be a first indicator that someone had their eyes on Granger and that Shacklebolt's paranoia wasn't for naught.

Draco sent a quick note to Granger: Someone set off your wards.
We need to talk.

When Granger didn't respond immediately, he checked her schedule. She was currently lecturing in Muggle Cambridge.

Draco decided to join her there – he was essentially next door, anyway.

I'm coming to you, he wrote.

Still Disillusioned, he Apparated to Trinity College.

~

Granger's lecture had been on the cusp of ending. Draco only had to wait for ten minutes outside the door of the small classroom. A half-dozen students filed out as he, all but invisible to Muggle eyes, slipped through them into the room.

The chalkboard indicated that the day's topic had been 'Conjugated monoclonal antibodies.' Draco was pleased that these antibodies knew their verb tenses, if nothing else.

Granger, unaware of his presence, was packing papers (sans wand) into a briefcase. She wore a pinstripe blouse tucked into high-waisted trousers – pieces that Draco wouldn't have immediately thought of as complementary, and yet, on Granger, the ensemble was rather flattering.

As the last student filed out, Granger pulled her Jotter out of her pocket. It gave Draco a strange pleasure to watch her flip the Jotter open and grow visibly interested when she saw that it was a message from him.

She read the note and drew her eyebrows into a frown. She began to compose a response. Draco supposed that he ought to reveal himself, as the responding buzz from his own Jotter would soon give him away.

He came to stand in front of her and dismissed his Disillusionment.

Granger gave a kind of gasping shriek, jumped back, and tripped over her chair.

Draco caught her by the wrist, preventing an outright tumble. Granger landed awkwardly in the chair.

Draco leaned against the desk and said, conversationally: “You know, I wish you’d go for your wand and shriek out a curse rather than a scream. You saw my message?”

Granger was not ready to talk about the message. His ring told him that her heart was racing. “You’ve just frightened me out of my wits! How long have you been here? Warn me, next time!”

“I did warn you that I was coming,” said Draco.

Which was true, but Granger nevertheless looked irascible. “I read that message a millisecond before you materialised before me like the Bloody Bollocksing Baron!”

“It’s not my fault you were too busy conjugating antibodies.”

Granger’s expression shifted from cross to confused. “I – what?”

Draco jutted his chin towards the chalkboard.

Granger observed the chalkboard, processed his comment, raised her forefinger, and said, “That’s not what that means–”

Draco cut her off because he, frankly, wasn’t interested. “I’m here to talk about who is nosing around your cottage. And why.”

His interruption earned him a scathing glare. However, Granger took a deep breath and seemed to quell whatever intemperate urges he had roused.

She folded her hands on the desk in a facsimile of serenity. “Sit. And tell me what happened.”

Draco sent a Colloportus towards the classroom’s door. Then he levitated a chair towards them and sat in it across from Granger. Something about this shifted the dynamic between them. He was on the student side of the desk, feeling rather like he was about to be examined.

She crossed her arms and waited, her eyes fixed on his face. The weight of the entire attention of the great Granger brain pressed upon Draco, ready to acquire his information and make meaning of it.

“One of my wards triggered an alarm round the back of your cottage,” said Draco. “Someone was either testing the warding or attempting a disarming. I got there within minutes, but they’d already left. Nothing from Hominem Revelio except your neighbour, but I found a magical trace of them—”

“How?” interjected Granger.

“A magical detection spell,” said Draco. “One of mine.”

Granger looked intrigued but appeared to bracket her questions for later discussion.

Draco continued. “Based on the size, it was most certainly an adult witch or wizard. I followed the trail to the field behind your house. The individual Disapparated or Portkeyed out; the trace ended too suddenly for broom travel.”

Granger clambered to her feet, her wand in her hand. “Is the trace still there? I want to see—”

“No. They dissipate quickly. I only saw it because I’d arrived moments afterwards – and knew the spell.”

Granger sat back down with a mow. “And they definitely interacted with the wards? It wasn’t just the postie?”

“Obviously it wasn’t just the postie. I’m alerted to magical interactions, otherwise I’d be fielding alarms whenever a robin lands on your wisteria.”

“Might the neighbour have seen something?”

“She was asleep and on the wrong side of your cottage. And if this intruder was worth anything, they were at the very least Disillusioned for a jaunt into Muggle Cambridgeshire.”

Granger’s fingers tapped the desk. “You said that Apparitions could be traced. Mightn’t we track this one?”

Draco was growing fatigued of being interrogated like a wayward undergraduate, but he supposed he should’ve expected it from Granger. “The rumour – which you did not hear from me – is that the Ministry tracks Apparitions on certain Individuals of Interest. I’m going to have a look, but unless this person has been particularly naughty or interesting, there’ll be nothing on the books.”

“I wish I’d thought to install cameras at home,” said Granger, looking irritated with herself. “I’ve got some at the lab. I’m rectifying that immediately. Did you see anything else? Footprints? A bit of fabric?”

Draco twitched a sardonic eyebrow at her. “No. This isn’t a Muggle film where suspects leave convenient clues. Now, if you’re quite finished quizzing me, Professor, I have some questions of my own. Or should I wait until your office hours?”

Granger stiffened visibly at his use of her title. “Eurgh. Don’t do that.” “Don’t do what, Professor?”

“That is profoundly unsettling,” said Granger. “I kind of like it.”

The Professor gave him a black look.

“You look cross. Are you going to give me detention?” asked Draco.

“This is uni – we don’t do detentions. Can we move on to your questions?”

Draco took special note of Granger’s discomfort for next time he wished to push her buttons. Perhaps he’d send his next Jot in the form of an assignment for her to mark.

But for now, business. “Best case scenario, this was a one-off visit by a wizarding burglar who wanted to make a quick Galleon and was frightened off by your warding. But we are going to proceed as though it was a first contact by a possibly hostile party. Have you given anyone a hint, recently, that you’ve made a Discovery?”

“No,” said Granger, squaring her shoulders and looking defensive. “Ever since Shacklebolt’s disproportionate reaction, I’ve said nothing. The project is entirely self-funded and has therefore always been under the radar – hang on, you don’t know what a radar is – always been low profile. I’ve not mentioned a thing to friends or colleagues. I have several research projects on the go – more than enough to explain away my time.”

“So why now? Why today?”

“I don’t know,” said Granger. “Isn’t it your job to work that out?”

“That’s what I’m in the process of doing, Professor.” For this remark, Draco was rewarded with a glower. “The incident occurred all of twenty minutes ago, so if you’d give me a moment, rather than interrupting—”

Granger flared. “You’re one to talk about interrupting.” “Who is Larsen?”

“...Gunnar? How did you—”

Draco waved Granger’s schedule at her. “I’ve developed an unfortunate level of familiarity with your schedule and he’s the only new element in the last fortnight.”

“I met him when – last Thursday? He’s the head of a Danish pharmaceutical company. They’re developing a new drug delivery system. Nanoparticles. The potential clinical applications are extremely interesting for my field.”

“So he’s a Muggle?” “Yes.”

Draco’s fingertips rapped impatiently on Granger’s desk. That wasn’t helpful. “And you’ve been a paragon of discretion, otherwise.”

“Yes. The Auror protecting me doesn’t even know anything.”

“Oh, I am aware of that, as well as his frustrations on that front.” Draco’s fingers rapped the desk harder. “It makes it that much more difficult to know what the hell I’m to protect you from.”

“From nothing. No one knows.”

“And yet, someone was at your cottage today.”

“Yes. But you said yourself it might very well have been a housebreaker on the prowl.” Even as she repeated this supposition, Granger looked sceptical.

“But why your cottage, specifically?” “I don’t know.”

“I don’t believe in coincidence, not when you’re involved.”

“Neither do I.” Granger looked as troubled as Draco felt about the entire affair. She was bouncing one of her feet under the desk, as she was wont to do when she was irked. Again, Draco was reminded of the annoyed swish of a cat’s tail.

“If someone leaked something, and there are people sniffing about, this situation is no longer the same as it was in January when we were taking precautionary measures. We’ll call this a one-off, but another incident like this, Granger, and I’m going to have to know what you’re up to. You can bind me with a Vow of Secrecy if you must.”

“I understand. And I hope there isn’t another such incident. I’d rather no one know anything until I’m ready to go public. You’ll probably force me into hiding or something equally inordinate.”

Draco regarded her seriously. “If you think I’d force you into hiding, then this thing must be Big.” “It’s Big. But it’s also Good. But it will upset some people.”

The urge to use Legilimency was strong. The Big and Good thing was at the forefront of Granger’s mind at the moment. She wasn’t Occluding, because at some point in the past few months, she had begun to trust him.

In fact, right now, Granger was in an utterly unguarded state, her gaze openly meeting his. She awaited his retort or further questioning. He could be in her mind and see the thing before she could Occlude, and then he'd know. She'd be furious, and never trust him again, but he'd know.

Draco, gripping his wand in his pocket, found that he couldn't do it. He told himself that it was because he didn't want to endure the righteously angry shrieking that would be sure to follow. And that it had nothing whatsoever to do with the weight of that new trust, with the preciousness of it.

Granger ran her hands up and down her arms as though she were cold. "I find this entire thing disquieting. I don't like it. I really hope it was a stupid burglar."

"If it wasn't a stupid burglar, well – the baddies now know that you're well protected." "Is that good or bad?"

Draco shrugged. "Both. It'll tell them that you – or the Ministry – are aware of the risks and have taken precautions. That you're being guarded. That might scare them off. Or it might drive them to nastier manoeuvres."

“I was rather thinking the latter,” said Granger, concern drawing her brows together. “However, I’ve got the ring and I’ve got you. That’s something.”

The unasked-for earnestness there made Draco want to flee the room. Why did she have to inflict such sincerity upon him? He wanted to squirm.

“And I’m not exactly a defenceless imbecile,” continued Granger. “Shrieking and falling over chairs because of you notwithstanding. And I’ve got the best warding available for private residences. Well – most private residences. I suppose Manors and chateaux in the Loire valley are a rather different breed.”

“There are advantages to ancient abodes,” said Draco. He wasn’t trying to sound smug; it was true.

Granger’s enumeration of her protective measures seemed to have calmed her, at least – until she recollected something and asked, “Did you see my cat?”

“No,” said Draco. “But I wasn’t looking. I’m sure the bugger’s fine.”

“I won’t tell him you called him that,” said Granger. “He’s only just stopped hissing when I talk to him about you.”

“...You talk to your cat about me?” asked Draco, unsure whether this was deranged behaviour, or normal for Granger.

“He likes to be kept informed. Helps him decide how much fur to make you eat.” “Tell him I think he’s a fine animal.”

“I will.”

“The most impressive specimen of a half-Kneazle I’ve ever seen.”

Granger’s mouth quirked into a smile for the first time during this conversation. She rose and resumed piling student papers into her briefcase. “I’d better crack on.”

Draco, too, stood, and floated his chair back to its place. “What’s a love psychic?”

Watching Granger process non sequiturs was developing into a new and amusing sub-hobby, under the umbrella of Bothering Granger.

She stared at him as though she couldn't possibly have heard him correctly. "Did you just say love psychic?"

"Yes."

"Where on earth did you hear about those?"

"A naughty potioneer's been posing as one. What are they?"

"They claim to be able to help lonely people find love through the usual flimflam – mind reading, tarot cards, tea leaves. They're fraudsters cheating the vulnerable out of money."

"Well, this one was getting results. Magically assisted, mind you." "No. Love potions?"

"Yes."

"For Muggles?"

"Yes."

"That's awful," said Granger. "You'll want to keep an eye on the poor things. Potions have vastly different potencies on non-magical populations."

"I know. The victims are being checked in on by medis for the next fortnight." "Good. What potions were they?"

"I've no idea," said Draco, jangling the satchel into which he'd hurriedly stuffed the confiscated stash. "Haven't taken inventory yet."

"Ooh, you have them?"

Draco flipped open the satchel.

Granger peered in. "Contraband! What a thrill!"

Draco pulled out a few of the dark, unlabelled vials. "I reckon the bigger ones are Cupid's Brew. The smaller – Amortentia?" He popped the cork on one of the vials and held it out to Granger. "Does that look mother-of-pearl to you?"

"Hard to say," said Granger, peering into the dark vial. She passed it under her nose. "It doesn't smell like Amortentia. It smells like expensive cologne."

"What? Give it here," said Draco, and he smelled it too. It didn't smell remotely like cologne to him; it smelled sweet, with notes of coffee and toffee, and afterwards, something smoky.

“Well?” asked Granger, a hand on her cocked hip. “Are you sure you didn’t raid a perfumery?” “Smells like coffee to me,” said Draco. “It’s Amortentia.”

Granger sniffed at the vial again. “But Amortentia smells like grass cuttings to me... this is a man’s eau de toilette. Let’s see the sheen.”

She Transfigured one of the papers on the desk into a flat dish, upon which she poured out a measure of the potion. The liquid emerged from the dark vial with a shimmery mother-of-pearl gloss. A faint spiral of steam hissed out of it as it made contact with the air, confirming evidence that it was, indeed, Amortentia.

Granger stared at it for a longish moment, her arms crossed. “Well,” she said finally, “It’s Amortentia.”

“When’s the last time you smelled Amortentia?” asked Draco.
“Er – the one time in Slughorn’s class.”

Draco’s own memory of his experience of the potion was vague: he recollected the smell of citrus, perhaps. This new version was rather nice. Another breath of it wafted towards him: this time it smelled like the vast sky, sea salt, and a faint trace of something clean-smelling.

“Amortentia is meant to smell like things you find appealing or attractive,” muttered Granger. “So why...?”

“Why what?”

“What happened to my grass cuttings and new parchment?” asked Granger. She looked accusatory, as though Draco were personally responsible for the change.

“Your taste in men has evolved,” shrugged Draco. “You can do better than the gardener’s assistant, surely...”

Granger looked irritated. “Don’t be patronising. Did yours change?”

Draco observed Granger for a moment, judging whether or not she was worthy of this rather private information. “Perhaps.”

“What was it, before?”

“I don’t remember. Lemon sweeties, or something.” “And now it’s coffee?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “And toffee.” “Do you ever stop thinking of food?” “No.”

“Romance is dead.”

“Preaching to the converted, Granger.” Draco Vanished the sampling of Amortentia that Granger had poured out. Then he packed the vials back into his satchel. “I’m going to go find a café, and incidentally my soul-mate.”

“The café downstairs has a toffee-coffee panna cotta. Perhaps your soul-mate is a custard.” “Show me.”

They left the classroom together and walked down the few storeys to the ground floor. Granger waved her wand at Draco’s chest to hide his Auror insignia from view; his black robes did not otherwise elicit second glances in Muggle Cambridge.

She led him to the small café. There was a single panna cotta remaining in the window. “It’s a sign,” said Granger.

She bought it for him (he hadn’t any Muggle money), and a cappuccino for herself.

“Thank you for letting me share this special day with the two of you,” said Granger, placing the dessert in Draco’s hands with great solemnity. “Here’s to a lifetime of happiness and love.”

Then she handed him a small plastic spoon. “My wedding gift for the happy couple.” Bit sarcastic, sometimes, was Granger.

They walked out of the building and into warm May sunshine. Draco, eating his soul-mate with his spoon, saw his revenge in the form of a strapping young lad cutting the lawn.

“Look, Granger – your gardener is trimming the quad. Do you want me to talk to him for you?” “They’re courts, not quads. And don’t–”

“Oi,” said Draco to the strapping lad. “Do you have a mobile?”
“Er – yes?” said the gardener.

Draco grasped Granger by the shoulders and stood behind her.
“She’s a bit shy, but this Professor here would like your numbers?”

“My what?”

“You know,” said Draco, mimicking Granger using her Muggle device. “Oh!” said the gardener. “My number.”

Granger knocked Draco’s hands down. “Ignore him,” she said to the gardener. “He’s an imbecile.”

The gardener looked confused, yet – to Draco’s enormous amusement – hopeful. He eyed Granger up and down. “Do you want my number, though?”

“No. I’m sorry for disturbing you. Please, carry on.”

The gardener’s face fell. “All right. You know where to find me if you change your mind, Professor...?”

“Granger,” said Draco, helpfully.

“That won’t be necessary. As I said, this man is an imbecile.”

Granger, with a grasp on Draco’s elbow that was more of a pinch than anything else, walked them away from the gardener, who looked on in disappointment.

Draco, feeling about twelve years old, was snickering to himself. “Poor man looked frightfully sad, you know.”

Granger was, apparently, too peeved at him to answer. “Gutted, Granger.”

“Oh, hush.”

“Where are we going?”

“To a place where I can Disapparate and get away from you.”

There was a shadowy alcove behind some shrubbery that seemed to suit. Granger pulled out her wand and, with a last irritated glance at Draco, Disapparated home.

Draco, still chortling, dug his spoon into his toffee-coffee thing.

That was when he discovered that Granger had Transfigured it into Flobberworm mucus. “That fucking witch,” said Draco.

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Chapter 12

The Tea Party

Draco's Jotter sank into taciturn silence in the next few days. He assumed that Granger was pouting and that he wouldn't hear from her again until he prodded her about her next asterisk holiday.

He was therefore surprised to receive a missive from her before the week had elapsed.

Received invitation to tea from your mother. This Sunday. Will you be nice and attend? asked Draco.

Not sure you deserve me being nice , said Granger.

Don't punish my mother because of me, said Draco. Besides, I ate Flobberworm mucus – haven't I suffered enough?

Did you really eat it? asked Granger.

Yes, replied Draco.

Liar, said Granger.

Draco didn't respond, because she was right.

His Jotter buzzed again. Am only going if you'll be there. Not suffering alone. I can't. I already fabricated a scheduling conflict for myself, said Draco.

Too bad, said Granger. Unmake it.

But that's complicated, said Draco. He hoped that she could hear the whinge through the text.

So is attending an event at Malfoy Manor.

Draco straightened in his seat. So she was playing that card. He supposed he hadn't a choice, then.

Understood. I will be there.

She didn't respond.

Sunday came around and with it the usual flurry of preparations that preceded Narcissa's functions. Draco remained in his chambers until the whirlwind of Henriette and her fellow elves had abated and the first guests had arrived.

Narcissa managed her guest lists with a strategy and refinement developed over decades of serving as the perfect hostess. Today's invitees were a mix of higher level Ministry employees and academics. For Granger, the group would permit comfortable mingling with a familiar crowd. For Draco, it was a boon, as the categories of clingy débutantes and high level Ministry employees were normally mutually exclusive.

He caught Henriette and asked her, quietly, to let him know when Granger had arrived.

Then he made his way into the salon, which Narcissa had opened up onto the west terrace on this lovely May afternoon. Delicately wrought silver tables, piled high with finger sandwiches and cakes, spilled out onto the terrace. Guests were shielded from the sun by floating lace parasols that drifted over them.

Draco recognised some old school mates and wandered over to make small talk with Terry Boot (Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes), Davies (Magical Transportation), and Padma Patil (University of Edinburgh). The conversation moved from mutual ribbing about getting old, to the recent performance of the Falmouth Falcons, to children, at which point Draco lost interest and began to consider evasive manoeuvres.

Rescue came in the form of Henriette, who tugged at Draco's sleeve to inform that Healer Granger had just Flooed in.

Draco found Granger dusting herself off in the Floo parlour. He had half expected her to arrive in Muggle attire to make a point. However, she had gone to the effort of wearing robes for the occasion. They were a light grey-blue in the French style, accentuating her collar bones and slender neck, and tailored high about the waist.

Granger looked pale but seemed preternaturally calm as she spotted Draco and asked, "Why am I here, again?"

Draco enumerated possibilities on his fingers: "A sudden interest in building bridges. To thank the Malfoys for making the Delacroix ward possible. Because you were personally invited by

Narcissa Malfoy and no one says no to her. Because I coerced you. Take your pick.”

“Don’t flatter yourself – you couldn’t coerce me into anything.”

“Don’t challenge me, or I may decide to prove you wrong.”

He and Granger exchanged mutually obstinate looks. However, Draco was more interested in the distinct lack of shaky hands or other trembles that usually marked Granger’s anxious states – which today’s event ought to have triggered, given the location.

“You’ve taken a Calming Draught,” said Draco.

“Whatever gets me through it,” said Granger. “I needn’t remind you of what my last sojourn under this roof was like.”

“It’s hardly the same roof,” said Draco, looking up at the grand white arc above them. “What do you mean? Oh – you said you had rebuilt.”

Granger, too, looked up at the grand ceiling. She was quiet for a moment, and then said, “A thought experiment: is it still the same Manor if its original components were all replaced?”

“The Ship of Theseus,” said Draco. “Well – Manor of Theseus, I suppose.”

Granger turned her attention from the ceiling to him. Her expression flitted from surprised to impressed, then back to neutral. “Precisely.”

“Tell me when you’ve worked it out.” Draco held his arm towards the door. “Shall we?”

“No,” said Granger, an arm wrapped around her midsection. “I’d rather stay here and discuss the metaphysics of identity.”

“Half the guests here today are brains. You can discuss metaphysics to your little heart’s content. The Patil twin who teaches at Edinburgh is here.”

“Ooh, Padma’s here?”

This news spurred Granger on to follow Draco to the door that led to the entrance hall. She paused at the threshold and took a small, fortifying breath. Then she walked into the Manor proper. Draco, glancing behind him, noticed that she was keeping her head down and not looking about at all.

Which was a pity, because substantial changes had been made since her last, unfortunate, visit.

“We wanted to be rid of every reminder of the... darker moments in our lives. Of Voldemort’s stay here.” Draco’s comment drew Granger’s attention beyond her own feet. “It’s changed a bit.”

With an effort, Granger forced her gaze up and about. “Oh – it’s much... much brighter than I remember.”

Encouraged by this success, Draco decided to prattle on about the changes – whatever kept Granger’s chin up. It wouldn’t do for her to walk into the salon looking terrified.

“We put in some new windows. Well – that skylight was a huge bloody hole from some explosion. But we rather liked the sun being let into the foyer, so we had it glassed up instead of roofed.”

They stopped at another large, oddly-shaped window that gave onto the East. “This was a group- cast Bombarda by a bunch of Aurors. Didn’t seem worth bricking back up again, not when it let the sunrise in so nicely.”

Granger tilted her head, studying the decidedly non-traditional architectural feature. “You know – I rather like it.”

“The damage to the serpents and other grotesques led to a rather interesting discovery,” said Draco, gesturing to the arch mouldings above them. “We found that they’d been built over angel iconography. I thought it made the place feel like a cathedral, but my mother liked them. She kept the more intact ones.”

Granger surveyed the half-dozen angels variously perched and soaring, up near the top of the ceiling. “Oh. I would’ve thought they’d always been serpents.”

“So did we. It seems some Malfoy ancestor in the eighteenth century got a bit excited about the family’s ties to Salazar Slytherin and decided to adopt the serpentine imagery wholeheartedly.”

As they moved down the hall to the salon, the glossy planks of wood below their feet gave way suddenly to glass.

“Now, this is interesting,” said Draco. “The dungeons were entirely destroyed in the last battle – and below them–”

“Oh – ruins!”

“We had archaeologists come. They think it was a monastic settlement. Sixth century.” “Celtic?”

“Yes. They wrote a report – er – it’s somewhere—”

Granger seemed just about ready to drop to her knees and press her face to the glass floor, under which the magically illuminated ruins shimmered. “You must send me a copy. How fascinating.”

Draco promised to do so. He was just going to congratulate himself on his skillful management of Granger’s mood, when the next difficulty presented itself in the form of Henriette.

“Egg and cress sandwich?” piped up a voice somewhere at their waists. “Scone with clotted cream?”

Granger observed the house-elf. Henriette was impeccably dressed in an embroidered pillow-case, smiling and attentive. When Granger didn’t immediately answer, Henriette proffered another tray. “Or perhaps caramel teacakes for Mademoiselle?”

Granger’s internal struggle was evident, but she mastered it. “Yes, I’ll have a teacake. Un grand merci.”

“Cela me fait plaisir, Mademoiselle,” said Henriette with a curtsey, before disappearing. Granger caught Draco watching her

as the house-elf vanished.

“What?” she asked.

“I await your Manifesto,” said Draco.

Granger sniffed. “I’ve come to terms with the fact that there are some parts of wizarding society I shall never understand.”

“But you accept them?”

“No,” said Granger. “I tolerate them.” “Hm.”

“Don’t worry, I shan’t begin a house-elf revolution within your halls.”

“Too bad,” said Draco. “Henriette is French, you know. A Radical by nature.”

Finally, they made it to the salon. Draco heard a small intake of breath beside him. Granger had gasped. He himself was desensitised to his mother’s decorations, but he supposed that the scene was rather pretty – the sunlight, the terrace, the parasols...

“The flowers,” said Granger.

"I'm delighted that they meet your approval," came Narcissa's voice. "Welcome, Healer Granger. So pleased that you could come."

Draco noted his mother's use of Granger's title and wondered how much she would scold him if she heard him refer to Granger as, well, Granger.

Narcissa, superb hostess that she was, eased Granger into the room through a tour of the most extravagant flower arrangements. There was a stiffness between the two of them, moderated by each witch's best attempt at neutral civility.

Narcissa swept Granger off towards an older Ministry crowd. Draco watched as Granger was introduced with a great deal of attention to her many accomplishments. In these circles, Granger hardly needed introduction, but her presence at Malfoy Manor was – as Narcissa had hoped – noted in quiet whispers.

Confident now that Granger wasn't about to faint in terror or flee the premises, Draco carried on with his mingling. The rebuilding of the Malfoy name and cachet had taken a decade and a half of work by himself and his mother. They were seeing the fruits of it now: the room was full of people with power, all of whom were glad to be seen at a Malfoy function, and thoroughly enjoying

Narcissa's hospitality. Draco took note of who was in need of money, and who was in need of influence.

Tea was served. Granger had drifted into the Hogwarts crowd and was chatting with Patil and Boot. Draco was pleased to note that she stirred her tea correctly, back and forth, without clinking the spoon against the china. He was certain that his mother would also have noticed.

Yes – Narcissa had just glanced over to Granger and her eyes had flitted to the stirring. Her gaze then slid to those that Granger was speaking with, observing the nature of her interactions.

A few days prior, Narcissa had confessed to Draco her surprise that 'the Granger girl' had accepted the invitation to tea. She had paced Draco's study and enumerated the benefits at length: a Muggle-born, an intimate friend of Potter's, a Healer with an excellent reputation – and, of course, a witch who had been on the Other Side of the war, who now condescended to join them at the Manor. She should've thought of this before, really – but Miss Granger had always been so cold and unsociable. What a stroke of luck that Draco had danced with her.

Narcissa regarded Granger's attendance as something of a coup. Now she was watching it unfold with evident pleasure. Granger

was being cordial, rather than standoffish as she might've been, and was behaving in a perfectly ladylike and witchlike manner. She laughed at the feeble jokes of important figures in the Ministry and spoke with authority on a great many subjects. She was effusive in her praise of the food, the rooms, the hosts. Altogether the ideal guest.

When everyone was properly stuffed with smoked salmon and cakes and jam, there was an exodus down the terrace steps and into the gardens. The guests, numbering about forty at Draco's count, wandered through the hedges and spring flower beds as the sun began to set.

Those with a special interest in botany followed Narcissa into the greenhouses, where she led a tour of her rarer and more delicate specimens. Granger, of course, joined that group. Draco trailed behind, thinking vaguely that this gathering counted as a public event, and that he should therefore be on hand, should a guest lose their head and attack Granger in the presence of one of the Ministry's most notorious Aurors.

Granger took a special interest in the origin of Narcissa's hummingbird hyacinth, which his mother informed her had been imported from a wizard in Provence, many years ago.

Narcissa moved to the next row, along with the rest of the group. Granger stood and studied the hyacinth, whose clusters of flowers opened and closed their petals in shivering flitters, like their namesake hummingbirds.

“Are you admiring, or are you plotting something?” asked Draco, popping out from behind a giant fern.

Granger jumped. Then she looked annoyed. “Never you mind.”

“The latter, then.”

“I’m just thinking,” said Granger.

Draco came to stand beside her. “If you need the flower for something, I’m sure my mother wouldn’t mind. She’d probably be overjoyed to contribute to whatever your endeavour is.” “No.” Granger’s voice was vague and her eyes were unfocused. “No, she’s already helped.” “How?”

“Nothing; it doesn’t matter,” said Granger, snapping back to the present. Which was a lie, but Draco decided not to press.

She cast about to see where the group had got to. However, something gave her pause. Draco followed her line of sight to the Manor’s roofline, through the greenhouse glass.

Realisation dawned on her. “Malfoy, is this – is this where the drawing room used to be?” “It is.”

A kind of shudder coursed through Granger. Then came defiance: a straightening of the back, a setting of the jaw. Then an odd reflexive clutching at one of her sleeves.

Now her face looked drawn and her breath was coming shallow. Had the Calming Draught worn off at such a truly unfortunate moment?

“Let’s get out of here,” said Draco. He didn’t give her the option to argue, threading his arm through hers and steering her out of the greenhouse. To any onlookers, he was being a gentleman escorting a lady past mud puddles, but his grip was iron.

He told himself that this solicitousness was because it would devastate his mother if Granger fainted away and caused a scene during one of her teas. It wasn’t because he cared particularly about the witch holding his arm, who somehow vacillated between powerful and utterly fragile at the drop of a hat.

“Malfoy, I’m fine,” said Granger through clenched teeth. She tried to pull her arm away. “Liar,” said Draco, not relinquishing his grip.

“All right. I’ll be fine in a moment. I didn’t expect to be so...” “If you say weak, I shall be cross,” said Draco.

“Overcome, then.” Granger dabbed at her forehead. “Eurgh, cold sweats.”

“Should I fetch something? Draught of Peace?” asked Draco. However, just as Granger opened her mouth, he remembered: “No, contraindicated within 24 hours of a Calming Draught. I almost forgot. Sit.”

Granger sat on the stone bench that Draco had steered her towards.

And there, finally, were the trembling hands. She tried to hide them amongst the folds of her robes. “I’m fine, really,” said Granger.

“Your bravado is irritating to the highest degree,” said Draco.

He called a house-elf to fetch chocolate, which was immediately presented on a silver platter, in the form of one enormous slab, and two chocolate gâteaux.

Granger broke a piece of the slab off and let it melt in her mouth. “Better?” asked Draco.

“Mm, endorphins,” said Granger. The attempt at levity was belied by her bloodless face.

“If my mother asks what happened, we’ll say we took a detour because you wanted to see the fountain.”

“What fountain?” asked Granger. “That fountain,” said Draco. Granger took stock of her surroundings for the first time and found herself looking at the fountain.



La Fontaine des Quatre Parties du Monde, Paris: our fountain inspiration for today. (Photo: eutouring.com)

“Hippocampuses!” gasped Granger. “Er – Hippocampodes!”

Draco waved his wand at the fountain, activating the gurgle of sprays that truly made it come to life. “Now that I’ve seen them in person, this seems but a pale imitation.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s beautiful. Who is it by?” “Fremiet,” said Draco.

“Of course.”

Draco regarded the statue critically. “The scale is right, the proportions are perfect, the movement is gorgeous – but it’s hard to capture the majesty.”

“What we really need is a frigid North Sea wind to freeze our bits off, to complete the experience,” said Granger.

“I shall have the groundskeeper add sprays of hail.”

“Do you have a manky old broom to fly about on together?”

“Probably,” said Draco. “Shall I fetch it?”

“No.”

“But imagine what my mother would say?” “Exactly.”

Draco leaned back onto his palms. “Now I fancy mulled wine.”

They watched the play of the water over the rearing Hippocampuses in silence broken only by the gurgling of the jets. Granger ate another piece of chocolate. Draco had one of the cakes.

Light chit-chat about the fountain aside, Draco was wrestling with some uncomfortable feelings. He had convinced Granger to come to please his mother, but it hadn't been merely an afternoon outing at the home of a former enemy for her. Seeing her reaction to standing where that cursed drawing room had been helped Draco understand that this had been something greater and far more difficult.

To his mind, the house wasn't even the same house, and the drawing room didn't even exist anymore, but to Granger, this had been a visit to a scene of suffering. Her screams had echoed throughout these very grounds over many hours under Bellatrix's wand. During his more restless nights, he remembered them.

It hadn't been bravado – it had been real bravery, to come here.

"I shouldn't have made you come," said Draco, without looking at Granger, because admitting wrongdoing did not come easily to him. "Do you want to go home? I'll take you back to the Floo parlour. We can say you were needed by one of your patients."

Granger glanced at him in a kind of muted surprise. Then she looked down at her hands, which had stopped shaking. “I think I’m all right now.”

The colour had returned to her face and her breathing was back to normal. However, she hadn’t returned to the level of unusual calmness that had marked her arrival here; the Draught had truly worn off.

Granger was looking at the greenhouse that stood in the place where she had been tortured. “I think it’s good to come back. Possibly. It’s closure, isn’t it? It marks the end of a terrible chapter.”

The water danced. As the sun set, the garden’s magical illumination began to take over. The fountain was bathed in light; the Hippocampuses looked as though they breathed. The greenhouse glowed golden.

“Good things grow there, now,” said Granger. “Even your home is... it’s different. And I don’t just mean the building. It’s touched by Light.”

Draco said nothing. They had strayed into a strange new territory beyond quarrels and banter, and he did not have solid footing.

“Sometimes I think fifteen years is so terribly far away,” continued Granger. “Half our lives, really. An age. And then I have moments like – like what I just had, where it feels like it was yesterday.

And everything is raw and hurts.”

“I know,” said Draco. He knew exactly.

There was a long silence. The water danced and sang.

At length, Granger spoke again. “At least you’ve changed enough that I no longer see the bullying idiot from my school days.”

“Have I?”

“Yes.” Granger smiled a tiny smile. “You’re just an idiot, now.”

As Granger smiled, Draco felt the détente. They had passed back onto familiar ground. “Wow,” said Draco.

“You’ve grown into your chin, too,” said Granger. “Thanks.”

“And your feet – more or less.” “Continue. This cataloguing is thrilling.” “What next?”

“You haven’t insulted my hands yet,” said Draco.

“Show me.” She took his hand in her small one and passed it over with a critical eye. “Overlarge. Perhaps you have another growth spurt in you.”

“Maybe.”

“Better not, though,” said Granger, releasing his hand. “You’re already tall. You don’t want to be gawky.”

“Anything else you’d like to critique about my proportions?” “I think I’ve inventoried the worst offenders.”

“Tch. I’m the golden ratio personified.”

Granger gave him a severe once-over. “Fibonacci must’ve been absolutely marinated in Chianti.”

An unexpected laugh burst out of Draco. Then he collected himself. “Has it occurred to you that your baseline metric is off?”

“How do you mean?”

“You being generally minuscule,” said Draco, gesturing at Granger. “That basis of comparison makes the rest of us look enormous.”

Granger looked provoked. “I’m not minuscule.” She sat up very straight on the bench. “I’m average, thank you. Or a hair below.”

“Several hairs, I think. You might have some Pixie heritage. It would explain the shrillness.” “I’m not shrill,” said Granger, growing shrill.

Draco held up his forefinger and thumb and looked at Granger through the gap. “Twenty centimetres high – that’s about right. Itsy-bitsy.”

“Itsy-bitsy?!”

“Microscopic, really. You’re the nanoparticle; you should talk to that Danish bloke and ask about your clinical applications.”

Granger opened her mouth. Offence and amusement warred briefly across her features, then she burst into laughter.

As the bright sound of it echoed across the courtyard, Draco decided that making Granger laugh might also be a hobby worthy of pursuit.

Granger's merriment abated. She took some deep breaths and wiped a tear delicately from under her eye. "Wonderful. Cold sweats and now tears. Are there any other emotions you'd like to wring out of me in your war against my makeup?"

"What emotion haven't you gone through today?"

"Let's see. I've been stressed, angry, frightened, forgiving (of your flaws), joyful, er..." "Love, then," suggested Draco.

"I have felt that." "Have you?"

"Yes. There is something between me and this chocolate. I should like to be left alone with it, if you don't mind."

"Sorry, you entered into a ménage à trois by default when you accepted chocolate in my home," said Draco, breaking off a piece for himself.

"This chocolate isn't monogamous?" "No."

"Fine," sighed Granger. "I suppose there's enough to share."

She pulled out her wand and melted some of the chocolate. Then she broke off a piece of the remaining chocolate gateau, and dipped it into the melted chocolate.

“Pure decadence, Granger, but I like your style.” They finished the gateau.

“I am truly feeling better,” said Granger, afterwards. “Hadn’t we better rejoin the others?” “I suppose,” said Draco.

Really, though, he didn’t want to. He’d rather sit here and watch the sunset tinge the sky soft pink, and listen to the fountain, and enjoy the feel-good buzz that only wizarding chocolate could give. Perhaps spring an argument or two onto Granger, just for sport.

What topic would provoke her the most? Divination? Oxford outranking Cambridge? Her cat?

Quizzing her on her project? Suggesting a group broom ride over the estate? Insulting Potter? House-elves?

Granger had a great deal of buttons.

However, before Draco had the luxury of launching his next missile, a wandering group of partygoers joined them in the

courtyard and ruined the atmosphere with exclamations about the prettiness of the fountain.

Draco noticed that Granger had edged away from him on the bench. This amused him – what did she think, that people would see them on a bench together and leap to some kind of conclusion? He was Draco Malfoy and she was Hermione Granger. That was utterly risible.

(Her distancing nevertheless made him feel sulky. He, too, shifted away from her on the bench.) This made just enough room for a freshly arrived git to invite himself to sit between them. “Zabini,” said Draco. “I didn’t realise you were invited.”
“Draco,” said Zabini. “Grang – er – Healer Granger? Professor Granger?”

“Hermione is fine,” said Granger, now shielded entirely from Draco’s view by Zabini. “I disagree,” said Draco, “Do not get on a first name basis with Zabini.”

“Too late,” said Zabini. “I have the lady’s permission.” “Use it wisely,” said Granger.

“Hermione,” said Zabini, pronouncing the word slowly, and annoying the shite out of Draco. “Shakespearean, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said Granger. She sounded surprised.

Draco was all the more irritated for it. And how the bloody hell did Zabini know that? The absolute twat.

Zabini then gave Draco his back and proceeded to make affable small-talk with Granger. He enquired about her job(s), about her research, and about why she was wasting her time with a great prat like Draco? She should come and sit with him under the cherry trees. Narcissa had taken out the champagne.

“I’m right here,” said Draco. “Oh,” said Zabini. “I’d forgotten.”
“Malfoy isn’t a great prat,” said Granger. Zabini grinned. “What size prat is he, then?” “Smallish, and only when he’s vexed.”
“You don’t know him, clearly,” tutted Zabini. “I’ve developed a familiarity,” said Granger.

Zabini looked at Draco in wonder. “A familiarity, you say?”

“Work,” said Granger.

“Oh? And in what capacity are you and Draco working together?”

“A dull Ministry affair, which I shan’t bore you with.” Granger rose, straightened out her robes, and left for the group of guests near the fountain. “Excuse me – I need a word with Padma.”

Draco, who had been looking at Granger's bum as she left, was irked to find that Zabini was doing the same.

"Hmm," said Zabini.

"What's got you acting like a massive bellend?" asked Draco.

"Nothing," said Zabini. "I saw a pretty thing and I wanted to sit next to her. Just like you did – no?"

"I wasn't sitting next to her because she's a pretty thing," said Draco. He didn't want to explain the hows and whys of it, however. "It just – happened."

"So I wasn't interrupting anything?"

"Of course not. She's Granger. How much drink have you had?"

"None whatsoever. But – this is good. For a moment I thought you were getting a touch possessive, old boy."

Draco scoffed. "Possessive? It's Granger."

“We’ve established that, yes,” said Zabini. “And she’s gone from a precocious kidlet to a rather fiery kind of witch. Authoritative. Competent. That does things for me. But if you prefer to live in the past – by all means, continue. I will happily find my amusement in the present.”

Zabini rose to join Granger and Patil, leaving Draco to stew upon this.

One thing was certain: if Zabini thought that Granger was going to be a mere amusement, he was in for a bit of a shock to the system. The Pure-blood witches who partook in their usual dalliances were Granger’s diametrical opposite on a hundred levels. An amusement? Zabini had no idea what he was getting into.

Draco snatched a glass of champagne from a passing tray.

And the suggestion that he’d been acting possessive? Ludicrous. At worst, Draco told himself as he observed Granger over his glass, he was watchful over her. And that was only because he was, you know, on assignment to protect her. Which Zabini also didn’t know.

Draco concluded that Zabini didn't know anything at all and that he was an idiot.

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Chapter 13

Solstice

Draco did not see Granger again until mid-June. She came into her laboratory at Trinity just as he was recasting her wards.

She looked as sweaty as he was, and rather more harried.

“You’re limping,” observed Granger as she trotted past Draco, her Healer robes streaming behind her.

“Perceptive.”

“Bludger?”

“Manticore.”

This gave her pause. She pivoted. “Have you had it looked at?”

“Obviously.”

“By whom?”

“Healer Parnell.”

“Oh, he’s wonderful. Excellent. Bye.”

With that, Granger closeted herself in her office.

Draco might've been offended at this cavalier treatment of his esteemed self, except that he recognised the distant look in Granger's eyes – the far away, thinking of something, probably solving world hunger look.

Under the pretext of double-checking the interior warding, Draco sauntered into the laboratory proper. As always, it was irreproachably neat. It seemed to him that there were more bottles of Sanitatem than before, and also a few other healing potions of varying potencies, clustered into groups. Again, no written notes anywhere, nor any real indication of what Granger was working on.

He was bending over a group of tiny phials, trying to determine if any of them contained either the Green Well sample, or the Beltane Ash, or the mystery substance she had harvested at Ostara, but he was interrupted by Granger poking her head out of her office.

“You won’t find much of interest there,” said Granger when she saw him snooping. “I need to learn The Computer,” said Draco, a hand on his chin.

“It would help.”

“Teach me,” said Draco.

He’d rather expected Granger to leap at the occasion. However, she said, “No.”

“No?”

“I’d rather keep you useless, for strategic reasons.”

“Ungenerous of you.”

“I know,” said Granger. “By the way, I have a favour to ask of you.”

“The answer is no,” said Draco.

“Brilliant,” said Granger. “That’s sorted, then.”

She pulled her head back into her office and shut the door again.

“What’s sorted?” asked Draco to the closed door.

“Nothing,” said Granger from within. “Tell me.”

“No.”

“Is it to do with the Solstice coming up? Litha?” “Go away – you said you didn’t want to help.” “I’m opening this door,” said Draco.

“Don’t. I’m not decent.”

“Liar.”

“It’s true. I’m undressing,” came Granger’s voice. It was slightly muffled. Draco paused. “Bit convenient, isn’t it?”

“Just give me a sodding minute.” Draco gave her a sodding minute.

Granger pulled open the door again. She was accompanied by the cold draft of cooling charms and a (surprisingly enticing) whiff of antiseptic and sweat. Her hair was a mussed-up bun at her crown. She had removed her Healer robes and replaced them with Muggle clothes.

“You’re still not decent,” said Draco, observing her shorts and the low-cut top (still long-sleeved, however).

“Please. This is normal attire when it’s bloody scorching. Are all wizards secretly nuns, or is it just you?”

Draco considered this an attack on his machismo, and seriously contemplated offering to show Granger how much of a nun he was not, except he couldn’t think of how to phrase that in a manly, virile way.

“Have you changed your mind about the favour?” asked Granger, backing out of his way so he could come in.

Draco took his usual chair in front of her desk and assumed a magnanimous pose. “I’ve decided to, at the very least, hear you out.”

“Thank you for lavishing me with your charity.”

Draco gestured at her to continue in a kingly sort of way. Also, he wasn’t having any difficulty focusing on her face and her low neckline was not distracting him at all.

“I’m only asking you this because I know you are morally corrupt and have no ethical standards,” began Granger. “I would ask no other Auror what I am about to ask you.”

“Strong preface,” said Draco. “I am flattered. Continue.” “How do you feel about thievery?”

“In favour,” said Draco.

“You don’t even know what we’re stealing.” “What is it?”

“What if it were – theoretically, of course – a precious relic of critical religious significance?” “...When are we going?”

“Have you got any plans for the Solstice?” asked Granger.

“Thievery of a religious artefact with a surprisingly naughty Healer,” said Draco. “You?”

A pleased look flitted across Granger's face, then disappeared. "I have plans with a morally bankrupt Auror."

"He sounds like a catch."

"I'm beginning to think he is," said Granger. Her withheld laughter made her eyes bright. "So tell me."

"Promise you won't report me to the authorities?" "I am the authorities, Granger."

"All right." Granger clasped her hands in front of her in a nervous knot. "I'm going to steal part of a skull."

"A skull."

"Yes."

"Human?"

"Yes."

Granger watched Draco anxiously for his reaction. He made her suffer by staring at her expressionlessly for a full twenty seconds.

She was holding her breath. “Diabolical, Granger.” Granger let out the breath.

“Is the person dead or alive?” asked Draco. Granger looked scandalised. “Dead, of course.” “I don't make assumptions. Whose skull?” “Mary Magdalene's.”

Granger was holding her breath again. “What?”

“I told you it was of religious significance,” said Granger.

“Isn't she wildly important to the Muggles? The Christian ones? Where is her skull kept? Are we going to raid the Vatican?”

“Well, that's the good news, I think. Her skull lies in a reliquary, in a crypt. And that crypt is in a quiet little monastery in the south of France.”

“So what's the bad news?”

“Well – speaking of nuns – the monastery is run by the Benedictine Sisters of the Sacred Heart.”

“And?”

“They're witches.”

“Ah,” said Draco.

“They've been undercover as a religious order for centuries, to escape persecution. They protected the Magdalene when she fled

from the Holy Land. Stealing from them will be slightly more complicated than Apparating in and nicking their most precious relic.”

“I assume that you have a plan,” said Draco.

Granger looked offended that he would even ask. “Obviously. I am choosing a simple approach with the fewest moving parts possible. Your input as an Auror would be appreciated, incidentally.”

“Tell me.”

“The monastery is open for visitors – it’s a popular walk up for Muggles in the area. We are going to be bumbling Muggle newlyweds.”

“Must we be bumbling? I shall find it difficult to remain in character.”

“Yes, we must. Our walk up will coincide – unfortunately, silly us, we are so bumbling – with the Benedictine Sisters’ midsummer celebrations.”

“Must we be newlyweds? We quite detest each other.”

"I know, but yes. If the nuns try to bar entry, because of the midsummer celebrations – they probably won't, but just in case – we'll say this visit was the highlight of our honeymoon, and that the pilgrimage up was a wedding vow promise, and that all we want to do is pray to the Magdalene, and won't they please consider making an exception? I will cry. You can cry, too.

Hopefully they let the snivelling idiots in with minimal supervision." "And if they don't?" asked Draco.

"That will mean they are heartless wretches and I shan't feel bad for Stunning them to get in." "See, that's the problem with morals. I would've just skipped to Stunning."

"Yes, well, I have a slightly more developed sense of ethics than you do, so I would like them to deserve it in some capacity. Only slightly, mind. I can't claim to be too noble, since I'm setting out to damage a priceless artefact. Though, it's for a very good cause – does that balance out? Anyway, by mid-morning, most of the Sisters will be down in the village – there's a basilica there where the townspeople congregate with them. There will only be a skeleton crew left at the monastery, and, of course, whatever wards these witches have put up to protect the skull and their other relics."

"The priceless relics that they've been protecting for centuries. A few dusty Caterwauling Charms, I'm sure. This'll be a doddle."

“That’s why I’d be rather pleased if you’d come with me,” said Granger. “I have some knowledge of wards, but yours eclipses mine. Now, in the event that things go pear-shaped, I’ve prepared a few – er – distractions that I’ll be planting as we do our innocent bumbling tour.”

“What kind of distractions?”

Granger waved her wand and a glowing rune came to life between them. She flicked her wand and displayed two or three more. Every one of them contained the radical Kenaz: fire.
“Incendiary devices? In a monastery?”

Granger bit her lip. “Yes.” “You’re a menace, Granger.”

“But I’ve modified them – they will look a lot worse than they actually are. They’ll give the Sisters real trouble to extinguish, though. I integrated combustible metals.”

The alchemist in Draco was intrigued. “What metals?”

“Magnesium, lithium, potassium.”

“Aguamenti will do bugger all,” said Draco. “They’ll need to find a dry extinguishing agent.”

“Yes. By the time they work it out, we’ll be long gone. I’ve put a peripheral boundary on each explosion; the fires will look

enormous, but the real damage should be limited to a square metre.”

“And disguises?” asked Draco.

Here Granger looked ambivalent. “I’ll leave yours to you. I was going to do a few simple glamours. I studied in France for two years and I was only recognised once, by a fellow English student. I don’t think the nuns in the country’s most remote monastery will be up to date on Hermione Granger’s most recent look.”

“Fair.”

“We’ll bumble our way through the monastery, Stunning and Obliviating as needed (hopefully not at all), and I shall take a fragment of the skull so tiny, they won’t even know it’s gone.”

“And then? We Disapparate out?”

“The entire area is warded against,” grimaced Granger. “That’s why we’re being Muggle walkers. We’ll have to trot along to the edge of the ward to Disapparate.”

“Portkey?”

“Too trackable, unless you’ve fixed the one you attempted in the ring?”

“I haven’t,” said Draco. “That enchantment is a real bugger. There’s a reason why there’s an entire Department dedicated to Portus experts.”

“Damn it.”

“Brooms?”

Granger responded to this intelligent suggestion with all the gratitude and eagerness that might have been expected, which is to say, none at all.

“Why is it always brooms, with you?” she asked in a kind of snarl.

“Because they’re bloody useful, and a good deal faster than bimbling back down the trail by foot until we can Disapparate. Unless you’re secretly a mountain goat Animagus?”

“But how would we even involve brooms? Hide them on the trail in advance?” “Can you squeeze a broom into your Extended pockets?”

“Probably,” said Granger, frowning. “Probably just one, given the awkward shape.”

“That’s settled, then. Disillusionment and a quick broom-ride out. I’ve used it hundreds of times to get out of sticky situations. As soon as you hit the sky, they can’t see you at all – and you’re miles away before they can summon their own brooms.”

Granger sighed. “Fine. Broom until we’re past the Anti-Apparition Ward. Then we Disapparate out. Only in the unfortunate event that we trigger a ward or they catch us with our hands on the skull and give chase. Otherwise, we leave the way we came.”

“I’ll choose one of my racers,” said Draco, growing rather excited at the prospect. “I can attach a second seat.”

For her part, Granger looked tetchy. “A racer. Wonderful.” “The point is to be fast. Shall we do a S.W.O.T. analysis?”

“No. I know it’s a good idea,” said Granger. She looked pouty. “I don’t have to like it.”

“Good. When shall I bring my broomstick for you to squeeze into your pocket? We’ll have to see if the shaft fits whatever minuscule crevice you’re offering, Extension charms or no.”

Granger valiantly attempted to keep a straight face. “What?” asked Draco, his own face impassive.

Granger collapsed into a restrained giggle. “W-why did you have to phrase it like that?” Draco’s poker-face was impeccable. “Like what?”

“Like a horrid euphemism for – ugh – never mind.” “For what, Granger?”

“I said, never mind.”

Draco let up and smirked. “Who’s giggling about penises now?”

Granger, realising that he’d been taking the piss, gave him a black look. “At least I’m not choking on an omelette while doing so.”

“Choking while stuffing your gob at the Knob is a rite of passage.” Granger couldn’t help the snort that escaped her. “Stop.”

“Now, if we can stop talking about penises for one moment—”

“I’m not talking about penises – you are.”

“I’m talking about broomsticks and pubs. I’m innocent.”

“No, you’re maddening.” Granger pressed her fingertips to her temples. “Right. Let’s focus. I have places to be.”

“Where do you have to be?”

“Places,” said Granger. “As for us, we’re leaving next Friday. I shall jot the details to you, but, in brief – we’ll Floo to Aix-en-Provence. I’ll drive us to the town of Saint-Maximin so that we arrive like Muggles.”

“Fine.”

“And keep this escapade to yourself,” added Granger.

“No,” said Draco in a gush of annoyed sarcasm. “I was thinking of placing an advert in the Prophet.”

“I just don’t want people asking questions—”

Draco held up his hands to frame an imaginary headline: “Attractive Auror Agrees to Hare Off to France with Harridan Healer.”

“Harridan?” repeated Granger, in a harridanly sort of way.

“Or Harpy – would you prefer that? I’d like to keep the alliteration.”

Granger’s nostrils flared. “I would prefer it if we brought this conversation to a close.” “Huffy Healer,” said Draco, generously. Granger’s jaw clenched.

Given that he didn’t want to have his bollocks jinxed off, Draco rose to make his exit. “Raging Researcher?” he called over his shoulder. “Piqued Professor?”

There was something delightfully murderous in the way she spat “Malfoy!” at his retreating back.

When Draco had descended the stairs in King’s Hall, well clear of jinxing range, he took out his copy of Granger’s schedule and investigated the ‘Places’ she had to be.

It was an Italian restaurant in an hour. Participant(s) unspecified. Draco stuffed her schedule back into his pocket. He had a certain suspicion that Granger had a date.

And he didn't care at all, and it certainly didn't irritate him for no reason.

He sent a Jot to Zabini, out of an abundance of – well, he'd call it caution – asking him if he had any plans that evening. Zabini said no, but he'd be glad to have plans; should they meet at the Macassar?

Draco sent back his agreement. Theo was invited too, who suggested they invite Pansy, who brought her Longbottomed plonker of a husband, who invited MacMillan, who arrived with three Ministry colleagues, and they ended up making quite an evening of it.

One of MacMillan's juniors was a witch with whom Draco had slept a few times over the years. She gave him her amorous attentions all evening and he accepted them with a kind of listlessness – the touches at his thigh, the holding of his arm. However, when she trailed after him to the dark corridor leading to the loo, he found that he had no desire to pursue anything further with her.

When he returned, very much un-mussed, and with an offended looking witch behind him, Zabini and Ernie both regarded him with a raised eyebrow.

Whatever. As he shot back his Firewhisky, Draco reflected that at least he could rest easy that it wasn't bloody Zabini that Granger was cosying up to tonight.

~

The journey from London to France went as smoothly as could be desired. Draco met Granger at one of the International Floo departures in London. After she pronounced herself satisfied with Draco's holidaying Mugglewear ("Quite smart, really – you look like you own a boat.") they stepped into the fire.

Then, after a longish, three-minute whirl in the Floo that made Granger green, they found themselves at the hearth of the Tournesol in Aix-en-Provence.

From there, Granger took over, navigating them to a car hire place, and then driving the forty kilometres to the charming seaside town of Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume. Their suitcases were in the boot, their snacks were in the back seat, and the car stereo played something that wasn't Austrian folk music. Draco found it to be altogether a pleasant drive through olive groves,

vineyards, and hilltops dotted with medieval ruins. Perhaps there was something to be said for the Muggles' scenic routes, rather than the immediacy of Apparition.

Granger was full of a kind of nervous energy that manifested itself in a stream of informative babbling paired with peppy driving. Draco endured the former and rather enjoyed the latter. Their hired Peugeot had looked, to Draco's unpractised eye, like a stodgy sort of car, but Granger had awakened a zeal for life in the thing.

They whizzed past meandering Provençal traffic without issue until Granger found a challenger: a black Citroën whose chief joy was racing to catch up and pass them, and then slowing down again in a pissy sort of way.

“Twat,” said Draco, the third time this had happened.

“A Parisian, of course,” said Granger, observing the registration plate.

“I’ve half a mind to hit him with a puncture,” said Draco, spinning his wand between his fingers.

“That wouldn’t be sporting,” said Granger. The road straightened out enough for her to attempt a pass. She shifted gears. “Hold onto your trousers.”

The Peugeot’s engine whined in startled protest as Granger hit the accelerator. The car responded with an astonishing burst of speed. Draco’s head and body felt as though they were being pressed into the seat by the G-forces – a delightful sensation that made him want to whoop.

The tyres squeaked and their small car surged ahead of the Citroën.

“Cheers, dickhead,” said Draco, making the V-sign to the other driver as they passed. The man in the car made an equally friendly gesture back.

As they whizzed down the road, Draco remarked, “I didn’t think this car had that kind of verve. What did you put in her for petrol, Pepperup? Oi – you had your wand out!”

Granger was tucking something into her pocket. She started.
“What? No.”

“And you called me unsporting?”

“I only gave us a bit of a boost,” said Granger, with a triumphant glare back at the other car through the rearview mirror.

Draco observed her. “Granger’s Paradox.” “I beg your pardon?”
“You’re a speed demon, and yet you hate flying.”

“I’m not a speed demon,” scoffed Granger. “I’m just a bit impatient.”

“You ski, too. Isn’t skiing rather an extreme sport? You launch yourself down the Alps at high velocity?”

“Only if you put it that way—”

“From the top of a mountain,” said Draco. “Thousands of metres in the air. Brooms will take you two hundred metres up, at the most extreme.”

“It’s different when there’s nothing below you.”

A lengthy argument ensued. Meanwhile, the country around them grew wooded. They took a slip- road off to a rural road, winding down through gorges and then back up again. They passed through convivial medieval villages and then down a sinuous

country lane, which eventually brought them to vast flatlands striped with lavender fields and, finally, the sea.

“Oh, how beautiful,” sighed Granger, in a moment of uncharacteristic softness.

“A balm upon the soul,” said Draco, with enough of an edge to suggest cynicism, to cover the fact that he meant it.

The picturesque town of Saint-Maximin came into view under the afternoon sun.

“We’ll stay at the hotel tonight,” said Granger, “And we’ll do the walk up and the – the other activity – tomorrow morning.”

Draco felt her give him a sidelong look, to which he quirked an eyebrow. “What?”

“The nicer hotels were all booked up, so don’t be a prat about the quality of the place. It’s... older. The restaurant is apparently lovely, though.”

“Is the hotel run by ogres?”

“Of course not – this is a Muggle town.” “Then it’ll be fine.”

“You’ve stayed in a place run by ogres?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “A stakeout in Budle. I did learn a bed bug extermination spell as a result, so we’ll be sorted if you feel anything scurrying up your legs tonight.”

“Eurgh,” shuddered Granger.

Granger’s mobile, which had been serving as a kind of live map for the duration of the drive, suddenly announced that the Hotel Plaisance was coming up on their right.

The hotel was old and tired, but beautifully situated. The small foyer was packed with other arrivals, all of whom were being served by a single, hard-of-hearing old woman, who moved with all of the agility of a mollusc. Eventually, it was their turn, and the woman gave them the key to their room and took their names down for a dinner reservation.

The tiny room had a bed of questionable structural integrity, a lamp, a caved-in sofa, and an afterthought of a bathroom.

There was a vague, fusty scent to the room, as though someone’s great aunt had sprayed perfume and then died there in sad circumstances.

“All mod cons, Granger,” said Draco as they took stock.

“Sea view, at least?” said Granger, banging open the shutters to air things out.

The bed squeaked as Draco sat on it and then sank almost to the ground, with intimations that it was planning on collapsing entirely under his weight as soon as he was asleep.

Granger observed Draco where he sat, his knees almost at his chin.

“The bed is yours,” she said with what she’d no doubt intended to sound like generosity. It sounded rather strategic to Draco’s ear. She had her eye on the sofa. “I’ll Transfigure this into something serviceable for myself.”

“Something serviceable,” repeated Draco, as Granger undertook a complex, ten minute Transfiguration exercise, turning the sofa into a lovely, cushy-looking bed, in a regal burgundy.

Granger missed the raillery. “That should do it,” she said, slightly breathless from the magical exertion. “Now. I should like a shower. What are your plans for the evening? Dinner’s at eight.”

“My job,” said Draco, already warding the window. “I’m going to have a wander. I’ll meet you back here at quarter to.”

“All right,” said Granger. She had pulled out a list. “What’s that?”

“My itinerary for the evening,” said Granger.

“...You only have three hours,” said Draco. Even from across the room, the list looked long.

“I know. I’d better crack on. There are so many lovely little museums and bookshops – and of course, the basilica.”

Granger grappled with her luggage, pulled out a change of clothes, and stepped into the bathroom.

Draco left her to it and stalked the hotel’s dingy halls, warding as he went. He did not find any baddies. There were only Muggles present. Granger’s plan, at least for Day One, was unfurling smoothly.

Tomorrow was an entirely different story, of course. Draco returned to their room to read the tome on warding he’d brought with him.

Granger had already left – all the better for him to squeeze in another bit of studying. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out on Granger’s bed, the book floating above him as he flicked through pages.

Draco had been focusing his study on warding techniques on the Continent, but especially on the work of magical religious orders. He hoped that his readings on the warding systems of Cistercian and Dominican Monks would, at the very least, give him a clue tomorrow when he uncovered whatever the Benedictine Sisters had cast around their beloved relics.

As promised, Granger returned at a quarter to eight. She saw him reading and immediately made a beeline for him. “Ooh, what’ve you got there?”

“Studying for tomorrow,” said Draco. “Give me a minute – I found something interesting.”

Granger approached the bed to read the title of his book. Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw that she had changed into a white, breezy sundress. Her hair was tied into a plait, though it was slowly unraveling. She smelled like sun on skin and something sweet. He took a deeper breath. Almonds?

She was chewing on something.

Draco held out his hand, his focus still on the book. “None left,” said Granger.

Draco floated the book lower so he could look into her eyes. “Liar.”

Granger sighed and pulled out a crinkly bag. “Datte fourrée à la pâte d'amande.” Draco took the proffered marzipan-stuffed date. It was exquisite.

“Mm,” said Draco. “Bless the French.”

He resumed his reading, but only for a moment, because Granger was hovering over the book in a jealous sort of way.

He floated the book lower again. “Yes?”

“Could I have a look?” asked Granger.

“You can have it after dinner,” said Draco, floating the book back up again. Granger perched a thigh on the side of the bed.

“Can I help you?” asked Draco, observing this activity. “Budge up,” said Granger. “We can both read.”

“No, we can’t. Personal space, Granger,” said Draco, making a shooing motion with his hand. “This is my bed,” noted Granger, quite rightly.

Draco shifted over with a grumble (there wasn’t much room to shift). “We’re about to go to dinner.”

“But you found an Interesting Thing,” said Granger. Her eyes were alight with curiosity. She squeezed onto the bed next to him. The book floated above them.

“This is—” began Draco.

“Quiet,” said Granger. “I’m reading.” Draco lapsed into annoyed silence.

Granger did not read, by the way – Granger devoured. Her reading speed outpaced Draco’s by fifty percent at his best guess, and he was himself a fast reader. However, he did not turn the pages to cater to her pace; he gave her a moral lecture about the importance of Absorbing the Information and Savouring the Text instead.

She responded with a long and dramatic sigh. Draco felt the expansion of her chest against his side. That made him aware that Granger was there in a different way than her impatient presence. It made him alert and twitchy, because he was lying down on a bed with a woman, and that woman was Hermione Granger. If

he'd ever been mad enough to imagine such a scene, he would've pictured a moment of recoil, of distaste, probably, at this level of closeness with his childhood enemy.

Instead, she felt warm, and she smelled like sunshine and almonds, and her hair was touching his neck, and it was intimate and strange. He felt a kind of pleasurable paralysis, of not wanting to breathe, of not daring to move and accidentally touching her too much, or worse, causing her to move away.

He turned the page, with no idea what he had just read.

His eyes kept drifting from the book above them to her legs, which were bent at the knee, with one leg crossed over the other. Her dress was bunched up at her thighs, covering anything of interest – there was nothing indecent about any of it, really – and yet it felt illicit and thrilling, to see Granger's legs from here. She had kicked off her sandals to join him on the bed. He could see the delicate arch of her bare foot, the tan lines where the sun had kissed her and then worked around the straps, the pink-painted toes.

The delicate foot started to bounce.

“You’re doing it on purpose to annoy me, being this slow,” said Granger. Draco snapped his eyes back to the page. “No, I am being attentive.”

Granger waved her wand to tell the time – it was eight on the dot.
“Ugh. We’ve got to go.”

She rose and slipped on her sandals. “The Caleruega warding technique sounds terribly sensitive. Do you think the Sisters might be using that?”

“They might be,” said Draco. (He found that his brain was working in a kind of slow motion; it was still processing her thighs and the bunched-up dress, and had not yet joined him in the present.)

“We’ll have to be ever so careful tomorrow, if those things are as hair-trigger as this text suggests.”

Granger was redoing her plait. Draco got a whiff of her shampoo. That brought his brain back to the present, because it liked it.

She was still going on about the chapter they had just read, and whether Draco felt that he needed more preparation, and whether they should revisit the plan, and if so, which parts they should modify. Perhaps she should feign illness in the monastery to

distract the Sisters while Draco went into the crypt, to buy him more time? But no, he hadn't studied the maps as she had; it had taken her weeks to memorise the labyrinthine paths, &c. &c.

Which was excellent, as it gave Draco time to Get a Grip. What the fuck was wrong with him? He went to the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face, and hopefully some sense into his brain.

They made their way downstairs to dinner.

~

The restaurant was all a-bustle. It was a lovely outdoor installation on a long kind of wharf that extended out into the sea, crammed with as many tables as possible. Draco and Granger threaded their way through the other patrons to a table for two at the end of the wharf.

It being midsummer, the sun was still hanging over the horizon at this late hour, tinging the sea gold and orange. It was an utterly gorgeous June evening; the breeze played lazily with their hair,

the sea splashed along the edge of the wharf in musical little wavelets, the sea-birds weaved their wheels above.

As it turned out, the half-deaf old lady who had taken their reservation had creatively interpreted their names.

The slate placard indicated that the table was reserved for Hormone et Crotch.

A solemn waiter came by to light the candles on the table. Granger's lips were pressed tightly together. Draco felt an uncomfortable bubbling of hilarity.

"Monsieur, the wine list," said the waiter, handing it to Draco.
"Merci," said Draco.

The waiter recommended the red; Draco went with that, because all of his brain power was focused on not bursting into a scream of laughter.

Granger's eyes flitted back to the placard. She let out a gurgle that she turned into a kind of cough.

The waiter enumerated the evening's menu. Granger nodded her approval of the buttered sole while Draco croaked out a yes for the fillet mignon.

Granger was biting one of her knuckles. Draco heard her undertaking a deep breathing exercise. Finally, the waiter left.

Granger collapsed onto the table. “Crotch,” she gasped, attempting to breathe. “H-Hormone?” wheezed Draco.

Granger was a boneless mass of restrained laughter. Her shoulders shook. Draco fell back into his chair and actually felt himself disintegrate into mirth.

“My god,” breathed Granger. “Oh my god... why... why...”

Draco attempted to sober up, but then he looked at the placard again, and Crotch looked back at him in a beautiful flowing script, and he brought his napkin to his mouth to muffle himself.

Granger took a deep breath. “What wine did you order, for us, C-Crotch—”

Her voice veered high and she couldn’t finish the sentence because of her shrieking giggle. A few heads from the tables around them turned her way. She hid her face in her hands.

“They’re going to think we’re already pissed and kick us out,” said Draco, valiantly straightening up and attempting to regain control.

“Right.” Her face still hidden in her hands, Granger breathed.
“Hide the placard. I can’t see it again. I will die.”

Draco flipped the slate so that it was face down. “Done, H—”
“Don’t say it,” said Granger.

The waiter returned, bearing bread, butter, and wine. “Merci,” said Granger, wiping at a tear.

As for Draco, he could hardly feel his cheeks. He gestured to the waiter to leave the wine bottle.

After a bit more breathing, both of them had regained their self-control – well, mostly. Granger was avoiding looking anywhere near the slate.

The sea caressed the rocky edges of the wharf below them. The patrons chattered, as did the gulls. The sun tilted lower. The bread was split and buttered and Draco poured the wine.

“Cheers,” said Granger.

“To success tomorrow,” said Draco, tilting his glass into hers.

The final trace of amusement vanished from Granger’s face. She grew serious. Draco eyed her. He cast a silencing charm around

them. “You’re nervous.”

“Yes,” said Granger. Anxiety tightened the corners of her mouth. “A lot could go wrong and, to be honest, it frightens the bollocks off of me. I haven’t done anything like this in well over a decade. I’m a law abiding citizen now, you know.”

“Mostly.” Draco could think of at least twenty laws that Granger had broken since he had been assigned to her in January.

“Mostly,” conceded Granger.

“Tomorrow will go according to plan. And if it doesn’t, you’ll set fire to the place and we can go steal a better skull. ”

An amused huff escaped Granger in the face of this cavalier attitude. “You aren’t the slightest bit worried, are you?”

“I promise I’ve faced missions far more nerve-wracking than a gaggle of nuns,” said Draco. “Have you?”

“Obviously.”

“Tell me.”

So Draco told her. He shared two or three of his favourite stories, which prominently featured his own heroics and wits. Granger

was not the captive, eyelash-fluttering audience that he usually shared these tales with, however. She was analytical and inquisitive, and asked some rather penetrating questions. Why didn't he Silence the Sirens first? The knife fight was thrilling, but how did he let himself get disarmed in the first place? Why didn't his emergency kit include blood replenishing potions? Shouldn't all Aurors have a basic knowledge of the properties of Aconite?

Why hadn't he used a nerve agent on the troll?

Why, indeed? Draco parried, and countered, and justified, and defended, until Granger was satisfied.

He poured himself a second glass of wine, finding himself rather wrung-out and thirsty after the interrogation. His tales were usually followed by praise and gushing, and starry-eyed gaspings about his bravery and sagacity. With Granger? Not a chance.

"At least one of us will be feeling confident, which is better than none," was her closing remark.

She drained her glass of wine. Draco offered to refill it and she acquiesced, saying that she needed it for emotional support.

The waiter arrived with their orders. It was about time; Draco was ravenous. The car snacks and single stuffed date seemed very far away.

Granger said, Bon appétit, and Draco responded in kind.

He put away the fillet mignon with gusto. As for Granger, she poked distractedly at her plate, her pensive gaze on the coastline curving away from them.

After five minutes of this, Draco lost his patience with her absent-mindedness. He tapped at her plate with his knife. “Food first, then thinking.”

Granger blinked. Then she pointed somewhere behind him. “I think I can see the monastery.”

Draco turned around in his chair to look at the sandy-grey protrusion jutting from a distant cliff, above the tree-line. “My word. That’s rather high up, isn’t it?”

“It’s almost a two hour climb.”

“So eat. If you feel faint, it’ll be a broom ride up.” The threat was sufficient. Granger ate.

Draco's Jotter buzzed in his pocket.

"My mother," he said as he composed a response. "She wants to know that I've arrived safely." "Does she know you're here with me?" asked Granger.

"No," said Draco. "Only that it's for work." "Good." Granger sipped at her wine.

Draco sent back his response, assuring his mother that all was well and that he hadn't been waylaid by French bandits.

Granger was finishing her sole. She was struggling to keep a neutral expression; a look of amusement kept washing across her features.

"What?" asked Draco.

"Oh – nothing." Granger found a fresh focus on a carrot, which she pushed about with her fork. "I didn't know your mother used the Jotters."

"She didn't. I convinced her to get one last week, since owls to France take so long."

Granger glanced up with a vivid interest that she was trying, and failing, to keep hidden. “Did you? Does she like hers?”

“She does. What’s got you so intrigued?”

“Nothing,” said Granger, making intimate eye contact with Draco’s chin.

“Was that really your best try?” asked Draco in the face of this miserable failure.

Granger offered him more wine in a transparent attempt to distract him, which only fixated him more on his line of enquiry. (He did accept the wine, however.)

“Granger.” “Yes?”

“Tell me.”

“We should review our plans for tomorrow,” said Granger in another attempt at a side-step. “We’ve reviewed them ad nauseum. What is it about the Jotters?”

Granger busied herself with pushing the carrot around again.

Draco reached over and blocked her fork with his knife. “Stop punting the bloody legume around and answer me.”

“Carrots aren’t a legume,” said Granger. In the face of Draco’s stare, however, she added, “It’s absolutely nothing – I thought your mother was rather traditional, so I was surprised that she’d even try a Jotter. That’s all.”

“That’s not all, though,” said Draco.

Granger tapped Draco’s knife with her fork in an unspoken request to remove it from her plate. He did not.

Granger sighed. “You’re utterly unrelenting. Did you know?”
“Yes. Now tell me.”

“...Did you just steal my carrot?” Draco chewed. “Yes.”

“Wow.”

“You weren’t eating it, you were pushing it about on a forky carousel. Now, tell me.”

Granger shifted back in her seat with a resigned sigh. “I rather thought you’d have worked it out by now.”

“Worked what out?”

Granger paused as though to gather herself. Then she asked, “Do you know who invented the Jabbering Jotter?”

“...Wasn’t it the Weasley twins?”

“No. They merely assisted the inventor in mass-producing and marketing them.”

A slow dawning of realisation crept upon Draco. The witch across from him was now holding back a grin.

“You’re the inventor of the bloody Jotters?” “Yes,” said Granger.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Granger looked terribly amused. “Explain,” said Draco. Granger settled into a pose that Draco could only describe as professorial. She crossed her legs and held up her fork, ready to point to an invisible blackboard. “Instantaneous communication systems really took off in the Muggle world about 10 years ago. They already had a leg up over wizards with the telephone for the entirety of the twentieth century, but when email became

common, and texting, and, later, instant messaging, wizarding communication methods went from old fashioned to utterly archaic. I'd already experimented with rudimentary Magical communication methods as a child – those Galleons, during the war – but I knew there had to be something more elegant, that retained that tactile feeling of parchment or a notebook, but that would be far more immediate than Owling.”

Here Granger was interrupted by the waiter removing their empty plates. She accepted the dessert menu, then continued. “I love owls; I find them so quaint and dear, but so slow. Don’t look cross, they are slow – you said so yourself not a moment ago. And Flooing is only convenient if you’re near a connected hearth. I created the Jotters to supplement those means of communication, not replace them – I do love writing a good letter. I never expected them to be as popular as they are. The twins helped me bring them to market and they get a percentage of the profits.”

Draco kept his features schooled into something neutral. The other option was a bug-eyed stare. Not only was this woman frighteningly intelligent, but she was also absolutely minted. Everyone had a Jotter. His own mother had a Jotter and was, judging by the buzzing in his pocket, rapidly gaining proficiency. Granger must be rolling in Galleons. Small wonder she handed off a sackful to a hag without a second thought.

“So this is how you’re funding your bloody project,” he said at length.

“Amongst other things, yes. I’ve spent enough time under the tyranny of granting agencies to enjoy the independence.”

“But – everyone thinks the Weasley brothers invented the Jotters. Why aren’t you claiming credit? They’re revolutionary.”

“They’re really not,” said Granger. “Muggle equivalents are ever so much more advanced – they can send each other photos and media and data of all sorts. They can have live calls with hundreds of participants. The Jotters are rudimentary. An improvement, but rudimentary.” Here Granger gave a shrug. “The bar was rather low. And as for the credit – I’ve had my time in the limelight.

I’m not in it for the glory. I saw a problem that was in my capacity to fix.”

“Is that what your project is about, too?” asked Draco. “A problem that is within your capacity to fix?”

“Exactly.” Granger regarded him seriously, now. “I needn’t tell you that I’d prefer the truth about the Jotters to remain between

us. I only told you because you were being so horridly insistent.”

Draco eyed her. “You’re positively a mogul. A tycoon.”

Granger laughed, but it was bitter. “No. Developing new therapies is terribly expensive.” “Is it?”

“Yes.” Granger began to enumerate costs on her fingers, until she ran out of fingers. “Materials, space, laboratory staff, medical leads, legal staff, protocol writers, data scientists, staticians... testing for safety and efficacy is spendy too, of course – pharmacokinetic studies, preclinical toxicology testing, bioanalytical testing, and the clinical trials themselves. And the financial outlay to meet every requirement of the GCP, the GMP, the GLP, the MHRA, and the EMA is eye-watering.”

Draco, whose eyes had largely glazed over, said, “Oh.”

Granger shifted in her seat in a discontented sort of way. “My project involves complex biologics that are commercially unattractive and nigh incomprehensible to the monumentally idiotic wizards who hold the national purse strings for magical research. So I am very much on my own. On my own and, frankly, at rather an embryonic stage. I’m still doing in vitro research, trying to confirm that my target can actually be affected

by an exogenous compound in the first place. Money doesn't solve all problems, unfortunately."

The waiter returned to take their dessert orders. Granger flinched out an apology, having forgotten to even look at the menu, and made a haphazard selection of crème caramel.

Meanwhile, Draco was struggling to understand the paradoxical phenomenon that was Granger. She could have been wealthy – extravagantly so. And yet, she chose to fund her research instead of enjoying a life of leisure. She worked approximately twelve jobs. She could've had her own country house, but she lived in a cramped cottage in the outskirts of Cambridge. She could have a full staff of house-elves, but she only had a cat and a grim tin of tuna in her cupboards.

It made no sense. And yet, as Draco considered what he knew of the witch in front of him, it sort of did. She was too driven for a life of leisure. Too grounded for the extravagance of large homes and house-elves. Too much of a Do-Gooder to do anything but Good with that money. It was all terribly laudable. Dreadful, really.

Granger cleared her throat. Draco realised that he'd been staring at her, and that the waiter was staring at him.

“Monsieur’s dessert selection?” “What she’s having,” said Draco. “Une crème caramel pour Monsieur Crotch,” said the waiter, inscribing this precious information upon his notepad with care.

Granger touched eyes with Draco. She held a hand to her mouth. The waiter left.

Granger squeaked out a giggle, struggled to control it, took a large breath, and was still. “Hormone,” said Draco.

Granger collapsed into a fit of uncontrollable giggling.

“I told you not to do that,” she gasped, coming back up for air. “There is something gratifying about making you utterly lose it.”

Granger sniffed and dabbed at her lashes with a napkin. “It’s a rare sight, I hope you’re appreciating it.”

“I am,” said Draco.

And he was. Granger’s dark eyes were bright with laughter. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips were reddened by wine. Her hair in its loose plait snaked down to her waist, a dark line against her white sundress. Her legs were curled under her; she looked dainty and fragile, and small enough to fit perfectly into a man’s lap, if a man were thinking about such things. (Draco certainly wasn’t.)

And the candlelight loved her. It kissed at her forehead and flickered warm touches across her collarbone. It danced in her eyes.

The effect was enchanting.

Draco sank, unaware, into a state of soft fascination.

An accordionist began to play, somewhere near the hotel, filling the air with romance. “Monsieur, your crème caramel.”

The return to reality was jarring.

“Merci,” said Draco, instead of sod the fucking crème caramel.

Granger was eating her dessert, blissfully unaware of Draco’s reverie, thank the gods. He decided to blame the wine for making him such a daft, moon-eyed cretin tonight. That and too few recent shags, clearly, if he was going to faff off and daydream about Granger, of all of the witches in his life.

It would help if she didn’t look like a lovely Grecian dryad tonight, about to join Artemis’ retinue.

Since when was Granger beautiful? What an aggravating development. “Are you all right?” asked Granger.

“Why?” asked Draco, injecting some irritation into the syllable, to sound Absolutely Normal.

“You’ve hardly touched your dessert,” said Granger, gesturing to Draco’s crème caramel with her spoon. “Rather uncharacteristic.”

There were other things going on that were rather uncharacteristic, but if that was the only one that the Brain was catching on to, that was fine by Draco.

“I’m savouring it,” said Draco. He took a slow bite to demonstrate. Granger’s eyebrow twitched. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?” asked Draco. “Being indecent with the spoon.”

“I am using the spoon. Anything else is a figment of your imagination.”

Granger narrowed her eyes at him. Draco took another slow bite, maintaining an obnoxious level of eye contact. Granger looked away.

“Now you aren’t eating yours,” pointed out Draco.

“I’ve quite lost my appetite, watching you snog the cutlery,” sniffed Granger. “You aren’t going to finish?”

“No. Do you want it?”

“I’d rather you choke it down and have strength for the monastery. If the nuns get shirty, tomorrow could be rather strenuous, magically speaking.”

Granger finished her crème caramel doggedly, if not with enthusiasm.

Draco found himself observing her now with a critical eye. When he had first met her, in long-ago January, he had been struck by the exhausted thinness that had made her face severe and gaunt. It seemed to him that she had a slightly healthier mien, now – but only slightly. She was a little less bony, a little rosier in the cheeks.

Granger gestured to the waiter for the bill. “L’addition, s’il vous plaît.”

Her raised arm made Draco realise that her dress had left her arms bare, something that Granger’s choice of attire normally trended against. And now, precisely because it was trying not to

catch his attention, her left forearm caught his attention – there was a Notice-Me-Not charm there.

He deliberately looked at the table next door, allowing Granger and her arm to slip into his peripheral vision. There: a blur across the skin of her inner arm.

He realised what the glamour was covering with a sickening plummeting sensation in his stomach. A vivid memory returned, of Bellatrix's handiwork, stark against Granger's skin. Of Granger, limp and wrought-out, lying like a dead thing on the drawing room floor. Of the blood oozing out of the fresh-carved letters.

Draco had never used the word Mudblood again, after that.

Now there was something terribly sorrowful in Granger's habit of wearing long sleeves. In the discreet glamour that she'd cast to be able to wear a pretty dress. Draco hid his own inner arm shame from the world, but he would've thought that Granger, of all people, would've been able to heal hers away. Clearly, she still bore the mark of Bellatrix's knife.

"Malfoy?"

Draco blinked. “Hm?” “You’ve gone quiet.”

Granger had settled the bill with Muggle money. She was rising from her chair. Draco rose with her. “Just thinking about tomorrow.”

But really, he was thinking about a distant yesterday, when this witch had been mutilated in the halls of his home. And she still bore the scar, and she hid it, from him, and from everyone, but it was still there. A daily reminder for her, of cruelty and sick hate. Of how close she’d come to death. Of how near their world had come to a point of no return.

He wished to say something to her – words of sorrow, or of apology – but such words did not come easily to him, and he couldn’t see such a conversation go anywhere but difficult, awkward places.

As they weaved their way through tables back off the wharf, Draco concluded that this was not quite the moment. But, watching the blur of the glamour brush against her skirts as she walked, he determined that there would be A Moment, and he would find the words. Not tonight, but some night.

The sun was finally setting, languidly, lazily, on this gorgeous evening, Midsummer less a day.

Granger was looking wistfully along the rocky beach. “There’s meant to be a marker along there, where the Magdalene would’ve first set foot in France.”

“I suppose that was on your itinerary?” “It was, but I ran out of time.”

“Let’s go,” said Draco.

Granger looked at him in surprise. “You’d come?”

Draco gave her his most nonchalant shrug. “I fancy a walk.”

Granger’s surprise turned to a prudent kind of delight. “All right, it’s about a fifteen minute ramble, that way. So the guidebook said, anyway.”

They clambered and slid down large boulders to the rocky beach, where they found a kind of coastal path. Granger led Draco along, pointing out features of geological or historical interest as they went. The views became progressively more dramatic as they left the shallow bay that the hotel was nestled in and made their way around the headland.

The tide began to come in. Draco rolled up his trousers and his shirtsleeves (ensuring, on the latter point, that his own glamour

was in place), then tied his shoes together, and slung them over his shoulder. Granger carried her sandals hooked through her fingers. They splashed through salty rock pools, as warm as bathwater. The sound of the accordion on the wharf faded away; now it was only the heart-pulse of the waves.

They meandered into a flock of hundreds of seabirds, which took off around them and unravelled into the skies in a whirr of wingbeats and sea-cries. It was a startling moment of sublimity that took a bit of their souls with it. Granger watched the birds' disappearance into the blue with a soft sigh, her fingertips on her collarbone, her lips parted.

Granger said, "Beautiful," and Draco said, "Yes," but they were not talking about the same thing.

They continued. The marker for the Magdalene's point of arrival was a modest stone, half-buried in sand, at the tip of the headland. A few cut flowers were scattered about, as well as candles gamely fighting to stay lit in the breeze.

Granger furnished Draco with a great many details about the legend of the Magdalene's expulsion from the Holy Land, and what disciples were with her, and when she had reached this shore. Draco cared little for the details, but he was glad of the

excuse to keep his attention on her, on the way the wind wended her plait hither and thither, on her bare legs trickling with seawater. At one point, she almost lost her balance on the wet stones and her fingers touched his arm. They were quickly withdrawn.

Draco said he supposed that there were worse places to land than Provence. Granger said she thought so, too. Draco asked whether the Magdalene would've eaten marzipan-stuffed dates when she was here. Granger fancied that she was the one who had brought the recipe over from the Holy Land, in the first place. Draco said that stealing the credit for such a sublime culinary creation was a classically French thing to do. Granger agreed.

Then they lapsed into silence and they stood where the land met the sea, and breathed the sweet air, and were tickled by the salt breeze. Little waves strained to reach past their knees before atomising into brine.

Draco found a seastar. Granger was delighted by the discovery and squatted down to look at it, and interrogated Draco on what species it was, and Draco said he hadn't a sodding clue.

They turned to walk back to the hotel, splish-splashing through the warm tide pools, wavelets clinging foamily at their ankles.

Their hands brushed a time or two, and they said sorry, and stepped away from each other, and kept walking, and then their elbows brushed, by accident, because they'd drifted together again.

The large boulders near the wharf presented more difficulty for Granger on the way up than down; she stood, irresolute, grasping the wand in her pocket, but there were Muggles about, and her plans to Transfigure a stairway were interrupted.

Draco came up behind her and lifted her in one smooth motion, and received an indignant squeal and a face-full of sandy skirts for his troubles. Her waist felt narrow and taut between his palms, and warm.

He didn't need her help to clamber up behind her, but he nevertheless accepted the small hand she reached towards him and took amusement in the serious effort she put into her pull.

They meandered back towards the hotel.

The sun poured gold across the horizon. With the brightness behind her, Granger looked like she was wearing nothing but light.

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Chapter 14

Get Thee to a Nunnery





Back at the hotel, Granger observed Draco as he attempted to Transfigure his bed into something sturdier than the present offering. Transfiguration became exponentially more difficult at scale, however, and all he managed to do was make it squattish and off-kilter.

“A very fair attempt,” said Granger, patting him on the head. (He was too surprised to be indignant.)

“I’m waiting for you to take pity on me,” panted Draco.

Granger nodded with a kind of exaggerated benevolence. She spent ten minutes wrangling the collapsing frame into a comfortable bed, explaining what she was doing as she went, and what Principles and Laws Draco hadn't quite been applying correctly, for a Transfiguration this large.

"Why didn't you stay in Transfiguration?" asked Draco to interrupt the lecture. "Why Healing?"

Granger looked up from where she was transforming the worn coverlet into a plush blanket. "Transfiguration's practical applications peak at the Mastery level – Doctoral studies veer into the abstruse and theoretical. Healing was a branch of magic that offered more scope to help people in the real world. And Healing harmonised more readily with my studies in Muggle medicine, of course."

The sad-sack, greying pillows were transformed into puffy white ones. Granger gave Draco a quick glance. "Did you complete further studies, after Hogwarts?"

The question was posed with a self-conscious kind of curiosity. Draco thought that this might've been the first time that she had asked him something personal.

“A Bachelor’s in Alchemy and a Mastery in Duelling,” answered Draco.

“Oh! Well done. I always told Harry and Ron that they ought to consider something like Duelling. But, well—” Here, in the face of Draco’s cynically raised brow, Granger finished, weakly, “—They never loved academia.”

“Those two knobheads don’t even have their NEWTs. They wouldn’t have survived a day,” said Draco, vexed that she dared consider them of his calibre.

“They aren’t knobheads,” said Granger, a fist on a hip.

“The entirety of the programme’s foundational year was theory and philosophy of martial magicks. When’s the last time Pot and Wheeze even read a book?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” asked Granger. “No. Answer me.”
“Damn it.” Granger lapsed into silence as she thought, a finger on her lip. At length, having recollected no recent memory, she said, “Just because they haven’t mentioned reading a book to me, doesn’t mean they haven’t read one.”

Draco dismissed this with a scoff.

“Do Quidditch magazines count?” asked Granger in subdued desperation. “No.”

“Years,” conceded Granger with an unwilling sigh.

“You would’ve done better than that pair of plonkers,” said Draco. “Except for the practicals. Too much shrieking, insufficient cursing. Maître Toussaint would’ve eaten you alive.”

“You did it in France?” “Université de Paris.”

“Mm. Mind you, my French masters almost ate me alive. Their paedagogical methods consisted principally of browbeating. I did a concentration at the Sorbonne. I cried every day.”

“Better than bleeding every day,” said Draco, with a heroic kind of nonchalance. (It was, in his defence, barely an exaggeration.)

Granger bit her lip. “I’ll stop whining then, shall I?”

Draco almost offered to show her his more dashing scars, but recalled, just in time, that Granger had her own, and that it wouldn’t do to embark on a competition on that front.

Now it was time to get ready for bed. An awkwardness made the room feel close and warm. Both of them carried on as though

they didn't feel it.

Granger changed into her sleeping things in the bathroom. She had apparently selected the most horridly modest cotton pyjamas in her wardrobe for this weekend escapade.

“What?” she asked, in the face of Draco’s once-over.

“Those put me in mind of McGonagall,” said Draco. “Are you going to pinch my ear and call me naughty?”

“You find Muggle shorts indecent, remember?” said Granger. “My other option was a negligée, which would most certainly have offended your sensibilities.”

Draco thought he'd rather have liked to see this negligée. Out loud he said, “More than this picnic rug you’re sporting? Impossible.”

“O, yes.” Granger climbed into her bed. Draco noticed that she had appropriated his tome on wards. She waved a hand at him. “Well, go on then – go change, and let’s have a look at your haute couture jimjams.”

Draco brushed his teeth and changed into his usual black silk pyjamas. It was a queer feeling, to await the judgement of Granger on his choice sleeping attire. Not that he gave a damn what she thought, or anything.

He sauntered back out of the bathroom. “Careful, Granger: I’m wildly attractive in black.” Granger observed him over the book. “Irresistible,” she said drily. “I am undone.” The sarcasm was blistering.

Draco flicked non-existent dust from his shoulder. “It is, at the very least, not a seat cover from the Hogwarts Express.”

“Mm, rather lugubrious, though.” “I beg your pardon?”

“Funereal, really,” sniffed Granger. “Who died?” “Your wit, about a minute ago.”

“I was witty before?” “To a limited degree.”

A smile was pulling at the edges of Granger’s mouth. She held the book up to hide it. “More than I can say about you.”

“Watch your cheek, or I shall revoke your reading privileges.”

Granger held up her hands. “Pax. Cease-fire?”

“I accede.”

Draco had nursed a suspicion that Granger was one of those hateful morning people. She proved it as soon as she could the next day, by launching herself out of bed at the unholy hour of half five.

The sun rose with her on this Solstice morning and seemed equally fixated on denying Draco his preferred nice, healthy lie-in till 11 a.m.

To further compound his irritation, Draco woke up hard. He remained unmoving, face down on the bed, as Granger faffed about with her suitcase, complained about getting naff all sleep, and finally got into the shower.

He waved away his indecency with his wand, trying to recollect when he had last woken up with such a rager. Bloody hell, he needed a shag.

Granger was quick in the shower. Then, smelling of soap and warm skin, she stood next to Draco's bed and cleared her throat.

"What," said Draco irascibly into the pillow. "Are you up?"

Draco thought he ought to nominate himself for sainthood, in view of the jokes that he did not make.

“Go away,” said Draco.

“We should leave soon,” said Granger. “You said eight,” said Draco.

“It’s almost eight,” said Granger.

Draco cracked open an eye to observe the clock beside the bed.
“Load of tosh. It’s six. Kindly fuck off.”

Granger, clearly full of anxious energies, hissed out a sigh. “All right. Fine. I’ll go find us some breakfast.”

“Don’t come back till eight,” growled Draco in warning. The threat got Granger’s back up. “Or what?”

“I shall bite off your head.”

“Are you a werewolf?” asked Granger.

“I might become one, for the purpose,” said Draco. “Fine. What d’you want?”

“For you to go away. Evidently.” “To eat, I mean.”

“Don’t care. Let me sleep.” “Fine.”

Granger left in a bit of a huff.

Draco attempted to carry on sleeping. Instead, he was visited by a second erection, which he irritatedly took care of in the minuscule shower. It was unsatisfying and he cracked his elbow against the wall doing it, but it was a release.

Granger returned at eight on the dot – bless her for occasionally following instructions – bearing breakfast. This consisted of butter, jam, and a baguette, and for drink, two coffees.

“They’re both for you,” said Granger, pressing both cups into Draco’s hands. “Hopefully you’ll be less arsey for the remainder of the morning.”

Draco, still tetchy, took the offerings wordlessly, and popped off to the tiny balcony to enjoy them in peace.

When he returned to the room (feeling substantially less inclined to tear off Granger’s head), Granger had donned her walking kit. “Shall we get our disguises on?”

“Let’s,” said Draco.

Granger turned the other way while Draco pulled on his bumbling newlywed Muggle hiker attire. He glamoured his hair to look less Malfoyish. Granger did the same, to look less Grangery.

Draco Malfoy, and the Mortifying Ordeal of Being in Love
by [isthisselfcare](#)



“Ready?” asked Granger. “Ready,” said Draco.

They turned around and looked at each other. “Funny,” said Granger.

“Hilarious,” said Draco.

Granger had elected to make her hair white-blond and straight, and change her eyes to a cold grey. Draco had chosen a mop of dark curls and brown eyes.

“You look terrifying,” said Draco. “You look ridiculous,” said Granger. “You look like the cadaver of a Veela.” “Your hair looks like a merkin.”

This exchange of pleasantries completed, Granger asked, “Shall we crack on?”

Draco nodded and slipped on the sunglasses that he had purchased for the occasion. They were heart-shaped and pink and wonderfully kitschy. Granger stared at them for a long moment, then declared that she wanted some too, and conjured a matching pair.

Thus equipped, they began the hike up towards the monastery; a nice, sweaty preamble to a sacrilegious violation of a priceless relic.

The way up was, as promised by Granger, a bit of a slog. It was early enough that the heat of the day didn’t utterly flatten them. As they progressed upwards, they were protected from the worst of the sun by a cathedral of trees that filtered the light into cool

greens. White hyacinths dotted the undergrowth. It smelled of earth and mushrooms.

Between gasps for breath, Granger provided Draco with histories of the various pilgrims who had walked this path, and the alleged Miracles that had followed.

Draco said that, as riveting as these histories were, he would advise her to save her breath for the climb and concentrate. She did not heed his advice. About halfway up a steep ascent, her lecture distracted her too much and she tripped off the path and into a ditch full of brambles and mud. Her wand, which she'd been using to sear away thorny overgrowth, remained on the path with Draco.

Draco, seeing that Granger was unhurt at the bottom of the ditch, took up a contemplative position, leaning his shoulder against a tree. "What you've done there, Granger, is gone arse over tit."

"Thank you for that instructive remark." Granger was peevish, for some reason.

Draco then generously explained to her what Principles and Laws of physics she hadn't quite been applying correctly.

Granger attempted a clamber out, which only sank her further in brambles. Draco observed with great interest. “Blondes really do have more fun.”

Granger gave up on the climb, having been distracted by the torn-up state of her clothing, courtesy of the brambles. “Ugh. These were new.”

“You look like you’ve lost a square go with a Jack Russell,” said Draco. Granger looked waspish. “Are you going to help me up?”

“You’ve a broom,” said Draco.

“No,” said Granger. “Pass me my wand.”

“But the broom is right there. With you. In your pocket.”

“No. Are you mad? It’s your fastest broom. I’ll give myself a traumatic brain injury.” Draco scoffed. “You aren’t that terrible at flying. Are you?”

Granger glowered at him, both hands on her hips. Then she changed tack. “How’s your leg?” “...Fine.”

“Liar. You’ve been favouring it the past quarter hour.” Which was true, but Draco had hoped she hadn’t noticed. “Do you want me to have a look?” asked Granger.

“No,” said Draco.

“Manticore bites are nasty,” said Granger. “Have you been keeping up with the exercises Parnell gave you?”

“None of your business,” said Draco, because the answer was no, because he was a procrastinator, and then he forgot.

“It’s your PCL, isn’t it? I can tell by your gait.”

“You’re angling to bribe me with a Healing to avoid using the broom, aren’t you?” “Yes. Is it working?”

Draco considered the muddy witch at the bottom of the pit. Then he considered the hilarity of watching Granger attempt to ride his broom. Then he considered the pain in his knee.

The pain won out. He needed to be agile, for whatever the monastery was going to throw at them. Unfortunate.

Draco tossed Granger’s wand down to her.

She made quick work of her escape, thereafter. The earth before her split into a platform, which, propelled by thick roots, carried her back to the path.

Granger with her wand back in her hand looked rather more dangerous than the wandless one in the ditch. She was eyeing Draco with something less than kindness for his giggle at her expense. The heat of it rather promised Revenge.

However, a deal was a deal (bless her, you could always count on her for that) and Granger's wand was soon pointed at Draco's knee, and the relief of Healing spread across it.

"You need to do the exercises," said Granger, dusting herself off. "Healing can only do so much. Don't be lazy. You've only got two knees."

"Yes yes, you're right, of course. Let's get on. We've wasted enough time with your dilly-dallying in ditches."

Now sound of body, Draco strode up the path, with Granger scurrying behind him to keep up, muttering rude things at his back.

Finally, they came to the monastery. Granger had explained that it had been built at the entrance of the grotto where the Magdalene had first taken refuge, which now served as a chapel.

Draco and Granger took a moment to camouflage their wands upon their persons and rearrange their mutually hostile body language into that of Bumbling Muggle Newlyweds. They walked next to each other, Granger's arm hooked through Draco's.

Their first obstacle was the Sister at the monastery door—an older woman, observing their approach with a dour expression.

“Ah non non non. Aucune visite aujourd’hui; le monastère est fermé,” said the Sister. Granger, wiping sweat from her brow, feigned shock, and asked why it was closed?

The Sister explained that it was Midsummer; everyone was at the Basilica below. They were welcome to join in the celebrations there. There would be no services in the monastery chapel today.

Granger made a fair approximation of distress. Draco jumped in with an explanation to the nun that the pilgrimage to the monastery was of Spiritual Significance to both of them, and that they had honeymooned here especially to visit. Wouldn’t she consider making an exception?

Granger sniffed that all she wanted to do was light a candle and make a prayer to the Magdalene, because she was a Repentant Sinner, and needed Her sacred blessing.

Draco made a great show of comforting his sobbing wife. (It felt interesting to cradle Granger and feel her breath on his chest through his shirt. It felt surprisingly... nice. He would go with nice.)

He patted her bum theatrically; she stiffened and her grip on his arm grew pinchy. The nun pursed her lips as she observed the spectacle.

Draco brushed the forefront of the nun's mind with a light touch of Legilimency to determine whether he needed to start Stunning. He discovered that the sunglasses perched on their heads were the deciding factor: the nun concluded that they were gormless idiots, and that a brief visit would do no harm, despite the Prioress' instructions.



Please do not be jealous.

The nun led them through the small monastery and into the Magdalene's grotto. "Quinze minutes," she said with a severe finger wag.

Fifteen minutes was most certainly not enough for their nefarious plans, but Draco and Granger burbled out some gratitude.

"Doddery old piss bag," said Draco as the nun left. "Shh," said Granger. "She'll chuck us out." "Nunchuck us, you might say." Granger made a wry face. "I might not." Draco concluded that he was wasted on her.

“You did a fair job at lying, at least,” said Draco.

“I can lie,” said Granger. “I once bluffed my way past Gringotts goblins, you know. I do all right when I’m not being transfixed by those – those lances you call eyes.”

“Transfixed, you say.”

“Pierced. Impaled, even. Look away before you cut me to pieces.”

Draco looked away, amused. He did not tell her that her eyes had a contrary effect – of drawing one in, of pulling towards. Sometimes, if he wasn’t guarded, locking eyes with her felt like falling, like plummeting head-first.

But enough nonsense about eyes.

They took stock of the grotto. It was far bigger than Draco had imagined – rather more of a cave – containing an entire chapel. The walls were dotted with votive candles. Fissures in the cave had been blocked up by stained glass, which bathed the place in deep reds and blues.

There was no one about. In a dark corner of the cave, Granger Transfigured two statues into kneeling replicas of herself and Draco, and put a cluster of candles in front of them. Should the guard nun check in on them, their silhouettes would be hunched in quiet contemplation at the far end of the grotto.

Granger also placed the first of her incendiary runes at the base of the Magdalene's statue. "But not too close," she whispered as she flicked the symbol into life. "I don't want to actually damage it..."

Meanwhile, Draco was casting his detection spells, which told him there were about five nuns on the premises. "There might be more. This rock makes it hard to say. So that's five witches and untold amounts of wards."

“Much better than the usual fifty witches, anyroad,” said Granger.

Satisfied with the arrangement of their stone Doppelgangers, Granger crept round the edge of the grotto and poked her head into the passage that led from the grotto to the crypt.

Footsteps resonated from that very direction a moment afterwards. A younger nun appeared and asked, in surprise and annoyance, what Granger thought she was doing?

Granger said, “Pardon, je cherche les toilettes.”

The nun raised a finger to point to the excruciatingly clear sign above the door that said, ACCÈS INTERDIT, and asked if Granger could see through those silly glasses? Then she asked why they were even here, and who had let them in; the monastery was closed? And (suddenly noticing the stone Doppelgangers), what was that?

The nun was getting too worked up to play Bumbling with. Draco cut her fact-finding mission short, Stunning her without fanfare.

“Shit,” said Granger. “But, unfortunately, necessary.”

Granger had insisted that she be in charge of any Obliviations. She removed the past five minutes from the nun's mind with, admittedly, far more care than Draco would've.

"Your Stun will hold for at least another twenty minutes?" asked Granger. "Half an hour, unless she's got Troll blood."

"Good." Granger Transfigured the nun into a pew and floated her against the wall. "Let's get on."

Granger cast a Silencing spell around the two of them as Draco Disillusioned them, followed by Notice-Me-Not charms for good measure. They carried on, into the passage that led from the grotto to the crypt.

As planned, Draco took the lead, doing a little recce around every corner before he let Granger follow. She dropped two more runes as they went.

They met the first alarm wards at the downwards stairway into the crypt. Draco dismissed these without issue, but proceeded more slowly thereafter – now they were getting closer to where things might become interesting.

They encountered two illusory staircases that led to oubliettes. Draco disarmed some nasty pressure-triggered traps (an Orb of Pestilence and a Rot Rune). Granger took care of a Searing Sacrilege aimed at their hearts.

“The Sisters aren’t very nice,” she said. Draco could hear the frown in her voice.

At the bottom of the stone stairway, the air grew stale and musty. They came upon the gate of the crypt, and with it, their first real challenge: a Blood Lock.

“That’s Dark,” said Draco. “These nuns aren’t bollocksing about.” “We need that Stunned nun,” said Granger. “We should go back up—”

“We don’t have time. Accio,” said Draco, waving his wand towards the Transfigured nun, who lay, pewishly, somewhere above them.

“But that’s far too heavy for a Summoning...?”

Granger clearly had no idea of Draco’s capabilities. He did not respond, focusing his will on the flight of the bulky pew, currently whizzing through the passage above them. Should any

nun be unfortunate enough to be in its way, she would be summarily pulverised.

There was some thumping as the pew descended the stairway towards them. “Wow,” said Granger at the sight of this absurd, yet impressive, display.

“You just had to Transfigure her into the bloody weight of an actual pew,” panted Draco as the pew tottered into view.

Granger undid the Transfiguration on the Stunned nun with mutterings about the importance of accuracy. Then Draco watched Granger’s Disillusioned shape hover indecisively over the limp body.

Draco, seeing that Granger hadn’t the bottle to do the dirty part, pulled out his knife.

“A light cut,” said Granger. There was apprehension in her voice. Bodily harm to others had been a distant, worst-case Plan F.

Draco snatched up the nun’s hand and sliced open her palm. He pressed it on the Blood Lock’s smooth obsidian surface. “Better hope she’s got permission to open this, or we’re going hunting for the Prioress.”

“I bloody well hope not – she’s probably back down in the village.” For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then the Blood Lock glowed golden and popped open.

Granger sighed out in relief. As Draco checked for further wards beyond the gate, she healed the Stunned nun’s hand, then Transfigured her again – this time, into a torch sconce to match the others along the wall.

“Couldn’t’ve done that in the first place?” asked Draco.

“There weren’t torches upstairs!” snarled Granger. “She needed to be camouflaged!”

They moved into the crypt – wet-walled, mouldy, and stinking of centuries of death. Granger, tucked behind Draco, muttered directions to him as they went. She had committed the entirety of the labyrinthine area to memory, based on whatever ancient texts she had got her hands on. If their progress down one passageway was blocked, she would have three alternatives at the ready.

Draco disarmed a series of increasingly malicious wards – wards that hardly merited the name, really; these were curses. He slowed them down to a crawl.

“Fucking hell, a Gutting Glyph?” he muttered as he caught the next ward. “These nuns are murderous.”

He felt Granger peek around his shoulder and watch his translucent wand disarm the thing. “These are rather Darker than I anticipated,” said Granger.

“How are we doing for time?”

“Five minutes till the bonne sœur at the entrance comes to badger us. Maybe ten if she backs off at the sight of our pious heads.”

“This is going far slower than I would’ve liked,” said Draco, picking up his pace, his wand held high to detect further threats.

“I know,” said Granger, worry tightening her voice.

They continued into progressively narrower passageways, past several centuries of stacked bones and bodies mummified by the passage of time. Draco’s wand being otherwise engaged, Granger conjured a circle of blue flames around them to light the way, along with her Lumos.

For a suspiciously long time, there were no other interruptions.

Then they came to a grinning goat's skull, floating in the middle of the passage. It looked inoffensive and inert, simply suspended in place. Carved into the dusty floor below it was a pentagram.

Draco grit his teeth: this one, he'd read about in the text about the Dominican monks. "What is it?" asked Granger to Draco's back. "Beelzebub's Barrier," said Draco. "I had rather hoped we wouldn't encounter it." "Why? What happens if we trigger it?" "A rather serious case of demonic possession. That neither of us is devout enough to deal with, by the by," said Draco.

"Ugh. How do we disarm it?" asked Granger. "Human sacrifice."
"What?"

"Shall I summon the nun?"

"No. We'll find another way round. Hang on. Let me think of a detour. This was the most direct route, of course..."

After a few moments of thinking – during which Granger drew out her mental maps on Draco's back and gave him a shiver – she guided them down another passageway. They were both aware of the time ticking by.

Granger spelled out another of her incendiary runes, then said, “We’re past the fifteen minute mark.”

“We can expect hostility on the way back,” said Draco. “Hopefully only the four nuns.”

“The runes should provide a distraction,” said Granger, but there was anxious irritation lacing her voice: this wasn’t going according to plan.

The new path led to a Cloud of Contagion and a Carcerem sine fine ward, both disarmed by Draco. As he worked, Granger, fretting about the time, took a step ahead of him to peer around the corner.

In Granger’s defence, Draco also wouldn’t have expected another ward so soon after these two – but there it was. Granger tripped it, and a flurry of Arcanist’s Arrows flew at them from all directions.

Only Draco’s reflexes saved them from death by impalement; as the fiery arrows whizzed, he pushed Granger into the wall and cast Obice circum. The arrows embedded themselves into the glow of his shield instead.

“You idiot!” said Draco, his face in Granger’s invisible hair. “You properly dropped a bollock on that one. You were to stay behind me at all times!”

“They put three wards within two square metres?” gasped Granger from somewhere in his chest. “Evidently. And now we’re in a nice pickle,” said Draco as the arrows exploded against the shield. “A pickle?! That’s what you’re calling this hellscape?”

“Do something about the bloody fire before it takes down my shield!”

Granger, spurred into action, slid her wand under Draco’s arm and waved out a complex command in runic.

The fiery arrows fizzled out.

“You’ll have to teach me that one,” said Draco, pushing away from her.

“Another time,” said Granger. There was a shakiness in her voice, though whether it was nerves or fatigue, Draco wasn’t certain. Every incendiary rune and spell she used she was placing was a drain on her magic, just as every curse he was breaking was a drain on his. Neither of them had expected to be this

strained. At Draco's count, they had broken over twenty curses in the span of a quarter hour.

"We're getting close – this is the last corridor," said Granger as they approached. The ceiling lowered the further they progressed.

"Are you sure we aren't going into a bloody burial chamber?" muttered Draco as he half-crouched to keep advancing.

"Yes. This is the right way. I'm sure they tightened it up on purpose—"

Draco stopped abruptly. Granger walked into his arse, swore, then removed their Disillusionments so that they could see each other.

Draco shifted so that Granger could observe the almost invisible reddish glimmer across the stone floor, under the glow of his wand.

"These fucking nuns," said Draco. "What is it?"

"One of the Torments invented by the Carthusians. They called it Spiritual Sanctification. Satirical buggers."

"What's it do?"

“An area-of-effect Crucio. Easier than continually casting it. Great for dungeon floors.” “A Crucio carpet?”

“Essentially.”

“Horrid,” shuddered Granger. “Any alternate routes?”

“The Beezlebub blocked off the main artery. We need to face it, or cross this—”

As she spoke, a spark of purple shimmered in Draco’s peripheral vision. He tackled Granger out of the way just as the spark burst into a whip-lash of vicious violet light. The curse hissed against the wall where Granger’s head had been.

“What was that?” Granger’s mouth was open as she watched the corrosive purple ooze gnaw into the stone wall.

“Mind Flayer,” said Draco, regaining his feet. “Delayed onset. Nasty.”

“Mind Flayer?” repeated Granger, clambering to her feet as well. “These bloody nuns...” “Broom,” said Draco, his attention back on the Torment. “We mustn’t touch the floor. And don’t suggest Wingardium Leviosa instead.”

“I wasn’t going to,” snapped Granger, pulling the broom out of her Extended pocket. “I wouldn’t trust myself in these close quarters, not with a great bloody body like yours to heft about...”

They mounted the broom, both keeping their legs unusually tightly wound. The ceiling was so low here that even at that, with their heads brushing the stone above, Draco’s knees were inches from the Torment.

“These fucking nuns,” he muttered as he steered them with utmost delicacy over the five metre long patch of suffering.

Granger was focused on strangling the broom with her hands and her legs.

They passed the ruddy patch. Draco lowered them to dismount. Something gold was glittering at the end of the passage: it looked like the reliquary that Granger had described to him. Fucking finally.

“Wait!” hissed Granger. “Look!”

Above them, and visible only thanks to Granger’s circle of blue flame, a rune was carved into the ceiling.

Draco pulled the broom back up into a hover. “What is it?”

“Ethos?” said Granger, tilting her head and talking to herself. “Raidhu? But why is it...? Oh! But I didn’t know you could do that? What?! This usage isn’t in any of the syllabaries...”

“What the bloody hell is it?” repeated Draco.

“I think – based on an extremely preliminary analysis – it’s – I suppose you could call it a Rune of Inverted Ethics?”

“Inverted... Ethics?” repeated Draco. He had expected something rather more lethal. Inverted Entrails, perhaps.

“It would reverse whatever your normal moral standpoint would be,” continued Granger. “I think. It would flip your intentions.”

“So you’d come off the Torture Carpet hating the nuns, and wanting to kill them all and destroy the whole place, and then you’d be hit by that and...”

“Love them, want to help them, and not do the naughty things you had set out to do, yes,” said Granger. “Brilliant idea, to put it last. Let me take care of this one. Can you fly us up closer?”

Draco moved the broom up and held it as steadily as possible as Granger drew out the counter runes. This exercise took what felt like an eternity. Draco kept casting detection spells behind them, aware, now, that there would almost certainly be a search on for the Bumbling Muggles.

He fancied that he heard voices.

The ceiling crackled and the rune disintegrated into dust.

“Sorted,” said Granger.

“Finally.”

They dismounted from the broom. Draco took point again, so aggravated at the delays that he’d half a mind to reactivate all the wards and drag the nuns through the bloody labyrinth, to get a taste of their own medicine.

At last, they came upon the Magdalene’s reliquary.



The entire thing looked to be made of pure gold. It shimmered in the darkness, save for the Magdalene's skull, which jutted out

blackly. Heaped on either side was more gold – crucifixes, goblets, statuettes, and coffers overflowing with coin.

Draco detected no further malicious spells, so they approached. An inscription glittered below the reliquary.

“Noli me tangere,” read Draco. “Touch me not. Well, that’s excellent.” “We are only going to tangere her a little bit,” said Granger, biting her lip. “What’s that flask beside her?”

“The Sainte Ampoule. Alleged to contain earth, soaked in Christ’s blood, collected by the Magdalene from under the cross.”

Draco let out a whistle as they approached the reliquary. “This lot’s got to be worth a few Knuts.” A hoarse voice spoke in French. “A few? Cheeky little bugger.”

Draco and Granger both jumped out of their skin. Hominem Revelios ricocheted against the walls as they cast them, to absolutely no avail. Draco flung a Protego around Granger.

The voice spoke again: “My only visitors in centuries, so, of course, they are irredeemably stupid.” “Oh my god,” gasped Granger, “It’s the skull.”

Draco stared at it.

“Hello,” ground out the skull to Draco. “You’re pretty.”

“Merlin’s tits,” said Draco.

“I like you.” The skull grinned in his direction. “Give us a kiss.”

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Chapter 15

Noli Me Tangere



Draco had experienced a great many strange and wonderful things in his life, but being chatted up by the skull of a long-dead saint certainly ranked amongst the most bizarre.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t shriek to the good Sisters about intruders,” said the skull.

“I shall blast you into bits if you try,” said Draco. “Promises, promises,” said the skull.

“Please – are you the Magdalene?” asked Granger, her shock now making way for wide-eyed curiosity.

“An echo of she who was once known by that name,” said the skull. “A ghost? Spirit?”

“There are many States of Being.” Draco elbowed Granger. “Not the time.”

“Right, let’s rather discuss what a pretty lad like you is doing in a place like this.” “I’m up to no good,” said Draco. “Obviously.”

“Ooo la la, a bad boy,” said the skull.

Granger was fixed in a state of utter entrancement at the skull. Draco elbowed her again. “Do what you came here to do. We need to leave.”

Granger seemed to come to. “Right – I have to – but –”

There were voices coming down the passageway. “We’ve got company,” cut in Draco. “Set off your charges.”

Granger raised her wand and muttered harsh words of ancient runic. Draco felt gooseflesh rise on his arms as her magic washed out of her. Five brilliant sparks burst out of her wand and whizzed down the passage to detonate their counterparts.

There was a moment of pure, perfect silence.

Then the crypt, the passageways, and the grotto, were rocked by explosions. Screams echoed distantly. A fine dusting of stone coated Draco, Granger, and the Magdalene’s reliquary.

From the passageway, there came no further sounds.

Granger had her hands on her knees, breathless from the magical exertion. “What have you done?” asked the skull.

“Bought time,” said Granger.

“Do the thing,” said Draco, standing guard at the passage. “Quickly!” Granger was agitated. “But it’s sentient! It wasn’t

meant to be sentient!” “Sentient is a rather optimistic term,” said the skull.

“But you can perceive!” said Granger. “I can’t just – just–” “Just what, precisely?”

“I need a little piece of you,” said Granger.

“Tch. You and the rest of the world. Bits of me have been stolen over centuries and centuries, you know.”

“Get a bloody move on!” said Draco.

Granger slipped a rather wicked looking osteotome out of her pocket.

“Yes. My jaw lived in Rome for 700 years; we have only just been reunited.” “H-have you?”

“In 1295. Thanks to Pope Boniface the Eighth, bless his pointy head.”

Granger was now edging towards the skull. “I er – I see that your occipital bone is cracked. D’you mind if I tidy it up a bit?”

Draco rolled his eyes heavenward. Granger was trying to get consent from the bloody skull. “Noli me tangere,” said the skull.

Granger, the osteotome in one hand and her wand in the other, said, “I’m sorry about this.” She Vanished the reliquary’s glass away. “So sorry – but it’s for a good cause, I promise...”

“Noli me tangere,” repeated the skull as Granger’s hand approached. “You will regret it.” Something in the skull’s tone made Draco turn.

He reached out and grabbed Granger’s arm, just in time to join her as the skull – a bloody fucking Portkey – transported them out.

~

They materialised in a dungeon, ten metres above the floor, and began to plummet downwards. As though in slow motion, both of them swiveled to see a ruddy shimmer across the stone floor below: Spiritual Sanctification.

Their saving grace, as they fell, was that they both had their wands out. Granger flung a Wingardium Leviosa at Draco just as he cast the same at her, and then they hovered, utterly at the mercy of the other’s willpower, inches over the Torment.

Granger was doing a decent job at holding his ‘great bloody body’ aloft, but there was something febrile in her magic; she wouldn’t be able to hold him for long. Draco himself was beginning to feel lightheaded: the day’s magical output was catching up to him, and even keeping Granger’s lithe figure afloat was taxing.

“Broom!” gasped Draco.

Granger tossed the skull to Draco, who caught it like a bony kind of Quaffle. She pulled out the broom. In a feat of awkward, floaty acrobatics, she got a leg over it. Then, under her unpractised hands, it moved towards Draco in whippy, uncertain jerks. When Granger got close enough, he pulled the tail-end to him, and collapsed onto it behind her.

“Fuck!” puffed Granger, utterly winded.

Draco was fuming. “These bloody, gods-damned nuns!”

“Oh my,” said the skull as he passed it back to Granger. “This hasn’t happened since the Dark Ages. What a thrill!”

Draco floated the broom up and down the narrow dungeon, his wand aloft, looking for a way out.

“This stone must be metres and metres thick,” said Granger, casting bursts of Transfiguration spells at the wall as Draco glided them past. “I can’t do a thing past the inside layer.”

“We could try to brute force a few Bombardas,” said Draco. “But that would drain us both – and who knows what’s on the other side.”

“Oh, about fifty enraged Sisters,” replied the skull. “They’ll have sounded the alarm by now and all flown back up from the Solstice do. Oooh, I hope you don’t meet the Prioress, my dear, she would leave your pretty face quite unrecognisable.”

“There’s got to be an entrance – how else do they fetch the prisoners?” Draco redoubled his searching. “We need to find it – that’ll be the weak spot.”

“I wager there isn’t one. They probably lift the Anti-Apparition Ward and pop in to pick the tortured corpses off the Crucio Carpet,” mulled Granger darkly.

“Clever thing,” said the skull.

“Quiet, you – it’s your fault we’re here.”

“I tried to warn you,” said the skull. “Don’t you speak Latin?”

Granger was now grasping at her person. “I have a million things in my pockets – but what do I do with them? Do we lay traps? Do we make explosives? They could let us rot in here for years before they come and fetch us. I have enough food for – er – months, maybe? How will we sleep over the Torment? I could make us hammocks?”

In the course of her hand-wavy blathering, Granger inadvertently presented A Solution. Draco seized her by the wrist. In their shared wand-light, her ring glimmered.

Granger followed his line of sight. “But – you said you didn’t finish the Portkey.” “I didn’t.”

“So – so what are you thinking?”

Draco rapped his fingers against Granger’s wrist. “I don’t know. A possibility. I couldn’t fix the final destination to a desired location. The Arithmancy is all correct, there’s just a stupid hiccup in the tail end I haven’t worked out.”

Granger was now getting excited. She twisted towards him on the broom. “So you’re saying it works, but we haven’t any idea

where we'll end up?"

"Yes."

Granger held out her hand to him. "Activate it."

"You don't understand. I have no bloody clue where we'll end up," repeated Draco. "It might be the bowels of the earth. It might be the inside of a volcano, or the depths of Atlantis. We could die the moment we arrive – crushed, or burned, or asphyxiated."

Granger searched his eyes, looking as flummoxed as he felt. "Fifty angry nuns descending upon us in holy wrath, or asphyxiation?"

Draco ran a hand down his face. "Fuck me. How the fuck did we get here?" "Ooh, do the Portkey, do the Portkey!" said the skull. "I want to see the world!" "You choose," said Draco to Granger, ignoring the skull.

Granger turned away from him on the broom and thought.

"You're doing a SWOT analysis," said Draco, watching the twitch of her fingers. "Shh."

"What's a swot analysis?" asked the skull.

“What she does best,” said Draco. (It was a good thing that Granger wasn’t listening; unasked-for fondness had slipped into the statement. Eburgh.)

Granger came out of her process looking determined. She twisted back towards Draco on the broom. “Portkey. Wands out, ready to Disapparate the moment we materialise in the Other Place. Even in the most hostile environment, whatever damage we sustain in that split second should be Healable.”

“Even lava? We’re taking a big bloody risk.”

“We have the skull. And I have lives to change for the better. Let’s check the stupid thing for tracking spells; we don’t need the Sisterhood following us to wherever we end up.”

The skull was subjected to diagnostic spells from both Granger and Draco. Neither of them was gentle about it, but the skull seemed to have little feeling.

“That tickles,” said the skull as it was suspended between the two of them and sprayed with spells. “It’s clean,” said Draco at length. “Only echoes of the Portus.”

“Which was a brilliant idea. A single non-malicious spell at the very end. Right into a dungeon. Bloody nuns.”

“All right,” said Draco. “Let’s go. But first, I want to leave a few thank-yous for the Benedictine Sisters of the Sacred Bollocks.”

“Ooh, naughty,” said the skull as Draco tucked a few maledictions, curses and other devilry into the stonework.

Sod his fatigue. He needed vengeance.

“Ready?” asked Draco, his wand-tip at Granger’s ring, prepared to activate the Portkey. Granger met his eyes and nodded. She was on edge, but she wasn’t afraid.

Brave fucking witch.

“Portus,” said Draco.

~

The Portkey sucked them through the Anti-Apparition Ward in a prolonged, sickening drag. Draco wasn’t sure what he was

gripping harder: his wand, Granger's waist, or the broom between his legs.

They materialised about sixty metres above the ground – thank the gods for the broom – above a strange, surreal scene. They were flying above a cluster of boats, grouped about as though moored at a marina – but there was no water. As far as Draco's eye could see, dunes undulated, on and on into the horizon.



Granger's head swivelled about too, observing the place, her curiosity overrunning her fear of flight. A wisp of smoke

emanated from her ring – the last of the imperfect Portus fizzling out of existence.

Hot wind blew grit into their eyes and chapped their lips. “Of course we wouldn’t end up in, say, Kent,” said Draco.

“That would’ve been rather too convenient,” said Granger. “But I’ll take this over the centre of a volcano – and we didn’t get Splinched by poorly executed Arithmancy. Well done.”

Draco flew lower, casting detection spells towards the graveyard of ships. There was no living thing within.

“I’m going to take us down. We need to rest – we’re both bollocksed.”

“Agreed.”

They landed amongst the rusting hulls and found a spot in the shade of a smaller ship.

Granger tumbled off the broom in that ungainly way of hers, stayed on all fours on the ground for a long moment, and then regained her feet.

She groped about her pocket until she found her Muggle device, which she pulled out in triumph. However, the triumph was short-lived. Granger paced, held the mobile up high, held it low, pressed a few buttons – but whatever it was meant to do, it wasn't doing.

"No service," sighed Granger. "We're out of range of Muggle telecommunications. I'd have liked to know where we are."

"A great bloody desert like this? Somewhere in Africa would be my guess."

"That was mine, too," said Granger. "There's a place called the Skeleton Coast in Namibia, famous for shipwrecks amongst the dunes. But that theory is buggered by the rather conspicuous absence of the sea. Perhaps the boats will give us a clue."

She walked, speculative, towards the prow of the ship that they were sheltering under. Faded characters were scattered about that would've once spelled the vessel's name.

Granger's hands found her hips. "Cyrillic?" "...Are you suggesting we're in Russia?"

"I've no idea," said Granger, sounding, for once in her life, utterly bewildered.

They set aside the mysteries of their present circumstances to replenish their strength. Draco was keen on a rest – he had a nagging worry that the nuns would somehow find them, and he was presently too magically fatigued to take on fifty of them in a firefight.

“Where’s the skull?” he asked, all of a sudden, as the last ten minutes had been free of its croaky remarks.

“In my pocket,” said Granger. “With a Muffliato around her temporal bones. I’m tired of her running commentary.”

“Good shout. D’you have anything to eat in that pocket?”
“Obviously.”

Bits of rusted-out boat were minimally Transfigured into a makeshift low table and stools. Draco noted that none of Granger’s usual flourishes – or concern for accuracy – were on display. The stools peeled old marine paint upon their bottoms; the table threatened a side of tetanus with their dinner. Granger was tired.

And yet, she still managed to surprise him. Fishing things out of her Extended pocket, she placed the makings of a real meal upon the table. A baguette, pâté, and various cheeses were laid out.

Then came an assortment of charcuterie, some cornichons, and olives. A container of spiced aubergine salad followed.

She surveyed the table. “What am I missing? Oh! The drinks.”

Bottled water (“Grossly overpriced”) and a bottle of white wine (“No idea if it’s good; the bottle was pretty”) followed.

Granger passed Draco the wine. “Would you chill this? We might as well do the thing properly.”

Draco passed several cooling charms over the bottle. “Right. I can at least feel as though I’ve contributed something to this repast.”

It was nothing but a throwaway remark, but Granger took it seriously. She frowned at him. “Contributed something? Malfoy, today would’ve been impossible without you. I would’ve taken a wrong turn at the first hallucinatory staircase and ended up in an oubliette forever. And if I hadn’t, I’d be demonically possessed – or very dead. You knew the counter-spell to every sodding thing we encountered. You curse-broke your way through a labyrinth that hasn’t been penetrated since the Dark Ages. You half-arsed a Portus on this ring, and it bloody worked, and we’re here, and alive, because of you. You were –”

Here she paused, and searched for words, and seemed to grow self-conscious. “You were extraordinary,” she finished, quietly. She cleared her throat, avoided his eye, and busied herself with her wand. “I’ll conjure some glasses, shall I?”

As for Draco, he said nothing, because he was wrestling with a swell of pleasure at this slew of compliments, and amusement at Granger’s discomfiture, and what felt like the warmth of a blush at his cheeks, only he didn’t blush, because he was Draco Fucking Malfoy, so it was probably sunburn from this damned desert.

“One last thing before we eat, if you don’t mind,” said Draco, opting to violently change the subject.

Granger looked up. “What?”

“Finite incantatem,” said Draco, pointing his wand at her.

Her hair, in a lank blonde ponytail, returned to its full, brown curls. Her eyes, growing dark and warm as the glamour faded, flashed her amusement at him. “Shall I do you?”

“Do.”

“Excellent. I’m tired of the merkin. Finite incantatem.”

Draco felt the quiver of her magic through his hair and the caress of it across his eyes. It felt, perhaps, even more intimate than a touch would’ve been.

He ran a hand through his hair. “Less pubic wiggy?”

“Eh,” shrugged Granger, but she was holding back a smile.

“You can just say my hair is magnificent, you know,” said Draco.

“It’s adequate, for a wizard who just broke into a crypt and fled from nuns. Shall we eat?”

They ate and drank and rested, and began to replenish their depleted magical energies. Draco shared his shock that Granger was able to put together a meal not comprised of tuna and Cheesy Wotsits. Granger said that she had a packet of Cheesy Wotsits in her pocket, just for him, since they lingered so powerfully on his psyche. Draco asked if she had a few cat hairs too, to complete the experience. Granger said, of course, and plucked two out of her pocket, and wafted them in Draco’s

direction. Draco said thank you, he felt quite at home now, and also, would there be Banoffee pie for dessert?

He'd half expected Granger to produce one, but she demurred: "The village's shops didn't carry those."

Her dessert offerings were more of those marzipan-stuffed dates, dried figs, and apricots.

"You know," said Draco as he chewed on a date, "We could ask the Magdalene if she brought this recipe over, after all."

"Oh!" gasped Granger. And then, after half a moment's thought: "Let's!"

The skull was summoned out of Granger's pocket and the Muffliato was dismissed.

"Hello, what's this?" asked the skull, its shadowy eye-holes gazing at the ship's hull. "Are we at sea?"

"No," said Granger. "But would you settle a line of enquiry for us? Did you bring the recipe for marzipan-stuffed dates to France from the Holy Land?"

A date was held in front of the skull, for illustrative purposes.

“What is that? A clam?”

“Well, that’s settled, then,” said Granger, eating the date.

“You have restored the honour of an entire nation,” said Draco to the skull.

The skull’s attention turned to him. “O, it’s you. Do you know, I was just thinking you’d look better as a blonde.”

“Thank you,” said Draco.

He and Granger exchanged a look of realisation – the skull had now seen them sans disguise. “Can skulls be Obliviated?” asked Draco. “They’ve got no brain.”

“We’ll have to try, now that she’s seen us,” said Granger, looking serious. “She has a mind, anyway.”

The skull, who had been completing an assessment of Granger, said, “As for you, you’re rather less corpsey than you were before.”

“Bit rich, coming from you.”

“I was a great beauty,” said the skull.

“You still have gorgeous cheekbones,” said Draco. The skull giggled – a mildly disconcerting sound.

Draco noted that Granger had pulled her osteotome back out – she was finally going to get that sample. She angled the skull towards Draco. He distracted it by flipping his hair and looking at it seductively.

Granger pressed the bevelled edge of her instrument along an already jagged part of the skull.

There was a dullish snap as a piece broke off, which she transferred to a test tube. “What was that?” asked the skull. “Did you hear something?”

“No,” said Draco.

Granger produced a sack, which she threw over the skull so that it would see them no longer. Then she pointed her wand at the bump in the bag. “Obliviate.”

The skull’s muffled and confused voice came through the sack. “Sister Sophia? Is that you? Why is it so dark?”

Granger cast Muffliato and Silencio upon the sack, and stuffed it back into her pocket. She looked regretful. “Religious historians

would give their eye teeth to have a chat with her. Can you imagine—”

“No,” said Draco.

“I know, I know,” said Granger, though the pain of the missing knowledge made her clutch at her breast. “I’ll send her back to the monastery as soon as we reach civilisation. Hopefully her safe return keeps the nuns off our backs.”

“I rather fancied a duel with the Prioress. She sounded like a fury.”

The meal being over, they crawled off of the uncomfortable stools and stretched. Granger produced a large, puffy blanket, which she placed upon the sand. She laid down upon it and Draco invited himself to lie down next to her.

“She did sound like a fury,” said Granger. “Sod Aurors and the Order – we should’ve sent French nuns after Voldemort.”

“Did you see that labyrinth? The good Sisters would’ve overthrown him in five minutes. We’d be living in a new, nunnish world order.”

“Everyone would wear habits,” said Granger, a laugh in her voice. “You’d have positively thrived.” “I merely express surprise at Muggle skin-showing,” said Draco huffily. “Not objections.” “Dismay, rather.”

“Astonishment. It’s culture shock.”

“Don’t robes interfere with the checking out of bums?” asked Granger. “They are a blight on the entire sport.”

“Then?”

“I didn’t really think about the alternatives, until – until quite recently.”

“You don’t know what you don’t know,” nodded Granger sagely.

“Exactly. I’m developing a new esteem for Muggle fashions – they know how to do bums.” Granger laughed. Draco raised his wand lazily and floated the wine bottle over to them.

“You know – the sun is setting here.” Granger’s voice was thoughtful. “It was midmorning at the monastery. That means we’ve jumped eight or ten timezones ahead, depending on our proximity to the equator.”

“Where would that put us? Western China?”

Granger had turned onto her stomach and edged towards the side of the blanket. She was scribbling a map into the sand. “Er – possibly. Any number of places, depending on how many zones we jumped. Iran... Oman... any of the ‘Stans...”

Draco floated over the dried figs and chewed on those while Granger made her speculations. “Oh!” said Granger.
“What?”

She passed him something for his inspection: a whitish, elongated seashell.

“This used to be a seabed,” said Granger as she peered at the sand. “How curious.”

Now she was passing her fingers through the sand, digging up more desiccated bits of sea-life. Her eyes were alight with inquisitiveness. All of the day’s troubles – the curses, the near-death experiences – seemed to have faded away in light of this fresh mystery. With her hair strewn with crypt dust, and a purplish line of Mind Flayer residue across her cheek, and her torn-up walking kit, she looked rather like a wild-eyed archaeologist, seeking answers amongst the endless sands.

The effect was quite fetching. Had anyone told Draco, months ago, that he would've found a banged-up, dirt-smudged witch digging about in sand fetching, he would've scoffed. But there it was.

"That's a Scaphopoda," said Granger in reference to the shell in Draco's hands. "But I don't know what species, so that won't help us narrow down our location."

Draco examined the shell, concluded that it was, indeed, a shell, and passed it back to her. Their fingers touched. Hers were warm, his were cool.

"Sea urchin," she said, holding up another whitish thing, but round. "Fascinating."

Granger returned to studying her erstwhile map, now scattered with bits of shell. "I don't know enough about ancient seas to make any kind of intelligent supposition, based on these creatures. It'll be dangerous for us to Apparate anywhere, given that we haven't any idea where we are on the planet. I think our next plan of action should be a reconnaissance flight to see if we can find civilisation, and hopefully an internationally connected Floo."

Draco popped himself onto his elbows. "I'm sorry, did you just say flight?" "Yes."

“As in, use the broom?”

“Yes.”

“You? Willingly? Want to use a broom?”

Granger looked a combination of miffed and harassed. “Yes, all right? It ended up being terribly useful. Don’t be smug about it.”

“Too late.”

“I can see that.”

Oh yes, he was smug. Granger, with her Firmly Established Opinions on Everything, had changed her mind about flying, of all things. He dearly wanted to rub it in, but self-control prevailed. “The sun’s setting. Let’s wait until it’s under the horizon, and then do a little recce from on high. If there are settlements about, they’ll be lit up, and we’ll be able to see them from miles away.”

Just as Granger was nodding her agreement, an odd sort of groan echoed across the dunes towards them.

“Did you just hear a cow?” asked Granger.

“A cow? That sounded like Weasel on the loo.”

“Eurgh – don’t be – oh! Look!”

A herd of – of something – came into view over the dunes.

They looked like gazelles who had been half-Transfigured into tapirs.

“Oh, I’ve read about those – they’re Saiga antelope!” said Granger, leaping to her feet.

The animals paused at the sudden movement. They eyed Granger as though she was the half- Transfigured oddity, and not them. Then, with a strange loping gait, they carried on.

“Queer looking things,” said Draco. “Magical?”

“Mundane.” Granger was on her tiptoes, watching the herd pass. “Exceedingly rare, though.” The lead animal groaned its peculiar moo and the herd disappeared behind a dune.

Granger returned to the blanket and kneeled at her sandy map. “This will help situate us. Those antelope have a narrow range. We’re somewhere in Central Asia.” Granger bit at her lip. “Population centres will be few and far in between.”

“We’ll fly south or west, then,” said Draco. “Definitely not north.” “Agreed – nothing but Russia’s steppes that way.”

“I’d give it another hour,” said Draco, eyeing the sun as it sank behind the dunes. “Then we can fly.”

Granger stretched out on her back next to him and tucked her hands behind her head. There was a smile in her voice when she next spoke. “I can’t believe I saw a Saiga antelope.”

“I can’t believe we had a chinwag with Mary Magdalene’s skull.” “And we were almost outwitted by nuns.”

“Those nuns were savage old birds. My next warding will be inspired. Shall I cast Beelzebub’s Barrier at your lab?”

“Could do. A spot of demonic possession would inject some vim into Trinity’s halls.”

Soon, the sun was nothing but a golden memory reflected in the firmament. There was no birdsong in the desert; all was quiet, save for the plaintive whistling of the wind amongst the rusted-out hulls.

The wind quietened as the world darkened. The moon emerged and painted the dunes a silvery white. Then, in the black stillness

above them, constellation after constellation of stars glimmered into being, and galaxies, and nebulas innumerable.

Draco had never seen a sky like this one, so alight with its own brilliance, shimmering with mighty mysteries of worlds far away.

Together, in awed silence, Draco and Granger observed the whirling radiance above. Their hearts felt strangely full, and their troubles small and distant, under such living skies.

~

Neither Draco nor Granger had planned for a nap, but magical exhaustion took its toll and knocked them both out for two hours.

On the bright side, Draco awoke feeling positively rejuvenated, and ready to take on a hundred nuns, should circumstances require it. Granger, as she uncurled herself, also looked reinvigorated.

A few lively wand-waves packed up or erased all traces of their passing. And then it was time to fly.

There must've been eagerness on Draco's face, because Granger held the broom from him, and said, "Just because I think it's a good idea doesn't mean I'm going to enjoy it. Making me scream in terror is not the object of this exercise."

"I would never," said Draco, feigning offence as he set aside nefarious plans to do just that. Granger, with a look of profound mistrust, passed him the broom. Draco mounted, and then angled

his way towards her for her to hop on. She twisted her hands together, took a breath, muttered about bloody brooms, and, finally, clambered on.

“You do better when you don’t have time to think about it,” remarked Draco as Granger wedged herself between his legs. “Like in the crypt.”

“Imminent death does push slightly-less-imminent death out of my mind,” said Granger with a tight jaw.

Draco cast the usual assortment of wind-breakers and warming spells. “Ready?” “No,” came the strangled response. “Just go.”

Draco did not wait to be told twice. He kicked off with a will, eager to get lost in these skies with their millions upon millions of stars.

The post-apocalyptic scene of the corroded fleet of boats grew smaller and smaller, until the hulls were mere specks below.

As they reached flying altitude, Draco revelled in the views. There was no sea here, but an ocean of silver dunes, undulating without end all around them. Above, long lanes of stars streaked – gates to strange eternities. It was Awesome in the true sense of the word and filled Draco with profound wonder.

To his surprise, Granger had her eyes open. She breathed out a single, stupefied, “Wow,” and then went silent.

Draco struck a south-eastern course. His broom hummed under him, wanting to be given its head as they flew. But this broom, the newest model Étincelle, was the quickest in Draco’s collection and he dared not go faster than he already was. Despite the wind-breaking charms, Granger’s ponytail had half unravelled and was having its way with his face. And, of course, the witch herself would kill him upon landing.

After a time, Granger asked, “Why’s the broom buzzing at us?” Her question was laced in unspoken fear of a malfunction.

“She wants to go fast,” said Draco.

There was a pause. Then, timidly, Granger asked, “How fast?”

Draco gave a moment’s thought to his answer, which took the form of a question: “How fast does your car go?”

“I’ve broken two hundred kilometres per hour – in Germany, mind.” (Draco did not understand why Germany was relevant to

this statement.) “We can do two hundred on the broom,” said Draco. “If you’re game.”

Draco knew Granger’s body language enough now to see that she was torn, even without a view of her face. “This is a bloody big desert,” she said after some musing.

“It is.”

“We’ve been flying for twenty minutes and we haven’t seen a single sign of human habitation.”

“Correct.”

“We’d cover much more ground at speed.” “We would.”

Granger straightened up between Draco’s arms. “Let’s do it. Cast a few more wind-breakers – I’m going to do something with my hair.”

Which was excellent, because between Granger and her cat, Draco had now ingested enough hair to last the week. He slowed them down to cast his spells as Granger coiled her ponytail into a plait and tucked it into her top.

Granger’s voice was tightened by nerves. “Don’t accelerate too fast or I shall fall.” “You won’t fall. I’m holding you.”

“I know.”

“It’ll be just like we’re in your car,” said Draco, edging the broom up to speed. “My car has seat belts and is solidly on the earth at all tiiiiiiimes—”

Granger’s statement gave way to a shriek as the broom surged ahead. Draco wondered whether he ought to slow down – and then he realised that the shriek had turned into a delighted, adrenaline-filled laugh.

The speed had Granger half enjoying herself, half frightened out of coherent thought.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” said Draco as the dunes turned to a silvery blur below them. “Oh my goddd—”

“You are keeping an eye out for lights, aren’t you?” “Ughfrlp.”

“Good.”

They streaked across the desert, meteoric. Draco wished for a shooting star, so that they might race it. Since Granger was doing so well, he gave the broom her head, and she spiritedly jetted forth even faster, and now the dunes were a silver radiance below, and the stars were a dazzling whirl.

He held Granger tightly, partially to keep her safe, partially because he wanted to, because the feel of it was enjoyable – the holding of this slightly mad, brilliant witch, who passed her weekends skylarking about crypts, and who provoked him at every turn.

She was warm between his arms, and she smelled like travel dust and adventure and exhilaration.

The whole thing was mad – the holding of Granger as though he wanted to, the flying over these unsettled wilds, the having no actual clue where on Earth they were, the illegal and unfinished Portus, the talking skull, the whole of it. Absolutely mental.

He had loved every minute. “There!” said Granger, suddenly.

She made the mistake of holding out her arm to point. At this speed, it was whipped backwards and smacked Draco in the temple.

“Sorry!” blurted Granger. “But – look!”

To the south of them glowed the yellow glow of Muggle lights. At first they dotted the sands, here and there, and then they began to form long, parallel lanes. Roads.

“A city!” said Granger.

Draco flew them lower and slower. As they slowed, Granger cast Disillusionments on the two of them, lest a Muggle be stargazing on a night like this.

They skimmed the rooftops now, looking for more clues on their location. Signs across shopfronts were in Cyrillic and, oddly, Arabic, with what looked like Korean Hangul thrown in to confuse any lost witches and wizards as much as possible.

Granger asked Draco to slow down further so that she could consult her mobile, now that they had reached civilisation.

“Tashkent,” she said. “Bless you,” said Draco.

“No, it’s where we are. We’re in Uzbekistan.”

“My word,” said Draco. “That’s a step off the beaten path.”

“This is excellent. There’s a British embassy here. There’ll be a Magical consulate tucked in there with them. We’ll be able to Floo home.”

With that, Granger's mobile began peppering directions out to Draco, which led them to the roof of the British embassy, which was closed for the night. Draco broke them in and sniffed out the Consul's chambers (his was the only trace of magic in the entire building), and they startled the poor wizard awake.

Draco intimidated the Consul into lighting the international Floo flue, despite their lack of any kind of documentation, and Granger Obliviated him, and Draco cast a Sleeping Charm on him, and then they were whisked back to London by blue flames.

Draco reflected that he and Granger made a rather decent team.

They were spat out on British soil twenty minutes later, after the longest and most dizzying Floo journey that either of them had ever experienced. Draco rolled out of it; Granger plopped down bonelessly.

Then, on the cold floor of the London warehouse that served as the Arrivals platform, Granger laid herself down and did not move.

Draco, who generally fared better than her in all things spinny, had a look about. His knee was stinging at him, unhappy with the way he'd landed on the concrete.

“They’ve put in a line of domestic Floo hearths,” he said, returning to Granger’s limp corpse. “We can each Floo straight home.”

“Shan’t,” said Granger.

Draco came to stand next to her and contemplated her greenish mien. “You look ready to be sick.”

“I feel it,” said Granger.

“It’s one more little spin in the Floo.”

“Go away and leave me to die,” came Granger’s feeble voice.

Draco, who fancied a hot shower and a nap, was moderately tempted, but leaving his Principal queasy and utterly prone on the floor was, unfortunately, contrary to protocol. “Haven’t you some potion to take for the nausea?”

“If I so much as smell a potion, I shall decorate this floor with aubergine and—” “Shh,” said Draco.

Footsteps were ringing across the warehouse.

Draco knelt beside Granger. “There’s an agent coming and we haven’t got an explanation for how we just got spat out of

Tashkent with no papers, nor a stamp from the Consul. We have to go.”

“Shit,” said Granger, raising her head weakly off the floor.
“They’ll find my Extension charms, if they search us.”

“And we’ve still got the bloody skull. That’s a stolen Artefact – not to mention precious enough to spark an international incident.”

“I heard an arrival, I tell you,” came a man’s voice.

“Impossible,” came another. “There’s nothing scheduled till Istanbul at half-past.” Granger held out her arm and whispered, “Disapparate us.”

“Where?”

“Bloody anywhere!”

Draco grasped her arm and Disapparated as quietly as he could.

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Chapter 16

The Seneca



The bath and the nap which had been at the forefront of Draco's mind inspired his choice of destination. He and Granger materialised in the foyer of the Seneca, London's choicest wizarding hotel.

Draco hoisted Granger up to her feet. The employees at the Seneca were the epitome of discretion, including the witch who stepped out from behind the front desk, took no notice of their filthy clothing, and graciously asked if they were looking for a room, or dining at the hotel?

The mention of dining made Granger go dangerously green.

Draco propped her onto a bench and made arrangements for a room with the front desk witch. The woman, sensing that they wanted a room more than chit-chat about the hotel's amenities, summoned an ornate key, whisked them to the lifts, and enquired if they had any luggage? (No, nothing, and certainly no illegal skulls, thank you.)

And so Draco reached the end of this bizarre day, in one of the Seneca's famous suites, overlooking the Kensington Palace gardens, with a droopy Granger thrown decoratively across a chaise longue.

On the low table next to her, a carafe of water magically materialised, as well as a bucket. Thoughtful sort, that front desk witch.

Deciding that Granger had been sufficiently provided for, Draco went off to shower. That was a delightful experience, far more enjoyable than the small closet provided by the Hotel Plaisance. Draco turned on every single jet that was available, amused himself with the soap selections, and didn't crack his elbows against a wall once (which was good, because he had a nice bruise going on his left one from that morning's activities).

Thoroughly clean, now, Draco decided that he was a little peckish, and placed an order for a light dinner with the mirror. Then, given that he hadn't any clothes save for the reeking pile that he had stripped off, he pulled on a fluffy white dressing gown and matching slippers.

As he tied the dressing gown, he made sure that the V at the opening properly exposed the best of his chest (because he liked to show off in general, and not because of Granger in particular). Water droplets glistened artfully across his pectorals and down to where the top of his abs peeked out.



Then he fixed his hair so that it was appropriately, sexily mussed up, for that post-shower, delicious look.

The mirror commented that he looked quite divine. “I know,” said Draco.

He emerged from the shower in a mist of well-being, sexiness, and soap.

And he needn’t have bothered with any of it, really. Granger didn’t even look up when he exited the bathroom in his steamy glory. She was engrossed in her mobile.

The water had been drunk and the bucket looked unused – at least she was feeling better.

“The Aral Sea!” exclaimed Granger, her eyes riveted on the mobile. “That’s where we were. It was almost completely desiccated in the 60’s because of Soviet irrigation projects...”

A blow-by-blow account of the Sea’s disappearance followed, with much outraged commentary from Granger on what an ecological disaster it was. Meanwhile, the sexy droplets of water dried off of Draco’s pectorals, uselessly unseen by any audience whatsoever. Sod the Aral Sea; where was Granger’s concern for Draco’s desiccated chest?

“Riveting,” said Draco.

Granger, detecting his lack of enthusiasm for her information dump, lowered her mobile.

She looked him up and down, from the ends of his artfully tossed hair to his slippers feet. Her sole comment: “Haven’t you any clothes?”

“No, I haven’t, given that my luggage is currently enjoying a sojourn on the coast of Provence, along with yours.”

“Ugh.” Granger tilted her head back against the chaise longue in exhausted annoyance. “I’ll make arrangements to have it sent back. And the car! We’re going to get about twelve parking fines, not to mention a nice kerfuffle to have the thing returned. Why can’t anything be simple? Right – I need a shower next, if you’re done. I stink of crypt and now I’m self-conscious about it because you smell g– you smell like soap.”

With that, Granger rose, and proceeded to monopolise the shower for a full hour. Draco’s room service shimmered into existence on the low table.

“Granger,” he called at the bathroom door, “there’s food – do you want any, or shall I eat it all?” “Have it all,” came Granger’s voice from amidst the sound of spraying. “I just want tea.”

“Ask the mirror,” said Draco. “The mirror?”

“Yes, for the tea.”

Draco heard the mirror interject that the tea would be up momentarily. Granger thanked it. Interesting feeling, to be talking to Granger while she was naked.

Draco made it all the way to dessert (chocolate bonbons) before Granger came out of the bathroom. She, too, was now wearing a dressing gown – ridiculously oversized on her. Draco noted that Granger had not strategically left a V open at the front – rather, she had crossed both sides into each other so high that the robe covered her to her chin. Nor had she sexily mussed her hair, which was a wet pile on top of her head, held in place by her wand.

She shuffled over in too-big slippers.

“What?” she said as she noted Draco’s observation. Then she looked down at herself. “Rather like a gnome in a housecoat, isn’t it? I’d like to know whose boat-like feet these slippers were designed for?”

A steaming pot of tea popped into existence on the low table as Granger approached. She pulled some pillows off of the bed and made a cosy nest for herself on the floor next to it.

“What are you doing with your clothes?” she asked, with a gesture at the torn, stained pile she had left in the bathroom next to his. “I unstitched my Extendable pocket. I can’t decide if it’s worth sending them to laundry? Do we donate to orphans?”

“Burn them,” said Draco.

“But what about the orphans?”

“The orphans can burn them to warm their hovels. Stop talking about the reeking clothes. You’re putting me right off my chocolate bonbons.”

Granger sighed at him, like she wanted to tell him that he was dreadful, but it wasn’t worth the effort, because he already knew that. Then she noticed a note on the table. “What’s this?”

“A welcome note from the hotel,” said Draco. Granger picked up the note, which was addressed to— “Miss Hormone and Mr. Crotch,” read Granger.

She set it down. Slowly, her hands rose to cover her face. Then, for a long minute, her shoulders shook, and she made small sounds, muffled by her hands.

“Er – are you laughing, or crying?” asked Draco at length, because if it was the latter, he supposed that he ought to do something?

“Both,” hiccoughed Granger. She sniffed, then rose to fetch a tissue.

When she returned, her eyes were bright, and a bit red around the edges, and her nose was pink. She resumed her seat at the low table and poured herself tea. “I can’t believe you did that to me again.”

“They wanted names downstairs,” shrugged Draco. “Though I rather suspect the witch knew who we were.”

“Do you think so? We came in looking like a pair of Muggle ruffians, one of which was bilious, and the other limping like Mad-Eye.”

“I wasn’t limping like Mad-Eye.”

“O, yes, you were. Still are, though the heat from the shower helped you. Do you want me to heal it again?”

Draco pondered this, then swallowed his pride and slid on to the floor next to her. He flipped open the dressing gown to expose his knee.

“I didn’t realise you observed me so closely,” said Draco. (Because she certainly didn’t observe the things he wished her to observe, the irritating creature.)

Granger’s wand tickled at his leg hair as she passed it over his knee. “Don’t flatter yourself; it comes with my job. Rather like how you assess everyone as though they’re a secret assassin.”

Draco scoffed.

“It’s true,” said Granger. “You eye everyone up like you’re deciding how best to break their necks. To say nothing of your devious uses of Legilimency.” She muttered a Healing spell, then added, “It’s not a complaint, mind you. It does feel safer to have someone of your calibre about. Especially today – today would’ve been an absolute catastrophe, had I attempted it on my own.”

Draco supposed that he could inform her that she’d performed quite competently in the field herself, and that he had been

properly impressed by a few of her stunts, but Granger completed the Healing and the moment passed.

She gave his knee a pat, as though he were a naughty boy who had fallen out of a tree, and not an Auror who had been attacked by a rampaging Manticore. “There. Now, no more dramatic rolls on concrete for a week. Parnell won’t be as nice as I am.”

Then she pulled at the edge of Draco’s robe and tucked it forcefully under his thigh.

“...I promise no dangly bits are going to escape without permission,” said Draco, observing this activity.

“I’m not chancing it, especially with a man named Crotch.”

Draco released an unexpected snort of amusement, so strong that it hurt his nose. Granger looked prim. “Today has been a comedy of errors.”

“Right. Let us not tempt the Fates,” said Draco.

Which was a big fat lie, because Draco had had a vague, not quite formed idea of Tempting the Fates by looking wildly seductive for absolutely no reason and seeing where that went (it had gone precisely nowhere). There had been an interesting sort

of potential in hot showers and a luxurious hotel suite, and being all but stark bollock naked with a witch.

But that was all it was – potential; existing in possibility, but not in actuality. With any other witch, yes. With this witch? No. This was Granger, and Granger was, well – Granger.

Now she kicked off her oversized slippers and moved to the window. She undid her hair from its wet pile and untangled it with her fingers. The curtains opened magically as she approached, desiring to show off the exclusive view of the Kensington Palace gardens. As she combed out her hair, Granger admired the vista, and regaled Draco with bits of Muggle and magical history on the place.

The sun was setting upon the British Isles, as it had set hours ago in the graveyard of ships in the desert.

“Two sunsets in one day,” said Granger with a sigh. “Rather magical, isn’t it?”

And she stood in the red light, rather magical herself, as though touched by fire. And gloaming fell upon the great city of London, and the sky turned to purple, and then, finally, came night. Draco had a glimpse of an enchantress with a cascade of hair tumbling

down her back – and then she twisted it up, and she was Granger again.

Draco joined her at the window. “Rather fewer stars than with the ships.”

“Rather,” said Granger, peering upwards. “Should anyone seek our counsel on where to build the next great wizarding observatory, we will have an answer.”

“Does that happen to you frequently? Being asked where to build observatories?” “O, daily. Hourly, even. Doesn’t it happen to you?”

“Of course. I field incessant enquiries as I care for the orphans.”

“Good of you.”

“Noblesse oblige.”

Granger glanced up at him with a look that told him he was an absolute smart-arse. Unless he was mistaken, there was a kind of latent fondness in it, though it was very, very deep down.

She pulled her robe more tightly around herself. “D’you think that mirror would send up some clothing for us? I don’t fancy going to the foyer to Floo in this finery.”

“You’re ready to face the Floo again so soon?” asked Draco.

He had been rather enjoying this interlude of peace and luxe decadence and – well, nice company. It was the détente after an Adventure. If it was strictly up to him, he would’ve planned untold hours of idleness in fluffy beds, and several more delectable meals, and visiting the spa, and perhaps a massage. He would’ve most certainly carried on until past Monday, with an explanation to Tonks that he and Granger were Recovering from an Ordeal.

Granger, however, did not seem to have even considered this delicious potential for lazing about. Granger was not that sort of woman. Granger was the type to drag you on a violent adventure, reduce your brain to boiled mash through hours of curse-breaking, impose exhausting transcendental moments upon you under the stars, have you fly her across a desert, and then, over tea, expect you to form some kind of intelligent opinion on Soviet irrigation projects.

Beastly.

“Am I ready? No. But I must get on. I have so much to do, now that I have the fragment. And Crooks will be waiting, you know.”

Draco strode to the mirror to cover his mild disappointment.
“Very well. Let’s make arrangements for the clothes.”

The request for robes was made, for a tall wizard and a witch of the approximate height of a pixie. (Granger stuck her head into the bathroom and corrected this non-error.)

It took about a quarter of an hour for the clothing to be sent up – Draco supposed that the unusual request must’ve sent the hotel’s house-elves all of a dither. Eventually, their dinner things faded off of the table, and two tidy packages surfaced.

The staid establishment had sent up equally sedate attire. The clothes were in the traditional style, with a great many buttons for Draco, and a great deal of lacing up for Granger.

“Well,” said Granger, eyeing her dark blue robes, “It’ll do to get me to the Floo, anyway.”

“Look – underthings,” said Draco, holding up a spectacularly unsexy pair of bloomers. “You can look like my great aunt Auriga.”

“Ugh – no.”

Draco added the bloomers to the orphan burning pile.

Granger went into the bathroom to change, while Draco made relatively quick work of his new attire, save for the buttons, which were too finicky for him to fasten using his wand. He did them halfway to his throat, and then decided that he didn't care enough to do them up further. They were only making themselves decent for a walk across the foyer to the Floo, after all.

Granger popped out of the bathroom with a similar problem, though hers consisted of ribbons and laces. "I see that these robes come with an assumption that the wearer will have a lady-in-waiting. Would you help?"

Draco, having no idea how to tie proper knots for a lady's robe, opted to grasp a handful of the ribbons and shove them into the back of the dress. And he did not spend a moment thinking about how Granger was not wearing underthings, thank you.

"That doesn't feel quite right," said Granger as the ribbons were stuffed in. "No. It's utterly shambolic."

"The naughty bits are covered, that's what matters."

They stopped in front of the mirror for a look before they descended to the foyer.

Draco said that Granger looked terribly like a Pure-blood wife, off to drop off the sprogs at King's Cross, in 1961.

Granger said that Draco looked like he'd just exited Scotland Yard in 1825.

The mirror chimed in to register its opinion that they were "An exceedingly handsome couple." Granger shuddered; Draco ran away.

The Seneca's foyer was irritatingly busy. Draco, doing mental arithmetic involving two sunsets, realised that it was only Saturday night in London. The crowds made more sense, then; the Seneca's dining rooms were the place to be for a certain slice of London's wizarding set.

The Floo hearth was just across the foyer, crackling cheerfully at them as they exited the lift. Granger's stride lengthened. "We can finally put this surreal day behind us—"

Then she stopped, and grasped Draco's arm in her pinchy grasp, and whipped him towards her. "What—"

"Shush," said Granger, flattening herself against the wall and manoeuvering Draco to stand in front of her. "Stand there."

“What are we—”

“Be big. Why are you always large and in the way, except when I need you to be?” asked Granger in a peevish whisper. “Shield me.”

“From who?” asked Draco, dearly wishing to turn around and assess the Secret Assassin, and perhaps murder him in cold blood.

“Cormac.”

“McLaggen?”

“How many other bloody Cormacs do you know?” asked Granger. She raised her hands to Draco’s robes and pulled up his collar, as though the flaps would afford her more privacy.

“What’s he done?”

“Oh, he’s only been infatuated with me for years. Tenacious kind of man. Sticky. Viscous, really. Stay there, his group is about to go into the dining rooms. No – wait – they’re still talking. I’m going to cast a Notice-Me-Not. Oh no – Derrick’s just spotted

you, I think. It's your stupid hair. Like a beacon across the bloody Pennines. No. They're coming this way. I was never here. Goodbye."

With that, Granger slipped under Draco's arm and attempted to dart back towards the lift, but it opened and a veritable flood of ladies and gentlemen ready for dinner poured out, and battered her to the side like a piece of flotsam.

Granger Disillusioned herself and asked why the lift was a bloody bollocksing clown car.

Draco, having gathered that his role was now to distract and deflect, turned around and greeted the approaching Derrick with a handshake ("Peregrine, my little lamb chop, how are you?") and McLaggen with a very long double handshake: "Hello; I don't believe we've met, Draco Malfoy – yes, I know I need no introduction – are you here for dinner with this scoundrel? I believe I remember you from Hogwarts. Do you still play Quidditch? You must join us at the pitch.

Peregrine comes on occasion, still a decent beater, though the swing's less powerful than it used to be – a touch of arthritis in his shoulder, I fancy, poor blighter. Do join us. Wednesday nights at the Manor. We've only had one death in five years. It's all in good fun, really..."

McLaggen had grown into a tall chap, as tall as Draco, and quite handsome, so Draco decided immediately that he didn't like him.

The man looked frightfully confused at Draco's effusive greeting, which probably ran contrary to Draco's general reputation as an arsehole. By the time McLaggen had regained possession of his hand, however, Granger had disappeared.

"Right," said Draco, "I must be off."

"Aren't you dining, Malfoy?" asked Peregrine. A grin played across his mouth. "Or did you have other business you were getting on with?"

"Other business?" repeated Draco with an innocent blink.

"I could've sworn I'd seen Hermione with you," said McLaggen, sidestepping around Draco to look towards the lifts. "I'd know that witch anywhere."

"Hermione? Hermione Granger? With me?" said Draco, his eyebrows at his hairline.

McLaggen, still gazing longingly beyond Draco's shoulder, did a kind of double-take towards him. "Oh – er – well, I suppose I might've been seeing things."

Peregrine scoffed. "They'd sooner kill each other than talk, I'd wager."

McLaggen's gaze slid to Draco's half-unbuttoned robes, and then to his crooked collar, which looked rather like a lady had gripped it in the last five minutes. "I suppose," he said, but there was doubt in his voice.

Draco decided that a spot of Legilimency was in order, to quantify that doubt. And besides,

Granger had felt unsafe and fled from this man, and given that his Principal had felt threatened, Draco was well within his rights to investigate.

This sound reasoning completed, Draco touched at McLaggen's mind to see if this wanker had the slightest training in Occlumency.

He did not.

Draco made a few remarks on the recent win of the Kestrels over the Cannons. When both of his interlocutors were occupied with the subject, he had a look at McLaggen's brains, such as they were.

He kept his examination at surface-level, flicking through the man's most recent thoughts. He saw himself as McLaggen had seen him across the foyer, pressed against the figure of a woman in navy robes, with dark hair piled onto her head. Then he saw the woman's back as she slipped towards the lift, undone ribbons streaming behind her. McLaggen was certain that Draco had been snogging someone, and almost certain that it had been Granger. Only the formal robes had thrown him off – that and the fact that she'd been with Draco Malfoy, of all people. The cognitive dissonance of the latter point rang throughout the memory.

Then Draco found associated memories: Granger speaking at the Ministry a year or two ago and then fleeing from McLaggen's amorous attentions; Granger giving McLaggen flustered excuses to avoid a dinner date as he grasped at her hand; Granger at a pub with her friends, cornered by McLaggen near the loo and fending off his drunken kiss, something like fear in her eyes. Every memory was tinged by McLaggen's mounting frustration, longing, and a chilling ongoing obsession with Granger.

Draco fought a very real urge to break McLaggen's handsome jaw.

Any further delving into the wizard's memories would bear the risk of discovery. Draco retreated from his mind and seamlessly rejoined the conversation with a snide remark on the performance of the Kestrels' Chasers. Meanwhile, he added McLaggen to his blacklist.

They said their goodbyes. Draco grinned as he shook McLaggen's hand. "Enjoy your dinner. See you at the pitch, I very much hope."

Derrick and McLaggen left.

Draco stalked off in search of Granger.

"Here," hissed a familiar whisper as Draco passed the lifts.

Granger's voice led to a sort of conference room, just off the corridor. It was dark. "Is he gone?" asked Granger.

"Soon," said Draco. "Their reservation is at half-past. Where are you?" "Here." Granger undid her Disillusionment. "Why do you look so murderous?" "What? This is my usual face."

“No: your eyes are flashing.”

“We had an argument about Quidditch.”

Granger’s dark gaze studied Draco in the penumbra. She had a hand on her hip. “Quidditch.” “Yes.”

So focused was Granger’s study of his eyes that Draco reflexively Occluded, even if Granger wasn’t a Legilimens.

Granger saw the change and her focus grew even more acute.

“You’re lying.” “Let’s go to the Floo.”

Granger refused to be distracted. “What happened?”

“How long are you going to let McLaggen terrorise you before you curse off his balls?”

“I knew it,” said Granger in a shrill mix of triumph and annoyance. “You used Legilimency on him.

You can’t do that.” “I can and I did.”

“Those are private matters. They have nothing to do with you.”

“He’s a danger to you.”

“What exactly did you see?” “Enough to decide that he’s a threat.”

“A threat?” repeated Granger. “He’s just a handsy idiot. I can, and always have, handled him, in the way I deem most

appropriate. If I thought hexing off his balls was the correct approach, I assure you that I would've done so."

"Why haven't you?"

"Because there are larger things at play."

"What larger things?" asked Draco. "And don't say his penis."

"Disgusting. No. He's on the MNHS Foundation Trust and on St. Mungo's Board of Directors. Even reporting him would have repercussions I need to balance carefully – much less a direct attack on his genitalia."

"He's one Firewhisky away from cornering you in a toilet and Stunning you," said Draco.

Granger made a gesture of flat dismissal. "He would never cross that line. He's not that stupid. He toes it – that's all. Stop looking like that, like you're about to go duel him in the foyer."

Draco scoffed. "He isn't worthy of a duel; I'd happily curse him in the back."

“No cursing. No nothing. None of this has anything to do with you. You shouldn’t have seen any of it.”

“Nothing to do with me?!” repeated Draco with fresh pique. “I’ve been mandated to keep you safe. That is literally why I am here, right now, dressed like a Victorian barrister, after a day of frolicking about labyrinths!”

“To keep me safe in the scope of my activities as a researcher – not my personal life!”

“This may shock you, but if you’re injured or incapacitated in your personal life, there would be a definite impact on your ability to research. Or do you disagree?”

Granger raised her eyes to the dark ceiling. “You’re acting like McLaggen is going to tear me limb from limb.”

“Were you in his head?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll decide what he’s likely to do,” said Draco, tapping at his own chest with unnecessary force.

Granger studied him. Then, warily, she asked, “Did you see him want to tear me limb from limb?” “No,” conceded Draco. “But

you've maddened him for years.”

“I know.”

The quarrel was blowing itself out. Granger's hands were now hooked onto the back of a chair, rather than balled at her hips, and Draco had stopped looking murderously in the direction of the foyer.

“Are there any other randy suitors that I need to be aware of?” asked Draco after a beat. Granger put a fingertip on her lip and thought. At length, she said, “Not to McLaggen's extent.” “That doesn't inspire confidence.”

Granger tossed her head. “What can I say; I'm magnetic. I can't even walk across a room without wizards falling into my lap.”

Draco recognised an echo of some of his own claims during their dance at the Delacroix party – at this very hotel, in fact. It was the exaggerated accent that got to him. “I do not sound that posh, Granger.”

“Oh yes, you do. You sound like you're about to go to the opera after a day of shooting innocent wildlife. Partridges, probably.”

“I rather thought you were going to say orphans.”

“You are terrible, but not that terrible. Now, promise me you won’t go and do something stupid about McLaggen.”

“I promise I shan’t do anything stupid about McLaggen,” said Draco, truthfully.

Granger’s eyes narrowed at him in the shadowy room, and she wisely rephrased her demand. “Promise you won’t do anything about McLaggen, full stop.”

“No,” said Draco. “Please.”

“No.”

“Malfoy.”

“Fine. I promise.”

“I wish I believed you.” “I wish you did, too.”

Granger massaged her temples. “All right. I will take you at your word. I have no other choice.” Draco did not bother to point out the severity of this mistake.

Now Granger stepped to the conference room door and poked her head out. “I think the coast is clear.”

Draco joined her at the door to ascertain the same. “Right. Notice-Me-Nots, this time, and a brisk pace.”

Thus equipped, they traversed the busy foyer, and made it to the hearth without further interruption.

“The Mitre,” said Granger, tossing in Floo powder.

The flames turned green and awaited Granger’s approach. Granger looked over her shoulder towards Draco, a new hesitancy in her expression.

“Poor darling. Be brave,” said Draco in mock encouragement.

Granger straightened. “I was going to say thank you, for today, but never mind.”

“Only doing my job,” said Draco, with as much devil-may-care insouciance as he could inject into it, as though today hadn’t been a Wickedly Dangerous Ordeal.

“Right. But perhaps a bit above and beyond.” “Nonsense.”

Granger sighed. “All right. Goodbye, then.” “Granger.”

“What?”

“Tell your cat I said pspsps.”

Her smile was brightness. She turned and disappeared into the fire. And, briefly, it felt like there was less gravity in the room.

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Chapter 17

The Dinner / Draco Malfoy Almost Causes
The Next Murder Sensation



To Draco's devious pleasure, McLaggen took him up on the invitation to pop by the pitch a few weeks later.

An unfortunate sequence of events occurred, which had positively, absolutely nothing to do with Draco – wet conditions, terribly aggressive Bludgers, temperamental brooms – that resulted in McLaggen taking a tumble off his broom from 30 metres up.

“I say,” said Davies, watching McLaggen being carted off the pitch by mediwitches. “That Bludger had it in for the bloke.”

“I didn’t even hit it that hard,” said Zabini.

“Poor old egg,” said Draco. “First time back on the broom in a while, as I understand it.” “Perhaps Bludgers can smell fear,” suggested Zabini.

“Hope it doesn’t put him off the sport,” said Davies. “We need a decent Keeper. Bickford’s moving to Spain.”

The general mood was a little subdued after the accident. The players decided to call it quits for the night, said their goodbyes, and Disapparated off to shower.

All except for Draco, who found, to the contrary, that the accident had had a stimulating effect on his morale. He left the pitch feeling quite invigorated.

~

Granger had a grievance to air. This development was heralded by her silvery otter, which found Draco the next evening. The timing was hideous; Draco was on a sensitive stakeout in Fowlmere, about to apprehend the notorious Thomas Talfrynn.

“You! You promised you wouldn’t do anything!” shrieked Granger’s otter into Draco’s face. “You are the worst!”

The shrill sound of Granger’s voice echoed through the alley where Draco had been hidden.

Talfrynn, who had been smoking in a doorway, just out of Stunning range, started – and Disapparated.

“Fucking fuck!” hissed Draco.

The otter, having conveyed its message, disappeared.

With a snarl, Draco pulled out Granger’s schedule. She was home. Which was perfect, because he was going to murder her.

He Apparated to her cottage in an exceedingly foul mood. He swept her wards aside and stormed up the path to her front door, which he proceeded to hammer.

Granger flung open the door with a vehemence that suggested that she, too, was on the warpath. “You’re a bloody idiot,” said Draco, by way of greeting.

“Me?” said Granger. She was wild about the eyes. “Me?! You’re the idiot! You weren’t to touch McLaggen!”

“You just ruined my best chance to catch bloody Talfrynn with your stupid otter!” “You sent McLaggen to A&E!”

“I’ve been pursuing Talfrynn for three fucking months!” snarled Draco. “Guess who was on shift at A&E last night?!” screeched Granger.

“Talfrynn has charges against him longer than my arm! Beast-baiting! Forgery! Blood sports! Racketeering! Cruelty to Magical Creatures! Extortion!—”

“I had to take care of that troglodyte for four fucking hours! You broke all of his limbs!” “—Fraud! Assault! Smuggling! And you utterly bodged it! Now he’s gone again!”

“McLaggen lived his every bloody hot nurse fantasy last night, thanks to you!” said Granger, jabbing her finger in Draco’s chest.

Draco snatched her hand and pulled it down. “If you could keep your fucking emotions under control, I’d have my man in shackles! But no! You had to send your rabid otter!”

“My emotions?!” blazed Granger. “You’re the one who worked himself up into a lather over McLaggen!”

“You’re the one who spectacularly bollocked my stakeout with your shrieking!” “If you had kept your word, none of this would have happened!”

“I didn’t even do anything – the man fell off his broom like the hollow-headed cretin he is!”

“I don’t believe you for an instant!”

“Believe whatever you want!”

“I will – you’re an opportunistic ghoul!”

“You’re a quarrelsome bloody shrew!”

“I can’t stand you!”

“I can’t stand you!”

Then they stood, tempers ablaze, lips parted, breaths coming quickly, and waited for the other to spit out a retort, so they might

continue tearing off each other's heads. Somehow, in the process of their screaming match and finger jabbing, they had come to stand close together. Granger was on the doorstop, so that, for once, her height almost matched Draco's. He felt her breath flutter against his chin.

Her anger made her glow; her gaze was afire with the heat of her conviction; her cheeks were flushed. She wanted to throttle him as much as he wanted to throttle her. And there was a moment of madness, where the fulcrum between rage and passion wavered and tilted, and he could've throttled her, or he could've crushed his mouth against hers, hard, to do something with the intensity of the feeling; to shut her up; to prove a point.

The mad possibility was contagious – her eyes flitted to his mouth. Then she blinked and, like a thing awakening from a trance, looked distantly shocked.

Realising that he was still gripping at her hand, Draco released it, and took a large step back. Granger, too, took a large step away, and looked like she'd rather toddle back to the crypt and throw herself onto the Crucio carpet than be there. Her blush carried up from her cheeks to across the bridge of her nose.

Draco, feeling utterly thrown off-kilter by the Moment, cleared his throat, cast about for a thing to say (nothing was forthcoming), and then said he'd best be off, as it was getting dark.

Granger looked anywhere but at him and said, "Right."

Mutually satisfied with this mature, robust conclusion to their quarrel, they stepped apart even further, and Granger made as though to shut the door.

There was a long, sustained meow from somewhere in the garden. In the shadows, an orangey blotch advanced towards them.

The cat paused at Draco's feet, and then, as though it was bestowing a great gift upon him, it wound itself around his boots and coated his trousers in orange.

Draco was almost as wrong-footed by this as by the Moment with Granger. He hardly knew what to do with himself. However, when he bent down to stroke the cat, it hissed at him, and fled back into the dark garden.

“It’s on his terms, and his terms only,” said Granger. “Pernickety creature.”

“He is.”

Granger studied a bit of peeling paint on the doorpost. Draco stared at the wisteria.

Granger bit her lip. “Did I really ruin your stakeout?” “Yes. Did McLaggen really end up with you last night?” “Yes.”

They muttered something that may have been, to the listener with impossibly acute ears, an apology, in a language principally consisting of mutters and throat-clearing. Their seething fury gave way now to a certain degree of abashedness, which Draco was more adept at hiding than Granger.

“Did he really have all of his limbs broken?” asked Draco. “All. And a concussion, to boot.”

“Ah. Poor boy.”

“Blood sports, though?” asked Granger, with a bit of Do-Gooder anxiety creeping into her voice. “Nundu-baiting,” nodded Draco. “Talfrynn’s made a bloody fortune on it, too.”

“Nundu?! How is he even keeping one captive?”

“We aren’t sure – a tranquiliser cocktail, no doubt. Stunners.”

“Shit,” said Granger, looking freshly guilty.

“Indeed.”

The conversation petered out. The wisteria’s long fronds fluttered in the breeze, so Draco looked at them again, out of pure intellectual curiosity. Granger took a powerful interest in a crack in the threshold.

Draco was about to say that he had to be off – again – but Granger’s stance shifted. She was no longer positioned to pounce at his throat – she was half turned into the house, hesitating over something.

Normally, Draco would’ve prompted her, rudely, but today, he rather felt that he had used up his rudeness allowance.

Granger cleared her throat and spoke in a smallish voice. “I had something I wanted to show you.” “What is it?”

Granger disappeared into the cottage and returned with a newspaper clipping. She passed it to Draco. It was from the seventh page of the Prophet and titled, Plundering in Provence!

The article described the theft of a relic from a monastery that Draco had certainly never heard of in his life. The burglars were described as uniquely powerful individuals with a penchant for

arson, who had defeated nigh-impenetrable security measures, unbroken since 1008.

Our readers will be as flabbergasted as the investigators when they learn that the prized relic – the skull of a saint – was returned to the monastery anonymously a few days after the break-in. Investigators suspect that the burglars may have been thrill-seekers looking for a challenge. A few of the Sisters sustained non-life threatening injuries following the intrusion. When asked whether the investigation would continue, French authorities said, “Quelle question idiote, la relique est de retour, non?”, which your correspondent takes to mean ‘No.’

“I got my alliterative headline,” said Draco.

“You did.” Granger twisted her hands together. “I got what I absolutely didn’t want, which was publicity.”

“You will be the prime suspect, certainly,” said Draco. “Everyone knows that beloved Healer Hermione Granger is secretly a thrill-seeker and an arsonist.”

Granger gave him a reproving look. “Be serious.” “I am. You’re a perilous sort of witch.”

Granger plucked the article out of Draco's hand, pulled out her wand, and burnt the clipping. "See? More arson," said Draco. "And we can add destroying evidence to your list of crimes." "You'll have to arrest me, if I continue down this troubled path." "I'm already thinking of it. Did the skull end up being useful? Please tell me it was worth the faff." "It was," said Granger. "Immensely. I've made significant strides."

"Good."

Granger leaned against the doorpost, a small amount of her awkward tension gone. "My next frolic will be devastatingly boring, in comparison."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

"It's true. I'm only going to Hogwarts."
"Whatever for?"
"A medieval text. One of Snape's."

"Ah," said Draco. Snape had bequeathed the entirety of his library to Hogwarts, and had thus, in one fell swoop, made the school's rare book collection almost as extensive as that of most universities.

“That won’t be till later in the summer, at Lughnasadh. Not because any magical potencies are at play, mind you. It’s just my next weekend off before—”

A shrill sound interrupted her. Draco’s first thought was a ward alarm. He whipped around, brandishing his wand, with every intention to maim.

Granger gasped, “I left the cooker on!”

Draco had smelled something burning, come to think of it, but he’d thought it was the bit of newspaper.

Granger plunged into the house. Draco followed to witness whatever entertainment was to come.

She pulled something out of the cooker – something quite black. Draco opened a window and conjured a stiff breeze to air the place out.

“Well,” said Granger, looking sad. “That was dinner.” “Mm mm,” said Draco, observing the coal.

Draco had naively thought that her font of fury had been drained. He was wrong. Granger always had an additional supply of wrath.

“This is your fault,” said Granger, turning towards him with a hand on her hip. “You distracted me.”

“What was it?” asked Draco, to ascertain whether he should feel bad.

Granger pointed to the bin. A box was sticking out of it, which indicated that it had been Miss Mabel’s Frozen Fish Pie.

“I haven’t the slightest regret,” said Draco.

Granger scraped the blackened heap into the bin along with the box, which was, in Draco’s opinion, where it had belonged in the first place.

Now Granger was poking about her cupboards, the contents of which were two tins of tuna, dried beans, and a packet of biscuits. “Take-away it is. I usually pop round to the shops at the weekend. Stop looking so judgy.”

Draco, feeling very judgy indeed about the dried beans, was struck by an impetuous, mad, wild idea.

“Granger.”

“What.”

“Come with me to dinner.”

Granger, who had disappeared halfway to Narnia to retrieve a stale box of crackers, pulled out of her cupboard. “What?”

Draco repeated himself slowly, with interpretive gestures, so that she would understand. “You. Me. Dinner.”

He might as well have suggested setting fire to a children’s hospital, for all the shock his suggestion generated.

“You want to eat dinner with me? Tonight? On purpose?”

“No,” said Draco with a thick layer of sarcasm slathered across the top. “By accident. We’ll trip up to the table with our mouths open and mash in some hors d’oeuvres.”

Granger was still looking at him askance.

Draco raised his eyes to the ceiling. She was making such a Thing of this. “I promise that if I were going to poison you, it would’ve been upon my arrival, not now. There’s a rather large amount of food waiting for me at the Manor. And it would

delight the elves. And,” he hastened to add, “My mother is in Florence.”

She was still regarding him in a suspicious kind of confusion, her arms crossed in the typical Granger defence stance. “Why?”

“It’s my fault you burnt your cardboard pie.”

Granger’s raised eyebrow suggested that a lot of things were his fault, for which he’d never attempted to make amends previously, so he would have to pardon her misgivings.

“Shall we go?” asked Draco, ignoring these rather just qualms.

Granger stood unmoving, studying him sceptically, as though she was trying to work out his Ulterior Motive. It was a stark and aggravating contrast to the typical witch’s reaction to a dinner invitation from Draco Malfoy, which was usually breathless yeses and a great many giggles.

Not that he was inviting her to that kind of dinner. He was simply observing the distinction.

The smell of burnt fish pie wafted from the bin and settled around them in a gentle, tragic aura.

It spurred Granger to action. She crammed the bin's lid on tightly, turned, and made for the stairs.

Women didn't run from Draco, as a general rule – quite the contrary. It was an unfamiliar and unpleasant sensation.

"Oi," said Draco, vexed.

"I'm going to change," called Granger. "I'm not going to the Manor in my house things. Besides, I stink like burnt."

Draco, as he watched her and her bum sprint up the stairs in her short Muggle shorts, vaguely wanted to say that he didn't object to the house things, and that it was only her and him at dinner, so it didn't matter, and plus, she often smelled a bit like candle smoke, and it didn't bother him in the least.

However, Granger was upstairs, so Draco kept these mawkish sentiments to himself.

He waited for her to change, which took approximately two business days. Then she came tumbling down the stairs, wearing a red summer dress. "There, now I'll be presentable."

"Presentable for whom?"

“I don’t know,” said Granger, pulling her hair into a low side bun that was, somehow, both elegant and messy. “Being with you attracts chaos; I half expect Shacklebolt to decide to pop in for a chit-chat.”

Draco felt that the chaos attractor was her, but, nevertheless. “I rather hope he does. He can tell Tonks I’m building a rapport with my Principal and not being a frightful bully.”

“You aren’t a bully. You’re just pushy,” said Granger, sliding on strappy sandals. “I’m pushy?”

“Bit bossy, really.” “Oh, this is rich.”

They Apparated to the Mitre, and from there Flooed to the Swan, and from there they Apparated to the Manor. It was the same trajectory that they had taken on that fateful night when Granger had popped into existence on the Manor’s Quidditch pitch, only in reverse – and in less frantic circumstances.

This thought also seemed to have crossed Granger’s mind, as they materialised at the Manor. Just as Draco was stealing a glance at her, Granger met his eyes. Then she held up her hand. It was trembling only slightly.

“Progress,” said Granger.

Draco said, “Well done,” with quiet sincerity.

The Manor’s large front doors swung open at their approach. One of the younger house-elves scurried across the entrance hall with a high-pitched word of welcome – and then he saw Granger.

He squeaked in surprise, Disapparated, and then his high voice echoed from the kitchens: “Master is home! And he brought a lady! Make whipped cream!”

Then the elf Apparated before them again, as though he hadn’t gone anywhere in the first place. “Welcome, Sir and Miss.”

“Thank you, Tupey. Could you tell the kitchens that I will be joined by my colleague, Healer Granger, for dinner?”

Draco might as well have broken the house-elf’s heart with this clarification. “Of course, Sir,” he said, his large eyes filled with sudden devastation.

“And we want to dine on the south terrace,” added Draco.

Tupey bowed and Disapparated. Distantly, his shrill voice echoed with a request to cancel the whipped cream.

Granger looked bemused. "...Whipped cream?"

"Never mind that," said Draco. "Let's have an aperitif to start. I think we've just launched a panic in the kitchens."

Granger was not quite so fixated on her feet as she'd been during her last visit. She glanced about, taking in the white walls, the enchanted clusters of candles floating every few paces, the fires ablaze in the many hearths. The new Manor was a sight less dreary than the old.

Draco steered her to one of the salons, which was well-supplied with all manner of snacks. They had twenty seconds to select a seat and pick at olives before Tupey materialised again, desiring to know what they'd like to drink.

"A cognac for me," said Draco.

"And for Colleague Healer Granger?" asked Tupey. "Red wine, please."

"Cabernet Sauvignon? Merlot? Pinot Noir? Malbec?" asked Tupey.

Granger appeared paralysed by the onslaught of choices. "Er – I'll try the Malbec. Thank you." Tupey bowed and Disapparated.

Next came Henriette, who was slightly better at concealing her excitement (only her quivering ears gave her away).

“Mademoiselle Granger,” she said with a curtsey, before proffering a tray. “Roulades de courgettes, noix épicées au piri-piri, blinis de saumon et de chèvre au pesto.”

The tray of amuse-gueules was set to hovering next to Granger. Henriette Disapparated.

Granger opened her mouth to say something, but there was another crack, and Tupey Apparated with the drinks. Draco was given his with the usual amount of politeness, but Granger’s was placed in her hand with the utmost care. Tupey Disapparated.

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but a third elf Apparated from the kitchens to ask whether Colleague Healer Granger had any allergies or preferences the kitchens should be aware of? She did not. The kitchen elf Disapparated.

Granger attempted a comment, but Henriette cracked into existence with serviettes and tiny forks, and Disapparated again.

Draco and Granger eyed each other warily as silence descended upon the salon, half expecting another loud crack to interrupt

their next attempt at conversation.

“They are a bit – a bit intense, aren’t they?” said Granger.

“They are positively itching for guests,” said Draco. “When my mother is away, there aren’t any functions to host, and there’s only me to feed.”

“This entire tray is enough for dinner,” said Granger, selecting a salmon blini.

“Er – no. Save your appetite.”

They meandered towards the south terrace. It was an exquisite summer night, warm, but blessed with a sweet, playful little breeze. The breeze toyed with the escaped tendrils of Granger’s hair and tugged at the hem of her dress. Not that Draco was looking at her.

The grounds were illuminated at night by enchanted candles and lanterns at the foot of every tree, and strung along all of the footpaths. In some ways, the effect was even more magnificent than during the day – the fountains and water features shimmered and the flowers were luminous, as though glowing from within.

Draco left Granger to admire a prospect of the gardens while he strode ahead to see if the table was ready. He was satisfied by what the house-elves had put together on such short notice: a silver table and two chairs, a surfeit of summer flowers lending their perfume to the night air, and a real extravagance of lanterns and fairy lights.

It was, however, terribly romantic. Henriette was laying it on rather thick, given that Draco had specified a colleague. He had had countless dinners and drinks with colleagues and collaborators al fresco over the summer, and Henriette had never once seen fit to decorate with roses. Red roses.

“Henriette?” he called.

“Oui?” replied Henriette, cracking into existence at his side.

“You are a scallywag.”

“Je ne connais pas ce mot,” said Henriette, shrugging her lack of comprehension. “The roses, Henriette.”

“What about them, Monsieur?”

“They are too much.”

“Too much what, Monsieur?”

“Too much everything, Henriette.”

“Il faut se laisser ensorceler, Monsieur.”

Which was just what Draco was asking for, really – unsolicited mysticism about allowing himself to be bewitched.

“Take them away, Henriette.”

“They are at the peak of their bloom, Monsieur. It seems a pity to waste them.” “Nevertheless, I’d like—”

“Oh!” came Granger’s voice. “The roses!”

Henriette gave Draco a long look which suggested that, as always, she knew best, and if he’d stop second guessing her, he would also stop making a fool of himself, the silly boy.

Granger was clutching her hands together, standing before the table. “How beautiful! I’ve never seen this variety – is it double-flowered? – and the colouration, it’s so deep!”

“It’s the Apolline,” said Henriette. “The rose garden is quite resplendent with them, Mademoiselle. You should go for a walk after dinner. I am sure Monsieur would be pleased to escort you, in Madame Malfoy’s absence.”

The Monsieur in question gave Henriette a quelling look in the face of this fresh impertinence. Granger, however, found a vast delight in the idea, and said that she would adore it, and asked

where the Apolline had come from, and how long they had had her, etc.?

“Food first, then feminine ecstasies about the rose garden,” said Draco.

Granger and Henriette both regarded him coolly and made Draco feel the weight of their Low Opinion of him.

Henriette indicated that she would fetch their first course.

Granger took her chair with a sniff. “I wouldn’t want my feminine ecstasies to get in the way of your masculine appetites, of course.”

Draco hid a smile in his cognac. “And what do you know about my masculine appetites?” “Only that they are unrelenting.”

“Accurate.”

“And impair your judgement.” “Sometimes.”

“We can only hope they will be satisfied by Henriette’s entrée, then perhaps we can have a civil conversation about roses, uninterrupted.”

“Partially satisfied, probably.”

Granger regarded him with narrowed eyes, as though she was detecting the double-entendre, but wasn't quite sure he meant it. Draco decided to let her stew in the incertitude.

“Tourteau frais, décortiqué par nos soins,” announced Henriette, as she and Tupey arrived with crab and herbed butter.

They ate. Granger was dainty about it, as she tended to be, and easily distracted by long looks out past the terrace and onto the candle-lit grounds. Now she had her chin propped onto the back of her hand, and was gazing at the evanescent beauty of a row of poplars, whose young leaves shivered in the breeze like silvery medallions.

Draco half wanted to interrupt her and bring her back to the important things (himself), but it was also rather nice to sit in companionable silence and sip their drinks. Dinners at the Manor were normally agenda-driven affairs, with either the guest or Draco having something to gain or something to lose. This one was unique for its lack of any of those pressures; Draco had no manoeuvering to do and knew he wasn't being manipulated against. They were merely eating together as he made small reparations for a burnt fish pie. Granger had no designs on his fortune or his person.

Sometimes, being with her was easy.

“Risotto au basilic,” said Henriette, sweeping away their crab and depositing a plump dollop of risotto in front of them instead. Basil wafted deliciously off of it. “How do you know so much about roses, anyway?” asked Draco.

“My mum used to grow them,” said Granger, with a kind of laboured insouciance. “Used to? She’s quit the hobby?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen my parents in a few years.”

“Oh.”

Given that she was trying to look unaffected, Draco did not question her further on the subject, which he thought showed great delicacy.

However, Granger continued. “I Obliviated both of them during the war. Sent them to Australia to keep them safe. By the time I’d found them again, it was too late to reverse the spell without risking damage to their minds. They’re living quite happily in Adelaide and have no idea that they ever had a daughter.”

Ah, yes, just what Draco had been hoping for. Some light-hearted reminiscing about wartime tragedies.

He didn't bother with words of sympathy because he didn't really do those, and she wouldn't believe he was being sincere, anyway.

"This explains how careful you are with Obliviate," said Draco.

"Oh, yes. It was a hard lesson to learn. Minds – memories – aren't to be tampered with lightly. And I systematically dismantled eighteen years' worth. That had repercussions."

"It kept your parents alive," said Draco.

"It did. At a cost." Granger finished her wine. "Anyway – it's too beautiful an evening to be maudlin. Let's talk of other things."

Draco finished his cognac so that her empty glass didn't feel lonely. He was sensitive that way. He eyed Granger. "You rather look as though you have a subject in mind."

"Broken promises," said Granger. Accusation lingered in the statement. Draco raised an eyebrow, feeling rather targeted. "I've broken a promise?" "Yes."

"Have I? Illuminate me."

Just as Granger was about to speak, Tupey cracked into existence to suggest a Sauvignon Blanc for the next course, given that it

was fish. Draco and Granger agreed. Tupey served the wine and Disapparated.

“The archaeologists’ report on the Celtic ruins,” said Granger. “The ones you found under the dungeons. You never sent it to me.”

Draco sat back in theatrical shock. “You’re right. I never did. Caught en flagrant délit.”

“Je sais,” said Granger, looking grave. “A terrible breach of trust.”

“Will you ever forgive me?”

“No. I quite fancy holding a fearsome grudge about it. Perhaps launching a wholesale feud.” “You say that as though the houses of Granger and Malfoy weren’t already feuding,” said Draco. “True,” said Granger.

As Granger mulled over this new complexity, Draco waved Henriette towards them and sent her to fetch the archaeologists’ report. Henriette returned with a thick roll of parchment in her hands and a quizzical look on her face.

She then offered to fetch other reading materials more suited to a summer evening, such as some books of French poésie?

“No, thank you, Henriette – that will be all,” said Draco.
“Mademoiselle has peculiar literary tastes and prefers to read about dead monks.”

Henriette Disapparated with a shake of her head.

Granger accepted the scroll with a smile playing across her lips.
“When you put it that way, I most certainly sound peculiar.”

Draco shrugged. “Peculiar is, at the very least, not boring.”

“I accept your poorly delivered, backhanded excuse for a compliment,” said Granger, unfurling the scroll.

“I wouldn’t want you to become conceited, you know.” “No. You are unerringly vigilant on that front.”

Granger sank into the report, leaving her risotto to grow cold on her plate. She occasionally remembered Draco’s presence, which was signaled by an “Oh!” and then a sharing of some fascinating snippet or other.

Henriette Apparated with the next course and gave Granger a reproving look when she took stock of the situation.

“Mademoiselle! J’ose vous rappeler que vous êtes à table.”

Granger jumped and blurted out an apology, and tucked the scroll away. She looked abashed as Henriette took away the risotto (now a congealed lump) and replaced it with the fish.

“Turbot poêlé, artichauts poivrade et citron confit.” Henriette deposited Granger’s fish and artichokes with particular firmness, with intimations that if she did not consume it all, there would be Words to be had.

The effect of Henriette’s menacing looming was somewhat lessened by the fact that her nose barely came above the table. However, Granger, wide-eyed, said the turbot looked utterly delicious, and crammed a few forkfuls into her mouth under Henriette’s watchful eye.

Satisfied, Henriette Disapparated.

Granger choked down her fish with the help of some wine.

Draco was holding back laughter. “You look properly terrorised.”

“She is frightening.” Granger cast a furtive glance over her shoulder and then looked back at him. “And I’m sorry – that was terribly rude of me. I got engrossed and I – I didn’t realise.”

“I should like to have a look about for a Boggart,” mused Draco between his own bites. “Perhaps in one of the spare rooms.”

Granger blinked. “A Boggart? Whatever for?”

“I have a feeling yours will now take the shape of an eighty year old French house-elf and I’d like to confirm the theory.”

Granger bit at her lip to keep from smiling. “You think you’re terribly funny.” “I am,” said Draco.

“And what form would yours take, should we go Boggart-hunting?”

Draco sat back and steepled his fingers together. “Now, that’s a question. I haven’t encountered one since the war. I’d like to think it would no longer be Voldemort springing up at me like an Ennervated cadaver.”

“Well, what’s frightened you recently?” “Would you like me to be honest with you?”

“I’d prefer it, but I don’t expect it,” sniffed Granger.

“There was a moment today, on your doorstep, when you looked like you were about to Transfigure me into an insect and stamp

on me.”

Granger looked as though she were making special note of this new idea. “What kind of insect?” “I don’t know – I’d assume a loathsome little cockroach.”

“Nigh unkillable,” said Granger, shaking her head. “Poor choice. I’d go with something more squishy. Though, if I was to kill you, I’d like you to know that I wouldn’t use Transfiguration.”

“Oh, good. That wouldn’t be sporting. How would you do it, then?”

“Perhaps tie you up and let Crookshanks have a go. Then I’d only be an accessory to murder.” “The first part of that sentence was promising, until you brought in the cat.”

Granger took no notice whatsoever of this mild flirtatious overture. She was reminiscing. “He nearly suffocated Ron, once. Laid down across his face while he was sleeping. I harbour a private fear that it was on purpose.”

“Well, that’s settled, then: my new Boggart is your cat.”

Granger didn’t give him the honour of an all-out laugh, but she hid a smile behind a sip of wine. Henriette returned to inspect Granger’s progress. Granger said that it was all delicious, and

that the artichokes in particular were the most perfectly prepared that she had ever had the pleasure of eating.

Henriette said, “Parfait. They have a great many health benefits, you know, artichokes.” “Do they?”

“Oui, oui, so many nutrients and vitamins. They are also an aphrodisiac.” Henriette Disapparated after conveying this vital information.

Granger contemplated her empty plate with a kind of consternation. Draco dearly wanted to laugh. “I’ll know what to blame, should you get handsy,” said Draco.

Granger turned her gaze to his equally empty plate and said, “Likewise.” Tupey and Henriette Vanished the empty plates and served dessert.

“Millefeuille à la vanille de Bourbon,” said Henriette, presenting the final course with a flourish. Tupey proposed a sweet Sauternes wine to accompany it, which Draco and Granger accepted.

Granger pressed her fork into the tender millefeuille. “Henriette, Tupey, I need to thank you. This meal was a great deal better than what I was going to have tonight.”

Henriette curtseyed and Tupey bowed.

“I’m certain Miss Mabel makes a cracking fish pie,” said Draco.

“Pardon? Who is Miss Mabel?” asked Henriette. “Is it your house-elf, Mademoiselle?”

“No,” said Granger. “She is, er – she makes fish pies that you can buy at the shops. Well, I’m not actually sure she’s a real entity; it’s all marketing, probably...”

“Frozen fish pies,” said Draco to Henriette. “Frozen pies that Mademoiselle keeps frozen, and then pops in the cooker when she has half a moment to think about feeding herself.”

Henriette gasped at this revelation. Tupey’s hands flew to his mouth.

“And when that fails, Mademoiselle has two tins of tuna and some dried lentils. Those are the entire contents of her cupboards.” Draco grew grave. “I’ve seen many troubling things in my life, Henriette, but Mademoiselle’s cupboards are another thing entirely.”

Henriette’s hands were upon her heart; her eyes were wide.
“Non!” “Oh, oui. I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“Monsieur is slightly exaggerating,” said Granger, her grip on her fork suggesting that she might poke Draco with it, if he didn’t

stop scandalising the elves.

“You’re right,” said Draco. “There was also a box of crackers, only a few years old. Bit dusty, but still good.”

Henriette and Tupey both looked at Granger and seemed ready to weep.

“I hadn’t gone to the shops yet this week,” said Granger, in an attempt at reassurance. “That’s why my cupboards were so empty. I was a bit busy.”

“O, yes,” said Draco. “Because they’re usually filled to bursting, aren’t they?”

He’d been waiting for Granger’s under-the-table kick, and it came. He snatched her ankle in his hand and tutted.

Granger tried to regain possession of her foot, but Draco informed her that being kicky meant that she had lost foot privileges.

Henriette was oblivious to the exchange, too busy being distraught about why nobody was helping Mademoiselle and her

empty cupboards? Tupey seemed on the verge of hyperventilation.

“I have a Modest Proposal,” said Draco.

Granger’s leg twitched. Draco’s grasp held firm. And that was all it was – a grasp. Her ankle was bare and soft under his palm, and his fingers were curious about the delicate shape of her bones, and what it would feel like to trace them, but he did not partake. It remained a grasp. Because this was Granger. And he had no interest whatsoever in caressing her ankle.

And if he had any interest in doing so – which he didn’t – it would be the fault of the artichokes.

Granger didn’t quite seem to dare demand her foot back out loud in front of Henriette, because that would lead to uncomfortable questions about why she had attempted to kick Monsieur at the dinner table, which was a gaffe far greater than reading.

“What Proposal?” asked Granger in a kind of growl, as of a cat caught by the scruff of its neck.

“The house-elves are bored out of their skulls without my mother and her fêtes – why don’t you give them permission to pop in

once or twice a week, and fill up your cupboards? At least until my mother is back?”

“Absolutely n—”

Draco gave Granger's ankle a squeeze before she could devastate the elves.

Henriette and Tupey swiveled towards Granger as she spoke, hearts in their eyes at the thought of her empty pantry just waiting for attention. Henriette's hands were pressed against her breast; Tupey's were folded into a kind of supplication. Their swimmy eyes positively shimmered.

Granger's voice died.

“Absolutely necessary, I think Mademoiselle was going to say,” said Draco to the elves.

Granger gave him a look suggestive of a second incoming kick, if only she wasn't frightened of losing possession of her other foot, too. She gave the elves her best attempt at a smile. “Perhaps Monsieur and I could discuss the details in private?”

“So it's a yes, Miss?” asked Tupey, breathless.

“Of course it’s a yes,” said Henriette, starry-eyed. “Mademoiselle would never be so rude as to turn down Monsieur’s offer. She is too bien élevée.”

Granger’s smile was quite fixed.

The elves bowed and curtseyed half a dozen times, then Disapparated to the kitchens to share the good news.

“You would try the patience of a saint,” said Granger through a clenched jaw. “Return my foot before I turn you into that cockroach.”

Draco relinquished possession of her foot, probably a bit slower than necessary, the tips of his fingers brushing at her ankle as he let go.

She noticed. There was a flush of pink across her cheekbones. Possibly the wine. Possibly other things.

“I’ve only spoken to one saint, and she quite liked me,” said Draco, running his hand through his hair.

Granger, blush notwithstanding, was exasperated. “She’d only spent five minutes in your precious company, not long enough to discover how endlessly aggravating you are. Like imposing house- elves on me, of all people. What was the thought process, if any, behind that decision?”

“I saw a problem that was in my capacity to fix,” said Draco. “It’s a life philosophy I learned from a rather clever witch.”

Granger stared at him. The double blow of her own words and the genuine compliment threw her entirely off-kilter. She sat back, struggling to remain cross. “You are – you are simply –”

“Indescribable, I know,” said Draco. “Must you always have the last word?”

“Only on the rare occasions when you permit it.”

Granger was struggling with her lingering annoyance and amusement. Her eyes sparkled with it. It made for a rather lovely picture.

“When does your mother come back to England?”

“Not for another fortnight,” said Draco. “Then you’ll be free of the elves. But in the meantime, you’ll have given them back their

joie de vivre.”

Granger was looking in the direction of the kitchens. “Very well. But only because I don’t want Henriette to think me mal élevée for rejecting your offer. I think she would take personal offence.”

“If Henriette had concerns about your upbringing, she would’ve snubbed you from the beginning. She is a rather opinionated elf. Now eat your millefeuille, or she’ll be scolding you again.”

Granger turned her attention to her plate. Draco sipped at the sweet wine. “What was the whipped cream for?” asked Granger. “That is a private matter and it would be best for you to forget it.” “Hm,” said Granger, studying him over her glass.

They finished their desserts.

Henriette materialised and kindly reminded Monsieur that he was meant to take Mademoiselle through the rose garden. Then she stood, her small hands curled onto her bony hips, and stared intimidatingly at him until he got up and offered his arm to Granger.

Granger’s touch on his arm was light, at first, but after a few steps, her grip tightened. “Shit. Is the ground a bit wobbly, or am I completely battered?”

“We are both steeped to the tonsils in wine,” said Draco.
“Tupey’s attentions were – unrelenting.”

It was a miracle neither of them had said something tipsy and stupid yet – but the night was young, and the path to the gardens beckoned, and the possibilities for stupidities glimmered like the candles that lined the way.

They wandered through a double row of lilacs heavy with bloom. On their right stood the greenhouse, its warm glow dappled by the riot of mauve blossoms. The breeze made the blossoms quiver in a butterfly-tremble; the light shimmered across the path.

In the mingling shadows, Granger held up her hand so that it was silhouetted against the light of the greenhouse.

It was steady.

It was her left hand that she held up. Her arm was bare and against the skin of her inner arm lay that blur.

Granger turned, intending to continue down the path, but Draco interrupted by committing the first of the evening’s stupidities. Later, he would blame the wine.

He took her wrist – gently, but she nonetheless flinched – and pulled it toward him. Granger was shocked. “What are you–?!”
“I didn’t realise you still had this,” said Draco.

He turned her wrist so that the blur of the glamour caught the vacillating light.

“Well – I do.” Her voice was uncertain. She stared at him with a wide-eyed wariness – a wild thing about to pull away and run. She smelled like the sweetness of the Sauternes.

Two heavy words that Draco had been carrying since Provence came out with difficulty. “I’m sorry.”

“It was your mad aunt, not you.” “I did nothing to stop her.” To this, Granger gave no answer.

“I suppose that if there was a way to heal it away, you would’ve found it,” said Draco. “I would’ve. I tried a great many things, but...”

“Some things don’t heal.”

“No. They don’t.” Granger was quiet for a moment. Then she waved the glamour away to reveal the word. “Ugly thing.”

The old injury stood clear on her skin, as raw as the day it had been carved. It glistened still. Draco's mouth was cottony and dry. For a moment she was 17, lying as though dead on the drawing room floor, mere metres from where they stood. Then she was Granger again, a burning intelligence, a world-changer, but still, for all that, marked. Draco's hold on her wrist grew a little tighter – shame and sorrow.

“Does it still hurt?” asked Draco, because it looked too raw not to. “Sometimes. I’m used to it, now. Or I just forget.”

Draco had never had any intention to show her his own inner arm shame – all the more shameful because it had been willingly acquired.

And yet, he found himself unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeve.

What was left on his arm was a distorted, half-faded Mark. It was a grotesque mix of black flesh and raised scar tissue, now, from failed attempts to remove it.

“Oh,” gasped Granger.

“Mine’s uglier. In every way, Granger. I wanted it.”

The gasp had been shock more than horror. She was observing the twisted flesh with a Healer's eye, one that had seen worse things.

Granger was silent for a long time. At length, she said, "But you don't want it any more." "No."

"That's what matters."

"It doesn't erase the past," said Draco. The defiled arm he held between them was an eloquent attestation of that.

"No. But the choices you've made since define you more than those you made then." "Do they?"

"You were sixteen years old. You were – we were all – child soldiers flung into a war, trying to do what we were taught was right. Trying to protect our loved ones."

"Must you be so terribly forgiving?"

"It's been fifteen years," said Granger. She lowered her own arm. She looked weary. "I can assure you that I've ruminated on the matter at length. I've forgiven those who deserve it."

“It rather interferes with my wallowing in self-reproach.”

“Wallowing isn’t productive.”

Now it was Granger’s turn to take his wrist. She pulled it to a triangle of light amongst the shadows and leaned in to observe the Mark more closely. Draco wanted to pull away – but she had been brave enough to let him look at hers, so he mustn’t be a coward now.

Her finger brushed over scarred ridges and half-melted flesh that had never felt the touch of another’s hand.

She looked heartsick. “You tried to curse it off?”

“Yes,” said Draco. Amongst other things. “Years ago, now.”

His arm twitched under her scrutiny. He wanted to put the Mark away again: it was so ugly, so misshapen, so full of hideous memories and shame.

“I don’t think there’s much I could do with this one, either,” said Granger. “In terms of Healing, I mean.” The thought seemed to make her sad.

“Mine is a memento of some terrible decisions. It’s well deserved. Yours – yours is a wretched tragedy.”

"It is," said Granger. Then she added, "Well, they're both tragedies in different ways." More righteous forgiveness. It made Draco want to flee.

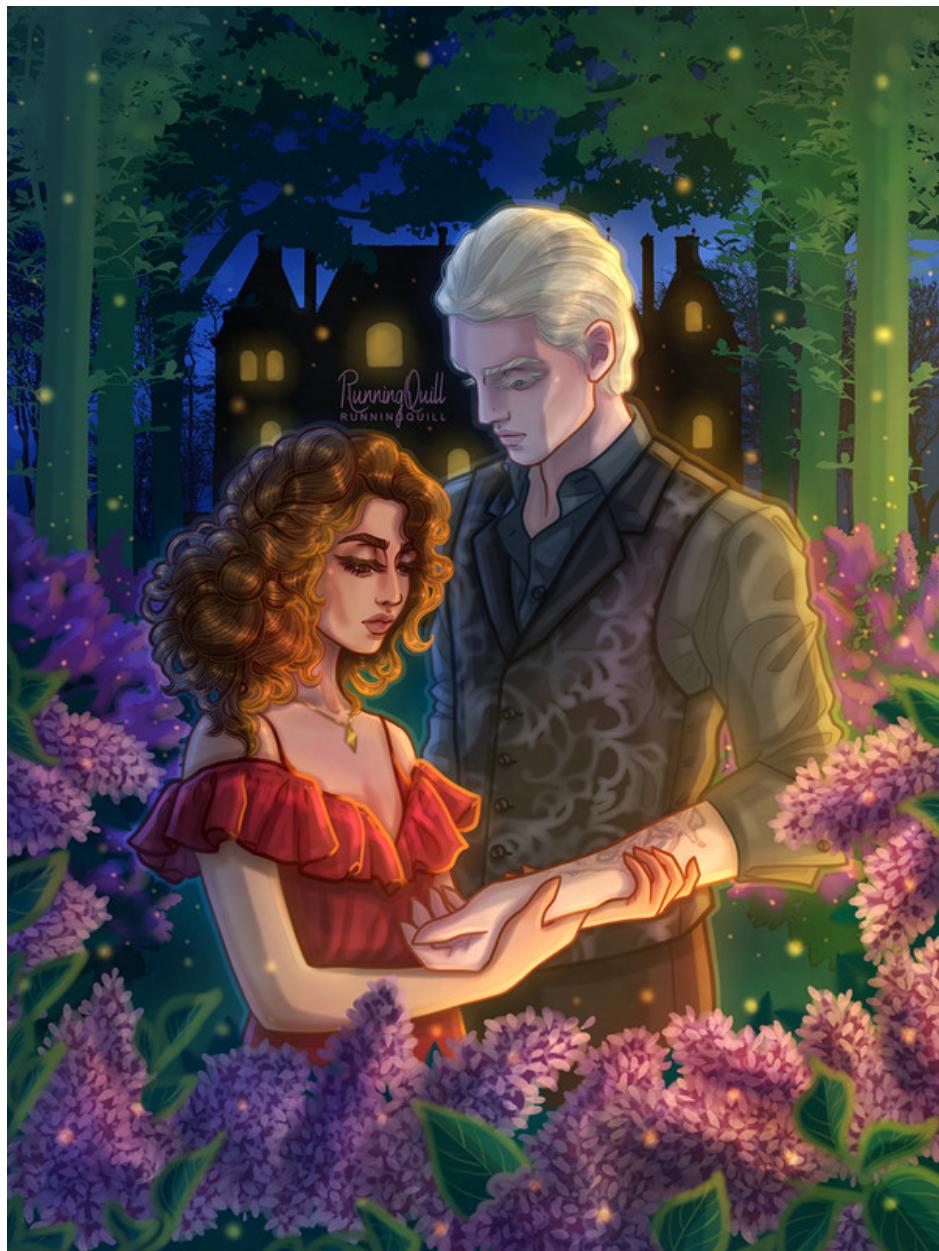
They stood in silence. And now she knew some of his griefs and he knew some of hers. There was an intimacy to it. To being seen. It was unfamiliar, tender to the touch, unnerving.

They stood in silence and yet it wasn't silence, it was thick and dense and whirling. It weighed upon their eardrums and chests

like

a

pressure.



"I should like a pithy conclusion, or words of wisdom," said Draco, to cut through it. "Yes, please," said Granger. She seemed relieved.

“I meant from you.”

Granger clasped her hands before her and looked up to the stars, as though she might find the pithiness there. “The Ennervated cadaver of a man who gave us these scars is quite dead.”

“And we’re alive.”

“I think that’s good enough.”

Draco rolled his sleeve back down and did up his cufflinks. Granger glamoured her scar back to the discreet blur.

“It’s too beautiful an evening to be maudlin,” said Draco. “I do not sound that swotty,” said Granger.

“You do. Shall we have a look at the roses? Have your feminine ecstasies at the ready.”

They wandered down the path that curved through the candlelight until they reached the rose garden. At their feet, Midnight Violets peeped, here and there, lured out by the crescent moon.

Their footsteps were slow and drunk and deliciously aimless. It was perfect; Draco knew too little of roses to give a real tour and

Granger was content to meander from one to the next without plan nor purpose, touching at their loosely cupped petals. Pretty names fell from her lips as she recognised a few: Annabelle, the Wildfire, the Apolline, the Duchess, Ivory Kiss, Claire, Crimson Romance.

Fairy lights twinkled amongst the rose bushes. Petals drifted onto the path. A nightingale sang and fountains gurgled. Granger, with a kind of dreamy-eyed tipsiness, said it was like being in an enchanted glade.

Draco wanted to have a go at her for being sentimental, but he found himself also in a soft, mellow kind of mood. The kind of mood in which he might tell a witch that yes, the roses were sweet, but she was the sweetest thing in the garden, just to see her blush.

He did not, because he was made of stronger stuff.

Fragrances, delicate and elusive, teased at their noses. Granger tried to name the scents and held up the roses to Draco, so that he could try, and he stood next to her, closer than necessary, and they made idle guesses together – apple, vanilla, clove, myrrh, honey – amongst the damask.

His wine-drenched mind collected impressions. Delectable nearness. Being close enough to feel her giving off warmth. The rose she held to his face, so close that his lips brushed its petals. The moonlight on her skin. The escaped curls of hair at her nape. The corner of her mouth. The biting of her lip. Eyelashes against a cheek.

They moved to the next rose. This one, Granger was convinced smelled of apricots. Draco came to stand behind her and leaned over her shoulder. To him, it was tangerine. Granger smelled it again, and said no, apricots, most certainly. And Draco leaned in closer and said no – tangerine, don't be silly. Granger theorised that they might've found an Amortentia rose; that would explain the discrepancy. Draco said he would be sure to record this discovery.

They moved on to the next one, a splendid white rose. Granger cupped its heavy head and drew it out. Draco came behind her again and they both smelled it at the same time, and her cheek brushed his chin.

He caught himself, just in time, as he was about to put a hand on her waist. That way lay madness.

The curve of her skirts brushed against the front of his trousers. Her hair tickled at the side of his face.

Granger said it was coconut and dared him to disagree. Draco disagreed as a matter of course – it was kiwi.

Kiwi?! repeated Granger. Kiwi, said Draco. Granger said that she would have him sent to an otolaryngologist, if he didn't stop this nonsense. Draco said the only nonsense here was the word otolaryngologist.

The sweet paralysis was coming over him again, of not wanting to move, of lightness in his veins, of limbs feeling weightless and eyelids feeling heavy. He wanted to put his chin where her neck met her shoulder and just stand there. He wanted to say things in her ear and feel her shiver against him. He wanted to linger here, being stupid about kiwi, for an age or two. He wanted to float.

It was the wine, certainly. And the artichokes.

They moved to the next roses, small wild things that grew in bunches and smelled like vetiver. Granger asked if she might pick one. Draco did so for her; it seemed ungentlemanly not to. And he gave it to her, his arm wrapped around her from behind, and their fingertips touched, and that was as close as they could get – touching fingertips over a rose.

She looked over her shoulder at him to say thank you, and their eyes met, and hers were dark and curious and his were light and keen, and it was universes colliding. It was all of those contrapositions of Light and Dark and Muggle-born and Pure-blood and Order and Death Eater and terrible incompatibility after terrible incompatibility. The violent polarities that made them who they were.

They fell into each other a bit, in that moment of collision, a bit drunk, a bit soul-tangled. She slid the rose into her hair and turned away.

They came to the end of the rose garden, where the hedges grew thickest and stupidities might be said most freely. Where terrible incompatibilities stopped meaning so much, because, here amongst green boughs and the rustling breeze, they were just a man and a woman, meandering through a garden, being idiots about roses.

They found a seat on a stone bench near a fountain adorned with chubby Cupids. Granger curled her legs under herself. The rose in her hair was askew, so Draco reached over to fix it, expecting to do so suavely but finding instead that he was transfixed by a feeling of exquisite nervousness, the likes of which he hadn't felt since he was a teenager. Granger breathed out a thank you. Her cheeks were pink.

They talked of things trivial and not, of roses and cupboards and scars and war and artichokes and fish pie. They looked up at the smouldering stars, and the nightbirds warbled their unearthly cadences, and roses dropped their petals in beautiful melancholy. An hour drifted by, and then two, and then three – though it felt like they'd only just sat down beside each other on this damp bench amongst the roses to witter away the evening.

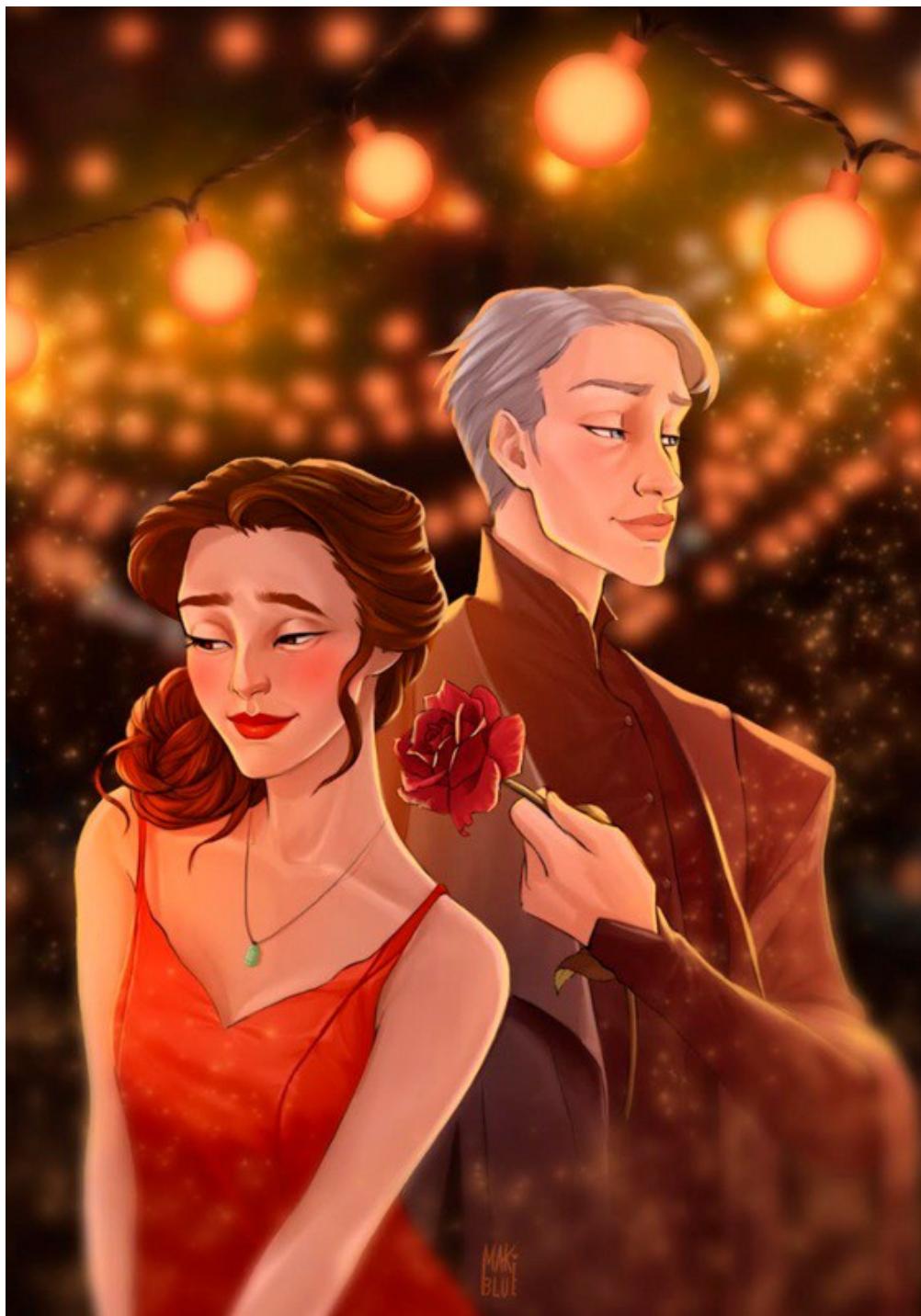
The memory of that night would remain with Draco for a long time afterwards, moon-kissed and sweet. The light in her eyes, the taste of wine, the glitter of starshine in the fountain, the slow seduction of the roses.

Il faut se laisser ensorceler.

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Chapter 18

Amends



I have something for you, came a Jot from Granger a week later.
I think you lot would call it a lead. On the Nundu-baiter.

Well???, answered Draco.

Off to teach. Can you meet at 6? said Granger.

Where?

The café at Trinity, said Granger. I've got another meeting there just before. If I run late, don't barge in shouting about brooms. It's with a Muggle.

Draco was grateful for the instructions, as he typically arrived early and charged into cafés, shouting about brooms. He tossed the Jotter aside to check Granger's schedule. The Muggle in question was Gunnar Larsen, the head of Skjern Pharmaceutics.

At 5.55 p.m. a Disillusioned Draco strode to the Muggle café at Trinity College, curious about Granger's ostensible lead on Talfrynn.

He saw her through the café window, still deep in talk with a man. Draco had formed a comfortable mental image of this Larsen fellow: a smallish and thin scientist type, probably balding and bespectacled.

Instead, sitting across the table from Granger, was a six-foot-something, eighteen stone hulk of a man. His hair was reddish-blonde, as was his rather impressive beard, and his eyes were a penetrating blue.

He was a Viking in a three-piece suit. There was probably more curly chest hair peeking over the top of his collar than Draco had grown since puberty.

Draco decided that he didn't like him.

Still Disillusioned, he slid into the café after an exiting customer and leaned against a wall to eavesdrop. Granger and the Viking were chatting mostly in jargon (his, slightly accented). Granger was explaining, in that passionate way of hers, something about adaptive immune systems and microenvironments. Larsen responded something about checkpoint inhibitor therapy, to which Granger replied with vast enthusiasm.

The Viking's eyes were riveted on Granger in a way that Draco didn't like. There was something predatory about it – something hungry. And Granger was gesticulating away and too busy being excited about nanobiologics to notice. Suspicions began to percolate: was this meaty Muggle going to try to steal her ideas? Make money off her? Literally eat her?

There was only one way to find out.

Draco's dive into the man's mind was over as soon as it began. He found himself butting against extremely sophisticated mental barriers, the likes of which only a highly trained Occlumens would have in place.

So Granger was wrong. The man wasn't a Muggle.

The Viking, feeling the attempted intrusion, turned to where Draco was Disillusioned. His piercing eyes roved across crowded tables, trying to pick out his attacker.

Granger asked him, "Is everything all right?"

Larsen turned back to Granger. "Yes – my apologies, Professor. I thought I'd heard something."

They continued the conversation, though Larsen's responses were reduced to distracted monosyllables.

Draco's first reaction – to supplex the man through a table and ask him what he was playing at – was made difficult by the crowds. (To say nothing of the fact that Draco wasn't actually certain that he could throw him.)

His second thought was to Stun Larsen and rip through his mind to discover what his designs were, but again, the crowds, and besides, the man was an Occlumens. He'd need to soften him up first, then render his brain into purée.

Granger checked the time and rushed the meeting to its end. Larsen shook her hand (her entire arm, really) and weaved through the tables. Draco saw him systematically observe every patron in the café as he walked to the door. Was this just to remember faces, or was he a Legilimens, too?

Draco followed Larsen into the street with vague thoughts of a Stunner to the back and a Side-Along to an Auror holding cell for a friendly chat. However, as soon as Larsen found a doorway out of view of the Muggle public, he Disapparated.

Draco did not like that at all.

He was a mixture of perplexed and irritable as he rejoined Granger at the café, Disillusion removed. For her part, Granger hadn't any idea of what had just transpired, and she met his approach with a cheerful wave. She had bought him a coffee and one of those toffee panna cottas, but it was simply Not The Time.

"Let's go to your lab," said Draco in lieu of a greeting. "We need to talk in private." Granger's cheerfulness faded. "Oh – but I—" "In private," repeated Draco.

Granger snatched up the coffee and panna cotta as Draco swept her out of the café.

When they arrived at Granger's office, she sat at her desk and Draco began to storm from one end of the small room to the other.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" she asked.

Draco paused in his pacing, his Auror robes whipping dramatically about his boots as he did. "Larsen. He's not a Muggle."

Granger's eyebrows rose to her hairline. "...What?"

Draco resumed his pacing. “He was Occluding as he was speaking to you in the café. Whatever he’s told you he is – he isn’t.”

Granger stared. “I’m going to set aside the question of why you were spying on my guest at a meeting that had nothing to do with you—”

“Good, that’s not the important bit.”

“—But I’ve looked into Larsen. I do background checks on everyone I consider for collaborations. He is everything he said he was.” Here Granger rose and rifled through a filing cabinet, pulling out a few sheets of paper. “PhD from LMU Munich, the European Commission has confirmed all of his patents, his firm went public last year and very much exists – he’s invited me to visit, in fact...”

“Invited you to visit? I can tell you now you’re not bloody going. Why is he pretending to be a Muggle?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t know I’m a witch? I met him at a Muggle conference; I don’t introduce myself as Doctor Granger the Witch at those events. He might do the same.”

Granger was looking at Draco like he might be making much ado about nothing. Draco disagreed. “And the Occluding?” prompted Draco.

“I’ve no idea,” admitted Granger, pressing a finger to her lip as she thought.

“He knows you’re a witch,” said Draco. “He must do. The wizarding world is too small for him to never have heard of Hermione Granger, unless he’s got nano-ears on top of his nano-brains.”

“Nano-brains? He’s quite a brilliant scientist.”

“And also a brilliant Occlumens. Who was making damn sure that, if you happened to have a peek in his mind—”

“Which I would never do – I’m not even a Legilimens—”

“—If you did, you wouldn’t see anything. He’s hiding something.” Draco almost walked into the wall and pivoted to stride forth again.

“Stop bouncing about like a sodding ping-pong ball.” “I’d like to interrogate him,” declared Draco. “Interrogate him?”

“Friendly-like.”

“Please tell me what comprises a friendly interrogation by Draco Malfoy; I’d love a laugh.”

“We use you to lure him out to the pub. Get a few pints in him. More than a few, given the fellow’s sheer mass. A spot of Veritaserum, just because he knows how to Occlude. Take him out round the back, tie him up, pry open his eyes, and voilà. Answers. He’d wake up with a bit of a headache and be on his merry way.”

“And you? A nice fine and loss of your job for breaking about thirty laws?” Draco waved those minor, vexatious concerns away.

“May I suggest that at my next meeting with him, I simply ask him?” said Granger. Draco paused his striding to consider this. “And you think he’ll be honest with you?” “I don’t know. But it’s a start – and a rather less drastic approach than yours.” “When do you next meet him?”

“We’re to continue talks in a fortnight.” “All right. But I’m going to be there.” Granger opened her mouth to speak.

“No,” cut in Draco. “This is the same man you met the week someone tested out your wards. Who lied to you about being a

Muggle. And who was Occluding so hard I bruised my brain trying to get in. Don't argue with me.”

“...I was just going to ask if you could be Disillusioned, if you were going to be in the same room. So he isn't immediately suspicious about me having an escort.”

“Oh. Yes.” Draco swept to the other end of the office. “But I'll be close. I didn't like how he looked at you.”

“How he looked at me?” “Too hard. Too much.”

One of Granger's eyebrows quirked at him. “His eyes aren't half so penetrating as y— as other people's, I can assure you.”

“He didn't smell right,” said Draco, swishing his robes about him to pivot again. “What does that even mean?”

“I don't know. Instincts, Granger. I wish you'd be more in touch with yours.”

“I prefer hard facts, as a rule.” Granger sniffed. “Can we set aside the mystery of Larsen for a moment, to talk about your convict? And will you sit down, before your spinning about makes me ill?”

Draco sat. “He’s not a convict until he’s tried and sentenced. But yes. Lars the Arse can wait. Tell me what you’ve been up to – sans permission, of course. I would like to register my disapproval, incidentally.”

The look that Granger leveled at him was most unimpressed. “O, because you ask for my permission to jump into my life all the time.”

“That’s an entirely different affair.”

“I disagree vehemently. But let’s not get sidetracked, or we shall never get to the point.”

Draco gestured at her to proceed. She gave him a hard stare which informed him that she didn’t require his permission on that front.

“I had a think about what you said, about how your man was keeping the Nundu down. They’re meant to be all but impossible to keep in captivity.”

“Correct.”

Granger pulled some documents out of an envelope. “I assumed that you’d already have checked up on all tranquiliser suppliers or manufacturers in the UK, Magical or Muggle, to see if you could find anything interesting.”

“Naturally.”

“My thinking is that he’s finding a supply of incapacitating agents overseas – black market – otherwise the sheer quantities he’s ordering would be sure to raise eyebrows. And I assumed you’d also have looked into all of the remote drug distribution systems you could think of, to see if that would lead anywhere.”

“Obviously.” Draco rolled his hand in an impatient gesture. “Skip to the findings, please.”

Granger gave him a long look informing him that she would get to the findings when she got there, and should any impatient twats have objections, they could fuck off.

Draco’s hands occupied themselves with the panna cotta instead.

Granger resumed. “Given that your man is a wizard, I thought it’d be unlikely that he’d go for a dart projector – he wouldn’t know how to use a gun. Nor could he install a sophisticated

vaporiser system for the immobilising compound he's using, not if he's hop-skipping across the country with this poor beast. Ingestibles would be too difficult to dose, especially if the Nundu refused to eat."

"All excellent deductions."

"The most portable, failsafe system would be something wizardish he could modify to use a ballistic syringe, filled with his tranquiliser of choice, wherever he's sourcing that. And as it turns out, there are very few ballistic syringe manufacturers, globally. Did you know that?"

"No," said Draco.

"Me neither. It was a convenient discovery – narrowed the search down rather a lot." Granger pushed her document towards Draco. "This one does the most business with the UK – a German company. We haven't a massive demand for the things, mostly a handful of Muggle zoos. But there is one private buyer who has been making repeated, large purchases over the past three months. The manufacturer will have a shipping address on file. How you decide to go about obtaining that information, I leave to you."

Draco took the document, unsure of what impressed him more – Granger’s work, or the fact that she had somehow squeezed in the time to do this amongst her obscene amount of existing commitments.

“Thank you,” he said, examining the document.

“An attempt to make amends,” said Granger. “Plus, I feel awful for the Nundu.”

This made Draco sigh through his teeth. “If this leads anywhere, I shall need to make amends for McLaggen.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” said Granger, wrinkling her nose. “I saw things. I heard things.” “I’d offer you an Obliviate, but...”

There was a knock on the door. One of Granger’s students brought in a package, hissing with a slightly leaky cooling agent, that needed to be signed for.

“Another pet project,” said Granger in response to Draco’s interrogative glance. “One of – well, far too many.”

“I’ll let you get on with it, then,” said Draco, rising.

As Draco made for the door, Granger called, “Malfoy?” “What?”

“Be careful, won’t you?”

Draco waved over his shoulder and left.

~

Granger’s lead ended up being rather a solid one. How could it be anything else? It was Granger. The shipping address led Draco to a nondescript importer, who was passing the goods on to a known small-time miscreant, who was transferring them to a warehouse, which was being accessed at indecent hours by a handful of other known delinquents, who were dropping them off at a

ruined fort in Norfolk. The fort was suspiciously well warded for an abandoned place. And nearby Muggles had recently submitted noise complaints – apparently, something occasionally roared at two in the morning.

Draco informed Tonks and they began to put together a mixed team of Aurors and Magizoologists, preparing for a full-scale raid in three days’ time.

And Draco was left pondering what he would do to make his own amends. Now he owed Granger. Bugger and blast.

Keep tomorrow eve free, he Jotted to her. I have something to drop off. If it's McLaggen's head on a platter, you can keep it, said Granger.

I would never be so crass, responded Draco.

No?

It would be something a bit more elegant. Use him as compost in the gardens and then send you a bouquet.

A charming combination of gentlemanly and psychopathic, was the dry response. I'll be home after 8.

Draco duly Apparated at Granger's cottage after eight, bearing a precious thing that was not McLaggen's severed head.

Granger looked unusually tired. Draco knew from her schedule that she had been putting in long hours at her laboratory that week, but seeing the shadows under her eyes made him ponder quite how late.

However, he was pleased to find her at the table with the remains of an actual meal – a stew of some kind, bread, and a bowl of yoghurt. He made no comment; she didn’t need an I-told-you-so to know that his idea had been a good one.

Granger eyed him and his rectangular parcel with wariness.
“Well, I suppose it’s the wrong shape for McLaggen’s head.”

“Perhaps I put it in a box, just to trick you.” “Rather a large box.”
“Maybe it’s an arm instead.”

“Eurgh.” Granger’s hands were clasped in front of her, but nervously – as though she knew, logically, that it wouldn’t be a body part, but also knew Draco enough not to be too certain about that.

Draco placed the parcel on the table with care. “First, I want you to know that this was an absolute pain in the arse to find.”

“Oh?”

“Secondly, I want you to know that I was originally going to use this as leverage to blackmail you.” This remark caused Granger to cross her arms. “You were going to blackmail me?”

“Well – bribe, perhaps more accurately.”

Now Granger's arms were crossed and her hip was cocked. Disapproval and amusement warred for primacy. "You were going to bribe me?"

"Yes."

"In exchange for what?!"

"For you to tell me what your project is about," said Draco, loosening the thick satin that wrapped the object.

"You are utterly shameless." "I didn't, though, did I?"

"No. I suppose that showed a real strength of character," said Granger.

Draco stepped aside and motioned Granger forward. She approached the table, mingled curiosity and worry in her eyes. The satin wrappings fell away to reveal an ornately carved box.

Granger glanced at him. "If this is a head, I will scream." "Open it." Draco found himself holding back a grin.

Granger pried the lid off of the box.

Inside it, within folds of the finest silk, was nestled a book. Its title shone in worn gold lettering:
Revelations.

Granger gasped and stepped back, her hands at her collarbone. Then she said, in a breathy kind of shriek, “How?!”
“A friend of a friend.”

“But – but the last undamaged copy was destroyed when Glyndwr burnt down–”

“Was it?” Draco leaned against the table to better take in the giddiness. “Are you sure?”

Granger approached the box again and peeped over the top, as though the tome might disappear if it felt too crowded.

Then, without a word of warning, she launched herself at Draco, seized his face, and planted a kiss on each of his cheeks. Before he could so much as twitch out a response, she had released him again.

Now she was back at the box, her hands clasped at her mouth.
“This can’t be! I’m dreaming.”

Meanwhile, Draco was recovering from the joyful assault upon his person, and thinking that Granger had felt rather nice all pressed up against him, and smelt good, and her lips were soft. She had leapt away too quickly for him to make any kind of further assessment. Which, frankly, felt like a pity.

But it was Granger he was being wistful about, and so he, too, must be dreaming. Now she was walking about in a tight circle, muttering about a burning abbey.

“I can’t keep this,” she said at length. “It’s far too precious. When I’ve studied it – oh, I do hope the portions I’m missing are extant in this one – I’ll have to give it to one of the libraries. I can’t keep it to myself.”

“Do whatever you want with it. It’s yours,” said Draco with a nonchalant shrug. The nonchalant shrug was to show that he was cool and unaffected, rather than feeling stupidly pleased that she was so happy.

“Goodness,” said Granger, her hands upon her cheeks, which were rather pink. “I think if you’d tried to bribe me with this, it would’ve worked.”

“It would’ve? Bugger it all.” Draco put an arm between Granger and the box. “I take it back. You can’t have it.”

Granger gave him a look of utmost reproach, which, of course, made no impression whatsoever. “You wouldn’t do that to me,” said Granger.

“Wouldn’t I?”

“No. We’ve just established that you have a real strength of character.” “I lied. I’m a craven double-crossing coward.”

“I might’ve believed that if you hadn’t provided evidence to the contrary over the past several years.”

“What evidence? I deny everything.”

“You’re Tonks’ favourite, and it’s not because you flee from the baddies.” “I’m her favourite? Tss. Did she tell you that?”

“Lupin.”

“Rubbish,” said Draco, though he was rather pleased.

Granger pressed a single finger to his hand and, from that mighty fulcrum, lowered his arm. “I suppose that this unspeakably

precious gift must mean my lead on Talfrynn got you somewhere?”

“It did. We know where he is.”

“Do give him my regards when you bring him in. What’ll happen to the Nundu?”

“A few Magizoologists are joining us on the raid. They’ll assess the beast and decide what to do with it.”

Granger nodded. Then her attention was back on the tome in the carved box. Draco saw the polite, restrained impatience in her stance, in the way she was twirling the tip of her plait.

“I’ll leave the two of you alone, shall I?” said Draco. Granger gave him a Look, but she flashed him a smile.

“Jot me next time you’re meeting Larsen,” said Draco. “I’m not through with him.” “Understood.”

“And if he shows up unanticipated – any kind of out of the blue, chance meeting – activate the distress beacon. Three turns on the ring.”

Granger tore her attention away from the book to regard him with surprise. “Really?” “Yes.”

“Even if I run into him when I pop out to get milk?”

Draco held up a hand to stop her there. “First of all, you manage to pop out to get milk once a year—”

“Hey.”

“—Secondly, yes, especially that kind of off the cuff meeting. I don’t trust him. No wizard Occludes for an entire conversation unless he’s hiding something significant.”

“All right, all right,” said Granger. “Having you Apparate into Tesco in your full Auror kit would be terribly amusing to witness, anyway...”

She walked him to the door and leaned against the frame as Draco readied his wand for his Disapparation. A parting glance at her became a double-take, because Granger – her arms loosely crossed, her eyes warm, the memory of a smile on her lips – almost looked as though she might actually like him.

“Thank you again,” she said. “For the book.” “Amends,” shrugged Draco.

“A fair and just reparation for the damages caused.” “I’ll keep the head for next time.”

Granger laughed. “Make it the bouquet, rather.” “Fine.”

“Bye, Malfoy.”

A general lightness of being always accompanied Disapparation,
didn’t it?

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Chapter 19

The Nundu / Trying Times for Draco Malfoy

Draco was feeling good. He and four other Aurors had set up a broad Anti-Apparition Ward half a kilometre away from the fort, with the old ruin at its centre. The team had been briefed by the Magizoologists accompanying them on the dangers of the Nundu – its lethal venom with no known antidote, its aggression, its wicked agility.



The Aurors were to deal with the naughty wizards and the Magizoologists with the beast.

At Draco's signal, they began their stealthy assault on the fort. The Magizoologists were a well-trained bunch who kept well behind the Disillusioned Aurors, per their instructions.

Two half-asleep watchmen were Stunned, Silenced, and immobilised with cuffs. Then the Aurors moved into the fort proper, after Draco had rid the door of wards and Buckley had taken care of the rather complex Magical locking mechanism.

“German-made,” Buckley muttered by way of apology for taking so long.

Now they advanced down poorly lit corridors rife with ill-cast wards. Draco took care of the latter as Buckley raised his wand in a detection spell. He signalled two more guards ahead, which Goggin and young Humphreys crept onwards to take care of.

They came across a guard room, which was a mess of decrepit furniture and new sleeping bags, old food and heaps upon heaps of the ballistic syringes that had proven so critical to track Talfrynn down.

Two Aurors stood sentinel as Draco and the others pulled in the Magizoologists to inspect the syringes and their contents. They concluded that it was etorphine hydrochloride – a Muggle opioid.

“Very potent,” said the most senior of the Magizoologists, a witch called Ridgewell. “Muggles use it to take down rhinoceroses. A squirt of this will stop a human heart in half a minute.”

“Blimey, they’ve got enough here for two dozen rhinos,” said her younger partner. “Or one very large Nundu.”

They discovered a stash of small crossbows in a dark corner. After a brief conference, two the Magizoologists equipped themselves with them: “We’ve got our own sedatives,” said Ridgewell, “but we know these will work, if ours don’t.”

“Wait here,” said Draco as he opened the door to the next passage. “We’ll go ahead and clear the way. And what’s that bloody smell? Is it...?”

Ridgewell sniffed at the air, looking rather like an English Setter about to point. There was a foul, pungent smell seeping into the room. “That’ll be the Nundu,” said Ridgewell. “Male, judging by the potency. If you spot it, don’t make eye contact, move slowly,

and come back to us. I'm not sure Disillusionment works on Magical felids."

Draco, who was rather more interested in Talfryn than the Nundu, slipped into the corridor, flanked by Buckley and Humphreys, with Goggin bringing up the rear. Fernsby was left to protect the Magizoologists.

As they advanced, their detection spells suggested three more nearby human presences in the fort – as well as whoever else might be behind the metres of rock ahead of them. And underneath them –

"Something big," said Humphreys, holding her wand to her ear as she knelt on the floor. "It's growling, too – I wonder if it's dinnertime."

"Happy to let the Magis deal with that bugger," said Buckley with a shudder.

There was a cry of frustration up ahead. The Aurors crept up close enough to hear someone swear. "I can't fucking Disapparate," came a rough voice. "You try."

“Idiot,” came a drawl. There was a moment of silence, and then, “I can’t either.”

“Fuck!” came a third voice – Talfrynn’s. “Anti-Apparition Ward. Sound the bloody alarm, you idiot! Accio broom!”

The Disillusioned Aurors slipped into a kind of inner courtyard. Goggin got a Stunner off on the drawly wizard just as he’d lifted his wand to raise the alarm. A broom whizzed by Draco in the dark. He hit it with an Incendio; it was a smouldering stick by the time it reached Talfrynn’s waiting hand.

“They’re here!” said Talfrynn, backing into a corner behind a half-collapsed pillar. “ Finite incantatem! Finite incantatem! Hominem Revelio!”

He was casting the spells in the general direction of the passage the Aurors had emerged from, hoping to hit someone and break their Disillusionment. His remaining acolyte joined him behind the pillar and did the same, forcing the Aurors to take up defensive positions behind piles of rubble.

Talfrynn swept his wand into the air to set off an intruder alarm. From a room behind them came footsteps, and then, suddenly, the courtyard was crawling with two dozen wizards.

“Shit,” hissed Humphreys.

Things had just become interesting.

“I’ll take the left with Goggin,” muttered Draco to Humphreys and Buckley. “You two stay here and distract – mind you keep moving so they don’t pin you.”

Now that they were heavily outnumbered, there would be no fighting nice. Which was excellent, because Draco preferred to fight dirty – Disillusioned and with liberal use of Legilimency. Goggin was an excellent partner; the Irishman was a brawler at heart and loved an opportunity to get messy.

Goggin’s Disillusioned shape bobbed behind him as Draco weaved to the ragged line of men that was forming around Talfryn. He went ahead, softening the ranks with Stunners while Goggin cleaned up after.

When he tired of garden variety Stuns and Petrificus Totalus, Draco added a little spice. Having identified the better fighters through observation or Legilimency, he cast a few of the more magically demanding Turncoat jinxes – and briefly, those

opponents fought for the Aurors, until their colleagues cursed some sense into them.

Buckley and Humphreys pounded Talfrynn's line with explosive spells and kept their enemies' attention on the front of the courtyard. Aguamenti was being sprayed where things (or people) had caught fire and added a heavy steam to the atmosphere. This was ideal for Draco and Goggin, who were even more difficult to spot within.

They continued their advance towards Talfrynn. Goggin came behind Draco to Stun any who were still twitching after his passing. He secured them with the satisfying click of the cuffs.

Draco's Legilimency showed him one man's intent to collapse a pillar into the corner where Buckley and Humphreys had holed up. Fatigued by his repeated Stunners, Draco switched it up – a flick of his wand took the wizard out at the knees. Then he blinded him. Then he severed his Achilles tendons. All non-lethal measures, of course; Draco played by the rules. Mostly.

Gradually, their adversaries became aware of a growing stillness on their left flank as Draco and Goggin moved in, while Buckley and Humphreys hammered them with an unfriendly barrage of spells.

An unlucky Finite Incantatem hit Goggin and revealed him. Goggin Disillusioned himself again immediately while Draco levitated the big man to a spot fifteen metres away, just before a Bombarda exploded where he had stood.

“Cheers,” came Goggin’s throaty whisper.

They continued their advance. Stun, curse, Legilimens, dodge Finite, Stun, Turncoat Jinx,
Impedimenta, dodge, blind, Legilimens, Stun.

Their numbers reducing alarmingly, Talfrynn’s remaining men were now Disillusioning themselves as well, screeching Protego! and scattering across the courtyard. It was the Aurors’ turn to fire Finite Incantatem at will.

The Anti-Apparition Ward was a double-edged sword. Draco dearly wished that he could Apparate to Talfrynn’s side and take him, but he was only two-thirds of the way there.

At Draco’s count, there were only four opponents left, plus Talfrynn.

Buckley was hit with a Finite emanating from somewhere near Draco. Suddenly in the realm of the visible, he was forced to dodge behind piles of boulders before a friendly Disillusionment from the east side of the courtyard removed him from sight again: Humphreys.

Draco systematically ploughed the ground near him with Petrificus Totalus until he got the Disillusioned wizard who had hit Buckley. Three left.

“Yer man’s goin’ for that chain,” gasped Goggin.

Draco whirled to see Talfrynn launching himself at a dangling chain connected to an ancient pulley. The pulley was connected to a large grille laying across a hole in the ground.

“Shit!” said Draco.

Both Aurors aimed desperate long-range Stunners at Talfrynn. By some miracle, Goggin hit the man’s leg and Draco his shoulder, but Talfrynn had already wrapped his arms around the chain and his Stunned body pulled it down.

There was a grating sound as the grille was slid out of place. Then a rumbling growl shook the very stones under their feet.

The Nundu leapt out of its underground prison and was now loose in the courtyard. A fetid odour accompanied it, enough to make the weaker-stomached men retch.

The Aurors called out their retreat; they were not equipped to deal with this beast. Draco heard Goggin's breathless run at his side as they sprinted for the passage.

The Nundu turned to them.

As it transpired, Disillusionment did not work on Magical felids. Draco made a note to tell Ridgewell, should he survive long enough to speak to her again. The beast was tracking their movement, as well as that of a handful of other invisible-to-them figures in the courtyard.

As the Nundu's eyes slid over him, Draco felt, for the first time in his life, what it felt like to be prey – the yellow gaze had a paralysing effect. The creature's movements were so easy and sinuous they were hypnotic. Its scarred, Magic-repelling hide, bristling with venomous spines, rippled as it walked. Draco's wand felt as useless as a twig in his hand.

He and Goggin stilled and looked at the ground, as they had been taught by Ridgewell. It was one of the singular most difficult things Draco had ever done. His every instinct was screaming at him to flee or to fire a Bombarda at the creature's face.

He could hear Goggin swearing a constant stream of fuck under his breath.

There was a scuffle at the passage that led to the exit. Two of Talfrynn's men were fighting to get through before the other. The Nundu leapt, crossing the courtyard in two graceful bounds. The men's Disillusionment dissipated as they died, one crushed by the creature's weight, the other casually decapitated by the sweep of a paw. His head rolled to Draco's feet like a gory Quaffle.

The passage was too small for the Nundu to enter. It turned its attention back to the courtyard, its nostrils flared wide, venom drip-dripping from its muzzle. It was sniffing for something.

Another of Talfrynn's Disillusioned men made a run for it. He was summarily killed, cut in two bloody halves by a bite.

That was, at Draco's best count, the last of Talfrynn's crew. Now there were only Aurors left standing.

The Nundu turned its nose back to the wind. It found what it had been sniffing for: Talfrynn's Stunned body.

Talfrynn was snatched up and tossed into the air like a child's plaything. He hit the wall with a musical crunch. Then the creature eviscerated him with an easy swipe and began to eat.

Slowly, amongst the wet sounds of Talfrynn's innards being slurped up, Draco and Goggin moved towards the passage. Draco hoped that the Disillusioned Buckley and Humphreys were doing the same – no sudden movement, no eye contact, just an uninteresting drift towards safety.

The Nundu raised its head. It looked to the east of the courtyard.

Humphreys.

The creature ambled towards the eastern corner with a kind of lazy anticipation.

Draco couldn't blame the young Auror for the explosion of spells she cast towards the beast; he would've done the same, had he been cornered. She sent something cutting at its face; it shrugged it off with a sneeze that scattered venom in a two metre radius.

Draco raised his wand; Goggin's Disillusioned arm by his side did the same. "Confrigo, as hard as you can go," said Draco.

They slashed their wands downwards with identical timing, causing their spells to twin together and hurl like a fireball towards the beast's flank. The spell exploded upon impact, leaving their ears ringing. Humphreys was hit by the percussive force of the blast; she hit a wall and lost her Disillusion. Draco could see her crawling away through the smoke.

And the Nundu? It had been knocked sideways by the explosion, but now it regained its feet and shook its mane, as though this had been a playful shove and not a deadly spell.

It turned the considerable weight of its attention to Draco and Goggin. "Shite," said Goggin.

They raised their wands. The beast leapt. Goggin hit it with a Bombarda in its open mouth, which bought them a moment of respite as it landed, mere metres from them, and hacked out a cough wet with venom. Draco's Blinding Jinx was next, aimed at the eyes, almost at point-blank range.

It did nothing but seal one eye shut – and piss the thing off.

Draco and Goggin scrambled backwards as pneumatic whizzing filled the air.

The Magizoologists had come. They peeked out of the passage and peppered the beast with the ballistic syringes and their own tranquillisers. At this distance, half of the syringes were bouncing off the Nundu's hide.

Buckley, limping badly, was dragging Humphreys towards the safety of the passage. Fernsby stood guard in front of the Magis and thickened the air with Protegos before darting out to assist Buckley.

Ridgewell Conjured a herd of small leaping things which danced around the beast and distracted it for a moment, until it vomited out its venom and they all dissolved. It bought enough time for Draco and Goggin to pull themselves behind a boulder.

The Nundu's attention turned to Humphreys and Buckley.

A dozen syringes were embedded in its shoulder and neck – to, so far, minor effect. The Magizoologists levitated half a dead doe, stuffed with tranquillisers, towards the creature. It batted the doe aside, having learnt in the course of its captivity not to trust any meat except what it had killed itself.

The Magizoologists launched projectiles full of inhalant sedatives which exploded at the beast's feet. This had been their last-ditch plan, as the inhalant would be just as dangerous to the Aurors as it would be to the beast. Draco and Goggin cast Bubble-Head Charms at each other and staggered further away.

The Nundu stepped through the purpling cloud with a hiss, and, finally, showed signs of slowing – one eye jinxed shut, blood running from its mouth, sedatives in its bloodstream and lungs. Its remaining eye was fixed on the stumbling Humphreys and Buckley, who were both now being dragged by Fernsby.

Draco saw the sweep of the tail and the lowering of the hindquarters that signaled an imminent pounce. He slashed his wand towards the chain and pulley and whipped the chain around the Nundu's hind leg just as it leapt. Goggin joined him, his wand crackling with effort as they pulled the chain backwards through sheer force of magic. The Nundu was forced back, its claws digging deep gouges into the rocky ground.

The injured trio of Aurors collapsed into the relative safety of the passage, leaving Draco and Goggin to face the beast. The Magizoologists were scrambling to distract the creature, Conjuring a female Nundu (ignored), more meat (swatted aside), prey animals (ignored), a cage around it (smashed to bits), and,

finally, launching enough immobilising agents to sedate twelve rhinoceroses.

Draco believed the tales, now, of a single Nundu wiping out entire villages in Eastern Africa.

The Nundu had half-collapsed – the sedatives were finally working. Its remaining eye was bleary, its mouth hung open, its legs grew boneless. It bared its fangs at Draco and Goggin and a hot stream of venom jetted out at them. They dodged and were separated by a hissing black-purple flow.

Draco was on the side of its remaining good eye. He aimed another Blinding Jinx just as the beast turned its heavy head to him and bared its fangs again.

He got the beast in the eye, the beast got him across the throat with searing venom.

The pain of it shocked his system. His Bubble-Head Charm vanished. He gasped out to breathe and took in a lungful of sedative-filled air.

As the Nundu finally collapsed, so, too, did Draco.

~

Draco awoke to a white ceiling streaking past him, as though he or the ceiling were moving at high velocity. There were raised voices and indistinct words and sounds of general chaos. Running feet, clinking equipment, the whirr of wheels.

Then there was a crisp voice of command. The voice was reassuring, somehow. It was the voice of Competence and Order, and it was Good.

His body was no longer his body; it was a thing chiefly composed of pain. He could not scream.

His ears caught words and communicated them to his numb brain. Envenomated. Respiratory depression. Paralysis of the diaphragm. Lethal dose.

And then, distantly, he could hear a scream. But it was not his – it was his mother's.

“Get her out,” said the Voice of Competence. “I’ll speak to her when I’ve saved this one’s life.”

~

Draco awoke to another white ceiling. This time, it was not whizzing by impossibly fast. He took this development to be good news.

Other good news: he felt no pain. In fact, he felt excellent. He had never felt so wonderful in his life. Full of vitality. Full of joy.

“Full of painkillers,” came a kindly voice. “You’re stuffed to the gills with them, child. Don’t try to get up. I’ll fetch your Healer.”

The kindly voice belonged to a matronly sort of witch in light green St. Mungo’s robes. A nurse. Draco watched her leave, giggling at the odd fish-eye effect occurring in his vision, which made her bum hilariously large. Then he blinked and the walls began to squeeze inwards. If he closed his eyes, he saw kaleidoscopes. An orange cat and a Nundu, whirling into each other, fighting one another in concentric spirals, on and on and on.

He opened his eyes again. He was at St. Mungo’s. He was alive. Shouldn’t he be dead? “You should,” came the cutting Voice of

Order.

“Am I saying everything I’m thinking?” asked Draco of the ceiling, with a deep philosophical curiosity.

“Yes, and you will for another few hours, at least. You’re on a little cocktail that affects neurotransmission. It was the only way to manage your pain during the procedure. You’ll probably experience hallucinations – if you haven’t already, of course.”

The swot was strong with this one.

In a kind of slow motion, Draco turned his head to observe the Healer. Her deep green robes swam into sight. Her mouth was set in a straight line, but her dark eyes were warmed by concern. She was beautiful. The light behind her glowed into a blinding halo. He thought he heard the sound of hymns.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Positively top-hole,” said Draco. “Are you an angel?”

The Angel-Healer did her utmost not to laugh – which was an angelic sort of thing to do, and only further proved her secret identity.

“You can trust me,” said Draco. He attempted to tap his nose but poked himself in the eye instead. “I’ll keep your secret.”

The Angel-Healer did not respond; she was reading a chart. “I had an operation?” asked Draco.

“We’ll talk about it later. When you’ve slept this off a bit.” Something about her authoritativeness was terribly familiar. “I know who you are,” gasped Draco.

“That’s good.”

“You’re Hermione Granger.”

“Correct.” She rose. Her robes danced about her in green swathes of colour. “Your mother is frothing to be let in. She Flooed back from Italy as soon as we sent word. But I want you to sleep first. I’d prefer you to have your mouth under control before you see her. All right?”

“Fine,” said Draco.

“Excellent. Have a nap. We’ll talk again when you wake up.” Draco, with an effort, patted the bed.

“Join me,” said Draco. “No.”

“Why not?” asked Draco in a long sort of whinge.

“Because you don’t know what you’re saying,” said Granger. There was restrained amusement in her voice. “I hope you don’t remember this, for your sake.”

Draco, with a distant thrill of horror, heard himself say, “I want to kiss you.” “No you don’t.”

“Come and sit in my lap.” “Go to sleep, Malfoy.”

Granger was a distant figure now, melding in and out of the shadows of the corridor. She shut the door behind her.

Draco closed his eyes. The Nundu and the cat continued their whirling battle, on and on until he fell asleep.



Draco woke up again. Something about the sun streaming through the window told him that it was the next day.

Unfortunately, he remembered every word of his conversation with Granger. Where was the Nundu? Could it come and finish

the job of killing him?

The kind nurse was back. She fussed a bit over Draco's sheets and then applied a paste that smelled strongly of pine to his neck.

“Dittany?”

“Vahlia. It should help with the scarring.”

The nurse cast a few diagnostic spells on him and seemed satisfied by the results. “You are doing remarkably well, Mr. Malfoy, all things considered. Your mother is here. Do you feel like seeing her? You needn’t if you don’t want to.”

Draco nodded.

A few minutes later, his mother rushed in and embraced him in her thin arms. She looked frightfully shaken, pale, and tired. She perched next to the bed and fussed over him at length, enquiring about how he felt, how his neck felt, whether he could breathe, whether he could swallow, how he had slept, and so on and so forth, until Draco’s mouth grew dry and he had to call for water.

Draco learned that his team had made it out of the fort with a mix of injuries, though none as dire as his. This was his third day at St. Mungo’s.

The Nundu had survived and been transported back to the wilds of Tanzania. And the baddies? The beast had taken its blood-soaked revenge on Talfryn and company. Many were dead. Those that had survived the courtyard massacre were awaiting trial.

Narcissa squeezed Draco's hand. There were tears in her eyes. "But enough about them. I am so – so happy to see you well. I very nearly lost you. I don't know what I would've done."

Narcissa stopped and took a deep breath to force down a sob. She didn't like to cry. "I'm going to be fine, mother," said Draco.

Narcissa straightened and dabbed at her eyes. "Don't be cavalier about it. You almost weren't fine. You almost died. The Granger girl – Healer Granger – she was instrumental. Nobody knew what to do. That venom doesn't have a known antivenom. Most of the Healers didn't even know what a Nundu was. Neither did I, mind you – what possessed you to go in pursuit of such a creature, I shall never understand. You were as good as dead. But she knew things. Muggle things, I think. She whisked you away for four hours – I composed an entire eulogy in my head – and when she came back, she said you were going to live."

Draco squeezed his mother's hand. He attempted humour. "Will you write the eulogy out for me? I should quite like to read it."

Narcissa sniffed. She rose and strode to the window with her back to Draco. Her thin shoulders shook. "Can't you take a desk job?" she asked breathily. "Quit this terrible Auror business?"

There was a knock on the door.

Narcissa wiped away her tears. With her back ramrod straight and her usual severe expression back into place, she went to answer.

It was Granger. She wasn't wearing her Healer robes, today – it was her professorial Muggle attire. Another of those high-waisted skirts and silky blouses.

"Oh – er, I'm sorry for interrupting," said Granger. "I can come back later."

Draco couldn't really see what happened next – his mother lunged into the corridor with her arms spread wide, and all he heard was an oof from Granger as she was, presumably, hugged quite hard.

There was the sound of weeping. Some awkward words of comfort. Then his mother's heels click-clacked down the corridor. Her voice, thicker than usual, asked where the loo was.

"Er – your left," came Granger's voice. "No, your other left." A door slammed. Then, silence.

Granger poked her head into Draco's room. "And how are we?" "A sight better than her," said Draco.

"She's had a rather distressing few days. She was convinced that you were going to die." "So I gathered."

"One of my attendants had to Stun her." "You Stunned my mother?"

"Yes. She went quite mad when she saw you on the stretcher. She was a danger to herself and hospital staff."

"I am terribly sorry that you had to witness that."

Granger's expression grew rather wistful. "It means she loves you very much. You're lucky to have that."

"...Right."

Granger was being a bit standoffish, hovering at the door. "Aren't you coming in?" asked Draco.

“Oh, I’m not on duty today. I was just popping round to see how you were getting on. I’ve got to be at Trinity in a quarter hour.”

“Teaching?”

“Examining. A PhD viva.” “Are you going to be nice?”

“In direct proportion to the strength of the candidate’s thesis.”

Granger stepped back into the corridor and glanced down it.

“Should I send someone to check on your mother?”

“No. Let her compose herself. She detests crying and she loathes public displays of affection, and she’s just done both with you.”

“Perhaps I should leave, before she comes back,” mused Granger. “She won’t have to relive the ignominy of the hug so soon.”

Draco agreed; however, there was one thing that he wanted to address, in private, before Granger left – his anaesthesia-fuelled idiocy.

“Might I borrow your wand?” he asked.

“Whatever for?”

“I – unfortunately – remember the things I said yesterday.” “Oh.”

“I’d rather like to Oblivate myself.”

“No self-Obliviations. You can use Firewhisky, just like everyone else.” A bit cheeky, sometimes, was Granger.

“Right,” said Draco. “Then I’ll be off to the pub as soon as bloody possible. When can I leave?”

Granger finally abandoned her post at the door to enter the room. She examined the documentation variously pinned or floating above Draco’s bed. Then she cast a series of diagnostic spells which glowed in abstruse green schemata above his chest.

“Frankly, I could have you discharged tomorrow morning,” said Granger. “But no alcohol for at least a fortnight, I’m afraid. You’ve just survived a lethal toxin, kindly allow your body to recover before you begin to imbibe another.”

“Not even a Butterbeer?”

“No.”

“But I have things I need to forget.” “So do I.” Granger’s mouth quirked.

“Bloody hell,” said Draco, running his hand down his face. “It happens all the time,” said Granger.

“All the time.”

“Yes.”

“You get called an angel all the time?”

“Truly.”

“And invited for a nap?”

“Yes.”

“And sitting in laps?”

“So frequently I’ve stopped taking notice.” “Fuck,” said Draco, reliving the memory again.

“I’m going to go now,” said Granger. There was a warble in her voice, the kind that indicated that she was on the verge of laughter.

She left. Draco did not – repeat, did not – look at her bum as she walked away. For all he knew, some lingering trace of the cocktail would make him blurt out something stupid.

All right, so he stole one glance when she was already well out of the room. Narcissa returned, nose powdered, eyes glamoured to be bright rather than red.

“A brilliant girl,” she said of Granger. “Quite brilliant. But what in heaven’s name was she wearing today?”

Draco did not inform her that he rather liked it. Narcissa had endured a great many shocks already.

Finally convinced that her only son, her treasure, the apple of her eye, wasn't about to pop his clogs, Narcissa retired to the Manor.

Draco joined her there the next day and was near-suffocated by the joint attentions of his mother and the worried house-elves. For the next week, his every step – amongst a steady stream of friends and well-wishers – was haunted by either an elf or Narcissa bearing Vahlia ointment or restorative soups or warm compresses. He languished in delicious self-indulgence under their care for the first few days, and then grew tired of it, and took to hiding in distant reaches of the Manor grounds for the rest of his recovery.

One morning, when Draco was feeling sociable enough to join his mother for breakfast in the dining room, he found her hard at work on a truly breathtaking floral arrangement. It was alive with movement – hummingbird hyacinths fluttering, the glitter of ruby poppies, the dance of halla vines.

"You've outdone yourself, mother," said Draco. "Do you like it? Good. I hope she does, too." "She?" repeated Draco.

Narcissa spared him a look over her shoulder, as though to check that it was, indeed, her son behind her, and not a stupid idiot who

had snuck in unannounced. “Yes, she. Healer Granger. Who else?”

“She will positively adore it, I’m sure.” “It’s to be delivered later today.”

“One of the elves? I’d suggest Henriette, she—”

Narcissa interrupted with severity. “A house-elf? Really? That witch saved your life. You are going to take it to her, with as much effusive thanks as you can convey.”

She slid a thick envelope under a ribbon at the base of the arrangement. “My words of thanks, I wrote. I doubt I’d be able to speak them without further hysterics. I’ve embarrassed myself enough on that front.”

Now Narcissa dusted her hands and stepped away from the flowers, observing them with a critical eye. She called for Tupey to bring more ribbon. “And your other task, Draco, will be to uncover whatever cause is near and dear to Healer Granger’s heart, and ensure that our name and Galleons are immediately lined up in support of that cause.”

“I had been thinking the same,” said Draco.

“Unless it’s more of that chicanery about house-elves.”

“Right.”

“Or Muggle things. No Muggle things. Well – perhaps yes to Muggle things. Have they got orphans? See to it that you find out.”

“Of course.”

There was a lull in the conversation. Narcissa cleared her throat and, with casual insouciance, said, “Speaking of elves – they mentioned that you’d had a great many dinner guests in my absence. I’m glad that you were able to keep them occupied.”

“Happy to,” said Draco, with an equal measure of insouciance. “They did very well.” “They mentioned, en passant, that Healer Granger had been by,” said Narcissa.

Draco felt that they had just arrived at the real crux of the conversation. “She did come by, yes.” “...Might I inquire about the subject of discussion?”

So his mother was going to be nosy about it. Not a surprise. “I had to make amends – I made her burn a pie,” said Draco. “You made her burn a pie.”

“Yes. We were quarrelling about her otter.”

“Her otter.”

“Yes. She was partially in the right, mind you; I did concuss McLaggen.”

“You concussed McLaggen?”

“Amongst other things. He hadn’t much in the way of brains anyway. Have we finished with the quizzing?”

“I must confess I’m left with more questions than answers,” said Narcissa. “Henriette also tells me they replenished Healer Granger’s larder?”

“Oh, that. Yes – I was rather dismayed to find that the witch who was to save my life was subsisting on dried goods and tinned tuna. And it gave the elves something to do.”

Narcissa looked eminently confused, but said, “Of course.”

Draco turned the insouciance up a notch. “It was a dinner with a colleague, nothing more.”

“A colleague?”

“Ministry business; terribly dull and also top secret. Can’t discuss it.”

“I see,” said Narcissa. “I shan’t pry further, then.”

“That would be the best course of action.”

Narcissa’s speculative look was interrupted by a crack.

Henriette popped into being and curtseyed. “Pardonnez-moi for the intrusion, Madame, Monsieur. Monsieur Draco, Madame Tonks is Flooing for you.”

Draco left his mother to her confused dissatisfaction.

Tonks’ head was protruding from the fireplace in the Floo parlour.

She said something that might’ve been “Wotcher,” but might’ve also been a sneeze. “Do you want to come through?” asked Draco.

“No, haven’t the time. I just wanted to observe you with my beady eye—” as she said this, her eye grew quite beady “—and ensure that you did survive the Nundu venom. The rumours are true. Show me the injury; it must be dramatic.”

Draco tugged down at his collar, which was gooey with Vahlia ointment. “Oh, my! Are they saying it’ll heal?”

“Probably,” said Draco, grimacing as he replaced the collar against his still-raw neck. “Better it doesn’t – the scar would be quite dashing.”

“How are the others?”

“O, you know, a little worse for wear, a bit limpy, a bit bruisy. Goggin and Buckley are still coughing up inhalant; we’ll have to devise better than the Bubble-Head Charms, next time.”

“And Humphreys?”

“She’s developed a phobia of cats, poor thing.” Now Tonks’ arm was sticking out of the fireplace. She shook out a scroll. “But look at this: you lot cuffed twenty naughty wizards, all told – other than the dead ones, I mean. They must’ve been planning for a show that night, that’s why there were so many of them there.”

Draco crouched to examine the list. “Shit – we got Hawkes? Kerr was there? I didn’t recognise him.”

“And Royston. Lovely harvest. One of our best in years. I’d offer you a pay rise, but, you know.” Tonks gestured to Draco’s grandiose surroundings. “It seems a paltry sort of bonus, considering. I thought I’d offer you something else as a reward.”

“Oh?” asked Draco, curious about how one rewards the man who has everything. “Absolute freedom on your next assignment – you choose from my box of surprises.” “Goody.”

“And I’ll be taking you off the Granger protection jobbie, because that is the kind of tender-hearted, grateful cousin I am. I

know you were never keen on that one.”

Draco felt himself grow unaccountably tense. “What?”

Tonks, under the impression that she was making a grand and generous gesture, wiggled her eyebrows at him. “I know. I was thinking of Humphreys. They’d get along, wouldn’t they? Better than the two of you, anyroad.”

“Humphreys couldn’t – Granger has a cat,” said Draco. To his ears, the weakness of the excuse resonated embarrassingly through the Floo parlour.

Tonks scoffed. “Humphie would work around it. Don’t be silly. Or perhaps I slip the job to Goggin to keep his nose unbroken for a bit; the man gets into a punch-up with every mission...”

Tonks withdrew her head from the flames. Draco heard her screech, “Someone kill the bloody thing!”

Her head popped back into view. “Sorry. Weasley is having a crisis: there’s a spider.”

The interval had given Draco time to work out an excuse. “Not Goggin, for Granger,” he said, keeping his voice disinterested

and neutral. “Not any of them, really. My family rings are a rather key component of the game. I think it’ll be best for me to stay on this one.”

Tonks arched an eyebrow. “Really? Are you sure?” “Yes. We’ve found an – an equilibrium,” said Draco.

“An equilibrium,” repeated Tonks with unnecessary poshness. She was fixing him with a shrewd look behind the mockery. “All right. The offer stands, should you change your mind. I’ll see you next week?”

“Before, no doubt. I’m being suffocated.”

Tonks tutted. “Poor darling. Enjoy the remainder of your convalescence. My regards to Narcissa.” Tonks’ head disappeared from the fireplace with a pop.

As the flames in the hearth resumed their normal colour, Draco was left to ruminate on the unexpectedness of his reaction at the thought of losing the Granger assignment. His response had been almost physical, almost jealous. He dearly hoped that Tonks hadn’t noticed.

He also pondered the uncomfortable question of why he hadn’t let the Granger job go. Some immediately obvious reasons sprung to mind. Well, not exactly reasons – memories, rather, of

specific moments: a golden evening on a beach; the way she bit her lip when she didn't want to laugh; roses and their bewitching effects; the feel of her joyous kisses. But these were not reasons and were therefore easily dismissed as pointless Sentiment.

After some grasping about for sounder arguments, which took altogether too long, Draco concluded that it was because he was an Auror with pride, who wanted the job to be done right, and who wanted to see the thing through to the end.

There. That was better. It all made sense. And if a minuscule part of him enjoyed Granger's ludicrous 'holidays,' or took delight in her company, or had rather begun to look forward to seeing her, or any such nonsense, it was vastly overpowered by this robust rationale.

His mother called him into the dining room to advise him that the flower arrangement was completed, and that he could deliver it to Granger at his earliest convenience.

Draco sent a note to Granger enquiring about her availability that evening. She'd be at the pub with Potter and Friends, but home by nine. Would that suit? Draco replied that it would.

Home by nine. Granger was a wild one.

That night, Draco retired to his chambers for a shower and a shave. As he dabbed a drop of cologne on his wrists, he felt oddly like he was preparing for a date. Which was idiotic, because all he was doing was being an errand boy for his mother, really.

When he dressed, he made sure that his collar remained half-open to show off the dashing injury. But only because it was so dashing, and not because he wanted to solicit any kind of fussing or attention from Granger, or anything like that.

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Chapter 20

Draco Malfoy the Errand Boy, Life and Times of

Draco needn't have worried about Granger fussing. That was the problem with Healers; they had seen too much and a minor issue like a lethal envenoming was of little interest, really, when it was on the mend.

Granger opened the door, observed his neck from a polite distance, pronounced herself pleased that it was healing so nicely, and then asked him what he wanted.

There was no Romance about Granger. No luring her into coy guessing, or eyelash-fluttering suppositions. She was terribly pragmatic.

"Well?" asked Granger. "Is something the matter?" Draco produced the flowers.

"Oh!" gasped Granger, with that expression of surprised delight that Draco was coming to find rather addictive.

“And no – they did not sprout from McLaggen’s corpse.”

“Of course they didn’t,” said Granger, accepting the bouquet.
“They are far too beautiful.”

Draco gave her a small bow. “With my mother’s compliments. She’s attached a letter for you. I am also to convey my exuberant thanks to you, for saving my life. Please tell her I did so, if she asks.”

“Your ebullience quite knocked me off my feet.” “Perfect.”

“Do I put them in water?” asked Granger, holding the gently fluttering bouquet to her face. “I believe my mother charmed them to last – but I suppose it couldn’t hurt.”

Granger disappeared into the cottage. “You can come in, if you’d like,” she called, “if you haven’t any other plans?”

“My only other plans involve being smothered by the elves.”

Granger tutted. “Poor darling.”

Which was the second time that a woman had teased Draco for his hardships today and he felt rather put upon.

“I shall offer you a very standard cup of tea,” said Granger. “Will that be refreshing, after all of the coddling you’ve endured?”

“Quite. Make it sub-par, even.”

“I’ll forget to boil the water.”

“Excellent,” said Draco, seating himself on a kitchen chair.

Granger Transfigured a vase out of a glass. The fluttering, glittering bouquet was put in pride of place upon her kitchen worktop. Her cat leapt up beside it and touched at the moving petals with a curious paw.

“Lovely!” said Granger. “I’ll have to work out how to charm it to follow me around, depending on what room I’m in, so that I can look at it all the time.”

“I’ll inform my mother. That will flatter her.”

Granger discovered the envelope. “Shall I read her letter now, or later?”

“Later, please,” said Draco. “I’ve heard quite enough about her relief that her treasured son is still alive.”

Granger duly set the letter aside. “She wants you to quit the Auror business, you know. She is quite disgusted with it.”

“I know. She never loved it to begin with. The Nundu incident is the closest I’ve come to dying on the job. Bit of a shock for her.”

Granger, who had been idly touching the hummingbird hyacinths, turned to him with a grimace of guilt. “I feel terrible about it.”

“You? Why? You saved me.”

“Yes, but if I hadn’t bogged your first attempt to catch Talfrynn, none of this would have happened.” “True,” conceded Draco. Then he added, “I should like an apology from your otter.”

Granger’s look was mingled uncertainty and amusement. Draco held her gaze with a raised eyebrow.

Granger sighed, then took out her wand and cast Expecto Patronum. Her otter floated to Draco and looked as contrite as an otter could. “I’m sorry,” said the otter.

“You’re forgiven,” said Draco with great benevolence.

The otter rolled its eyes, if you please, and then disappeared.

“The absolute cheek of that creature,” said Draco. He turned back to Granger. “Mind you, if you hadn’t bungled my first

attempt, I would only have caught Talfryn. We ended up cuffing twenty baddies. Perhaps it evens out.”

“Twenty? Tonks must be well pleased.”

“She is. She offered to give me the pick of the litter for my next mission, as a reward – and to take me off this protection assignment.”

The last bit Draco added conversationally, out of a kind of curiosity, to see if Granger would react in any sort of interesting way to the news.

Granger, who had been occupied with tea things, stilled. “Did she?” “Yes.”

Granger started the kettle. Her back was to Draco but there was a tension in her shoulders. “And? What did you say?”

“I said no.”

Her shoulders released. “Oh, did you?” she said, with studied nonchalance. “Yes. Are you pleased? I can’t tell.”

Granger turned. Her face was carefully neutral. “I think it’s good news,” she said, addressing a space somewhere above Draco’s head. “I won’t have to get used to someone else popping round at

all hours, you know. And besides, you're – you're very good. At what you do. Not that I think your colleagues couldn't do as fine a job."

They were interrupted by the cat making a leap from the worktop to Draco's lap. "Er—" said Draco.

Granger looked bemused. "Crooks, what are you doing, you silly thing? You're going to get hair all over him."

As though it had been reminded of this central imperative in its life, the cat took a few steps towards Draco's chest and rubbed itself against his fine black robes. Its tail swept under his chin.

"Is that – is that purring?" asked Draco, feeling a powerful rumble emanating from the cat. "Oh – yes. It's measurable on the Richter scale, when he does it."

"Can I stroke him, or will he bite my hand off?"

"You can try," said Granger, though there was doubt in her voice.

The cat permitted a brief scratch under its chin. Then it clambered up Draco's chest, onto his shoulder, and onto his head, which served as a launching point for a shelf above. It settled, loaf-like, between a jar of flour and some dried herbs, and observed him with its yellow eyes.

Draco fixed his hair, which had never been so ignominiously used.

“I forgot to forget to boil the water,” said Granger, serving the tea in two steaming mugs. “And you – are you pleased? I know the protection assignment wasn’t the preferred outcome for either of us. I’m rather surprised you decided to keep it.”

Draco stirred milk into his tea, which gave him time to think of a nice and neutral response. “I wouldn’t pass my family ring onto another Auror – which is the only way to keep the protection minimally intrusive for you.”

“Oh – yes. That is very appreciated.”

“And... I think I’d like to see the thing through to the end,” said Draco. “Now that I’ve come this far.”

“A completionist.”

“Occasionally.”

“The end might be a long way away.” Granger was observing him over her tea with a kind of veiled anxiousness. “Another six months, if all goes well.”

Draco shrugged. “It’s July. What’s another six?”

“Has it really already been half a year?”

“Yes. I took the assignment in January.”

Granger propped her chin on her hand. She looked thoughtful. “Six entire months. Where did the time go? And we’ve only tried to kill each other two or three times. We’re doing all right.”

“Your latest attempt was the most successful to date,” said Draco with a gesture at his neck. “If that had been on purpose, you’d be quite dead, I assure you,” said Granger.

“How did you heal it? Mother said you did Muggle things.”

Granger eyed him as though deciding how much dumbing down would be required in her explanation. “Well. As soon as you mentioned that there was a Nundu on English soil, I thought it would be useful to do a bit of research.”

“Of course you did.”

“No magical hospital in the UK, nor the entirety of Europe, is equipped to handle Nundu venom – much less little old St. Mungo’s. I didn’t think anything would go wrong, necessarily,

but I knew how terribly unprepared we would be, if something did. So I had a venom sample imported.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Did that sample happen to arrive when I was in your office?”

“Yes.”

“Pet project, my arse.”

“It was a pet project. For all I knew, it was going nowhere. There is no known antivenom, after all.”

Granger, who had been sitting at the table, pushed off from it, and waved her wand, and began to warm up to her lecture.

Diagrams, vials, and molecules came to life around her.



"Nundu venom is a potent neurotoxin known as Alorectin – this purple one. When I was reading up on its effects, they sounded nearly identical to a non-magical biotoxin called Phentyoxin –

that orange one. It's a predatory venom. I did a spot of lab work to confirm the synonymy."

"A spot of lab work?"

"My laboratory happens to be unusually well-equipped to investigate these things. And I was curious. It was remarkably close – they're almost indistinguishable. These toxins both operate by – to oversimplify terribly – blocking sodium channels in motor nerves. They can cause almost complete motor paralysis and respiratory arrest within minutes of a dose."

"One of the Magizoologists told us a single milligram of Nundu venom can kill an adult within hours."

"Correct. You're lucky your team got you to St. Mungo's as quickly as they did. Anyway – there are experimental Muggle treatment protocols established for Phentytoxin and, well, given that it was that or your imminent death, I administered them. Neostigmine, Cholinesterase inhibitors, Alpha-adrenergic agonists."

Granger conjured more diagrams for Draco's edification. Then, a tiny figure representing him popped into existence, complete with white-blond hair. "Not an antivenom, technically, but your

body could antagonise repeated Alorectin challenges until the venom broke down and was excreted from your system.”

Now the tiny Draco was sweating and— “Is he having a wee?” asked Draco. “Yes,” said Granger.

A tiny nurse walked by and patted the tiny Draco on the head. He got up and did a tiny dance of joy. Then they both faded from existence.

A slowly spinning Alorectin molecule still glowed in violet next to Granger. Her finger was on her lip as she studied it. “Yet another fascinating bit of intersectionality between Muggle and Magical therapeutic approaches. Those in-betweens are woefully unexplored. But, well, there’s only one me. Still – can you imagine an artificial antigen to combat Nundu venom? An antitoxic serum? It would serve both worlds...”

She drifted off in thought. Then she blinked, seemed to remember that Draco was in the room, and resumed her chair. “I’ve left notes for a treatment protocol at St. Mungo’s. They’re going to share with our colleagues in Tanzania. However – my hope is that Nundu envenoming on English soil will remain a rare occurrence.”

“You really are something else,” said Draco, observing her with his chin propped on his knuckles. Granger glanced up from her mug and caught his stare. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” said Draco, softening his eyes further and allowing a vague smile to creep upon his features.

“Like you’re all – all dazzled.”

“Why?”

“It unsettles me.”

“Isn’t everyone dazzled by you? “Yes, but with you, it’s perturbing.”

“But I am dazzled. Mesmerised, even–” Granger gave him an annoyed glare.

“–Professor.”

With a sound of irritation, Granger rose and went to refill her mug. Draco thought that she looked flustered. Which was interesting.

“Anyway, you’ll go down in history as the Auror who fought a Nundu and lived,” said Granger over the sound of pouring water.

“I feel I ought to receive a trophy. Or a plaque.” Draco paused, then added, “No – if anyone’s receiving plaques, it should be

you. I didn't really do anything but walk into a stream of venom fresh from the source."

"I have so many plaques I haven't any idea what to do with them. A smart-arse once called my collection a mosaic, you know."

"What a clever and amusing observation," said Draco. "He thought so, too."

Having apparently decided that Draco's unnerving stare had sufficiently abated, Granger returned to the table.

"I'm to ask you if you have any orphans or other noble causes to support," said Draco. "My mother and I wish to add our considerable clout to whatever issue is near and dear to your heart."

"That is entirely unnecessary," said Granger with a decisiveness that would have offended Narcissa. "I was only doing my job."

"Wrong answer. Think of something." "Host a Kneazle information booth." "Be serious."

Granger looked at him, saw that he was, himself, being serious, and sighed. "I reiterate that I was merely doing my job."

“Right. But maybe ‘a bit above and beyond,’” said Draco, echoing Granger’s sentiments in a far- away foyer.

“Psh.”

“No? Not at all? With that bit of extracurricular research on the side?”

“Perhaps a little,” said Granger, holding back a smile. “I see that I have to watch my tongue with you, lest my own words be used against me.”

“Likewise,” said Draco, because it was true. “So what will it be? We’d be delighted to contribute to your research fund. I’m told it’s eye-wateringly expensive to run a laboratory.”

“Make it a contribution to St. Mungo’s, rather. If you must.”

“Not to your own research?”

“No. It would do more immediate good at St. Mungo’s, I think.”

“Any ward in particular?”

Granger paused to think. “What kind of sum have the generous Malfoys got in mind?”

“Large,” said Malfoy. “You saved my life.”

“Quantify ‘large.’”

“You’ll find out.”

Granger narrowed her eyes at him. “Then please direct it to the Janus Thickey Ward for the hospital’s long-term residents. It’s terribly tired and dingy.”

“Done.”

“As a general comment, it would be nice if there were more windows.”

“All right.”

“More private suites, too. A studio for exercising. A piano. A small library. A swimming pool?” The final item was proposed with a kind of questioning hesitation.

Draco raised an eyebrow at her.

Granger held up her hands. “What? You said large and didn’t define it.”

“I promise my definition of large will not disappoint.”

“I’ll withhold judgement until I see something concrete,” said Granger. “I know – you prefer hard evidence.”

“Exactly.”

They eyed each other.

Then Draco asked, “Are we still talking about money?”

“Obviously,” said Granger, looking prim. For a moment, he thought he saw the ghost of a grin, but if it had been there, she mastered it quickly.

“I’ve noted all of your requests,” said Malfoy. “Except the bloody swimming pool; I think they haven’t the room. What on earth do you want a swimming pool for? Fancy a dip between patients?”

“Not for me,” said Granger. “Hydrotherapy is wonderful for so many ailments – chronic pain, exercising post-surgery, treating nerve damage or spinal injuries. And for the longer-term residents with significant deconditioning, it’s a brilliant way to ease them back into a physical activity, but gently. I know I’m dreaming. But you did say large.”

Now Granger lapsed into a daydream, her thoughts far away, in some unrealised Janus Thickey Ward where joyful patients pranced about in an exercise studio, and played the piano, and did swan dives into pools. She was starry-eyed, her hands clasped under her chin, a smile on her lips.

She hadn't even taken him up on the offer to fund her own research. Did she have to be so good? So giving? So pure?

In a moment that was as epiphanic as it was startling, Draco realised that it wasn't him – or any other Pure-blood – who was pure. Granger was purer than them in every way that mattered. Of heart and of mind. Of purpose. No family tree or convoluted intermarriages or tapestries, only purity of intent.

He looked about, half expecting a herd of unicorns to descend upon her cottage to be stroked by her.

"Although, frankly, at this point, even a new coat of paint and a Cheering Charm on Healer Crutchley would be a vast improvement," said Granger, returning to the present. "I should ambush her and do it myself."

She noticed Draco's silent stare. "What?" "Waiting for the unicorns to arrive," said Draco. "The unicorns?"

"Nothing," said Draco. "Never mind."

Granger rose to take their empty mugs to the sink, eyeing him over her shoulder with suspicion. Draco also rose, to bring their spoons, even if he could've just as easily levitated them over. But

she was doing it by hand, and he was in her house, so he did as she did, and it wasn't an excuse to remain in her vicinity at all.

This fine reasoning concluded, Draco sought a new topic of conversation. "Did the book end up being useful?"

It was an extremely successful choice.

"Yes!" Granger clapped her hands together. "It did!" "Well I'm glad—"

He had unlocked a floodgate of enthusiasm. Granger dragged him to the front room before he could finish his sentence. The new copy of Revelations was on a plinth, covered by stasis charms and a small inventory of alarm wards.

Now Granger spoke in rapid-fire excitement. "You saw how damaged my own copy was (don't lie, I know you did) – I had perhaps thirty percent of the text in its integral form. I was able to make certain educated inferences but I would've soon hit a dead end."

She waved away the charms, cast some sort of protective spell on her hand, and opened the book. "In this copy, the second half is almost completely intact. Look. Look! Spectacular. I never dreamed that another copy existed, or that it would be half so

well preserved. Having the entire thing at my disposal has been a gift. A gift! I can't thank you enough! I could just – I could squeeze the life out of you," she finished, wringing her hands in lieu of.

The words were out of Draco's mouth before he could stop them.
"You can, you know." "I can what?"
"Squeeze the life out of me."

He hadn't expected the force of her launch. She jumped to reach his neck, locked her arms around him, and squeezed him into a hug of earnest gratitude. He wrapped a single polite arm around her – to keep balance, or something. She smelled like tea and sugar and she felt delightful against him.

"One day," said Granger, somewhere in his neck, "I'll explain to you why this matters so much."

Draco waited for his tongue to supply him with a witty response, but he found himself experiencing an absolute lexical blank. Nothing witty was forthcoming. Nothing unwitty, either. He was as good as Stunned.

He made a tactical error in glancing down, and then he saw her warm eyes, and her smile, and oh no. Now he wanted to wrap his

arms around her – truly, not this half-arsed thing he had going – and lift her up. Make it a real hug, a whole body thing, full frontal contact – that's what he wanted. And maybe deposit her on the back of the sofa; it seemed the right sort of height. And then – other things.

He did not do these things. Because he was not an idiot. And she would run away shrieking. And probably slap him. It was Granger.

Granger, satisfied with her squeeze, released him and returned to the book, utterly unperturbed, while Draco stood wordlessly by like a tongue-tied cretin.

She returned to her enthusiastic guided tour of the tome, pointing to some marks along the edges of the pages. “Even the marginalia is undamaged – that's a few hundred years' worth of commentary, you know. Layers and layers of it. Fascinating. Look. Look. Malfoy, you aren't looking.”

“I'm looking,” said Draco.

He was a liar; he was floating off somewhere in the furthest reaches of the universe in a happy daze.

Granger continued her demonstration. “The illuminations on this page are really sumptuous. D’you think that’s real silver leaf?”

“Er – could be,” said Draco.

His bloodstream was awash with feel-good hormones. He was thirteen years old and a girl had hugged him. There was Time-Turning afoot. That’s what this was about. There was no other explanation for being so stupidly giddy about a single stupid hug.

“Gorgeous!” said Granger, pointing to another illumination, a green dragon. “That’s from the legend of St. George. And there’s his cross – the red and white bit.”

“Right.”

Granger seemed to sense that she had lost her audience’s attention. With a small, happy sigh, she shut the book. “I’ve almost finished digitising the entire thing. Then I’ll have this copy sent to the library at King’s Hall. The head librarian will fall out of her chair. I was going to offer it under your name.”

“Make it a joint gift, rather,” said Draco.

“Done,” said Granger. She waved the stasis charm around the tome back to life. “We’ll give the head librarian another reason to fall out of her chair.”

“How so?”

“Our names? Together? On a gift?” “She’ll think one of us lost a bet.”

“Let her. Better than the lurid truth about blackmail and reparations for McLaggen’s nurse fantasies.”

Draco grimaced. “At least Malfoy-Granger has a decent ring to it.”

“I beg your pardon? It would be Granger-Malfoy, if it was going to be anything. Alphabetical...” Granger’s sentence drifted off as she attempted to smother a wide yawn.

Draco took the hint. “I should be off.”

“Sorry,” said Granger, yawning again. She accompanied him to the door. “Positively knackered.” “You look it.”

“Charming. Thank you.”

Draco could’ve voiced a secret truth about how fatigue somehow became her. How the smudges under her eyes spoke of the tireless work of a brilliant mind. How her haphazard plait looked fetchingly artless and invited the play of fingers amongst escaped tendrils.

He could’ve. He didn’t. He wasn’t stupid.

Granger opened the front door. Draco passed her to get out with a fleeting brush of his arm against her shoulder. He stepped into the moon-bathed July night, sweet with the full scent of summer.

“Has anyone told you that you might be stretching yourself too thin?” asked Draco. “Mm yes. Not even an hour ago, at the pub.”

“Good.”

“Did Harry and Ron put you up to reinforcing their message? Or Neville? Ginny?”

Draco scoffed. “I wouldn’t serve as their messenger boy. I am happy that they noticed and aren’t abysmally useless friends.”

“O, because you and your friends are the quintessence of selfless love and support,” said Granger, raising a brow at him.

“Absolute paragons, Granger.” “Tss.”

Granger was framed by the golden glow of the cottage behind her – soft lights and a fire in the hearth. Her shadow flickered across the stoop. Draco’s shadow was darker, cast from behind, a moon-shadow intersecting delicately with hers.

He watched the twine and unwind of their shadow selves as Granger shifted to a lean.

And it was a strange thing, because she was tired, and he was on his way out, and yet, it felt like they were both lingering.

He wanted to linger. It was sweet to linger. To stand under fading wisteria, watching their mingling shadows, and bicker about unimportant things. There was something terribly precious about it.

Perhaps because it was unnecessary. It was for the pleasure of it. It was Just Because.

He watched her for a shift, for a sign of impatience, but there was none. Only a hip against the door jamb, an arm held loosely at her waist. She was talking about his mother now, asking him to tell her that she adored the flowers. He said something in return, something that she could respond to, to continue to stretch out the moment.

She laughed at something. Their eyes met. Draco felt woolly-headed and vague. It was the anaesthesia again, the feel of the world in flux, a slow spinning. Granger was idly plucking a few strands of wisteria. He asked if that was the extent of her flower arranging. She said yes, was he impressed? And passed him the droopy bouquet.

He said it was the loveliest thing he had ever seen. He reached to take it. He drew his fingertips against hers.

In his veins, not blood, but lightness.

His touch lingered probably too long. He wondered what to call this thing, this stealing of glances and touches and moments. The headlong giddiness impelled by the most platonic of hugs. The wanting to be near. He wasn't foolish enough to call it love, and it was too delicate for lust, but it wasn't nothing, either. It was Something.

Yes. Unless he was very much mistaken, there was Something, between himself and Granger. And wouldn't that just be an exquisite catastrophe.

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Chapter 21

The Mortifying Ordeal Begins

Draco spent a pleasant few days in a state of floaty delight. Nothing could anger him. He was adrift on happy little clouds. He didn't argue with his mother about whatever functions she strong-armed him into attending. He wholeheartedly hugged Zabini when he next saw him. He charmed a Gringotts goblin into a minor policy breach. At work, he greeted Potter and Weasley so pleasantly that they tackled him to the ground, convinced that he was Imperiused.

It was then – with his face in Potter's armpit – that Draco began to realise that something dangerous was afoot. Something unbecoming of Draco Fucking Malfoy.

Then the feel-good began to ebb and reason began to flow. Draco, face removed from Potter's disturbingly moist armpit, devoted a considerable amount of time to wondering what the fuck was wrong with him. If he was to be honest with himself – unpleasant sensation – it was the Something with Granger. It was

a Something which he had been nursing for a few weeks. Perhaps a few months.

When had it begun? He wasn't certain. There were, now that he was looking back and attempting objectivity, certain pivotal moments. Perhaps when they'd danced. Perhaps in Provence. Perhaps when she'd touched his scarred mess of a Mark. Perhaps when she'd brought herself to magical depletion to rescue him from a nonexistent threat on the Quidditch pitch. Or when she'd called him a strength in her SWOT analysis. It might have been when she'd grown wildly enthusiastic about moss. He didn't know. It had been gradual and slow and easily ignored.

However. A Something of any kind between himself and Granger was dangerous and unacceptable. The obvious – ghastly – insurmountable – issues of their history and baggage and general antagonism aside, she was his Principal, and Somethings were strictly prohibited between Aurors and their charges. Attraction was one thing, but feelings (if he was to give a term to the Something) were a violation of the Code of Conduct – and of common sense. Draco broke a great many rules, but this one was not one that he was willing to flout. Feelings clouded judgement and endangered Auror and Principal both. It was sloppy. It was negligent.

And, furthermore – furthermore! – Draco detested feelings. They were an irritation and a distraction at the best of times and a hideous vulnerability at the worst. He had successfully dodged feelings in all of his entanglements with the fairer sex, including his engagement to Astoria. It was a good habit to cultivate. It kept things clean and tidy. It kept him unconquered and free.

And now he had them. Lingering at Granger's door and getting lost in her eyes amongst the wisteria had opened a monstrous Pandora's box of them. Feelings. Mild ones, but still. Thoughts. Daydreams. They crept up on him when he least expected them, when he was eating breakfast, or arresting a Dark wizard, or dodging a Bludger. They had absolutely no business being in his head, and yet they were.

He sighed wistfully approximately two hundred times a day. He replayed memories of old conversations with Granger, those back and forths that were sometimes easy banter and sometimes the crossing of swords. The smell of roses made him calf-eyed and stupid. He daydreamed about the kisses on his cheeks and the delight of the hug. When he woke up hard, he thought of Granger doing other things – vivid imaginings of which he was not proud, afterwards, but, fuck it, they were easy to get off to.

He checked his Jotter for missed messages from Granger daily. Pathetic. He sought out stupid reasons to Jot her. Also pathetic. He paid more attention to the ring than usual. Even more pathetic. He resisted the urge to check her schedule and happen to pop along where she was, but the fact that he had the urge in the first place was excruciatingly pathetic.

Patheticness abounded since the night under the wisteria. It needed immediate rectification. Draco called an Emergency Meeting with Theo.

They met at the Nott estate, a few days after Draco's doorway dawdle with Granger. Draco cut a dramatic figure as he paced through the salon, black robes streaming behind him. He had, by this point, quite worked himself into a lather.

Meanwhile, Theo, being an idle sort of fellow (unlike Draco, who was a champion of industriousness) was reclined on a chaise, a glass in his hand. Being useless, as always.

“If you told me who she was, I might be able to advise you better,” said Theo. “I don’t want your advice.”

“Then what are you asking of me?”

“I want – I need – I don’t know – a bucket of cold water to the face.”

Theo flicked his wand. A bucket, brimming with icy water, was conjured. Draco slashed it away. “Not literally, you absolute spanner.”

Theo looked put upon. “You’re giving me terribly mixed messages. I only want to help.”

“I need an anti-love potion.” Draco came to an abrupt halt. “Do those exist? A hate potion.” “Who do we want to hate?” asked Theo. “Don’t we hate everyone, anyway?”

“We do. Except her. But I need to hate her. Well – perhaps not hate. Dislike. Or – or rather, continue to be annoyed by. Not like, anyway.”

Theo sipped at his wine. “Why?”

“Because I’m Draco Fucking Malfoy, and I don’t do fluffy fucking little emotional entanglements with – with fucking–”

“Who?”

“Her.”

“Perhaps you should. You might find them more spiritually enriching than your usual quick fuck.” “I don’t need spiritual enrichment.”

“Mm. I disagree.”

Draco scoffed, paced some more, then ran a hand through his hair. “It’s bad.” “How bad?” asked Theo.

“Bad. Daydreaming. Daydreaming. Me!”

“Ooh,” said Theo with a delighted squirm. “Tell me about the daydreams.” “No.”

“Are they kissing in the moonlight sorts of daydreams? Or naughty fantasies of her in bed? Or – gasp! – weddings and kidlets?”

“Shut up.”

“All of the above, then,” said Theo. He ate a grape and looked satisfied.

“None of them. Fuck off.” Draco swept into a corner of the room, stood poutily for a moment, and then stalked back towards Theo. “There are a hundred – a thousand – reasons why I shouldn’t be having any of these feelings.”

“Enumerate the reasons.”

“No.”

“But I want to know if they’re valid.”

“You’d narrow down who she is in a moment. No.”

“I’ve already narrowed it down,” said Theo. “Now it’s just a matter of confirming my theory.” “What’s your theory? Actually, I don’t want to know. Don’t answer.”

“Are you Occluding?” asked Theo. “Yes.”

“Come off it. I’m not a Legilimens.”

“It makes it easier to think about these idiocies without – eurgh – feelings.”

“Would she make you happy?”

“No. We can hardly stand the sight of each other. We are fundamentally incompatible.”

Theo pressed his hands to his chest. “Oh, this is delicious. Much more interesting than your usual sordid tales. Top three at least.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realise that we rank my dalliances.”

"We do." Theo ate another grape. "Out of pure intellectual curiosity, would she make your mother happy?"

Draco paused and thought for a moment. At length he said, "I haven't a bloody clue." "Hm," said Theo. "That weakens my theory."

"Good."

Draco resumed his agitated striding across the salon. His whirling robes caught Theo's bottle of wine and it shattered against a wall.

Theo whistled. "You're lucky I'd drunk most of that. It's been aging since I was some sort of zygote. And now look at it – meeting its demise because Draco Malfoy has a crush."

Draco Vanished the shards of glass. "It's not a crush."

"Then what is it?"

"It's – fine. Fine. It's a bloody crush."

"When do you see her next?"

"I don't know. I don't want to. I think it's better that I don't see her at all. Let this wear off." "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," said Theo.

"Then what do you suggest? I don't want to see her again; I'll just be a moon-eyed fool trying to find excuses to put flowers in

her hair.”

“I’d say find someone else to distract you, but I’ve a feeling that was your first line of attack, and a miserable failure.”

It irritated Draco profoundly that Theo was right. “And how would you know that?”

“Word travels. You’ve brushed off quite a number of witches in the past few months, you know. Feelings have been hurt.”

“Ah.”

“Apparently, you’ve become picky. Some are blaming Narcissa for reining you in. Some are speculating that you’ve begun looking for a wife. Luella suggests sudden-onset impotence.”

“Charming witch, that one.”

“What shall I say, the next time I hear your good name being tarnished?” “My mother does make a convenient excuse.”

“Done.” Theo summoned another wine bottle and placed it away from Draco. “Aren’t you having any? Or is dramatic pacing your libation of choice tonight?”

“I can’t,” said Draco. “G— my Healer said I had to remain off the sauce for a fortnight. I’ve got to wait til Tuesday”

“Poor darling. I shall have one for you, then. And tell me about your Healer – it was Granger, wasn’t it? Apparently it was quite a scientific coup, what she pulled, saving your hide.”

“It was.” Draco endeavoured to look nonchalant. “She attempted to explain it but I can’t pretend I understood a word. Muggle methods, you know. My eyes quite glazed over.”

“You must be grateful to her.”

Draco eyed Theo, but Theo seemed to be pursuing this line of enquiry innocently. “Of course. I’ll be making a contribution to St. Mungo’s in thanks.”

“Are you still working together?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “Where are you going with this?”

“Nowhere,” said Theo. “I’ve merely heard that she’s extraordinary.”

“Right.”

“I should invite her to my next party,” mused Theo. “Introduce everyone to the witch who saved our Draco’s life.”

Draco, quite certain that he was being baited, now, merely sniffed. “If you think a swotty Healer would be an exciting addition to the usual crowd.”

“I think she might be. And just think – we could have a dance, and quite shock Luella with the sight of Granger cosying up to you...”

Draco was deaf to the remainder of the sentence; his cognitive functions were entirely occupied by the lovely notion of holding Granger in his arms. Backless dress again, certainly. Green was fine. Or black? She would probably be a vision in black. And heels that brought her to just the right height for–

No. Fuck.

“Right,” said Draco, sharply, to conceal his imbecilic flight of fancy. “I’ll be off. You’ve proven to be quite useless.”

“I could help you procure some version of a hate potion. But you know that its effects would only be temporary.”

“As I said: useless.”

“I think she’s a lucky witch, personally,” said Theo, settling back into his chaise. “Whoever she is. I’ve never known you to develop anything more romantic for a witch than a desire to spaff all over her tits.”

“And you?”

“I’ve loved and lost,” said Theo with a tragic sigh. “And spaffed.”

“O, yes.”

Draco pressed his fingers to his eyebrows. “I need to skip forwards to the lost part and carry on with my life.”

“If you two are at odds as much as you say, I’m certain she’ll soon insult you in some unforgivable way and quite put out whatever tentative flame burns in your breast. At this early stage, feelings are delicate.”

“She called me an opportunistic ghoul and I almost kissed her.”

“Goodness.”

“Her eyes were afire; she was moments from strangling me. It was surprisingly arousing.”

“Oh, my,” breathed Theo. “You’re waxing lyrical about eyes. That’s dangerous.”

“Is it?”

“Terribly. You’ll be attempting sonnets next. Then it won’t be a crush anymore, it’ll be love.” Draco shuddered. “Bloody fucking hell, no.”

Theo set down his glass with great finality. “I shan’t read your poems, if it happens. I’m telling you now, I refuse. They’ll be soul-shrivellingly horrid.”

“There will be no fucking poems,” said Draco. “I may have to brute force my way through this. When thoughts arise, simply quash them.”

“Quash them.”

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t strike me as healthy, old boy,” said Theo, peeling a grape. “But what do I know.”

“Nothing, as this conversation has made amply clear. I’m going. I needn’t ask you to keep this to yourself.”

“Obviously.”

“I should Obliviate you, just in case.”

“But I won’t remember how to defend you against Luella’s aspersions.” “Bah,” said Draco, stalking out of the salon.

“Give my regards to Hermione,” called Theo. “Fuck you.”

~

Over the next few weeks, Draco grew pleased with himself – the quashing worked. Whenever his mind strayed towards Granger, he redirected his thoughts violently to other things. Work.

Investments. Society dinners. Nundu venom. Voldemort. Tonks. He developed a veritable arsenal of subjects to launch at suspect thoughts, including memories of dark eyes, the brush of fingertips, or repartee over rose-strewn tables.

He and Granger spoke little, with only the occasional Jot from her to advise him of her attendance at public events or movements out of town. Of Larsen he heard nothing further. Granger said that the man had grown standoffish and no longer seemed interested in meeting with her. Draco took this as good

news, though the Viking and his interest in Granger still weighed on him. He casually added Larsen's description to the Aurors' Persons of Interest list, with a note to contact him directly, should this individual be spotted on English soil.

Draco grew confident that the Something had been nothing after all – a momentary lapse in judgement, a forgettable summertime crush.

So confident was he – or, perhaps, eager to prove it to himself – that when Granger advised him of her next asterisk outing, he decided to escort her.

Really? said Granger. It's Hogwarts. It's project business, said Draco.

All right. But don't blame me if you're bored out of your skull.
Monday Aug 1, 4 p.m., Hogsmeade.

Draco told himself that his anticipation for the meet-up was merely due to it being a nice, easy end to Monday's schedule, which otherwise consisted of a visit to St. Mungo's for a tour of the Janus Thickey Ward with the hospital's top brass, followed by a spot of Necromancer hunting.

So the final days of July drifted by and it was the first of August: Lughnasadh.

It was an offensively Mondayish sort of day. It was Monday, but it didn't have to be so odious about it. At any rate, it found Draco at St. Mungo's, preparing to tour the Janus Thickey Ward at the loathsome hour of nine o'clock.

He was accompanied by a horde of St. Mungo's administrators and Board members, all of whom had heard news of Mr. Draco Malfoy's site visit in preparation for a Substantial Gift. The crowd bustled and prattled self-importantly about the thrill of visiting the ward as they climbed the stairs to the hospital's fourth floor.

Draco had been introduced to the more important members of the horde, including Hippocrates Smethwyck (a mild-mannered Healer and recently appointed head of St. Mungo's) and a few members of the Board.

The excrescence known as McLaggen had even seen fit to grace them with its presence. Draco shook his hand and asked how the old lemon was doing – concussions were serious business, you know. McLaggen was a touch cool, and grew even cooler when

he learned, through the general chatter, that Draco's donation stemmed from Healer Granger's extraordinary work.

"Yes," said Smethwyck. "She is rather non-traditional in some of her approaches – and thank goodness for that, eh, Mr. Malfoy? Healer Granger has been nothing but an asset to our hospital."

"Non-traditional how?" queried a Board member. Draco thought his name might've been Penlington.

"She is a doctor as well as a Healer," said Smethwyck.

"You mean one of those Muggle cutty-uppy types?" asked Penlington, his mustache bristling in alarm.

"Yes," said Smethwyck. "But she's also a fully qualified Healer, of course. Her final examination scores broke even Gummidge's—"

"A doctor, you say? Do we permit those to practise at St. Mungo's? I had no idea," said another Board member.

"Do the patients she sees know this about her?" asked someone else. "Oughtn't they be informed?"

There was a general disconcerted rustle amongst the horde. Draco felt that a few disparaging comments were on the boil – but subtle ones, you know. The ones that would suggest shock; but, of course, if Healer Granger was permitted to continue here, it must be fine. Of course. It wasn't about her being Muggle-born, or anything, it was merely an expression of concern and surprise about the unwizardliness of having a Muggle doctor on staff. That she was a fully qualified wizarding Healer was a footnote.

Draco knew the subtleties. He used to be quite a master of them, in circles where such things weren't said, but quietly implied.

"I'm alive today thanks to Healer Granger's non-traditional approaches," said Draco, his voice slicing through the mutterings. "If she'd kept to our Healing methods, like the three Healers who saw me before she arrived, the treatment would've consisted of shrieking that there was no antidote. And I'd be dead."

"Quite right, quite right," nodded Smethwyck.

Draco turned to the Board members. "It was Healer Granger who asked me to direct my gift to St. Mungo's. I had no intention of doing so; I was going to advance the funds to her research

enterprise at Cambridge. I certainly hope you'll thank her, the next time you see her."

There was a rumble of assent and much nodding. Some Board members looked abashed, some looked utterly confused at this categorical defence of a Healer with Muggle ties by Draco Malfoy, of all people.

McLaggen was observing Draco thoughtfully. A dangerous pursuit.

Any further mutterings were quieted. The Board members were all businessmen or politicians; they could smell Draco's money and would behave accordingly.

At last, they came to the fourth floor. Granger hadn't exaggerated how dingy the long-term care ward was. As he strode through the door, Draco noticed that the J and T were missing from the sign, which dustily proclaimed:

anus hickey Ward

Draco stared at it gravely.

The Board members looked perturbed.

Smethwyck walked them through the ward, interspersing their advance with details on the number of beds, the Healers per patient, the average length of stay, and other factoids that would have enthralled Granger, probably (not that Draco was thinking about her, because he was Quashing).

There were thirty wire-frame beds, all separated by dingy cloth partitions. There were two tired, but clean, bathrooms, equipped with a toilet and shower. The floor was well-worn tile, through which shallow depressions ran where people passed the most. There was only one window to speak of, at the far end of the ward, under which a few stringy plants valiantly struggled.

The entire floor had a whiff of the forgotten about it; something like a storage area for things that had no further use but that couldn't quite be thrown out.

The patients were a mixed lot – some very old, some young. About half were victims of the war, struggling with residual ailments that couldn't be cured. Even Draco was moved by some Do-Gooding thoughts at the sight of the latter: he spotted the Creevey boy (now a small, listless man), Lavender Brown (ravaged almost beyond recognition), Michael Corner (struggling against straps), Mitchell something-or-other from Hufflepuff

(speaking to a wall in hushed tones), and others he couldn't name.

Other beds had curtains drawn around them. A voice floated out from behind one, mellow and sad and familiar, but Draco couldn't quite place it. A child answered.

A sombre-faced Healer and her aides moved from one bed to the next. A few of the patients had visitors. They stared in surprise at Draco and the unusually large and loud crowd around him. He understood why; he had a feeling that this ward was usually a quiet, abandoned sort of place.

Granger had wanted a piano.

The group finished its tour and congregated at the window, which was easily the least dreary spot.

Smethwyck was looking at Draco with a sort of dread, awaiting his judgement. However, it wasn't Smethwyck who held the purse strings – it was the Board. It was that collection of mustachioed men who received the brunt of Draco's censure.

He kept his voice low, but his questions sharp: was there a reason why the Board hadn't seen fit to inject funding into this ward

since, by all appearances, 1903? Why hadn't funds for maintenance and upkeep been directed here? Had they been diverted elsewhere? Too many Board luncheons and dinners at the Seneca, perhaps? Didn't the Board conduct regular visits to the hospital? Did they consider this ward acceptable? Why did this appear to be their first time up here? Why were there only sufficient monies for 1.5 Healers in this ward, while the café upstairs offered Porcelana hot chocolate? Why did valiant survivors of the great war have a single window, and no bathtubs? Why, for Merlin's sake, couldn't they replace the bloody 'J' on the front door?

The group now stood in poses variously humbled and guilty.
“Right,” said Draco. “We can do better.”

He turned to Smethwyck. “I am going to give you a substantial infusion of cash. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Smethwyck.

“It will be the hospital’s first gift of this magnitude.”

“A-all right.”

“It will be transformational.”

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy, thank—”

“There will be strings attached.”

“Strings?”

“Strings. Stipulations. On hiring. On refurbishing. On operations. And there will be—” Draco eyed the Board members darkly “—safeguards in place to protect it from being whittled away.”

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy, of course—”

“Here,” said Draco, pressing a thick envelope into Smethwyck’s hands. “The details and the stipulations. You are to come back to me with a plan.”

“Oh, excellent – wonderful – Mr. Malfoy, I – how can we thank you—” “You don’t thank me. You thank Granger. It’s for her.”

Draco strode out.

Astonished stares followed him to the door. He heard Smethwyck open the envelope.

There was a gasp followed by what might’ve been the sound of Smethwyck falling into a dead faint.

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Chapter 22

Lughnasadh / The Top of the World

Monday afternoon consisted chiefly of pursuing shambling corpses raised by a Necromancer in Slough. Draco occasionally had trouble distinguishing the corpses from Slough's fine citizens, but that is a story for another day.

He arrived in Hogsmeade to meet Granger at four o'clock on the dot. He found the village exceedingly quiet. Most of the shopkeepers were on holiday and the remaining villagers had retreated indoors to avoid the heat.

Draco hurriedly arranged the front of his robes so that they fell just so about his chest, hinting at robust pectorals. He passed a hand through his hair to ensure that it looked ruggedly tousled, as befitted an Auror having done rugged, manly sorts of things.

Then he reclined against a lamppost to wait for Granger, intending to project a cool, casual, uninterested sort of vibe.

It was ruined by Granger almost Apparating into him.

They fell and untangled themselves from one another with gasps.

“You had to choose this precise square inch to Apparate to?” asked Draco tetchily, dusting off his robes.

“You couldn’t find anywhere else to lounge about than the main thoroughfare?! Really?” Granger picked herself up. “I think my foot was in your spleen.”

“I felt it.”

They regained their feet and regarded each other in a kind of mutual assessment. It had been almost a month since they had last seen each other. Granger had that overworked look about her again – the deep smudging under her eyes, the drawn mouth.

She wore a yellow sundress, as though its obnoxious cheerfulness would obfuscate her fatigue. It did not.

“You look bollocksed,” said Draco.

“Thank you. Might I enquire about the eyeball you’ve got draped over your shoulder?”

Draco looked down. Whatever corpse he had most recently dealt with had left an eye and a long optic nerve curled over the back of his arm, quite ruining his cool and casual vibe.

“Right,” he said, Vanishing it. “Souvenir from this morning’s mission.”

“Won’t its owner miss it?”

“He was dead, so, no.”

Granger’s eyes raked over the rest of him, but there were no more rogue body parts to be found. She gestured down the road.
“Shall we? Irma agreed to meet me at 4.15.”

“Irma?”

“Madame Pince.”

“She’s still with us? Merlin, I’d quite forgotten about that old bird...”

They walked. Draco checked in on himself and was pleased that he was feeling none of the fluffy shite that had so terrified him. He merely appreciated the sight of Granger’s legs, which was normal enough. Ish. She did have nice legs.

Draco noted that there was no stream of information directed at him, no Look, Malfoy, no gallivanting through the undergrowth

to point at a leaf. Perhaps Granger was tired – this was, at his best reckoning, her first day off since Midsummer. And that holiday had hardly been a relaxing time: too many death nuns.

But there was more than the tiredness – there was also a kind of reserve coming off her. She was keeping her distance. He wondered, wildly, if she, too, had noticed a Something, and whether it had frightened her as much as it had frightened him.

Perhaps she, too, was quashing things.

The idea was stupid and based on nothing but speculation, but there was something comforting about it, nonetheless.

They came to the Hogwarts gates, which swung open at their approach. The old gates and winged boars seemed far less imposing than Draco remembered.

“Have you been back here since our N.E.W.T.s?” asked Granger, observing him out of the corner of her eye.

“No,” said Draco. “You?”

“A few times – mostly to say hello to professors or for the library.”

The walk to the school from Hogsmeade seemed laughably brief. “Did we really take carriages to cover this much ground? That wasn’t even ten minutes.”

“I suppose it’s far for a twelve-year-old’s wee legs,” said Granger. “Everything seems small.”
“I know.”

As the castle itself came into view around a bend, Draco was pleased to find that it had retained its aura of magic and mystery – even if it, too, looked smaller than he recollect ed.

“Smells the same,” said Draco as they walked into the Entrance Hall. Wood, old stone, schoolish.

“Better, rather,” said Granger, taking in a breath. “No hordes of grimy children during the summer. When I was here last winter, there was a definite whiff of teenaged boy in the air.”

Now they were in the castle proper. Draco was not particularly prone to nostalgic reminiscing, but he had spent many happy years here (and two horrid ones) and he rather enjoyed the wander through the old corridors. They, too, felt narrower than in

his youth. He recalled the suits of armour towering over him; now he looked down at them.

They peeked into the Great Hall, where the four House tables stood, scuffed and bare, awaiting September first. The room had always felt so grand, the tables almost interminable. Now Draco wasn't certain that he could squeeze his way onto one of the Slytherin benches without kneecapping himself.

The enchanted ceiling was the deep blue of high summer.

They continued past empty classrooms that smelled of chalk and years of spilled ink. Sunlight streamed through dusty windows.

Granger grew visibly excited as they neared the library, though she was doing her best to appear restrained. When she reached the heavy doors, she paused to rub a palm against the well-worn handle.

She pulled open the door and the smell of the library met them: old books, vellum, worn leather and dust.

It was potent. Draco felt fourteen again. "I feel as though I've got a Potions essay due," he said. A smile broke on Granger's face. "Mine's Transfiguration."

Madame Pince watched their approach from her desk. Draco was quite convinced that she still wore the same hat and pointy shoes that she had when they'd been students. He half expected a telling off from her for talking.

She, too, seemed small.

Granger was greeted by Madame Pince with something approaching warmth – a pinchy, reticent sort of warmth. Draco was observed with surprise, doubly so because he was with Granger.

“Strange sort of bedfellows,” sniffed Madame Pince. “Work,” said Granger.

Pince passed Granger a record card. “The Ypres Manuscript. I know that you can handle rare books, Miss Granger, but do be especially careful with this one. I’ve taken down the wards for you.”

Granger thanked her and led the way to the Restricted Section, which housed the bulk of Snape’s collection.

The air grew stuffier and pressed at their ears as they progressed deeper and deeper into the library. Whatever rudimentary

ventilation cooled the castle did not come to the library's inner reaches. It was hot. And had the stacks always been this narrow?

"Prime snogging stacks, these," said Draco in the quiet. "Pince couldn't hear."

"I remember," said Granger.

"Do you?"

Granger gave him a glance. "You needn't look so surprised."

"Curious, rather," said Draco. "He must've been a brave lad. Unless it was Weasley. He doesn't count. Can't, mostly."

"Don't be mean," tsked Granger. "But, no – Ron wasn't my first snog. Viktor had that honour." "Viktor?"

"Krum."

Draco gave a low whistle. "Good for Viktor."

Granger had come to a halt at a shadowy place between stacks. "Just here, if I'm not mistaken. Those shelves made decent hand-holds."

"The tales these stacks could tell."

Granger gave him a wry sort of look. “I’m sure they’d have equally bawdy tales about you.” Draco smirked at her instead of answering.

She looked away.

She was right, of course. Much teenage exploration had happened amongst these shelves. His first blow job, he thought, unless that had been in the common room? He couldn’t remember. But he did remember many romps with girls in short skirts through here, pushing them up against the books, tongues and fingers fumbling about.

And now he was here again, but the only skirt to chase was Granger’s. His eye wandered to her backside and legs as she walked ahead, until he caught himself wondering how she would look pushed up against the books, and then he gave himself a mental box on the ear. No. He was not doing that. He was Quashing.

He was getting sweaty. He cast a cooling charm on himself, and then on Granger, from behind. She squeaked in surprise as goosebumps broke over her arms.

“You’re welcome,” said Draco, in response to her dark look.

The Restricted Section had been enlarged to display the Snape collection, but otherwise looked much the same as it always had. Draco waved his wand out of curiosity, grinning as he illuminated the various nasty wards and jinxes strewn across the shelves.

“Pince has a flair for it, I’ll give her that,” said Draco. “Perhaps she missed her calling as a nun.” “You ought to suggest that to her. It’d be a laugh.”

“A laugh? She’d kick me in the bollocks with her pointy shoe.”

“I didn’t specify who would be laughing.”

Granger squatted down to search for her book. When she found it, she heaved the large manuscript to a reading table.

She paused to push a strand of dampish hair from her forehead. Instead of settling down to read, as Draco had expected, she merely took out her mobile and began to – if he was understanding it correctly – take photographs of the pages of interest.

The problem with Granger was that she always came with new intrigues. She never bored him. Why couldn’t she bore him? It would be easier for all parties if he wasn’t being perpetually stimulated by her. (Intellectually, obviously.)

“How, pray, is that working in bloody Hogwarts?” asked Draco.

“Hm? Oh,” said Granger, flipping over the mobile.

Attached to its back was one of her anti-magic pucks. “I’d forgotten about those things.”

“Terribly useful. I can’t go about life without my mobile.”

Granger bent over the reading desk to take the photos. Draco did not look at her. In fact, he turned away from her, and conjured a mirror, and attempted to salvage his hair.

“It’d be far more convenient for me to review this manuscript at home,” said Granger, “but Madame Pince would never let me remove it from the library. So I’m doing the next best thing – digital photos. Don’t tell her. She’ll think I’m stealing the book’s soul or something.”

“Right. I’m rather glad you’re not settling in for a read. I’m sweating my plums off,” said Draco, removing his robes and popping his collar open.

Granger directed another cooling charm at him, and then at herself. She pulled her hair into a coil above her crown and pushed her wand through it.

Draco, having done his best with his own coiffure, came beside her to observe the manuscript. It contained diagrams of medical procedures and medieval patients in various states of distress.

He noted that Granger was staying well away from him, though she was being casual about it. If he approached, she found a reason to shift to the other side of the table. If he joined her there, she went around again to take her photographs from a different angle.

Should he be offended? Should he be glad? He didn't know. He felt offended, but that was because witches didn't generally flee his vicinity.

"Do I smell like a cadaver?" asked Draco. "What?"

"Me. Rotting corpse, whiffs of. Yes or no?"

"No," said Granger with a quick glance up at him. She returned to her photographs. "Good," said Draco.

When he approached her again – ostensibly to examine an illustration – she didn't move away. So he'd made his point. To what purpose, he wasn't certain.

Granger snapped a few more photographs, took a moment to examine them on her device, then pronounced herself satisfied.

She closed the manuscript with great care and toddled off to replace it.

“That’s it?” asked Draco.

“Yes. I did warn you that it would be boring,” said Granger, leading the way out of the stacks. “You shouldn’t have bothered to come.”

Draco shrugged. “It’s a nice change, you know, the company of the living. You have slightly more vitality than a shambling corpse.”

“You have such a way with words,” came her dry response. “It quite undoes me.”

Draco was unable to pursue this interesting conversational twist because Pince popped out from behind a shelf. “Finished? Already?!”

“Yes,” said Granger. “I’ve just put it away; it’s ready for your wards. Thank you again for coming in during your holiday, just for me. I am terribly grateful.”

“Always a pleasure,” said Pince, but her look was profoundly suspicious. “I rather thought you’d be here for a few hours, at least.”

“Yes, well – I had a specific chapter to review, nothing more.”

“You look... rather sweaty.”

“Yes, it’s hot back there.”

“I see. You made very quick work of it. The manuscript, I mean.”

“Yes. As I said, my approach was quite focused.”

“Hm,” said Pince, narrowing her eyes, and becoming, if possible, even pinchier. Her black gaze moved to the sheen of sweat that covered the two of them to Draco’s state of relative undress, with his unbuttoned collar and his robes slung over his arm. “The library is for reading, you know.”

“Indeed,” said Granger, blinking at her. “Reading and research. Not other activities.”

Granger looked rather like she suspected that Pince had grown slightly barmy. “Quite right. Er – I suppose we’d best be going.”

“I suppose you ought to,” said Pince. Her gaze now travelled to Draco’s face and his hair, and his collar, and then his fly.

They left the library under the weight of her stare.

“What on earth was that about?” asked Granger, when the doors had safely closed behind them. “Has she gone a bit potty?” asked Draco. “Did she just eye my bulge?”

“She did.”

“I’m disturbed.”

“Me too. I wonder what—”

In a moment of shared realisation, Granger turned to look at Draco just as he turned to look at her. “Was she implying that we were doing things?” gasped Granger, appalled.

Draco looked back at the library doors. “I think she thinks we popped in for a fucking quickie.”

Granger pivoted so rapidly that her skirts swished into a circle around her thighs. “I’m going back there to set things straight with her.”

“And if we’re wrong?”

Granger paused. “Are we wrong?”

“I don’t know? Perhaps she just wanted to look at my bulge?”

Granger held up her hand. “Enough about your bulge. We have bigger things to deal with.” “Excuse you.”

“What if we’re right, and she... she tells someone?” asked Granger with a horrified intake of breath.

“That would be a laugh.”

“A laugh? No. Imagine if she told McGonagall.”

“I didn’t specify who would be laughing.”

“If you’re going to imitate me, kindly bring it down an octave; that was piercing.” Granger strode back to the library. “And why wasn’t she sweaty?” she called over her shoulder.

Amused at this turn of events, Draco waited for Granger to ‘set things straight.’ He leaned next to a slouching suit of armour, pressing his back into cool stone. A few drying charms got rid of the worst of the dampness at his armpits. Perhaps he hadn’t stunk like cadaver, perhaps it had just been sweat.

Granger was back. There was storminess in her stride as she marched down the corridor. The suit of armour beside Draco straightened up and saluted.

“So?” asked Draco.

“She’s gone,” said Granger. “Couldn’t find her. She must’ve left from the east entrance.”

“Write her a letter,” shrugged Draco.

Granger rounded on him. “A letter?! Really? You want me to put this absurdity in writing? Dear Madam Pince, you looked at Malfoy’s bulge so we weren’t sure if you had jumped to conclusions but please be advised that I did not get off with him in the library? Sincerely, Hermione?”

Draco was unable to hold back a laugh. He walked ahead of her, feeling that it might be safer to be out of swatting distance.

“I’m delighted that one of us is amused,” said Granger, striding up behind him with fire in her eyes. Draco came to a sudden stop. Granger walked into him.

“Ouch – what–”

“My common room,” said Draco, gesturing to a flight of stone stairs on the right. “That way. Let’s go.”

“No. I came here with explicit permission to use the library, not to take Draco Malfoy on a nostalgic scenic tour of the castle. What if Filch catches us?”

“What if Filch catches us?” repeated Draco, descending the stairs. “O, he’ll send us straight to detention, I expect.”

He glanced up to see that Granger had a hand on her hip. Now she was fourteen again. She looked as though she was hoping for a Prefect to pop by, so that she might tell on him and have house points docked.

Draco continued down the stairs. He heard her ugh of irritation, and then, at length, her footsteps clattering behind him.

It was noticeably cooler in the castle’s lower levels. The inhabitants of familiar portraits started as they passed, then waved, or gasped out a comment. “Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy! Proper grownups now!” cried a medieval sorceress who followed them through several paintings. “Look at them!”

“Did someone say Draco?” said a snide sort of voice. A black-haired, goateed man popped his head over the edge of a frame.

“Hullo, Phineas,” said Draco.

“Why are you here with her?” asked Phineas, jerking his head towards Granger. “Work,” said Draco.

Now a knight galloped into view along a wide seascape. “Ah! Hermione Granger! Well met, my lady! Well met!”

Granger, who kept glancing over her shoulder as though McGonagall might materialise and give her a scolding, smiled at the sight of the knight. “Sir Cadogan!”

“You’re with this rascalion, are you?” said the knight, pointing at Draco with his sword. “Are you here under duress?”

Granger glanced at Draco, as though wondering whether to say yes and have him suffer the fury of an 11 inch oil painting. “No, I’m here willingly. It turns out he’s all right.”

“Is he?” asked Sir Cadogan, flipping his visor open and observing Draco. “Stout-hearted?”

“He’s an Auror, you daft bugger,” said Phineas. “Of course he’s stout-hearted. Risking his neck for imbeciles daily, I’d wager.”

“Me? A daft bugger? How dare you? You, Sir, are a curmudgeonly old scroat, and I am going to remove your tongue.” Sir Cadogan lowered his visor and clanged towards Phineas, who exited the painting rather swiftly.

“Farewell, my lady!” echoed Sir Cadogan’s voice as he, too, disappeared.

They came to the Potions classroom. The door was ajar. Draco walked in. Everything looked the same, only smaller – the well-scrubbed worktops, the row of beaten-up sinks, the cauldrons heaped along the back wall.

Draco made his way to what had been his work table for seven years. Granger stood indecisively at the door, then followed him in.

“I wonder who the new Potions professor is,” she said, observing a bookshelf near the door. “They’re quite modern, anyway; they’ve got Buxton’s works, and Keynes’. Snape preferred the 19th Century masters. Bit of a traditionalist.” She turned to look at Draco and found that he had disappeared. “Er – what are you doing?”

Draco had crouched under this old work table and sent a Lumos under it. “Hah!” he said. Granger’s knees came into view, and then her face as she crouched next to him.

Draco pointed to the crude cock and balls carved under the desk. “Wow,” said Granger.

“Left my mark,” said Draco.

“An enduring legacy, to be sure,” said Granger. She shuffled under the desk on her knees, examining the rest of Draco’s oeuvre, which consisted chiefly of his own initials.

“What’s this?” she asked, pointing to an oblong sort of blob. “A hedgehog?” Draco crept closer to study the mysterious hieroglyph.

“A conker?” asked Granger.

Draco shook his head and said, gravely, “I believe that that is what twelve-year-old me thought lady bits looked like.”

Granger burst into laughter.

“A hedgehog,” repeated Draco with exaggerated offence.

“It has an eye,” said Granger, pointing at a speck.

“Conker hunting will now take on an exciting new meaning,” mused Draco. “Hopefully your knowledge of female anatomy has improved a little.”

“I’ve remedied the gaps in my knowledge since.”

“I’ve a few anatomy texts I can lend you, if you need help. So you know where to poke the hedgehogs.”

“Unnecessary, but thank you for your largesse of spirit.”

Granger was looking at the ‘hedgehog’ and pressing her hands to her mouth to keep from laughing again.

The moment felt surreal. Draco was in the Hogwarts dungeons, crouching under a Potions work table with Hermione Granger. He had spent seven years in this dungeon, staring at the back of her head, hating her. And now, somehow, almost two decades later, they were back, a respected Auror and esteemed Healer, on their knees, giggling about yonic conkers.

He had a strange moment of regret that it had taken this long – that they had spent so much time loathing each other.

And then he had an equally strange moment of hope that it wasn’t too late. (Too late for what? He didn’t know, exactly.)

Their knees touched.

Granger pulled away. She rose and dusted herself off briskly. “Right. Enough of your conceptual vulvas. Let’s get to your common room.”

Draco extricated himself from under the table and joined her.

Granger attempted to lead the way, but it soon became clear that she had no more than a general sense of where the Slytherin common room was.

“Over here,” called Draco as she took a wrong turn. “Haven’t you ever been?”

Granger turned around and caught up to him. “I didn’t have many Slytherin friends – so, no.” They stopped at a nondescript wall.

Granger looked about curiously. “Here?”

“Yes. The next question will be the password, of course,” said Draco. “You want us to stand here and guess?”

“Let’s have a go. For five minutes, Granger. I’m not asking you to blurt out Slytheriny things for the next week.”

Granger looked doubtful. “What sort of Slytheriny things should we blurt out?”

“Famous Slytherins. Ingredients. Ethically questionable spells. Anything you can think of.”

They called out guesses: plants and potions and curses and creatures. Rafflesia. Vermiculus. Banshee. Imperata cylindrica. Flesh-eating slug. Hebridean Black Dragon. Cuscata. Mountain Troll. Locomotor Wibbly. Belladonna. Nargle. Bloody Baron. Thestral. Basilisk.

Not even a quiver from the stone. Granger seemed to take it personally and began to warm up to the exercise.

“*Tacca chantirieri*,” she said, a hand on her hip. “Entomorphis!” “*Melofors*,” tried Draco. “Erkling? Parseltongue. Salazar’s bollocks.”

Granger switched strategies and began to list posh things. “Fox hunting. Tweed. Sabrage.” Draco tried some Latin for variety. “*Oderint dum metuant. Non ducor, duco. Carpe noctem.*” “Gilets,” said Granger. “Regattas! Pimm’s. Mustard trousers. Black market organs.” “Puffskein? Blood-sucking bugbear!” “Melon baller!” cried Granger.

“Godric Gryffindor is an absolute muppet,” said Draco with great authority. A shudder ran through the wall.

Granger gasped. “Godric is a bellend. A tosspot!”

“Godric couldn’t organise a piss-up in a pub. Godric is a useless fucking wanker.”

“Godric is a right numpty.”

“A pillock!”

“An infantile pillock.”

“Godric has saggy balls.”

“Godric is a slobbering plonker.”

“Godric is a proper duffer.”

“A thicko!”

“Godric the Gormless.”

“Quite.”

A nasally kind of laugh emanated from behind them. Phineas had slipped into a painting of a mountainous landscape. “This is wildly entertaining.”

Granger leapt into the air and looked guilty. Her cheeks were flushed as she addressed the former headmaster. “Er – hello again. Have you – have you still got your tongue?”

“Obviously,” said Phineas. “O, good. We were just, er–”

“Breaking into the common room,” said Draco. “To what end, pray?” asked Phineas.

Draco shrugged. “To reminisce about days gone by.”

“You? Want to reminisce? With Hermione Granger?” Granger held up her finger. “Actually, I—”

“O, yes,” interjected Draco. “We are reliving our terribly fond memories of one another.”

“I was under the apprehension that you hated each other,” said Phineas.

“We do,” said Draco and Granger at the same time.

Draco felt that the assertion would’ve been more credible if Phineas hadn’t just caught them giggling at a wall, shouting about Godric’s balls.

Phineas looked at Granger, who was blushing furiously, and then at Draco, who met his eye with a grin.

“You make even less sense than you did as smelly pubescents. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” said Draco.

“Password is Gurdyroot,” said Phineas, disappearing from view. “Only because you managed to make me laugh. Don’t get bodily fluids on the upholstery.”

While Granger sputtered at the effrontery, Draco turned to the wall. “Gurdyroot.”

The wall opened to reveal the dark, polished door that led to the Slytherin common room. Draco pushed it open.

It looked as though the school had made some efforts to lighten the place up. The greenish, bulbous lights of Draco's day had been replaced by gas lamps that lent a warm glow to the room. The furnishings looked much the same as they had in Draco's youth – tufted leather sofas and high-backed chairs, ornately carved tables and cabinets. Gilded mirrors shone in shadows.

The elaborately carved stone fireplace was unlit. On the walls around it, portraits of famous Slytherins were displayed. Merlin was reading something and spared Draco a raised eyebrow. Salazar's chair was empty. Phineas did not reappear. There were two new additions amongst the portraits: Slughorn and Snape. Slughorn was napping with a bottle of Ogden's Old held snug in his arms. Snape's black-robed silhouette lurked at the back of his portrait, brewing something.

Draco ran his hand along the back of a sofa. For seven years, he had plotted and schemed here. He had presided like a little lord

over a group of friends, many of whom were now dead. He'd felt terribly important here, terribly savvy and wise and adult.

And now it felt like a children's playroom. The desks for their homework. The House rules pinned to the noticeboard. The faded banners celebrating past House Cup victories. The bookshelves with their worn textbooks. It was all so small.

Granger sniffed. "They ought to replace the rugs. It smells like feet."

Granger could always be counted on to rout the sentimentality out of anything.

She wandered to the far edge of the dungeon, which extended partly under the lake. "Now this is interesting," she said, having come to the windows that gave into the water.

"There's a better view from the dormitories," said Draco. "Come on."

She followed him down a corridor and into the boys' dormitory that had been his for seven years. A window into the lake took up the entirety of the western wall.

“Fascinating!” said Granger, stepping up to it.

“The Giant Squid passes by now and again. Merfolk, too.”

Draco left her to her observation. He walked into the circle of five green-canopied beds that took up the rest of the room. Goyle, Crabbe, Zabini, Nott. Dead, dead, alive, alive.

Finally, he came to what had been his bed. Surely, surely it hadn’t been this small. It had always felt so vast.

He stretched out on it and chortled. His feet hung over the edge.

Granger drifted over, having heard his laugh. “No Giant Squid, but I see that a Giant Malfoy has taken possession of one of the beds.”

“I can hardly believe this is the same bed.”

“Did you carve any genitalia into it, so we can authenticate it?”

Draco turned to examine a bedpost. “Do you know, I don’t think I ever did.”

Granger perched herself on the edge of what had been Nott's bed. She passed her hands over her bare arms. "Didn't you find it dreary in here? I can't imagine how cold it was in the winter."

"It wasn't too different from the Manor," shrugged Draco. "We had the fire going, and warming charms, and hot toddy and Firewhisky."

A group of Grindylows was drifting by the window. Granger turned to watch.

Again, Draco was struck by the incongruity of the moment. Hermione Granger, in a bright sundress, with him in his childhood dormitory. He wondered what young Draco would've thought of it all. What would he have said if now-Draco told him that Granger would grow up to be pretty and witty and terrifyingly clever? That she'd boss him about a little and that he sometimes enjoyed it? That he'd make her laugh on purpose just to see it?

He'd tell him he was a soppy fucking wanker. Difficult to disagree.

"Have you reminisced to your satisfaction?" asked Granger.
"Yes," said Draco.

Better to move on than continue to think wanky thoughts.

Granger rose. He watched her skirts pass the bed. A whiff of her soap followed.

He quashed a not-quite-formed idea involving Granger and this old bed before it could reach a shape and then – horrors – live on in his mind's eye.

They retraced their steps out of the dormitory and through the common room.

Draco took a final look around. He mightn't be back here for another decade. Would it feel even smaller, then? As life pelted relentlessly onwards and his childhood memories shrank and shrank into an ever-smaller pinprick of light behind him?

Granger was smiling at him. “What?” asked Draco.
“You really did come to reminisce,” said Granger. “You've gone all – all wistful.” Draco shrugged.
“I think it's rather sweet,” said Granger, looking wistful herself.

She looked as though she caught herself, then, and grew serious, and strode away. “Do you want to go to your common room?” asked Draco.

She shook her head. “I come here more often than you. Another time.”

Granger made for the corridor they’d come down, from the Potions classroom. Draco caught her by the elbow and showed her a quicker way out, up a narrow staircase that led straight to the Entrance Hall.

Why had he caught her by the elbow? He’d had no reason to catch her by the elbow. He could’ve just said something. That was stupid, and a failure of Quashing.

He let her climb the narrow stair first and, because her bum was right there, he looked at his feet all the way up.

Granger peered into the Great Hall again on the way out, hoping to find Pince. She was not there. Granger muttered some words of irritation.

They exited the castle and descended the steps onto the gravel way that led back to Hogsmeade. The air smelled of sweet grass and the delicate fragrance of the willows that bordered the lake.

It was good to be outside again.

As they came into Hogsmeade, Granger drifted towards the Three Broomsticks. “I’m properly famished. Have you eaten?”

“No,” said Draco. “No lunch, either; the corpses put me off.”

Granger wrinkled her nose. “Well – you’re welcome to join me, but it won’t be quite as recherché as the Manor’s fare.”

She tried the door of the Three Broomsticks, only to find a notice indicating that they were closed until September.

They walked on to Madam Puddifoot’s, which was equally shuttered. Finally, they reached the Hog’s Head.

Granger hovered indecisively at the door. “Not sure I’m this desperate. I’ve heard it’s gone quite downhill since Aberforth retired.”

“What? Can’t be that bad for a pint and bit of pub grub, can it?”
It could.

Draco and Granger were welcomed (if such a cheerful term could be used) by a man who looked more like a Skrewt than most Skrewts do. He looked irritated that they dared to give him business. That was red flag number one that this was going to be a uniquely terrible experience.

They asked for a pint; they were told that there was no ale left on the premises. That was red flag number two. At this juncture, a wiser pair would have upped and left, but a kind of curiosity had been lit in them, to see how bad this could actually get.

“We’ll take what you’ve got then, mate,” said Draco. “And a bit of whatever’s in the kitchen.”

They sat themselves at a grubby table near what had probably been a window, once, except it was now coated with grime.

The Skrewt dropped two smudged glasses onto the table and poured out something clear into them before stomping off to the kitchen.

A powerful odour of turpentine washed over the table.

Granger sniffed at her glass and her eyes watered. “Oh my – it’s going to be a proper sinus cleanser.”

“Can’t be worse than Affpuddle’s Absinthe, can it?” asked Draco.
“Cheers.”

Granger held up her glass to Draco's with a worried look. She took a generous swallow of hers; he threw back half of his. They both sputtered and coughed.

“Burning,” choked out Granger.

“Th-that’s some first class nectar,” hacked Draco. “I’ve never felt so alive,” sniffed Granger.

They drank again to confirm that it had been that bad. It had. Granger was a weepy mixture of laughing and coughing. Draco lost most of his voice.

“What the hell is this stuff?” asked Draco hoarsely. “Was it distilled in a toilet?” enquired Granger.

The Skrewt had placed the bottle on a shelf behind the bar. Draco levitated it to them. It was Troll vodka.

The label included a warning that it was not to be consumed neat and to please drink responsibly. Which was red flag number three, but hey-ho; in for a Knut, in for Galleon.

“88 percent ABV,” gasped Granger. “Brilliant. I had just wanted to begin the week with a spot of alcohol poisoning.”

“It’s fine,” said Draco in his broken voice. “We’ll have food soon.” In retrospect, there was such beautiful positivity in that thought.

The Skrewt emerged from the kitchen with plates.

“Steak,” he grunted as he slapped a plate in front of Draco. “Salad,” he said, dropping that one in front of Granger. “Bangers and mash,” he concluded, throwing the final dish between the two of them, before Skrewting away.

Draco and Granger observed these offerings.

“Was this steak cooked on a radiator?” asked Draco.

Granger examined the grey lump. “It needed at least five more minutes under the hair dryer.” They turned their attention to Granger’s salad. It consisted of half of a raw onion. “Shocking,” said Draco.

Granger retained her sang-froid. She pulled the bangers and mash towards them with a kind of grim optimism.

“But why is the sausage so... shrunken?” asked Draco. “Perhaps it’s cold,” suggested Granger kindly.

“Or nervous,” nodded Draco.

Granger bit her lip. “It looks like a prolapse.” Draco laughed. It hurt his throat.

“And what’s this?” asked Granger, poking at an indistinct piece of gristly fat. “Lard Voldemort.”

“My god.”

“The mash looks... all right?”

“It smells like hot cat sick,” said Granger, knocking away Draco’s fork. “Do not try it. Nothing will come of this except cataclysmic diarrhoea.”

Draco, who did not want a runny bum, set aside his fork. They looked at each other.

“I think this might be a cry for help,” said Granger, sombre. “Should we ask him if he’s all right?”

Draco was less inclined towards sympathy. “I think we’ve just discovered a blatantly obvious front.”

“That too,” said Granger. “Are you going to investigate?” “I’ll pawn it off to one of the newbies.”

Granger was beginning to look a bit wobbly in her seat. She squinted at her almost empty glass. “Guesses as to our blood alcohol content?”

“Two... two hundred percent, approximately,” said Draco, not stuttering, but close. The booze was starting to hit him, too.

“Let’s totter off to find something actually edible,” said Granger, rising. She swayed on her feet. “Oh, bloody hell. I can’t Apparate.”

“It offends me to pay for this,” said Draco with a gesture to their untouched repast. He nevertheless dropped a Sickle onto the table.

“I can—” said Granger, grasping at a pocket.

“No,” said Draco. “I insisted on trying this place. You get the next.” “Fine.”

“You were right, after all. It wasn’t quite as recherché as the Manor’s fare.”

They staggered out of the pub and ambled down the street, bumping into each other and various objects as they went. Around the corner was a little grocer’s, just about to close up for the evening. They raided the last of the bread basket and bought a small wheel of cheese to go with it. Granger found some cherries. Draco discovered an enormous, slightly squashed blackberry pie. Granger asked if they ought to buy a slice? Draco said he wanted two, personally. They stared at the pie and then, their wits and willpower drowned by two inches of vodka,

bought the entire thing. A cool bottle of cider topped it off, and that was dinner sorted.

They meandered a small way out of the village, looking for a place to sit. Granger said that she fancied a view of the village; Draco said he wanted to look at the castle. They found an adequate compromise up a small path that led to a grassy sort of promontory, from where they could look out onto Hogsmeade and Hogwarts both.

Granger asked Draco for a handkerchief, which she Transfigured into a blanket and spread onto the grass. The blanket was rather more triangular than square, but then again, Granger was rather more sloshed than sober.

Loose limbed and wobbly, Granger decanted herself onto the blanket. Draco flumped down beside her. The bread, slightly chewy, was parted out first, in the hopes of belatedly absorbing some of the Troll vodka.

Granger said, “I am utterly hammered,” around a mouthful of it. There was a kind of serenity to her, a calm sort of acceptance that she was completely bollocksed, and that was how it was going to be.

She had great difficulty putting a piece of cheese on her bread. Draco attempted to help, but her piece of bread kept multiplying into two, then four, until he blinked, and it was one again, swaying gently.

“Hold still,” said Draco, snatching her wrist.

“I am,” said Granger. “You’re the wobbly one.”

Draco, with painstaking focus, managed to place a piece of cheese on the bread.

Granger hiccoughed. The cheese fell, bounced off her knee, and rolled into the grass. She watched it go with a gentle sort of sadness.

Draco gave up on her and focused on his own bread and cheese, which he put together moderately well. His only difficulty was finding his own mouth.

“Faschi... Fassi... Fascinating,” said Granger, watching him mash it into his chin. “You’re usually so elegant.”

“Am I?”

“Yes,” said Granger. “You make everything look ef-effortless, you know?” “You’re drunk enough to compliment me. This is a trill. Thrill.”

Granger chewed. “It was an observation. You can get cheeky when you can put a sandwich in your mouth, not before.”

Draco managed to do so, then inhaled to say something, then choked on a crumb.

As he coughed, Granger came to the rescue by floating the bottle of cider towards him. This was done with decidedly less finesse and wand control than usual. She had, presumably, been aiming for his hand, but the bottle pressed into his groin instead.

“Steady on,” said Draco.

“S-sorry,” said Granger, flinging the bottle over his shoulder and clipping his temple with it before dropping it onto the blanket next to him.

“Wow,” said Draco.

Granger set aside her wand as though it were a dangerous thing. Then she pressed her fingers to her mouth and looked like she

was holding back a shriek of laughter. “I’m so sorry – so sorry – not what I wanted to do—”

“It’s f-fine,” said Draco. “Bit of frottage with a cider bottle – new experience...”

After the Troll vodka, the cider was spectacular – fresh, tart, bubbly on the tongue, and honeyed in the finish. Draco drank and passed Granger the bottle. He had intended to make an eloquent remark on its aroma and notes, but what came out instead was a slurred observation that it didn’t hurt to drink.

Which was all the endorsement Granger needed, anyway. She drank, too, and passed it back.

There was nothing interesting about sharing a bottle with Granger. About tasting where her lips had been a moment before. Nothing whatsoever, and he wouldn’t think about it. And he wouldn’t look at her mouth, either.

“Stop looking at me,” said Granger, holding a hand in front of her mouth, which made Draco aware that he was looking at her mouth. “I can’t even eat a piece of cheese.”

“I’m not looking at you,” said Draco, like the liar he was. “I’m looking at the view.” “...The view is behind you,” said Granger. “Oh,” said Draco, turning around. “Right.”

“You weren’t joking about the two hundred percent BAC,” said Granger, edging nearer to him on the blanket to look at the view, too.

Hogsmeade’s quaint streets curved away into the growing dusk below them. Farther away, Hogwarts Castle was a silhouette, its windows reflecting the last of a red sunset.

“You should draw it,” declared Granger. “What? I don’t draw.”

“Liar. I know you’ve got an artistic streak; I saw your magnificent willy.” Draco tried to resist, but a giggle escaped him.

Granger looked at him with wide eyes. “I can’t decide if that was adorable or terrifying.”

“Both. Just like me.”

“You are neither,” sniffed Granger. “Calm down.”

“But I am elegant.”

“If you take the rambles of a drunken idiot for fact,” said Granger. She was attempting to look prim.

“The drunk mind speaks the sober heart,” said Draco. He tried to wiggle his eyebrows but he wasn’t sure what he managed to do; Granger merely looked perplexed.

“Shall we have some pie?” she asked.

“Unsubtle change of subject, but yes,” said Draco, waving his wand at the pie, which floated towards them. “Would you like a bit of frottage, too?”

Granger crossed her legs. “That was an accident.”

“Of course. Make us some cutlery, would you?” “I hardly trust myself to.”

She plucked at a few dandelion leaves for the purpose. She Transfigured them into two very credible spoons, though they were slightly green. The forks were a different matter; a formidable creation, non-Euclidean, unearthly. It hurt their heads to look at them. Draco and Granger grew frightened and threw them off the cliff.

Anyway, they had the spoons. Draco set the pie to floating between them and they ate and got crumbs all over themselves.

The Troll vodka was wearing off. Now they were simply drunk, not Utterly Cabbaged.

Granger, staring at Hogwarts Castle, drifted into introspection. “You know, today has been more interesting than I thought it would be.”

“Mm?”

“I didn’t imagine I’d ever see the Slytherin common room – much less your dormitory.”

“It did feel quite strange, seeing you in there.”

“Against the natural order of things?”

Draco thought about it. “Can we really call it a natural order?”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re rather artificial divisions, aren’t they? The Slytherin and Gryffindor business.” “Goodness,” said Granger, pulling her knees to her chin. “Are we getting philosophical?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “I’m drunk. Indulge me.”

“Of course – we mustn’t let the opportunity go to waste. And you’re right. Entirely artificial. But schools have to divide and conquer the masses of children somehow.”

“I suppose it keeps them manageable.”

“There might be a better way to do it than a pseudo-horoscopic enterprise involving underdeveloped character traits and a talking hat,” mused Granger. “My primary school assigned our houses at random – but then, it was Muggle, and they hadn’t a talking hat.”

Draco finished the last of the pie and threw bits of crust to some sparrows.

Granger, apparently not trusting herself with her wand, got up to fetch the cherries. “If we’re going to critique the system... After today, I think there might’ve been a downside to all the inter-House secrecy.”

“What do you mean?”

“The hidden common rooms, the isolation between houses. It’s – it’s terribly humanising, to see someone on a bed.”

“Are you saying you mightn’t have thought me such a dreadful creature, if you’d seen the pillow I drooled on at night?”

“Exactly,” laughed Granger. “But, really. I mean it. You were an entity that popped up out of nowhere, said awful things, and then vanished until the next skirmish.”

“I had to adopt guerilla tactics to avoid the slapping,” said Draco.

“That was once,” said Granger. She ate a cherry. “The secrecy fostered fractures above and beyond those created by House divisions. That’s my position. What are you smirking about?”

“Only thinking that a great many witches have formed a great many ideas after seeing me in bed, but a treatise on the House system is an entirely new one.”

“You are terribly full of yourself, you know,” said Granger, looking away to hide her amusement. “Of course I am. Have you seen me?”

“No, I haven’t. Your feet are always in the way.”

Draco, already close to the rocky edge of the promontory, turned and dangled his legs over the side. “There.”

Granger played along. She moved to sit beside him, ostensibly to observe him. Draco noticed that her reserve from earlier in the day had vanished. Was it the drink? The conversation? Him?

Which made him realise that he himself hadn’t been Quashing. And now that she was next to him, things were beginning to

happen again – the beginnings of that sweetness in his veins, the buzz of his pulse.

He ought to move away. He ought to Occlude and separate his rational self from fuzzy thought and feeling.

He ought to.

“Right. Let’s have a look, now that I can see you properly,” said Granger. She ran her analytical gaze down his face.

“I feel like a textbook,” said Draco.

“Perhaps I shall read you like one, now that my view isn’t obstructed.”

“You don’t read, you devour. I’m frightened.”

“As you should be.”

“Have I got any marginalia?”

Amusement pulled at Granger’s mouth. “You do listen to me sometimes. What’s the human equivalent of marginalia? Perhaps this?” she asked, running the back of a finger along his end-of-day stubble.

It was the lightest, most casual brush of a finger along his jawline. The thudding answer of his heart was utterly disproportionate.

“In which case, yes,” continued Granger. “But only a day’s worth of marginalia, at my best guess. Not half so fascinating as Revelations, you know.”

Draco was somehow simultaneously rooted to the spot and floating. He was nerveless. He was all nerves. His pulse was up. This was bad. He ought to Occlude and pull away from her and also jump off the cliff.

Instead, like the weak-willed cretin he was, he continued. “What about illuminations?” he asked. “Have I got those?” If his voice was husky, it was because of the vodka.

“Oh, that is an interesting question,” said Granger. She grew thoughtful in her study of his face. She smelled like the notes of honey from the cider.

“I would have to say your eyes,” she said at length. “Is that dreadfully trite?”

“It is,” said Draco. “I forgive you; you haven’t a poetic soul. Are they sumptuous illuminations?” “O, yes. Splendid. They’re aglitter with silver leaf and everything.”

“I ought to give myself to the head librarian as a gift.”

“She would make good use of you.”

“Although... perhaps I’d rather remain in the Granger private collection.”

Granger gave a theatrical little gasp. “Bold. She curates it fiercely. I wouldn’t be so certain that you’d make the cut.”

“My illuminations, though.”

“Mm. They are tempting.”

Their eyes met. And there again was the pull from her dark gaze – the drawing-towards, the beckoning, the invitation to fall in. It inspired a soft sort of longing in him. A wanting to reach out and a wanting to fall. A strange and gentle vertigo.

He knew that she wasn’t doing it on purpose. He knew that she hadn’t set out to do it. There was no calculation in her. She didn’t even know what she was doing to him.

And yet, here he was, falling, falling... She blinked and looked away.

He had been staring.

“So – what’s your conclusion, Professor?” he asked, throwing in a Granger Irritant to ensure that he sounded normal. “Have you completed your assessment?”

If there was any irritation on her part, it was diluted by amusement. “Have you got any family in Hogsmeade?” she asked in a casual sort of way.

Draco saw her coming. “If you’re about to suggest that I look like our barkeep from earlier...” “Mm. A wart, yearning for self-expression.”

“Oi.”

“Thank you for removing your feet from the picture. It brought me a real clarity.” Then, seeing his annoyance, she looked skywards. “Stop fishing about for compliments. You know you’re terribly good looking.”

“I never tire of hearing it.”

“You grew out of being a greasy little ferret. There: a compliment. Are you happy?”

“Yes. I’ll have another, please.”

“No. You’re unbearable.”

“Do my hair next.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

She narrowed her eyes critically. Then her fingers ran through the ends of his hair, only for a moment.

Draco did not permit touching of his hair. Those who were foolish enough to try were hexed into a quivering pile of mince. But Granger...

Her brief touch was far more intoxicating than any of the drink he'd had today.

There went his pulse again, shooting upwards in another disproportionate fit of excitement. "Middling," said Granger.

Draco sniffed as though he was letting the remark pass with sublime equanimity. Really, he was too floaty to give a damn.

Granger pursed her lips and brushed her fingers through his hair again, switching his part to the other side. "Adequate, you know. Decent. One day, you'll find someone who can look past it."

She was holding back a smile.

His eyelids felt heavy; his body felt light.

He wanted to reciprocate some kind of teasing compliment but – he oughtn't. He wanted to tell her that she was like the vodka –

intoxicating even in the smallest measures and leading to errors in judgement. He wanted to taunt her about how she ate cherries – who bit cherries in half? It must be because of her tiny mouth. He wanted to tell her that if he'd outgrown his greasy ferret phase, she'd moved well past her startled squirrel days. He wanted to make suppositions about why her wand was pushing things into his groin.

But that would further blur the already indistinct line between teasing and flirting, and he wasn't meant to be flirting. He was meant to be Quashing. He was meant to be remaining coolly neutral, unaffected, aloof. Professional. She was his Principal.

He stole a glance at her. She had turned away to resume her perennial battle with her hair. She loosened it – he smelled shampoo – and then pulled it into a ponytail. And he wasn't looking at her nape, where small curls escaped and the skin was most sensitive and kissable. He wasn't looking at the scalloped edge of her dress where it dipped between her shoulder blades. He wasn't looking at the zipper.

Right, but what if he just – just moved in behind her and pulled a bit of her dress off her shoulder and pressed his mouth to that spot?

Draco folded his hands into his lap. He could not trust them. She was his Principal.

He grew dimly aware that he was heading for disaster.

Granger, blithely unconscious of the turmoil caused by the back of her neck, pushed a final hairpin into place.



Then she put the little basket of cherries between herself and Draco and sat next to him on the edge of the promontory, so that her legs dangled next to his.

They talked. He tried not to look at her cherry-reddened mouth. Tried not to think about the wet rim of the cider bottle that they passed back and forth. Their shoulders touched now and again. He felt the occasional brush of her curls when the wind teased them his way. The breeze brought hints of her towards him, cider and shampoo and the salt of skin in summer heat.

Would it truly be so terrible, not to quash, just for now? He had quashed for weeks, after all. He knew he could do it again. He could simply enjoy right now, and go back to quashing afterwards, couldn't he? It would be fine, wouldn't it? He had everything under control.

They threw cherry pits into the shrubbery below the promontory. Granger said they'd make a pretty grove of cherry trees, one day. Draco chased the pits with Herbivicus charms. His aim was true; here and there below them, the pits split and pushed forth small, tender leaves. Granger, delighted, cast a few Aguamenti.

The evening light grew delicate and elusive.

Granger leaned back on her hands and sighed. There was contentment in it. Happiness, even. Draco felt her gaze on him.

“What?” he asked. “Nothing,” said Granger. “Tell me.”

“It’s maudlin, vodka-fuelled sentimentality.” “Even better.”

She chose her words carefully, but, at length, spoke. “I’m glad you kept the protection assignment.”

Now she wasn’t teasing – now she was sincere.

Draco felt a smile, unbidden, flash across his face. A new and unfamiliar joy swelled in his chest. “Do you know – so am I,” said Draco.

She gave him a sideways glance. There was a blush on her cheeks, or it might’ve been the last of the red sunset. “Maudlin.”

“Frightfully.”

Something danced in the beats of his heart.

They both went for a cherry at the same time. There was a tangling of fingers. The touch was fleeting, hasty. Anything else would be too sweet.

The evening air was summer caught in a breeze – crushed grass and clover. A curlew sang.

And it was beautiful, sitting next to Granger, with his arm brushing hers, here at the top of the promontory, which, at this moment, felt like the top of the world.

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Chapter 23

Draco Malfoy, Notorious Auror

Draco's post-Granger afterglow lingered all night. When he returned to the Manor he wandered about, sighing and staring out of windows. He smiled vaguely at nothing. He thought about the back of her neck and where he would most like to put his mouth. He read some of her old notes on the Jotter. He indulged in a delicious daydream of her in the library, pushed up against the stacks.

When he found himself floating towards the rose garden for a midnight stroll – an unprecedented activity, for him – Draco realised he was acting like a besotted imbecile. Again.

His brain, which had been adrift amongst those stupid fluffy clouds, came plummeting back to earth, where it took up residence in his skull once again, but grumpily, as though he'd interrupted it in something important. As though there was anything remotely important about cherries and sundresses and I'm glad you kept the protection assignment.

At the entrance to the rose garden, Draco pivoted on his heel and stormed back into the Manor. He closeted himself in his study, where he strode about, freshly perturbed.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Seeing her had been a bad idea. He had done very well over the month of July, getting Granger out of his head. The crush had all but been quashed out of existence. But then, in her presence, his quashing had lasted all of an hour. An hour!

This was troubling. Aggravating. Fuck Theo and his nonsense about absence making the heart grow fonder; he did far better when he was away from her. When he couldn't see her, tease and be teased by her, smell her, steal looks at the back of her neck...

Draco half-lapsed into another daydream before catching himself at it again.

Right. This was fixable. Granger's next asterisk holiday wasn't until Mabon – that was late September. That was ample time to let this thing wear off and disappear.

Draco leaned against the unlit fireplace and rapped his fingers against it. She was his fucking Principal. And – even more

importantly – he was Draco Malfoy. Highly eligible, perpetually unattached. He didn’t do besotted imbecile.

His Jotter buzzed. Draco waited an entire ten minutes before checking it, during which he paced in agitation while telling himself that he was playing it cool.

It wasn’t Granger Jotting him, anyway. And he was not disappointed in the least. It was Goggin, scheduling a training session for the next morning. Which would be an excellent outlet for these mad, frustrated energies that he was grappling with.

Draco replied, No wands, to ensure that Goggin would knock a bit of sense into him.

~

The next day, Draco and Goggin knocked so much sense into each other that they both became quite venerable philosophers. This was marred by one minor hiccup: nobody could understand them through their fat lips. The world made do without their unutterable wisdom.

A few days passed, during which Draco did wonderfully from a quashing perspective. Granger became a mere afterthought amongst various emergencies, missions, and brutal training sessions.

Draco grew pleased with himself once more. Everything was going to be fine.

His first contact with Granger was initiated by her, and it began with an insult, which was promising.

You're mad, was Granger's opener.

Draco, who was Playing It Cool, waited for two hours before responding with: ? I've just spoken to Hippocrates, said Granger.

Draco answered, Who?

Hippocrates Smethwyck. The head of St. Mungo's. He showed me your letter. Did you mean to put that many zeroes??

Draco found it challenging to play it cool when there was a grin breaking across his face. Did my definition of large meet your expectations?

E for Exceeds. Am properly gobsmacked.

You wanted a swimming pool, said Draco. That takes another zero.

That was idle daydreaming! answered Granger. Draco could all but hear her voice growing shrill.

You didn't answer me re: madness.

He didn't respond, because his first impulse was to tell the truth, which was that it brought him a real pleasure to make her idle daydreams come to fruition, but that was – that was too – eurgh. The truth was a saccharine mess.

The Jotter buzzed again. I'm sat at work trying not to cry. Stiff upper lip, said Draco.

Thank you for doing this, said Granger. It's going to change so many lives for the better.

That seemed like a strong concluding remark to Draco, who decided not to respond further. He cast an eye over the conversation and was pleased with himself: it had been overwhelmingly neutral.

Well, except, perhaps, for the 'definition of large' thing, but that was just – just flirting for sport. He hadn't even made the

screamingly obvious joke when she said she'd been gobsmacked by it.

See? This was going fine. Everything was under control. There was no crush here.

Later that night, Granger sent another note, this time, inviting him to dinner to thank him; she knew a good French place, if he'd like to come? Draco read the invitation with a stupid degree of longing. However, an in-person thanks would present challenges to the Quash, and also, no doubt, warrant another one of her hugs. The fewer of those he got, the less of a cretin he was.

He said, I've got other plans. You needn't thank me, the gift was my thanks to you . Granger responded after a few minutes: All right. Do tell me if you change your mind. No. He wasn't going to change his mind about dinner with her.

He was only going to daydream about it all evening, thanks.

Days passed. Smethwyck sent Draco plans for a full-scale renovation of the Janus Thickey Ward, per his instructions. The plans were remarkably detailed and thorough. Architects and consulting engineers had been pre-selected, pending his approval, to reimagine the Ward and create a state-of- the-art

retreat for long-term care patients. Consultation processes were outlined, as well as plans for specialist Healer and nurse training. A new structure for interdisciplinary collaborations and research focusing on long term ailments was proposed.

The general whiff of competence that floated off the page was, Draco knew, atypical of St. Mungo's administration. It smelled like Granger.

It occurred to him that he could ask her, but no – it was safer to keep communications to a minimum. He approved of the plans and made arrangements for the transfer of the funds.

He refused an invitation to attend an announcement-slash-fête at St. Mungo's in honour of the gift; she would be there. He therefore indicated that he wished to keep a low profile and that the new Ward was the focus, not him. Please get plastered on champagne in his honour.

Granger sent him a Jot, after the event, saying that she had hoped to see him there, why hadn't he come? Draco said he had been busy – cannibal warlock in Castle Combe eating tourists, you know. Granger said, of course, she understood.

When it came time to recast Granger's wards, Draco deliberately chose moments when she was elbow-deep in someone's intestines in A&E.

In the weeks that followed, Draco, with increasing desperation, even went on dates. They were fine, as far as they went – which wasn't very far. The witches didn't trigger whatever primitive portion of his brain they used to trigger. This resulted in Draco acting like a perfect gentleman, because he made positively no moves to fuck, or even snog, anyone, but he did a great deal of pulling out of chairs and opening doors (so that they could leave).

No tits were spaffed upon.

Theo advised him that his virtuous behaviour was read as a Maturing by their acquaintance and that all and sundry were now convinced that Draco Malfoy had earnestly begun his search for a wife.

Which was better than the impotence thing, Draco supposed. He resigned himself to a monk-like existence (*avec wank*) because, apparently, no witch in the world was good enough for his cock, except for one, maybe, but he wasn't thinking of her. She did not

exist except as a Principal under remote protection, whose heart occasionally called to him through the ring.

But it was all under control. It was fine.

If Granger noticed a withdrawal on his part, she made no comment. Her communications mirrored his – brief and to the point.

So August bled into September in long, Grangerless days.

Autumn came all of a sudden after a particularly cold night, turning the Manor's leafy gardens into a glorious pageant of colour.

The Auror Office was kept busy. A witch summoned an Eldritch abomination in Northamptonshire. During the three nights of September's harvest moon, there was a rash of werewolf attacks whose sole objective seemed to be increasing infections amongst the wizarding population. Tonks formed a Werewolf Task Force (the WTF). Potter, who led the Task Force, told

Draco that it was aptly named, as their meetings consisted chiefly of saying “What the fuck” as news of fresh attacks came in.

In brief, it was business as usual.

As the month wore on, Draco began to keep an eye on his Jotter.
With September's end came Mabon, the autumnal equinox.

Granger was punctual. A few days before Mabon, Draco's Jotter went off. When he saw that it was from her, he was exceedingly collected – bored, even – and his heart rate did not accelerate in the least.

With a detached kind of ennui, he read the missive:

Haven't done any of the legwork I was meant to do before Mabon. Day will consist of gallivanting across the UK, looking at mushrooms. Leave your attendance to your discretion.

Odds of hags or nuns? asked Draco.

Low to nonexistent, said Granger. Visiting megalithic tombs – exteriors only – to examine fungi. Given your penchant for attracting danger, I expect a deluge of dark creatures.

The only deluge will be a spot of rain hardly worthy of the name, said Granger.

Fine, said Draco. Won't go, but do send itinerary when ready.
And, for a little while, that was that.

Until all hell broke loose, of course, and Granger lost all of her
Alone Privileges before she could even begin to gallivant.

~

Hell broke loose on a Wednesday night. Draco was on the
Manor's Quidditch pitch, pursuing the Snitch through driving
rain, when his wand whistled out the alarm for Granger's
laboratory.

At the same moment, his Jotter buzzed with a note from Granger:
Someone is here.

Which informed Draco that not only was someone prying at
Granger's laboratory wards, but also, Granger was at the bloody
laboratory. At midnight. By herself.

The ring at his finger echoed fear. Draco didn't bother with
explanations for his befuddled teammates, who were querying
him rudely about why the fuck he was checking his bloody Jotter
instead of catching the Snitch?

Just as Draco pulled out his wand to Disapparate, his ring burned. Granger had activated the distress beacon.

Granger had never before activated the distress beacon. Fuck.

A shock of adrenaline and dread coursed through Draco, matching that he felt through the ring. He Disapparated from the pitch to the Manor and Flooed to Cambridge. King's Hall was warded against Apparition, so he Apparated again just outside its doors, where he thwacked the bronze plaque with his wand until the magically concealed building appeared. The ring burned with increased urgency. Granger's heart was racing.

Draco's broom was still in his hand and provided a convenient means of whipping up the three storeys to the Granger laboratory. As he rounded the final corner at breakneck speed, dread in his veins, he cast a Disillusionment and a flurry of protective spells on himself.

First he thought he'd missed the intruder again. The impersonal sign on the door – GRANGER. Ring for attention – loomed large in his vision. Then he grew aware of sounds and movement just outside the door. Draco stilled the broom and his breathing and cast nonverbal revelation spells.

Three Disillusioned figures came into view. Two were crouched and working on the wards – which were withstanding the assault without trouble – and one was standing sentinel. The sentinel did not detect Draco's silent, invisible approach on the broom.

Granger was safe within – that was the main thing. Now Draco's dread gave way to relief and a desire to systematically dismember each of these men.

King's Hall did not permit Apparition or Disapparition within its walls. Which was, at this particular moment, ideal. Draco shot a silent Caeli Praesidium over his shoulder, which expanded into a geodesic, cage-like ward, sealing the corridor shut behind him. These men would not be leaving here under their own power.

Three baddies against one Draco. You had to feel a bit sorry for them.

He got a Stunner off on the one who was playing sentinel, then cast a Finite to rid the others of their Disillusion, and then the game began in earnest. Judging by the eruption of spells aimed in his direction, of the two remaining wizards, the tall one was the more seasoned duellist and the bald one was a twitchy, panicky loose cannon.

Draco, still Disillusioned, flattened himself against a wall and sent two more Stunners, deflected by the tall one. He managed enough eye-contact with the bald one for a spot of Legilimency, which informed him that a killing curse was coming his way. He rolled the broom and floated to the ceiling as the curse flashed green where he had been a moment before.

A killing curse so early in the game was unusual – and also, terribly unsporting. It upped the stakes. No more playing nice. No more Stunners.

Draco severed the bald man's wand arm for his impudence. Amongst the screams and spurts of blood, he sized up the tall wizard. His attempt at Legilimency there was blocked by novice level Occlusion – just enough to prevent him from gleaning the wizard's next move at this range.

The tall one sent a Confrigo through the corridor, too large to dodge, forcing Draco to throw a Protego and reveal his approximate location.

“There you are, you bastard,” hissed Tall, and he sent another.

It exploded against Draco's ward at the end of the corridor. “He's bloody locked us in,” gasped Tall at this sight.

The bald wizard cradled his bloody stump to his chest, snatched his wand with his other hand and regained his feet. A look into his mind informed Draco of another imminent Avada Kedavra.

Draco's second cutting curse left Bald a double amputee.

As the screams began again, Draco said, "I would cast a cooling charm on the severed limbs, if I were you, you know – so they can be reattached."

The tall one grew panicky, but had the presence of mind to Disillusion himself again. Amongst Bald's screams, he and Draco traded spells of varying nastiness and legality, each looking for a weakness in the other's shields.

The tall wizard was skilled at defensive spells and deflections. Draco made his way closer to him, hoping to get a spell in from closer range.

Draco got another Finite in, ridding his opponent of his Disillusion while granting himself enough eye contact for another attempt at Legilimency. At this closer range and with a more powerful push of it, he caught a glimpse of an imminent Bombarda.

He levitated the Stunned body of the sentinel in front of himself to catch the brunt of it. Noble duellists were dead duellists – and Draco intended to be neither of these things.

The tall wizard swore as watched himself cremate his colleague. Meanwhile, Bald's screams of pain were echoing throughout the corridor and, frankly, distracting.

“Shh,” said Draco, standing behind him and sending a silencing spell at point-blank range into his larynx.

The bald one collapsed, clutching at his convulsing throat.

Draco was hit with a Finite. Which was fine – he didn’t mind them knowing who was about to finish them off.

The tall one made a sprint past Draco to the exit. He was repelled by the ward and flung back towards Draco.

Now panicking enough to turn to Unforgivables, he raised his wand, a killing curse in his eyes. Draco spat out an Immobulus, freezing the man’s wand arm into its upward trajectory. The killing curse flashed green against the ceiling.

He gasped, “You f–” but Draco’s choking curse hit him in the neck. He fell to his knees, clutching at his throat.

Draco straightened his robes. The wards were intact and Granger was safe, and this now felt like a long-awaited opportunity to get some fucking answers.

Draco usually adhered, more or less, to the standard Auror interrogation protocols, but tonight, he had no time for them. He pulled the choking wizard’s head back by the hair, forced open his eyes, and plunged into his mind.

The man’s Occlumency offered meagre resistance in his half-conscious state. Draco pushed through his memories, following the stream of thoughts that had led him to Granger’s door tonight. This man, whoever he was, was a pawn – he had received an order from a shadowy figure in a dark room and knew nothing beyond his instructions. He was to break into the Granger laboratory and “confirm what the girl was doing.” Draco spent a longish moment in that memory, trying to place the rasping voice.

The bald one had received his instructions from the tall one, and so was even more useless.

The sentinel was the most useless of all, being quite dead and giving off whiffs of burned pork.

Fucking useless. Draco Stunned the two survivors with unnecessary vigour, directly in the chest. The bald one's severed limbs were placed under a stasis charm.

Draco sent a Patronus each to Goggin, Tonks, and the Mediwitch Service. Three aristocratic Borzoi, tall and silvery, streaked out of his wand and sprinted away.

He turned to the laboratory door and slashed away the wards. A few steps took him to the door to Granger's office, which he pummelled.

“You in there? Answer, or I shall knock down the door.”

Granger's shaky voice came through: “What kind of cake did you have at Tyntesfield?”

There was reassurance in her being well enough to check that Draco was really Draco. “Poppyseed.”

Granger pulled open the door, wand in hand, the white sparkle of a waiting Protego glowing at its tip. She looked pale, but

otherwise unhurt. Her eyes were enormous and darkened by stress.

Draco fought a sudden, wild urge to lift her up and squeeze her. Adrenaline, obviously.

“There were—” began Draco.

“I know,” said Granger. She held up her mobile. “I watched the entire thing.” Draco’s debrief was thrown off course. “What?”

“I’ve got a camera in the doorbell,” said Granger. Her mobile screen flashed at him. It showed the now-quiet corridor, an arc of blood splattered across the wall. The burnt corpse was visible, slumped against the skirting boards.

Granger was regarding Draco with wide eyes. “Ah,” said Draco.

“Are they – are they all dead?” “Only one. Caught a Bombarda.”

“What did they want from me?” Granger’s voice was small.

She was shaken. She looked fragile in front of her overstacked desk, her arms wrapped around her midsection, her lips pale.

Draco wanted to hug her again.

“They had instructions to confirm what you’re doing,” said Draco.

Granger met his eyes. In hers – alarm, shock, worry. The look in his probably matched. “Shit,” she breathed.

“Yes,” said Draco. “Whatever Shacklebolt was worried about – it’s finally happening. Let’s go.”

“But how?!” Granger was gathering a few things into her pockets, including bits of the computers. “And where are we going?”

“Out of here. The wards held. But you will never be here alone again. We need to talk.” “My house?”

“Fine – for tonight. But they know where you live.”

Goggin, Tonks, and the mediwitches arrived within moments of each other. Their footsteps echoed up the three flights of stairs to Granger’s laboratory and they burst into the corridor.

“Hello, hello, hello,” said Tonks, observing the carnage. “A little midnight duelling after Quidditch, was it?” she asked, when she spotted Draco’s ensemble.

“That’s why I smelled bacon,” said Goggin, nudging the sentinel’s body with his boot.

The lead mediwitch grimaced and said that there wasn't much she could do for that one, but she would take it in for a post-mortem. The other two were floated out on stretchers, to which Goggin added rather nasty straps, should they awaken. He followed them out.

Tonks spotted Granger and flew to her, seized her by the shoulders, and asked if she was all right.

"Yes – I'm fine – Malfoy arrived within a minute –" said Granger as her face and her hands were alternatively grasped and squeezed by Tonks.

"You're sure? You didn't get hit? No one got in?"

"No – the wards held beautifully – I'm fine, really, Tonks –"

"Good. Brilliant. Excellent." Tonks patted Granger's cheeks a final time and turned to Draco. "Did you have a chance to have a little peek?"

Strictly speaking, Aurors were not to conduct interrogations without following specific procedures on suspects in custody. However, practitioners of Legilimency were allowed to use it

during a firefight. If they gleaned anything useful during, that was a fortunate bonus.

“Only a glimpse,” said Draco. “They’d been instructed to confirm what Granger is working on. It’ll be worth doing a deeper dive. The taller one had a conversation with someone – there was something about his voice – it was so bloody familiar, but I can’t place it...”

“I’ll interrogate them personally,” said Tonks, her hair turning into an ominous blood red mohawk. “I’ll tell you two the moment I have anything. Hermione – my god, you look about to drop.”

“Malfoy was about to take me home,” said Granger.

“Home?” Tonks wrinkled her nose. “I don’t love home. We suspect they’d been poking about there already, don’t we?”

“I’ll stay with her overnight,” said Draco. “Then we can make other arrangements.” “Other arrangements?” asked Granger as he and Tonks swept her down the stairs.

“A safehouse, I’m thinking, until we understand what’s going on, and put away those responsible,” said Tonks.

“But I have—”

“We'll strive for minimal disruption to work and life,” interrupted Tonks. Her tone, though friendly, brooked no argument.

Granger looked resigned. It was difficult to mount an objection when evidence of baddies seeking to harm her was splattered bloodily across the wall.

Tonks turned to Draco. “Now that they've made a move, I want around the clock Auror protection on her, in person. When you're unavailable, make arrangements. I can spare Weasley when needed. Goggin and Humphreys, too.”

“Understood.”

They emerged from King's Hall. Trinity's quad glowed with dew under the waning September moon.

“They've finally begun to show their cards,” said Tonks, tapping at her lip. “Let's see what I can discover from No-Hands and Friend tonight. Hermione – a cup of tea or something stronger, please. Well – I suppose you're the Healer – you know how to treat shock.”

With that, Tonks raised her wand, spun on her heel, and Disapparated. Draco stuck his elbow out to Granger. “Let’s go.”

Her eyes were still wide. She hesitated for a moment, then took his arm. They jostled together as he spun into the Disapparation. He fancied that he felt her shudder.

They materialised in Granger’s dark kitchen. She flung an Incendio into the hearth and clicked on some Muggle lights.

Then they stood in the middle of the kitchen and looked at each other. There was something tense about it.

Draco had rather a lot of things bubbling away, wanting to be communicated – that it had been a bloody relief to see her unharmed, that she would never work alone again, that if Tonks’ interrogation yielded nothing, he would personally squeeze the minds the surviving men to eke out any new drop of information...

Granger had one hand clasped in the other, a sure sign that she, too, had things to say. “Thank y–” began Granger, just as Draco said, “I–”

They both fell into silence and waited for the other to speak. Granger said, “Did you–” and Draco said, “You–”

Again they interrupted each other into silence. Granger wrung her hands again, but there was exasperation in it. “For god’s sake. Talk!”

“What’s your treatment protocol for shock?”

“Er – well, there are several kinds of shock, of course, so—”
“Psychological.”

“Magical or Muggle subject?” “Magical.”

Granger rattled off a list, counting on her fingers: “In the immediate: removal of the stimulus that caused the shock. A brew of opium tranquillitas – excellent for emotional distress, psychomotor agitation, panic disorders. And, of course, reassurance.”

“Right,” said Draco. “Let’s begin with that, then we can talk.
Have you any opium tranquillitas
on the premises?” “For me?”

“Yes,” said Draco, poking about at the overgrown plants on the window sill. “It’s the broad-leaved one. But I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. You’ve gone Veela cadaver again, minus the hair.”

Granger looked into the side of a shiny pot and breathed out a gasp at the sight of her reflection. “Oh, my. I’ll – I’ll put on the kettle, shall I?”

Her hands were quivering.

“And you?” asked Granger as the water boiled. Her gaze ran down his face “You’re utterly unfazed, I suppose – these kinds of episodes must roll right off you.”

Draco, pulling off his Quidditch gloves, shrugged in feigned indifference. He had no interest in informing her that, actually, his mad rush to her side had been marked by profound dread and something approaching panic. “They didn’t manage to hit me, other than a Finite. I’ve seen worse.”

He passed her a few leaves for her brew. They smelled powerfully of peppermint when they hit the hot water.

“Should I even offer you a cup?” asked Granger.

“Go on, then,” said Draco, as the scent wafted to him.

Granger poured the tisane into two mugs and they sat at the kitchen table. She was still regarding him with that wide-eyed

look.

Of all the things that Draco wanted to blurt out, querying her on that seemed the least risky. “Why are you giving me a queasy side-eye?”

Granger didn’t quite seem to know where to look. “I – er – I suppose I’m just a bit disconcerted, having seen you in action against those men. You were–” she searched for a word for a moment “– quite ruthless.”

“When someone uses an unblockable killing curse as their opener, you don’t mess about with Stunners.”

“Oh yes,” said Granger, straightening and nodding. She began a nervous kind of explanatory babble. “I suppose I mean that – that I’ve never seen you like that. I’ve mostly known you as – as a thorn in my side who shows up when he’s not wanted and makes remarks. I knew, conceptually, that you were an excellent duellist, but it was something else to see it. You know? It – it quite drove the point home. It was impressive. You were terrifying. But I’m – so grateful. I turned the ring and had no idea if you’d even come. And then you were there. And there was blood everywhere. And I was safe. So – thank you. I’m going to stop talking now. Would you like more opium? I think we need more opium. I’ll make us another batch, shall I?”

Granger did not wait for his answer and rose to bustle about with the plant and the kettle. She was flustered and discomposed. She knocked over the strainer.

The final step in Granger's protocol had been reassurance. Draco supposed that he could try.

He came to stand next to her at the worktop and stilled her hands with his own. Granger flinched at the touch and looked up at him in confusion.

"I am now going to attempt Reassurance," declared Draco.

It was the right thing to say. Granger laughed a small, unexpected laugh. Terribly trite how he had missed the sound of it.

The awkward tension, the shutters of standoffishness, loosened.

"Go on, then," said Granger, a bemused smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

"The minds of the baddies we caught tonight are going to be wrung for every iota of information they consciously or unconsciously contain."

Granger nodded.

“And then we will work out who sent them and we will catch them. And you’ll be able to continue your research unhindered.”

“Thank you.”

“The wards held and you are safe.” She nodded again.

He could have ended it there. But he had something else to say. His grasp twitched around her hands. “And – I need you to know something.”

“Yes?”

“I will always come to you when you turn that ring.” His voice betrayed him; it went slightly husky.

Granger hadn’t expected the sincerity – in fact, she looked devastated by it. The smile was gone. Now she looked like she wanted to cry.

She broke his grip and pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. “Sorry, I – just–” There was silence. Then a large sniff. Granger looked at the ceiling.

Then she turned to him and melted into his arms.

Oh, he'd wanted this. A distant part of his brain said, fucking finally. There was no awkwardness this time; his arms knew exactly what to do. He caught her up and squeezed her and held her against his chest. He heard and felt her shuddering breaths as she fought away the tears. He muttered some things – that it was all right to cry, that her lab had suffered a violent intrusion and that was distressing and awful, that shock and fear were utterly normal reactions.

Could she hear his heart thudding away in his chest? He was still in his Quidditch kit. He probably stank. Why was she so fragile-feeling? Her breath was warm. Her arms were a sweet pressure around his ribs. The feel of her head pressed against him was unspeakably precious. The feel of her chest, expanding and contracting against arms as she breathed was a thing rare and to be treasured.

It was pleasure and it was misery, holding Granger in that embrace. It broke through whatever fortifications he'd created in the last month with a crystalline shatter. It made him want to say things, blurt out things, tell her that he'd missed her and that he wanted to – to be with her more, whatever that meant. That he was quashing things because he wanted no part of those things, but they existed still, a teeming, roiling, unspeakable mess. That these things tormented him in the small hours of the night, when the world was quiet and he was alone with his thoughts. That he

would voice none of it, because he was too afraid of risking the thing they had right now – this dance at the tip of a fulcrum, this equilibrium.

He couldn't tell her. This was not the time. And besides – he wouldn't risk it. It would change things. And he loved whatever this was, right now, more than he hated the feeling that it wasn't enough.

Pleasure and misery. Pleasure and misery. The beats of it alternated with his pulse, one for joy, two for sorrow, one for joy, two for sorrow.

Granger's breathing slowed. The tension in her dissipated. She sighed against him and her arms loosened from around his ribs and her hands were tucked into his chest, and he suffered, and he wanted to fly.



Draco would have happily stood there for an aeon, holding her. It was Granger, bless and damn her, who ended it.

She hadn't cried. However, she said, in a tight voice, and without looking at him, "I need a moment," and left the kitchen.

Draco heard a tap running. He strode about to clear his head, running perturbed hands through his hair.

He downed the now-lukewarm tisane, wishing it were fortified by a few drams of whisky. It did spread a pleasant numbing sensation down his throat and to his limbs. Close enough. He was composed. This was fine.

Granger returned. A few drops of water lingered on her face from her visit to the bathroom. Her bun had been remade, higher and tighter.

“Right,” said Granger, resuming her seat with a fresh briskness.

She looked as though she had run through her quota of emotions for the day and had no more to give, and besides, things needed to be discussed.

She downed half of her tisane, thumped the mug down, then asked, “How did those men know about me? Why my lab? I’ve said nothing. I’ve published nothing. I am, to all observers, a dreadfully uninteresting academic up my own arse in abstruse research. So how?”

“I haven’t got an answer,” said Draco. “What I want to know is who. Who is the population that Shacklebolt was so worried about? Because that was absolutely them, at the door.”

“It shouldn’t matter,” said Granger. She looked irritated, an excellent indicator that she was feeling more herself. “They shouldn’t know. How do they know?”

“It doesn’t matter how. They know. Pass me your hand.”

“I promise you I don’t need more Reassurance,” said Granger, keeping her hand away. “Vow of Secrecy,” said Draco.

“But—”

“I told you that if there was another incident, I’d need to know. And this was more than an incident – it was a brazen bloody break-in. This isn’t Shacklebolt overreacting anymore. It’s real.”

Granger’s gaze was a roiling mixture of worry, anger, powerlessness, and frustration. Draco held out his hand again.

She sighed. “All right. But – but you must promise to do as Tonks said. About minimal disruptions. I won’t be locked up and kept away from my work. It’s too important.”

“I promise.”

“I know you’re going to get all – all –”

“All what?” asked Draco, when she remained stuck at the end of the sentence. “I don’t know.” Granger looked anxious. “Carried away. Zealous.” “Nonsense. I am the definition of measured. Give me your hand.”

“...You just burned a man alive.” “I didn’t burn him.”

Granger gurgled out a frustrated sound. “Hand,” said Draco.

With trepidation, Granger extended her hand to him. It was the one with the ring on it. He grasped it in his. It was delicate and warm.

Draco pointed his wand to their joined hands and murmured the incantation for the Vow.

Threads of gold emanated from his wand and wound their way around their hands in hypnotic spirals. He felt the magic taking hold, a kind of pressure at his throat and his palms, promising magical suppression if he should try to convey the incoming secret to the world.

He locked eyes with Granger: it was time.

She took a breath. And, to Draco's surprise, amid the worry in her gaze, he saw a quiet, steady trust.

"Are you ready?" asked Granger. "Yes."

Granger took a breath. "I'm going to cure lycanthropy."

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Chapter 24

Draco Malfoy, Literal Wanker

Granger had, as she always did, enunciated perfectly clearly. And yet, Draco found himself processing her sentence with difficulty.

And she hadn't finished. "Lycanthropy to begin, that's where the results have been the most promising. But, eventually, vampirism too. And I may be able to reverse the Dementor's Kiss, on recent victims."

Draco felt his mouth hanging open. He closed it.

Granger was eyeing him apprehensively. "So – so not quite a Panacea." "Holy fuck, Granger."

"Quite," said Granger. "Explain."

Granger looked too tired to take on her usual professorial air. She took a breath and appeared to be gathering her thoughts. "These diseases have been the bête noire of Healers for centuries and centuries. Incurable. Often deadly. Muggle medicine has made

incredible advancements in targeted therapies for their own ‘incurable’ diseases in recent decades. They’ve developed something called immunotherapy – using a patient’s own immune system to fight specific conditions. I presented on it at Oxford, do you remember? Well, to oversimplify terribly, I’m applying that concept to magical maladies. My treatment will mimic the action of antibodies, targeting specific magical diseases.”

Granger glanced at the threads of gold still emanating from Draco’s wand, checking that it was still safe to disclose details. “Essentially, I’ll help the patient’s immune system mount its own response to infected cells. It will be a long course of treatment – two or three years of infusions, every fortnight – but, eventually, the patient’s body will learn to combat the disease. And hopefully eradicate it completely. One day, there will be lycanthropy patients in remission. No more Wolfsbane. No more transformations.”

Draco sat back and tried to keep his eyes in his head. Granger was curing a condition that had plagued the wizarding world for centuries upon centuries. She was brilliant. She was outstanding. She was an absolute legend. She was in the lofty company of Merlin and Cerridwen and Circe. She ought to be on a Chocolate Frog Card.

“You ought to be on a Chocolate Frog Card,” said Draco, as that was the least ridiculously effusive of his thoughts.

“I’m already on a Chocolate Frog Card,” said Granger.

“Right.” Draco stared at her. “So what’s all the gallivanting been about, then?”

Granger studied him as though deciding to what degree she needed to oversimplify. “The treatment targets diseased cells and disrupts their functions so they starve off or die. But it needs a serum, of sorts, to deliver it to the cells and bind them. Sanitatem was a perfect base for that serum. It would also help protect patients from some difficult side effects – the treatment is particularly hard on endocrine systems and it can also trigger cytokine storms. But standard Santitatem wasn’t powerful enough by itself. There’s a kind of – a kind of proto-Sanitatem that I’ve been struggling to recreate for the past year. The same ingredient classes, only a thousand times more magically potent. The Green Well’s water at Imbolc instead of holy water. An Elder Dragon’s blood harvested at Ostara, instead of regular dragon blood. An ossified saintly relic taken at the Solstice, instead of mere human bone...”

Granger shifted their still-joined hands so they rested on the table; her arm must've been tiring. Which meant that they were now holding hands across a table. Which was fine and meant nothing at all.

Draco turned his concentration back to the magically demanding Vow and Granger's intellectually demanding words.

"The original text with the proto-Sanitatem formula has been lost to the ages, but references to it exist here and there. Revelations contained the most fragments. But they were horribly vague – it was written by a Herbologist-cum-philosopher who was recording what seems to be a third-hand version from somewhere, and her focus is unerringly on the flora and fungi of the sacred sites, with little other description to help me pinpoint them. Hence my wild goose chases across the country. My Mabon holiday will consist of visiting dolmen that have recorded colonies of *Agaricus aureum* and *Agaricus silvaticus*, because that's what intrigued her the most, bless her."

Granger finished her now-cold tisane. "The light is at the end of the tunnel, with only Mabon and Samhain left. When I've synthesised the first doses of the treatment, I'll be ready to move to manufacture. That was where Larsen and his lab came in. He produces immunotherapy drugs and has an excellent

understanding of the biomechanisms of diseases, and he has the facilities for mass- production. But he's dropped entirely off the map. I'd have to look into another collaborator with – you know – the veritable heaps of spare time I have. I believe I could attempt smaller scale syntheses in my own laboratory – perhaps enough for clinical trials..."

Granger trailed off, watching the swirl of the golden threads of the Vow between their hands. "I think – I think that's the most of it," she said, her hand twitching against Draco's.

"Right," said Draco. He stared at Granger in a kind of daze for a moment, then said, "Secretum finitur."

A final ribbon of golden light emanated from his wand, wrapped around their hands, then travelled up Draco's arm and across his lips before disappearing. His tongue felt heavy and there was a new feeling of restriction in his hands. It would fade in a few hours, but it was a physical reminder that he was now spell-bound.

He let out a heavy breath and put down his wand.

"You must be properly exhausted," said Granger, eyeing him. "That spell is challenging to sustain at length."

“A real bugger.” “Replenishing potion?”

“All right,” said Draco, setting bravado aside. It seemed wiser not to be magically fatigued when Granger had been an active target today.

She floated a vial into his hands from a repository of bottles tucked against the splashback. Draco drank the bitter mixture in a single swallow.

Now that the first shock of discovering the true nature of Granger’s research enterprise was wearing off, he could turn to more pressing concerns.

He understood, now, something of Shacklebolt’s mingled delight and panic – and, at the time, there hadn’t even been a werewolf resurgence in the works.

All of a sudden, Draco placed the rasping voice he’d heard in the intruder’s memory. He hadn’t heard it in 15 years.

“Shit,” he said, sitting back and running a hand through his hair. “I know who gave those men their instructions. It was fucking Fenrir.”

Granger blanched. “Greyback?!” “Yes.”

“No! No – it can’t’ve been. He’s been dead for a decade.”

“Presumed dead. There have been the occasional reports of sightings... Argentina, Bolivia, Peru... All unsubstantiated. But that’s absolutely who it was, today, in that wizard’s memory. Shit. And there’s more fuckery about – there’s been an increase in werewolf attacks across the UK. The DMLE’s had us keep it quiet while we investigate.”

“There’s been a what?!” said Granger, jumping forwards in her seat so suddenly that their knees knocked. “How long has this been going on?”

“When was the harvest moon? A week ago? And then there was that rash of infections in infants in the Lake District a few months ago, but we caught the individual responsible. At least, we thought we had.”

Granger’s hands were pressed anxiously to her mouth. “Are you thinking that Greyback has returned, and has somehow heard of my project, and is deliberately infecting more people as – as a kind of countermeasure? Revenge? Warning?”

Draco rose and began to pace. “He’s always taken a sick pleasure in spreading his disease to as many innocents as possible. If that

wolfy old wankstain suspects that you're working on a bona fide cure for lycanthropy, and he's back on English soil, we have real cause for concern.”

By which he meant that he was genuinely fucking worried about Granger’s continued well-being. Granger was pale. “Does Shacklebolt know about the attacks?”

“It’s Potter’s file, but I think not. Robards – he leads the DMLE – wanted to see if it was another one-off, like the baby-biter in the Lake District. Shack’s going to throw a wobbly.”

Granger groaned and pressed her fingers into her forehead. “He is. He was already over-worried about my safety when the treatment was hypothetical and the werewolves were a disorganised, nonexistent threat, who hadn’t a clue what I was doing. Now they know, and Greyback is back? Shacklebolt will be frenetic. He’ll want ridiculous protection measures – he’ll want to lock me away.”

Her voice had gone tight and anxious. Her next glance towards Draco spoke of a long-held fear that he, too, would push to lock her up. He understood, now, her reticence to tell him anything. Because urges stemmed from this new knowledge of what she was doing – urges to force her into hiding, and yes, to lock her up. To sequester her away, miles from here, continents from here,

and make sure that Greyback would never have an opportunity to harm her.

Keeping her safe had always been the point, but the vital importance of it now pressed upon him like an ache, like a fear. It was sickening.

The three men at her laboratory had been a mere preview of what was to come. And even then, it had been a near thing – what if they'd managed to break the wards, thinking that the laboratory would be empty at the midnight hour, and encountered Granger therein? With that arsehole using the killing curse at will, and her, boxed into that small office, with nowhere to go? She would've been dead in a moment.

Yes. Draco also wanted to lock her away.

She must've seen a glint of it in his eye, because she sat up, and the anxiety was replaced by sudden fire. “Locking me away isn’t an option. I must finish my work. You promised minimal disruptions.”

“I know what I said. But your safety comes first. I didn’t know it was fucking Greyback.”

“If Greyback’s objective is countering my cure with infections, we need to counter that with the treatment. I must continue uninterrupted. I refuse to prioritise my safety to the detriment of potentially thousands of innocents. I refuse.”

“If you die, they’re fucked anyway.”

Even Granger had to concede this point, which she did with a sigh, dropping her head into her hands.

“How much longer will it take to finish developing your treatment?” asked Draco.

“If everything goes according to my predictive models, I should be ready to begin clinical trials by December.”

“That’s three more bloody full moons,” said Draco.

Granger looked grim. “That’s three months’ worth of organising, for Greyback. You see why I can’t postpone things – I can’t leave off and hide until he’s caught. He could do so much damage...”

“I understand,” said Draco.

Now he, too, wanted to sigh and drop his head into his hands, because it would've been so much simpler to whisk Granger away until Fenrir and his acolytes had been arrested. But Granger was right; postponing her project until Greyback was caught could mean potentially dozens of full moons. The man had evaded capture for 15 years.

“We’re going to have to tell Potter,” said Draco. “And Tonks.”

“Agreed,” said Granger, growing even more serious. “I worry a bit about Tonks. This is going to hit rather close to home, for her.”

“Because of Lupin?”

“Yes. Lycanthropes bear a disproportionate risk of premature mortality and he’s been – unwell. But I don’t want to give her false hopes that I can help her husband. Clinical trials are trials for a reason, you know. Failure is par for the course. My data suggests success, but this is a new therapy – no one has ever combined immunotherapy with magical methods or used it to treat a magical disease. This is utterly uncharted territory, clinically speaking.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you. There hasn’t been a witch or wizard alive with your combination of magical and Muggle knowledge. You’re – you’re—” Draco cut himself off and turned to stare out of the dark window. “Bloody hell. I can’t believe I’ll live to see lycanthropy cured in my lifetime.”

If he hadn’t already been nursing a Something for Granger, Draco would’ve begun a whole-hearted intellectual crush on her, in that moment.

But back to more pressing matters.

“When Greyback’s men don’t come back tonight, he’ll know they were caught,” said Draco. “A laboratory break-in shouldn’t have resulted in all three of them being apprehended – not unless the laboratory was exceptionally well-protected. And why would it be exceptionally well-protected, if not to hide something exceptional? Greyback is probably going to read this as a confirmation that you are doing what he thinks you’re doing. Things are going to get dangerous. His primary objective will be killing you.”

Granger pressed her lips together into an unhappy line. “I suppose I really can’t stay here?”

“Tonight is all right. I don’t think they’ll try anything else. Afterwards? No. Someone’s already sniffed around your wards here once. It was probably them. They must’ve decided that your lab was a worthier target. Not that they’ll find anything there, thanks to your clouds and things. The only real thing of value there at any given point is – you. Tonight was your last night there by yourself. And you’re going to have to curtail your movements in public.”

“But I have so many things to do,” said Granger, pressing her fingers to her cheeks in a kind of despair. “What about Mabon?”

“I’m coming with you.”

“And teaching? And A&E? And – everything else?”

Draco attempted to be as measured as he promised he was and not categorically tell her that she would never be alone again. “Until we catch Greyback and whoever is working with him, you can expect an Auror with you everywhere. I agree that your work has got to go on–” Granger looked relieved as Draco spoke those words “–but Greyback is ruthless. He’ll have an entire network of his old pack here and he’ll whip them into a frenzy. He’d sooner die than see you cure lycanthropy. He probably shat

himself when he found out what the great Granger was working on – gods, I would've loved to have seen his reaction..."

"How did he find out – that's what I want to know. You don't think – Shacklebolt?"

Draco shook his head. "No. Why would he have insisted on Auror protection so early on? And you bound him with a Vow of Secrecy, too."

"Unless one of my students–? But they're working on pieces of about twelve projects for me. They don't know the bigger picture. It can't have been."

"Leaks happen. We'll try to work out how and where – but my immediate concern is how we keep you safe and able to keep working."

"Should I be worried about the vampires?" asked Granger.

"Blood hell," said Draco running a hand down his face. "I don't know. They've never been as expansionist as the werewolves. More interested in feeding than Turning. But if they got wind of a cure? I don't know how they'd react. And you said – Dementors?!"

Granger bit her lip. “Yes. Maybe. If the victim is brought in quickly enough.” “Come off it.”

“I’m serious.”

“How, pray, is ‘immunotherapy’ meant to restore a soul?”

Granger waved her hand in a swotty gesture of dismissal. “There is no soul-sucking. That’s typical wizarding embellishment. It’s brain death. The Dementor’s Kiss transfers an aggressive necrotising bacteria to the victim. It attacks the brain as well as the body. Highly virulent.”

“...Seriously?”

“Yes,” said Granger. “You ought to read Rasmussen and Vestergaard.”

In the face of Draco’s blank stare, she added, “The Danish Necrologists? No? I suppose you don’t keep up with medical journals. They’ve made impressive inroads in the study of Dementors in the last decade. The condition is a magical disease, like lycanthropy and vampirism. It causes putrefaction within minutes and irreversible loss of brain function within hours. Anyway – we’ve begun high-throughput small molecule

screening at the lab and seen good preliminary results. It's potentially curable, if the victim is brought in quickly.”

Draco stared at her.

Granger shifted in her seat. “But – again, this is medicine at its most experimental. We are on the fringes of the map – proper here there be monsters territory, you know.”

This witch was blowing Draco’s fucking mind. “What you’re doing – if you succeed – it’ll be – it’ll be an absolute tour de force. Utterly revolutionary.”

“Mm. I will accept that term for this, more than the Jotters.”

“Right. Have you quite finished with these revelations? I’m not sure I can take another.” “Have I shocked you so terribly?” asked Granger with a half-smile.

“I’ve been reduced to a goggle-eyed, blithering cretin, and don’t pretend you haven’t noticed.” “Nothing beyond the usual blithering, no.”

“How can you be so cruel to me in my fragile state?”

Granger’s half-smile grew to a full one. “I’ll make us another dose of opium.”

“Merlin,” muttered Draco, resuming his seat. He did more goggle-eyed staring at Granger’s back. This witch was something else.

Draco generally thought himself Better than those around him – not that there was anything wrong with them, but he was just Better, you know – cleverer, quicker, handsomer, sharper, richer. With Granger, he had always felt that he was in the presence of an intellect far greater than his own. But now – now he felt himself in the presence of someone Better than him on too many levels – too good for him, really.

He sat and felt the stirrings of an unfamiliar and strange thing, a quelling thing. So unfamiliar was it that it took him a moment to place it.

It was humility.

He hadn’t felt so humbled since – he reached back into his memories – since the summer of 1992, when first year exam results had come out and he’d discovered that a Muggle-born had taken top of the class, above him, in every subject at Hogwarts.

Well, she was at it again. Only now she’d grown into someone Fucking Important.

And he was her Auror. The weight of the responsibility pressed on him in a way he hadn't yet experienced. She'd gone from an annoying sort of chore to – to this; to changing the world.

The responsibility weighed so heavily on him that he could hardly raise his hand to accept the fresh mug of opium that Granger passed him.

"There you are," said Granger. "A cure for the blithering."

"I should like to take a few doses away with me. There are blitherers I'd like to administer this to." "Who?"

Draco gave a vague wave. "Friends, family, colleagues." "Are you so surrounded by idiots?"

"Present company excepted."

Granger bit her lip. "You musn't do that, you know." "Do what?"
"Compliment me. You're meant to be unerringly vigilant about my ego."

"Tonight, you've earned it. You quite floored me. I shall resume my vigilance tomorrow."

Granger looked satisfied. And she looked better in general – her cheeks had regained their colour and her hands weren't shaking as she moved to the pantry. "I haven't had anything since breakfast – I suppose I ought to get something into my system other than two doses of opium. Are you hungry?"

"Yes," said Draco, who generally found Quidditch and mortal duels to be excellent appetite stimulants.

He was pleased to note that the cupboards were chock-a-block with foodstuffs – though whether it was through Granger's own efforts or lingering effects of the elves' overzealousness, he wasn't sure.

"What about a cheeky little onion salad?" asked Granger as she rummaged about. "Only if it comes with a prolapse like the Skrewt served us."

"That can be arranged."

Granger set out cheese, crackers and hummus, and a crinkly brown bag of sausage rolls, which was the closest thing to a prolapse she had on hand (they were delicious).

She refrained from recreating the Skrewt's onion salad, which was for the best, as Draco was already wafting whiffs of armpit into the room and didn't fancy competition.

They finished with a delightful Muggle invention called Maltesers.

Tranquil moments with Granger were few and far between, and when she had finished eating, she rose, wand-waved most of the things away, and began to bustle about. “You’re staying the night, then?”

“Yes. I won’t sleep much – but if I do, I can have a kip on your sofa.” “Right. Let me clear it off.”

Granger moved to the front room, where she surrounded herself with a vortex of books and papers, which settled into neat stacks.

Of course she wouldn't question his suggestion of the sofa. Of course she wasn't going to counter-offer with, you know, sharing her bed. Which was absolutely big enough for two.

Not that Draco would have accepted anyway. He was a professional.

It had only been A Thought. He would be that much closer to her, should anything happen.

Setting aside these unproductive musings, Draco began to peel off his Quidditch kit, which reminded him that he stank. “Might I use your shower?”

“Er – of course. It’s upstairs.”

Granger watched him struggle with the knotted leather ties that held his chest-plate in place. “Were you in the middle of a game?”

“Yes. Inches from the Snitch, of course.” “I’m sorry.”

Draco shrugged like the insouciant hero he was. “Catching baddies is a bit more of a thrill.”

He continued to fight with the awkward tie under his armpit, which resisted him devilishly. Of course, the one time he had an audience was the one time he’d got the thing soaking wet and then let it dry, which resulted in this stiffened, ghastly mess of a knot. Of course, he’d never had an issue divesting himself of his Quidditch kit in his literal life, until this moment, when Granger was there to witness his incompetence.

“Do you need help?” asked Granger. “I’ve got it.”

Granger observed him as he continued to very much Not Got It.

She sat down, her hands folded on her knees, to watch his exertions.

“Fine,” spat Draco a moment later, all insouciance gone. “Help me. Don’t cut it; it’s wyvern leather.”

“All right,” said Granger. Her face was grave but her lips were pressed together in a way that suggested the suppression of laughter.

In Draco’s defence, she, too, struggled, and eventually went at it with her wand and repeated detangling charms.

Then she helped him pull off his chest-and back-plates, very much like a fair maiden helping her knight after a battle, if fair maidens were nonpareil researchers and knights were useless cretins.

Granger led him to the shower and handed him towels.

“The mirror doesn’t talk,” said Granger as Draco took in his dishevelled reflection. “Good,” said Draco. “I don’t want its

opinion at this precise moment.”

Granger stepped out of the bathroom, partially closed the door, and stuck her arm through the gap. “Pass me your clothes. I’ll chuck them in the wash.”

Stripping naked, with Granger’s hand right there, was an interesting feeling. There were other things he’d have liked to place in her hand but those bits were smelly and unwashed and also, for fuck’s sake, she had just gone through something traumatic. What was wrong with him?

Next to the sink, he discovered the nesting ground of Granger’s hairpins in the form of a jar full of the things. He cast a tracking spell on the lot.

As he got into the shower, Draco placed his wand within arm’s reach. He was quite prepared to dash out and attack werewolves naked, should one of the cottage’s wards be tripped.

The shower was everything that smelled nice about Granger, distilled into bottles. It took Draco a moment to identify the soap and shampoo amongst the many mysterious feminine products therein – oils and hair masks and body washes and things.

It felt – interesting – alluring – erotic – to use her soap and shampoo.

Then it was time to Quash before his cock decided to awaken. He was not having a wank in Granger's shower. He was simply not.

All right, so he was, but it was quick and dirty and borne of post-fight adrenaline. It was just to get the job done and get the randiness out of his system.

Knowing that she was somewhere on the other side of the door while he stroked himself was unaccountably arousing. He leaned into it, one hand splayed against the tile and one hand working himself over, and the steam and smells of Granger took him to a favourite fantasy involving Granger and her mouth, and delicate hands stroking up and down, and suckling–

His hand made a fist against the wall as he came with a sharp gasp.

He rested his head on his forearm, breathing heavily, dazed, watching the evidence wash down the drain.

Bloody hell.

But, all right. It was done. It was out of his system.

Everything was under control.

He turned the water to cold in an effort to cool away the flush across his face and chest.

The Muggle plumbing did not mess about – it was glacial. Wanky thoughts were superseded by shudders as Draco regained his breath.

Right. He was fine.

Granger knocked on the door and startled the shite out of him. “What?” he asked, irritated.

“Have you quite finished?” (Yes, he had, thank you.) “You’ve taken an age.” “I was positively filthy.” (Also very true.)

“Right. I’ve got your clothes.”

Draco stepped out of the shower and opened the door enough for Granger to stuff in his freshly cleaned clothes. Too bad she was so efficient; he would’ve been quite happy to walk out wrapped in a towel, for showy-offy purposes.

“A sight faster than I’d’ve expected,” said Draco.

“Quick-wash only takes a quarter of an hour on my machine. And drying charms for the rest. I like your pants.”

Draco did not remember what pants he had put on. He apprehensively pulled them out of the pile. They had little dragons on them.

“Gods,” said Draco.

“It’s all right,” said Granger. She closed the door. He could hear the warble of withheld laughter through it. “I’ve got ones with little cats on them.”

“Show me.”

“I’d rather die.”

Draco snickered as he pulled his pants on. Then came the loose black trousers and long-sleeved top that he wore under his Quidditch kit. They also smelled like Granger, now – whatever soap her machine used.

He fixed his hair in the mirror, exceptionally glad that it could not talk and inform Granger of what it had witnessed.

He found himself not quite able to meet her eye as he stepped out of the bathroom, but pretended it was because he was looking out of the windows, for Important Auror Security Purposes. She did not need to know what he had just imagined her doing.

He was not looking at her mouth. Fuck, that had been hot.

Right.

Downstairs, Draco was presented with his makeshift bed, which was the sofa, Transfigured into a kind of day bed. Beside it was a glass of water and a packet of biscuits.

Granger was growing tired – and with reason, as they were now pushing two o'clock in the morning. She yawned as she summoned pillows and a blanket and threw them onto the bed.

She had even seen fit to provide him with reading material to while away the hours: a copy of Rasmussen and Vestergaard's newest article. One glance at the hideous decasyllabic scientific jargon made his eyes glaze over.

"Have you got anything more stimulating?" he asked, before the Danes could put him to sleep.

“More stimulating?” repeated Granger, looking offended, as though she had already given him the most stimulating work written in the entirety of human history and he was being precious about it.

“Yes. Porn mags, or something?” asked Draco with a general hand-wave. “A few back issues of Fantastic Teats and Where to Find Them?”

Not that he required porn mags to get off – not when he had twenty scenarios involving her, carefully quashed into the back of his brain. It was, however, amusing to watch Granger look thoughtfully at the stacks of books around the room.

“Hmm. I do have the latest Journal of Sexual and Reproductive Health.” She summoned a volume from one of the piles and flipped through until she found a diagram. “Ooh, here’s a picture.”

Draco looked at it and read the description. “Fig. 11: Luminal calibre of abnormal oviductal wall.”

“Does that do it for you?”

“No. It curdles my jizz.”

Granger took the journal back and flipped to another page. “Try this.”

“Fig. 23,” read Draco. “Fallopian tube – Cross-section of the tubal lumen. Note the subepithelial endometrial stroma.”

“Stimulating?”

“Oh yes. Subepithelial endometrial stromas are a particular fetish of mine.”

“Stromata is the plural.”

Draco gave her a long and patient stare. “Right.”

“That’s your entertainment sorted, then.” Granger placed the volume into his hands. “I’m going to bed – I’ve got a feeling tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

Granger switched off the Muggle lighting, leaving only the fire in the hearth to illuminate the room.

She paused at the foot of the stairs and turned to Draco. “Thank you for everything you did today.”

Draco waved her off. It was awkward to be the recipient of innocent gratitude when he had just been terrible in her shower.

“Only doing my job.”

“Right,” said Granger. “Well – you do it well, and I’m grateful. You probably saved my life.”

“Go sleep,” said Draco.

Granger looked annoyed at this cavalier dismissal, but seemed to decide that it was Draco being Draco. “Fine. Good night.”

~

Draco drifted into a doze at some point in the night. He was awoken by a light sound, so quiet that he might’ve dreamed it.

Gripping his wand, a curse at the ready, he turned his head to see that it was the cat. It spotted him on the sofa at the same moment.

Draco had half expected it to hiss at him for daring to be in Granger’s home after hours. Instead, the cat trotted towards him with its tail held high, and, with a cat’s unerring instinct for finding warm places, it jumped on him and settled onto his chest.

Draco moved a hand to attempt to stroke its head, but a large paw met his knuckles and kept his hand down. The claws were sheathed but the message was clear: Draco was a heat source and mustn't get presumptuous and think he was anything better.

“Noli me tangere, is it?” muttered Draco. “I understand. I don't like people touching my hair, either. Except her, but I'd wager you know that.”

The cat blinked its yellow eyes at him.

“She's warned me about your smothering, so don't even try,” said Draco.

The cat's stare informed Draco without reserve that, if it had wanted him dead, he would be dead. “All right,” said Draco.

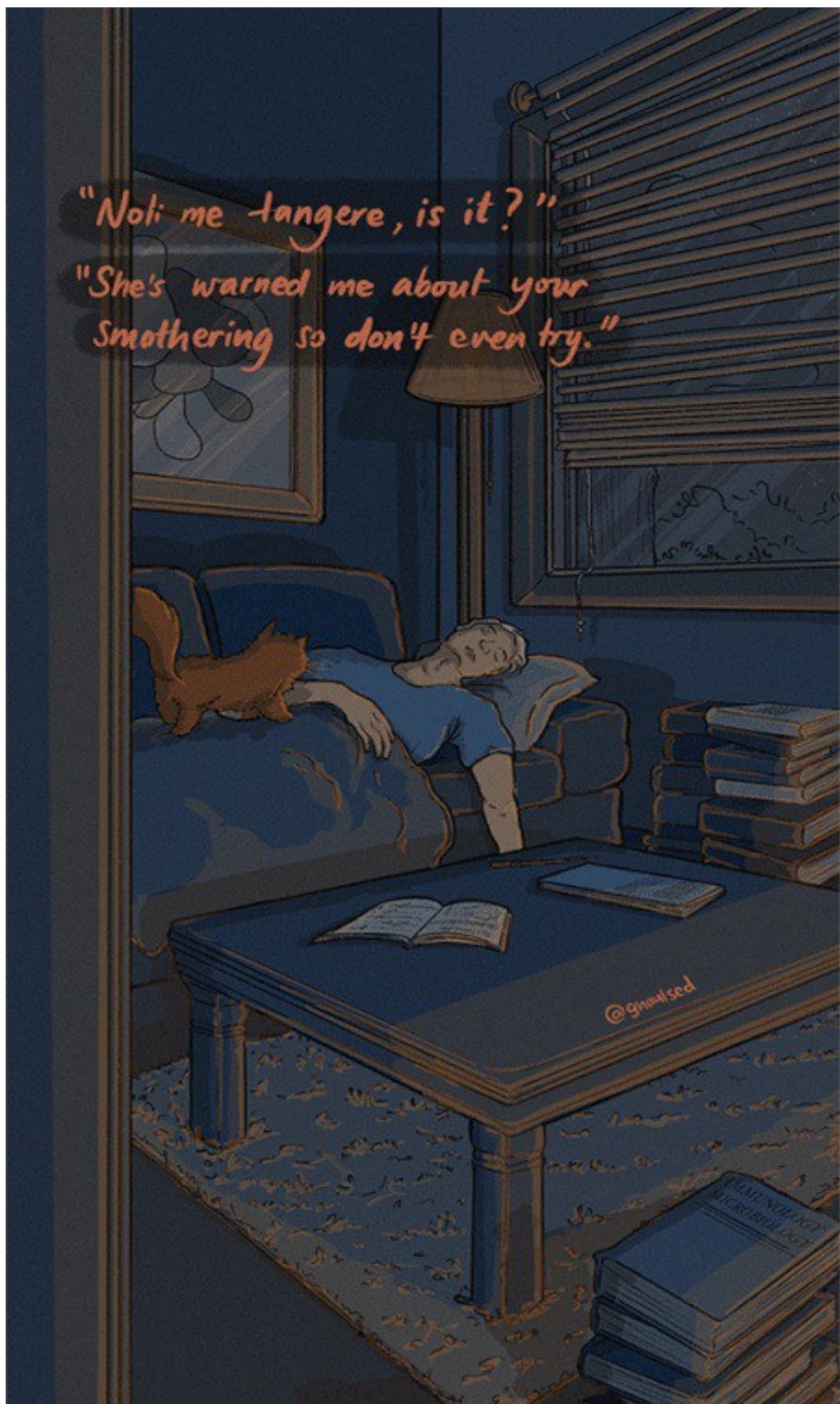
The cat lowered its head and closed its eyes. There was a tickle of whiskers against Draco's chin and then a deep rumble.

As he lay there in the dark, under the warmth of the purring cat, his heart still shuddered with aftershocks of the fear he had felt when Granger had activated the distress beacon. He didn't need a Boggart to tell him what he had dreaded to see.

Draco grasped about for the fragments of his self-control, which had shattered so spectacularly that evening. He Occluded and pulled together his discipline, his professionalism, and his pride, and built the Great Wall of Quashing once again.

It was a useful exercise, in theory.

In practise, the entire thing was overshadowed by a private fear that the whole brittle structure would crumble again, the next time Granger so much as smiled at him.



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Chapter 25

Nearness of Granger, Perils of

Draco awoke, groggy and small-eyed, to the sound of a gasp.

Granger was on the stairs, her fingertips on the balustrade, a foot frozen in midair above a step.

She was looking him and his new accessory – the sleeping cat, curled about his neck like a hirsute scarf.

“Er – good morning,” said Granger, when she saw that she was being observed.

The cat stirred at the sound of her voice. It leapt off of Draco, using his face as a launch point, and sauntered towards its mistress.

Granger asked Draco what he would like for breakfast. He requested a cup of coffee to wash away the piquant flavour of cat

foot.

Granger made a very decent cup of coffee.

The morning passed in a flurry of meetings. The first was with Tonks, who they met at Auror Headquarters, to hear what she had discovered in the course of her interrogations.

“You will be delighted to learn that No-Hands’ hands were successfully reattached,” said Tonks as they arrived.

“Too bad,” said Draco.

“That’s what I said.” Tonks closed the door to her office and sat at her desk. “Murderous little bastard. Right. Sit yourselves down. Robards cleared the use of Veritaserum on our friends last night, so we had a wee chat. Neither man knows the identity of the person who gave them their instructions. However – I did discover something rather interesting. Both men are werewolves, and both participated in the harvest moon attacks.”

Tonks placed a slip of parchment on the table. “The mediwitch’s post-mortem confirms that the other one was a werewolf, as well.”

Tonks looked from Granger to Draco and back again. “Thoughts? Reactions from the two luminaries before me?”

The luminaries looked at one another.

Granger shifted. “I think it’s time I told you what I’m working on. Malfoy, would you do the honours for the Vow of Secrecy?”

The Vow was cast. Granger summarised her work and findings for Tonks, and Draco added the equally interesting (and distressing) discovery that Fenrir Greyback had returned and appeared to have reassembled something of his old pack. They were probably the ones responsible for the full moon attacks, on top of targeting Granger.

“Bonkers,” gasped Tonks. “The whole jolly lot of them.”

Granger concluded with the same cautionary language that she had used with Draco the night before, about uncharted waters and the uncertain outcome of the clinical trials.

Tonks took the news of Granger’s lycanthropy cure with laudable neutrality, given Lupin’s condition. Only her mohawk betrayed her, turning a few shades paler than its blood red.

She gave Granger a long, adoration-filled look, whispered, “Incredible,” and then she turned brisk. “Bring Potter and Weasley up to speed under the Vow. We’ll also have to inform Robards and Shacklebolt. That would be the extent of it at the moment, I think. We’ll involve others as needed. Take the conference room. I’ll join you in a moment.”

Tonks shooed them out of her office.

As they left, Draco stole a backward glance at her. Tonks was sitting at her desk, her hands clasped before her, her knuckles pressed to her mouth.

Her eyes were unusually bright.

In the conference room, Potter and Weasley were apprised of the situation under the Vow. Their reactions were predictable, but there was something comforting in their clasping of Granger, in their chest-puffing, gung-ho declarations to keep her safe, and in their table-pounding promises to find Greyback if it was the last thing they did. As the lead on the WTF, Potter looked to have found a fresh determination to catch the werewolves. There was a dangerous green light in his eye.

Weasley was quite as goggle-eyed as Draco had been the night before on the potential for a cure for lycanthropy. His reactions consisted chiefly of repetitions of “Blimey!” and “Bloody hell!” and “You’re brilliant, Hermione!”

Granger gave him a quick smile. She and Draco were then quizzed on the break-in attempt. “I’ve got a recording of it,” said Granger, and she pulled out her mobile.

It seemed that she had been able to preserve the camera footage in a kind of mini film. Curious in spite of himself, Draco rose to join Potter and Weasley in crowding around Granger and watching the small screen.

He quelled a flicker of jealousy at the easy way that Potter propped an elbow on Granger’s armrest and came in close to her, and how Weasley casually threw himself around the back of her chair – all while Draco stood a decorous and stiff arm’s length away.

Granger played the film. Draco, having been Disillusioned for most of the skirmish, was largely invisible until the end, his whereabouts only indicated by bursts of spells and their effects on his opponents – the severed arms, the sentry consumed by the Bombarda. The fight had lasted an age in Draco’s head, but it had taken less than a minute in real time.

Weasley clapped him on the shoulder. “You gave them hell. Well done, mate.” Potter shook his hand. “Remind me never to duel you.”

“Play it again,” said Weasley.

The replay was accompanied by much commentary by Potter and Weasley. “The killing curse right off the bat – that fucking wanker – can you imagine if they’d got in? Hermione wouldn’t have stood a chance. Oh! Look at the blood! Ha! Majestic spurt, that! Disarming’s meant to be Harry’s thing, but you’ve put a new spin on it, Malfoy. Dis-arming. Ha ha! That bloke’s face when he realises he’s trapped! Nice Quidditch kit, they’ll have a phobia of Seekers for life... is that the newest Étincelle?”

Draco left them to their several re-watches, resuming his seat on the other side of the table.

He glanced at Granger and found that she wasn’t looking at her mobile, but rather at him. Her expression took him a moment to interpret – it was something serious, something studious, something pensive.

She was puzzle-solving. Blast.

She turned away when he caught her eye. Draco determined to keep catching her when she observed him, to interrupt her thought process and keep himself safely Unsolved.

Tonks arrived, preceded by the sound of her combat boots stamping along the corridor. She looked as unruffled as ever and entered the room at full tilt. Her elbow collided vigorously with the back of Potter's head.

"Sorry," said Tonks. "It didn't ring hollow – that's a compliment, Potter. We've all been brought up to speed?"

Granger put away her mobile. "Yes, boss," said the Aurors. Tonks sat at the head of the table. "We've rather a lot to discuss, but let's begin with the most important bit: Hermione's safety."

Potter and Weasley both leaned forwards, as though ready to seize Granger and carry her off to a distant tower, never to be seen again.

"Right," said Weasley. "We've got to get her out of here. What d'you fancy, Hermione? Madagascar? Greenland? Tibet?"

Draco could not blame the man for the reaction – he had had precisely the same reflex. Granger was tight about the jaw. "I am

positively not going anywhere.”

An explosive argument ensued, of course. Potter and Weasley pushed for Granger’s immediate evacuation, the more remote the location, the better. They were motivated by genuine worry and the same anxieties that Draco suffered at the sound of Greyback’s hated name. Draco, having already attempted that line of argument unsuccessfully, now sided with Granger. There was too much riding on her research – if Greyback continued to be as wily as they knew him to be, they were looking at potentially hundreds, if not thousands of new infections over untold full moons, while work on Granger’s cure stalled.

Tonks, with a look of saintly forbearance upon her face, allowed the argument to roil for four minutes. Then she clapped her hands. “Thank you, boys, for sharing your thoughts. Fortunately, none of your opinions matter.”

Draco, Potter, and Weasley experienced ego death.

Tonks continued as they clutched at the shredded remains of their psyches. “The Auror Office does not have the authority to tell the eminent Professor Granger what she can and cannot do. Our job is to keep her protected as she carries out her project, as requested by the Minister. So. First order of business: scheduling and housing.”

Potter and Weasley's cadavers twitched out some arguments, but Tonks' lips were growing more pursed by the minute, and they wisely gave it up. Together, the five of them drew up a draft schedule to ensure that, wherever Granger went, there would be someone with her – either Draco or another Auror.

Granger agreed to cut down on her public appearances. She also agreed, glumly, to suspend her duties in the Muggle world – the shifts at the Muggle surgery and the teaching at Muggle Cambridge – until Greyback had been caught. Non-magical locations were too difficult to protect.

Magical locations were far safer by nature, but an Auror would heretofore accompany her at her lab and at St. Mungo's A&E.

The discussion turned to housing. Granger agreed to move to a safehouse, as long as it was within Flooing distance of her laboratory. The dozen safehouses managed by the DMLE were discussed, each of which offered pros and cons (location, ease of travel, defensibility). Tonks and Draco shared a certain anxiety about the fact that the safehouses were necessarily known to many Aurors and DMLE staff.

Other options were discussed. Creating a new safehouse? Complex and time-consuming, but an option.

Potter and Weasley each suggested that Granger stay in one of their homes. Draco pointed out that moving Granger to the residence of either of her best mates was a blatantly obvious next move. In any case, Granger rejected the option point-blank: she wouldn't put their families in danger. She levelled the same objection at Potter's suggestion of Hogwarts – children were not acceptable as potential collateral damage.

"Chuck her in Malfoy's bloody Manor," said Weasley, jerking a thumb towards Draco. "No one will look for her there."

Granger said, "Hah!"

Potter laughed and then grew thoughtful.

Tonks took the suggestion with a surprising degree of seriousness. She pressed a finger to her chin and said, "Weasley has made a point."

Granger blinked.

Draco felt a swell of confused anticipation.

“We could set up decoy Hermiones in the safehouses and her cottage,” mused Tonks. “Traps,” said Draco.

“I like traps,” nodded Potter. “And ambushes.” “I’m brilliant,” said Weasley.

Tonks nodded. “Ingenious, really.”

“No,” said Granger, shaking her head. “I have the same objection as with Harry and Ron – I won’t put Malfoy’s household in danger. If the Manor were attacked, and something were to happen to his mother, or the house-elves—”

“The Manor is nigh impenetrable,” said Tonks. “As are most of those old estates. It took twenty ward-breakers three days to get in, during that last push in the War. It’s ten times safer than our safest safehouse”

“True,” said Draco. He tried not to sound particularly eager. “Also – my mother is spending the season on the Continent. She isn’t at the Manor.”

Granger, wide-eyed, turned to him. “Are you agreeing with this idea?”

Draco produced the world’s most careless shrug. “I think it’s an option worth considering.”

Which was an understatement. He bloody loved it. It was perfect. She'd be protected by centuries- old magicks, they'd have houseelves as secondary surveillance, and he'd be there every night. He was positively delighted by it.

Weasley, who was looking on smugly, rose an entire inch in Draco's esteem.

Meanwhile, Potter was eyeing Granger. "The Manor isn't exactly the site of happy memories, is it? You'd be all right with this, Hermione?"

Granger was still staring at Draco in confusion. "Hm? Oh – no, it'd be all right. I've been back since. One of Narcissa Malfoy's functions." (Draco noted that she did not mention the dinner.) "It was – fine. Objectively speaking, it's not an unreasonable suggestion, as a temporary measure. I only hesitate because it feels like a real imposition."

"An imposition? Pish tosh – there are about fifty rooms in the Manor," said Tonks, waving any real or imagined reservations away in her cousin's place. "Malfoy won't even know you're there."

Granger's glance passed over to Draco. Tonks, too, pinned him with an inquisitive eye.

"Let's do it," said Draco, endeavouring for neutrality in his expression. "It's an easy short term solution. We can always revisit – or we can be creating a proper safehouse in the meantime, off the books."

Tonks rubbed her hands together. "Brilliant. Weasley is absolutely correct – Malfoy Manor is the last place on earth anyone would expect to find Hermione Granger."

The remainder of the meeting passed in a tangle of debates on logistics, timetables, and ambushes.

Tonks took point on updating Robards and – with a sigh – Shacklebolt. "He won't be happy about us keeping the harvest moon attacks under wraps. He'll have to take that up with Robards. But at least we've a plan to keep Hermione safe and well."

Draco escorted Granger back to her cottage to pack up for what Granger called a "Hopefully extremely brief" stay at the Manor.

The excellent thing about moving Miss Dab Hand at Extension Charms was that it was an almost painless process. Draco hardly had time to send word to the elves to prepare one of the guest suites for Colleague Healer Granger when she announced that she was ready.

Whatever belongings she'd deemed indispensable (including both copies of *Revelations*) were in a Muggle rolly case thingy, magically Extended.

Her cat was wrestled, hissing and scratching, into a carrier.

"I'm instructing the elves to keep your stay utterly under wraps," said Draco as they made their way to the cottage's front door. "My mother won't even know about it until we decide that it's safe to say something."

Granger looked uneasy. "When will she be back?"

"March, I believe. She's decided to skip the English winter altogether."

Granger's unease persisted. "Right. Good. The elves themselves, though – if someone were to try to reach me in the Manor, and

one of the elves got hurt? Or killed? The thought makes me sick.”

“Didn’t you hear Tonks? Stop worrying. No one in their right mind would look for you there. And if they did, they’d need two dozen ward breakers bashing away for days – which I can assure you I would notice. This was one of Weasley’s brighter ideas.”

Granger fell silent, but the frown that pulled her brows together told Draco that she had most certainly not stopped worrying.

At the Manor, Henriette greeted them at the great doors and whisked Granger off to a guest suite overlooking the gardens.

Granger’s cat was released into the suite, where it indicated its disapproval of the situation by streaking under the bed and hissing at anyone who approached.

Draco followed at a distance as Henriette gave Granger a tour of the Manor. The old house-elf had understood the gravity of the situation. There were no coy looks in Draco’s direction, nor any mucking about with roses. Henriette was all business. Colleague Healer Granger must be made comfortable and kept safe.

Draco watched the two of them walk ahead of him – Henriette’s small form and Granger’s slender figure, bent attentively towards the elf as she spoke. Henriette pointed to Monsieur’s study on her left and indicated in a whisper that Monsieur should be left alone when he was in there, as he was often grumpy about pestilential levels of incompetence and other things of that nature. Granger nodded gravely, then shot an amused look back at Draco when Henriette proceeded again.

The doors to the library were gestured to, then Henriette moved on to the conservatory. Granger lingered at the closed library doors for a moment before hurrying to catch up, and it was Draco’s turn to be amused.

The accompanying swell of fondness was quashed before it could make him smile.

By the time Granger had been settled and oriented, and Draco and the elves had revisited the Manor’s extensive wards for his own peace of mind, it was early evening.

If Draco had hopes of a quiet dinner for two that night, they were obliterated by Granger. She had a shift at A&E that she positively refused to miss, as she was the only Healer on duty and her backup was suffering from Spattergroat.

Today had felt like a long day, but, as Draco waited for Granger at the foot of the grand staircase, it also felt like it was just beginning. He supposed that he ought to get used to long bloody days. This was, after all, Granger.

She trotted down the stairs, her freshly donned Healer robes fluttering behind her. “I’m ready. I suppose I needn’t ask if you faint at the sight of blood. Are you all right with eviscerations?”

“Yes,” said Draco.

“Good. One never knows what one is going to walk into at St. Mungo’s.”

Draco cast his most powerful Notice-Me-Not and Disillusion on himself to forestall questions about why an Auror was following Healer Granger about.

They Flooed to St. Mungo’s for what was to be the first of many shifts at Granger’s side at A&E.

Draco performed Legilimency on every mind in the waiting room to satisfy himself that no one had fiendish plans, other than bleeding to death.

When that was done, he settled into a corner outside the operating theatre, and proceeded to be moderately disturbed by the evening's entertainment, which included unpronounceable diseases, a wizard who presented with a Muggle traffic cone protruding straight through his chest, and a truly inspiring amount of patients who had 'fallen' onto vaguely phallic objects, which were now stuck in various orifices.

Draco cast silencing charms to muffle his alternating gasps of horror and laughter. Nothing rattled Granger, however. She dealt with his idiotic countrymen with a relentless professionalism that he couldn't help but admire.

~

If Draco had nursed any thoughts of a long and leisurely breakfast with Granger the next day, they, too, were doomed from the beginning. By the time he got downstairs at the (very respectable, he thought) hour of nine o'clock, Granger had done her yoga thing, showered, dressed, and eaten.

He arrived just in time to see her off in the Floo parlour. She was to spend the day at the lab, where Weasley was on Granger-duty. Draco was scheduled to wring out the minds of No-Hands (now simply Hands) and Friend.

Draco heard a muffled buzz emanate from Granger's vicinity. It was her Jotter.

She ignored it in favour of twisting her hands together in that anxious gesture of hers. "I doubt that Greyback will be stupid enough to send anyone to the lab again so soon," she said, sounding as though she was reassuring herself more than speaking to Draco. "The wards held beautifully last time. I needn't be worried."

There was another muffled buzz from her Jotter.

"It'll be perfectly fine," said Draco. "They'd never be stupid enough to attempt something in broad daylight. And Weasley will be with you. And you've got the ring. Don't even wait to be sure there's a threat to use it – just use it."

"Right."

“No hesitations. I’d rather pop in ready to fight the postie than be too late.” “Yes. Of course. Thank you.”

Again, Granger’s Jotter buzzed.

Irritated, Draco asked, “Who’s bloody Jotting you at this hour?”

Granger hesitated before pulling out the Jotter to look at it. “Er – everyone.” “Why?”

“Nothing important,” said Granger, who clearly never learned that the more she dismissed a thing, the more Draco wanted to know about the thing.

“Tell me.”

Granger looked an interesting mixture of annoyed and sheepish.

“It’s my birthday.” “Ah,” said Draco.

There was a longish silence.

“Er – happy birthday, I suppose,” said Draco.

Really? That was the best he could manage? Why was it that his suaveness utterly vacated his body when it was most needed? What was it about Granger? She was a murderer of suave.

“Thank you,” said Granger. “But we’ve got bigger things to worry about than birthdays, haven’t we?”

“Quite.”

Granger threw Floo powder into the fire. “I’ll turn the ring at the slightest provocation, I promise. Cambridge.”

And then she was gone, and Draco was left to mull over the timeless brilliance of Er – happy birthday, I suppose and suffer all by himself.

Before he Flooed into the office, Draco asked Henriette to help him stage a recovery effort that evening, if Granger was back on the premises at a decent hour.

She’d have a stupid bloody birthday cake, even if she was trapped in the Manor with a blundering fool.

Draco spent his day conducting Legilimency on the two apprehended wizards, having received special permission to do so from the powers that be. The only memory of any real worth was the one he had found the night of the break-in. He spent long hours in Friend’s brain in particular, combing through weeks and months’ worth of memories. Greyback had been careful. A few

bits of information about potential meeting locations for Greyback's werewolves were all that Draco gleaned. He passed them to Potter.

That evening, his brain feeling more like a queasy, gurgling mix of porridge than actual brain, Draco left for home.

Draco and Granger seemed to be developing a speciality for collisions when using magical means of transport. Granger Flooed back to the Manor from Cambridge at almost the same time as he did from London. His only warning was a witch-shaped blur coming at him amongst the hearths he was hurtling past, and the blur was whipped into him (with a shriek that confirmed that it was Granger), and they were both spat out onto the ashy flagstones of the Manor's Floo parlour.

There was a tangle of green robes amongst black robes and much coughing up of soot.

A shrill giggle echoed through the Floo parlour. By the time Draco's head had escaped Granger's skirts, Tupey had disappeared and the little voyeur could not be immediately reprimanded.

Draco dropped back down with a groan. The beginnings of a colossal Legilimency headache tingled at the back of his skull.

Granger appeared to have accepted the recurring issue of their collisions philosophically and directed no venom towards Draco.

Instead, she said, “Right,” and attempted to rise. She trod on her robe and fell over again.

“You properly Tonksed that one,” said Draco.

Granger made an exasperated sound and lay on the floor next to Draco, who had already given up. They looked at each other. Granger sighed. Draco tasted smoke.

She looked exhausted. He hadn’t even had a moment to ask her how she’d slept during her first night at the Manor – her fault for getting up so bloody early.

“Anything from the Legilimency?” asked Granger.

“Only minor findings. Potential meeting places. Gave them to Potter.”

“Damn it.”

“No trouble at the lab?”

“No. And only one quarrel with Ron.”

“About what?”

“He wanted to wee in a bottle instead of leaving me by myself for five minutes while he went to the toilet.”

Draco snorted. “Dedicated sort of bloke.”

“He’s always been a bit full-on.”

“I can admire that.”

“Should we get up?”

“No,” said Draco, pressing the back of his head into the cool stone. “I quite fancy lying here until death takes me.”

Granger reacted more casually than he would have liked in the face of this dramatic pronouncement. “Mm? What’s the matter?”

“Headache.”

“Went too hard on the Legilimency, did we?”

“I wanted answers.”

“I can help you with the headache. Bath first – I’ve had a sweaty sort of day.”

“Henriette can Apparate us to our chambers.”

“Our chambers,” repeated Granger in an exaggerated drawl. It seemed to give her the courage she needed to push herself up. “I shall make my way to mine under my own power.”

“Go forth and conquer,” said Draco. And she did.

Dinner was a quiet affair. It began at the formal dining table, then Granger asked Henriette if she would mind terribly if they dined in one of the salons, which offered more scope for stretching out their tired carcasses on sofas.

Henriette was delighted to accommodate. She soon had them set up cosily in the smallest salon at the back of the house, around a low table piled with foodstuffs. (Draco did notice the addition of a single red rose in a small vase, but given that there was only one, he decided that it was purely decorative.)

Granger dragged a mixed pile of Muggle and wizarding books out of somewhere and took advantage of the moment to brief Draco on their autumnal equinox plans, given that Mabon was only two nights away. She had narrowed her search down to twelve potential sacred sites. Their objective was to identify the dolmen written about in Revelations.

“We are getting so close to completing this,” said Granger, who seemed to take fresh vigour from the thought. “Quite exciting, really.”

“We? Piffle. It’s all you.”

Granger looked up. “Yes, we. You’ve been with me on this since the beginning. Don’t be modest – it doesn’t suit you.”

“All right. I’ll take whatever reflected glory comes my way,” said Draco with a languid wave of his hand.

He slid into his sofa until he was lying down and draped his arm over his eyes to block the light that made his head ache. He wanted to go to bed, but it was only eight o’clock. Granger’s hours were rubbing off on him and she’d only been there a day.

Granger observed him. “Right. Your headache. Let’s have a look. Why didn’t you say something, instead of letting me cram more into your brain for half an hour?”

When Draco didn’t answer (machismo seemed a weak response), Granger pulled out her wand and moved from her sofa to his. He budged up enough to give her room to perch herself beside him. She cast a diagnostic spell, studied the resulting pictorial, and tutted.

“That’s going to develop into a great bloody migraine,” she said. “I’ll attempt Solamentum. It’s delicate. Lie still.”

Draco closed his eyes. He felt the tip of her wand against his temple. The sensation would normally initiate a stress response. He wasn't sure when he had begun to trust Granger this implicitly, but he didn't even crack open an eye.

She whispered an incantation and a gentle soothing began to pour into his overwrought brain. "Glorious," muttered Draco.

"Shh. I've got to concentrate."

"Mm."

"Hush."

"Mmm."

"Can you stop moaning for a bloody minute?"

"Not when it feels this nice – mff."

The warmth of Granger's fingertip pressed against his lips.

His eyes flew open in surprise. Above him, Granger was frowning in concentration, and she flashed him a warning look. He closed his eyes again.

Now his other senses grew more sensitive. Against his side he could feel the push of Granger's thigh and the curve of her bum. Upon his temple, the coolness of the spell. She smelled of something antiseptic, which shouldn't have been as terribly

enticing as it was, but he wanted to bury his face into her and inhale.

He wondered what would happen if he were to flick his tongue against the finger that was pressed upon his lips.

Perhaps something betrayed his thought. Granger removed her finger from his lips and pressed it under his chin instead, tilting his head towards her.

She moved her wand to his other temple and he heard the whisper of the incantation again, “Solamentum.”

The healing spell irradiated the cramping heaviness away. “How is that?” asked Granger.

Draco did that thing he’d grown to like doing, of giving her answers that actually referred to her. “Gorgeous,” said Draco.

“Isn’t it?”

“Heavenly.”

“Good.”

“Sublime.”

“Now you’re just trying to provoke me.”

“No. It’s true.”

Granger looked to the ceiling in a gesture of mild exasperation and rose. She resumed her seat on the sofa across from Draco,

which left him with a distinct feeling of Lack at his side.

He would've been perfectly happy for her to continue next to him and whisper complex Healing spells, in lieu of sweet nothings, into his ear.

Right. The crush that he was meant to be quashing.

He bound and gagged his heart and shoved it into some profound psychic abyss.

Henriette materialised with the meal's pièce de résistance – a small chocolate mousse cake, topped with a single candle.

“Oh, merci! C'est trop gentil! ” exclaimed Granger, a hand pressed to her collarbones.

Draco had had a feeling that Granger would've absolutely detested Happy Birthday being sung to her by himself and the elves (as riotous as it would've been), so he had instructed Henriette to leave off the singing.

Henriette merely said, “Joyeux anniversaire, Mademoiselle!” and curtseyed out with a crack. “You really didn't need to do anything,” said Granger to Draco, looking genuinely touched.

“Rather a rotten birthday otherwise, stuck in the Manor with me, with a horde of werewolves skulking about and trying to kill you.”

Granger tugged the candle out of the cake and blew it out. (“It’s more sanitary,” she said in the face of Draco’s raised eyebrow.)

“What did you wish for?”

“Can’t say.”

Draco passed his hand through his hair. “Nothing, I’d wager. You’ve already got me. What else could you possibly ask for?”

She laughed, as expected (miserable feeling), and pulled the cake towards herself. “Do you want some?”

At his nod, Granger cut them each a gooey slice of the mousse cake. “Ron said he’d check the cottage for parcels for me, on the way home. He’s to drop them off tomorrow.”

“Good of him.”

“Mm.”

There was silence as the cake was savoured.

“What happened between you and Weasley, anyway?” asked Draco.

As a general rule, he and Granger didn't do personal questions – a healthy habit to cultivate between Auror and Principal. She had let one slip in Provence, about his schooling – and now he permitted himself one, out of not-so-idle curiosity.

Perhaps it was a query that Granger fielded regularly. She merely shrugged. “We wanted different things. We were young when we got engaged – just out of the war. I had a great many plans that didn't involve building the Burrow II and popping out the next Weasley dynasty. But we split amicably, in the end. I'm lucky. Ron remains my dear friend. He and Luna have been together for a bit, now – they're a much happier match.”

Draco muttered out a noncommittal response around a spoonful of cake.

“And you?” asked Granger. There was restrained curiosity in her glance. “I'd heard that you and the younger Greengrass sister were engaged.”

It was Draco's turn to shrug. “Same as you, I suppose. Different plans. She wanted to be the next Mrs Malfoy and do the thing properly, you know – the society thing, the parties, the dinners, four children and two nannies by age 25. I wanted regular

beatings by French professors—” (Granger nodded and said, “As one does”) “—and mucky weekends in Barcelona.”

“Your mother must’ve been upset.”

“Devastated. We were perfect on paper.”

“So many things are.”

They were silent for a while. Neither looked at the other.

“Thank you again, for the cake,” said Granger. “It was – an unexpected gesture.”

“Thank Henriette,” said Draco.

He took it that Granger had finished with the cake and snuck his fork towards it for another bite, without bothering to cut himself a piece.

“You’ll ruin the structural integrity,” gasped Granger. “Don’t you dare!” “Or what?” asked Draco, aiming for the soft mousse centre.

Granger knocked his fork away with hers. “I shall carry out a citizen’s arrest.” “Ha. Do you know, I’d absolutely love to see you tr—”

A flick of Granger’s wand Transfigured Draco’s silver cufflinks into narrow handcuffs, neatly attached in the middle. The Transfiguration was impossibly quick – shockingly so.

Draco observed this new state of affairs. He pulled his hands apart. The cuffs chinked against each other and held firm.

He whistled.

“Transition metals near your hands can’t be the wisest decision for an Auror,” said Granger. “Most baddies haven’t a Master’s in Transfiguration.”

“And I suppose you aren’t typically distracted by chocolate mousse, either.”

“Correct.”

“Still,” said Granger. There was merriment in her eyes. “That wasn’t so hard.”

“I say again, you’d have made quite the Auror, sans the shrieking.”

“My brains are better used elsewhere,” said Granger. Quite rightly, too.

“Are you going to let me go, or are we going to see how long it takes me to develop a new kink?” asked Draco.

“I suppose I’d better. We don’t want you getting too excitable at work.” Granger waved her wand and the handcuffs became cufflinks once more.

But it was too late – the cuffs were now a Thing that was going to reside in Draco’s head. There was an exhilaration that came

with being so quickly overpowered. His wand had been well out of reach, too. She could've gone on to do all manner of interesting things – and found him to be a willing participant.

But no. There would be no shagging of her handcuffed Auror upon a sofa. She was Granger. She would never cross the line. She was controlled and professional. Ethical. Correct.

Damn her.

Draco poured himself a generous glass of wine and finished it.

He ought to follow suit and be equally Correct. But it was rather difficult when she was pressing her bum into him and putting fingers on his mouth and cuffing him. And that had only been one evening's worth of activities. And there would be many more together.

Deep down, in his bound-and-gagged heart, Draco felt stirrings of alarm.

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Chapter 26

Mabon / Being Irritating Is A Love Language

As promised, the next day, Weasley Flooed to the Manor to drop off the birthday gifts that had been sent to Granger's cottage. Granger had already popped off to her laboratory, so it was Draco who had the dubious privilege of receiving him.

Weasley was not a dab hand at Extension Charms, which he demonstrated by arriving with a bulky burlap sack full of parcels, promptly heaved into Draco's arms.

Weasley panted. "Took me ten minutes to pack up that lot." "Popular witch," said Draco, clutching at the ponderous thing. "Yeah." Weasley wiped sweaty hands onto his trousers and looked about. "Hermione sounds like she's handling it all right, staying here. Funny that this ended up being the safest place for her, after all these years."

"I suppose."

“Thanks for doing this for her. You’re really a decent bloke – only a bit of a twat, after all.”

Draco had just opened his mouth to tell Weasley thanks, and to piss off, when Weasley added, “She likes you, you know.”

“...Likes me?”

“Genuinely,” said Weasley. “Thinks you’re enormously competent – eminently respectable – generally marvellous–” he took on a high, Grangery voice “–Rather brilliant, you know, Ron, you mustn’t tease him. Can’t even refer to you as ‘the Ferret’ without being corrected.”

This had an immense cheering effect on Draco, but he kept his face neutral. “She does like to take up unfortunate causes.”

“Yeah. She’ll bung together a Society for the Protection of Eminently Respectable Malfoy soon, I reckon. SPERM. Suits you.”

So buoyed was Draco’s mood that this insolence hardly rankled. He called Weasley a freckly fucker, but without rancour.

“Has she launched a house-elf rebellion yet?” asked Weasley.

“No, but I expect her to start agitating imminently. It’s only been two nights.”

“Yeah. She has loads of time to do damage.” Weasley waggled his eyebrows as he looked about deviously for elves. “I’d better be off. You’re on at the lab later?”

“It’s Humphreys this morning and Goggin in the PM. I’m with Potter at the safehouses.”

Weasley tossed Floo powder into the hearth. “Right – the traps. Make them evil and borderline illegal, won’t you?”

“Obviously.” “Bye.”

“Off you fuck.”

Weasley Flooed out.

The bag in Draco’s arms was heavy with expressions of love from Granger’s friends and admirers. He felt the corners of books and the squishiness of clothing. Something cinnamony wafted through the burlap.

He cast a few detection spells to ensure that there were no cursed or poisoned items within and called Tupey to take the thing to Granger's suite.

He did not spend a single moment moodily musing upon a gift for Granger to outshine all of these offerings.

The day passed in a series of visits to safehouses, where Draco and Potter hoped to lure any snooping baddies in with false indicators of Granger's presence. They created decoy Grangers, charmed to move between various rooms, and set lights to turn on and off at night. They concealed a variety of wards and ensnarements around the properties.

And yes, Draco's were crueler than Potter's. Potter had all the imagination of a Horklump.

When they had thus baited five safehouses, along with Granger's cottage, they returned to the Office to meet with Tonks, who had spoken to Shacklebolt.

“Did he throw a full-on tanty?” asked Potter.

Tonks shook her head. “No – you know Kingsley. It was quiet disappointment. He didn’t threaten to sack me or Robards, so that

was a positive.”

“Come off it,” said Draco. “He’d never sack you for this.”

“The Greyback resurgence was a bit of a shock,” grimaced Tonks. “He wasn’t happy. Robards caught the worse of the bollocking; he shouldn’t have tried to keep things under wraps after the infant infector. Anyway – I’ve reassured him that Hermione is safe and will be continuing her work. He’s asked to be kept apprised of the WTF’s plans for the next full moon – I’d like to participate in the next meeting, Potter, if you don’t mind...”

A buzz in his pocket caused Draco’s attention to drift. He glanced under the table to see a message from Granger.

Humphreys is very chatty, said Granger.

She is, a bit, said Draco.

Worse than you.

Everyone is worse than me. I am the best.

Have been apprised of the ailments of her entire extended family, said Granger.

And Goggin?

A very nice man.

Good, said Draco, who did not grow jealous at all.

Loud breather, said Granger.

Man's broken his nose a few times. Rather whistley on the exhale, isn't it? Ask him to toot you a tune.

He already is. Which song?

There was a delay as Granger, presumably, paused to listen to Goggin. Auld Lang Syne, I think. Festive, said Draco.

Three more hours of this – I may go mad. Miss you terribly. Will never be mean to you again.

Draco's heart stopped beating at the sight of Miss you terribly. Then it resumed with disturbing vigour.

"Malfoy? Would you kindly join us in the present?" came the voice of Tonks.

Draco looked up to find Tonks and Potter looking at him. He grew aware of a vague smile on his face and replaced it with a scowl.

Tonks opened her mouth to launch a barbed query about what was holding his attention so pleasantly, but Draco was spared further explanation by a knock on the door.

“Is Malfoy in here?” came the voice of Brimble, one of the junior Aurors. “What is it?” asked Draco.

“I’ve got something to show you, if you’ve got a moment?”

Tonks shooed Draco away with a lively gesture, as though glad of an excuse to rid herself of the dreamy-eyed idiot.

Miss you terribly.

Why did that give him such a pleasant fluttery feeling? It kind of felt too nice to quash.

Right. Brimble.

Brimble was a young Muggle-born witch who generally regarded Draco with a kind of fearful awe. Her specialty was surveillance and espionage. When Draco joined her at her desk, she nervously shuffled through a stack of paper and dropped her quill.

“S-sorry for interrupting,” she said. “I thought it might be important. I’ve been monitoring INTERPOL’s notices and one of your Persons of Interest has just popped up.”

“Which one?”

“Gunnar Larsen. INTERPOL has just linked him to a string of attacks – your man is on some kind of international rampage against researchers. They’ve finally caught him on camera.”

She placed a stack of unmoving Muggle photographs into Draco’s hands. “Here. These were taken at a laboratory in the Netherlands. Larsen strangled the lead scientist.”

Draco examined the sequence of photographs, which were blurry, black and white, and shot from a high angle that made it difficult to discern what was happening. In the first photos, Larsen’s large form hovered over the white coated body, then he held the scientist’s head between his hands for several more frames – conducting Legilimency, no doubt. The scientist appeared to raise an arm to defend himself and then Larsen’s hands were at his throat.

“Is the scientist alive?”

Brimble riffled through more documents. “Alive, but in critical condition. Hospitalised in Rotterdam.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s, er – wait, I’ve got it somewhere – an oncologist. That’s a kind of Muggle Healer who–” “I know what an oncologist is.”

Brimble looked at him with surprise. “Right. Well, his name is Dr. Johann Driessen.” Fuck. That had been one of Granger’s co-speakers at that Oxford event.

“The Dutch National Police Corps is investigating, as are the Dutch Aurors. They’ve been informed that we also have an interest in Larsen. I’ve reached out to colleagues in Japan and America about the other attacks – from the reports I’ve seen, it sounds as though he’s been performing Legilimency on them and leaving them for dead.”

Draco took the file from Brimble. “Well done. Tell me immediately if there’s anything else. And I want to know if he comes into the country – eyes on portkeys and international Floos.”

Brimble nodded as Draco swept away.

That evening, Granger was welcomed to the dining table by the stack of photographs and a retelling of Brimble's findings.

She blanched as she learned of the string of attacks and gasped in horror at the photographs of Dr. Driessen.

Draco didn't want to say, I bloody told you so, but something of the thought was clearly in his expression, because Granger made a rare admission: "You were right about Larsen."

It gave Draco no pleasure. Well, perhaps a little pleasure. "I'm always right."

It was a monumental burden, always being right, but he bore it with his usual grace. "What the hell is Larsen playing at?" asked Granger. "What is wrong with him?!" "I'd like to know, too. What is the arsehole looking for?"

Granger's brows were contracted into a worried line. "If he's targeting researchers in my field – most of them are Muggles. They'll be utterly incapable of defending themselves."

"Give me a list of likely targets. I'll inform their respective Auror HQs."

“All right.”

Granger stared at one of the photographs of Driessen being throttled. She looked sick. Draco plucked it away and put it back in the file. “It’s not your fault.”

They sat in silence.

Tupey materialised to serve dessert (a tarte tatin), which snapped them both out of their broody stupors.

Granger took a long breath, as of one attempting to Move On To Other Matters, but with difficulty.

“Right,” she sighed. “We need to talk about Mabon. It’s tomorrow and we’ve got so many sites to visit, we need to be frightfully organised about it.”

As though Granger knew how to be any other sort of organised. Now it was her turn to plonk a pile of papers in front of Draco. She moved her chair closer and her knee touched his thigh, which felt nice, and she ran through the itinerary with him.

The wild, ancient names of the dolmens they would be visiting rang off of her tongue: Bodowyr, Henblas, Ty Mawr, Pentre Ifan, Hell Stone, Goward, Annadorn...

Draco suppressed a shiver. There was magic in those names.

There were twelve in all. Granger's itinerary included Floo points and Apparition points, often a little way away from the sites themselves, as they were built on major ley lines too magically potent to Apparate directly onto.

Granger suggested that they use Side-Along Apparition when not Flooing, in order to stay together and avoid magical depletion through so many repeated Apparitions across the UK.

They bickered over who would Apparate whom – Granger wanted Draco to preserve his magic for detecting and duelling if needed; Draco wanted her to save hers to defend herself, and perhaps reattach his limbs in the case of a firefight.

They decided to compromise by alternating, which left neither of them satisfied and both of them glaring at the other as though they had never dealt with such a bloody minded fool in their lives.

Now Granger bit her lip. "We'll need to leave early tomorrow. I know you'll be thrilled." "I am positively effervescent with joy." "Brilliant." "Frothing with it."

Granger proposed the foul hour of seven o'clock. "What? Bloody hell."

Granger's eyeroll was magnificent. "Poor darling. It isn't that awful."

"Vile, is what it is." Draco sighed a dramatic sigh and sat limply in his chair. "I should've taken the troll porn."

"The what?" asked Granger. "Nothing. Never mind. Eat your tart."

"Eat your tart."

"I'd like nothing more."

"Good."

Draco ate the tart in front of him but he'd rather have been eating the one beside him. Yet another wearisome irony in the difficult life of Draco Malfoy.

~

Draco awoke at the monumentally gruesome hour of six o'clock the next day to get ready. He bore the hardship with great fortitude, which he thought he ought to be praised for.

He paid particular attention to his toilette that morning, desiring to achieve a certain Look for the day's gallivanting: dashing, yet elegant; adventurous, yet bien mis; intrepid, but suave.

His hair he arranged to look roguishly debonair. He wore his favourite boots, which he fancied gave him a swashbuckling kind of air.

As he adjusted his hair in the mirror, Draco reflected that the prospect of spending an entire day with Granger, looking at mushrooms, should have provoked annoyance and true ennui. And yet – despite the hideous hour – Draco found himself rather looking forward to the excursion.

At 6.55 a.m., satisfied with his Look, Draco made his way to the entrance hall to find Granger.

She was at the foot of the stairs, her hair in a high ponytail, her walking boots laced up tight, her eyes bright.

Seeing her waiting for him, all kitted up in her walking things, was – good. It gave Draco a pleasant sense of anticipation for adventure and argument. For treks through forests, and accidental engagements, and fleeing mad nuns, all in good company.

He had missed this.

Draco downed two coffees and four eggs, and they were ready to crack on.

Granger led the way to the Floo parlour. She, too, looked to be anticipating this newest gallivant with pleasure. Her smile was warm.

“Shall we carpe this diem?” “Let’s.”

Granger threw Floo powder into the flames and spoke the name of their first waypoint. She stepped in, closely followed by Draco, and they were off.

They fell into an enjoyable rhythm as they progressed through Granger’s itinerary. At each stop, Draco’s detection spells confirmed that they were alone (save for cows or sheep) and then Granger set to work, looking for the specific mushrooms and other plant matter her Herbologist- philosopher had decided to elaborate on, instead of something useful, like bloody coordinates.

The dolmens were large structures, still impressive despite their occasional collapsed states. Granger provided her usual historical commentary, explaining that the monuments typically housed

burial chambers, and would have been covered entirely by a mound of earth, thousands of years ago.

They experienced every season imaginable as they progressed through Granger's list. Driving rain at Bodowyr, glorious September sunshine at Ty Mawr, thick fog at Henblas.

The landscapes were breathtaking. In the morning they discovered ancient woodlands of gnarled trees, smelling of wild thyme, wide moorlands covered in millions of purple blossoms, and miles of rolling green turf disappearing into a hazy sky.

In the afternoon, it was endless fells covered in bracken, domesticated pasturelands, and cliffs plunging into the sea at the end of the world.

Draco's favourite bit was the Disappearions – the moments when Granger threaded her arm in his and clung to him, and he felt the sweep of her magic over him, or cloaked her in his, and the spin of the Disappearance knocked them into one another and pressed them together.

He couldn't read whether she felt the same – she hopped cheerily to his side every time, but she was joyously in her element, today, and doing everything cheerily. Her cheeks were quite pink, but

then again, the wind was whipping over the Isle of Anglesey and the air was frosty in County Down.

But one thing was for certain: Granger was happy. Draco felt that there could never have been a happier fungi-hunter hop-skipping about these ancient sites. There was a jubilance and a hope about her, fed by the knowledge that this was the penultimate step in her project. The end was in sight and the world-changing would soon commence.

Amongst the gorse and the autumn-sweet air, the pack of lethal werewolves and the murderous Larsen must have seemed far away to her – problems for tomorrow’s Granger, not today’s.

It gave him unaccountable pleasure, to see her so happy.

Now Granger approached him, shaking her head. “Not here. Goward next. Direct Apparition – my turn. Ready?”

“Let’s go.”

The spin, the squeeze, the warmth of her. Draco hoped for an awkward, slippery landing somewhere, so that she could conveniently fall on top of him, but alas – their landing places

had been selected by Granger, and were therefore, necessarily, as level as one could ask for.

The next dolmen was in a misty farmer's field, recently ploughed.

Draco's detection spells showed nothing but a smallish herd of deer where the field turned to forest. Granger squelched off, shin-deep in mud, towards the massive dolmen.

Draco aimed a series of drying charms at a one metre square patch of mud and stepped onto it to keep the worst of the muck off of his boots. Then he alternated between keeping an eye on Granger and on the horizon.

The herd of deer that Draco had detected drifted through the trees towards them. Their steps were soundless. As they approached, Draco saw that their pelts were the golden-white of Oisín deer – the Magical cousins of the red deer. Rare creatures that only existed in this part of Ireland. Draco had never seen a live one.

The lead stag paused when it saw Draco, its magnificent antlers sweeping upwards and losing themselves amongst the branches. The stag's assessment must have culminated in a decision that

Draco posed no threat – it lowered its head to nose at the ground, as did the hinds behind it.

Draco cast a few detection spells to satisfy himself that these deer weren't baddies who had developed excruciatingly specific Animagi for the purpose of attacking Granger.

They were not.

He wasn't paranoid, he was just – careful. (Maybe a bit paranoid.)

Draco glanced towards Granger to see that she, too, had noticed their company. She stood stock-still, a piece of parchment in one hand and her wand in the other.

Sunshine began to pierce through the mist, turning the muddy field into a glittering expanse of dew bejewelled with golden wheat-stubble and the shining pelts of the deer.

The retreating mist meant that the deer had lost their cover. They turned back towards the safety of the trees and, wraith-like, disappeared into the forest.

One, a smallish, younger hind, was trailing the herd, limping badly.

“Oh!” came Granger’s voice, which told Draco that she, too, had spotted the creature. “What’s the matter with her?”

Her voice startled the herd into flight. The injured hind was left to follow, limping as quickly as she could.

“I suppose she’s hurt,” said Draco. “We need to help her.”

“Help her? It’s a wild animal. Let nature take its course.”

Granger was, unsurprisingly, unwilling to follow this logical course of action. “I didn’t see any blood. The way she was dangling the leg – I think it’s just a dislocation.”

“So she’ll be fine.”

“No. She won’t be able to put it back herself. She’ll die a slow and fear-filled death or be killed by something horrid.”

To Draco’s enormous irritation, Granger began to squelch towards the trees. “Granger,” called Draco, in a voice of great authority and menace.

She took no notice, obviously.

“Let’s just Stun her so I can have a look. They’re terribly rare – almost hunted to extinction because of their pelts. We can’t just let her die.”

“We absolutely can,” said Draco. “Have you forgotten the beastly itinerary you’ve put together?”

“Of course not. I built in extra time for contingencies.”

“And this is a contingency, is it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a bloody deer.”

“Of which there remain less than three hundred living specimens! She’ll die if we don’t do something.”

Hermione Granger, the most irritating witch of her age, continued into the forest.

Draco swore and kicked an innocent mushroom which had led a blameless life and did not deserve it.

“I do not approve,” said Draco, stamping into the wet forest after Granger.

Granger was beginning to sound shirty. “I remember with vivid distinctness not having requested your approval. Haven’t you any empathy?”

“I’m fresh out. Could you stop being such a bloody fucking Do-Gooder, for one day in your life?” “Could you find a single ounce of compassion in that fermented porridge you call a soul?”

“I have loads of compassion. For my boots.”

“Your boots?!” came the reply. “This is an act of kindness!” “It’s a monstrous bother!”

And where was Granger’s compassion for his hair and robes, if you please? Why were they wading in a bog?

In the trees ahead, the golden hind glimmered. The poor creature was doing her best to get away, but her three-legged sprint had exhausted her, and Draco and Granger soon gained ground.

Granger’s Stunners were flying in pursuit. “Stupefy! Stupefy!”

“You would be so easy to lure into a trap,” panted Draco, catching up. “Baddies just need to find a bunny with a hurt footsie—”

“If you’d help me, this would be over faster!”

“Fine. Stupefy!”

Draco’s Stunner hit the hind in the back – to absolutely no effect.

“Right,” said Draco. “Magic-absorbing pelts.”

“Damn it,” said Granger. “I didn’t think they’d be quite so potent.”

Granger changed tactics and transformed the muddy ground into a few metres of literal swamp, which half-swallowed the hind, until she was stuck.

When they were about three metres away, Draco and Granger fired off an Immobulus and a sleeping charm, respectively, neither of which took effect, even at this close range.

“Incredible,” said Granger, as though this was an intriguing scientific phenomenon and not a catastrophic death sentence for Draco’s Look.

With strength borne by panic, the hind pulled herself out of the mud and plunged between the two of them, hoping to make her getaway between the lumbering humans.

In a masterful display of athleticism and idiocy, Draco leapt towards her. He managed to grab one slender hoof – then it

slipped out of his grasp. He splashed into the swamp on his knees.

It was in his hair. His. Hair.

He was going to murder them both. He would have venison for dinner and tart for dessert and life would be simple again.

Granger conjured a rope that snaked after the deer, but it was magically repelled the moment it touched her pelt.

“We just want to help you!” called Granger.

“Stand still, you stupid bloody quadruped!” shouted Draco, less kindly. The creature did not, judging by her extra burst of speed, speak English.

Granger waved her wand and spoke an incantation, and a wall of earth surrounded the three of them.

“There,” said Granger. “No more running.”

The hind took her new surroundings into view. She was in a circular earthen pen. Draco leapt at her again, hoping to sweep her legs out from under her and lie her down to be examined. The hind dodged. Granger darted at her with her arms flung wide. The hind capered to the side.

At this point, the creature seemed to conclude that they were absolute amateurs. She appeared to be making sport of their pursuit, dangling leg and all. She waited until Draco or Granger got near her and then dashed off again, churning muck into their faces.

“I am going to skin her myself and make a bloody cloak of her,” snarled Draco through mud.

A swish of Granger’s wand brought the earthen walls further inward. Soon, there were only two or three square metres of space to step on – all of it swamp.

They caught her. Draco laid the creature down and held her three good legs in a double-fisted grasp, as all attempts at conjured ropes or chains slid off. Her injured leg stuck out at an unnatural angle behind her.

The hind gave out heart-breaking bleats of fear and trembled, as though anticipating some horrid end at their hands.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” shushed Granger. Somehow, muddied and dishevelled, she managed to look perfectly angelic. “We

aren't going to hurt you. The mean man was joking. I'd sooner make a cloak of him."

Draco had no coherent reply to offer, as he was spitting out mud.

Granger felt about the deer's hind end, muttering about femurs.

The deer kicked a leg free and coated Granger's hair in a liberal glob of mud. Granger closed her eyes and breathed.

"What are you doing?" asked Draco. "Repenting? I hope so."

"It's fine," said Granger, throwing her sodden hair over her shoulder. "She's afraid. It's not her fault."

The creature did look pathetic. Draco's conscience, which was largely absent from his life, prickled at the sight of her fear-filled black eyes. He fell into an ill-considered lapse of kindness and stroked the hind's dainty head.

Granger gave him a quick look of surprise before casting a diagnostic spell. "It is a dislocation. Brilliant. We'll need to put her to sleep – she'll need to be completely relaxed – and then we'll do a bit of tug of war."

At the sight of Granger's wand, the creature sighed, a look of absolute pathos on her face as she prepared for death.

They poked about the deer until they found a patch of skin uncovered by her magical pelt – a velvety smooth spot just under her chin.

Granger Stunned her. She consulted the diagnostic schema and then, under her directions, they began the tug of war. Draco was instructed to lock his arms around the creature's pelvis and hold it as steady as he could. Granger wrestled with the leg, trying to find the magical angle where the head of the femur would slide back over the edge of the acetabulum.

For a long minute, Granger tugged the leg, folded it, twisted it, pulled it – and then, finally, there was a soft click.

"Yes," said Granger. "You did it?"

"I think so." Granger flexed the hind's leg, which bent smoothly, now, and no longer lay at that unnatural angle.

Granger cast another diagnostic spell. "Perfect."

Granger Ennervated the hind, who found her feet, trembling. She backed away from them, putting her weight evenly on all four

legs.

She was sound again.

They lowered the earthen walls.

The creature galloped off without a backwards glance, lavishing one final splash of filth at them in lieu of a farewell.

It went into Draco's mouth and up Granger's nose.

"There's some bloody – fucking – gratitude," said Draco, spitting with every word.

Granger sneezed.

They looked at each other, wide-eyed, mud-streaked, stinking abominably. "Your face."

"Y-your hair! I–"

They collapsed into hysterics and laughed until they couldn't breathe.

~

Granger was still shaking with giggles as they Apparated to the next site, the Devil's Den.

And her high spirits endured, because there, amongst long grasses under a soft blue sky, she found the magical combination of fungi and flora that she had been looking for.



“Finally!” said Granger. “Yes!”

She kissed a mushroom (mushrooms got more action than Draco; it was fine), and launched into a flurry of activity. She pulled

mysterious paraphernalia out of her pocket and began to set something up between the dolmen's great stones.

As for Draco, well. Once lost, one's dignity is difficult to find again, but Draco did his utmost to recover his.

He had to concede that his Look was ruined. He cast Scourgify and Aguamenti until he was, at the very least, no longer a walking poo.

Then he cast a few Aguamenti at Granger as she bustled about, just for sport, and also because she had kissed a mushroom instead of him.

He stopped after her squeals got shrieky and she snarled, “Malfoy!”, because he did not want her to turn him into an actual poo out of pique.

“What are we collecting here?” asked Draco, sauntering towards the instruments that Granger was setting out.

“Light,” said Granger, holding a kind of sextant up to the sky.
“Light?”

“Yes. Standard Sanitatem requires exposure to sunlight in a churchyard. For the proto-Sanitatem, we need autumnal equinox

light collected at a tomb far more ancient, captured just as the sun passes the celestial equator.”

A shallow, mirrored bowl gleamed amongst the instruments. Runes were carved down its sides. Granger played with the sextant and a bronze compass and tilted the bowl further, so that it was aimed upwards, but towards the west.

In her hand was a clicky tube thing. “What’s the clicky tube thing?”

“A Deluminator,” said Granger. “Ron lent it to me, bless him.”

Granger lay herself down on the ground next to the silver bowl and used the sextant again, making minute adjustments to the bowl’s direction.

Then she rose and clambered upon one of the dolmen’s massive stones, and perched herself there. “Now what?” asked Draco.

“Now we wait,” said Granger. “This year, the autumnal equinox takes place at 6.20 p.m.”

“Oh. We’ve got loads of time.”

“We do. We struck lucky, really, finding it on the sixth try.”

They had a picnic on the rock – thick egg and cress sandwiches prepared by Henriette.

“The Devil’s Den,” said Draco, looking upwards at the massive capstone above them. “What’s so devilish about it?”

“Local tradition has it that a demon could be summoned here by pouring water into these.” Granger pointed at dish-shaped recesses in the rock. “It would appear at midnight to have a drink.”

“Only water? Nice sort of demon. I would’ve expected the blood of infants, at the very least.” “Perhaps we can leave him some. Water, I mean. Not infant blood – I haven’t any.”

When they finished their picnic, Granger rubbed at her face. In spite of Draco’s sporadic efforts, she was still plastered with muck. Grime streaked across her cheeks like war paint.

“I think I prefer human medicine,” she said with a bit of primness as she aimed Scourgify and Evanescos at herself. “There’s less chasing about of patients. It was fun, though.”

“Fun. O, yes. I positively adore going arse over tit in swamps.”

Granger tutted, then leaned over to fix his collar. “A bit of dirt makes you look dashing.” Draco was nonplussed.

Amusement made its way onto Granger’s face and it was – affectionate. Draco did not know what to do with it.

“But your hair – an absolute lost cause, today,” said Granger.

“Speak for your bloody self.”

They whiled away the rest of the evening with talk. They insulted each other a few times, and snarled at each other a few times, but it was all right, because his insults made her laugh, and the warmth in her eyes softened the edges of hers, and were they arguing or were they flirting, really?

As the equinox drew nearer, Granger began to get fidgety. She leapt from the rock, checked the position of her silver bowl again, took out the Deluminator, put the Deluminator back, calibrated the bowl again, and began to pace.

“Sorry,” she said, when she noticed that Draco was watching her. “I’ve practised this so many times, you know, but this is real, and if I bodge it, the entire project is set back by a year – but I won’t bodge it – but if I did –”

“You won’t,” said Draco. “I won’t.”

She flung up a spell to tell the time.

6.15 p.m.

Granger knelt next to the silver bowl. The breeze danced amongst the long grasses. A charm of goldfinches took flight.

18. p.m.

The smell of autumn drifted deliciously around the dolmen, heavy with fresh-cut hay.

19. p.m.

The air grew thick with magic.

20. p.m.

The equinox struck.

The sun's rays hit the mirrored bowl, reflected upon themselves thousands upon thousands of luminous times, and formed a sphere of pure light.

Granger, kneeling next to the bowl, clicked the Deluminator. The ball of light was sucked into the instrument.

The sun set.

And just like that, it was done.

Granger carefully slipped the Deluminator into her pocket.

Then she stood, tilted her head up, spread out her arms, and said, “Yes!”

She spun in a circle, a small figure under a big sky, laughing her happiness to the heavens.

Her spin swung her into Draco, and she turned the collision into an embrace into which, on tip-toe, she pressed all of her joy and relief.

He indulged. He held her just as tightly, this favourite old enemy, this brilliant do-gooder, this stupid crush.

She looked up just as he looked down. Their cheeks met in a wet, muddy press. And then, so did their lips.

It was the most innocent, naive kiss that Draco had ever stumbled into. It dumped an entire litre of endorphins into his system

They broke away and gasped apologies to each other, because, obviously, it had been an accident.

They carried on as though nothing had happened. Because he was her Auror and she was his Principal and they were both

consummate professionals.

But something had happened.

And Granger hadn't leapt away screaming, you know. She hadn't wiped her mouth, she hadn't spat. She had just – felt warm, and breathed once, and now she blushed and busied herself with packing.

Draco's brain revelled in the attainment of a new memory, of lips chapped by the wind and the taste of salt and earth.

Granger assembled her instruments.

"That's Mabon sorted," she said, relief in her voice. "I can hardly believe it."

"A triumph," said Draco, and he meant it.

"A small triumph."

"You're working towards a bloody big one."

"Yes."

The last of the Mabon sun caressed the tops of distant trees, exultant in a scarlet and gold blaze. Far above the trembling grasses and the rolling hills, the moon rose.

Granger finished packing and fell onto her bum between the dolmen's colossal stones.

She sat there for a long time, her hands in the earth behind her, her face to the sky, breathing relief. Then she caught his eye and smiled at him.

The Great Wall of Quashing was obliterated. Something vast and nameless swelled in his heart.

This witch was – this witch was – he hadn't the words for it, but he was struck by it. It wanted to engulf him.

The sphere of light glowed, still. But it wasn't in the Deluminator. It was in him.

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Chapter 27

Theo's Party

So. The quashing. It was, objectively, not going well.

As Draco preferred to fault anyone but himself for his problems, he laid the blame squarely upon Granger, who had no business smiling at him. Frankly, how dare she. Obnoxious behaviour.

Thoughtless. Rude, really.

Granger carried on in cheerful ignorance of her culpability. As the days went by, she settled into life in the Manor with surprising ease – perhaps because she was rarely actually there. She arrived in time to inhale a late dinner, most nights, and was awake early again the next day, dragging a bleary-eyed Draco behind her as she frolicked off to save the world.

Potter and Weasley visited Granger often. The three of them shared long late-night conversations, piled upon each other in some salon or other. Draco joined only when specifically invited in by Granger – he spent enough time with those two duffers at

the office and didn't relish more of their company. He also found them rather too watchful – Potter in particular. Not that there was anything to see here.

Even in his wildest lapses into truth, Draco would never admit how much he enjoyed Granger's – admittedly sporadic – company at the Manor. The way her presence filled the great rooms with warmth. The pleasure of dinnertime repartee. Walking through a corridor and knowing that she'd just passed there, because of the lingering smell of soap.

Even her cat was a decent addition to the house. Late one night, a "Mraa?" at the foot of Draco's bed informed him that the creature had somehow entered his rooms and was calling plaintively for him. Then it had looked at him in a self-pitying kind of way and Draco realised that it was lost. He had walked it back to Granger's suite, knocked, and told her, "I believe this is yours," as the cat bounded into familiar territory. Granger had been doing yoga, and was wearing those clothes, and was sweaty and breathless and shining, and smelled like salt and candle-smoke. She had gasped "Oh! Crooks, my darling, you mustn't go too far," and a trickle of perspiration had run down between her breasts, which Draco did not look at.

Anyway, the cat was all right.

Draco never explicitly admitted it to himself, but behind the quashing, in a secret, stupid, soppy part of his soul, he wished that they could share more quiet moments together, uninterrupted by screams of pain at A&E or swotty graduate students at her laboratory. But perhaps it was better this way – perhaps anything else would be too much.

He had often wondered what pushed so many of his friends to marriage and the smallness of domestic bliss. But sometimes, when Granger came home, and smiled a hello, and sat next to him at the table, sometimes, for a brief moment, he understood. Those moments were a glimpse of something he didn't know he could want, but they were fleeting, and the feeling vanished when she went to bed, and left him with a sense of loss of something he had never had in the first place.

He had one such moment on a rainy October day. It was a Sunday, and, miracle of miracles, both he and Granger were off. By the time Draco made it to the dining room, Granger was having lunch, but she kindly called it brunch as she waved him to a chair.

Draco asked for porridge (unfermented) from the kitchens. Granger sat cross-legged in her chair, one hand occupied with her

fork, the other with her foldy computer, surrounded by silver pucks.

Draco had just settled in to enjoy the quiet and the company when the moment was interrupted by Theo's owl, who dropped two identical envelopes over the table – one in Granger's lap, and one directly into Draco's porridge.

Granger opened hers to discover an invitation from Theo. She showed it to Draco, who saw that Theo had taken great pains with it: the script was beautiful, the parchment was of the highest grade, the ink shimmered luxuriously.

Dear Healer/Professor/Doctor Granger,

I understand that you are to be thanked/blamed (?) for our dear Draco's continued presence on this earth. A few friends of Draco's and I would relish the opportunity to celebrate your medical tour de force in person. (I know it may come as a surprise, but he does have some friends. That being said, it will necessarily be an intimate gathering, as he only has six.)

If you would be amenable to joining us, we would request the pleasure of your company at Nott House, this Saturday, at seven o'clock.

In the bottom corner of the invitation was a note: Dress - Black tie.

Draco's soggy envelope enclosed a note that made for rather a sharp contrast, scrawled in Theo's usual illegible hand and written in Biro.

Dear fucko,

Lost my Jotter, hence missive through ancient means. Drinks and delights at mine, this Saturday,

7. I invited Granger.

Come or I will kill you. Kisses,

Theo

P.S. Invitation list encl. for your edification

A crumpled napkin had been shoved into the envelope, with the following information:

Granger

Pansy + Longbott Blaise

Davies + wife

Luella (abroad) Flint

Draco I suppose

Draco tossed the note and napkin to Granger, who read Theo's illegible missive with her eyebrows raised. "Goodness. We'd almost have to send this to Bletchley Park to have it deciphered. Does your correspondence with your friends typically involve death threats?"

"Yes, and we attempt murders once or twice a year; it's a kind of tradition."

Granger nodded as though this was entirely unsurprising and turned to examine the guest list. "Any dodgy histories here?"

"Only the last one."

"Mm. I know all about him. What about secret werewolves, any of those?"

"I bloody well hope not. I'd go first and have a poke about their heads, if you decided to go." "You'd let me go?" asked Granger.

“I’m not your gaoler,” said Draco. “Nott House is quite as well protected as the Manor. And I’d be with you the entire time.”

And also, Theo had promised dancing and snuggling.

And there it was: a textbook example of why Somethings between Aurors and Principals were prohibited. His entire security analysis had been predicated on the potential for fucking snuggling.

Draco opened his mouth to say that, on second thoughts, Granger probably oughtn’t go, but Granger was now tapping at her lip.
“Black tie. I’ll have a think about a dress.”

Draco closed his mouth.

~

Draco and Granger arranged to Floo to Nott House separately, to keep up the pretence that they were each in their own homes. Draco was to go first to scope the place out and confirm that there were no rogue werewolves on the premises. This ended up being a good idea, as Henriette got wind of the party and

cloistered herself with Granger all afternoon and into the evening.

By the time Draco was ready to leave, neither the witch nor the elf had emerged from the guest suite. There was only Tupey to see Draco off in all of his black-tied resplendence.

Draco Flooed to Nott House at half seven. As he shook off the soot, Theo appeared to greet his esteemed guest. “Thank you for coming, Draco. I know it’s not something you’ve been doing very much of.”

Draco and Theo entered the salon, where the small group of guests was already deep in conversation. Draco did a spot of unobtrusive Legilimency as he greeted them. No one had any naughty intentions, except for Longbottom and Pansy, who intended to find a secluded bathroom for a quick shag.

“Gods,” muttered Draco, instead of “Hello.” “Sorry?” said Longbottom.

Pansy raised an eyebrow. “Nothing. How are you?”

After brief small talk, Draco moved to Davies and his wife, Audrielle. Davies was thinking about where to hide his newest broom from his wife; his wife was missing the baby they had left

all of twenty minutes ago and wondering how early they could politely escape to home.

Zabini, in excellent fettle, had his mind upon a brainy brunette. However, before Draco could disembowel the man where he sat, he noticed Zabini's plus-one: Padma Patil, radiant in a turquoise gown.

Zabini gave Draco one of his insufferably smug smiles.

Patil's surface-level thoughts were of Zabini – mostly that he was a bit twattish, but she would endure him because he was also funny and decent in bed.

"You're too good for Zabini," said Draco to Patil. "Oh – I know," said Patil with a wide smile.

Zabini laughed.

Flint was at the bar. His thoughts were bent on cajoling the house-elves into bringing out Theo's most prized bottles.

That completed Draco's survey of the guests. He was satisfied that Granger could join the gathering safely and sent her a Jot to that effect.

Granger's answer came a moment later: There in 10. Henriette is a bully.

Draco began to find himself buzzing with anticipation, half nervous (why?!), half pleasant. Flint waved Draco towards him.
“What are you drinking?”

“A G&T, and make it stiff.”

The house-elf behind the bar squeaked, “Yes, sir!”

“Give him Theo’s best stuff,” said Flint, clapping Draco on the shoulder. “We are celebrating Draco’s survival tonight.”

Theo strode over and attempted to elbow Flint out of the way, with limited success. “Pipsy, do not let this man berate, persuade, or otherwise impel you to open the vault.”

“Of course not, sir,” said the elf, with a distrustful look at Flint.

“He took abominable liberties with my collection, last time,” said Theo to Draco. “Horrible man.” Flint, unabashed, took his drink and blew Theo a kiss before joining Davies.

Pipsy the house-elf presented Draco with his G&T – very stiff. He approved.

“Any idea when we might expect your guardian angel?” asked Theo, glancing towards the alcove outside the salon, where the Floo hearth flickered. “She did say she was coming.”

“I haven’t a clue,” shrugged Draco.

They joined the others at the sofas. Draco kept up a passable stream of conversation, but his attention kept drifting to the Floo.

He was nervous. Why was he nervous?

Finally, the flames turned green, and Granger’s form spun into existence within, and she was deposited upon the hearth stones.

“Ah!” said Theo, who had apparently been watching the fire with equal attention. “Our guest of honour!”

He leapt to his feet to usher Granger into the salon. She was besieged by Longbottom (hugs), Padma (more hugs), Pansy (cheek kiss), and Zabini (firm handshake).

Draco, being the cool and self-possessed sort, whose heart rate had certainly not accelerated, merely raised his glass to her from the sofa. She gave him a small smile.

Draco turned his gaze back to Flint without hearing anything that the man was saying, because oh no, Granger was wearing a black gown, and it was low in the back, and there was a slit in it up to her thigh, and her hair was swept to the side and showed off that part of her neck that looked the most delicious, and Flint had just asked him a question and he had no idea what was going on.

She had a rose in her hair.

“What?” said Draco. “Sorry – couldn’t hear you over the sound of the – ice. In my glass.” “Bollocks,” said Flint. He inclined his head towards Granger. “You’re distracted.”

Draco flicked a V at him and sipped his drink.

“Don’t get shirty with me,” said Flint. “I’m not the one who went all daft and dewy-eyed in the middle of a conversation.”

“Me? Dewy-eyed? Absolute rot. I’m just – preoccupied.”

“Give your head a wobble and give her a proper hello, then, Mr. Preoccupied.” “Fuck off.” Draco rose and strode to the bar. “I need a refill.”

After opening greetings and chit-chat, Granger, Longbottom and Patil formed a small group and got to talking about – plants. A thrill. Pansy perched herself upon the arm of Longbottom’s chair

and looked on with an affectionate sort of ennui, twirling a finger in her husband's hair.

Draco wanted someone to twirl his hair, but her hands were occupied with a spirited description of some sort of fungus.

He listened with one ear as Davies asked his immediate audience if they had seen the Cannons get battered by Puddlemere on Thursday?

"No Quidditch talk," called Pansy across the room. "It stifles me." Granger looked amused.

"You just keep fingering your husband," retorted Flint with a brusque wave. "We'll keep it to a whisper."

Always the height of class, was Flint.

Pansy smiled and began a more vigorous massage of Longbottom's head, who, for his part, had gone rather red.

Pipsy the house-elf served hors d'oeuvres and refilled everyone's drinks. Flint and Zabini got to arm-wrestling over something (Flint won). Davies shared a few Ministry scandals, including a new one about what really went on in the Love Room at the Department of Mysteries. Theo flirted outrageously with anyone

unmarried including Granger, Patil, Flint and Zabini. (He had long ago determined that Draco was a lost cause, but nevertheless made the occasional sporting overture.)

When there was a lull in the conversation, Theo rose and tapped his glass.

“I would like to propose a toast,” he said, catching Draco’s eye with a naughty grin.

There was a stir as everyone rose, variously gathered up their skirts or drinks, and came to stand around Theo and Draco in a circle. Granger was nudged forwards by Longbottom on one side and Patil on the other.

Incidentally, Longbottom’s hair was now a disaster, and Draco almost reconsidered his wishes for the twirl of feminine fingers.

“As you know,” said Theo, looking solemn, “our Draco is afflicted by a chronic form of stupidity—”

There were grave mutters of “Tragic,”
“Heartbreaking,” and “Poor wretch.”

“—A chronic form of stupidity for which there is no known cure. His most recent relapse involved a spot of mano a mano combat with a Nundu, followed by a casual jaunt straight into a jet of its venom.”

Everyone shook their heads at the poignant tale. Draco contemplated Theo’s murder.

“Enter Hermione Granger,” said Theo, holding his glass towards the witch in question, who looked a pretty combination of flustered and pleased. “Saviour of idiots and champion of morons since, I believe, age eleven (that’s when you met Potter, right?). Thanks to her quick thinking and knowledge and, er – rather complicated Muggle sciencey things that I shan’t attempt to explain, not because I don’t understand them, but because you lot won’t – Draco is still with us, free to continue being recklessly stupid for the remainder of his life (however short; not too short, we hope). And so I propose a toast – to the triumph of modern medicine, to old enemies and new friends, to Draco Malfoy for being alive, and to Hermione Granger for saving his life.”

There was a resounding, laugh-filled, “Cheers!”

Draco found himself being jostled and slapped on the shoulder and punched in the ribs, and some oaf from the deepest circles of

cretinhood mussed his hair. Meanwhile, Granger was surrounded by a delicate crowd of people gently tapping their glasses to hers.

“And when you’ve discovered a cure for stupidity, do let us know,” said Pansy. “I will,” grinned Granger.

“Tell us, what do you think of Draco, now that you’ve got to know him a bit?” asked Theo. “Was he a good patient?”

“He does grow on you,” said Granger, with a latent kind of affection, as though Draco was a sort of parasite that had taken up residence on her person and begun to endear itself to her.

“Show us the scar, mate,” said Flint.

Draco, hero that he was, condescended to do so. He undid his bow tie and opened his collar, and there was a gratifying chorus of “Oooh!” at the sight.

“Could the good Professor explain what we’re looking at?” asked Zabini, observing Draco’s neck.

Granger, who had been half-watching over her shoulder, straightened, and got Professory. She stood next to Draco (her heels put her face at a very interesting distance to his, by the way), and began. “Of course. This is developing into a lovely

example of scar contracture. You see here along the sides, the pulling together of the tissues? That's a typical presentation – the edges of the wound contract around the damaged skin and it draws nearby tissues inwards. Malfoy is lucky – this one is small and won't affect his mobility, bigger ones come with those sorts of challenges..."

The rest was lost on Draco, who was presently enjoying some interstellar travel because Granger's fingers kept brushing at his neck.

Theo shook his head at Draco. "You absolute maniac. You're lucky to be alive, much less poncing about, drinking all of my best booze."

Longbottom queried Granger on the characteristics of the venom, Patil on the treatment, Zabini on where one might obtain Nundu venom, for purposes that he couldn't disclose.

Granger's lecture ended and there was general mingling and drink-refilling and eating.

Draco did not bother to do his tie back up. An untied bow tie, a scar, and an open collar gave one a devil-may-care sort of look that he thought quite suited him.

A gathering was beginning to form at the far end of the salon. Draco sauntered over, scotch in hand (Flint had either bullied or seduced Theo into opening a bottle of Laphroaig 25), to see what the fuss was about.

There was an ornate gilded frame on the wall. And within the frame? The splatter of wine from Draco's frothy whinefest a month ago.

Theo had added a small inscription beside the frame:

“The Turbulence of the Soul” 21st century

Mixed media Artist unknown

Theo looked upon it fondly. “Do you like it?”

“There’s an elegance to it,” said Patil, tilting her head to the side.

“Very modern,” said Pansy. “I therefore don’t understand it.”

“What do you make of it, Hermione?” asked Theo.

Granger considered the oeuvre. “It’s very – er – expressionist.”

“Kandinsky, but drunk?” proposed Patil.

“Can you feel the restrained passion?” Theo gripped at his breast.

“The confusion? The frustration?”

“There’s something I like about it,” said Granger. “A kind of – botheration.”

“A kind of self-denial, I think,” said Theo, his fingers on his chin.
“And you, Draco? Thoughts on my newest acquisition?”

Draco glared at Theo, the cheekiest twat who had ever twatted. “I didn’t realise that you were such a patron of the arts.”

“I like to encourage genius when I see it. So many of these young artists don’t know their own potential.”

Theo amused himself for a few minutes more, probing the ladies on their interpretations of the work and their opinions on the artist’s choice of materials (he was given to understand that the paint had been rather expensive, and aged 30 years before application).

An irritated Draco retreated to the safety of Davies, Flint and Quidditch. “What’s got you looking like someone shit in your kettle?” asked Flint. “Help me with this,” said Draco, passing him a bottle.

“Gladly.”

With Flint and Davies' assistance, Draco emptied Theo's cherished bottle of Laphroaig 25, in revenge.

When Theo had exhausted his fount of amusement with the ladies, he called to the room at large: "Shall we dance?"

There was clapping and a chorus of yeses. Wands were raised to clear a space, and music filled the room, and Zabini charmed the chandelier above to spin as Theo dimmed the lights.

The dance did not go as planned in Draco's head.

To begin with, by some twist of fate – or unspoken mutual agreement, he didn't know – he and Granger danced with everyone except each other.

Patil, Audrielle and Pansy each took a spin with Draco. Meanwhile, seeing Granger in Flint's arms made Draco wish to garotte the man with his own bow tie. Seeing her in Zabini's clutches invited thoughts of suffocation with one of the sofa cushions. And Theo – Draco had half a mind to smash his glass into a shiv and stab him.

Longbottom was fine, however.

There was spinning, there was dipping, there was some ill-advised lifting of ladies by half-drunk men, and once of a man (Theo) by a very drunk woman (Pansy), there was laughter.

Then Theo, who seemed far more sober than he was letting on, drew attention to the fact that Draco hadn't even had a proper dance with his saviour, which was unacceptable. To Draco's

annoyance, he and Granger were pushed together, and everyone gathered about and danced with them and around them, and it was not at all the intimate vision that Draco had daydreamed about to excess.

He and Granger held each other stiffly. Granger looked annoyed under her smile. He trod on her foot and she trod on his. They snarled at each other. Draco said that her feet were so small that if he was treading on them, it must be because she was wedging hers under his on purpose. Granger said that if she was treading on his, it was because one couldn't help stepping on Draco's feet if one was in the same room as him, given their surface area.

"And why isn't your tie done up?" asked Granger in a tetchy whisper.

"Because you were using me as a specimen for your demonstration," muttered Draco. "Fix it."

Draco took this insinuation that Granger did not approve of his devil-may-care suave look as a personal affront.

"You fix it," said Draco, equally tetchy. "I don't know how to tie bow ties."

"I'll show you when we've been released from this tyranny. Perhaps you can learn something, for once."

“Me? Learn something? For once?”

The remainder of their dance went on just as harmoniously.

After two or three songs, they were freed from the circle, and able to stand a little apart from the group and sip drinks and pretend not to be aggravated by – well, everything.

Granger bit a samosa as though it had personally wronged her. Draco had a spirited battle with a cocktail shrimp.

“Right,” said Draco, reaching for his tie. “Since you care so much.”

Granger observed him as he demonstrated the knot, with a sort of annoyed focus. “Have you got it?” asked Draco.

“Yes.”

Draco pulled it undone again. “Show me.”

Granger sputtered into her glass. “What? You didn’t tell me there was going to be a test.” “Marked out of ten.”

“A test?” A specific disaster named Theo popped into being next to Draco. “Ooh. Let’s see how you do, Hermione.”

“But I wasn’t watching – I mean, I was watching, but not – anyway, all right, I’ll have a go.” Granger tottered closer and made an attempt. Draco couldn’t even enjoy a bit of it, because two more idiots came by in the form of Zabini and Longbottom.

“What’s going on over here?” asked Zabini.

“She’s tying the knot,” said Theo. “With who?”

“Draco.”

“Ooh.”

“What’s happening?” asked Pansy. “They’re tying the knot,” said Zabini. Patil arrived. “What are we doing?”

“Draco and Hermione are tying the knot,” said Theo. “I am tying a knot, Nott,” said Granger.

Patil looked confused. “A Nott Nott?”

“A bow tie,” said Granger with great patience. That kind of knot. Not Nott.” Flint arrived. “Who’s tying the knot?”

“Hermione is. With Draco.” “I am not,” said Granger. “No, I’m Nott,” said Theo.

Draco informed them that he hated them all.

Granger stepped back and looked cynically at her handiwork. “I’m not quite certain that’s a pass.” Draco examined the bow tie in a nearby mirror. “Six out of ten.”

“How can you be so cruel to Hermione?” asked Theo. “She tried so.”

Granger made a substantial positive contribution to Draco’s mood by saying, “I suppose I’ll have to practise more on him.”

Draco knotted his bow tie to his usual standards and made a note to ensure that Granger was provided with opportunities for self-improvement.

There was a migration from the dance floor to the bar for more drinks. Everyone grew pleasantly sloshed on their tipple of choice. The expensive scotch in Draco’s veins made him relaxed and languorous. Pansy and Longbottom disappeared for a longish time and returned looking only slightly dishevelled. Davies and wife made their exit through the Floo.

At the bar, Theo began to mess about with cocktails. He was swirling his wand over a bowl of something white and frothy. “Right. Which of you wants to try my newest creation?”

Pipsy the house-elf set out crystal champagne flutes, looking excited. She poured a generous measure of rosé champagne into every one.

“What kind of cocktail?” asked Pansy, observing the proceedings.

“I call it champagne di amore,” said Theo. “There’s nothing Italian about it – I just thought it sounded sexy.”

Pansy propped her elbows onto the bar to watch and was joined there by Patil. Granger looked a combination of curious and cynical, and kept her distance.

Theo pulled out a small vial and held it up. “The secret ingredient. Let’s see how well you lot remember your potions.”

He poured the vial into the bowl of white mousse. Steam sizzled upwards in graceful spirals. “That’s Amortentia!” gasped Patil.

“Messing about with controlled substances, are we?” asked Draco. “You’re a cheeky little thing, Theo,” said Flint.

“Mm. Amortentia gives it a certain—” Theo’s mouth squeezed into the pucker of a Brit about to speak French “—Je ne sais quoi. Well below the threshold for an actual dose of Amortentia, of course – just enough to taste positively delicious.”

“We’re microdosing on Amortentia?” asked Granger with a raised eyebrow.

“Only if you’d like to,” said Theo. He added a dollop of the white foam to each champagne flute. “Don’t worry, Doctor – in these minute concentrations, you won’t fall in love with me. It’s merely a flavour enhancer.”

“Foolish of you to assume we aren’t already in love with you,” said Zabini. Theo blew him a kiss.

The row of champagne flutes sparkled pink and white. Theo, his tongue poking out between his teeth as he concentrated, added a curl of some kind of citrus garnish to each. “Voilà!”

“Ooh,” said Pansy, taking hers, and passing the other to Longbottom.

Zabini wiggled his eyebrows and he and Patil took theirs. They touched glasses. Flint downed his in a single swallow. “Mmm. Let’s have another.”

“They’re meant to be savoured, you great lout,” said Theo.

“What? Are we rationing champagne?” asked Flint.

“Why are we rationing champagne?” gasped Pansy. “Is there a war?”

Flint leaned over the bar and said, in a loud whisper, “Make me another and I’ll tell you what mine tasted like.”

Theo grew flustered. Pipsy passed out the remaining flutes of champagne.

Draco’s scotch-induced languor gave way to apprehension mingled with a paralysing fatalism. Apprehension for what was to come, and fatalism because he knew, deep down in his quashed heart of hearts, what was to come.

Pipsy gave Draco his flute of champagne di amore. He stepped away from the bar and concealed himself behind the convenient land mass that was Flint.

He stared at the gently bubbling concoction. Ridiculously, his heart was racing.

He did not need to smell it to discover what was going to greet him. The fatalism grew heavy; the inevitability of it was a slow horror.

He held the delicate flute to his face, feeling the fizz of champagne on the tip of his nose.

He took a breath. And there it was: coffee, brine-filled air, antiseptic. And now there were more complex undercurrents to it – of shampoo, adventure dust, Sauternes. The smell of a candle just burnt.

Granger in a glass.

Fuck.

Draco cleared his throat, glanced about, and tried to look Unconcerned.

Granger was now stepping forwards to take hers from the house-elf. On her face was a look of noble dread, as of a queen walking to the guillotine.

After taking the flute, she held it at waist height, well away from her face, and turned to chat with Patil.

Patil was distracted by a squabble between Flint and Theo. Granger visibly steeled herself. Draco watched as she lifted the glass to her face.

She breathed in and looked stricken – as though some ghastly thing had just been confirmed. She hardly had time to collect herself when Pansy turned to her. “Have you tried yours?”

Granger, tight about the jaw, gave Pansy a restricted sort of smile and took a sip.

“And?” asked Theo.

“Delicious,” said Granger in a strangled voice.

When the group’s focus had moved elsewhere, Granger stared at the flute as though she was pondering spilling its contents onto the floor.

She did not look at Draco.

Longbottom held his champagne under his nose and sighed. “My wife after a shower.” Zabini sniffed his. “I’m getting – mm. Ginger.”

“Emotional stability,” said Patil, inhaling hers with a laugh. “And bergamot.” “Damp grass,” said Pansy.

“A fire in late winter,” mused Theo.

“Leather,” said Flint. “Oooh,” said everyone.

“Sloe gin,” said Granger, but she was lying. “Fresh-picked lavender.”

“Mint. And – crushed basil.”

“Orange peel,” lied Draco. “Masala chai.”

“Nougat.”

Theo topped them up with more champagne and the crowd dispersed. The ladies lingered at the bar. Pipsy snapped her fingers and started a fire in the salon’s fireplace, which the men gathered around. They pulled a few chairs in close for some cosy philosophising.

Draco threw himself upon a chair in an attitude suggestive of careless elegance and manly athleticism, in case Granger looked his way.

They talked of travel. Draco sipped his drink.

“Draco is doing it right,” said Theo with an approving look.

“Doing what right?” asked Draco.

“Savouring.”

It was true; he was. The champagne was bliss in a glass. The Amortentia was so lightly dosed that it felt like memories on his tongue, rather than tastes. It lured feelings out from behind the quashing and made him want to revel in them.

There was a leisurely sort of misery accompanying the bliss. It made him aware that he wanted things. Not just obvious Granger things – but deeper things.

The conversation moved back to travel plans and Draco was left to savour.

He looked at Longbottom and found himself, for the first time in his life, envious of the man. He wanted what this plonker had. He wanted to be wanted. Not for his name or his money or his looks, but for being a decent, occasionally stupid, man. He wanted someone to twirl his hair and do his bow ties. He wanted someone to grasp his hand and pull him onto dance floors, and into bathrooms for quickies, and along the path of life.

It was a yearning, as delicious as it was painful.

He Occluded before he could fall too far into besotted, self-pitying despair. (He didn't need the Carthusians and their devious torments; armed with a glass of Amortentia champagne, he could amply torture himself.)

Talk now turned to Theo's plans for a vineyard.

"Draco hasn't given us his usual grain of salt," said Zabini. "I think it's going to be an utter failure."

“Draco is Preoccupied tonight,” said Flint. “I’m savouring,” said Draco.

“Let him savour,” said Theo, flinging a protective arm across Draco’s chest.

Ideal locations for Theo’s vineyard were batted about; some favoured France, some, Italy, some argued for exotic locales like distant California. Draco released his barrier of Occlusion as his emotional turbulence subsided.

The three witches wandered towards the fire in a tiddly meander, arms hooked into one another’s.

Patil was passing a finger through Granger’s curls. “May I form a parasocial relationship with your hair? It’s got so long.”

“Only if I can with yours,” said Granger, looping Patil’s plait around her palm. “I positively love it.”

“Ladies, join us,” said Zabini.

“Shh,” said Flint, leaning forwards with interest. “Don’t interrupt. I want to see where this goes.”

But it was too late. Granger and Patil disentangled themselves from one another and where it was going would remain a tragic mystery.

Pansy observed the gathered wizards with crossed arms and a cocked hip. “Join you? You’ve pulled up precisely enough chairs for your five shapely arses.”

“I’ll conjure—” began Longbottom.

“No,” said Theo. He gestured towards the laps of the various gentlemen around the fire. “There’s loads of space.”

Pansy strode towards Longbottom with an exaggerated sway in her hips, and collapsed onto him with an ease that spoke of years of familiarity.

The small, jealous barb prickled at Draco’s heart. Patil slipped onto Zabini’s knee.

And Granger? Granger was going for her wand, and was a moment away from conjuring a chair, when Theo called her courage into question by saying, “You mustn’t be afraid of Draco, you know. He is quite domesticated. I’m sure he won’t bite.”

The look that Granger levelled at Theo was combustive in nature.
“Afraid? Of him?”

And then, drunk and bursting with bravado, she strode towards Draco, dropped herself into his lap, and made him hold her champagne while she arranged her skirts.

Granger was in his lap. Granger was in his lap.

Draco wanted to die.

Also, he resolved to kill Theo for the third time that evening. He would ask Zabini for Nundu venom, when he acquired it.

Granger had seated herself across his legs, her bum on his thighs, her feet crossed at the ankles off to the side. This offered Draco an excellent view of her profile, including the side of a breast, clad in clingy black fabric, precisely at eye level. Draco averted his eyes to find something safer to look at. His gaze landed lower, where the slit of her dress exposed her thigh, right there, near his crotch.

Unsafe. He looked at Longbottom’s shoes instead. Granger was – warm. Hot, even.

“Do you bite?” asked Granger.

“On request,” said Draco, with a slow smile.

Nothing wrong with a bit of recreational flirting. His friends would think it odd if he didn’t, really.

It threw her. Draco filed this away as a new method of Bothering Granger, though its exploration seemed fraught with danger for the Botherer as well as the Botheree.

Granger plucked her drink out of Draco’s hand. Theo, satisfied with the arrangements, turned away to continue to be a nuisance elsewhere.

“Does Theo know about your anaesthesia-induced flights of fancy, or was this coincidence?” asked Granger.

“Sheer coincidence – I can assure you I did not share those thoughts with the class.” “Dreams really do come true.”

“In the most unexpected ways,” said Draco, before retreating to safer territory. “Was Henriette a terrible bully?”

“Yes. Very insistent on the black.”

She would be, the meddlesome little scamp.

Draco could smell Granger's shampoo, but he didn't know if it was coming off her, or the flutes of Amortentia champagne fizzling in their hands.

This was fine.

He was not going to get hard just because a woman was on his knee. He was an Adult.

Theo was now insulting Zabini's taste in wine. Patil joined in with glee; apparently, this had been a source of previous argument, and she had an arsenal of witticisms at the ready.

Granger was studying Theo with a perilous sort of glint in her eye. "Turn him into a cockroach," suggested Draco.

"I may."

"What's this about cocks?" asked Flint. "Cockroaches," said Draco.

"Who is talking about cocks?" asked Pansy. "Draco," said Flint.

"Typical," said Pansy.

"Granger is going to turn Theo into a cockroach," said Draco.

"You can do that?" asked Zabini.

"Obviously," said Granger.

Theo raised his glass with a wary look at Granger. “Cheers – just what I wanted: a new phobia.” “Very Kafkaesque,” said Patil. “You’ll have to write a book about your experience.”

“These philistines won’t grasp that reference,” sniffed Theo. “Excuse me; I’ve got to go refill my drink and incidentally flee Hermione’s vicinity.”

“She can do it at range,” called Draco to Theo’s retreating back.

He felt the shake of Granger’s withheld laugh as Theo’s strides accelerated away. The talk turned back to wine. Zabini mounted a fairly sound defence of Vermentino. Granger was on his lap.

Draco tried not to think about it. He gave an opinion on tannins.

He felt warm under the collar. He loosened his bow tie.

From the bar across the room, Theo shouted: “Right! The practise!” Which wasn’t at all what Draco had been going for, but all right.

Granger started. “Oh! I think I’ve already forgotten everything.”

She drew closer to Draco with a tipsy sort of focus. She had done a smoky thing around her eyes that made them even more fally-inny. Draco therefore did not look at her. He admired the ceiling.

He felt a slight tug here and there at his neck as Granger mucked about with his bow tie.

“Wait,” muttered Granger, “that’s – no – wrong way.”

Granger’s fingers were careful around his scar as she undid whatever she had just done. Draco indulged in a brief daydream wherein she continued to undo things, starting with the rest of his buttons, and then, him.

His cock began to take an interest in the proceedings and twitched at him. Brilliant.

Granger stared at the bow tie tangle and sighed. “Bugger. I’ve got no idea where I am.” Draco didn’t either, so that was fine.

Granger hiccoughed, shuffled deeper into his lap, and started over. He waited for his brain to suggest a droll remark, but all it proposed was: glurkk.

Draco was much obliged.

If she shuffled closer and did much more wriggling, he would soon be providing Granger with the Hard Evidence she so craved.

Distantly, he registered words of encouragement from Longbottom to Granger. “Done!” said Granger.

Longbottom inspected it and said it was a proper bow tie, this time. Granger conjured a mirror for Draco to give his judgement. All he really took in was his own reflection, dark-eyed, with a flush of pink across the top of his cheekbones. Also, he had a hair out of place.

“Eight out of ten,” said Draco. “Hold that there for me, darling, I’ve got to fix this.”

Granger was not a darling. She gave him a look that was cutting. He fixed his hair just in time; she transformed the mirror into a concave monstrosity that made him look like the Skrewt.

Zabini sauntered off to find Theo, followed by Patil.

“I suppose I’ve improved, at least,” said Granger, but it was clear that it rankled in her swotty soul that she had not achieved top marks.

“It’s rather fun to teach you something, for a change.”

“There’s loads I’d like you to teach me.”

“Oh?”

“That magic detection spell,” said Granger in a low voice. “The one you used at my cottage.”

Draco said, in an equally low voice, “Only if you teach me that runic command – the one you used on the arrows.”

Granger thought about it, a finger on her lip. Then she came in closer, smelling delicious, and whispered: “Fine. But you’ve got to teach me the geodesic warding spell, in exchange.”

There was nothing titillating about geodesic warding spell, and yet, Draco found himself clenching his jaw to suppress a shiver as the words ran across his ear and went straight to his groin. He was half-hard.

Draco had one final request, so private that he gestured Granger in even closer. One of her curls brushed across his mouth as she leaned in.

“Then you’ve got to teach me The Computer,” said Draco.

Granger gasped. “You extortionist.”

“I know.”

“You’ll have to produce a better bargaining chip; The Computer’s secrets are too powerful.”

“Oh? I’ll have a think about something else to offer.”

Granger ran a hand down her arm. She had goosebumps.

Which was wickedly satisfying, but also, potentially, A Problem.

These paedagogical matters having been negotiated and settled, each took a sip of their champagne.

Draco glanced about and was pleased to discover that no one was paying attention to them. Flint was explaining to Longbottom that he was banned from Fortescue’s. Draco hadn’t caught the rest of the tale, which might ordinarily have interested him, but these were not ordinary times. Pansy was dozing on Longbottom’s shoulder.

Flint muttered that he was desperate for a slash and rose. Longbottom carried Pansy to one of the sofas.

Granger swirled the remainder of her champagne and watched the pink liquid fizz. “Orange peel,” she said, looking pensive. “What about it?” asked Draco.

“What happened to your toffee and coffee?” “What happened to your expensive cologne?”

“You were lying.”

“So were you.”

“Why?”

“Why were you?”

“I suppose it’s – quite private.”

“Yes.”

Granger, swaying a little in Draco’s lap, downed the rest of her champagne. She swallowed. A drop lingered on her lip, which she wiped away with the tip of a finger.

Glurkk.

Draco looked away until it was safe, and then back again.

Now her face was close to his. Her gaze was soft, tipsy, dreamy.

“I hate that this tastes so good,” said Granger. She looked devastated by it. Sexily devastated. She pressed her fingertip between her lips.

Draco finished his own champagne to distract himself. Granger’s gaze flitted to his mouth and back up again.

“I positively loathe mine. If that is – any comfort,” said Draco.

“Strangely, it is.”

Draco shifted under the pretence of – getting more comfortable, or something. Granger slid in closer as a result.

He could feel the swell of her breast against his chest. The mass of her hair was trapped between them and tickled at his neck.

And there was the Granger gravitational force – the falling-towards, the drawing-in. Her mouth was two inches from his. Her eyes were warm. He could slip a hand behind her neck and – gods, from the way she was leaning, he wouldn't even have to pull her in, she would just fall into him, and it would be – it would be –

Granger blinked and breathed out and drew back. It would be a bad idea. Yes.

“I have had too much to drink and am not thinking clearly,” said Granger, but it sounded like she was declaring it to herself, rather than to Draco.

“I have never thought less clearly in my life,” said Draco.

Granger sat up straighter. The warmth in her eyes was extinguished. She was Occluding.

Draco followed suit. It was probably the right thing to do. Righter than a full on snog in the middle of Theo's party, anyway.

They looked about to find that they were alone. All of the chairs were empty. Granger had been sitting on his lap under the weakest of pretences, but now, there was absolutely no reason for it.

There were voices from the Floo hearth just outside the salon. People were getting ready to leave.

With a sudden panicky vigour, Granger sprung off of Draco's lap. She strode to the bar, where she asked Pipsy for an ice water, which she promptly downed. Then she dropped the glass onto the bar and, stiff-backed, stared at nothing. Pipsy asked if everything was all right, Miss? Granger, in a tight voice, said that everything was fine.

Draco waited for long enough to ensure the dissipation of any hard evidence and then walked to the group at the Floo. The Occlusion helped with the general air of insouciance he wished to convey as he joined in with the goodbyes.

Granger joined them, looking relatively composed, and also gave her thanks and farewells. Longbottom, carrying Pansy,

disappeared into the Floo, followed by Zabini and Patil, then Flint.

Draco lured Theo back into the salon under some pretext, so that Granger could Floo to the Manor without being heard.

“You were less of a miserable bastard than usual tonight,” said Theo. “You’re a meddlesome little twat,” said Draco.

“I’m glad you had a good time.”

“I hated every moment.”

Theo grinned. “Fuck off home, Draco.”

Draco gave him a wave and strode to the Floo.

He hoped that Granger hadn’t run off straight to bed during his chat with Theo. They had unfinished business.

He was going to get his bloody dance.

~

Draco stepped out of the Floo to find Henriette assisting Granger with a delicate dusting off of her gown.

Henriette cleaned Draco off, too, then bid them both goodnight, an annoying sort of twinkle in her eye.

“Right,” said Draco, straightening his bow tie. “Good that you’re still here.” Granger looked guarded. “Why...?”

Draco took her arm and strode out of the Floo parlour. “Where are we—” gasped Granger.

“The ballroom.”

“But wh—”

“I want a proper dance.”

“But we—”

“No. That was rubbish.”

Granger mounted no further objections but allowed her drunken self to be pulled along, looking politely confused.

Draco pushed open the ballroom’s enormous double doors. The elves kept every room in the Manor ready for use at a moment’s notice and the regal ballroom was no exception. In the penumbra, the white marble floor shone and the multitude of mirrors that covered the walls sparkled. At the south end, floor to ceiling windows stretched upwards until they disappeared into shadow.

Draco waved his wand at the vaulted ceilings. Eight enormous crystal chandeliers glowed into life, lowered, and began a slow rotation across the ceiling. Their lights reflected brilliantly off the glossy marble and the mirrors.

Another wand-wave and the sounds of an orchestra resonated through the ballroom.

Granger gasped in that delighted, breathy, lips-parted-just-so way of hers, that gave Draco so much pleasure.

He felt a grin make its way onto his face. “It is quite splendid, isn’t it?”

“It is!”

Draco took one of Granger’s hands in his, put the other at her waist, and began to lead her through a waltz before she could get Grangery and pose too many questions, such as whether he had gone mad.

They danced a few cautious steps. He glanced at her to see whether she was planning on bolting from the lunatic – but she was following his lead, looking wary, but curious. She had looked at him this way once before, when he had charmed an

entire cohort of Muggle doctors at that Oxford pub. It was pleasant surprise and who the bloody hell are you, all in one.

As it had been in Provence, her waist was warm under his palm. Her hand in his was gentle. She was light as they moved, and, this time, there was no treading on one another's feet.

Draco watched their dance in the mirrors – how her figure nestled so snugly against his, how her gown whisked in time with their movements, brushing at his legs when they turned. He indulged unrepentantly in this kaleidoscope of angles through which to delight in her. If he looked ahead, it was the dip between her bare shoulder blades in the mirror there, to the left, it was the curve of her backside, if he looked down, it was dark eyelashes, flushed cheeks, and pink lips.

She came in closer as they turned, and pressed against him, and it felt gorgeous. He didn't let her pull away again; his hand slipped to her lower back and kept her there. She looked up at him in dark wonder, then looked down, her lip between her teeth.

The music swelled. Around them the ballroom spun, the stars in the windows glowed, the chandeliers danced their own soft-tinkling dance and scattered splendor through the room.

It was a moment of enchantment, of harmony, of gleaming reverie. Their eyes were filled with lights and their ears with the crescendo of violins and their hearts with each other.

This – this was what he had wanted.

He raised his arm and she spun away from him, and they were joined only at the fingers, and then she twirled back into him, so close that he felt her take her next breath.

The light was in his veins again – the Mabon sun, incandescent, glorious, swelling about his heart and squeezing the very air out of him.

Again she spun away, and this time came in with her back to him, pressed against his chest, her bum against his groin. Their eyes locked in one of the mirrors, but it was too intense to sustain and they looked away again.

Now it was his turn to partake in some ill-advised lifting, which he did, with his hands around her waist, sweeping her up and into the air. He spun her while she was aloft, taking pleasure in her gasp, in her grip on his shoulders. She flew above him with a squeal of surprised laughter.

When he brought her down, she clung to him, laughing, the brightness of real joy in her eyes. He felt a matching joy whose like he had never felt before. The lightness in him was sublime.

Her arms were around his neck. She was so close to him that he wanted to explode.

The feeling was rare – precious – heart-rending. She was radiant. She took his breath away. She was everything he wanted.

The lights dimmed. The music quieted.

They stopped moving and stood in this lover's embrace, breathing, dark-eyed, high on one another, waiting.

“Granger, I—” She looked up.

He said nothing more. He was falling.

He didn't need the ring to tell him that her heart was racing. He could feel the pulse of it against his chest. His thudded a matching beat, too fast, so fast it hurt.

He was drunk on endorphins and too much good booze and too little good sense. Her lips were parted. She was looking at him like she could kiss him. It was – impossible. It couldn't happen.

Now her fingers were on his jaw.

He bent towards her; the pull was too sweet. Her kiss was a soft question.

His answer was to squeeze her up and into him. She gasped against his lips as he kissed her back. Finally. Fucking finally.

Their mouths met with the press of yearning, of too much champagne, of I hate that this tastes so good.

Only now it wasn't Amortentia that he tasted; it wasn't those fragrant, fabricated whiffs – it was her. It was real. And the champagne was a poor imitation, now that he had the real thing against him, breathing staccato breaths against his mouth, winding fingers into his shirt. The Amortentia didn't speak of the softness of her lips, of quivering, of fingers hooked into his collar, of a witch delicious, flush-cheeked, unsteady, pressing her smiling mouth to his.

She shook slightly, as did he, with a euphoric mess of adrenaline and nerves and restraint.

She pulled away and pressed her face into his neck. The intimacy of it sent his heart into a fresh frenzy. His arms wrapped around her. She was fine-boned and delicate and trembling deliciously.

“I’m still not thinking clearly,” she said, her voice low and dusky, her words brushing across his scar.

“Shall we – shall we say it’s the drink?” asked Draco in a half-whisper. “Yes,” breathed Granger with relief. “Let’s. We had – a lot.”

“And that’s certainly to blame for any – any unwise behaviours.” There was the golden sound of her laughter. “Obviously.” They looked at each other.

He thought he could die happy if her lips wet his again.

And then they did.

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Chapter 28

The Viking, Shameful Conduct of / Healing, Pleasures of

The dance, the lights, the music, the woman in his arms – it was a moment of scintillating joy that would become one of Draco's fondest memories and produce astoundingly powerful Patronuses for years to come.

They broke apart with a breathy, clinging regret. Granger pulled away first, then Draco kissed her again; he felt the imminent knell of reality and wanted just one more.

Then he tried to pull back, but she rose to the tips of her toes and pressed her mouth to the edge of his jaw. His hand slipped to the nape of her neck, rose petals brushed against his knuckles, she sighed against his cheek.

The dream of the moment began to fade. Draco ran his fingers down her side to memorise the feel of her and kissed her one last

time to seal away the memory of her sweet mouth.

They stared at each other, wet lipped, bewildered, their drunken faculties finally catching up to what they had done.

Reality was cold and unyielding and it hit hard. Draco's brain, which had been, by all accounts, absent all evening, returned. It asked, with violence, what the fuck he thought he was doing? An Auror did not snog his Principal.

Granger looked equally confounded. She took a step back. There was self-reproach, regret, and dread in the movement.

They regarded each other with mounting alarm and a desperation to assert that it had been nothing at all.

Granger, stricken, found her tongue first. "We shouldn't have done that."

"No – we shouldn't have," said Draco, hating how breathless he sounded.

Granger looked at the floor, at the mirrors, at anywhere but him. "I know that we're not – erm – I know that – obviously, you know—"

"Yes, obviously—"

“And also – we aren’t”

“Yes.”

“We have a working relationship,” said Granger. “And there are strict rules about this sort of thing. For very good reasons.”

“There are. Yes. Rules. And a Code of Conduct that is unequivocal on – on things of this nature.” “Right. Of course.”

“It was a lapse in judgement,” said Draco.

“Yes. We were both – both under the influence. It won’t happen again. I wouldn’t want to contravene anything and jeopardise – this. You as my Auror and – and everything.”

“Right.”

“Right,” repeated Granger.

Draco attempted to find his insouciance. “It was the drinks. Just the drinks.”

“Obviously, yes. Nothing more.”

“Nothing more,” repeated Draco. “Good,” said Granger.

“Shall we – go to bed?” asked Draco. “Yes.”

“I mean separately, of course. Go to – beds. Plural. I mean we can leave together but go to separate beds.”

“Right,” said Granger, nodding vigorously in the face of this critical clarification. “Yes.”

“Because we would never go to the same bed, obviously—”

“Of course not.”

“—That would be mad.”

“Yes.”

“We aren’t mad.”

“No. We are – perfectly sane.”

Having established their vexing soundness of mind, they turned to the door.

The things that had drawn them together were still at it; they brushed elbows, then leapt away from each other as though burnt, with more apologising.

Leaving the ballroom was an awkward jig of who would open the door and who would go first, without touching the other.

Draco walked Granger to the grand staircase but did not follow her up. “Aren’t you—?” asked Granger.

“No,” said Draco. “Upon reflection, I’ve decided to throw myself into the lake.”

Granger looked as though this was truly an excellent next step.
“I’m going to go scream into a pillow.”

“Good. Brilliant. Er – do enjoy.”

“Thank you.”

Granger hurried up the stairs without looking behind her. Draco waited until he heard her door close.

Then he said, quietly, but with all of the turbulence in his soul:
“Fuck.”

~

The full moon was imminent.

The Ministry of Magic, attempting to balance public safety with public hysteria, published an advisory asking the wizarding community to stay indoors during the three nights of the hunter’s moon, due to suspected werewolf activity.

Potter, the WTF, and every available Auror spent the hunter’s moon on the hunt themselves, and caught thirty werewolves who

had positioned themselves to transform where they could infect the most people. Seven werewolves were not caught on time, fifteen people were infected, five succumbed to their injuries.

Granger's work took on a new urgency. Draco's Legilimency had never been so in demand. But Fenrir Greyback was careful. There was nothing of use in the minds of the captives.

The traps at the safe-houses and Granger's cottage yielded four captures: one witch, three wizards, all working under Greyback's orders, and all infuriatingly unaware of his whereabouts.

Security at King's Hall was tightened. Bemused scholars and students found themselves made to present credentials at the entrance, now guarded by DMLE operatives. Access to the third floor, which housed Granger's laboratory, was blocked off. The other Fellows were relocated elsewhere. Granger briefed her laboratory staff on the threat and gave them the option to discontinue their work, with pay, until the situation was resolved. None took it.

Days passed in a tense, anxious blur. When he wasn't with Granger, Draco's attention was obsessively on the ring, waiting to feel the panicked rise of her heart or the shrill call of her distress beacon.

So, of course, at the next incident, he felt neither.

It was Goggin's burly ram Patronus who alerted him that there was a problem.

Draco had been interrogating a werewolf caught at Granger's cottage when the silvery ram bounded into the holding cell.

"King's Hall," it grunted in Goggin's voice. "Quickly!"

Draco Apparated to Cambridge to find panicky wizards and Muggles running about along Trinity's quad. He fought his way to the entrance of King's Hall, where Goggin lay, sliced open from the sternum downwards, bleeding out.

Beside him were the limp figures of the DMLE operatives who had been on guard and the bodies of five unknown wizards. Further on, a scattered pile of books. No sign of Granger.

Feeling a horrid, inverted sense of déjà-vu, Draco sent three Borzoi streaking to the Auror Office and the Mediwitch Service.

He Disillusioned himself and Apparated to the ring. Why the fuck hadn't she activated the distress beacon? What had they done to her?

He cracked into existence in near darkness, in the living room of a boarded-up house. The silhouettes of a half-dozen men jumped in surprise as the crack of his Apparition gave his arrival away.

He couldn't see Granger and therefore dared not plough through them with something explosive. He managed to Petrify three of them as he gathered his bearings, deflected two curses – then he was in the crossfire of too many spells to deflect, and was hit by a Finite Incantatem, something concussive at his knee, and a Stupefy.

The Stunner was a glancing blow, striking him in the shoulder. His wand fell out of his nerveless hand.

Draco, seeing his wand clatter away to his opponents' feet, feigned a collapse, as though the Stunner had hit true.

There were four men left. From where he now lay on the floor, Draco could see Granger, slumped against a cracked wall. She, too, looked Stunned. No obvious bleeding. It was a minor relief.

Draco's wand was picked up by the largest figure amongst the men, who now held three – Draco's, Granger's, and his own.

“Is that a bloody Auror? How the fuck is this arsehole here?” asked one of the men. He shone a Lumos at the insignia on Draco’s cloak.

“This one must have a tracker on her,” said another in a nasally whinge, kicking at Granger. He cast a basic revelation spell, too rudimentary to reveal the ring. “Let’s strip her.”

He pulled Granger off the floor with unnecessary violence, snapping her lolling head backwards. He began to tear at the front of her jumper and stuffed one hand under it to undo her jeans.

He was going to die today.

“I will search her,” said the biggest figure.

That slightly accented rumble. The red-blond glint of the beard. It was Larsen.

“You always do the fun bits,” said the nasally one, his groping hand at Granger’s fly. “I want to have a go—”

Larsen grabbed the man by the back of the neck. “Moore. I said I will do it.”

“Get your fucking hands off me,” said Moore, dropping Granger to squirm against Larsen’s grip.

They had a scuffle. Draco watched and waited for a moment when one of the men would stumble too close to him and he could steal a wand.

One of the other kidnappers attempted peacekeeping, shoving his way between the two of them. “Oi oi oi. Could you two stop fucking about? Who knows how many other Aurors are on their way?

“Aye,” said the lanky fourth man. “Let’s get what we need from her and go.”

Moore took advantage of the distraction to land a blow to Larsen’s face. “Let me go, you fucking—”

Larsen did not react well to the hit. He backhanded Moore into a wall. Moore pushed himself off it and launched himself at Larsen with a rageful yell. The other two tried to intervene, wands up, threatening to Stun both combatants.

Draco waited for his opening – he would only have one. They were closer to Granger than to him, now, and too far for him to

seize one of the wands from Larsen's fist.

The failed Stunner was wearing off of Draco's arm. He slid his hand to his thigh holster, where his favourite knife was strapped.

A smattering of an elevated heart rate came through the ring – and then a flutter of fear. Granger was waking up.

As her abductors grappled with each other, one of her hands shifted towards her pocket. She kept her head hanging as though she was still unconscious.

Now, amongst the stomping boots of the arguing men, Draco could see something shining in her palm. It was a stack of her anti-magic pucks.

Oh. Oh.

Granger was about to even out the playing field. Draco waited.

With snaps of her wrist, Granger sent pucks skidding into the corners of the room, under rotted furniture and into dark nooks.

One of the men noticed the movement. “What the fuck did she just do?”

“What d’you mean?”

“I just saw her – I dunno – twitch – I think she threw something.”

They crowded around Granger.

Larsen snatched her by the chin and pressed his wand to her temple. “Legilimens!”

But it was too late. Draco had felt the change the moment the perimeter was complete – there was a kind of extinguishing, deep within him. A sudden lack.

There would be no Legilimency in this room. “The fuck is happening?” asked Moore.

The lanky one pressed his hand against his chest, as though the breath had been stolen from him. “What the—?”

Draco did not give them time to work it out.

He sprang to his feet, took three strides towards the group, and plunged his knife into the side of the first available neck.

Then, being happily unencumbered by a sense of honour, he stabbed the next man in the back. The lanky one and the peacekeeper were down.

Larsen and Moore whipped around and backed against the wall, wands raised. “Expulsis visceribus!” spat Larsen, slicing his wand towards Draco. “Confrigo!” shouted Moore, jabbing his towards him, too. “Crucio!”

Nothing happened.

Looking bewildered, Larsen switched to Draco's wand – “Decapio!” – then to Granger's – “Stupefy!” – to no effect.

“What the fuck is wrong–” said Moore, pointing his useless wand at Draco.

Draco plucked the wand from Moore's hand, as he was conveniently offering it to him. He plunged it into Moore's eye to the hilt.

There was some spurting of vitreous gel. Moore pitched forwards with a strangled scream. Draco stepped onto the back of his head and did not remove his weight until he felt the tip of the wand pierce the man's skull and press against the bottom of his boot.

That was for Granger.

He stepped over him and turned to Larsen. He and the Viking sized each other up.

The biggest man that Draco had sparred with was Goggin. This man made Goggin look like a pubescent boy. Draco was wise enough to know that he was physically outmatched. In any other situation, he would have retreated. The right move here was to

flee, if only for long enough to call for reinforcements. The logical move. The obvious move.

But he would not be fleeing. He would leave Granger alone with this man over his literal dead body.

That was the problem with Somethings between Aurors and their Principals. Draco had a knife. Larsen had all of the advantages of superior height and weight. This was going to be interesting.

Larsen blinked at Draco in the penumbra. “The pilot...?” Right. Driessen’s memories.

“Do not fight me,” said Larsen, raising his hands. “I will let you go. I only need her. She is not worth what I am going to do to you.”

“She is definitely worth what I’m going to do to you.”

Larsen dropped the useless wands and rushed in. They began a dangerous dance, with Draco doing his best to avoid being grappled, while Larsen wanted nothing more than to bring him into close quarters and beat him out with superior mass.

Draco positioned himself between Larsen and Granger, who was huddled into a corner, her heart racing through the ring.

Larsen came in too close. Draco sliced a pretty line across his face. A punch intended for Draco's throat hit him in the chest. He felt something crack.

He lashed out with the knife. Larsen ducked away at the last moment and lost an ear instead of his life.

They separated. Draco found it difficult to catch his breath – something was not sitting correctly in his ribcage. Larsen touched at the side of his head and looked at his bloody hand in wonder. The flap of flesh that had been his ear was on the floor.

They stared at each other. Draco sorely missed his Legilimency.

Larsen snarled and launched himself at Draco again. Draco landed a kick at his solar plexus that should have put him on his knees.

It did not. It slowed him for a moment, then he switched tactics, focusing on seizing the knife from Draco's hand. Draco saw an opening for a clean hook and seized it, his fist smashing into the man's eye. He felt the precise outline of Larsen's eye socket against his knuckles, felt a kind of grinding.

That punch would've thrown any other man on his arse, but not the Viking. He shook it off and lunged again for the knife. Draco welcomed his groping hand with the point of the knife and pushed it through his palm.

Larsen snatched his hand away and swung in with an uppercut with the other, only partially dodged by Draco.

It clipped Draco on the jaw. He saw stars.

If Larsen landed a single solid punch, this fight was over. The Viking was a beast.

They broke apart. Larsen held his punctured palm to the side. Draco shook his head to knock his brain back into place. Black spots swam in his vision.

Hand to hand combat was exhausting. After these long sixty seconds of fighting, Larsen should've been like Draco, panting, shaking with exertion. He was hardly winded.

They came together again. Draco crunched a fist into Larsen's mouth. The Viking was thrown off course and spun away.

Now he was angry. He spat out teeth. He lunged – outrageously quickly, for such a large man – and managed to kick the knife out of Draco's hand.

They both dove for it.

Draco realised, as Larsen wrestled him into the ground, that the man hadn't wanted the knife. He had wanted Draco within reach of his monstrous bulk.

Draco was pinned. Larsen was on him, a hand at his neck, pressing every pound of his hideous weight into it.

Draco's vision began to swim. Larsen raised his fist.

Draco was dead.

In a kind of slow motion, he saw a small hand appear beside Larsen's thigh. In the small hand glinted a scalpel.

Larsen's fist began its downward trajectory. Time slowed to a crawl. With loving precision, the scalpel was pressed deep into the upper part of Larsen's thigh and dragged down the length of his femoral artery.

The descending fist paused. Larsen's trousers split along the cut. There was a gorgeous gush of blood.

Time accelerated again. Larsen turned with a snarl and knocked Granger to the floor. She tumbled away.

The damage was done. Larsen staggered to his feet – a mistake. The long wound disgorged what looked like a pint of blood.

Draco's vision cleared. Granger was on her knees, two of the wands clutched to her chest. She was reaching for the third.

Larsen kicked her away and snatched up the remaining wand. Then he took her by the arm and heaved her up. Draco's heart stopped – she looked so fragile, so breakable as she dangled before finding her feet.

The Viking staggered for the door, bleeding profusely, dragging Granger along, evidently planning on making an escape.

Draco disagreed with Larsen's plan, which he indicated by throwing himself towards him, knife in hand, and severing his stupidly thick Achilles tendons, first his left, then his right.

Granger pulled her arm from Larsen's grip as the man fell to his knees.

The Viking looked over his shoulder, at the knife and the scalpel, and at the long smear of his own blood, red-black on the grimy floor.

He half crawled, half fell out of the door. He did not know it, but it put him just outside of Granger's perimeter.

Draco, still on his hands and knees, threw the knife.

Clutching at his wand with his bloodied hand, Larsen opened his mouth to Disapparate.

The knife hit him in the shoulder. He grunted, raised the wand again weakly – and then his jaw went slack. He – finally – fell unconscious, in a pool of his blood.

Draco and Granger both scrambled to their feet and joined him outside the perimeter. Draco pulled Larsen's wand out of his hand; Granger passed him his own.

"He mustn't die," cried Granger, kneeling next to Larsen, Healing spells aglow at the tip of her wand. "I need to know why."

Draco flung cuffs on the man and tightened them without mercy.

They sent a small menagerie of Patronuses out, summoning mediwitches, Potter and Weasley, whoever was at Auror HQ, and Tonks.

While Granger stabilised the man, Draco snatched him by the beard and snapped his head back, swiped his wand at him to open his eyes, and spat, “Legilimens.”

In his half-dead state, the Viking’s Occlumency softened. Draco gasped out his findings to Granger as he went.

“Right – what does this arsehole want from you – two things – first he wanted to scour your brain for information on anyone else who might be working on magical immunotherapy, or even Muggles who might be able to help magical researchers. And secondly –”

Draco encountered a denser Occlusive barrier. He struggled against it, then decided to take a shortcut by squeezing at Larsen’s throat until it faded away. “Secondly, when he heard that you were developing a treatment for lycanthropy, he – first he didn’t believe it – it was impossible – and then he wanted to understand how you’d isolated the virus to target it in the first place – he hasn’t been able to isolate it, himself –”

“How did he hear about it?” asked Granger. “And why is he trying to isolate it?”

“Give us a minute,” said Draco, working through disjointed threads of memories to find answers. “He wanted to gain enough of your trust to meet you somewhere alone to read you and understand how you’d done it. You were too careful – too guarded, so he – offered to work with you so he could get in behind the scenes. He felt me read him in the café – didn’t want a confrontation – decided to prune off other researchers before coming back to you. Discovered that your protection measures had been ramped up – has been watching King’s Hall for weeks – gathered today’s group to kidnap you – was going to use Legilimency to learn how you’d isolated the virus, or torture it out of you – and then – fucking arsehole – then kill you.”

“But why?”

“I’m getting there.” Draco plunged deeper into Larsen’s mind, where involuntary Occlusion lingered the thickest, in spite of the man’s near-unconsciousness. “He wants to kill anyone working in this field because he – doesn’t want a cure. For lycanthropy.”

He shattered another barrier, in the deepest part of Larsen's brain, where all of his most precious secrets were kept. "Bloody hell, he's a – he's a fucking werewolf. Fuck! He's working with Greyback – Greyback told him about you."

"What?!"

"He needs to understand how you targeted the virus because – they are trying to develop – some kind of countermeasure to you – Larsen's lab is trying to produce – a strain of lycanthropy that can be used to infect others at any time, not only at the full moon. That's why he needed to understand how you'd done it. They're – they're trying to weaponise it."

Draco pulled out of Larsen's mind. He and Granger stared at one another.

The cracks of Apparitions resonated around them. "I don't think so," came the voice of Tonks.

One of the Petrified men, still half-paralyzed, was dragging himself out of the house, one hand clutching his wand. Tonks' combat boot crushed his fist into the floor.

"Get her out of here," said Tonks.

Granger insisted upon collecting her pucks. Then, arm in bloody arm, they Apparated to the Manor.

~

At the Manor, Draco and Granger wiped the blood from their faces and held a summit meeting with Tonks, Shacklebolt, Potter, and Weasley. There was much hugging of Granger and clapping of Draco's shoulders (he dodged the hugs).

After the expected expostulating and fussing, the six of them settled in around a pot of opium to debrief on the incident.

Larsen and Greyback's plans were a shock to all. There was Greyback's usual vindictive form of madness, then there was this – a concerted effort to spread a cruel disease on a massive scale and kill any of the researchers remotely able to work out a cure. It was well beyond the scope of what any of them had thought him capable of.

"Buy me time until December," said Granger, pale-faced.

Draco learned that Granger had been Stunned immediately upon exiting King's Hall, which explained why he hadn't had the slightest hint from the ring on her predicament. Goggin and the DMLE operatives had taken five men down before they were overwhelmed by their opponents' numbers. Goggin was at St. Mungo's, recovering from the same nasty evisceration curse that Larsen had attempted on Draco.

In attacking Granger as she left King's Hall, her kidnappers had made use of her only real vulnerability – the sole moment when she wasn't surrounded by wards, stepping out of the Hall to Disapparate. Shacklebolt said that he would have a word with Magical Transport to have a Floo hearth installed in Granger's laboratory, so that she would never have to leave King's Hall's protective walls again.

Greyback was playing an entirely new game, now. Under the weight of Shacklebolt and Tonks' wild-eyed stares, Granger agreed, with obvious pain, to drop her shifts at St. Mungo's A&E. If Larsen had been bold enough for a daytime kidnapping at Trinity, there was now a real possibility that Greyback would be bold enough to stage something at A&E.

Tonks said she would advise the Danish Auror Office of Larsen's attack, laboratory, and repugnant plans. She, Potter, and Weasley

left to pump Larsen full of Veritaserum and extract whatever information he might have on Greyback's most recent location.

Draco rose to join them, but Tonks categorically forbade it, snapped at him to sit down, and told him not to be a martyr – he'd bloody well done enough for one day.

“If you’re going anywhere, it’ll be St. Mungo’s,” she said, eyeing Draco’s various injuries. “I’ll take care of him,” said Granger. The summit meeting dissolved.

~

Draco and Granger showered and reconvened in one of the smaller salons, both a bit worse for the wear. Draco was limping (“That colossal fucker was so heavy, I think I’ve ruptured a bollock”).

Henriette and Tupey hovered anxiously, offering tea, more opium, and chocolate, until they were gently shooed out.

Granger and Draco took stock of their injuries. Mostly contusions for Granger, where she’d been thrown about and grabbed at and kicked. Wrists, arms, jaw.

The sight of the marks made Draco vacillate at the edge of a sudden descent into rage.

Something of it must have shown in his face. Granger gave him a kind of disconcerted look and healed herself with a few quick

passes of her wand.

The contusions were gone. The rage remained. Draco bound it up tightly and tucked it away.

Now he found himself surrounded by the green glow of diagnostic spells as Granger began to examine him.

He looked about at the pictographs teeming with cryptic meanings. “You’re a useful witch to have around,” said Draco.

“You’re a decent sort of wizard yourself,” said Granger. “Thank you. For today. Again.” “Absolutely brilliant move, pulling those pucks of yours out.”

“Exceptionally glad you had a knife. Was going to throw you the scalpel.”

Granger fell quiet for a bit as she studied the diagnostics. Then she said, “I’m not very fond of being a damsel in distress.”

“You aren’t very good at it, either. I’ve never seen one open a femoral artery with such sublime exactitude.”

“He was beautifully positioned for it.”

There was a silence. Her hands were steady as she flicked her way through a few more diagnostic spells.

“You’re feeling all right?” asked Draco. “About what? Slicing a man open?” “Yes. And – everything.”

“At the moment, I am more angry than anything else. The opium is palliating the rest. You?” “Fine. Eager for revenge. Plotting Larsen’s accidental death when I interrogate him. Fantasising about Greyback’s violent murder at my hands. You know. Fine.”

Granger gave him a sidelong look. “Doesn’t fantasising about murder weaken one’s moral fibre?” “I haven’t a single moral fibre to speak of.”

“Haven’t you?”

“No. I gave them all to the orphans.”

Granger paused. She turned away, laughed into her hands, then breathed and faced him again. “Stop being silly. We have work to do.”

No. He would not stop being silly. He liked to see her laugh. It gave him a fluttery feeling. Also, that post-adrenaline randiness

was awakening, and the Granger-induced fluttery feeling kept wanting to descend to his groin.

Steady on, old boy.

Granger, happily unaware of Draco and his fluttering crotch, dismissed a few of the schemata and made an inventory of his ailments.

These consisted of a black eye, two broken ribs, a sprained knee (the bad one – of course), and a fractured jaw.

She was pleased to inform Draco that he hadn't ruptured a bollock.

She went off to wash her hands. Then she came back and got Healery – serious and focused, with a certain authority in her bearing. "Right. Let's get you properly fixed up. We'll begin with those ribs. Take off your shirt."

Draco tried not to look too delighted at the opportunity.

He was instructed to lie down on the sofa, which he did, happily. He put his hands behind his head (because it was comfortable, but also because it made his pecs pop, as a bonus for Granger).

(Also, he had a rippling six pack. She was free to notice that, too.)

Granger was less interested in revelling over the Apollonian perfection before her than in muttering about Lars the Arse between incantations. Draco felt the pressure of her wand at his side and his cracked ribs became whole again, one after the other, with a muffled snap.

Granger passed him his shirt.

Her professionalism and efficiency were, frankly, abominable.

Draco put his shirt back on because Granger, dangling it between two fingers, was now wiggling it at him impatiently.

Next was his injured knee. Draco offered to take off his trousers.
No, said Granger, he could just roll up his trouser leg.

Beastly.

Draco rolled up his trouser leg. She healed his knee. Next was his black eye, which took all of a moment.

Draco cogitated. Perhaps he ought to have allowed himself to be beaten to a pulp to give Granger more trouble and more reasons to strip him down.

In a further foray into madness, he thought that perhaps he should have ruptured a bollock. Finally, Granger came to his fractured jaw.

A glowing rendition of Draco's skull floated in the air between them. It was very handsome and shapely, with cheekbones quite as nice as the Magdalene's.

Along the mandible, a crack glowed in red. Granger took in a little breath.

"It's bigger than I thought," said Granger. "I'll be gentle," said Draco.

Granger laughed, then regained control of herself and gave him a look that was deeply unimpressed.

After studying the schema from several angles, she said that she wanted to be particularly careful healing this one, to make sure it was realigned properly and didn't affect his bite.

Good. Finally. Be careful. Be slow. Be close.

Granger cleared off one of the side tables for Draco to sit upon.

“Pretty,” she commented as she moved an ornate hourglass out of the way. “Do you think so? It’s my great great Uncle Snodsbury.”

“I’m sorry?”

Draco flipped over the hourglass to demonstrate. “He wanted to be cremated and still be of use.” “...Charming.”

Draco sat on the side table. Granger stood between his knees and took his face in her hands. This was good, thought Draco as he looked up at her. Very good.

Granger said that she knew it was going to be horribly difficult, but she needed Draco to keep his mouth closed for an entire six minutes.

This was fine by Draco. He was going to luxuriate, instead.

Granger enlarged the diagnostic image and got to work with wand movements slow and precise. Both her fingers and her wand were warm on his jaw. Draco closed his eyes and sighed, as though he were only sighing and not, you know, breathing in Granger just out of the shower. Soap, squeaky clean skin. What a pity that he couldn’t lean forwards and press his face between her breasts and inhale.

Draco's conscience twinkled irritatingly into existence to point out that Granger had just undergone a traumatic kidnapping and was now healing him, and all he could think of was her tits? He was beastly. He was a disgrace.

Draco weighed the allurements of Granger against the burden of good behaviour.

He decided that he was indeed beastly, and a disgrace, and fuck good behaviour, he would think about tits all he liked.

Granger shifted her weight from one foot to the other. He felt a brush of movement on the inside of his knee.

A slow-moving pleasure flowed through him.

She drew her wand tip along his jaw in deliberate lines, muttering an incantation that made things feel tighter throughout his mandible.

Also, things were feeling tighter in his trousers.

He should probably do something about that. Think about maths, or something.

Granger cast another imaging spell. “Sorry it’s so slow. I’m going to great lengths to prevent any dental misalignment.”

Draco made a “Mm” of understanding in the back of his throat. He, too, was going to great lengths.

An Auror did not shag his Principal. He was being hideously inappropriate. He needed to calm down.

Hearing Granger mutter incantations near his ear was – stirring. Her mouth pressed into a concentrated moue, right there, was terribly enticing. The push of her wand angled under his jaw triggered some fantastically arousing hormonal combination of threat and sexy. Her focused, serious gaze gave him a thrill right down to his balls.

Everything was sexy. These were six of the sexiest minutes of Draco’s life. He wanted to snatch her up and—

“Stop smirking,” snapped Granger. Oops.

“If this heals crooked, half of your teeth will only chew empty air,” scolded Granger. “I don’t think you’d fancy a liquid diet.”

Draco would have suggested that he could give her a few spurts of a liquid diet, if she was amenable, but alas, he couldn’t talk.

“Almost done,” said Granger, with far less tetchiness in her voice now that he was behaving himself (as far as she was concerned, anyway).

She waved a final diagnostic into existence and brushed her fingertips along his cheek as she studied it, tilting his head left, then right.

“Perfect,” she said, with evident satisfaction. “Quite as good as new. You may resume talking.” She gave him a gentle sort of pat along the jaw.

It was the kindest touch he’d felt in years.

He was completely hard.

He was an absolute disgrace.

Granger toddled off to wash her hands.

Unlike Madam Pince, she did not make it a habit to observe his bulge. Which was excellent, because right now, it was... rather bulgy.

Draco glanced down to find that his untucked shirt camouflaged the worst of it. He disengorged himself with a wand wave and

proceeded to sit there, on the side table, feeling like the world's most reprehensible man.

Which normally wouldn't bother him.

But Granger was so fucking – pure-souled – and – and, just, fuck. Granger came back to the salon with a brisk determination in her stride.

“Right,” she said. “Since an assortment of criminals is obsessed with interrupting my work, I’d best get on with preparations for Samhain, sharpish, before I’m waylaid again. Have you a moment to look at something with me?”

Draco followed Granger up the stairs (yes, he looked at her bum) and into the guest suite. The suite’s front room had been taken over, as her cottage’s had been, by books. Her foldy computer glowed on a table.

Her cat had found a favourite perch on a high shelf, from whence it watched Draco with a kind of imperious benevolence, as of a grand vizier permitting a peasant to enter the inner sanctum for an audience with the queen.

Revelations was back on its plinth. Floating around it were stacks of Anglo-Norman dictionaries and reference texts, bristling with yellow squares of paper upon which Granger had scrawled notes.

Granger opened the ancient tome with her usual degree of care and flipped to one of the latter portions.

“Right,” said Granger, frowning at the page. “I’ve got a question about that friend of a friend who helped you find this copy of Revelations.”

“Lady Saira. What about her?”

“Do you think she would be au fait with details on other rare, alleged-to-have-disappeared-forever, items or artifacts?”

“Er – possibly,” said Draco. “She’s exceptionally well-connected.”

Granger turned to him. Her hands were clasped in front of her. She had that anxious look about her, the one she’d worn when first asking him to join her to steal Mary Magdalene’s skull.

“I mean – I could do without it. I could. But if I want to do the thing properly...” “What is it?” asked Draco.

“Might you enquire about any rumours surrounding the location of another rare item, meant to be lost to the ages, if it ever existed at all?”

“What item?” Granger bit her lip. “Tell me,” said Draco.

“You’re going to think I’ve gone quite mad.”

Draco scoffed. “We’ve already established your aggravating soundness of mind. Tell me.” Granger took a breath.

“We are looking for Pandora’s box.”

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Chapter 29

Night Encounter / Granger is Sensible

The small hours of the morning found Draco in his study. He sent a missive to Lady Saira, enquiring – while feeling slightly like a lunatic – about any rumours she might have heard pertaining to Pandora’s box.

This task accomplished, he brought some semblance of order to his desk and floated a bottle of Macpherson’s Rare Oak towards himself, along with a tumbler.

Then he leaned upon the chimneypiece in shirtsleeves and braces, Firewhisky in hand, and stared into the dancing flames.

The shock of the day’s events was catching up to him, now that the opium was no longer in his system to dull it.

Granger was safe. It had been close, but she was safe.

He felt none of the feelings that typically followed close calls with Principals. Sometimes it was cockiness for having boldly pulled someone out of an impossible situation. Sometimes, if the close call had been preventable, it was a guilty stirring to do better next time. Mostly, it was simply relief.

None of that, tonight. Images repeated themselves in his mind and all he felt was nausea. Her slumped form against the wall. Moore grabbing at her. Her face, squeezed by Larsen's massive hand. Her helpless dangle from Larsen's arm, when he pulled her to the door.

No relief. Only this – this kind of heartsickness. Why?

Draco stared at the fire and refused, for a long time, to put the why into words. When he did, it was with dread.

It was because, gods help him, this Principal was precious to him. And it went beyond Amortentia attractions. She mattered to him. He cared for her.

All of the things an Auror ought not feel. Worse, it was all of the vulnerabilities that Draco hated, in one tidy package.

He told himself that it wasn't love – that was one comfort. Love was meant to be a nice thing. Butterflies and faffing about with

poems and that sort of rot. This thing? This thing holding him by the throat? It was a horrid thing. He ached with it.

She shouldn't be precious to him. She should just be – a Principal. They weren't meant to be anything. They were meant to be colleagues at best.

He had fucked up magnificently on that front. Gorgeously. A fuck-up for the ages.

She should not be precious to him. And yet, she was. Being with her was divine. It appalled him. He was wretched. He was obsessed. He was mortified. Maddened. Repelled. Addicted.

He hated it. He didn't want any part of it. He hadn't asked for this. Other than in moments of Granger- or Amortentia-induced weakness, he knew what he wanted. He wanted to remain unattached, unconquered and free. His own man.

(It was a kind of cowardice, by the way. It was being too afraid to lose something and therefore not trying in the first place. It was pride. It was an aversion to opening up and being hurt. To giving her some part of him that she could break. Far better to remain alone and call it freedom.)

There was an out. He knew the protocols. He should speak to Tonks and resign from this assignment. Let this fade away or blow itself out.

Perhaps there would be peace on the other side.

Even as he thought it, he knew that he wouldn't do it. Operationally, the timing of such a resignation would be simply appalling. But beyond that – fuck the protocols. Fuck anything that might put her further away from him. He didn't want to lose this thing. He was too selfish. He was too addicted. He wanted to continue this ongoing, endlessly careful, farouche sort of dance. Flirting that pretended not to be. Lapses that were quickly blamed on alcohol and swept under the rug.

An equilibrium, he had told Tonks.

It was true. A strained status quo. That was what he wanted to maintain. It was an approximation of happiness.

But it wasn't quite enough, was it?

Draco pushed away from the fireplace with fresh frustration. He extinguished the fire with a slash of his wand and left his study with no real purpose to direct his restless strides.

The Manor's stately corridors were dark. A chill October wind beat itself against the windows and rattled branches against the house.

Draco spotted movement in the shadows, coming towards him.

A white silhouette was at the end of the corridor. Her Lumos illuminated the floor in front of her as she walked.

There was a high-tailed orange blur at her ankles. Granger was letting her cat out. She was wearing one of those negligées she had mentioned in Provence.

Draco froze where he stood. Part of him wished to pivot and flee and not subject himself to what was sure to be another torturous encounter. Two hours of brooding had not made his cock forget that afternoon's travails. At this rate, she could probably just brush a fingertip on his cheek and he'd be hard.

Part of him very much wanted to inspect this negligée in person and proceed with his journey of education in, and appreciation of, Muggle fashion.

Look at him. He had just spent hours browbeating himself, and here he was, vacillating, instead of doing the obvious right thing.

He was a hopeless wretch.

Granger jumped, a hand upon her breast, when she noticed him.

“Oh – it’s you. Did I disturb you?” she asked in a whisper. “Sorry – Crooks needs a wee.”

“I was just finishing up,” said Draco in an equally low voice. If they woke the elves, there would be a fuss and offers of midnight snacks and other botheration.

“How is the pestilence of incompetence treating you?” asked Granger. “Abysmally. Where do you let the cat out?”

“Just through here,” said Granger.

She yawned into the back of her hand, looking half asleep as she led him to one of the salons. He drifted in her wake. Her legs were a pale flash in the darkness. Her hair was a mess of partially unwound plait, draped over a shoulder.

The silky negligée clung to her hips, her bum, her breasts. She was barefoot. It was – gorgeous. Tempting. Everything.

An Auror did not shag his Principal.

But bloody hell, would he be admiring from behind.

He watched the sway of her hips, the matching sway of the fabric, the shape of her calves. The delicacy of her ankles, felt under his fingers so long ago, now – and yet he still remembered the feeling, the detail of every edge and dip.

He smelled antiseptic and a struck match. He should have pivoted and fled.

Granger reached one of the terrace doors, lifted sheer curtains aside, and slid the pane open. The cat trotted out.

“I’ll have a cat flap put in here,” said Draco. “If he knows this way.”

“Oh, that’s really not necessary.”

“I’d prefer not to have you roving about at night, alone.”

“Tsk. The Manor is perfectly safe, or so I’ve been told. You’re the greatest threat I’ve encountered in all of my nighttime rovings.”

“Am I?”

“Yes. You looked fearsomely irascible, just then.”

“You caught me on a bad night.”

“Oh? Are you generally quite cheerful at half three in the morning?”

“Relentlessly.”

“Mm,” said Granger, sleepy amusement upon her lips.

She yawned into her hands again, then opened the door to see where the cat had got to.

There was a witchery in the trees, stripped of their leaves, stretching bare arms to the black sky.

The wind gusted the curtains about in a ghostly dance. With it came the melancholy smell of autumn at night – wet, heavy with something uncanny.

Samhain was near. The veil between worlds was growing thin. Granger shuddered and slid the door shut.

Draco did not look down. He was one hundred percent certain that there would be nipples visible through the *negligée*'s fine silk and he did not wish to know a single sodding thing about Granger's breasts, other than the information he had already gleaned here and there.

He did not want to know. At all. No more details, thanks.

Draco stood, fixed in a limbo, torn between bidding her good night – that would be the safest thing, the wise thing, the right thing – and wanting to stay. That would be masochistic and reckless and stupid.

The latter won out, of course. Flagellant that he was, Draco remained. He needed to maintain the equilibrium – that was all. He cast about for something to say. No ideas were forthcoming, except for comments about her tits. Brilliant.

Draco shook his brain about until something usable fell out, and, finally, he said: “The negligée is superior to the picnic rug.”

He heard Granger’s breath of amusement. “The picnic rug is being washed.” She looked down at the negligée. “I’m pleased you approve – it’s terribly Muggle.”

Draco made eye contact with her – a normal amount of eye contact, and no looking down – and then looked away again. “I’ve rather begun to appreciate Muggle fashions.”

“A moment of genuine personal development,” said Granger with solemn approval. “One mustn’t lie idle, you know – one must continue to grow.”

“Onwards and upwards.” “Expansion.” “Transformation.”

Now Draco was concentrating so hard on the appropriate ratio of looking away to eye contact (sans tits) that he was finding the conversation difficult to follow.

He also felt like they might be talking about penises. Again.

There was a smile playing at the corner of Granger’s mouth.

Kidnap attempts notwithstanding, her time with him in the Manor was serving her well. She was fuller in the face, rosier about the cheeks. Her dimple was back.

“The picnic rug would make excellent donation fodder for the orphans,” said Draco. “You always have the orphans’ best interests at heart, haven’t you?”

“What heart?” asked Draco.

“You have one – it might be a little, black, shrivelled up thing, but it’s there.”

“I suppose. And yes – I am selfless that way.”

“Draco Malfoy, the salt of the earth.”

(His name on her lips gave him a little frisson. He wanted to make her say it, again and again and again, sigh it, groan it, kiss it out on his mouth.)

Draco peered out into the darkness. “How long does it take for a cat to have a wee?”

“He’ll be back soon. He’s getting old – it takes him a bit, sometimes.”

“How old is he?”

“I’m not sure. He was probably a few years old when I got him in third year.”

“Third year? My word. You’ve had the bugger for a long time.”

“I have. Kneazles can live up to fifty years in captivity and he’s half one – I’d like to hope he’s got a few good years left.”

Granger drifted to a window that gave onto the other side of the terrace and looked out. “Oh – he’s hunting. Well, attempting to. My poor darling.”

Granger propped her elbows upon the window ledge to watch. And Draco, World Champion Idiot, decided to crowd in behind her to look out, too.

Because, obviously, that was an excellent idea. Getting close to her never led to complications.

The cat’s bandy-legged form was low in the grass outside, making repeated failed pounces at some creature or other.

“A mouse, do you think?” asked Granger.

“Or a shrew, or a gnome. You ought to charge me for pest control services, if he catches anything.”

“Only if you charge me for my stay here.”

“Certainly not.”

“Occasional life saving services and bed and board.” Granger sighed. Her breath made a mist upon the cold window pane. “I am a nauseating imposition.”

Actually, she was a cherished presence who added a vast pleasure to life in the Manor. Disgustingly saccharine, that.

“Those things fall under the heading of keeping Granger safe,” said Draco. “Which is my job, while you work to cure the incurable.”

“Right. But I don’t like feeling indebted to y—” Granger interrupted herself to gasp “—Oh! I think he caught it – look!”

Draco could have looked out of the window just next to her. But no – his idiot brain desired to look out of that one. The one she stood at. Obviously.

Sickening, how little resistance he had when he was near her.

He pushed aside the curtain and leaned over her shoulder to look out. He felt the brush of her hair against his chin.

The cat had something in its mouth. "...That's a leaf," said Draco. Granger laughed. The cat strode proudly across the lawn with its prize held high. Then it was distracted by another leaf, and dropped the first, and crouched into a prowl.

"Oh – he's trying again. You needn't stay – this may take a bit."

"I don't mind. This is entertaining."

Granger looked over her shoulder at him. "Really? All right."

The wind whipped around the house in fitful groans. The waxing moon glowed above the black line of the trees, a fine silver crescent.

Granger's smooth shoulder was – so close. Draco found himself staring at it, at the fine strap that held up her negligée, at the wind-blown shadows that played upon her skin.

"You aren't in my debt in any capacity," said Draco, to return to the subject.

“Kind of you to say so, though it doesn’t make it true,” said Granger. “Would you like us to make a list to tally things?”

“Do you think I haven’t already conducted that exercise?”

“Of course you have.”

“I know – I’m exasperating,” said Granger.

“Thank you, yes, you are. What was the outcome?”

“Until today, close, but in your favour; I only gave myself half a point for the Talfrynn lead. But you’ve pulled ahead significantly with today’s life-saving.”

“Have I? Excellent. I like winning.”

“Mm. Would you mind toddling off to do something moderately life-threatening?” asked Granger with a vague wave of her hand.
“Choke on a Cheesy Wotsit, or something?”

Draco laughed. His next breath carried the scent of her shampoo to his nose.

He crept in closer, to look at the cat (obviously), who was murdering the leaf with extreme feline violence.

“When I was at St. Mungo’s and having those hallucinations, I saw him fighting the Nundu,” said Draco.

He was close enough to feel the warmth coming off her, now, through that fine silk, and through his shirt, and against his chest.

Granger had gone rather still. “Did you?”

“Yes. Over and over, in circles. He was fierce. He won, in the end.” The cat scampered off around the corner.

Granger pressed her wand to the glass and sent out a Lumos, illuminating the lawn.

They both leaned forward to observe the next hunt. Now he could feel the silk of her negligée sliding against the fabric of his shirt. Now he could feel the brush of her backside against the front of his trousers. The button at his fly caught at the small of her back.

Maintain the equilibrium. Maintain the fucking equilibrium. He put a hand on the window ledge.

Granger’s breath was coming a bit faster – the faint patches that misted against the window gave her away.

The feel of her was so – pleasurable – tempting – ambrosial.

What was it about this witch?

Why were the forbidden things the sweetest?

“That—” began Draco, then he cleared his throat, because his voice had gone husky. “That neurotransmission cocktail you had me on, at St. Mungo’s.”

“What about it?” asked Granger, a kind of breathiness in her voice. “It lowers inhibitions?”

“Yes.”

“So – people speak the truth, when they’re on it?”

“Of a sort. It affects certain inhibitory interneurons in the cerebral cortex.” This breathless professorial voice was a new one – Draco liked it. “It removes the usual filters. Most people enter a state of feel-good disinhibition.”

“So when I said I wanted to kiss you, you knew that it was true. It wasn’t just – delirium.” Granger glanced up over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were dark.

Since when was a look between them so heavy? She nodded.

“It’s a similar effect to alcohol, I suppose,” said Draco. “A different mechanism, but yes.”

“I’ve had three Firewhiskies,” said Draco.

He hadn't a sodding clue where he was going with this. She did.

"And," said Granger, "do you still want to kiss me?" The world stopped spinning.

He took a moment to answer – as though there would be any other answer than a longing-filled affirmative.

He brushed a fingertip at the place where her shoulder and neck met. "Yes. Just here."

"Do."

The world resumed its spinning. Too fast. His brain was a blur. What equilibrium? He had never heard of that word in his life.

He lifted her unfurling plait out of the way. He permitted himself the caress of a finger from the side of her neck down to her shoulder, where the strap of the negligée lay delicately upon her skin. His fingertip went over the strap, though the real urge was to slip it underneath, and pull it off her shoulder.

The light of her Lumos faltered, then went out.

He lowered his face to her, felt the warmth of skin, breathed her in – sleepiness and the scent of a candle just burnt.

He brushed his mouth against the spot, much looked at, much longed-after. He felt her shudder against him, saw her silent, gasped-out breath dissipate against the cold window.

He pressed a kiss to the side of her neck. Under his lips, a memory of the night in the garden – the softness of rose petals.

His other hand found the window ledge. Now she was deliciously trapped between his arms. Now she would not be going anywhere.

Not that she wanted to escape. She was pressing herself against him, her head against his shoulder, her bum – oft imagined, never yet felt – against his groin. He splayed a hand against it and squeezed and felt her surprised jump.

He kissed the side of her neck again, then moved – delicious, delicious – up to just under her ear. From there he could look down and see her clavicle, and the swell of breasts – the exact shape of them, and, yes, the push of nipples under silk, and the fine line of shadow where her breasts pressed together, and the beat of her pulse at the dip between her collarbones. Not fast enough, yet, to echo through his ring-finger, but there, fluttering under skin, and if he were to turn her towards him, he could feel it under his lips.

He didn't know where to go from here – he knew exactly where to go from here – he didn't know if he should – he knew he shouldn't – he was drenched in endorphins, skin-addicted, pounding-hearted, mind-obliviated–

She sighed and backed herself into him further, there was the press of her arse against him, and he was hard, obviously, and he pushed against her, and she made a pleased sound in the back of her throat, but they shouldn't – they shouldn't.

She reached up and slid her fingers under the strap of the brace at his shoulder. He slipped an arm around her waist and snatched her against him, and kissed hard kisses at the nape of her neck, and kisses that were more bite than kiss into her shoulder, and her shudder and gasp were the sweetest thing. She lifted her other hand over her head and dug her fingers into his hair, and rubbed herself against his erection, and it was his turn to hold back a gasp.

“I’m fucking fourteen again and I’m going to finish in my pants, if you keep that up,” he muttered into her neck.

Granger breathed out a breathy kind of whine and she swept her bum against his cock again. “I – god – but we – we really–”

“—Shouldn’t?” ground out Draco between teeth. “No. We shouldn’t.”

“We shouldn’t,” repeated Draco, hating himself. “I think that would be – wise.” “I don’t want to be wise. I want to be stupid.”

“You’re Granger. That’s a – contradiction in terms.”

She removed her hand from his hair – tragic. “You’re right. I – I don’t know what’s come over me—”

(Not Draco, anyway, and more was the pity.)

“We are in the midst of a bloody werewolf resurgence,” said Granger. “Yes.”

“They are actively trying to kill me.”

”Yes.”

“I was literally kidnapped, today.”

“Yes.”

“I am working on the most intellectually demanding project I have ever worked on – possibly the most challenging I shall ever work on in my lifetime.”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t a brain cell to spare – I haven’t any additional mental capacity to dedicate to anything else—”

“Yes. Of course. We mustn’t add further complications to an – an already fraught situation.” “Yes,” said Granger. “It could make things – so much more difficult.”

“Yes.”

“So – we shouldn’t.”

“We shouldn’t.”

Granger groaned into her palms. “What is wrong with me...”

“Tell me when you’ve worked it out,” said Draco. “I suffer from the same – ailment.”

“Unbridled idiocy is my tentative diagnosis.” Granger was still breathless. “Right. Okay. All right. This was a dream and it did not happen.”

“Fine. I’ve never felt more awake in my life, but fine.”

“You’re asleep, and so am I.”

“Fine. This didn’t happen.” There was a muffled meow.

The bloody cat had finally seen fit to come back to the house. It sat outside the terrace door, staring at them.

Draco wondered how much it had seen.

He and Granger stepped away from each other. The new distance seemed cruel and cold. Draco's cock was weeping, in all senses of the word.

Granger let the cat in. Her face was flushed, her eyes wide and dark. She left the room and did not look back.

Draco turned to leave, then he froze. There, amongst the usual burnt-candle waft that trailed Granger, was the unmistakable scent of female arousal.

Draco went off to sin.

~

He closed his bedroom door and leaned against it, opened his fly, and freed his dripping cock. They had been closer than they had ever been, and the Granger-induced endorphins in his blood made the fantasy so easy, so within reach – he had smelled her, he knew what she smelled like, when she was wet.

The fantasy was an easy continuation of the scene downstairs – he imagined turning her to him, and lifting her so that she sat on the window ledge, and pulling down the straps of the negligée so that her lovely tits were, finally, exposed to him. His mouth would be all over those, from the soft undersides to the nipples that had teased him through silk, which he would tease in turn through tongue and the press of fingertips. And she would edge forward on the window ledge and hold up the silky skirts of the negligée, and offer herself to him, wet, and he would take the offering, with kisses and tongue and fingers in a rhythm slow at first, and then faster. He wanted to taste the place where that arousal had come from, he wanted it all over his chin. And then he'd find the angle she liked best, and she would gasp out some instruction – don't stop, or yes, and he would feel the twitch and spasm of her against his fingers and against his mouth.

The image put him over the edge. He gasped and pulled back on his cock with one final squeeze and his orgasm was on him in one, two, three, four spurts.

Several million Malfoy heirs were splattered onto the floor.
Oops.

His heart thundered. He fought to regain control of his breathing.
There was an echo of a heartbeat in the ring.
It was hers.

He was not the only sinner that night.

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Chapter 30

Samhain

Larsen's capture was an enormous blow to Greyback, but it was not yet the coup de grâce. They needed to find the man himself.

In spite of his Occlumency, Larsen had been so marinated in Veritaserum by Tonks that he produced an excellent series of leads. The next day, the hunter became the hunted. Potter and the WTF came close twice, cornering Greyback in a cabin in the Lake District and then again in a hideaway in the Shetland Islands. He only just slipped out of their grasp both times. Potter raged. The silver lining was that Greyback was running out of secure boltholes, as Larsen had compromised a half-dozen locations. That silver lining was tempered by a worry amongst the Aurors that he was going to become increasingly desperate and escalate.

Draco was given leave to scour the Viking's brain in a day-long interrogation session while the WTF hunted, to see what else he could find.

Tonks joined him in the interrogation room, along with Brimble. Larsen, bound hand and foot to a chair, glared balefully at them.

“Good morning,” said Tonks to Larsen with a frightening kind of brightness. “Lovely chat yesterday, thank you again. Have you had a think about any other bits and bobs you’d like to share with us? Locations? Plans? Any machinations against Healer Granger that we ought to know about?”

Larsen stared at her in stony silence.

“Otherwise,” continued Tonks, “we’ve received Ministerial permission to proceed with a spot of Legilimency. If you haven’t any more information to offer willingly, Auror Malfoy will be fetching it directly from the source.”

“Fetch it, then,” said Larsen.

“Brimble, make a note that Larsen has declined to cooperate,” said Tonks. Larsen turned his stare to Draco and spat at his feet. The defiance delighted Draco: Larsen was going to put up a fight.

“Do that again and I shall cast a Dessicatus directly into your throat,” said Draco, drawing a stool towards Larsen.

He held his wand to the centre of Larsen's forehead and said, "Legilimens."

Larsen was arrogant. Legilimens were rare and good ones were even rarer. Now that he was no longer bleeding out, his sophisticated Occlumency barriers were firmly back in place, except where the residual effects of yesterday's Veritaserum softened them at the edges.

He had good reason to be arrogant. As Draco pushed into his mind, he had to admit that Larsen's defences were impressive – a vast, nigh-impenetrable wall.

The resistance gave Draco an excuse to be rough and cruel, and rough and cruel he was. He cracked. He tore. He smashed. He had every advantage – the magical push of his wand, Larsen's lingering Veritaserum, the pent-up rage fuelling his assault – and he used them.

The more Larsen resisted, the more Draco hurt him. Before long, Draco had given the Viking contusions throughout his mind to match those that he had left on Granger's body.

In the silence of the interrogation room, the battle of wills raged. Draco could feel Larsen reeling in surprise at the violence of the battering. He had underestimated both Draco's Legilimency and his sheer force of will when it came to this particular subject. He paid for it.

Larsen's nose began to bleed. Brimble twitched. Tonks said nothing.

Larsen, feeling his barriers fade, began to offer Draco images – distractions, fabrications. Draco did not want those. He swept them away and hammered at the wall.

He found a fissure. He pried it open and broke through.

Larsen pulled his memories into darker recesses. Draco dragged them back out.

Draco rifled through the memories, pausing occasionally when Larsen scrambled to put up a barrier, with increasingly diminishing returns for his effort.

It had been Larsen who had wandered too close to Granger's cottage, many months ago, for a spot of reconnaissance.

Draco found conversations between Greyback and Larsen. Larsen considered Greyback a hot tempered old fool, but useful for the sheer man-power that he and his pack offered.

He found arguments about Granger. Greyback, when he had learned of the rumours surrounding her treatment, had simply wanted to kill her. Larsen was the one who had devised the grander plans.

The notion of creating a variant of the lycanthropy virus had made Greyback wild with delight. He had been so eager to confirm that Granger had actually isolated the virus that he had ordered the cack-handed break-in attempt. It had infuriated Larsen, who asked furiously what Greyback thought his brainless louts would discover in a scientific laboratory run by Britain's foremost magical researcher. Now they'd ramp up the security measures – now everything would be more difficult. They almost had a permanent falling-out, then – almost duelled each other – but each needed the other more than he wanted to kill him.

Draco pressed and searched, but Larsen did not know who had informed Greyback of Granger's project. Greyback had been careful enough, there. And, by design and mutual agreement, Larsen only knew of a handful of Greyback's hideouts, most of which had already been discovered by Tonks the day before. A

pity. Draco dictated a few additional locations to Brimble as he found them.

Then Draco found memories of himself – first as the pilot at the pub, doting on Granger, and then as the Auror putting his life on the line for her, during the knife fight. He saw the wildness in own eyes when he told Larsen, “She’s definitely worth what I’m going to do to you,” saw how it fed every subsequent blow and stab.

Larsen had concluded that Draco was some kind of mad-eyed lover of Granger's. Linked to that thought were more memories, shrouded by fear of discovery, that Larsen wished to hide from Draco in particular. As Draco approached them, Larsen grew panicky.

“Don’t,” said Larsen, throwing up a final, desperate barrier. Draco did.

He found memories of conversations between Larsen and Greyback, drunkenly discussing what they would do with Granger when they’d got what they needed out of her. They were graphic. They were vile.

“You bloody swine,” spat Draco.

Then came Larsen's imaginings themselves, beyond the memories of the conversations. Draco came close to losing control.

Blood oozed from Larsen's tear-ducts. Tonks put her hand on Draco's shoulder.

The Larsen who was escorted out of the interrogation room did not have the mental acuity of the one who had entered it.

He never fully recovered.

In the days that followed, the Viking was extradited to Denmark. The Danish Aurors, having learned of Larsen's plans, did not muck about. Their Head Auror, himself a lycanthrope, took a deep personal offence to Larsen's revolting project. Larsen's laboratory was raided, evidence removed, contents documented – then the Danes proceeded with a bold renovation project in the form of blowing the entire place up.

~

Lady Saira reported that, by and large, her queries about Pandora's box were greeted by tittering – until, one day in late October, she sent a note with a wisp of a rumour about a

reclusive collector, a Frenchman living in Spain called le Marquis d'Artois.

With a bit of jauntiness in his step, Draco went off in search of Granger to convey the good news.

Granger had taken to long walks through the Manor's grounds to stave off lab-induced cabin fever. Draco found her near the Hippocampus fountain, casting a warming charm upon herself to ward off the chill.

She smiled when she saw him. He said glurkk to himself.

Draco fell into step beside her and only half-listened as she spoke. The other half of his brain was occupied by the shape of her mouth and the play of the sun in her hair.

Today, the Floo hearth had been installed at her laboratory, open only to bilateral travel between the Manor and the lab. The Floo technician had not recognised Granger – he thought the nice young lady was a graduate student – and he had been so impressed by her incisive questions on the Floo creation process that he offered her a job as a trainee on the spot.

“I had to decline,” Granger sighed wistfully. “But it was tempting. I wonder what it’d be like to have a proper nine to five, you know – a normal job.”

“Too bad,” said Draco. “You can’t leave off saving the world halfway through. It simply wouldn’t be sporting.”

He gave her Lady Saira’s note. “We’ve got a lead on Pandora’s box.” Granger skimmed through the missive.

“A few details worthy of note,” said Draco as Granger read. “The Marquis never sells anything, never loans anything to museums, and never offers viewings of his collection. Only buys things on occasion – and when he does, nothing less than the rarest magical artefacts interest him.”

“He never sells things? Of course he doesn’t. Why would this be simple?”

“He’s known for it – rather disliked for it, actually – in collector circles. He has one of the greatest collections of arcane objects on the planet and not a single one has left his possession after acquisition. No sales, no bartering for other relics. Greedy sort of bugger, by all accounts.”

Granger walked pensively along the leaf-strewn path. “That doesn’t leave us many options, then, does it? We may once again have to do evil, so that good may follow.”

“Ooh. I believe that you’re about to suggest something naughty.”

“You sound titillated,” said Granger, holding back a smile.

“I am.”

“May I safely assume that your moral stance on thievery hasn’t shifted since Provence?”

“That did nothing but whet my appetite for it.”

Granger’s look was a mixture of relief and reproof. “You’re an Auror. Hadn’t you better think twice?”

“Darling, I don’t even think once.” Draco flipped his hair. “I’m an absolute maverick, you know. I’ve half a mind to quit the Auror business and become a gentleman thief. Let’s steal the box – that would be quite a feather in my cap.”

“I don’t really want Pandora’s box, though. I want what’s in it.”

“What’s in it?”

“Hope.”

“...Are we taking Hesiod’s myth quite so literally?” asked Draco with his eyebrows raised.

Granger nodded. “Revelations hasn’t misled me yet. Do you remember the final step, when brewing Sanitatem?”

“No. I’ve never brewed it.”

“It’s a ten minute stir, accompanied by a kind of meditation over the cauldron by the potioneer. Speramus is the incantation – ‘we hope.’ The strongest Sanitatem is made with the strongest infusion of hope in that final stage. Pandora’s box would contain it in its purest form. As with every other element, the same ingredient class, but the magical potencies would be stronger by hundreds of orders of magnitude.”

“Right. So what’s the plan?”

Granger grew pensive. “This Marquis d’Artois likes exceedingly rare things?”

“He does. A pity we returned the Magdalene’s skull – that would have tempted the man, I’m sure. We could have got an audience, at least – and had a poke about his hacienda.”

Granger shook her head. “If we hadn’t returned her, I expect we’d be dead by now. Those nuns would have been out for

blood. Have you any sort of ancient family possession that might intrigue the Marquis enough to grant us an interview? The rings?”

“Versions of those exist amongst many old families. They’re rare enough, but not so unique that they’d interest someone like the Marquis.”

“I don’t suppose your Uncle Snodsbury’s hourglass has any magical properties?”

“Er – sometimes, it gets flatulent.”

Granger gasped out a cackle, then attempted to find her dignity again. “Really.”

“It’s true.”

“Right. Well, unless the Marquis has a specific interest in borborygmus, I don’t think that will be of much use.”

Granger grew silent and thoughtful as they weaved through tree trunks and heaps of red-gold leaves.

Draco ran through his mental inventory of the Malfoy family heirlooms, of which there were many – jewels and weapons and diverse thingummies – but none were quite in the league of items that would impress a collector as discerning as the Marquis.

Granger cut into his reverie with an explosion of a revelation: “I know where the Elder Wand is.” Draco walked into a tree, tripped on a forgotten rake, and fell into an enormous pile of leaves.

“What?” he said, popping his head out of the leaves, while also making a note to sack the groundskeeper.

Granger leaned contemplatively against a tree and took stock of the situation. “What you’ve done there, Malfoy, is gone arse over tit.”

Then, with the smugness of one who has been waiting to exert her revenge for months, she explained various laws of physics that he hadn’t quite applied correctly, including the importance of not wedging one’s overlarge feet under gardening implements.

She had made a critical error, however: unlike Granger in a pit in Provence, Draco had his wand. He waved it at her and dragged her into the leaves with him.

Her indignant shriek made everything that followed worthwhile – her landing on top of him and elbowing him in the solar plexus (he was ninety percent certain that it was accidental), the handful of leaves she shoved into his face, the dirt and twigs in his hair.

Draco defended himself from her leaves with his own fistfuls of them, which caught in her hair as she struggled to get away from him.

“How dare you – I just washed my hair–!” shrieked Granger.

She attempted to roll off of Draco and kneed him in the balls instead. “Grkqp,” said Draco, curling his legs in.

He fell into a silent, ball-cupping paroxysm.

Granger froze with a gasp. “Oh my god – Malfoy, I’m so sorry – I didn’t mean to–” She fluttered above him anxiously.

“M’fine,” said Draco. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Granger was looking at him with wide-eyed compassion.

“You can – explain to my mother – why she will never have grandchildren–” Perhaps he shouldn’t have splattered them upon the floor so liberally.

He felt better after a few more breaths. The pain receded. The bollock was unruptured. Probably. Perhaps he ought to make Granger check, to be safe.

Also, by the way, Granger, poised above him, her hands planted in leaves on either side of his head? She was a nymph, crowned

in wine-red oak. She was the loveliness of autumn, the warmth of a hearth-fire against chill evenings, the elusiveness of summer's last goodbye, lined with golden sun.

Enchanting. The want – to pull her down on top of him, to kiss her – was searing. But one dallied with nymphs at one's peril. Draco merely drank in the loveliness.

The want fractured his soul. It was fine.

The nymph almost hit him in the balls again as she rose. They found their feet.

“The bloody Elder Wand?” prompted Draco, casting Evanescos upon the remains of a squashed worm on his arse.

Granger plucked leaves from her hair. “Yes. It’s irreparably broken, of course – Harry snapped it in half – but would something like that interest the Marquis?”

“One of the Deathly Hallows? Obviously. Broken or not, that is an Artefact.”

“I’d have to ask for Harry’s permission to use it as our bargaining chip. If he says yes, it shouldn’t be too complicated to obtain. It’s unguarded, as far as I know.”

“The Elder Wand? Unguarded? Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Granger glanced at him. “D’you fancy nipping out to raid a tomb, as a – a cheeky little warm-up for a larger heist?”

“Let’s,” said Draco, wildly intrigued.

At the Manor, Granger Flooed Potter, who gave his blessing for the use of the remains of the Elder Wand, indicating that he, frankly, did not care what they did with it, just get Granger’s bloody project done, for god’s sake, before they were all turned into werewolves.

That night, Draco and Granger popped into Hogsmeade, from whence they wandered into the Hogwarts grounds and, Disillusioned, contemplated life and death piously over Dumbledore’s tomb.

Draco, being a clumsy sort of wizard, accidentally dismantled all of the tomb’s wards, and tripped over, and pushed off the enormous marble slab that covered the grave. Then the Elder Wand fell, quite by chance, into Granger’s hand, and she, out of sheer ineptitude, created a perfect duplicate of it, and, by absolute happenstance, dropped the duplicate into the tomb, and they left

with the Elder Wand in her pocket without noticing that it had fallen in.

After some deliberation, they decided that Draco should request an introduction to the Marquis via Lady Saira. Their hope was that the Malfoy name, along with his offer of the remains of the Elder Wand, might carry sufficient cachet and credibility to intrigue the Marquis.

It worked. The Marquis wrote a brief missive to Draco, delivered by a gorgeous lyrebird, inviting him to Málaga. The Marquis proposed a hotel on the waterfront for the meet. Draco countered with worries about his personal safety, given the value of the object he would be carrying with him, and invited the Marquis to the Manor instead. As they had hoped, the Marquis declined the trip to England, but offered his own villa as a meeting place, if Mr. Malfoy would be more inclined to meet there? His only request would be that Mr. Malfoy comply with his security measures and come alone.

Granger pursed her lips while reading the last bit, bent over Draco's shoulder. "Reply in the positive. We'll find a way to circumvent that particular bit of buggery. You certainly can't do this alone, absolute maverick or no."

“Can’t I?”

“No.”

“What an abhorrent lack of faith. What are you thinking, then?”

“I’ve got a few ideas,” said Granger.

Now she was eyeing Draco speculatively, twirling her wand between her fingers. Draco did not like the feeling.

They packed the Elder Wand, with a silken ribbon around its snapped middle, into a gorgeous case of satin and Grenadil wood.

The wand was inert in Draco’s hand as he nestled it into the case.

“Kindling, really. Not even a spark left.”

“It might still have the power to do one last bit of good,” said Granger.

~

The International Floo to Málaga took six minutes. Granger emerged from it with the tender green tint of a young asparagus.

A bored immigration wizard observed her, then gave Draco forms to fill out for him and his esposa, as well as a sick bag.

For his profession, Draco put, “Ne’er-do-well / Absolute Maverick,” and for Granger’s, “Arsonist.” She was too bilious to notice.

The Marquis lived just outside of one of the Pueblos Blancos along Spain’s southern coast. Draco and Granger took a room in a village a few kilometres away to finalise their preparations for the heist.

The designated time found Draco and Granger striding up the drive to the d’Artois villa.

Well, Granger strode. Draco trotted along next to her, a long feathery tail swishing elegantly behind him.

Because, yes. Draco had been Transfigured into a Borzoi. And Granger was Draco.

Draco, observing Granger-Draco from his new height just at her waist, told himself that there was no way he walked with quite so much hip.

Really made his bum pop, though. He had such a perfect arse. They came to the end of the drive. The Marquis' house wasn't a villa at all – the thing was, frankly, another Alhambra, nestled into the Andalusian hills.

Enormous gates swung open as they approached. Pairs of guards, armed with wands and ceremonial swords, flanked the drive at regular intervals and observed them wordlessly as they passed.

"Cheery lot," muttered Granger-Draco to Draco.

They walked through splendid gardens rich with almond trees, lemon groves, cascading fountains, and dazzling flowers of every colour. Exotic fowl strutted about – peacocks, pheasants, demoiselle cranes.

They came to the villa's front doors. A black-robed butler greeted Granger-Draco – a tall, well-built sort of butler, whose gait and breadth of shoulders suggested something more of the bodyguard than the manservant. His wand was holstered at his forearm and

the strategic once-over he gave Granger-Draco told Draco that he knew what he was about.

They followed the butler through a series of courtyards, crossing over ponds glittering with golden koi.

Granger-Draco, holding the Elder Wand's box under her arm as she strode, was doing an excellent job of looking Malfoyishly unimpressed by any of it. Draco heard her sniff.

by purpl3suit

They arrived at an anteroom, at the end of which glittered a translucent sort of wall – a magical shield of some kind.

A small figure, slightly distorted by the wall, appeared. It spoke with an aristocratic, accented voice: “Mr. Malfoy, welcome. I do hope that your travels did not fatigue you. Can François proceed with the usual checks, for my peace of mind?”

Granger-Draco inclined her head and replied in French. “Monsieur le Marquis. A pleasure. Please proceed. I am eager to begin our discussion.”



The butler cast a series of weapon revelation spells on Granger-Draco, exposing her wand and the knife that Draco typically had strapped to his thigh.

The butler proffered a tray, upon which Granger-Draco placed these items.

Draco's wand was subject to an identification spell, which glowingly confirmed that Mr. Draco Lucius Malfoy was its owner.

The butler asked Granger-Draco what was in the flask at her hip. "Only water," said Granger-Draco, proffering it to him for inspection.

The flask was subjected to five spells before the butler was satisfied that its contents were innocuous.

The Elder Wand's box was opened and similarly subjected to detection spells, to no effect.

"I presume you have no objections to François keeping hold of your wand and knife? Only for the duration of our chat, of course," said the Marquis from behind his shield.

After Granger-Draco's gesture of agreement, François slipped the wand and knife into his robes. "I do appreciate your patience with my foibles," said the Marquis. "May I enquire about the dog?"

“My familiar,” said Granger-Draco, stroking Draco’s sleek head.

“He can wait here, if that is your wish.”

“Oh, no. I understand the urge to keep one’s precious things by one’s side, you know – more than anyone. Is the creature good tempered? I shall have François run a few spells on it, and then we can proceed.”

François cast a few spells at Draco, including Finite Incantatem and an Animagus detection charm. Nothing happened.

Draco wagged his tail and let his tongue loll out of his mouth.

“Excellent,” said the Marquis. “The dog is a dog. Let them through, François.”

Draco breathed a doggy sigh of relief. Inspired by the pelt of the Oisín hind, Granger had rigged what she called ‘a kind of Faraday cage’ out of her anti-magic pucks and some wiring. The rig was now strapped to his body, covered by his thick fur. They had tested it at length. It wouldn’t deflect serious curses, but lighter spells at a distance seemed to fizzle out within the perimeter.

The butler lowered the shimmering wall, revealing the Marquis. Draco trotted at Granger-Draco’s side and took stock of the man.

He was slight of build and garbed in a violet suit that was tastefully tailored, though the cut of it seemed almost antique. A pair of bright blue eyes sparkled with intelligence in a face that seemed, strangely, both old and young.

To Draco's doggishly overzealous nose, he reeked of fine cigars – and gold.

"A Borzoi, is it?" said the Marquis, looking at Draco. "Noble animal. Unusual breed. What's his name?"

Granger-Draco glanced down at Draco with her eyebrows raised. "His name? It's – Crotch." "Krrotche?" repeated the Marquis in a strong French accent.

"Yes. It means clever, in – er, Mermish. I didn't name him."

"How came you by him?"

"Friends in St. Petersburg."

"Oh? What friends? I've got some connections there."

"The – Mikhailovs."

"Mm. I haven't the pleasure of their acquaintance."

Draco bounded forwards and put his head under the Marquis' hand, in an attempt to distract the man from further prying.

The Marquis looked pleased and gave him a few pats. “Quite a happy chappy, eh? Yes. You are a good boy.”

Draco trotted ahead, sniffing about, wondering if he should piss on something for added authenticity.

They came to a new courtyard, pierced at regular intervals by thin wooden columns. At the centre of it all was an elegant arrangement of furniture.

The Marquis raised his hand and François, who had been lurking unseen, advanced with drinks. “Would Krotche like a biscuit?” asked the Marquis.

“No, that's quite all right. He's on a special diet.”

“Oh?”

“He's – constipated.”

“Ah. Poor fellow.”

Draco wagged his tail as though nothing gave him more joy than constipation.

Granger-Draco took a glass of wine from François and swirled it with a haughty gesture. Draco was not that haughty.

“How do you find it?” asked the Marquis when Draco had tasted it.

"I tend to prefer my wines more – full-bodied," said Granger-Draco with a sniff. "But this is excellent."

One of the Marquis' eyebrows twitched at this faint praise. "I see." He examined his own glass. "I am afraid I cannot linger too long. I am rather busy this evening."

Granger-Draco produced an excellent insincere smile. “I would be delighted to dispense with further small talk. Shall I show you what I’ve come with?”

She settled herself upon a sofa. Draco laid himself at her feet.

She opened the Elder Wand’s glossy box and held it towards the Marquis. “Snapped in half by Harry Potter, on the second of May, 1998.”

The Marquis eyes were bright as he leaned over to look. “This seems fortuitous – you have brought me a Hallow on All Hallow’s Eve.”

“Indeed.”

“How came you by it?”

“Potter owed me a rather large favour.”

“A favour?”

“I can’t provide further details.”

The Marquis nodded. “Of course. I did not mean to pry. Do you mind if I–?”

Granger-Draco nodded yes, and held the box to the Marquis. He picked up the wand and inspected it, first with the naked eye, and then with a silver loupe, then with a golden one.

“Lovely. Lovely. Might I cast a few spells upon it?” Granger-Draco waved an indifferent hand in acquiescence.

She captured Draco’s mannerisms with an almost offensive accuracy – only a bit too affected for Draco himself to be convinced. He wasn’t this pretentious, surely.

“Fifteen inches, elder wood, Thestral tail-hair,” said the Marquis, flicking through various spells as he confirmed the Elder Wand’s authenticity. “Fascinating. This is quite a piece of history you have here, Mr. Malfoy. I am a veritable fiend for storied magical items and the Elder Wand is – well, quite one of the holy grails, you know. Such a pity that it was broken. I am certain that Mr. Potter had only the wizarding world’s best interests at heart, but...”

Draco rose and shook himself, leaving a mist of white fur on Granger-Draco, and began to wander about the courtyard, looking as bored as possible.

He drifted about, sniffing here and there, until he found François' lurking place. He could find no other trace of domestic staff or guards nearby. His doggishly enhanced hearing did catch what sounded like the kitchens, possibly, off to the right – the high voices of house-elves. Further beyond, he could hear cackling screeching – monkeys?!

He returned to Granger-Draco and laid himself, sphinx-like, at her feet. This was the signal for her to make a move – to request a viewing of the Marquis' collection, and, if the response was no, then things were about to get messy.

“Let us proceed to the part I despise the most. How much are you asking for, for this thing without price?” asked the Marquis.

“What can you offer me that I can’t buy for myself?”

The Marquis’ eyebrow rose. “I had understood from our exchanges that you were interested in selling. I do not barter pieces from my collection, if that is what you are suggesting.”

Granger-Draco shrugged. “Frankly, I’m more interested in finding a worthy home for this piece of history than anything else. I will tell you what you can offer me that I can’t buy: a little tour of your legendary collection.”

The Marquis' face closed. "Absolutely not."

Granger-Draco sighed. "Right. I had hoped for a bit of flexibility on your part. Thought that this was a rather generous offer, in fact – the Elder Wand for a few moments of your time. I respect your decision, of course."

Granger-Draco packed the Elder Wand back into its box and closed the lid with a snap. "Thank you, nevertheless, for—"

"Wait."

The Marquis was looking at the box with a greedy yearning.

"You simply want a tour of my collection?" he asked. "In exchange for the wand?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because that, too, would be a thing without price," said Granger-Draco. "I don't believe you've ever permitted a viewing."

“Indeed, I haven’t,” said the Marquis, looking grave.

He glanced towards François, who looked distinctly unhappy. Then he looked at the box again.

He turned back to Granger-Draco. “We will do a tour. A quarter of an hour. You are to follow my instructions – and, of course, touch nothing.”

“Of course.”

“And at the end of the tour, the Elder Wand will be mine.”

“That is correct.”

The Marquis looked serious. “What an unusual turn of events.”

“Monsieur le Marquis, are you – are you quite certain?” queried François.

The Marquis’ eyes were riveted on the Grenadil wood box. There was a muscle going in his cheek as he worked his way through an internal struggle.

At length, he said, “You have Mr. Malfoy’s wand, François – I don’t think that he would be able to do very much damage. Not that I would cast any such aspersions upon your character, Mr. Malfoy. François is simply being careful.”

“I understand. If there is anything else I can do for added peace of mind – shall I leave the dog behind?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Krotche can come,” said the Marquis, bending towards Draco and clicking his tongue at him. “He is a good lad.”

Draco did a spot of gambolling around the Marquis’ legs, to demonstrate what a good lad he was. “Yes, that’s right, you are a good boy. Yes, you are. Yes. Does he give kisses?”

It was difficult to gambol when you were transfixed by sudden horror. Draco did not want to give kisses.

Granger-Draco’s mouth twitched. “Er – no. I trained that out of him.” “Oh?”

“He has horrid breath.”

Draco gave Granger-Draco a look that distinctly said, I beg your pardon?

The Marquis was scratching his ears. “Naughty! We must brush your teeth more often, mustn’t we? Yes. You are a clever boy, you look almost as though you understand. A crotchety boy, I should say, rather, eh, in Mermish? François, lead the way, if you please.”

They crossed into a vast room with tall arches and an ornately carved ceiling.

They came to a door, heavily warded, with two expressionless wizards standing guard on either side.

The Marquis turned Granger-Draco's attention to the ceiling deliberately. "Take a moment to admire this craftsmanship: a representation of the seven Islamic heavens through which the soul must ascend, after death."

"Beautiful."

Meanwhile, François waved away layer after layer of wards. Draco sat a little ways away, like the good boy he was, and observed carefully. The dog hearing was useful: he could even hear the man's incantations.

The heavily warded door was opened. Now the tour began.

The Marquis was rather twitchy and stiff-backed, at first. However, Granger-Draco offered the precise amount of gasping and ooh-ing (probably genuine) to flatter him, and he warmed up to the tour. François followed at a distance, frowning, his wand aimed at Granger-Draco's back.

They passed through room after room of breathtaking Artefacts. The Marquis offered a running commentary on the items: “Those are feathers from Huginn and Muninn – Odin’s ravens. The very first bonsai – Han dynasty. The frankincense offered to the Christ Child by the biblical Magi.

Moctezuma’s staff – very temperamental, I’ve only played with it once, transformed my valet into a tortilla. A lock of Samson’s hair. Lakshmi’s lotus, acquired that in Kolhapur. Archangel Sandalphon’s harp...”

They passed into another room and the Marquis continued. “Ah, a few rarities from your part of the world. That is a pelt from one of the Hounds of Annwn – don’t look too closely at it, Krotche, it looks rather a lot like yours, doesn’t it, poor boy. The beautiful Excalibur – you are familiar with that one, of course. Cost me a pretty Knut. And here, Cerridwen’s cauldron, if you know her legend...”

“I have heard – something of it,” said Granger-Draco in a strangled voice.

They came to a door leading into a room full of books, books on shelves, books upon plinths, books in display cases.

The Marquis strode past the door with a wave. “We shan’t go in there; we would spend far too long and we mustn’t tarry. My most recent addition to the library is Nostradamus’ original manuscript for *Les Prophéties*. Quite a coup, I was ever so pleased. Good man, Nostradamus, actually quite funny in person. Er – so they say, anyway.”

Granger-Draco looked longingly into the room and made a sound suggestive of great suffering, holding her heart.

“Are you all right, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Er – yes. A spot of – indigestion. Heartburn.”

They carried on down another corridor, which branched off to a cage-filled courtyard to the left. The Marquis had a menagerie. That explained the monkeys.

He waved his hand in that direction. “A few interesting specimens from abroad. There is an aviary behind, and a butterfly garden. But let us proceed apace.”

The archway broke off into three more directions. At the end of one, Draco saw the glow of a violet flame in a dark room.

The Marquis shut that door as they passed with a casual wave of his wand, drawing Granger- Draco's attention instead to a Petrified chimaera.

At last, they came to the collection of objects from the ancient world. It was housed in a room styled as a Grecian temple, with Doric columns supporting an enormous central dome. The walls were marble and rippled with moving carvings of mythological scenes.

"Let me see, now, what are the most interesting pieces," said the Marquis, standing in the centre of it all, before whisking Granger-Draco to a glass display case. "That is the Anemoi – the original compass. And this – what do you make of it?"

Granger-Draco studied the small object under a glass dome. "Er – it looks like a dried fruit?" "It is: the remains of the original pomegranate eaten by Persephone."

"Incredible."

The Marquis pointed to a vast beam that reached the ceiling, strung with ancient rigging aglow with stasis charms. "The mast of the Argonaut. I am pursuing the Golden Fleece – have been for many years – I think they ought to be reunited, don't you?"

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

“Mm. Here is Pandora’s box – rather less of a box than a jar, as you see. A pithos would be the correct term. And here, the omphalos, from the Oracle at Delphi. Hephaestus’ anvil – absurdly heavy, I can’t even tell you what a fuss it was to have that brought in...”

Draco came to lean on Granger-Draco’s legs, as a slightly bored dog who wanted attention might. They had located the box – it was time to proceed to the next step.

The Marquis, observing Draco’s lean, said, “I hope you won’t take offence – I know that he is your familiar – but you must tell me if you would ever consider parting with the dog. He is such a well behaved specimen. He would add a nice dash of imperial sophistication to my menagerie.”

“Er – no – he is, unfortunately, rather dear to me.” Granger-Draco stroked Draco’s head. “I am really too fond of him to let him go.”

“Of course. Worth the ask – it always is. Now, this was a find: the skull of Typhoeus...”

Draco and Granger had made several plans for different scenarios. Granger now scratched at Draco's left ear, signalling – the fun one.

François was hovering broodily at the door, wand out, though it was pointed at the floor.

Feigning a sudden playfulness, Draco bounded towards the man and put his arse in the air (gods) and wagged his tail.

“What does Krotche want?” asked the Marquis. Then, seeing Draco’s bow, he gasped. “Oh, François, he thinks you have a stick! Silly boy, that’s a wand.”

Draco leapt and plucked the ‘stick’ out of François’ hand. He gambolled away – he was becoming quite an expert at gambolling – and then darted back towards François, the wand in his mouth.

François lunged at him. Draco darted away, then darted towards him again. “He’s playing keep-away with you, François!” chortled the Marquis.

Draco and Granger had practised this particular bit over many hours. The key was to make it look unintentional and harmless.

Draco shook his head and a shower of sparks flew out of the wand, quite at random. Then he tossed the wand to himself and bounded away to catch it, at which point a small flock of birds jetted out of it.

François gave chase in earnest. Draco whipped the wand about and hit him with an Aguamenti, his tail a whirl of doggy delight.

The Marquis was laughing. François was terribly unamused. Granger-Draco made futile attempts to call Krotche to heel.

Draco waited for François to lunge and hit him with a Locomotor Wibbly – in a playful, gambolling sort of way.

François careened head-first into a wall. The Marquis was hit by a Stunner.

Granger-Draco leapt to action, kneeling next to François to retrieve Draco's wand, carefully removing the Faraday rig from Draco, and Transfiguring him back into himself.

“Finally,” breathed Draco, delighted to be on two legs again.

Granger Stunned François for good measure and cast silencing charms around them.

They sprinted to Pandora's box (odd feeling, sprinting next to oneself). Draco took his wand from Granger and got to work on the protective warding that surrounded the pithos.

"Seventeen minutes left on my Polyjuice dose," said Granger.

Draco, sweating, peeled away the layers of wards surrounding the jar. "Right. These aren't too bad – I think the worst of them were at that first door – give me two more minutes..."

Granger conducted her own preparations, pulling out the flask of water and dumping its contents where Draco's Aguamenti had left puddles.

"Ready," said Draco.

Granger-Draco's hand hesitated over the pithos. "My god."

"What? Don't tell me you've suddenly developed a scruple."

"Are we really going to open Pandora's box?"

"She already did it once; the worst is out, isn't it?"

"Yes."

They stared at one another. "Let's do it," said Granger.

Together, they lifted the heavy lid. It came off with a grinding sort of creakiness.

They both stepped back, half expecting the remainder of the world's plagues to be unleashed into their faces.

But, no: the jar was brimming with Hope.

In its pure physical form, Hope was a nebulous, luminous substance, simultaneously curling in upon itself and expanding in quivers of trust, conviction, and faith.

“How beautiful,” sighed Granger-Draco.

“Take it and let’s get on,” prodded Draco, passing her his wand again.

Granger-Draco delicately pressed the wand into the substance and syphoned it into her flask.

This left a significant divot in the Hope in Pandora’s box – but only for a moment, and then it reshaped itself, and the jar brimmed again.

“Right,” breathed Granger-Draco. “Hope isn’t finite. It’s – infinite.”

There was no time for breathy philosophising on the nature of hope. Draco elbowed Granger-Draco out of the way, slid the lid of Pandora's pithos back on, and recast the wards.

The flask was secreted into Granger-Draco's cloak. "Ready?" asked Granger-Draco, pointing the wand at Draco.

"Bloody hell. Here we go. Yes. If you call me constipated again, I shall bite you."

Grinning, Granger-Draco Transfigured him back into a dog. She slipped the rig of anti-magic pucks back onto him, lashing them into deep fur. She shoved Draco's wand back into François' pocket.

Then she ran to the Marquis' side and used his wand to Ennervate him and François.

"Oh! Monsieur le Marquis – are you all right? I am so sorry – Krotche hit you with something, the silly dog. Just a Stunner, I think. I have put him in the corner. He is punished."

The Marquis rose with a look of dazed annoyance.

François, however, regained his feet with deep suspicion in his eyes. He snatched up his wand and aimed it at Draco.

Draco sat in a corner, looked downcast, and wagged his tail pathetically. “That’s not a bloody dog,” said François. “Finite Incantatem!”

He aimed the spell squarely at Draco’s fluffy chest. Nothing happened.

“Frankly, François, you’ve already cast that once on the poor creature – now he’s flinching.” The Marquis was dusting himself off. “Kindly stop terrorising the animal.”

“Thank you,” said Granger-Draco, giving François a severe look. “It was an unfortunate accident. Let us call that an end to the tour – I mustn’t impose upon your time any further.”

François, his mouth pulled down in a bitter grimace, cast revelation spells about the room. All of the wards were perfectly intact.

“I do agree with you there, Mr. Malfoy,” said the Marquis. “Let me show you out.”

They followed the Marquis. François muttered behind them and stared blackly at Draco, who regarded him with panting friendliness and did a spot of additional frolicking.

Finally, they came to the very first anteroom. “I must leave you here,” said the Marquis.

He looked with significance at the box in Granger-Draco’s hands.

“It is my very great pleasure to give you this, as agreed,” said Granger-Draco, passing him the box.

The Marquis took it and opened it again, as though to reassure himself that the wand hadn’t vanished from it through some sleight of hand.

“Some things in life haven’t got a price,” said Granger-Draco. “This evening’s tour has been a revelation. One of the most magical moments of my life, I daresay. You should be proud of this collector’s chef-d’oeuvre. Truly unsurpassed.”

The Marquis inclined his head. “My labour of love, over a great many years. Farewell, Mr. Malfoy. And do tell me if you change your mind about parting with Krotche.”

“I shan’t, but I will tell you if I hear anything on the whereabouts of the Golden Fleece,” said Granger-Draco. The Marquis sighed. “Do.”

He waved his wand and the translucent wall shimmered back into existence. François returned Draco's wand and knife to Granger-Draco.

Then, with a look of absolute hatred towards Draco, he escorted them back to the gates, through the gardens, past the long line of stone-faced guards, and muttered out a goodnight.

The gates clanged shut behind them and shuddered with a fresh series of wards cast by the angry butler.

Granger-Draco, grinning, put her arm around Draco, and Disapparated.

~

At the hotel, Draco and Granger-Draco cast silencing spells around their room and proceeded to bounce about frenetically, unable to believe what they had just pulled off.

Granger-Draco was clutching at her face, pacing, and hyperventilating. Draco spun about and landed on the bed, laughing. "We fucking did it."

"I can't believe it," said Granger-Draco.

“Gods, what a rush,” said Draco.

“We must stop stealing things before we trigger some latent kleptomania in you.”

“I am truly considering a career change.”

Granger-Draco paused in her circular pacing and grimaced. “Right – I desperately need a wee.” “So go,” said Draco, waving towards the toilet.

“But I’m you for – nine more minutes,” said Granger-Draco, consulting the clock.

“Oh.” Draco felt a grin make its way upon his face. “What’s the matter? You don’t want to hold my willy?”

“I mean–”

“I can go in there and hold it for you, if you’d like, so you can piss with your eyes closed?” “Absolutely not,” said Granger-Draco.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ll just – make it quick. Do I sit or do I stand? I’ll sit – I don’t want to splash everywhere–” “Don’t be ridiculous. The entire point of being a man is to stand.”

Granger-Draco disappeared into the loo with a rather stiff back.

Draco got to experience the intriguing and annoying sensation of Granger touching his penis without him being there to enjoy it.

The expression on her face when she returned to the room was – interesting. “Well,” said Granger-Draco, emerging from the toilet. “That explains your feet.” “About that definition of lar—”

Granger-Draco pointed a violent index finger at him. “Don’t.” Draco cackled.

When the final few minutes of the Polyjuice dose had elapsed, there was a kind of melting about Granger-Draco, and Granger appeared, positively swimming in his clothes.

Draco turned around on the bed so that she could change. “You were rather good at being me – though some of your mannerisms were a touch exaggerated.”

“You make an extraordinarily convincing Borzoi.”

“I do not flip my hair like that – that was your own invention.”

“Did you see François’ face, at the end?”

“He suspected something, I know.”

“The pucks worked – thank goodness he was only hitting you at range and didn’t try anything nastier...”

Granger, now in a lovely little summer dress, joined him on the bed. Draco noted that she hadn’t glamoured her scar.

“Did you see the Marquis’ collections?” asked Draco.

“Yes! Outrageous. I’ve never seen anything like that in my life – nor will I ever again. Any one of those items was worth the entire GDP of some countries.”

“Greedy bastard, isn’t he?”

“The book room,” sighed Granger, clutching at her breast. “He has Excalibur!”

“The mast of the Argonaut!” “Persephone’s bloody pomegranate!”

“Cerridwen’s cauldron! How?! Who is he?”

“I think I know,” said Draco. “And if I’m right–”

“Who?”

“Did you see the flame? The purple one?”

“Er – I don’t think I did.”

“He closed the door as we passed it – a violet fire in a dark room. I think – I think it was the Violet Flame.”

Granger gasped. “The Violet Flame?”

“Yes. That one. The one that was only ever mastered by one alchemist.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Draco laughed in disbelief. “No.”

“Granger.”

“No – it can’t have been.”

“Yes. It must have been. I think we just met one of the greatest alchemists who ever lived. I think we just met the Comte de St. Germain.”

Granger sputtered. “No! No. How?”

“How else do you explain that collection? That must have been assembled over centuries and centuries? The money involved?”

“His face was peculiarly ageless.”

Draco's palms pressed at his temples. "We just robbed St. Germain."

"Oh my god," said Granger, hyperventilating anew.

"I stunned St. Germain."

"I insulted his wine!"

"St. Germain wanted kisses from me!"

"At least he thinks you're a good boy."

"A crotchety boy—"

"With bad breath—" Granger gasped for air between giggles "—He thinks you're — constipated!"

Draco couldn't breathe. "You — the man is a legend! And you—! Bloody hell, couldn't you have thought of something other than constipation?"

"Stop — I'm going to piss myself—"

Granger fell onto her back next to Draco on the bed and they laughed in exhilaration until they could laugh no longer.

~

Draco and Granger had made vague plans to return to the UK that very night, if they could – though they had both brought overnight bags, just in case.

The ‘just in case’ materialised. The International Floos closed at seven o’clock in the evening, but, as it happened, they lost track of time, lingering too long over tapas and full-bodied wines.

“I suppose a night in Spain won’t be the greatest hardship,” said Granger as they left the tapas bar.

They wandered through the Muggle part of the village, enjoying the Andalusian atmosphere – the ubiquitous geraniums in their terra cotta pots, the impossibly narrow streets, the white homes piled atop one another all higgledy-piggledy.

They came to a night market, where Draco was easily distracted and had to be talked out of buying a variety of Muggle objects, including a trombone, a thing called a lava lamp, and an inflatable boat.

“You do not need a boat,” said Granger, pulling Draco along and looking exasperated. “Don’t look so exasperated; I know you’re fond of me.”

“Am I? Are you sure?” “You said so today.”

Granger waved dismissively, but she was biting back a smile.
“Slip of the tongue.” “I rather like your slips of the tongue.”
“You would.”

They climbed a winding cobblestoned street to a mirador at the east end of the village, a lookout from which they could see the dark Andalusian countryside, undulating gently away, and distant Málaga, and beyond that, the ink-black sea.

To Draco, it seemed a good place for a bit of looking about and, perhaps, an accidental rapprochement along the railings. However, Granger decided to give an unsexy accounting of some of the horrors inflicted upon heretics during the Spanish Inquisition, and the moment passed.

Granger led the way to the village’s wizarding quarter to continue their exploration. It consisted of a single, narrow street, accessed by touching one’s wand to a whitewashed wall that grew into an archway.

The village’s magical inhabitants were holding a veritable party within. The street was aglow with carved turnips, pumpkins, and what looked like real human skulls.

“I didn’t realise the Spanish celebrate Samhain,” said Draco.

Granger looked about with keen interest. “No – listen to them – that’s not Spanish. It’s Gallego. There must be a group of them from Galicia.”

In the face of Draco’s blank look, she added, “Northern Spain. That part of the Iberian peninsula was once dominated by Celtic tribes. They still celebrate Samhain. Yes – look! They’ve got Queimada!”

What was Queimada? At first, Draco was convinced that it was made of the same stuff as the lava lamp thingie. It was a flaming punch of some sort, aromatised by citrus peels and coffee beans.

As they walked along the street, they saw versions of the drink being prepared variously in emptied-out pumpkins, or pots, or cauldrons. White-clad Galician druids were chanting over the Queimada and setting fire to the drink, creating gorgeous blue flames. People were counting to three as they tipped their glasses back.

Some of the druids chanted in Gallego, some in Spanish. Of the latter, Draco could catch snippets of phrases – incantations about black magic, freedom from evil, and purification.

A friendly druid spotted them and waved the bemused-looking foreigners over. She handed Draco and Granger a small, espresso-sized cup each, waving away their offer of payment.

She held up three fingers. “You must finish it in three!”

Draco and Granger each took a first sip. It was a heady drink – hot brandy, caramelised sugars, a rich aftertaste of coffee.

The druid nodded. “The first banishes evil. Drink again.” They drank again.

“The second removes prejudice from the mind,” said the druid, tapping at the side of her head. “One more.”

They finished their cups.

“The last awakens the passion in the soul,” said the druid, pressing her hands to her chest. Then she said, “Blessed Samhain!” and turned away to set her cauldron on fire again.

Music began to play and the party turned raucous.

“Have your passions been awakened?” asked Draco over the music.

“O, yes – this is paving the way for all sorts of debaucheries,” said Granger. Draco smirked at her.

She laughed and, flushed about the cheeks, looked away.

They meandered back to their hotel room. Draco said he wished he’d asked for the recipe for the drink – the addition of the coffee beans was brilliant. Granger was more interested in the bits of the incantation they had heard, its provenance and history, and whether it, too, could be traced back to the ancient Celts?

At the hotel, they each had a shower (Draco thought he still smelled of dog; Granger said she still reeked of Draco’s cologne and it was unbearable; Draco took offence and flung a pillow at her).

As midnight approached, and amongst much yawning from Granger, they changed into their sleeping things.

Draco got into bed.

Also, by the way, there was only one bed. Because, obviously. Granger was wearing a negligée.

This was going to be fine.

Granger stood at the foot of the bed, wand in hand. She looked terribly focused, as though she was calculating long division.

Then, Draco, being the first class, grade A, 24-carat, right royal berk that he was, said, “I don’t mind sharing the bed.”

Granger looked conflicted. “I’m not convinced that that would be sensible.”

“It’s far too small in here to Transfigure another.”

“I could make it work.”

“I promise I shan’t steal the blankets.”

“That is hardly what’s giving me pause.”

“What is giving you pause, then?”

Granger took a moment to answer. “The Queimada.”

“Oh? What debaucheries are you afraid of?”

Her bravado was always a safe bet. It paid off. Granger narrowed her eyes at him, then climbed into the bed beside him and slid between white sheets.

Draco did not look down, because her negligée rode up as she did so, and it was better not to. He looked at her instead.

“What?” asked Granger.

“It is terribly humanising, to see someone in a bed,” said Draco, his chin propped upon his hand. “I had become convinced that you were something else.”

“Something else?”

“A nymph, if you must know.” Granger looked amused. “Oh?”
“A vindictive one. One who might Transfigure an errant man into a mushroom, or something.”

Granger scoffed and waved her wand to turn off the lights. “I can aim for bigger and better things than transforming naughty men, now.”

“Oh?”

“Mm. I know exactly where Cerridwen’s cauldron is.”

“Dangerous.”

“Yes. Likewise with you and the Violet Flame.”

“You’ll tell me when you’re ready for the next heist.”

“Perhaps, when all this is over, we ought to go hunting for the Fleece.”

“I am entirely at your disposal,” said Draco.

There was a smile in Granger's voice in the dark. "Brilliant." Silence fell.

Draco was a good boy, even when he was not a dog. He stayed well on his side of the bed. He did not allow his mind nor his hands to drift towards the soft warmth near him. He behaved like the perfect monk he was, lying unmoving and staring at the ceiling and not thinking about Granger.

~

It had been a long day and the excitement and alcohol gave way to fatigue. They slept an hour or two, only to awaken to the sound of the shutters banging open and closed. A chill wind played about the window.

A rustle beside Draco told him that Granger was awake, too. She sat up and turned to the window, half-asleep, wonder-eyed.

The wind blew witch-whispers through the cobblestoned streets. The night sky was heavy with the press of clouds. The sea beyond the village foamed, cresting in high waves that hung in the air for silent seconds in a host of white, unearthly things.

It was Samhain night. The dead awakened. Souls wandered. Portents glimmered.

The veil between worlds grew thin. Boundaries grew porous. Thresholds disappeared. Things could span gaps. Things could be between.

Granger settled onto her side and looked at Draco. One of the straps of her *négligée* had slipped down in her sleep. He reached out with a single finger and pulled it back up. He let his fingertip drag into a long touch.

Her eyes were clear. They could blame the Queimada all they liked, but they were both perfectly sober.

Her delicate hand made its way to his face and pushed a strand of his hair back into place.

It was Samhain night. The veil between worlds grew thin. Tonight, terrible incompatibilities mattered less. Violent polarities softened. Universes could collide and pass through one another, the stars of one lingering lovingly in the light of the other.

Perhaps there was a place for them to meet in the in-between.

He caught her hand before she could pull it away. She watched him, curious, wondering. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles, then to her open palm, then to the inside of her forearm, where a desecration was carved.

Through the thin skin there he felt her heartbeat, too slow, still, for his ring to echo, but enough for his lips to feel. He kissed unvoiced things into her scar – regrets, sorrows, confessions.

Her eyes were dark and soft. Her fingers found the rough flesh that delineated the remains of his Mark. She pushed her cheek to it with her eyes closed. His heart was full. He felt her breath against it, then the press of warm lips.

She came closer, or he did, he didn't know. All he knew was that her mouth was now there, inches from his. There was the pull, there was the wanting to fall. He propped himself onto an elbow and lifted her chin to him.

They hung there in that place of equilibrium, between the known and the unknown, between the never and the not yet.

Now, the air grew rare. Now, the only breath worth breathing was the other's.

He brushed his lips against hers. He would have let the matter lie there, if that had been her wish.

Then she pressed her own kiss to his mouth. They met again, together, this time, and their breaths came faster. Her hand slipped up to the nape of his neck. He pulled her towards him, bodily, to close the in-between.

They did not speak. Speaking would make it real and this was not real.

It was Samhain night. They were wandering souls amongst many wandering souls, seeking solace or a moment of bliss.

The warmth of her leg was flung over his hip. His hand caressed the skin of her thigh, unable to distinguish the silk of skin beneath his palm from the silk of the negligée across his knuckles. She was all softness, all give. His hand grabbed at the arse that had taunted him too many times. He dug possessive fingers into it.

Slow, in that in-between, slow, in that uncanny night, they pressed out their want onto the other's lips.

Things that had burned low kindled into life. They heaped kisses upon kisses, hot, open-mouthed, touching tongues and teeth. He pulled her on top of him – long-dreamt dream. She kissed her way down his neck. He left the world altogether, then, in a sweet euphoria. When he returned, his pyjamas were being unbuttoned in a deft sequence, from his throat down, down, down.

Draco felt the brush of her hand against his erection, but he did not want that yet – he wanted her. He pulled her back up towards him and loosened the straps at her shoulders. The negligée fell about her hips in a silken puddle.

He adored. He kissed the smooth underside of one breast, then the other, then wet her nipples with tongue and the heat of his mouth. As he went, and her breath came faster, he felt a matching dampness where she sat against his stomach, and another, where his cock strained in his pyjamas.

Draco's fingers were under the negligée now. He tugged her knickers off. The negligée followed – and then, there she was, the nymph, naked and on top of him, and he didn't need anything beyond this, except to see her finish above him.

He propped his head up with a pillow against the wall and moved her closer to his face with insistent hands against her arse. She

clambered forwards, one hand against the wall and the other on his shoulder, and pressed herself, gorgeous and wet and tender, against his mouth. The scent of her would have been enough for him to pull himself off in three strokes, if he'd wanted to. He tasted her, slid a finger into her, felt her clench. A second finger joined the first. They fell into a rhythm of him suckling and kissing and her rocking her hips against fingers and tongue, one hand pressed against the wall, the other in his hair.

Her breaths came heavy – and then, so did she, with a gasped-out groan and a long shudder that pinched Draco's knuckles together.

The ring on his hand came into life, echoing the pitch of her racing pulse.

She held herself up, one hand against the wall, one squeezing his shoulder, for a quivering moment, before falling on top of him to catch her breath. He slipped his hand into his pyjamas and stroked himself as she lay on him, his fingers wet and sticky and smelling of her. Her eyes were bliss-filled and dark.

She tugged at his pyjamas. He kicked them off. She put a knee on either side of his hips. As he pushed himself up and into her, she pushed her mouth against his. He slid into her halfway. The heat and snugness wanted to undo him. He trembled – restraint, want.

She spread her knees wider. He watched their joining, the way he opened her, the way she inched him in with these unhurried ups and downs, the way she left him glistening.

Again they found a rhythm, an in-and-out strewn with wet kisses and gasping breaths. Above him, the gorgeous sight of her arching upwards, her breasts, her parted lips. Every roll of her hips pulled him closer, and closer, and closer, until he was at the edge, panting.

She came down, clenched around him, and he went over, and emptied himself into her in jerky spurts, his hands clutching at her thighs.

He reeled into some in-between for a long moment, afterwards, neither here nor there, a place of pleasure and twitching aftershocks and joined pulses racing through rings.

She laid herself next to him, her head against his shoulder. From there, he could observe the rise and fall of her breasts and the path down to her stomach that he wished to follow with his mouth.

None of it had happened and it was not real.

A sleepy hand caressed his hair. He ran his fingers along her hip.
They fell into a light doze.

Draco woke up hard again, perhaps an hour later, and nudged
her, and found her receptive, and made his way down that path
between her breasts with his mouth.

It was Samhain night. The dead were living and the living went,
again and again, to their little deaths.

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Chapter 31

The (J)anus (T)ickey Ward

Dawn rose grey the next morning. Rain pitter-pattered against the window.

In that damp silence, Draco “the Quash” Malfoy and Hermione “No Capacity for Complications” Granger stared at the ceiling and reflected upon what they had done.

It was difficult to deny what had happened, given that each had the other’s bodily fluids in various stages of evaporation upon their person.

The pillow-talk was brief and to-the-point. What happened in Spain would stay in Spain. They were professionals. They were professionals who respected each other’s professionalism and would never act in any way other than professionally with their assigned professional. They repeated the word to the point of semantic satiation, grew confused, and left for home.

Draco's wank bank benefited from some new additions, so not all was lost.

If Granger hadn't a single brain cell to spare before, now, with the acquisition of the Hope from Pandora's box, the entirety of her being was consumed by her project. In the days that followed, she reached the final brewing stage for the proto-Sanitatem and spent every waking hour at the laboratory, preparing to synthesise her miracle and launch clinical trials.

November's full moon crept towards them. Greyback and Granger were in a fraught arms race, now – infection versus cure.

Watching Granger's feverish work at the lab, Draco knew that illicit activities with her Auror – including a night in Spain that hadn't happened – were the last thing on her mind. As the full moon approached, her drive to complete the treatment bordered on the manic. Her pace was frenetic. She ate only when reminded to and often had to be bullied into going home to bed.

There was a blankness in her eyes when she looked at Draco, sometimes, but it wasn't Occlusion. Her mind was obsessively, fervidly, Elsewhere.

The fire in her was a dangerous thing – it made her so bright, but it also threatened to consume her. He missed her so very much.

When he wasn't with Granger at King's Hall, Draco joined Potter, Weasley, and their team in the search for Greyback. Potter's chase was as mad-eyed and frenetic as Granger's lab work. They pursued every lead that Draco had dragged out of Larsen. Those yielded some captures, but not bloody Greyback.

Shacklebolt received an emissary from the largest vampire clan in the UK. The cadaverous fellow, a Mr. Dragavei, informed the Minister that several clans had been approached by Greyback to join his cause, as the rumour was now that Granger's treatment could eventually cure vampirism. Dragavei was adamant that, by and large, vampires had no quarrel with Granger or her treatment. Those stupid enough to want to give up the "exquisite delights" of vampirism were free to do so – the clans would be staging no actions against Granger and wished to remain well out of the conflict. If Shacklebolt would kindly do not send Aurors after them, "It vould be much appreciated, thank you, Minister."

Shacklebolt relayed the story with a shudder. Dragavei had concluded with an offer of drinks and told Shacklebolt that, by the by, he smelled delicious.

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With November came the completion of the Janus Thickey renovation project. St. Mungo's, bolstered by the Malfoy gift, had not mucked about. They employed the finest magical architects and engineers to accelerate the demolition and build process, resulting in a fully renovated facility within three months.

St. Mungo's arranged a celebration to commemorate the completion of the new ward. Both Draco and Granger were, of course, invited as guests of honour. Granger agreed to step out of her laboratory for one (1) hour, to attend. Draco gave Smethwyck a list of stringent security measures that would have to be adhered to, if he wanted Healer Granger there in person.

The celebration took place in the ward itself. Those patients who did not wish to participate retreated into their private suites – because, yes, they now had private suites.

Upon his arrival at the ward, Draco ensured that the Aurors and DMLE operatives on duty were at their posts and did a Legilimency survey of the attendees.

Granger arrived shortly after having received his Jot that all was clear. Draco was just able to ascertain that she was looking lovely in a set of soft pink robes when she was surrounded by a crowd and disappeared from view.

“Mr. Malfoy, welcome,” said Smethwyck, appearing at Draco’s elbow with a G&T for him. “May I offer you a tour? Let us begin with the medical facilities. Here on the main floor: a consulting room, three treatment rooms, and – my favourite – an operating theatre...”

Draco was pleased by what he saw as they went. The new facility was impressive, but, more importantly, he was certain that Granger would be overjoyed.

The ward had been magically expanded and divided into two floors. A large entrance foyer opened above into an enchanted ceiling à la Hogwarts, reflecting the day’s weather (today, a grey November sky). On the upper level were thirty suites and a lounge. The lower level now featured an exercise studio, a small library, and a cafeteria, currently serving drinks and finger food to the guests.

At the far end of the ward, where a few scraggly plants had once struggled for existence, there was a vast windowed wall, looking

out over London. An indoor garden had been built there. A small group was stepping through it with sounds of delight – Longbottom and his parents. Pansy brought up the rear, a steady hand on Frank Longbottom's back.

A corridor led to a hydrotherapy pool, jutting out of the main building in a feat of magical architecture. It was encircled by windows on all sides and surrounded by tropical plants. A man ponced about in a disturbingly small bathing suit with a long-suffering nurse at his heels. Draco recognised the luscious, if greying, flop of hair: Lockhart.

Near the garden was a piano. One of the patients was playing something gentle on it. Her family clustered about her with smiles upon their faces. It was Lavender Brown.

It jarred Draco, seeing her. It reminded him that Greyback had been victimising innocents for years, and was still doing it. He wondered if Granger's treatment might do anything about her scars.

He turned away to find himself looking at yet another Greyback victim – Remus Lupin.

Lupin, looking frail, was leaning on Tonks' arm, a cane in his hand. Tonks wore a tailored men's suit for the celebration, and, frankly, pulled it off better than most men.

Tonks was fiercely protective of her private life. She had never mentioned that Lupin had become a patient here. His was the mellow voice that Draco had heard upon his first visit to the ward.

They were speaking with Granger. All three of them were pointing up at the enchanted ceiling and smiling.

Lupin spotted Draco and waved him over.

Draco had spoken with Lupin a few times over the years – at the occasional Auror Christmas party and other events here and there. He did not like speaking with Lupin. Lupin always looked at him with a sad sort of kindness – the kindness of a teacher who watched you make poor choices, and almost destroy your life, but still remembers the child you were. It made Draco feel squeamish, that undeserved, unspoken caring.

Today, however, there was a frank joy in the smile that split Lupin's gaunt face. "The man of the hour."

“Don’t flatter him too much,” sniffed Tonks. “He’s already unmanageable.” “Unmanageable? Draco? I don’t believe it,” said Lupin, shaking Draco’s hand.

Granger was holding back a smile. Draco was certain that she had a few opinions of her own on his manageability.

Exclamations followed on the pool, the piano, the suites, the garden. Granger was delighted by everything and rather looked as though she wished to pounce on Draco. He positioned himself within an appropriate radius, but she did not proceed.

Tonks and Lupin were drawn away by their children, who wanted to play on the piano.

“This came together beautifully,” said Granger, positively vibrating. “I’d squeeze the life out of you, but – too many witnesses.”

“Pity. It’d be a good way to go.” “They’ve finally fixed that bloody sign.”

“Have they?” Draco observed the new sign. “I’ll miss the anus hickey Ward.” “It did have a certain cachet.”

“What’s this about anus hickeys?” came a voice. It was Theo.

“We think you look like one,” said Draco.

Granger laughed. It was good to see – she was still there, somewhere, under the work-fever.

“Fuck off, Draco. Hermione, hello – you look ravishing.” Theo bent over Granger’s hand and brushed a kiss onto it.

Which was true, she did, but it was not Theo’s place to say so. Draco, tight-jawed, conveyed this to Theo by impaling him with his eyes.

“How go the sonnets, Draco?” asked Theo. Draco glared. “Shall I recite one for you?” “No.”

“Coward.”

Granger looked politely confused.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” asked Draco.

“Auntie Maud.” Theo gestured over his shoulder, where a patient in a long gown was looking seductively at one of the waiters.

“You’re related to Maud?” asked Granger. “That explains so much.” “Does it?”

“She’s an insatiable flirt.”

“Runs in the family. I wanted to say, well done, you two – this place is brilliant. Did you see the pool? I’ve half a mind to order the same thing done at Nott House.”

Theo helped himself to a spring roll from Draco’s plate. Then he stole a stuffed mushroom. Then he plucked Draco’s napkin from his hand, used it, and returned it.

“Piss off, you bloody seagull,” said Draco, waving his hand at him. “Go see to your aunt.” Theo turned around. “Oh no – what’s she doing?”

Auntie Maud was eating a cocktail sausage, but indecently.

“I must away,” said Theo. “Well done, again. How wonderful to see you doing some good in the world, Draco. I always knew you had it in you.” He turned to Granger and pressed his hands to hers. “He is a good man, you know, under all the dickheadery.”

Theo left and pretended not to hear Draco inform him that he was a bellend.

Now that they were alone again, Draco was formulating a compliment for Granger, because he refused to be shown up by

Theo. However, something plucked at his trouser leg and interrupted.

A toddler was holding a damp cocktail sausage, of dubious, Maud-ish provenance, up to him, for his inspection.

“Hello?” called Draco to the room at large. “There is an unsupervised foetus here?”

“That’s Mr. Belford’s grandchild,” said Granger, looking about.
“Oh – the family is in the garden.”

Granger put her hands on her knees and complimented the sausage. (She hadn’t complimented Draco’s sausage, by the way – simply a note upon the injustice. Perhaps he, too, ought to parade it about, slightly moist.)

Granger swept up the child to return it to its parents, leaving Draco with an empty plate, a dirty napkin, and an unspoken compliment.

His mood was not improved by his next visitor – the absolute throbber that was McLaggen. There were far too many malformed sausages at this party.

McLaggen was looking quite handsome in a suit and tie. Draco noted that he had chosen a Muggle suit. It annoyed him.

“Well done, mate,” said McLaggen, shaking Draco's hand.
“Incredible gift.”

Draco was on a ‘mate’ basis with very few people and McLaggen was not one of them. He gave the man a smile that hardly merited the name. It was a mere tightening of the lips – a sm at best.

McLaggen prattled on about the ward for a bit, before reaching the real reason for his visit. “Can I ask you something rather – er – personal?” he asked.

“What?”

“Are you and Hermione...?” “Are we what?”

“Seeing each other? Together?”

Seeing each other? Daily. Together? All the time. Together together? Absurd. They merely maintained a complicated Equilibrium out of mutual paranoia and Reasons, and shagged during Pagan holidays, and pretended it didn't happen, and he said nothing because he didn't do feelings, but he suffered in anguish because he had them anyway, and the more he tried to

quash her out of his heart, the more she lived there, a bright thing in dark places, but it was fine and all under control.

“No,” said Draco, to sum it up succinctly. “Ah. Is she seeing anyone? Do you know?”

“I don’t know and, frankly, don’t care,” said Draco, while caring deeply. “Right. I only thought to ask because you two seem – friendly.” “Friendly.”

McLaggen gestured to the ward around them. “You just did all of this and said it was for her, mate.”

“It was. She saved my life.”

“Right.”

They took a sip of their respective drinks, eyeing each other with thinly veiled dislike. “May I now ask you something personal?” asked Draco.

“All right.”

“What makes you think you’re good enough for her?”

McLaggen stared at him. The offence came upon him slowly. He stood to face Draco, shoulders square, face reddening. “What do you mean by that, exactly?”

“Which word didn’t you understand? Never mind – let me rephrase. You’re not good enough for her.”

McLaggen had finished processing the insult, and, since he hadn’t the brains for a verbal resolution, he appeared to be moving to the next stage – they were either about to exchange hexes or fisticuffs.

“You needn’t be so offended,” said Draco with a careless shrug.
“I’m not sure anyone is good enough for her.”

This gave McLaggen pause. His fist, which had been balled at his side, relaxed. “She can decide who’s good enough for her.”

“I agree.”

“But she likes to play hard to get. Has done since Hogwarts. She just needs a little nudge.”

“A nudge?”

“I’ve got – leverage.”

“Have you?” asked Draco. “What sort of leverage?”

“Strategic seats on strategic boards.”

“A real knicker-dropper of a move, that.”

McLaggen shrugged. “The usual enticements don’t work on her – money, looks. As you might’ve discovered.”

“I haven’t.”

“Hm.”

Draco’s next question was eminently casual. “Have you spoken to Smethwyck today?” “Hippocrates? No. Why?”

“I believe he’s got a bit of news for you.”

“What news?”

“I suppose there’s no harm in telling you now,” mused Draco. “You’re no longer a member of the St. Mungo’s Board of Directors.”

“What?”

Draco looked apologetic. “I had you removed. Sorry, mate.”

McLaggen sputtered. “You – what? Who the bloody hell do you think you are? You don’t decide whether or not I–”

“I do. It was one of my stipulations. For a gift of this magnitude, they were happy to comply. You’ve apparently been considered a

reputational risk for a few years – something to do with your behaviour around women, particularly Granger. They've also brought this concern to the MNHS. I believe you're one of the Trustees there. I'm not certain how long you'll keep that seat, either.

Consider this a friendly head's up – perhaps you can resign and avoid losing face.”

In the centre of the foyer, Smethwyck was tapping a glass and calling for everyone's attention.

“That's for me,” said Draco. He placed his plate and dirty napkin in McLaggen's hands. “Hold these – there's a good lad. I've got to go.”

Smethwyck, representatives from the MNHS, and Healer Crutchley, all made speeches. Crutchley's was by far the most touching; she had seen decades of neglect turned around in a matter of months and seemed half convinced that this was all a dream. Draco and Granger were variously pulled to the front of the crowd, made to say a few words, pulled back into the crowd, pushed forwards again, toasted, photographed, and toasted again.

In the mingling that followed, Draco saw Granger being approached by members of the Board. Most were treating her

with a cautious respect. Some approached with apprehension, as though she might get cutty-uppy and launch herself at them with a scalpel. (They needn't have worried on that front; she only did that when her Auror's brains were about to be splattered onto the floor by a Viking.)

Narcissa had indicated to Draco that she would suffer the English damp for a few hours and look in on the celebration. She arrived in time for the speeches, tanned and still smelling like whatever terrace in Seville she had been lingering upon.

When she spotted Granger, Narcissa greeted her with far more warmth than Draco would have expected – perhaps the heat of Seville lingered in her, too.

Draco was in the clutches of the Belford family, which had gathered about him to thank him and explain Mr. Belford's long standing Bubotuber haemorrhoids, which had been cured, and have their toddler hold the cocktail sausage in his face.

Draco lured them towards Granger to hear what was being said between her and his mother

Granger was gesturing towards the ward at large and expressing gratitude in that passionate way of hers.

Narcissa seemed quite taken with Granger. She pressed Granger's hands into hers. "Please do not speak to me of gratitude. You returned my son to the world of the living. This is but a gesture. You must tell me if there is anything else my family can do for you. How are your larders?"

"Erm – they're fine – and you've done more than enough, really gone above and beyond –"

"It's only money," said Narcissa, with a hand wave and lack of concern that only the truly wealthy can indulge in. She peered at the enchanted ceiling. "Draco normally has little time or patience for charity work – his mind is bent on the investment side of things, you know, and I manage the philanthropic activities – but in this case, he did remarkably well."

"He did."

"You managed to hone a new sort of focus in him."

"Oh, yes, a focus." Granger gave Narcissa one of her stiff smiles. "He seems happy. I really do just want him to be happy, you know?" "Of course."

"I want him to find something – someone – to make him happy."

Narcissa looked significantly at Granger. Granger, blushing, stared at her gin fizz as though her entire being was held in its thrall. Draco considered launching himself at Narcissa and tackling her into the ground.

“Forgive me for my motherly witterings-on,” said Narcissa. “At any rate, he has impressed me. Perhaps he will be able to take on the mantle, after all. I always wished he would be more concerned with these things, you know. Did you see the little garden? I wouldn’t have put the chrysanthemums quite so close to the lily grass, they get a bit lost in it, but otherwise...”

The toddler escaped again and came to show Granger the cocktail sausage. “Oh!” said Narcissa. “Is it an orphan?”

“Er – no – he belongs to the Belfords,” said Granger, lifting the child up again and looking about the room. “He’s going to get trod on.”

“Are you sure? He looks like an orphan. He’s so dirty. Perhaps he is a street urchin. Why is he holding a sausage? Did he pickpocket it? Where are the nannies?”

The flock of Belfords swooped by to pick up their errant child. Granger was buffeted about between family members in a whirl

of thanks and congratulations and haemorrhoid updates, until Narcissa's thin hand hooked her round the elbow and fished her out of the vortex to resume their conversation.

Draco joined them.

"Ah, Draco, there you are. I was just telling Healer Granger that you've impressed me with your management of a philanthropic exercise at this scale."

"All I did was sign off on the transfer of the funds. The planning was all – all someone else at the hospital."

"Oh? Well. Someone rather brilliant, I imagine," said Narcissa.
"It is very well thought out. Only the chrysanthemums."

Draco looked at Granger. She gave her head the most minute shake. Very well. He wouldn't point out that the brilliant Someone was right here.

"You did well in your speeches, Draco," continued Narcissa.
"Not too verbose. Do try to smile a little, next time. We don't want to look haughty. We are men of the people, etcetera."

"Of course."

Narcissa gave a little shiver and pulled her shawl more closely around her thin shoulders. “Is there a draught? I believe there’s a draught. Did someone open a window? I suppose it’s just me – I was just in Seville, Healer Granger, and I shall be returning there directly. I cannot abide the English damp anymore. I suppose it’s age...”

Granger was called away to speak with reporters from the Prophet. Narcissa beckoned Draco closer with a crook of her finger. “Draco,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

There was Rebujito on her breath – sherry and lemon. It wasn’t the heat of Seville that was lingering in her – his mother was nicely tipsy and having a grand time of it. It explained the volubility.

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking,” said Narcissa. “Oh no.”

“Yes. Do we know if Healer Granger is single?” “Mother.”

“I am merely curious. I’ve been pondering – possibilities. Don’t be so defensive. You look as though you’ve just licked a nettle. Do you like her? I think you ought to like her. She is not milquetoast. You still haven’t told me in what capacity you are working together.”

“I literally cannot tell you that. I’ve taken a Vow of Secrecy.”

“Have you? Hm. It must be important, then. Find out if she’s single. Be proactive, Draco.” “Mother.”

“I am merely making a suggestion. Passivity breeds only pain, dear. I learned this over a long life of it. Don’t be like me. Oh – watch out behind you – that orphan is back again – mind your pockets – no, child, I do not want the sausage—”

Narcissa drifted off to continue her rounds and vaguely promised to send Draco a Jot when she returned to Seville.

It was Draco’s turn to be interviewed by the Prophet. He said various nice things about the importance of long-term care and Giving, all while reeling at his mother’s new infatuation with Granger.

The rogue toddler continued its rampage. It tugged at Longbottom’s trousers with vigour. Draco looked over at precisely the wrong moment. The trousers slid down and opened before him a magnificent panorama of Longbottom’s long bottom.

Healer Crutchley gave Draco and Granger enormous hugs, suffocating each of them in turn in her ample chest.

Granger came back up for air looking mildly disturbed. Draco, more accustomed to tits in his face, merely fixed his hair.

When they were free of Crutchley's abundant bosoms, Granger pulled Draco to the side.

"Smethwyck's just told me about McLaggen's seat on the Board. Was that your doing?" she asked. "Me? No. I don't meddle with affairs of hospital governance."

"I don't believe you."

"You're right not to. Did Smethwyck tell you who the vacant seat would be going to?" "No...?"

"Me," said Draco.

Granger's eyebrows rose. "Congratulations. A whole new pestilence of incompetence awaits you."

"No. It awaits you."

"What?"

"I've named you my delegate for the seat. I hope that's all right." The smile, gods, the smile.

“That is – very all right,” said Granger.

The brightness in her eyes, the lip bite, the glance down. “Whip them into shape, Granger.”

“It will be my absolute pleasure to.”

They sipped their drinks. Now she was giving him a long and wondering look. “What?” asked Draco.

“Nothing. Well – something. I agree with Ernie.”

“Oh?”

“They’re all right after all, these Malfoys.”

Draco touched his glass to hers with his most Malfoyish smirk.

The celebration drew to a close. After goodbyes, Draco accompanied a Disillusioned Granger to the St. Mungo’s foyer, where a line of Floo hearths flickered.

They found the place unusually crowded. There was a crush of people milling about and sounds of confusion. Pieces of parchment were fluttering everywhere, stuck to the ceiling, fixed upon windows, blowing about.

Montjoy, one of the Aurors on duty, shoved his way to Draco and Granger. “Get her out of here,” he muttered when he got close.

“What’s going on?”

Montjoy used a low-level Depulso to push people out of the way as Draco pulled Granger’s invisible self towards the fires.

“Hundreds – thousands of these, all over the foyer,” said Montjoy, snatching up a piece of parchment. “Humphreys just Jotted me – says they’re all over the Ministry, too.”

There was a Gemono Curse on the parchment – even as Montjoy held it, duplicates sprang into existence and spilled onto the floor.

Upon the parchment was a photograph of Granger. And below it, the following lines, in a rough, uneven hand:

Give me Granger and the attacks stop

~

They had expected an escalation from Greyback, and there it was.

It happened not in the form of another direct attack on her, but something far more insidious. Something that turned the eyes of the entire wizarding population on her and offered a hideous incentive to help Greyback reach her. Key magical locations in the UK had received the same treatment as St. Mungo's.

In collaboration with Granger, the Ministry released a statement on the nature of her breakthrough. With the announcement that a cure for lycanthropy was proceeding to clinical trials, Greyback's self-interested cowardice was exposed.

But, as November's full moon drew nearer, there were whispers, too. Two terror-filled full moons had passed and another loomed. The population was on edge. Some had already lost. Some were terrified of losing.

The damage was done. Granger could no longer go out in public. She was, for all intents and purposes, confined to the Manor and the lab.

She took the hardship as well as Draco could have hoped. If Greyback had intended to isolate her, he failed. Her Jotter buzzed endlessly with messages of support. Her cottage was half buried in letters. Requests to participate in the clinical trials flooded her postbox at Cambridge from all over the world. The Prophet's

front page was plastered with editorial outrage and letters from the populace expressing their disgust at Greyback's attempt at coercion.

Narcissa sent Draco an alarmed Jot to make sure he kept Healer Granger safe from that lunatic; should they offer the Manor to her? When Draco showed her the note, Granger smiled the first smile he'd seen in days.

During November's full moon, the Danish Auror HQ sent a detachment of thirty of their own Aurors to assist with the next round of attacks. Between that and a population that was now taking the threat seriously, only eight were infected, none killed.

November faded into December. There were good moments with the bad. Granger's fire, far from being quenched by Greyback, flared even more impressively.

In a moment of triumph at the lab that Draco felt honoured to witness, she completed the synthesis of the first batch of doses of the cure for lycanthropy. The laboratory was rocked by shrieks, jumps, and applause, as the entirety of Granger's team heaped themselves upon her. Then they all sat or laid down on the floor, and someone opened champagne, and they passed the bottle around because they were too exhausted to conjure glasses.

Granger attempted to make a speech, but her voice failed, and she put her face in her hands, and was wracked with silent sobs. This began a chain reaction of crying throughout her team, which only ceased when three or four more bottles of champagne had been consumed.

Many hours later, Draco found himself standing in a silent laboratory at midnight, with everyone asleep on the floor at his feet.

He carried Granger home through the Floo.

Granger finished passing submissions through a hideous maze of Codes, Authorities, Standards, and research and ethics review boards, and began her clinical trials.

Lupin was amongst the first group of patients to receive a dose. Draco escorted a Disillusioned Granger to St. Mungo's to administer it. Lupin's family was all around him. Tonks held one hand, his teenage son the other. His daughter was upon his knees.

Granger was all gentle professionalism as she administered the infusion. There was a smile on Lupin's thin face and hope in his eyes that matched the Hope that was pushed into his veins.

Draco saw Tonks cry for the first time.

~

When Draco and Granger returned to the Manor that afternoon, Granger, her own eyes rather bright, said that she fancied a walk, would he like to come?

He would. Of course.

They cast warming charms upon themselves, then crunched along a frosty path bordered by ferns of ice and creaking birches, silver on white. Their breath streamed behind them.

For a time, they said nothing. Granger was thoughtful as she picked her way past frozen puddles. Draco kept pace with her small steps, sometimes just behind her, sometimes next to her.

They came to the end of the path. It gave out onto a mirror-still lake whose edges glittered with new frost.

The air smelled cold and clear, so pure that it was dizzying to take in too deep a breath.

Granger stood upon the embankment and clasped her mitten hands together. Draco came to stand next to her.

They stood in silence.

He nudged her with an elbow. She looked up at him.

“You did it,” said Draco.

Granger pressed her mittens to her mouth, smiling, incredulous.

“I – yes. We need to see how the numbers come back, after the first few infusions. But – yes.”

She looked up at the sky winnowed by the wind. It was one of those December days when the firmament is a pure blue brilliance. The white puff of her sigh was carried up by a gust and disappeared into it.

There was a lovely, trembling sort of joy about her – the exhausted, can’t-believe-it joy of one who has achieved something after much effort and is slowly coming to revel in the elation of it.

There were tears in her eyes. She took in a shaky breath.

Draco gave her a handkerchief instead of the bone-crushing hug he wanted to give her. “I should like to point out that these are happy tears,” said Granger with a sniff. “Obviously.”

Granger dabbed her eyes, then held the handkerchief to her chest. She cleared her throat. “I’ll be writing an article on this project, now that my work is public. Perhaps even a book. And I shall have a long list of dedications and thanks. This has been the work of many hands and many minds. Everyone at the lab, of course, and so many colleagues whose work I incorporated, and the researchers that came before me, and...”

“And?”

“I’d like to add you,” said Granger.

An unexpected spark of happiness was lit in Draco. “Would you?” “Yes.”

“I’d be – honoured,” said Draco, unable to stop a delighted grin from making its way across his face.

“I haven’t decided how to phrase it yet. Would you prefer anonymity? I could use some sort of epithet – I would like to thank the thorn in my side?”

“The Nuisance Auror?” suggested Draco. “The opportunistic ghoul?”

“The real pestilence of incompetence?”

“Crotch?”

“Then you must sign off as Hormone.”

“That may be difficult to explain to the editor.”

“Do you think ‘Partner in Unspecified Crimes’ would constitute an admission of guilt?”

“I don’t know – you’re the Auror.”

“Mm. Better not.”

“Perhaps I shall simply say, my heartfelt thanks to Draco Malfoy –”

“I like it.”

“–whose hair was sacrificed many times for the cause.”

“That adds the required gravitas.”

“That’s settled, then. Thank you.”

“We ought to celebrate. Do you want to invite anyone to the Manor tonight? I’ve a bottle of 1972 Beaujeu-Saint-Vallier?”

“1972?! Goodness, no. Save it for a special occasion.”

“You are the special occasion.”

Granger laughed, then grew pensive. At length, she said, “Quite frankly, tonight, I’d rather do nothing at all.”

She looked out at the still lake. Under her coat, her shoulders relaxed. With the first infusions completed, a tremendous pressure had been lifted from her.

The mania of the fire had abated. She was back in her own head again.

Draco felt the change when their eyes met. Now he wasn’t being repelled by fever-heat and a mind too burdened to spare a thought to anything but the work. Now he was drawn in again by the usual warmth. The quiet attraction. The pull.

He held out his elbow to her. “Let’s go do nothing at all. I don’t believe anyone has ever deserved it more.”

They hadn’t really touched each other since Spain.

She looked up at him with a swift smile. He felt her grasp upon his elbow and the press of warm fingers through his cloak.

She was back.

His heart soared with the wind and went to meet the sky.

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Chapter 32

A Paedagogical Exchange

At the Manor, a briskly snapping fire awaited them in the smallest salon. The curtains had been drawn against the darkening sky. Henriette laid out a small goûter of cheese squares, tapenade, and tiny quiches lorraines.

They divested themselves of their winter things. Draco installed himself in an armchair in shirtsleeves and braces. Granger flung herself onto one of the sofas, folded her hands upon her chest, and smiled at the ceiling.

Her elation was catching. Draco, too, felt a deep gladness – for the wizarding world at large, but also for her, for having achieved something so meaningful after so much effort. The months had been long, the dangers had been many, the occasions for giving up, innumerable.

And she hadn't given up. She had pushed through. She had gone forth and conquered. He brimmed with admiration.

To communicate this powerful emotion, Draco floated a cube of cheese above Granger's face. "Can I help you?" said Granger to the cheese.

"You haven't eaten. Henriette will be vexed."

Now he tried to float the cheese into her mouth. It bumped her nose and chin. Granger swatted away the cheese. Draco wished to indicate that he was better at aiming for mouths with other things.

Granger sat up and summoned a few crackers towards herself. It was the first time they'd eaten together in a long time. Draco watched her partake in one of the quiches lorraines in small bites.

"What?" asked Granger. "You eat like a pygmy puff."

Granger looked provoked. Then she sniffed. "I should like to compare you to some creature or other – but I must be fair. Poor table manners don't number amongst your many flaws."

Draco was simultaneously flattered and offended. "My many flaws?" Now Granger looked prim.

"What did I do?" asked Draco. "What didn't I do?"

"Just another broken promise," said Granger, lightly, as one would, if one's trust in men had been obliterated, yet again, by

Draco Malfoy.

“Oh, we’re doing this again, are we?”

“Yes.”

“Which promise?”

“You never taught me Caeli Praesidium.”

Draco was piqued. “You never taught me the things you were meant to, either.” Granger was holding back a smile. “I suppose we’ve both been a bit busy.”

“A bit.”

“Are you busy tonight?” asked Granger. “You’re meant to be doing nothing.”

“I know.”

“Learning my most complex ward is not nothing.”

“Permit me this extravagance.”

“Fine. But you’re going to teach me the runic command.”

Granger hopped to her feet and looked eager. “All right.” She had managed to do nothing for all of ten minutes.

“Let’s go to my study,” said Draco. “I shall have to draw some things out. It gets a bit – theoretical.”

“Ooh,” said Granger, following him out of the salon. “I like theory.”

Draco opened the door to his study and stepped aside to let her in. She looked about, taking in the furnishings, the heavy curtains, the candles floating in glowing clusters. The fire sputtered and purred.

One wall was dominated by a painting of some of his grandfather’s prized Abraxans. The winged horses’ ears pricked at the sight of Granger. One gave her a curious little whicker.

Draco sat himself behind his desk. He had expected that Granger would take one of the two seats for guests across from it. However, when she saw him drawing parchment and an inkpot towards himself, she joined him on his side of the desk, and perched herself upon one of his chair’s wide armrests.

Draco did not mind this invasion of personal space in the least. It felt wonderful to have her back.

“So. Caeli Praesidium.” Draco inked his quill and drew out a few lines. “I suppose you know what a geodesic polyhedron is?”

“I do. Some viruses have capsids shaped like geodesic polyhedra, actually.”

“Capsids?”

“A sort of shell, made of protein.” Granger waved her hand at him. “Continue.”

“Right. My intent with this ward was to distribute any incoming magical forces throughout the structure. Most traditional wards have a point of weakness that can be brute forced through concussive or compressive magicks – especially the parabolic wards that we typically see used over dwellings. No ward is unbreakable, of course, but Caeli Praesidium requires far more magical pressure over a longer period to crack.”

Draco drew a few more polyhedra. “In essence, the more vertices cross the sphere – like this – the stronger it is. After you’ve established the ward’s desired scale and strength, you need a bit of arithmancy to divide its face and calculate its potency. So in this dodecahedron, for example—” he sketched it out “–I could divide those pentagons up into triangles, and from there into even smaller triangles. This gives us a great many more vertices. That’s called augmentation.”

He looked up to see if he had lost his audience yet, but no; Granger, her hands folded upon her lap, was the very picture of

rapt attention.

He could still smell winter on his own clothes, but she smelled of the fire from the salon. “Now for the arithmancy. This formula—” he wrote it out “—gives us the number of vertices the polyhedron will have and its potential magical force. Of course, the more complex it is, the more exhausting to cast – but the longer it will last.”

“Ooh,” said Granger, eyeing the formula. “That’s multiplex arithmancy. I haven’t done that since uni. Can I have a go?”

Draco jotted out an example for her to work on and passed her the quill. She leaned upon an elbow. There was a quiet delight in her as she worked – in the press of the quill on the parchment, in the thinking.

She solved it in half a minute, which was, frankly, fucking sexy. A little tingle of pleasure coursed through Draco.

He produced a more challenging example and gave her the quill again. He sat back to observe her. She brushed the tip of the feather against her lip as she pondered the new problem. Over his many years as an eligible bachelor and general libertine, Draco had been on the receiving end of a great many seduction

tactics. Granger's inattentive lip-brushing ranked amongst the most tantalising.

After a longer bit of working out, she solved the second example, too. Draco was – titillated.

He wished that she would slide off the arm rest and fall into his lap. That would be the pinnacle of whatever this was – this sapiophile's wet dream. Granger in his lap, solving obscure bits of arithmantic exponentiation.

His next challenge was unfair. Granger attempted it, stopped in confusion, then gave him an accusatory look, before breaking the arithmancy down in reverse.

“Tss. Your starting point was pentagons. This one has square facets.”

“Well spotted.” Draco held his hand out for her to return the quill. “What happens if we augment it?” asked Granger, withholding the quill. “We would rend the fabric of the universe, I expect.”

“Let's see.”

She worked through the calculation. “Oh. A geodesic subdivision resulting in right angle triangles, not equilateral ones. Not as strong, I suppose.”

Draco looked at Granger's interesting creation. "That would be my assumption, too."

"There's a beauty to it, isn't there?"

"There is," said Draco, not talking about geometry, obviously.

"Are you game for one more?" Granger looked suspicious. "All right."

"No tricks, this time, I promise – only complexities."

He produced a final example, a rather nasty one, to ensure that she would be occupied for longer than a moment, so that he could indulge in this experience, in the push of her hip against his arm, in the brush of her heel against his shin.

"Hm," said Granger. "I need to use Köhler's law."

"You know Köhler's?"

"I do."

"My word. This has become stimulating."

Granger pressed her lips together. "Whether I can remember it all, however..." She planted two elbows on the desk and muttered vague recollections of Köhler's. Yes. Stimulating. His cock twitched out a hello against his inner thigh.

Granger had taken off her bulky jumper and was wearing a thin Muggle top. Draco stared at the flare of her hips – very holdable, you know, very nicely shaped for a man’s hands, if a man were having filthy thoughts while a woman calculated primary vertices.

He decided to avert his eyes before he developed a full-on erection. The window across from his desk provided an unhelpful distraction. It was dark outside and all he could see was a reflection of the candle-lit study. Granger was leaning over, providing a lovely view of cleavage and the top edge of her bra.

Brilliant. Should he just have a wank over his Principal right here? She was distracted and it would probably take him a minute? Gods.

Granger made some breakthrough or other and began to scribble away. “Done!” she said, and flung down the quill.

Draco leaned forwards to study the parchment and her elegant solution. Yes. She had done it.

And it was fucking erotic.

The inkpot on his desk exploded. Granger jumped. “What the—?!”

An uncontrolled magical spurt. Wonderful. A step above coming in his pants. “Sorry,” said Draco, Vanishing away the evidence of his premature inkjaculation. “Are you all right?”

“I was – overstimulated.”

“Overstimulated?” repeated Granger, looking far more mystified than she had at any point during his explanation.

Draco cleared his throat. “Shall we carry on? You’ll be doing these calcs in your head after the first few times. The wand movement is similar to Salvio Hexia, only we want the upward cuts to equal c3. Which can take a long time, as you might imagine. The casting intent isn’t protection, it’s fortification. Do take note of that, the nuance matters. The incantation is Caeli Praesidium, once, at the beginning. That’s all.”

“Right,” said Granger. “Let me give it a go.” “Ward the door.”

Draco took advantage of her shifted attention to pull at a trouser leg, discreetly, so that the bulge looked like an innocuous fold in the material. More or less.

Granger cast the spell a few times, interspersed with a few more scribbles of arithmancy. Her casting was slow and her ward was small, but it was clear that she had understood the gist of it. On

her fifth attempt, a fairly credible silvery net splayed itself across the door, shimmered, and disappeared.

“Well done,” said Draco, instead of ‘I am wildly turned on at the moment.’

“I shall have to practise. What an interesting ward – I’ve not seen arithmancy applied to spellwork this way, I don’t think.”

“It’s useful. I’ve tried to teach it to other Aurors but most of them haven’t any interest as soon as they see the arithmantic notations.”

Granger tutted. “Their loss.”

She made as though to get up, but Draco touched his fingers to her arm. “What?”

“Our quid pro quo, Professor. The runic command.”

“Right.” Granger shifted in her seat to face him. One of her legs was tucked under her where she perched on the armrest, the other rested lightly between his.

Very good.

Granger held up her wand and drew out four golden runes. “Hverfðar vib inn laguz.” The candles went out and the fire in the hearth reduced to a glow of embers.

“Oops,” said Granger in the sudden darkness.

She waved her wand and the candles lit themselves again. “It’s an apotropaic syntax. The runes are from the Meginrunar syllabary, but I interpolated prosodics from the Rúnatal. It translates – broadly – to ‘extinguish.’ Try the incantation first – the intonation is a bit tricky.”

Draco tried. Granger shook her head and repeated the ancient syllables slowly. He tried again. Granger tutted. “You’re tripping up on the palatal ejectives.” “The whats?”

“Stop sounding so posh. You’re speaking ancient runic, not ordering foie gras at the Seneca.” Draco tried again, infusing a bit of Nordic harshness to his speech.

“Better. If only you spoke German instead of French.” Granger sighed and looked wistful. “Their fricatives are to die for. Now, the runes.”

Granger plucked up the quill and dipped it into the fragmented remains of the ink pot. She drew four runes on the parchment.

Draco copied them. The focus was good for him – he was, apparently, unable to concentrate on runes and sustain an erection at the same time.

Granger took a vast, teasing pleasure in critiquing his calligraphy. “Oh, no – you’ve made laguz too squishy. Straighten that up. Good. A bit more confidence in the downwards stroke. Right. Try again. What’s happening over here? The roof collapsed over Hverfðar? How does one draw such perfect polyhedra and then do that to a rune? It’s got four lines. As for this exhibit – is it a Cheesy Wotsit? And that one – another of your hedgehogs? And this? A spot of hyperbolic geometry?

You’re going to rend the fabric of the universe, at this rate.”

Draco did not rend the fabric of the universe, but he did laugh too hard and poke a hole through the parchment.

Granger studied it with a held-back smile, but offered no censure: “Runes are meant to be carved, after all.”

After a few more practice runs, Granger pronounced herself pleased.

They progressed to the wand movements. To prevent any universe-rending or other botheration, Granger put her hand over

his as he drew out the runes into the air.

Her hand was gentle over his, her palm soft over his knuckles.

Draco's first few attempts, paired with his horrid pronunciation, were botched aberrations. Then Granger spoke the runic command with him, and that, along with her guiding hand, resulted in the glow of golden runes, suspended, only for a moment, in the air.

The candles flickered.

Granger removed her hand from his so that he could crack on by himself. Draco pondered whether he ought to feign incompetence – but he also did not wish to look stupid in front of her.

A dilemma for the ages. Pride won out. He tried again and the runes glowed for a longer moment, and half the candles in the study were extinguished.

The fire, however, crackled on merrily. Impertinent thing.

“That was a very fair attempt,” said Granger. “Well done.”

She was looking at him with a mixture of satisfaction and admiration, which pleased Draco very much and sent lovely little flutterings to both his ego and his groin.

Granger – sadly – decided to end her perching upon his chair. She rose with a groan and pressed a hand to her arse. “My bum’s gone numb.”

“Shall I massage it?” asked Draco.

“That’s quite all right,” said Granger with a laugh. He hadn’t been joking, but fine.

Granger stretched, yawned, and eyed the door.

Draco was not ready to let her go yet – he felt as though he had only just got her back. “Are you off to do nothing?”

Granger observed him with a raised eyebrow. “You look as though you’ve a compelling alternative in mind.”

“I’ve thought of a new bargaining chip, for The Computer. But it can wait.”

“Now you’ve intrigued me.”

“Have I? Oh no.”

“What is it?”

“Come with me.”

They left the study. Granger fell into step beside Draco, with a few extra hops forwards here and there, given the relative lengths of their strides. “Where are we going?”

“First it was meant to be a birthday present, as I didn’t know what to get you, because you’re a mogul and you can buy yourself whatever you like, and I hadn’t any ideas besides appalling pyjamas and other less appropriate – er – anyway – Mabon came and went and I lost the moment. Then I wanted to use it to cheer you up when Greyback put his vile posters all over London, but you were consumed by your work and hardly had time to sleep.”

They arrived at a set of double doors. “Now, since I’ve missed all of my windows of opportunity, I’ve decided that I might as well be a proper scoundrel about it and use it as leverage for The Computer.”

Granger breathed out a soft oh when she recognised the doors. She turned to Draco, the beginnings of a smile upon her lips. “Strategic. I approve.”

“Wand,” said Draco, holding out his hand.

Granger placed it in his palm. Draco held it to the doors and, with a few waves of his own wand, added Granger to a very short list of individuals permitted to enter the Malfoy library.

He pushed open one of the doors. Granger took an excited step forwards, but found the way barred by his arm.

She looked up at him. “Yes?” “The Computer?”

“I will be your personal tutor until you’ve learned everything your little black heart desires.”

Draco smirked. They shook hands. And, to his delight, Granger did not let go, afterwards – she pulled him into the library behind her and drew him along as she discovered the place.

It was gratifying to be with her as she explored the library, which took up an entire wing of the Manor. It was part enormous reading room, part traditional stacks, part personal museum. Tall windows gave out onto the forest and the lake along the estate’s western edge. A fire crackled. Reading desks and oversized armchairs were placed in thoughtful arrangements here and there, lit by magical lanterns.

Granger’s gasps continued to be an enormous source of pleasure. She requested a tour. Draco provided. They wandered through

the stacks and display cases. Granger queried Draco upon the classification system, on the Malfoys' acquisition philosophy, on their weeding plan.

There was a soft light in her eyes.

Draco was expounding, very interestingly and intelligently, he thought, on the principles that guided his acquisitions and weeding, when he noticed that her gaze was unfocused.

“Are you still with me?” asked Draco. “Yes,” said Granger, blinking.

Draco continued. She drifted off again.

“Hello?” said Draco, vexed. “Sorry. Yes. I’m here.”

Draco decided to reschedule the lecture, as he was clearly not as fascinating as he thought he was. Granger had a vague smile on her face.

They walked past books and tomes and periodicals and a small collection of prints and drawings. He showed her the cartography collection. A scrawled Here there be monsters was inscribed upon a 17th century map. Draco pointed at a tiny speck amongst seamonsters and said that it was Granger.

They passed through the rare books collection, displayed under glass. Granger sighed as she observed the ancient grimoires and

manuscripts there.

“Who decided to put The Book of Din Eidyn under nonfiction?” she gasped, coming to a sudden halt as she passed a shelf.

“Me,” said Draco. “Tsk,” said Granger. “The battle happened.”

“That is open to interpretation,” said Granger, with no small degree of swot. “That bard’s very existence is unsubstantiated. You’d be better off putting it under poetry, I think.”

“Kind of you to share your opinion, but in this library, l’État, c’est moi,” said Draco. Granger looked to be fomenting thoughts of revolution.

They finished their tour. Granger found the sofa nearest the fire and curled up on it, and looked at the library as one might admire a prospective view over a beautiful landscape. “This may be my favourite spot on this entire estate.”

“May be? What others would compete for your affections?”

Granger enumerated upon her fingers. “I like the small salon near the back of the house – the one we were in today – it’s ever so cosy when Henriette has the fire going. The terrace where we ate

over the summer – that was just lovely. The rose garden is an absolute dream, of course..."

She trailed off as Draco seated himself next to her. "What about a certain window ledge?" asked Draco.

It took her a moment, but Granger gathered his meaning, and went pink across the cheeks. "I'm not sure I remember that one."

"No?"

"No."

"Right. I think you were dreaming."

A rather tense silence descended upon the library.

Granger was the first to crack. She leapt to her feet. "Shall I teach you the computer? I'll go fetch it."

"But we had just got round to doing nothing," said Draco.

Granger looked as though she had decided that doing nothing was a hazardous pursuit. "We may as well, you know. It's essentially nothing – for me, anyway. It's very easy."

She did not wait for his acquiescence and disappeared to fetch the device. She returned with the computer in her arms and a stack of her pucks. “You look excited,” she said as she sat herself next to him.

“I have been pondering this item’s mysteries for ages.” “You could’ve asked any Muggle-born, you know.”

“No. I wanted you.”

Granger gave him an interrogative look as she pushed at a few of the buttons on the machine.

It was lovely to learn The Computer, because Granger slid herself closer to him until their legs touched, and balanced the device between them, and then she put her hand over his to demonstrate how the ‘touchpad’ worked. All very nice. She showed him the computer’s functions – to write, to research, to communicate with others, to ‘browse the internet.’

The internet was a thing that Draco was not quite certain he understood, but Granger could write things like ‘cat’ or ‘house’ or ‘oncology’ in a box, and information about the things came up, and pictures, too. It seemed extraordinarily useful. An instant encyclopaedia. Granger said that the entire contents of libraries were on it.

She pushed the computer to him so that he could try the internet. The first thing he searched for, with much belaboured typing, was “tits.”

Granger shrieked out a giggle as she watched the word appear. “Malfoy!” Draco gave a low whistle as he observed the results of his endeavour.

“Now tell me what the cloud is, and Hackers,” said Draco, passing the computer back to her, with five rather nice pairs of tits upon the screen.

Granger got rid of the tits (a pity) and explained the cloud and Hackers. The cloud was interesting, conceptually. The Hackers’ lack of axes or other violent weaponry disappointed him. Granger confirmed that there was usually no bloodshed involved. Anticlimactic, overall.

When Draco had finished poking about on the computer (“bums” and “Draco” completed his tour of the internet), he passed it back to Granger, who rose and began to put things away.

“That was informative,” said Draco. “Now I know all of your secrets.” “Mm. I may have overplayed my hand – I don’t know all of yours.” “Oh?”

Granger moved towards the door. “But this has been an illuminating evening, regardless. Thank you for giving me access to the library, it’s—”

Draco had risen, too, and blocked her before she could reach the door handle. “Which secret of mine is intriguing you?”

Granger shook her head. “It’s stupid. I won’t tell you.” “Now I need to know.”

“You don’t need to know,” said Granger, stepping away from him. There was a smile making its way upon her face.

“I do. You live in my house. You’ve seen me stark bollock naked. You have literally been me. What mystery persists?”

Granger laughed. “A minor one.” She took another step away. “It’s silly.” He followed her into the stacks that she was backing into. “Tell me.” “No.”

“I shall back you into a corner and hex it out of you,” said Draco.

He made good on the first part of the threat. After a few more steps backwards, Granger was cornered.

She gasped in faux outrage. “You wouldn’t dare.”

The little chase into the stacks filled him with an unexpected rush of endorphins. His breathing picked up.

“I would,” said Draco. He came closer.

“I’d teach you what a real ruptured bollock feels like,” said Granger. “You can do whatever you’d like with my bollocks.”

He took another step towards her.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” said Granger.

She was against the stacks, now, and had nowhere to go. He smelled fire. He looked down at her. She looked up at him.

He felt that much of his future happiness lay in those bright eyes.

“What secret?” he prompted again, because if he didn’t occupy his mouth with queries, it might do something idiotic, such as declare undying devotion to her.

She looked off to the side, as though calculating an escape route. Draco threw an arm up to bar the way.

She looked to the other side. Draco put a single finger under her chin and turned her back towards him.

“You’re terribly insistent,” said Granger. “I get what I want,” said Draco.

Granger gave him a magnificent eye roll. Then, relenting at last, she relaxed against the shelves and beckoned him closer.

He crowded in with delight. A bit of her hair caught in his end-of-day stubble as he leaned in. “The whipped cream,” whispered Granger into his ear.

“Ah,” said Draco. It was his turn to grin. More than grin. He leaned his forehead into her shoulder and laughed.

“I await your answer,” said Granger, her breath brushing at the side of his neck. Draco lifted his head and said, “I think it would require a practical demonstration.”

“Demonstration is one of the more effective paedagogical methods,” nodded Granger. “Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be – gentlemanly. Or appropriate. Or wise.”

Granger looked unsurprised. “What a pity.”

“The tragedy of it rends my very being,” said Draco, hardly exaggerating.

Granger ran a hand down his arm and tutted. “Still wearing the silver cufflinks. We haven’t learned our lesson on the dangers of transition metals?”

“Perhaps we’ve been hoping for a reprise.”

“Repetition is also an excellent paedagogical method,” nodded Granger. “I await instruction,” said Draco, an absurd amount of hope in his voice. “Oh, no. That, too, would require a practical demonstration.”

“Oh?”

“Unladylike. Inappropriate. Unwise.”

“All the best things are.”

Granger gave him the most adorable, dangerous little grin.
“Perhaps I’ll show you when you show me the whipped cream.”

“You are devious and cruel.”

“Thank you. May I enquire about another minor secret, while I have you?”

“Yes.” (She had him in so many senses of the term, it was a bit ridiculous.)

“What was the other thing you thought of buying for me, other than the appalling pyjamas? The inappropriate thing?”

Draco teetered on the edge of the fulcrum.

“That was – nothing,” he said, instead of indicating that he had visited a lingerie shop in Muggle London and daydreamed about it for days.

“Nothing? I ought to push you into the stacks and tyrannise you into an answer.” Yes. She had him. His heart, that stupid and useless organ, was full.

“Please do,” said Draco.

She put a single finger to his chest and backed him up. He hadn’t far to go before he hit the stacks behind him, half a step at best.

A shelf dug into his back. Her fingertip pushed lightly into his front. Could she feel his heart? Probably.

“Tell me,” said Granger. “Mm – no.”

Granger hooked a finger into his collar and rose to her toes. “Tell me,” she whispered against his jaw. “Or else.”

Just a few sweet nothings and sweet threatenings and barely-there touchings, and he was back in the spin of the vertigo. The gentle euphoria was upon him.

He was a love-struck, Granger-addled fool. “Shan’t,” said Draco.

What were they even talking about?

It was her turn to put her fingers on his chin. She drew his face to her.

“Give us the barest of hints, then,” she said, fluttering, as she did, the barest of hints of her breath against his mouth.

“You’re terribly insistent.” “I, too, get what I want.”

“Is it still want, when the thing you want is so willing to give itself to you?” asked Draco. “Deep philosophies amongst the stacks,” said Granger. “Stop trying to distract me.”

“You’re the one distracting me,” said Draco. Their noses touched. “I haven’t any idea what we’re on about.”

“Inappropriate presents.” “Right.”

“What must I threaten you with, to disclose this information?” asked Granger, searching his eyes, a smile in her voice.

Draco put his forehead against hers. “Withholding whatever you’re teasing me with at the moment.”

“A conundrum.” She drew a finger along his jaw. “Difficult to withhold, when I so want to give.” “More philosophies to delight and intrigue.”

She breathed against his mouth for a moment longer. It was an exquisite exercise in self-control to not slide his hand around the back of her neck and pull her to him.

Granger drew away by an inch or two. “I am withholding. Talk.”
“Heartless,” said Draco.

“Satisfy my curiosity and I’ll satisfy these—” “These what?”
“Philosophical enquiries.”

“What a charming bit of bribery.”

“Will it work? Aurors are trained against, aren’t they?”

“En principe. But my professional integrity crumbles before you, yet again.”

“Oh, no,” said Granger.

“You needn’t look so smug.”

“Tell me.”

“I simply wanted to buy you – less appalling nightwear.”

“Thoughtful. Nothing too inappropriate about that.”

“It was a Muggle lingerie shop.”

“...Oh.”

“Muggles are very imaginative with their nightwear, you know. Far more than our wizarding equivalents. So many strappy

thingies – lace garters – camisoles – lovely matching sets – naughty little ensembles – all of which occupied my thoughts for far too long, afterwards.”

There was a blush on Granger’s cheeks.

“I told you it was inappropriate,” said Draco.

“Dreadfully,” said Granger. “Come here so I can give you your bribe.” Draco leaned down.

She pressed a kiss to his lips, but pulled away before he could respond in kind. It wasn’t enough. None of this was enough.

He wanted to kiss her slowly. He wanted to back her up into those stacks and lift her and squeeze all of his want into it.

“I should’ve negotiated parameters for this bribe’s duration and intensity,” mused Draco. “It’s probably – wiser, this way,” said Granger.

Her gaze flitted back to his mouth. Then, with an effort, she looked away. She twisted idly at one of his cufflinks. Delicate fingertips brushed at his wrist.

“You didn’t ask me where my favourite spot on the estate is,” said Draco. “Oh...? Well – where is it?”

“Here.”

“It is a beautiful library.”

“No. Here – with you.”

He caught her hand where she played with his cufflinks and entwined his fingers with hers.

She smiled that smile that made him soar. She was a light amongst the shadows, doe-eyed, blush-cheeked, golden-souled.

His heart was full of her. Her mind, her wit, her magic, her ambition, her beauty, her chaos. He felt himself at the edge of the fall.

He could love her. Gods, he could love her.

He ran a finger along her cheek.

He might love her already, in secret heartbeats and stolen touches and slow looks.

There was a tearing and a dissonance – a pleasurable pain as his mind stretched to accept what his heart already knew.

He loved her already.

It tore. He suffered in silence. She, unaware of his ordeal, turned her face into his hand. Against his palm, the softness of her cheek, the press of her smile. He was so full of longing it hurt. He was wretched, wretched.

“I’ve missed you,” said Draco. His voice caught at the edges. The horrible, heart-on-sleeve sincerity of it appalled him. She, bless her, responded in kind. “I’ve missed you, too.” There was a breathiness to the words, the unsteadiness of suppressed emotion. “Je reviens de loin. I feel as though I’m back in the world of the living.”

He still held her hand. He ran his thumb over her ring. “You must tell me when you’ve recovered your capacity for – complications.”

She looked up at him with lips parted and eyes the colour of curiosity. He felt her returning touch against his knuckles.

“After today, I – I may have a spot of wiggle room.”

“What if we were – just a bit stupid, then?”

“...Let’s be a bit stupid.”

She slipped her fingers under his braces, where they lay against his shoulders, and pulled him towards her.

He backed her into the books.

He kissed her slowly, as he had wanted to, and lifted her against the stacks, as he had wanted to, and squeezed all of his want into it.

Her lips smiled against his.

Her kiss was sweet, and, gods, it felt like love.

They snogged like idiot teenagers amongst the shadowy stacks. She was as beautiful as he imagined she would be, pressed against the books.

Her hair came loose. He breathed her in by the lungful, by the heartful. Small fingers sought something to hold, slipped at his bicep, went to his shoulder, then found his collar.

There was such a loveliness in all of it – her mouth keeping pace with his slow kisses, the lightness of her in his arms, her gasps. It was a rapture, a magic. He wanted to tell her that she had him, that he was hers. He wanted her for his own.

He loved her. He kissed this realisation into her neck. He was light-headed with it, sick with it, afloat with it.

The dinner gong rang.

After the stupidities – gorgeous, bright, shining stupidities – Draco found that there was love in everything he did. It was in the door he held open for her as they left the library, in the brush of his shoulder against hers in the corridor, in his walking her to the dining room.

There was desperate love when he stood still for her to fix his collar. There was tender love when he pulled out her chair. There was aching love in pouring her a glass of wine. When he, like a fool, reached to push a curl of her hair behind her ear, it was wrecked with love.

He teased her for her small bites because he loved her. He threatened to steal her last profiterole because he loved her. It was why he followed her into crypts – why he wrestled hinds in swamps – why he kissed her scar.

And that pull – that gravitational force – l'appel du vide – was falling into love, over and over again.

At the foot of the stairs, after dinner, there was frightened love in his “Good night,” pulling back on itself, trying to keep itself

secret.

His “Sleep well” sounded like “Come here and kiss me again.”

As she went up the stairs, and he watched her ascend, her every step away from him was a heartache.

He ran his hand through his hair and stared at the empty stairs.

He loved her. It was in every embrace, in flights under stars, in the crossing of swords, in secret ballroom dances, in the giving of things, in the life-savings, in the passing of handkerchiefs, the accidental touchings, the arguing about hyphenated surnames, the drunken picnics, the shared cups of tea. He loved her.

She made him understand the word.

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Chapter 33

Heroics, Hazards of

Notorious Auror Draco Malfoy was in love with his Principal. Everything was not under control and everything was not fine. Draco's harrowing realisation made things untenable on two fronts. He therefore got out of bed the next morning with two objectives, both of which filled him with different kinds of dread.

First, given that this was no longer Quashable, Equilibriumable, or remotely under control, he needed to speak to Tonks and resign formally from the Granger assignment.

Second, having rid himself of the fetters of their professional relationship, he was going to go to Granger, and bare his anguished soul to her.

And, if that went well, he formed a vague tertiary objective involving snogging her to within an inch of her life.

(Also shagging her to within an inch of her life. But first, the snogging. He was a gentleman.)

Draco arrived at the office that morning – well, morning-ish – to find Potter preparing to hold a WTF update. He asked Tonks if he might have a word with her after the meeting. She fixed him with an inquisitive look, nodded, then gestured at him to sit down – Potter was about to begin.

As Potter enumerated a few of the WTF's limited successes that week, Draco rehearsed his speech to Tonks. He would say that he was taking her up on her prior offer to drop the Granger job. He would insist that Granger keep the ring, but remove himself from the assignment in any official capacity. He would suggest that Granger stay at the Manor after he resigned, as it remained the safest place for her.

Tonks would be well within her rights to press him on the wisdom of stepping aside at this rather critical juncture – and if she did, he would play it cool. It was nothing, really. Just a minor issue, hardly worth mentioning. What issue? Oh, only that he was, you know, in love with Hermione Granger. Probably had been for a few months. Currently writhing in superb agonies about it. Did Tonks have a bin in her office? He might be sick.

Potter and Weasley were now presenting mugshots of suspected pack members. Draco's knee jiggled. If they could get on with it, it would be wonderful, so that he might accelerate this hideous confession and crawl away somewhere dark and lonely to die like an animal.

Suddenly, the ring flared to life on his finger. Granger's heart rate hit a new peak – there was a wave of echoed panic – then there was the burn of the distress beacon.

Everyone was staring at Draco, who had leapt to his feet, wand in hand.

“Granger,” he gasped.

Now all rose – Tonks, Potter, Weasley, Humphreys, Buckley, Brimble. “What is it? Where is she? What’s happened?”

But now, through the ring, Draco felt only emptiness. His attempt to Apparate resulted in nothing – there was no answer from Granger’s ring; he didn’t know where to go.

He stared at his hand with slow comprehension. “They’ve got her. They’ve done something to the ring – disabled it or destroyed it–”

Swearing, Draco cast his tracking charm. A map appeared before him, upon which Granger's hairpins glowed. He ran through the locations as the worried Aurors clustered around him. St. Mungo's, Trinity, the cottage, the Manor—

"There," said Brimble, pointing at a cluster of pin-pricks off of Scotland. "The Outer Hebrides." Draco raised his wand to Disapparate to the point, but Tonks pulled his arm down.

"Hold the heroics, Malfoy. You're going to Apparate to bloody Scotland? Don't be stupid. Give us one second to strategise before we all leap to our gory deaths."

Draco did not care about any gory death at the moment but Granger's, and preventing it with his own, if need be. Potter and Weasley jostled for their wands, looking as wild-eyed as he felt.

Tonks stuck her head out of the conference room and called for Montjoy and Goggin. "Kit up and get your arses over here."

As Montjoy and Goggin scrambled over, she asked, "Who was on duty with Hermione at the lab?"

"Fernsby," said Weasley.

"Humphreys – with Montjoy, to the lab – see what happened to Fernsby. Brimble – call in all available Aurors and DMLE

agents. All of you join us as soon as you are able. I've a feeling we are about to walk into the werewolf lair."

"Right."

"Nearest Floo is Leverburgh," said Brimble, pointing to the map.

They piled into the corridor towards the Auror Office's Floo hearth. Draco's heart thundered in his throat, in his mouth.

As they ran past Tonks' office, a hulking figure loomed in her Foe Glass. Tonks flicked a V at Greyback.

"Disillusions on," said Tonks, tapping her head with her wand. Everyone followed suit and stepped into the Floo.

A confused innkeeper in Leverburgh heard a gaggle of Disillusioned individuals drop out of his hearth. Before he could so much as offer them a pint, they'd rattled his glassware with the cracks of their Disapparations and left.

The Aurors Apparated to the tiny island amongst the Outer Hebrides that had glowed on Draco's map. They materialised onto a flat, green piece of coastline. There was no one to be seen.

Draco was unsurprised – he had felt his Apparition get forced off course by an Anti-Apparition Ward.

In his head, a screaming chorus: where is she? Where is she? Where is she? Nothing whatsoever from the ring.

He cast detection spells towards the centre of the island as the Aurors girded themselves with protection and deflection charms.

Things took an unfortunate turn. “Looks like three hundred of them, if not more,” said Draco as figures lit up beyond.

“Bloody hell,” said Weasley, at the same time as Potter said, “Shit,” and Tonks said, “Fuck.”

Draco cast his tracking spell again. At this proximity, the spell was able to produce a more detailed map, which showed Granger in the centre of a kind of bowl-shaped depression in the terrain, bound around the periphery by a high ridge.

“Wards?” asked Tonks.

“The usual,” said Draco. “Anti-Apparition and alarms, all along the ridge around this hollow. Tonks, she’s in the middle of everything – we’re going to need a distraction.”

“Take care of the wards. Buckley, Goggin – you’re the distraction. Draw fire from the western edge.”

Tonks focused on a morph. Through the Disillusion, Draco saw her features grow smaller and her broad shoulders grow narrower. He was now looking at a Disillusioned Granger.

“That’s a dangerous game,” said Goggin, shaking his head.
“Brilliant,” said Potter.

“Potter, Malfoy, Weasley – with me,” said Tonks. “Tambling’s infiltration protocol. We are going to Hermione. If we can get her out together, we do. If we can’t, I’ll take her place. You’re to extract her before they notice the swap. Send sparks when she’s safe – then we can have a spot of fun.”

Draco set himself upon the wards at the top of the ridge. He disarmed a patch large enough for the Aurors to squeeze through.

The Disillusioned forms of Goggin and Buckley sprinted off to the left.

From his new vantage within the wards, Draco could see the mess that awaited them – easily three hundred werewolves. Probably the entirety of Greyback’s remaining pack – the

fanatics, the true believers. They variously stood or squatted, watching something at the centre of the crowd.

In the middle of them all, strapped against an enormous boulder, was Granger. She still wore her white lab coat.

Draco was seized by a desire to sprint in and begin cursing. His Disillusioned wand hand jerked.

Tonks caught sight of the movement. She pinched his arm just above the elbow. “What’s the matter with you?” she whispered. “You’ll get her killed. Get me to her.”

Granger looked barely conscious. Her head hung. Weasley swore under his breath.

How the hell had they got to Granger? She’d been at the lab. Draco desperately wanted to tell her that he was here. Something like five minutes had passed since she had turned the ring.

The four Aurors crept their way through the crowd, Disillusioned, their heavy Notice-Me-Nots suppressing the werewolves’ ability to perceive them. If someone did notice something – a double- take, a sniffing of the air – they were hit by a silent Confundus or Obliviate.

As they neared the centre of the group, they could hear Greyback's hoarse voice spitting out some gloating speech at Granger. Thank the gods – thank the gods he was stupid enough, arrogant enough, to gloat.

"Should've chosen something else to cure, shouldn't you?" came the sound of his voice, even raspier now than it had been during the war. "Do I look like I need curing? Look at me, girl. Is there something wrong with me? Aren't you going to say anything?"

Draco hadn't cast an Unforgivable since the war. At the moment, the killing curse felt like a reasonable option. What cared he for his soul, when Greyback's filthy hand was under Granger's chin?

Draco was going to kill him.

They had at least another ten metres to go before he would be within range. The crowd grew thicker. Draco lost sight of Potter and Weasley's Disillusioned shapes. Tonks was at his side.

How long was Greyback going to gloat? He could snap her neck at any point between now and the swap.

Greyback began to move away from Granger – it was a blessing and a curse. Every step took him further from her, but also out of Draco's range.

He walked through his pack, revelling in his victory, asking his men whether they felt that they needed curing? He had a little Healer just here for their pleasure?

Carefully, carefully, the Aurors broke through the front line, and crept nearer to the boulder where Granger was tied.

The distraction came.

Tonks hadn't asked for subtle. An earthquake rumbled under Draco's feet, then there was the sound of an explosion. Draco felt the heat of it, a searing wind across his face. It sounded as though Goggin and Buckley had invented an entirely new, volcano-scaled Bombarda, and decided to take out as many werewolves as they could in the process.

As the werewolves scattered in confusion, the Disillusioned Aurors flanked Granger.

Greyback, unaware of the company, pointed to a group of men. "You lot – watch the girl." He sprinted towards the explosion

with a snarl. “How the fuck did they know where we are? I destroyed that bloody ring. How many are there?”

Potter and Weasley’s figures advanced towards the watchmen to head them off if needed while Draco and Tonks completed the swap.

Draco knelt next to Granger, in what looked like the wet ashes of an extinguished fire. He disarmed a few hastily cast alarm wards.

Granger stared at their approximate locations with half-open eyes. She had a split lip and marks across her face that spoke of blows. Something was wrong with one of her hands – broken or dislocated fingers, Draco thought. From someone violently tearing off the ring.

His rage was heady. He controlled it.

Tonks sat herself next to Granger. Her Disillusion shuddered as she matched Granger’s clothing.

The watchmen were distracted, only occasionally looking towards their charge as they strained to see what was causing the eruptions at the other side of the field.

Draco severed Granger's bonds and replaced them with illusory lookalikes strapped across Tonks' chest. He Disillusioned Granger just as Tonks cancelled her own Disillusion.

Granger was pulled away from the boulder. Tonks slid into her place, her wand tucked against her leg.

Just in time – two of the watchmen had turned around to check on the woman that looked like Granger.

The real Granger, invisible, was limp in Draco's arms. Draco whispered Gravitas Penna. He slung her almost weightless body over his shoulder like a Grangery sack of potatoes to keep his wand arm free.

Two watchmen got too close to the boulder for Potter and Weasley. Draco saw their eyes grow unfocused as they were hit by a Confundus each.

Another watchman said something to them and received no answer but gurgling. "Oi," he called to another. "What the fuck is wrong with—?"

He was Stunned.

"Go," came Tonks' sharp whisper.

The remaining watchmen shouted in alarm.

As instructed by Tonks, Potter and Weasley flanked Draco to accompany Granger out of the fray, drawing as little attention to themselves as possible. Draco felt Potter refresh his Notice-Me-Not charm.

They all cast a backwards glance at Tonks, hating to leave her so exposed.

The switch had worked. The remaining watchmen took positions next to Tonks-Granger, wands raised, but did not for a moment ponder whether this woman was anything other than the real Healer Granger.

Another explosion rocked the field. Spells were now whizzing into the sky in the direction of Goggin and Buckley.

“Are we sure none of us should stay with Tonks?” asked Weasley as they walked, slowly, carefully, amongst running werewolves.

“She’s still got her wand – she’ll Confrigo our arses if we don’t do as she says,” said Potter.

Draco would certainly not be staying. He had the most precious burden in the world on his shoulder, and his sole objective, now, was making it out of here undetected. Greyback's sudden death could wait.

They were almost run into by a group of werewolves jogging towards the watchmen. Potter and Weasley cast a Depulso, knocking them out of the way, then Petrified the lot of them.

They heard the watchmen shouting orders to look for whoever had Stunned and Confunded their colleagues at the boulder.

“Shit,” breathed Potter, sending another Confundus over his shoulder towards a witch who attempted to investigate her fallen comrades.

“Almost there,” said Weasley.

Draco flicked a Flipendo at another runner who got too close.

They were halfway up the ridge. From there, they could see Goggin and Buckley – and, thank the gods, the newly arrived Humphreys, Montjoy, and Fernsby, and a dozen other Aurors and DMLE operatives with them, who joined the clash on the western side of the hollow.

However, the three Aurors' trail of Petrifications and Stuns had been noticed. They could no longer advance freely amongst the chaos. They were being looked for. Bursts of Finite Incantatem and Homenum Revelio criss-crossed around them, which were deflected whenever it was impossible to dodge.

Weasley was hit, Disillusioned himself again, and entered into a scrum with four werewolves. Blast. Draco did not like this one bloody bit.

"Keep going," said Potter. "He can take care of himself – we've got to get her out." At the top of the ridge, a line of men now stood.

Behind them, a witch was patching the tear in the wards that Draco had made. Something about her sour face was familiar.

Potter's hand found Draco's shoulder. Draco stopped moving. Potter was right: they were too badly outnumbered and Draco bore too precious a burden to attempt a direct confrontation here.

Another Goggin-Buckley explosion detonated.

Draco and Potter turned and backed down the ridge, hoping to find a spot further on to open the wards again.

They made the mistake of looking back towards Tonks. Greyback was beside her, surrounded by a dozen men, and looked to be preparing to rip her off the boulder and – gods only knew what.

A Finite Incantatem flew in their direction. Potter was hit.

Draco cast a Depulso at Potter, flinging him out of the way of a sizzling curse. He scrambled down the ridge away from the werewolves that were now converging on Potter.

The only advantage to their being so seriously outmanned in this fight was that the werewolves couldn't Disillusion themselves without risking hitting each other as they circled their enemy.

Potter Disillusioned himself again, vanished from sight, and got serious. His Reducto flung Greyback's men away, with or without all of their limbs.

Draco decided that Potter, too, could take care of himself and continued his desperate search for a quiet place at the perimeter of the Anti-Apparition Ward, where he could put Granger down and cut his way through.

He sent a Patronus towards Goggin and the newly arrived reinforcements, asking for aid at this end of the field. The Borzoi

sprinted away in a silver streak.

Granger stirred against his shoulder.

“You’re all right,” said Draco. “I’ve got you – we’re almost out.”

“Wand,” said Granger.

Draco was loath to part with his. He spotted a Petrified wizard and muttered, “Accio wand.” A stout wand flew into Draco’s hand.

“Put me down,” said Granger. “I can walk.”

“Are you sure?”

“Y-yes.”

From what Draco could see under the Disillusion, Granger was dazed. She looked towards the boulder where she had been tied. “Oh – they’ve put it out... Of course they have, that would have been too – too easy, wouldn’t it?”

“Put it out? Put what out?”

Granger fell silent. She was healing herself. Draco saw her Disillusioned hand cast spells towards her head, her hand, one of her ankles.

“How many are there?” asked Granger in a weak voice.

“Three hundred. We have reinforcements coming – we’re too few. I’m looking for a spot to get you out of the Anti-Apparition Ward. They’ve wised up – they’ve put up a perimeter of men along the wards, now. We’re going to have to fight before we can get you through to safety.”

“There are too many of them,” said Granger, looking about with a hopelessness that matched the one in Draco’s heart that he hadn’t dared acknowledge.

Potter and Weasley had teamed up and were causing some rather strong turbulence amongst the werewolves, further down the ridge. A curse streaked towards Draco and Granger. He threw a Protego to deflect it.

The Protego was spotted. The line of wizards at the top of the ridge began a slow walk towards Draco and Granger, criss-crossing the ground before them with hexes.

Below them, a full-scale battle raged, as the Aurors and the DMLE agents attempted to make inroads towards them.

They were trapped. “Fuck,” hissed Draco.

“I need to make a fire,” said Granger.

“No. You need to get out of here, not make bloody fires—”

“Get out how? We’re surrounded.” Granger’s Disillusioned form kneeled on the ground. “Buy me three minutes and I’ll make them regret they were born.”

The wizards approaching from above were now far too close, and too numerous, for comfort. “Bloody fucking hell,” said Draco. “Three minutes.”

Also, he was going to make them regret they were born first.

He cast a dense Caeli Praesidium over Granger, cancelled his Disillusion to draw enemy fire towards himself, then got to work.

Under the silvery ward, Granger lit her fire.

The first three werewolves who approached Draco had their throats torn out. A vortex of conjured knives impaled the next two, and Arcanist’s Arrows thudded into the chests of the next. Every wand-arm raised towards Granger was met with an Immobulus and, if Draco had time, the burst of a detonation to rid the wizard of his troublesome limb.

Potter and Weasley were attempting to come towards him, but they were hemmed in by a crowd of werewolves.

Curses were hurtled towards Draco, parried, and countered with choking, rupturing, or dismemberment.

The first Unforgivable was cast, a killing curse just at his feet. The man responsible was decapitated.

Draco was beginning to draw attention to himself. There were too many opponents and more were coming. He couldn't use his Legilimency – couldn't cast lengthy Turncoat Jinxes – couldn't strategise. He only had time to react. A curse reached the silvery ward and bounced harmlessly off it. It should never have reached the ward. Draco should have deflected it.

He felt the beginnings of panic – not for himself, but for her. His casting grew rushed, reckless. This was why Somethings were forbidden between Aurors and their Principals.

Another killing curse flashed towards him. Draco summoned a werewolf to take the hit instead, then flung his attacker off the ridge.

Potter and Weasley managed to crash their way through their circle of enemies with a joint Reducto and came to Draco's aid.

“She’s doing something with the fire – Laceratio! Suffocatus! – she needs three minutes—” “We’ll give her three minutes,” gasped Potter. “Depulso!”

A pair of werewolves was sent flying. They were replaced by three more.

“Suffocatus! Scindo!” said Draco, whipping a choking curse and a throat-slicing towards two of them.

Weasley hit the third with a ball of orange flame. “What’s she going to do with the fire?” “No idea – Expulsis visceribus! – I trust it’ll be spectacular—”

A dozen werewolves broke off from a scuffle below and began to climb the ridge towards them. “Too many of them,” said Potter, spotting the group

“Shave down their numbers before they get too close,” panted Weasley to Draco.

Weasley and Potter positioned themselves defensively on either side of Granger’s silvery ward. Draco hated to trust them, but, with that crowd coming their way, he hadn’t a choice. He Disillusioned himself and clambered down the ridge.

He cast two Bombardas to soften the group up, and then, wand in one hand and knife in the other, he was amongst them. His wand met throats, his knife pressed into eyes and the soft spots under chins. He was a Disillusioned whirl whose passage was marked only by entrails and spurts of blood.

Not a single one made it up the ridge.

He clambered back to Potter and Weasley. The beginnings of the shakes were on him from imminent magic depletion.

“One minute,” said Potter.

Around Potter and Weasley, a small rampart of werewolf bodies had begun to form while Draco had been occupied with his butchery.

Below them, Tonks, still disguised as Granger, was holding the attention of Greyback and his retinue. She was dancing about, wreaking havoc with explosions, casting Depulso at the ground to push herself away from them, and leading them on a merry chase around the battlefield. Draco watched her trip backwards and fall, saw, with a thrill of fear, Greyback loom over her – then she planted a combat boot into his groin and scampered away

again, dodging spells and cackling, and Draco remembered that she was a Black as well as a Tonks.

Buckley had rejoined Tonks and was acting as her rearguard, putting up a defence of the alleged Granger for all he was worth.

Greyback looked up at the ridge. He saw the silvery ward. He pushed his wand to his throat and, in a magically amplified voice, ordered his men to destroy “whatever the fuck they’re doing under that thing.”

A fresh wave of attackers came upon the three Aurors at the top of the ridge.

They were in a storm of spells, now. The ward was hit repeatedly, but deflected every spell with a metallic ping. Underneath it, Draco could hear Granger gasping out a long incantation. The fire flickered between the polyhedra.

The new wave of attackers was fresh and numbered about two dozen. The Aurors shifted to desperate, back-to-the-wall defence, forming a triangle around Granger, unable to do more than deflect. They used the bodies of werewolves to absorb the killing curses that came their way.

Potter was hit by something concussive that threw him into a group of werewolves. He cast a Bombarda as he landed. The air reeked of burnt flesh.

Draco felt a cutting curse split his neck. He fell to his knees next to the ward, clutching at his throat – then felt the cut seal as quickly as it had opened up.

Granger.

Five approaching werewolves vanished from existence before his eyes. There were five worms on the ground where they had stood.

Draco stamped on them.

He felt the shakiness of magical exhaustion threaten his casting as he flung a Depulso at another werewolf.

A large, glowing rune emerged from within the ward and floated towards a line of werewolves approaching from above. Draco heard a word of command. The rune dissolved into a fine golden mist.

Greyback's men blinked at each other amongst the mist – then rushed to Potter's aid. Inverted ethics.

Tonks-Granger was doing too well against Greyback below them. He was a brutal duellist that few could go toe to toe with – certainly not a Healer who had last seen active combat fifteen years ago.

Greyback, parrying spells, his face a bloody mess, looked up towards the silver ward, at Draco and Potter and Weasley positioned around it, and finally came to realise that the Granger he was chasing, who was meeting every one of his curses with her own, was not Granger.

He whipped a killing curse towards Tonks, who dodged it.
“That’s not the fucking Healer. Finish her.”

Then, with a rage-filled yell, he scrambled up the ridge towards them.

The silver ward around Granger was beginning to flicker. Draco told Weasley to cover him and, panting, prepared to cast the exhausting thing again.

Weasley was assailed by three curses at once. He deflected two. The third hit. He went down. There were too many of them. Granger’s Disillusioned figure was now bent over Weasley. Draco heard a Healing incantation. He turned to shout at her to

return to the safety of the ward – but the ward had blinked out its last.

Now, where the ward had stood, there was a fire. What was special about this damned fire? Draco could not say. A circle of runes glowed at its base – Draco knew just enough runic to read the protection magicks there – Inextinguishable.



He needed to cast the ward over Granger again – it was the only reason she hadn't yet got hit by a Finite and been discovered.

There were too many of them. He needed time.

Potter said, “Look out!” and threw a Protego towards Draco. It deflected a curse, but another followed it.

Potter was hit.

There were too many of them.

A hex flung Draco's wand from his hand.

Another curse flew straight towards Granger where she knelt over Weasley. Draco was too far to knock her out of the way. He had no wand.

He had no choice – there was no choice to make. He stepped directly into it. He heard her gasped “No!”

Now he lay, a paralysing curse upon his limbs, blood dripping from his mouth, in a living nightmare, as Greyback, limping and bleeding, ascended the ridge.

The handful of werewolves still under the influence of the inverted ethics rune launched themselves at Greyback. He pulled back in surprise, then fought them off with the help of the men behind him.

“Keep the ones down there busy,” he barked, gesturing towards the field. “I’m going to finish this. Where is the bloody girl – I know she’s up here with these arseholes—”

Draco, Potter and Weasley might ordinarily have merited a curse while they were down, but they held no interest for Greyback in light of Granger. An explosion of Finite Incantatem churned the ground around them.

Granger was revealed, clutching at a wand with a shaking hand.

She had just finished casting something directly at Greyback. The side sweep of her arm looked like she had activated a tracking spell.

She, too, was spent. She collapsed onto her knees. The wand fell out of her hand. Stillness fell as everyone waited for something to happen.

It was going to be good. Draco, paralysed, powerless, knew it was going to be good. It would be – an enormous explosion. A

mass Transfiguration. Summon bloody Voldemort. Open the gates of hell. Anything. Anything.

The fire behind Granger crackled merrily, innocuously, as though it was the byproduct of a random

Confrigo on the battlefield and not the most dearly bought fire that had ever been lit. The werewolves looked at one another.

Nothing happened.

One by one, the werewolves began to laugh.

“That’s... it?” asked Greyback, his long yellow teeth bared in delight. “That’s what the great Granger did? So brainy she – made a fire?”

There was more laughter.

Greyback slashed his wand at the fire to extinguish it. Someone else cast Aguamenti. The fire crackled on.

Below Greyback, the sounds of a skirmish made their way up the hill. Draco heard Tonks’ voice, and Goggin’s, and Buckley’s. Faster, Tonks, for the love of the gods.

More of Greyback's men attempted to douse the fire, to no effect. Greyback spat at it. "Leave it." He turned to Granger. "When this is all over, girl, and I've taken care of your friends down there, I'm going to roast what remains of you on your little fire and eat you."

More shouts floated up from below.

Greyback looked over his shoulder, then began to circle Granger. "We'll have less time together than I wanted, but I'm going to enjoy every one of your screams."

He levelled his wand at her. Draco knew that stance. There was a Crucio coming.

Granger, blood-smeared, shaking from her magical depletion, stared him down. She was not afraid. Her scorn was magnificent.

Before Greyback could cast anything, there was a shudder of magic.

The fire behind Granger turned green. A specific kind of green. A Floo kind of green. Granger smiled.

Now there was a swishing sound. The werewolves scrambled anew to put out the fire, but it was being fed at the other end,

now, and it doubled, then tripled, then quintupled in size.

Figure after black-clad figure whipped out of the fire and spun upwards. Dozens and dozens of them on brooms, cackling shrilly.

Granger's smile grew dangerous, self-satisfied – the kind a Nundu might smile, just before it decimated an entire village.

Shrieks of wild laughter filled the air. The nuns had arrived.

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Chapter 34

Deus Ex Machina

The sky turned dark with the whirl of black robes. “What the fuck?” asked a werewolf.

“Who is that?” asked another. “...Nuns?” said the first.

“Are you bloody joking?” said Greyback. The werewolves looked up in confusion. Then they began to laugh again.

The nuns moved through the air together with a collaborative fluidity that could have been a warning to Greyback, if he hadn’t been so busy howling with laughter.

A few werewolves sent up spells. They were met with ruthless counter-curses that left the casters disfigured upon the ground, missing the majority of their faces.

There was a bit of shock, a bit of cognitive dissonance to wrestle with. Some of the werewolves began to shout and regroup. Greyback was still gasping with mockery.

The nuns lined themselves above them and, wands pointed down, group-cast some sort of area- effect Petrificus Totalus that froze everyone where they stood.

Draco felt his limbs stiffen beyond the curse. Granger grew unnaturally still. Greyback's laugh was frozen upon his bloodied face.

Silence fell.

A small, white-haired nun, who flew above the rest, cast a detection spell at the field. Greyback was illuminated in red.

The nun tutted in the silence. With a swish of her wand, Greyback's rigid body was floated into the centre of the field and dropped with a crunch into the blood and muck near the boulder.

"Clear the innocents," she said in French, waving her hand.

There was imperiousness in the gesture – she was used to command. She was the Prioress.

A contingent of nuns flew down and levitated figures out of the battlefield. From the insignia upon their cloaks, it was the Aurors and the DMLE operatives. Draco saw Tonks-Granger, Buckley, and Goggin's stiff forms lifted out.

Then he was, himself, levitated, jostling against Granger, Potter, and Weasley. They were deposited at the very top of the ridge.

When the innocents had been cleared and only Greyback's men remained on the field, the Prioress flew higher.

“Shall we have a Summoning?” she asked.

The nuns, cackling anew, whirled over the battlefield upon their brooms. Threads of violet magic glowed between them until they formed a floating pentagram.

The Prioress raised her wand, as did her sisters. They began a low chant in Latin. Shocks of occult magic coursed through the air – Dark, forbidden, dangerous.

A shape ossified into existence where the currents of magic concentrated at the centre of the field. It was a grinning goat's skull, silent and inert.

“Who will be the sacrificial lamb?” asked the Prioress.

A nun floated a bloody-faced wizard up – one of the ones who had begun the attack on the nuns. “I have a sinner.”

The sinner was levitated towards the goat's skull.

His screams, muffled by his Petrified tongue and clamped jaw, echoed across the silent field.

The nun flew above him and brought him in close, until his forehead pressed into the back of the skull.

There was a flash of red light. The man slackened. Now he looked grotesque, a hanging puppet with an oversized, horned head.

The nun resumed her place in the airborne pentagram. The skull trembled, then shuddered, then shook.

Its eye sockets, which had been shrouded in shadow, were lit by two red flames.

The man's body elongated and ripped. From within him, a form twisted and birthed itself into existence – a being of Fiendfyre and darkness, rending the fabric between worlds.

Granger had opened the gates of hell.

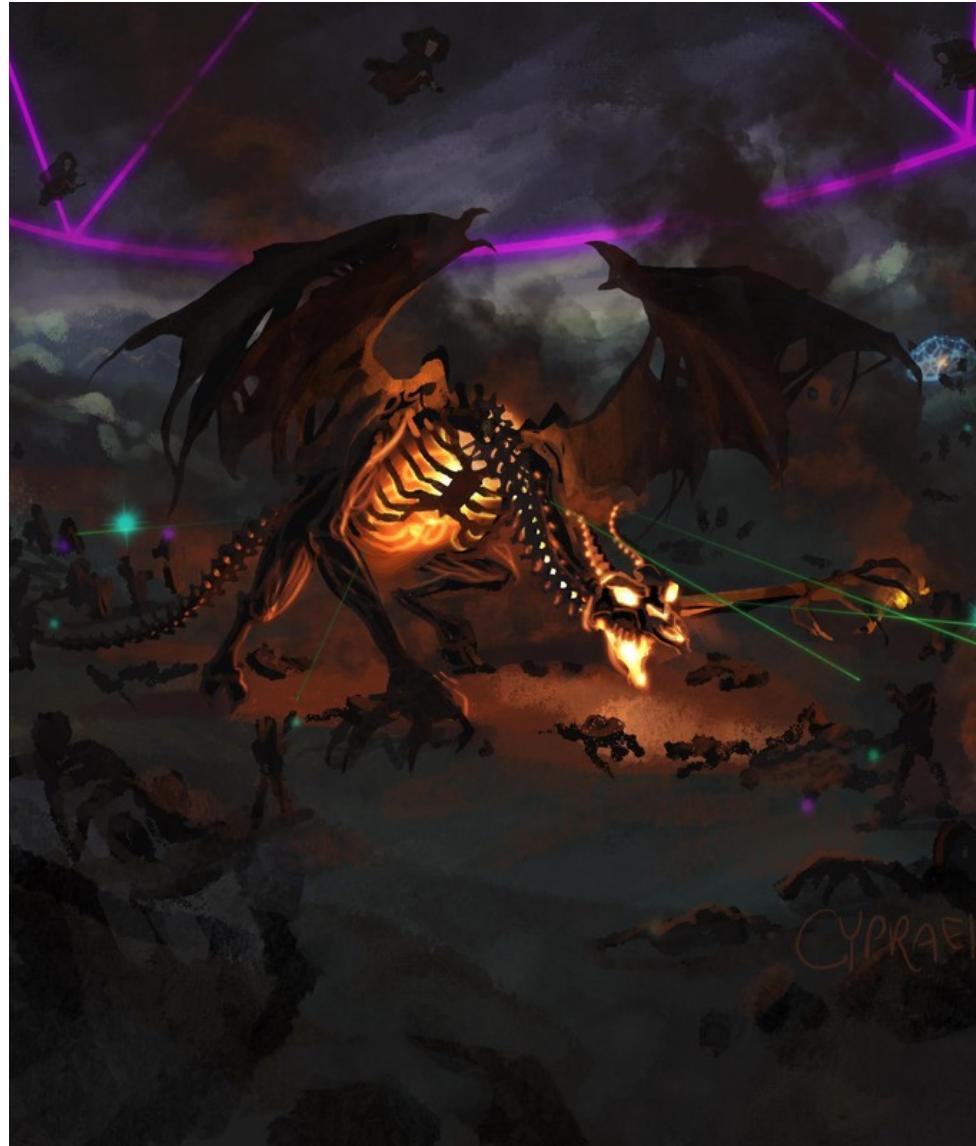
As it tore its way into existence, the thing vomited a sound out of the goat's skull that was half unholy laughter, half pain. It was suffering, but there was a hideous anticipation in it.

Limbs took shape. The thing was tall. The skull hung at the end of a long neck. Stringy wings, black, and dripping with abominable afterbirth, unfurled.

Two cloven hooves reached the earth and made unhallowed ground of that place.

There was no light of conscience in the thing's flaming eyes. Only a terrible thirst for death.

The nuns, breaking into shrieking laughter, released their paralysis spell within the confines of the pentagram.



It was not to give the werewolves a chance. It was for sport.

The demon's soul-blighting laughter joined that of the nuns. Hell
in its eyes, it launched itself at the werewolves.

Half of them tried to run, half launched spells. A curling talon
swiped at five of them and left corpses in its wake. Liquid fire

was disgorged and burnt a dozen where they stood. The searing blow of a wing left a group of men standing without their fronts – no faces, no skin, only guts and bone. They fell with a wet sound.

Those trying to run found themselves hemmed in by the pentagram, repelled, and cast back towards the demon's cloven hooves.

There was the crunch of skulls being crushed and a hoarse, unearthly cackle from the creature.

Ten killing curses flashed green and hit the demon at the same time. They did nothing. The thing wasn't alive – it was the prince of some underworld, and they were merely stoking its fire.

The spellcasters were gutted.

The nuns held their pentagram. The demon dared not or could not go beyond, but it did not matter – it found its pleasure within those ungodly confines.

Its rampage was sickening, hideous, perfect. The screams and its laughter mingled in a ghastly chorus. The shrieks lessened and

lessened as the demon made its way through its feast. Now there was only the sound of its terrible pleasure and the shatter of bone.

It saved Greyback for last.

Greyback fled from one end of the pentagram to the other, desperately hammering at it with curses. The nuns laughed. He aimed killing curses towards them. They dodged and laughed even more.

The demon caught sight of its final victim. The goat skull tilted. A plume of flame emerged from black nostrils.

Greyback was panicking, scrambling. He pushed his way into the pentagram and was repelled backwards.

He landed at the demon's feet. It planted one cloven hoof into the centre of Greyback's chest. Draco had the vast pleasure of watching Greyback torn, limb from limb, and eaten.

The massacre was complete.

There had been two hundred of Greyback's men in that pentagram. Now, nothing within it moved, save the demon. The air was fetid with brimstone and sulphur and heat-curdled blood.

The nuns began another chant in voices high and pure – the Lord's Prayer.

Pater noster, qui es in caelis, Sanctificetur Nomen Tuum;
Adveniat Regnum Tuum; Fiat voluntas Tua,
Sicut in caelo, et in terra.

As the prayer went on, the nuns drew forwards on their brooms.
The pentagram shrank.

A heavenly halo glowed now above each nun's head. Their crucifixes floated off of their necks and shone with a pious light.

The demon hissed and spat plumes of hellfire as the bounds of the pentagram came in towards it. The field shook with its discordant, infernal screams as it was forced inwards, and inwards again, until it had curled itself into a shadowy ball.

... but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, Forever and ever,
Amen.

All that remained of the demon was the goat's skull, then it, too, disappeared in a flash of red.

The holy auras surrounding the nuns faded. They broke the pentagram and began a leisurely flyover of the battlefield, cursing any member of Greypack's pack that still twitched.

The Prioress flew over Draco and Granger, her wand raised. She eyed his Auror insignia and Granger's lab coat and moved on.

Draco, petrified of her in both the physical and metaphorical sense, had never been happier to be irrelevant.

The nuns were satisfied with their absolute victory. They conjured a driving rain – something of holy water, something of the Genesis flood – that quenched the fires left behind by the demon and washed that unhallowed ground clean.

They released their paralysis over the remainder of the battlefield.

As witches and wizards began to sit up with gasps and groans, one of the nuns threw an entire tin of Floo powder into Granger's fire.

It flared green. The nuns flew into the flames and were gone.

~

The aftermath of the battle was a mess of muck and blood and confusion. The Anti-Apparition Ward fell. Someone summoned mediwitches, who Apparated across the field and distributed potions and Healings to those who needed it the most.

A pair of them worked on Draco and Granger until they were satisfied that they were stable. They moved on to Potter and Weasley, both of whom were groaning enough to confirm that they were alive and well.

Draco and Granger looked at each other – filthy, cut-up, bruised, and battered. Across Granger's face was a wide spray of blood. Droplets of it decorated her cheeks in a fine mist, running down in rivulets, now, as the rain washed it away. Draco felt the wet on his face and knew that he was similarly adorned; some his, some that of others.

They sat up and reached for each other's hands, face, shoulders, blurting out a flurry of questions – are you hurt, bloody hell, did they get you, are you all right, can you stand, are you sure you're all right, I saw you get hit, can you walk, oh, thank god, you're

all right, you're okay, you almost got killed, you stupid, bloody idiot–

They found their feet. He held her dear bruised-up face in his hands and she held his in hers.

He kissed her, softly, under the downpour, softly, against her split lip, softly, amongst tears and rain and blood.

She slid her arms around his neck and rose upon her tip-toes and kissed him back. Draco knew happiness, then. Happiness was her, alive, her tear-filled eyes spilling over, her heartbeat thudding against his chest. It was knowing that her greatest threat was dead and gone, it was the beauty of days ahead that he hardly dared imagine, it was the feel of fingers in his hair, it was the shudder of her half-crying, half-laughing, it was her whisper of you absolute idiot against his mouth.

She pushed her face into his chest and gasped out sobs of relief and joy.

There was movement around them. Potter and Weasley were on their feet. Tonks, looking like herself again, limped towards them, as did Goggin and Buckley.

As he held Granger to his heart, Draco, frankly, did not give a single solitary fuck about the opinions of his colleagues. He only cared about her – about this – this exquisite catastrophe, this beautiful, stupid disaster.

There were gasps, then grins, then Weasley chortled and said, “Steady on, mate,” and Potter burst into wild laughter and said, “I told you, I bloody told you.”

Granger hid her face in Draco’s cloak, shaking with something that verged on hysterical giggling.

Tonks, one eye swelled shut, put a fist on her hip and observed them with pursed lips. “I suppose this is what the word was going to be about?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “I’m – er – no longer able to be objective—”

“Funnily, I had worked that out just now, when I watched you walk into a curse for her,” said Tonks. “You’re off the Granger assignment, Malfoy.”

“Brilliant,” said Draco, a wide smile upon his face.

Tonks shook her head, but there was a smile on her face, too.

“Sorry to interrupt the love-making, but can someone explain the fucking nuns?” asked Goggin with a gesture to the sky.

All eyes were now on Granger.

“They – erm – they owed me a favour,” said Granger.

“A favour?” said Potter, looking at her in wonder. “You properly called in the cavalry, Hermione.” “I’m inspired,” said Tonks. “I think that demon would make a fine Auror.”

The group wandered the muddy battlefield, variously looking for colleagues or wands or – in the case of Draco – bits of family jewellery.

Draco’s wand was located near Granger’s fire. Granger’s was in a gooey pile of what looked suspiciously like demon-chewed human flesh near the boulder.

She plucked it out with a grimace. “I believe that is all that remains of Fenrir Greyback.” Draco pointed his wand at the pile of charred mince and said, “Accio Malfoy ring.”

A deformed piece of silver whizzed towards him – not from the pile, but from a spot a few metres away.

Granger winced. “Oh, no – he ripped it off me and smashed it to bits, as soon as he saw me turn it–”

“It’s fixable,” said Draco, pocketing the damaged ring. “Everything is.” She looked at him with a swift smile. “Everything is.”

“Shall we go home?”

“Yes, please – let’s.”

~

At the Manor, they showered and found one another in the small salon at the back of the house. Granger came down in her most appalling pyjamas.

Henriette and Tupey were given a redacted version of the day’s events, so that they would not grow hysterical. Opium was brewed to palliate the shock and soften the day’s emotional toll.

Granger explained her kidnap – such as it was. “Someone tampered with the Floo at the lab.” “What?!”

“Yes. I know. It was meant to only have two connections – the lab and the Manor. I stepped into it to come here – and I promise you I said Malfoy Manor – and the next thing I knew, I was

spinning out onto a field, and that monster was in front of me. They Disarmed me the moment I landed.

Greyback saw me twist the ring and tore it off me – I thought he was going to rip my fingers off, he was so rough. He knocked me about for trying to call for help. Absolute ulcer of a man. And, of course, Fernsby hadn't followed me into the Floo – I was coming straight here, he had no reason to..."

Draco paced. "Who tampered with the fucking Floo? I'm going to – I'm not even going to use my wand, I shall strangle them with my bare hands. And the bloody nuns?"

Granger, who was curled on a sofa with her arms wrapped around her legs, tucked her face into her knees and laughed. "I still can't believe that worked."

"How?"

"After having seen a bit of what they were capable of at the monastery, when I returned the skull, I thought it might be useful to – erm – harness the nuns for our benefit, if I could."

"Of course you did."

“When I sent the skull back, I pretended to be a collector who had bought it off a gang of thieves. I told the good Sisters that I was returning it to them because it was sentient, and it deserved to be in its own home – it seemed wrong to keep it. I said if they wanted vengeance on the gang, I could help them. I told them what tracking spell to look out for – that I’d activate it when the moment was right for them to exert their revenge.”

Granger swallowed. “I didn’t expect them to exert it so thoroughly... Anyway, I’ve been practising that bloody Floo spell for weeks and weeks. Finally got it down to three minutes. It’s as difficult as Portus – possibly even worse – I hate it and will never cast it again. The Floo specialist who came to my laboratory gave me a decent tutorial and I studied the rest. I knew the nuns wouldn’t be able to Apparate across the Channel, but if I had a Floo connection open wherever I was when I activated the tracking spell, then we’d have a chance...”

Draco was too gobsmacked to make any sort of articulate commentary. He merely said, “Fucking hell, Granger,” and rubbed his palm across his forehead.

“I know,” said Granger. “I may be the more ghoulish of the opportunists between us.” He stared at her. She laughed into her knees again.

“But – speaking of tracking – how did you find me?” she asked.
“When Greyback destroyed the ring, I was convinced that I was done for – there was simply no way you’d have had time to even attempt an Apparition to me.”

“Your hairpins,” said Draco. “My... hairpins?” blinked Granger. Draco made a general gesture towards her hair. “They’re everywhere and you always have them on you. I’ve been doing it since our first meeting. They’ve come in handy a time or two.”

Granger pulled a hairpin out of her curls and cast a revelation spell. It glowed green.

“Of course,” continued Draco, “next to Miss Floo The Fucking Nuns In, it feels rather uninspired, now...”

“I think it’s brilliant,” said Granger, smiling at the hairpin. “The simplest ideas often are.” “Right.”

“This explains Uffington.”

“Yes.”

“You’re a wily one.”

“So are you.”

Henriette popped into existence. “Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur, Mademoiselle – Madame Tonks is Flooing. She would like to

come in, if this is a convenient moment? She has a Mademoiselle Brimble with her.”

“Send them in,” said Draco.

A moment later, Tonks’ voice echoed down the corridor as she queried Henriette. “Not interrupting, are we? They aren’t up to anything? A bit of slap and tickle?”

“Euh – non, Madame...” Granger was pink in the cheeks.

Tonks burst into the room with a ridiculous amount of vigour, considering what they’d just gone through a few hours ago.

“Hermione, that is an outfit,” she said, spotting Granger’s pyjamas. “Small wonder Draco couldn’t keep his hands off you.”

Granger grew even pinker. “Tonks!”

“What? Is it not true?”

Brimble followed meekly behind Tonks, clutching at a stack of parchment.

It distracted Tonks from the pyjamas. “Right. Brimble’s got news. Tell us what you’ve found so that we can be properly outraged together.”

Henriette cracked into existence again. “So sorry – Monsieurs Potter and Weasley are at the Floo and they–”

Monsieurs Potter and Weasley had not waited to be invited in. Their footsteps and shouts of “Hermione? Malfoy? Where are you?” echoed through the Manor until Tonks stuck her head out of the salon and waved them in.

Draco’s vision of a quiet evening of rest and recuperation (and snogging Granger) was fast fading. Henriette served opium to the newcomers as they settled into sofas.

Brimble briefed them on her findings. In the end, the Auror Office really had done all it could have. Granger had been betrayed by two relative unknowns who would have been difficult to preempt.

“First bit of news – there’s been an arrest,” said Brimble. “A Mr. Terris has just turned himself in. Floo technician from the Department of Magical Transportation. Says he’s the one responsible for tampering with the hearth in Healer Granger’s laboratory. Greyback kidnapped his wife and children yesterday and gave him twelve hours to do it, or they died.”

“No!” gasped Granger.

“The family is fine – they were found bound and gagged, but otherwise unharmed. Mr. Terris is cooperating – it sounds as though he was quite repentant, actually – rather a lot of crying.”

Granger looked at Draco. “No strangling.”

“Yes, strangling,” said Draco, who did not find this to be an adequate excuse for what the man had done.

Tonks observed them with pursed lips. “Kindly discuss your bedroom plans at another time – Brimble is talking.”

Granger blushed. Weasley guffawed. One of Potter’s eyes twitched.

“As for my second bit of news,” said Brimble, taking out a long scroll of parchment. “This is a list of the dead. The ones whose remains we could identify, anyway.”

She held up the list. A name was circled on it. A Miss Clotilde Fiddlewood.

“Who?” said Granger. “What?” said Potter. “No,” said Weasley.

“Shacklebolt’s assistant,” said Tonks, her lips pressed into an unhappy line. “That old cacklebag?” said Draco.

That had been the witch who had looked familiar on the field – the one who had been patching the ward, barring their escape.

Brimble nodded. “We can’t interrogate her – obviously – but we are speculating that she may have overheard bits of Healer Granger’s very first conversation with the Minister. The one that triggered his protection request. Getting word to Greyback would’ve taken her months – he was deep in hiding at the time. We’ll be investigating what we can and we may never know for certain – but she was one of few individuals who could’ve known anything. And, of course, to find her running with Greyback’s pack, afterwards, is rather damning evidence...”

They sat in silence. Granger looked shocked. Draco shook his head. Then, in the quiet, Potter said, “Greyback is dead.”

Saying it made it real.

Granger’s hands found her cheeks. “Greyback is dead.”

“Greyback is fucking dead,” repeated Draco and Tonks. “The arsehole is dead!” said Weasley.

They touched their cups of opium together.

“Right,” said Weasley after downing his. He clapped his hands together. “What’s a bloke got to do to get a real drink round here?”

They decided to make a proper party of it. Patronuses and Jots were sent out. Soon, the salon was filled with family and friends – Lupin and the kids, Potter’s wife and tots, Luna Lovegood drifting dreamily about, Granger’s colleagues and star students, Shacklebolt (enduring much piss-taking on his choice of assistant), Aurors and their families, a host of Healers. Word of the victory and party got out and more people began to pour in, many in sleepwear because of the late hour – Longbottom and Pansy, Zabini and Patil, the entire Weasley clan (gods help Draco), Macmillan and other Ministry colleagues, and, finally, Theo, in a set of ridiculously sheer men’s pyjamas.

Henriette, Tupey and the kitchen elves were delighted to assist in the merrymaking. Tupey plied Weasley in particular with the hardest stuff in the cellars.

At some point during the festivities, Potter and Weasley waylaid Draco as he was making his way towards Granger. Draco found himself pressed into a corner by his favourite colleagues.

They were all properly sloshed. “What?” said Draco.
“I knew it. I knew you were up to something,” said Potter, leaning in so close that his boozy breath wafted up Draco’s nose.
“I saw how you looked at her.”

Draco pushed him away. “Back off, you speccy fucker.” “What are your intentions with Hermione?”

“My intentions? Have we returned to the Victorian era? Are you her father?”

“Answer the qu-question, Malfoy,” said Weasley, with what was presumably meant to be a threatening loom. (It ended up less than intimidating as he finished the movement by resting his head on Draco’s shoulder.)

“I haven’t any intentions,” said Draco. “Get off me.” He held Weasley at arm’s length.

“You smell good,” said Weasley. “He smells good,” he repeated to Potter. “Does he?”

Potter came in for a sniff.

“Get away,” said Draco, now holding Potter at arm’s length, too.

“Did you do something to her?” asked Weasley, one eye narrowed in suspicion (the other was closed and taking a nap). “Dose her with a love potion?”

“Of bloody course not – women fall for me all the time – I know that’s a novel concept for you—” “What about you?” asked Potter. “Are you in love with her?”

“I – that is none of your business – and why don’t you ask her if she’s dosed me?” “Because she’s not a – a scoundrel like you,” said Potter.

“A m-miscreant,” said Weasley.

Draco attempted to say “Tsk,” but he was so hammered that it came out as a raspberry. “You’re both under the delusion that she’s a perfect angel but she’s – t-ten times the scoundrel I am and that’s why I–”

“You what?” asked Potter. “...Like her.”

“You like her.” “Yes.”

“You’re her Auror, you know,” said Potter, aiming a vague finger in Draco’s direction. “That is unprofessional. Not allowed.”

“Unpfoff – unpfoffess – unprofessional,” repeated Weasley.

“Was her Auror. And I never – we didn’t cross the line – or if we did, it didn’t really happen–” Potter blinked unfocused eyes. “Did it or didn’t it happen?”

“Dreams. By a window ledge. Fantasies. In Spain. Nothing real. It was Samhain, you know. We got drunk on fire – genuinely –

you have to admire the Spanish, they know how to make a drink – or was it the Celts? Anyway, it was all – fantasies – gorgeous fantasies—”

“Stop talking to us about your fantasies,” said Weasley, looking alarmed.

“They are excellent, though. Right, my favourite one is when she—” “No,” said Potter, pressing his hand to Draco’s mouth. “Do not.” Draco beat his hand away. “Why are your fingers sticky?”

Potter looked at his fingers with intense focus. “Treacle tart,” he declared with a firm nod. “There isn’t any treacle tart.”

Weasley, endeavouring to be helpful, poured his Firewhisky on Potter’s hand and all over Draco’s shoes.

“Thank you,” said Potter gravely to Weasley as he wiped his hand on his robe. “You are a true friend—”

“You idiot. Now my toes are moist,” spat Draco.

“—Unlike Malfoy, who is a tosser. Listen, Malfoy – if you do anything to yurt her—” “Yurt her?”

“—Hurt her, we will yurder you. Murder you.”

“K-kill you in cold blood,” said Weasley. “Set fire to your house. Liberate your elves.”

“I would never do anything to hurt her,” said Draco in a rare, drunken plunge into genuine honesty. “Wouldn’t you?”

“No. She’s – I – right, it’s none of your fucking business, as I’ve just said—”

Weasley grasped Draco’s collar and, with a kind of plaintive desperation, said, “You promise you’d never do anything to hurt her?”

“Yes.”

Weasley pressed his forehead to Draco’s and stared into his eyes. “I think he’s telling the truth.” “Stop that – get off me – you’re not a Legilimens—”

“Do we give him our blessing?” asked Potter, frowning into space. “I don’t need your fucking blessing,” said Draco.

“It would matter to Hermione,” said Weasley. “She doesn’t need it either,” said Draco.

“Tell him that we’ll kill him if he hurts her,” said Potter. “We already did,” said Weasley. “I think.”

“Right.”

“Do you think we should just – kill him now?” asked Weasley. “Preemptively?” asked Potter.

“Yeah. I reckon that’d be proper proactive of us.”

“I like it.”

Draco pushed Weasley away. “For fuck’s – stop breathing at me, Weasley – eurgh, why are you so moist – why is everything moist and sticky – get away. Right. I would never hurt her. She’s genuinely important to me. I care about her. A lot. Too much, really. To an idiotic degree. I wish I didn’t. But – I do and it’s – anyway, this is not a conversation I wish to have with you slobbering imbeciles. You can kill me if I hurt her – but I won’t – I would never – she’ll be the one hurting me, if anything – that’s my fear – my fucking Boggart – all right? Have we finished here?”

Potter and Weasley narrowed their eyes, but it was unclear whether they were processing Draco’s diatribe or merely falling asleep.

“I think he’s all right,” said Weasley. Potter nodded and said, “I’m satisfied.”

“Oh?” said Draco. “Are you? Good. Now bugger off. I need to change my shoes because you are literally incapable of holding a glass upright – Tupey! Fresh shoes and socks, please, Weasley had an accident.”

They rejoined the party, got even more drunk, and pissed away the night in high spirits.

~

Draco had fallen asleep on one of the sofas. He awoke at dawn with a stiff neck and a throbbing headache.

He rose and stepped over bodies in various states of consciousness. Granger was nowhere to be found.

Henriette was making her way through the salon, placing a croissant and a hangover potion beside every snoring guest.

“Where is Mademoiselle?” asked Draco.

“I believe she went to take some air, Monsieur,” said Henriette.

“Shall I call her?”

“No, no – I’ll find her.”

Draco downed one of the hangover potions. Then he stood at the window and sighed a melodramatic sigh.

“Is everything all right?” asked Henriette.

Draco pressed his forehead to the cold window. “No.” Henriette approached. “What is the matter?” “Henriette?”

“Oui?”

“Je suis – je suis ensorcelé.”

“Ah!”

“Je l’aime de tout mon cœur, Henriette. De tout mon être.”

Henriette put down her plate of croissants and wrung her hands.

“Don’t be happy yet,” said Draco.

“No?”

“No. I haven’t told her. But I am going to go tell her. I am off to bare my soul, Henriette.” Henriette watched him go with tears in her eyes and her hands clasped to her chest.

“Bon courage, Monsieur,” she said in a whisper. The December dawn brightened the eastern sky.

Draco found Granger amongst silver birch and rising mist, walking a slow walk through the trees. It was cold.

She looked pale and tired as she stepped along the path. She had wrapped herself in a sort of shawl that looked suspiciously like one of Draco’s handkerchiefs, Transfigured. Her hair was only half-pinned and tumbled down her back.

She spotted him in the distance. She paused and watched him come to her amidst the frozen gorse and fen-sedge.

Everything about her seemed distinct and sharp, uncannily so. Breath misting from between parted lips. Fingers gripping the shawl. Dark lashes around bright eyes.

“You’re awake early,” she said, with a kind of soft surprise.

When Draco continued to stare at her like a love-struck cretin, she asked. “Are you all right? Is something the matter?”

He was taken by a kind of fool’s courage. An idiot’s courage.

It was true courage, for all of that. After this, things would never be the same again. “Yes, something is the matter,” said Draco.

“Oh?”

“Something is very the matter. I need to – I need to tell you something. It’s stupid, and probably a bad decision, but it feels like it’s going to kill me if I don’t, so—”

Granger was regarding him with curiosity, with something serious – with her puzzle-solving look. She pulled the shawl

more closely around herself.

Well, he was going to solve the bloody puzzle for her, right now.

“I don’t want to maintain the equilibrium,” said Draco. “I don’t want to quash anymore.”

“The... equilibrium?” repeated Granger. “Quash?”

“The – the back and forth – the not daring to do more – the not crossing the line. The blaming of booze for my lapses. The pretending I don’t care for you – that I wouldn’t die for you – I suppose that ship has already sailed, anyway. The denying – suppressing – slowly suffocating my heart – all of that.”

Draco took a moment to compose himself.

Not composed at all, he continued. “You’re – fucking brilliant and beautiful beyond – anything. It’s actually quite unfair that one person should have all of those – attributes. And I want to be more than your Auror, and I want you to be more than my Principal, or Healer, or any of your – many and diverse – titles. I’m – I’ve fallen for you despite what has been, I swear to you, a most sincere railing against. I know it was wrong – inappropriate – contravened all the protocols – all that rot. I did everything a man could do to quash these things, but I – failed. You are too

much. I couldn't withstand you. You found fissures in my defences and you tore them into great bloody rends, and then you came to live in my heart, like some sort of – light in a dark place. And the worst part is, I know you didn't do it on purpose. I know you didn't ask for it. I know you were just being – you, your stupid, brilliant, do-gooding self. But you are – as it turns out – everything I want.”

He dared to look at her. There were tears in her eyes. “Right – now I've bloody made you cry – brilliant –”

“M-me?” said Granger in a shaky voice. “I'm the one finding fissures? I couldn't withstand you.” “What?”

Granger took a breath. “I keep trying to control it but it's – stronger than me. I don't want it – I didn't want it – I don't know what I want. Yes, I do – I want one sodding night without thinking about you. I want to be in the same room as you without feeling that I'll die if I don't touch you – if I do touch you. I want my head to be my own again, and my heart. But you're in them both, you idiot – you're driving me round the bend –”

She brushed away a tear. “I just want to know – a bloody moment of peace, without you in my brain, but that is, apparently, too much to ask for.”

“What about me? I can’t – can’t cast the thought of you from my mind. You – your smile – you doing arithmancy – bloody Spain–”

“Do you know what my Amortentia smells like?” “Do you know how much you haunt my nights?”

“I hate this,” sniffed Granger. “It’s rubbish. I hate not – not being in control – I shouldn’t have any sorts of feelings for you – this is your fault–”

“My fault?”

“Why did you have to be so–?” “So what?”

Granger threw her hands into the air. “So everything! You were meant to be an arrogant, moderately competent Auror! You weren’t meant to be funny and endearing and heroic and – gentlemanly when it mattered. You weren’t meant to – to literally charm my knickers off and – worse still – worm your way into my heart–”

“Speak for yourself,” said Draco, outraged. “You’re the wormy one. You were meant to be an insufferable swot whose presence I couldn’t stand, not someone whose company – laughter – kisses – everything – I ended up craving like a bewitched, lovesick fool.

Do you know how many bloody dates I went on to push you out of my head?”

“I went on a date with that stupid gardener!”

“What?”

“You set me up.”

“Gods.”

“How can I be in love with you? You’re Draco Malfoy.”

“And me? In love with Hermione Granger? Head over fucking heels? I don’t do love. I can’t even say the word, it feels horrid in my mouth.”

“I should never have accepted this arrangement,” said Granger, addressing the sky. “I should have insisted on someone else, the moment I saw your stupid name on that stupid letter telling me that you had been assigned to me.”

“I tried,” said Draco. “I was told not to have a complex about Granger – well, here we are—”

“A complex?”

“—And now I have one – yes, a complex – a great bloody complex about Granger, beyond their wildest expectations.”

“I don’t want your complex.”

“Well, you have it – and far more besides.”

Silence fell. Granger wiped away a tear. Draco took a step closer to her. Their hands reached for one another’s.

“I feel as though I’ve given you a part of me that you could break,” said Granger. “Please don’t break it—”

“I shan’t break it. I would never. Potter and Weasley have informed me that they will kill me if I hurt you – not that their threats count for anything. And you have a part of me. I’m sick over it – you’d better not break it—”

“I would never.”

“–And why must you be so beautiful, even when you’re crying?”

“How do you make looking like a hungover vampire so alluring?”

“I’m going to snog the living daylights out of you.”

Her smile broke through the tears, a flash of sun.

She was happiness aglow in his veins. She had his little black heart in its entirety.

He closed the distance between them. He held her face in his hands. Their breath misted together in the cold air.

The sun rose in earnest, and brightened the snow, and greened the grass, and wreathed them in light.

He kissed her.

And it was the sweetest, most searing, most wondrous thing, to finally be able to do so, without interruption, without excuses, without breaking away. To do it knowing that his torment was shared, and had therefore become something else – a relief, a thundering joy.

He had a part of her and she had a part of him and it was going to be – it was going to be something beautiful. Could there be anything sweeter, could there be more bliss, than this?

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Chapter 35

Dynamic Fluid Exchanges: A Practical Model

The innocence of the kiss turned to something heavier as Draco made good on his promise to snog the living daylights out of Granger.

She ran her fingers through his hair. He backed her into a tree. She had his collar in her fists and was using that as leverage to either pull him in closer, or pull herself up higher, with the pleasurable result of tongue on tongue.

Draco felt the lack of the ring – he had grown accustomed to the thing keeping him apprised of Granger’s heart rate. He solved the problem by finding pulse points along her throat with his mouth, which gave him a much more immediate and tactile accounting of her feelings.

Her eyes were closed. Her hair caught in birch bark. Her pulse was a delicate, harried flutter against his lips. He could have taken her right here, against the tree, but she was Granger, and all that was good and wonderful in the world, and she deserved better.

Now one of her legs was around him. He hoisted her up higher, one hand on her arse, and pressed himself against her.

“I think I should like to – perhaps – go back inside,” gasped Granger with a kind of questioning, as though he would say anything but yes, gods, yes.

“I want you,” said Draco into her mouth. “In – all senses of the term.”

“All of them? Well – shall we – shall we begin with one?”

“Yes. The lowest common denominator,” said Draco. He pushed his cock into her harder, in case his meaning was not resoundingly clear. “Will you accompany me to my rooms?”

“Don’t you mean your chambers?” asked Granger in a breathy drawl.

Draco took her hand and began to pull her towards the Manor.
“Don’t be cheeky, or I shall make you regret it.”

Granger smiled at him.

He stopped to kiss her hard.

They stumbled back to the Manor, hand in hand. They crept upstairs through the back stairway near the kitchens, like naughty teenagers, to avoid being seen by their multitude of guests.

Upstairs, Granger looked about Draco's rooms curiously, passing through the sitting room, the dressing room, peeking into the bathroom, and, finally, coming to the bedroom.

"What are you smiling about?" asked Granger, looking at Draco over her shoulder. He was smiling? Oh.

Draco closed the bedroom door behind him and flung up a few wards. "It is – delightful to finally have you here in person."

"Have I been here in other states?" asked Granger, running her hand up the bedpost, which shouldn't have been as provocative as it was.

Draco laid himself on the bed. "Many. Dream versions of you, terribly naughty fantasy versions of you..."

“You must tell me about the latter.”

Draco wanted to follow up with something clever and sexy, but Granger chose that moment to shed her shawl and expose her hideous pyjamas.

“Gods,” said Draco, instead of the clever and sexy thing.

“Whatever is the matter?” asked Granger. “Don’t you like these? Am I – curdling your jizz?” “You are a vision,” said Draco.

Granger ran a seductive hand down her tartan-lined hip. “Aren’t I? Take me, I’m yours.”

“You mustn’t say things like that unless you mean them.”

“I do mean them.”

“Well then,” said Draco. “Come here. I must divest you of those – things – before we go any further.”

Granger clambered onto the bed. “I thought they added a bit of Scottish panache–” “The Scots have no panache. Don’t put those words together–”

“They’ve got loads of panache.”

“–I am going to buy you so many inappropriate, Muggley negligée things that you will have a new one to wear every

night.”

He began to undo her buttons.

“Likewise,” said Granger, observing his progress. “Theo’s pyjamas inspired me. We can find you something even better. Something with a – a penis hatch.”

“A penis hatch?”

“Yes, for ease of accessibility – a little opening –”

“Little?”

“I’m sorry – a gaping opening – a veritable chasm – oh –”

Granger’s soliloquy on penis flaps was cut off because Draco had freed her breasts from the hideous pyjamas and now had his mouth upon them.

She lay next to him and ran her hand down his front and opened his fly, and any witticisms Draco had been ready to launch vanished, except for stroke me like a bedpost, which did not seem strong enough to share with the class.

But that was fine. He did not need to share anything with the class. His face was in Granger’s tits and his mouth was occupied

with a nipple and his brain power was reduced to zero as all of his blood was currently in his cock, which was enjoying the sensation of Granger's hand, slipped into his trousers, caressing it and squeezing gently at his balls.

"As it turns out," said Draco, "the Malfoy attractant formula is simply – you."

"Yes," breathed Granger. "You feel as though you're ready to do a – a penetration test—" She squeaked out a laugh and fell off the bed.

Draco pulled her back up. "Really." He put her hand back on his cock. "As you were, Granger."

"See," breathed Granger as she slipped her hand back into his trousers. "This is why we need a penis hatch. I'm going to get a bloody cramp."

"We both ought to divest ourselves – everything," said Draco, kicking off his trousers. "Yes."

"Shower?" asked Draco. "Bath?" countered Granger. "Oh?"

"I quite like the – jets," said Granger, working her way down Draco's buttons. "Oh."

Draco shuffled off to run the bath, tripped upon the pants around his ankles, and threw them at Granger's head when she laughed.

“They’ve got little broomsticks on them, this time,” came Granger’s amused observation. She joined him in the bathroom as the enormous tub began to fill.

“Let’s have a look at yours,” said Draco, tugging at her pyjama bottoms. “I shall disappoint you – I’m not wearing any knickers.”

“That is anything but disappointing.”

He stood behind her and watched them both in the mirror as he pulled the things off her. Now she was naked, and he was naked, and all he wanted to do was run his hands over her and watch her reactions, the arching as he squeezed at a nipple, the sighing as he kissed at her neck. Gods, the feel of her bare skin against his cock.

She rubbed her arse against him and smiled at him in the mirror when he took in a breath. She sent a hand behind her and stroked him. He slipped a hand to her front, to where things were warmest and growing wetter, and began a little rubbing of his own. They both began to breathe harder.

“Bath?” gasped Granger. “Right,” said Draco.

They clambered into the enormous bathtub with a distinct lack of elegance, given that they were both fixated upon the other’s genitals.

They soaped one another up – an excellent excuse to continue to grope at each other. Draco had really intended to get clean and then get her back to the bed for subsequent activities, but she had said this interesting thing about the jets, and he was seized by a powerful and randy curiosity.

“So, the jets,” said Draco, turning on every single one. The bathtub became a frothing whirlpool. “Yes,” said Granger.

“Show me,” said Draco. “Wouldn’t you rather participate?”

“I want to watch, to begin. I can join in – later.”

Granger pressed her lips into a little smile, then began to feel about with her hands. Draco watched in a kind of aroused daze, because Granger was in his bathtub, and there was soap dripping off her tits, which he had put there, and now she was looking for a jet with which to get herself off, and he wasn’t certain that this wasn’t some glorious erotic dream.

“I’ve got options, in here. Ooh – this one,” said Granger, finding a jet at the end of the tub that gushed out horizontally.

She straddled her jet of choice. “The trick is to position yourself – just so–”

“Oh?”

“The angle matters rather a lot, of course—”

“Of course.”

“And then we let the – heat and the – water do the rest, you know—”

“Right.”

“—doesn’t take very long—”

Draco watched as her explanation became less coherent and, in the following moments, she grew pinker in the cheeks and along her collarbone. Her lips were parted. Her eyes, which had been on her own reflection in the mirror, now met his, dark and inviting. Her breath came faster as the frothing heat between her legs brought her closer.

Draco’s hand was on his cock – but lightly, because at this rate, he could come in a minute from the sights and sounds alone.

She ran a hand down her breast and teased at her own nipple.

“Fucking hell, Granger.”

Her answer was a smiling “Mm.”

She gestured to Draco to come position himself behind her – which he, obviously, did with alacrity.

Now he could see the two of them in the mirror. Granger bent over and hooked her fingers along the edge of the tub. The jet frothed at the front of her, while Draco was presented with a very wet and slick way in, just above the water line.

He put his hands on her hips. (They did make excellent handles, by the by.)

The way in was snug. She felt engorged. He watched himself enter her, the way his head opened her up as he nudged himself in, the way her wetness and his mingled when he pulled out again.

The jet roiled against his balls as he pushed himself back in, inch by sweet fucking inch. “I’m going to last about – forty seconds.” Her answer was breathy. “Doesn’t matter – we have – all morning—”

Draco was not certain he had ever seen a more arousing sight than Granger in the mirror, edging along the precipice of her orgasm, her breasts moving in time with his thrusts.

He watched her come, her wet hand clutching at the side of the bathtub, her cunt clenching around his cock in a long, convulsing

squeeze. She rode it out with a gasp between teeth, pressing her face into her forearm.

The nerve endings from the head of his cock all the way to his balls were overloaded by the feel of her, by the heat of the water, by the frothing jet. Draco, unable to withstand any of it, came along with her, thrusting his release in her as far as he could go.

They breathed. Granger shifted away from the jet, which now pushed at newly sensitive areas. Draco's cock slid out of her and dripped semen and her sticky contributions into the water.

They sank back into the tub, rested their heads on the edge, and panted at the ceiling.

Granger recovered first. She kissed Draco on his mouth where it hung slack and stupid and then amused herself with pressing buttons to discover varieties of soap.

"I, for one, feel clean and ready to crack on," said Granger.
"Drying charm?"

As blood began to make its way back to his brain, Draco began to feel that he might be in for something. Perhaps Granger did sex as she did everything – thoroughly.

Which was going to be interesting, because he, too, prided himself on his thoroughness in these matters.

They got out of the tub.

“Clean enough to eat off of?” asked Draco, aiming drying charms at her. “Do you know, I was just thinking that we haven’t had breakfast.”

“I shall ask the kitchens to send something up.”

“Perfect.”

“Strawberries and cream?”

Granger’s eyes grew bright with amusement. “Strawberries optional.” “Done.”

Draco slipped on a silk dressing gown to give the order as Granger attempted some hair management in the mirror.

She came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, still pink about the cheeks. A basket of toast awaited, and dippy eggs, and fresh-cut strawberries, and a ridiculously oversized bowl of whipped cream.

“An entire bucket,” said Granger, eyeing the thing. “Henriette was insistent. Shall we have a swim in it?” “I should’ve let you buy that boat.”

Speaking of boats, Draco ate breakfast with his cock at half mast, which amused Granger tremendously when she noticed.

“The dangly bits are escaping,” she said, pointing to Draco’s crotch with a fork. “I don’t think this counts as dangly.”

“You’re quite right. Rather more turgid than anything else.”

Draco looked down. “These bits wanted to escape last time I was with you in a dressing gown, but you were too busy being scandalised by Soviet irrigation projects.”

Granger laughed. “I needed a distraction.”

“Oh? From what?”

Granger occupied herself with a strawberry.

“From me out of the shower?” pressed Draco. “Was it? Tell me.”

“Never.”

“Are you being coy with me after what you just did in the bath?”

“That didn’t result in suffocating levels of smugness from you,” sniffed Granger. “So you did want to play with my dangly bits.”

Granger sipped her tea with an infuriating amount of ambivalence. Draco sat back. “You did. You’d be fervently denying it if you didn’t.”

“Mere conjecture.” Granger looked at him and his smirk. “You smug – ugh – I shall drown you in the whipped cream.”

“I do intend to be face-first in it at some point this morning,” said Draco, his smirk widening.

“Well, I’m not going to be coy – I can happily admit that I would’ve shagged you in that hotel room, repeatedly, for three or four days. Only you had to go off and save the world. Insufferable.”

Granger smiled into her teacup.

“Now your smugness is suffocating,” said Draco. “Good,” said Granger.

“Tell me you wanted to shag me,” said Draco. “Make me,” said Granger.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Safe word?”

“Neville.”

“Gods.”

“I know.”

“Get on the bed.”

Granger flung her arms towards him with a lazy sort of gesture. He carried her to the bed instead, which was even better. Bridal-style.

Not that he was thinking about brides, or marrying the tits off her, or anything.

He deposited her on his bed amongst white sheets and fluffy pillows and stopped to look at her – her plait across his pillow, the press of her breasts where the towel squeezed them together, her half-hidden thighs that he would soon be exposing and enjoying.

“What?” she asked when she noticed him standing and staring.

“Taking in the moment,” said Draco. He undid the twist that held her towel up. “This feels rather like unwrapping a lovely present.”

“I’m not sure who the present is for more,” sighed Granger when Draco, unable to help himself, bent over to press kisses along her clavicle.

“Happy early Christmas to both of us, then,” said Draco.

He floated the vessel of whipped cream towards them, then conjured a blindfold. “Yes?”

“Ooh. Yes.”

“Excellent.”

“The turgid bits have decidedly made their escape.” said Granger, running a fingertip along the underside of his cock, which now poked out of the dressing gown.

Draco let her touch, then pulled her hand down. “As – bloody enjoyable as that is – this is meant to be about you, and cajoling out confessions.”

Granger bit her lip and said, “Cajole away.”

Draco tied the silken blindfold around her head and stole a kiss before he began.

Well – he meant to merely steal a kiss, but he felt her tongue against his, and then found himself unable to pull away, and put an elbow into the pillow, and was thoroughly distracted by her mouth.

It was only when he found himself sliding a hand between her thighs that he broke away. “Right,” he breathed. “The whipped cream.”

“The entire point of the exercise,” said Granger, as breathless as he was.

A silver spoon stood upright in the bowl of whipped cream. Draco loaded it up, dripping slightly with the stuff, and turned to take in the sight of Granger, naked and blindfolded on his bed, her hands over her head. Her lips were swollen and wet, which brought to mind other swollen and wet bits, which put Draco’s head back in the game.

Draco dipped a finger into the whipped cream and held it against Granger’s lips. “Try it. You must tell me if it’s up to par.”

He felt the flick of her tongue against his finger – a rather clever kind of flick, a flick that knew exactly what it was doing. As for the soft sucking – that sensation went straight to his penis.

“Perfect,” said Granger.

Draco bent over her and kissed her, and tasted the residual sweetness. “You’ve got a naughty sort of tongue.”

An equally naughty sort of smile was his answer.

He had intended to place a dollop upon every inch of Granger that he wished to kiss, but discovered as he went that he wanted to kiss every literal inch of her, which would involve dumping the entire vessel upon her, which, while hilarious, would not be as sexy.

He therefore exercised restraint and prioritised. The globs of whipped cream formed a particular shape. He enjoyed her twitches as she flinched when the cool cream touched warm skin.

Granger went silent and was most definitely attempting to work it out, even as she shuddered. “What are you drawing?” she asked at length. “It had better not be the letter D—”

“Oh, no – far better. It’s a constellation.”

“Oh?”

“The constellation of Draco, to be specific.”

“You are—”

Draco never found out what he was – she cut herself off with a gasp. He had placed cream upon her nipples in two dollops that had absolutely nothing to do with constellations.

“You can’t tell me you’re surprised about that,” said Draco. “It’s cold.”

“I shall warm it up, sharpish,” said Draco, drawing creamy lines up her thighs, towards the juncture between her legs.

He set aside the cream and began. His mouth followed a trail down from her sweet mouth to her neck, across her collar bones, and to her breasts. The contrast between the cool cream and the warmth of her stiffened nipples was gorgeous.

“Delicious,” said Draco.

Granger, arching her back, breathed out some kind of agreement. Her hands were at her sides, pressed into the mattress. One of her legs twitched up and brushed against Draco’s erection. It was tempting to indulge in a bit of frottage against her, but he refrained.

Instead, he kissed and licked his way down her stomach and then, just when he had reached the interesting bits, and Granger

had grown quite still, he stopped, and kissed the cream off of her left thigh.

Granger breathed out. He made his way up soft skin and cream, all the way to the innermost part of her thigh. Granger breathed in, her fingertips pushed into the mattress.

He stopped again and turned his attention to the line of cream going up her right thigh. The sigh that followed was – frustrated.

“I can feel your smirk,” said Granger as Draco worked his way back up. “Oops,” said Draco.

“Insufferable – mm–” Draco had tasted his tart.

“Now I begin my interrogation,” said Draco. “I must be strong,” said Granger.

“Tell me about the Seneca,” said Draco, teasing at her with a fingertip. He found her slick, a mix of their earlier activities and new arousal.

“Wh-what do you want to know?”

“Why you wouldn’t look at me.”

He pressed his finger into her, one, two knuckles deep. She groaned out approval, then said, “You already know.”

“I love to hear it.”

“Because you were – stupidly attractive – no one has any right to strut about looking like that, all – steaming and dripping. I didn’t

want to look up because I didn't want to know – didn't want those pictures in my head – looked anyway, of course, damn you—”

Draco pulled his finger out, had a taste, and resisted the urge to plunge in and finish this right now. He was no longer certain who the fuck was teasing whom.

“So we could've spent three days shagging,” said Draco, brushing his lips against her wetness as he spoke.

“We had a professional relationship,” said Granger.

“So righteous,” said Draco, flicking his tongue where his finger had been. “I'm going to lick that right out of you.”

He did so.

Granger gasped. “But – to be sincere—”

“Yes?”

“The – competence in the crypt was possibly even more of a knicker-soaker—”

Draco paused in his ministrations. “I think we both share that – predilection. Next question: tell me what happened after our –

encounter – at the window ledge.”

“F-felt it through the ring, did you?”

“Yes.”

“I had – suspected. I hadn’t come so hard in months.”

“I’ve just changed my mind,” said Draco. He caught one of her hands and brought it inwards. “I don’t want you to tell me – I want you to show me.”

Granger laughed. “Hedonist.”

“Mm,” said Draco, sitting back a bit to give her room to manoeuvre. “First class seats. I’ll have you know that I am stroking myself.”

“Not too much,” tutted Granger. “You must leave me something to play with, after–”

“There will be – a lot to play with,” said Draco, glancing down at his cock.

Draco conducted a swot analysis. He watched her touch herself, two fingers pressing small circles around and around – she favoured a light touch, then, and not too much direct contact. She pushed a finger lower, gathered up wetness, and came back up again to continue her rhythmic circles.

Draco took his hand off his cock. He was almost ready to come, himself. Fuck.

And she was bringing herself there, too. He watched a new trickle make its way down between her fingers. He pushed her hand away and pressed it into the mattress. “My turn.”

Granger sighed.

He put one finger into her, then another, squeezed at the knuckles by her snugness. He pushed and pulled in a cadence matching the one she had shown him. His tongue found salt and tang and recreated those small circles of hers.

As she began to squirm, Draco found himself sorely missing the ring. But, no matter – he had other indicators.

She wasn’t a screamer. She was a grabber. Her hands found his hair. Her thighs clamped around his ears. She pushed her hips into him as his fingers pulled in and out and his tongue kissed out rhythmic heat against her.

“Exactly – like – that–” was her sole instruction, dutifully carried out by Draco.

The movement of her hips grew erratic. Draco held her arse to keep her pushed against his mouth.

She convulsed against him, gasped, and came with long contractions against his fingers, four, five, six, of them, as he worked his tongue against her. He felt himself twitch and drip into the sheets.

Hot. Fucking hot.

There was a shudder and she was still, panting, flushed from her neck down to her breasts.

Draco pushed himself up carefully, avoiding touching at his cock, which, frankly, felt ready to spurt out its own orgasm at the slightest provocation.

He slipped the blindfold off her. Her eyes were dark and dreamy. “You’re fucking beautiful,” said Draco.

She drifted in her afterglow with a smile and watched him lick his fingers. Draco fell onto the bed next to her and propped his head up on his fist. “Some cajoling,” said Granger in a soft voice. “I feel like you’re going to make me regret it.” She smiled the Nundu smile.

“Shit,” said Draco. “You look worried.”

“I am. But – worth it for the wank bank material.” Granger threw a pillow at him.

“I must call a recess before we continue, given that I’m a soft breeze away from getting off, myself,” said Draco, catching the pillow.

Granger bent towards his erection, put her mouth an inch from it, and breathed her warm breath on it. “A soft breeze, you say?”

“Oi,” said Draco. “That’s – unsporting.”

“Do you want me to stop?” asked Granger, her words feather-light touches of breath against his shaft.

“Yes. No. Fuck.”

Granger gave him a sensible sort of nod. “We ought to take that recess.”

She clambered over him, accidentally-on-purpose brushed her slickness against him, and got off the bed.

Draco laid on the bed and stared at the ceiling with a clenched jaw.

Granger poured herself a glass of water at the table. “Aren’t you coming?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Trying not to,” said Draco.

He looked – didn’t look – looked again – at her arse.

“I should like to bite that,” declared Draco. “Back up over here, won’t you?” “I think you ought to take your break while you can,” said Granger.

She did not back herself within biting range. Suppressing a grin, she disappeared into the bathroom to wipe off the worst of her sticky spots. Draco rose to drink and have a bite of toast. His penis accepted the interlude and began a downward trajectory.

Granger came out of the bathroom, swimming in one of Draco’s silky dressing gowns. “No,” groaned Draco when he saw the change of attire. “Stay naked. I was admiring.”

“Here,” said Granger, opening the front of the gown a bit. “I shall pull a Malfoy and make an egregious display for you.”

“That is far from egregious,” said Draco, waving his hand at her.
“More.”

“Like this?” asked Granger, having opened a modest window to show off her cleavage. “No. Kindly stop being a nun.”

Granger gave him a little scoff. “That is so rich, coming from you.”

“All the way down. In fact, leave it untied. Offer me glimpses.”

“Better?”

“Yes. We must have you in the next issue of Fantastic Teats and Where To Find Them.” Granger’s attention was on Draco’s groin. He did not object to the change of subject. “Have things grown dangly again?” she asked. “Shall we proceed?”

“Examine us, Doctor,” said Draco.

She slipped a hand between the folds of his gown. “Mm. Not exactly dangly, but – a good starting point.”

“And what are we starting?” asked Draco.

Granger tripped off to the bedside table and found Draco’s wand. She gave it to him. “I should like you to conduct a spot of Legilimency on me to find out.”

Well, that was new and exciting. “Oh?”

Granger stood before him. Draco, his eyebrows raised, asked, “You’re sure?” “Yes.”

“Legilimens.”

It felt surprisingly intimate, entering a mind that was so willing to have him. He felt the warmth of her, the currents of intelligence, the complexities, the knowledge.

She offered a thought to him. The scene was a long-daydreamed delight. “Ooh,” said Draco, pulling out of her mind, his eyebrows raised.

“Are you game?” asked Granger. “Obviously.”

“Safe word?”

“Prolapse.”

“You horrid man.”

She guided him towards the bed with a hand around his penis.

“And take this off,” she said, tugging at his dressing gown.

Draco did as he was bid. Now it was his turn to recline against the pillows, stark bollock naked. Properly living the dream, he was.

Granger pointed her wand towards his dressing room and said,

“Accio cufflinks.”

A pair of silver cufflinks flew into the room, floated next to Draco’s wrists, and was swiftly Transfigured into handcuffs, chained between the bedposts.

Whatever dangliness remained in Draco's penis quite vanished.
“Blindfold?” enquired Granger.

Draco, feeling preemptively dazed, said, “Fuck, no – I want to watch.” “Very well,” said Granger.

She settled herself beside him, propped her head upon her palm, and began to trip delicate fingers along his body, slightly languid, slightly exploratory.

“You really are the Platonic ideal of a man,” she said. “I don’t want to be a platonic anything, with you.”

Granger laughed. With a wave of her wand, she levitated the vessel of whipped cream towards herself and cast a cooling charm on it. “We mustn’t let this go to waste.”

Draco shuddered out a delicious shiver as Granger began to float gobs of whipped cream over him with her wand.

Hers were very focused on his erection, and placed with a great deal of precision along the shaft and upon the head, making of it a ridiculous piled-up penile knickerbocker glory.

“Cold?” asked Granger. “Yes.”

“Perhaps my plan is to induce shrinkage, so that I might better get my mouth around it.”

“Very – clever,” breathed Draco as she began to lick her way up his stomach, “but I worry that your mouth anywhere near it will have the contrary effect.”

“Oh? I shall have to test it,” said Granger.

Now she coiled her hair over her head, pushed her wand through it in a businesslike fashion, and got to work.

She kissed up the cream that she had dotted across his chest, licked up the daubs she had placed upon his nipples (with much smirking when she felt him twitch), and came up his neck (bliss) to kiss him on the mouth.

Delicious. One of his hands jerked forwards to snatch at the back of her neck and hold her there, only – the handcuffs.

“Oh no,” said Granger.

Draco hooked a leg around her instead, but it was not the same. Her kiss went from deep and sweet with tongue to a feather-light version brushing just across his lips.

He made a sound of discontent when she pulled away.

She moved lower and lower. He looked down and she was there, an elbow propped on the mattress between his thighs, observing the slow melt of cream down his shaft.

He had fantasised about something like this so much, he was, once again, not convinced that this wasn't a dream. It couldn't be real.

A very real fingertip collected a melting drip of whipped cream halfway down his penis, swiped it up his length to the very tip, and was pressed into a mouth.

"Fuck me," sighed Draco.

"I can confirm that your definition of large met my expectations," said Granger.

Draco had no coherent response to offer, as she chose that moment to begin kissing her way up his shaft, while gentle fingers tugged at his balls.

She was terribly thorough about it – terribly scientific – every ridge and bump and vein was discovered, and treated to the flick of a hot little tongue, and she hadn't even got to the head yet, and he felt close. He wanted to hold her by the hair, wanted to grasp at a breast, but he was cuffed, and he suffered deliciously instead.

"Mm," said Granger. "You were right."

"Oh?" said Draco in a strangled voice. "The shrinkage, if any, did not persist."

"I'm always right – you ought have to – learn th—"

He cut himself off with a groan. The flicks of her tongue became licks and velvety caresses along his length. Her fingers joined in, following her mouth in a slow up and down.

Draco let his head fall back and stared at his handcuffed hands. Now he felt her palm, too, and the other – now both hands were working him over, up and down, while her tongue made a little half-circle just under his head.

He closed his eyes. He would have given – anything – for her to take him entirely into her mouth, at that moment.

She didn't, obviously. She left the tip untouched. She knew she had him where she wanted him – everything gave him away, his

closed eyes, his heavy breathing, the tension running through him, the precome that dripped amongst the cream at his untouched head.

“Glurkk,” he commented sagaciously.

“Tell me about the wank bank material,” said Granger, cupping a palm around his balls. “I’ve a burning curiosity.”

“This is – one of several scenarios,” gasped Draco. “Your mouth on me – but – the real thing is so much better than what I’d been able to imagine—”

She rewarded him with a long series of licks. Her hands continued their slow up and down. “I actually thought of this when I – not sure I should be telling you this—”

Her hands moved faster – an encouragement.

“–When I cracked one off in your shower – the night I stayed over. Bit of a danger wank, that was – in case you needed further confirmation that I am a horrid man—”

Her hands paused. Draco stole a glance downwards to see her looking at him with a new flush on her cheeks. “Did you really?”

“Yes.”

“That’s – ridiculous, and yet – very hot. Continue.”

“Backless gowns – taking you from behind, heels on. Have wanted to since that party about the orphans–”

He felt the warmth of her laughter against his cock and then the welcome wetness of tongue. “What else?”

“You in handcuffs–”

“I shall have to give you cause to arrest me.”

“Good. Biting – obviously, you went to such lengths to prevent a dental misalignment–”

“Mm. We must put it to good use.”

Draco was finding it difficult to concentrate. Her tongue was – wow. “Professor fantasies – can’t decide if you’d be for it–”

The tongue paused. “I might be, with the right man.”

The tongue resumed, accompanied by suckling. Still his head had received no attention. It looked red-purple under the cream.

“I’d better be the right fucking man – I will kill every other man to be the right fucking man–” She laughed. He hadn’t been joking.

He lifted his hips, as though he might find a way to push himself into her mouth. He managed to bump her on the cheek. The brief feeling of soft skin on his touch-starved head was gorgeous.

“What else?” prompted Granger, wiping a smear of cream from her cheek and resuming her attentions.

“I’m going to need you to tell me I’m a good boy, at some point–”

“Oh?”

“You doing arithmancy – in my study – on my lap – riding me –”

“My. I like that one.”

Now the suckling moved to the underside of his shaft, the exquisitely sensitive part just below the tip. His entire penis twitched upwards. A glob of cream fell wetly onto the sheets. His cock desperately produced another few drops of precome, mingling with the remaining cream.

“Oops,” said Granger. “Slip of the tongue.”

“T-told you I liked those,” stammered Draco. She laughed and, finally, took pity on him.

“That concludes my interrogation,” she said, with a terrible amount of satisfaction. “Thank fuck.”

It had been one thing to imagine her mouth on him, but it was quite another to feel it, the smooth tongue, the sweet pressure of her lips finally encircling his head. He felt himself twitch out another dribble of precome, quickly sucked up.

He strained against the cuffs. He had wanted to take it slow – he had wanted to draw it out. But now her tongue drew warm circles around his head as she moved up and down, and took him as deep as she could. Her hands made up for the rest.

He had wanted to take it slow. “Fuck – I’m there – unless you–” She backed off. He had a moment of what was equal parts torture and respite. She looked up at him, wet lipped, next to his glistening head. She waited.

Well. He’d wanted to be undone. “Fuck it,” he breathed. “Finish me.”

Her mouth was on him again. He was enveloped in heat, simultaneously soft and firm. He felt the light scrape of teeth. The build-up was fast and the release was coming. He was panting.

His hips bucked. Her hands squeezed. Her tongue swept a tight circle at his very tip. She sucked harder. He came with indistinct swearing, in long spurts against tongue and teeth and tightness.

He felt the press of her swallow against the underside of his head and twitched out a final spurt, straining at the chains.

He went slack against the cuffs.

He did not move for two minutes, afterwards, feeling as though his life force had just been drained out of his balls.

He was undone. Very undone. She really was launching SPERM. Granger clambered up the bed, pressed a kiss to his lips – he tasted salt, himself, whipped cream, her – and freed him from the cuffs.

“You are a good boy,” said Granger. “Too late.”

She was a mix of concerned and amused. “Are you all right? You seem – dazed.”

His cock, still hard from overstimulation and ridiculous levels of arousal, dripped against his stomach.

“Ghlph,” was all he managed as he fell back onto pillows.

Granger bustled about with water for him and cast a few cleaning spells on the sheets. “Tsk,” she said, inspecting the vat of whipped cream. “We’ve hardly made a dent in it.” “Donate – orphans,” said Draco, reduced to linguistic fragments.

Granger came to stand beside the bed, still in the oversized dressing gown. She twinned her hands before her and tilted her head to the side, contemplating him.

Draco, his gooey brain loosely held together by hormones and one or two remaining neurons, sighed out, “What?”

“I’m pleased.”

“Oh?”

“I had a feeling, after Spain, that we’d be quite compatible – but one can’t be certain until one has conducted a few – er – trial runs, you know.”

“Quite compatible,” repeated Draco. “Don’t you think?”

“Have you seen me?” Granger grinned.

“I’d expound upon my findings,” said Draco, “but – you’ve just pumped all of my cognition out of my balls.”

He reached a languid hand towards her. She approached. He slipped it between the dressing gown's folds and ran it up her side.

"You're bloody – incredibly – I can't even string words together at the moment, but—" She laid herself onto the bed with him and put her head on his shoulder.

An ordinary sort of gesture, all told – only it was Granger, putting her head on his shoulder. His pulse picked up again, not in arousal, but out of a swell of joy.

He kissed the top of her head. He couldn't remember having kissed the top of anyone's head in his life, but there it was.

Granger appeared to be thinking things along the same lines. She spoke into his chest in a smiling mumble. "This is absurd. You're Draco Malfoy."

"Have we both gone mad?"

"I think so. A little."

"You've just reminded me that I wanted to make you say my name."

"We have time to correct the lapse."

Yes. There would be time.

Thank the gods, because Draco was making a list. He wanted to do it on a broom. He wanted a spot of professorial role play. He would have her in the library. Perhaps even the Hogwarts library, if they could bluff their way back in. On the dining table. In his cubicle at work. Definitely in the lab. At the Seneca, yes, of course. And he was going to have her on that window ledge, and every bloody window ledge in this house. And he was going to spaff on her tits. And definitely work out that auto-asphyxiation device of hers.

There would be time.

There would be a lifetime, perhaps, or was that too mad to think about? He thought about it anyway.

~

It had been, all told, a winning start to the day.

They settled into one another's arms and fell into a nap.

Judging by the angle of the sun, it was only about ten o'clock in the morning when Draco awoke. He took an unusual, groggy

delight in feeling warm and sticky, because it was Granger who he felt warm and sticky with.

Her robe had opened and exposed a thigh that looked delicious. He pushed himself up and kissed it.

Granger, far away in some distant, peaceful dream, slept on.

Draco had been about to lie back down when he realised that he was being watched.

Granger's cat was at the foot of his bed, staring at him.

"How the bloody hell do you keep getting in here?" whispered Draco. "I've got wards up." The cat's blink told him that this was no concern of his.

"Right – well – erm – as you can see, things have – progressed—" said Draco, attempting to cover Granger's thigh with her robe.

The cat's long stare informed him that it had indeed taken note, and that any progress was, in fact, its doing, given that Draco was largely a useless imbecile. Draco could offer payment in the form of kippered herring at breakfast.

"...You weren't really lost, were you, that one time? And the other night – you weren't really chasing a leaf."

No, said the cat. Of course not. Draco was a bumbler and at some point a cat simply runs out of patience. The twitch of the cat's tail informed Draco that, by the by, the consequences would be dire for him, should he bollocks this up.

Frankly, the cat intimidated Draco far more than Potter and Weasley. The cat actually had the gumption to carry out its threats.

Draco pulled a sheet over himself, feeling that the old sausage and beans were rather too exposed, with those claws at this level of proximity.

"I shan't bollocks it up," whispered Draco. "I can't bollocks it. I care for her far too much – it's a horrid feeling–"

The yellow eyes stared at him.

"What else do you want me to tell you? She has the entirety of my stupid heart – all right? I can't hurt her – I'd sooner rip out my own soul–"

Still the stare continued. "I love her."

That's what it had wanted to hear.

The cat wound its way towards him on the bed. Draco slid a protective hand in front of his crotch, in case it got any ideas.

The cat observed the movement. Its glance towards Draco told him that, if it were to carry out its revenge, it would go for his eyes, first, anyway. Then nipples. It had sharpened its claws for the purpose.

But, for now, that was unnecessary. They could be friends.

It butted its head at his chest and curled its tail under his chin.

Draco spat out a single cat hair, presumably placed upon his tongue to ensure that he knew his place.

Granger awoke to find Draco scratching her cat's ears.

“Oh,” she said.

“He’s approved of me,” said Draco, “with a few provisos.”

“Provisos?”

“They’re between him and me. Can’t disclose them.”

“All right.” Granger was smiling widely. “You know, I did have it on good authority that you’re a good man, under all the dickheadery, but now...”

“It’s irrefutable, is it?”

“Yes. Theo’s findings have been peer reviewed, as it were.”

The cat began to knead Draco’s thigh, too close his crotch for comfort – another intimidation tactic, no doubt.

Granger saw Draco’s wide eyes and came to the rescue. She picked up the cat and gave it a kiss on its ugly head before sending it on its merry way through the door.

“I still want to know how he’s getting in,” said Draco.

“Should’ve worked that into your provisos,” said Granger. “I am so pleased that you’re getting along.”

“I’m not sure it’s the most egalitarian of getting-alongs.”

“You sound as though he has something terrible on you.”

“He threatened to go after my nipples, should I, in any way, displease you.”

Granger laughed and pressed a kiss onto one of the nipples in question. “I shall keep you safe.” “Thank you. I can’t decide whether the cat or the Prioress terrifies me more, at the minute.” “New Boggart, is it?”

“Not quite,” said Draco. He had an entirely new terror, there.

Granger yawned. “Shall we have a shower and give the others a sign of life?” “No,” said Draco, selfishly.

“I think we ought to, or Harry and Ron might burst in next.”

“It’s one thing for that cryptid of yours to get in, but if those two bumbler got through my wards, I’d know I was losing my touch.”

“You were a bit distracted when you were casting them,” said Granger.

She then proceeded to distract him again by walking to the bathroom and letting the robe slip off as she went.

All other issues lost their significance over chasing Granger’s bare bum.

“Again?” gasped Granger as Draco ran after her and pushed his half-hard self against her.

“Obviously. Still plenty of life left in the old bag.”

As they entered the bathroom, Draco caught sight of himself in the mirror. His hair looked like a pineapple.

In a moment of real personal growth, he discovered that he didn’t care.

They showered, amongst other naughty things. Then, because Granger desired it, they went downstairs to give the requisite sign of life.

That night, when everyone – but particularly Potter and Weasley – had fucked off, Draco joined Granger in her rooms.

By then, they had got the worst of the randiness out of their systems, and they were able to take it slow, and it was something rather more akin to making love.

There was such pleasure in it. Not raw, carnal pleasure – that had been found several times that morning – but something intimate, and slow, and sweet. They undressed each other with care and caresses. She took off his braces and cufflinks with a soft smile

upon her face. He pulled the hairpins from her hair – all except one, out of lingering paranoia. She unbuttoned his shirt; he lifted her top off.

When they were both naked, he lay her onto the pillows with that lovely chaos of hair around her, under the light of a waxing moon. She was the enchantress that he had glimpsed at long ago. He drew his fingers through her hair and felt the impossibility of it, of the realness of this dream-vision. He told her that she was beautiful. She told him to kiss her.

Their kisses yielded secrets. He told her of his Amortentia and she told him of hers, and they found delightful surprises in the other's answers, of flying, and the sea, and roses, and his hair, and desert sands, and her soap, and his cologne, and honeyed cider, and cherries, bits and pieces and memories and moments that had brought them together. He told her what he thought of when he cast a Patronus. She told him of her puzzle, of paradoxes now solved.

It was a gentle delirium of stupidities and vulnerabilities. They made love in it, whispering wants, long-unvoiced, into the other's ear. Their hearts thudded and surged. Their mouths reaped and harvested kisses, and, when they spun over the edge together, each gasped out the other's name.

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Epilogue

Journeys End in Lovers Meeting

December's full moon came and went. There were no further werewolf attacks. The wizarding world sighed in relief – Greyback and his pack had been well and truly eradicated. And, if someone of his ilk did come back, well – there was a cure, now. Lycanthropy was no longer the life-changing affliction that it used to be.

In the days and weeks that followed, normalcy returned to Draco and Granger's lives. Granger moved back to her cottage – this despite Draco mentioning, with eminent casualness, that he didn't mind if she stayed at the Manor longer. By which he clearly meant that he wanted to spend the rest of his life there with her, but she was obtuse about it.

Anyway, Granger moved back into her cottage. She returned to her good works at Muggle Cambridge, at her local surgery, and at St. Mungo's A&E. The sound of a whip cracked over the St. Mungo's Board of Directors.

Her advancements in magical immunology took wizarding academia by storm and rocketed her to scholarly superstardom. What seemed like every magical research institution in the world endeavoured to poach her from Cambridge. Oxford was particularly insistent and attempted to recruit her with promises of heading her own research institute – and budgets, staff, and resources beyond her wildest dreams. Cambridge scrambled to make a counter-offer to ensure that Granger would stay. The Sorbonne sent in a proposal that bordered on outrageous. Heavyweight American universities entered the fray with offers even more extravagant, which even Draco found rather tempting when Granger showed them to him.

Granger watched the one-upmanship unfurl with a raised eyebrow, said that it was all very flattering, and decided to remain at Cambridge. They gave her the entirety of King's Hall's third floor to expand her laboratory and funded a new facility for mass-production of her treatment.

She won an absurd amount of prizes to add to her mosaic. Meanwhile, Muggle universities found an unaccountable influx of interest in their immunology programmes by prospective students with strange and wonderful academic qualifications.

As for Draco, well – he was awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class, for Acts of Outstanding Bravery, for his diverse manifestations of idiocy on the battlefield. He was also given a letter of reprimand for Conduct Unbecoming of an Auror for inappropriate acts with his Principal. It was signed by Tonks, with a post-scriptum enquiring about when the wedding would be. He framed the letter and put it in pride of place on his cubicle wall, next to the Order of Merlin. Granger's photograph from the original casefile was pinned next to it. She tutted at him when he came in late.

Draco returned to his usual assortment of missions. And, when he wasn't dealing with naughty witches and wizards, he faffed about with a certain damaged ring. The words carved into it – purity will always conquer – meant something different, now. Purity had conquered, but it had been purity another kind – of purpose, of heart and mind.

As for the Something between Draco and Granger – they saw each other when their schedules permitted, perhaps every second or third day. As December drew to its end, Draco decided that, whatever it was, it wasn't enough. He did not want to go back to Jotted notes, not when he could kiss meanings out onto her neck. He didn't want to wake up in separate beds. He didn't want scheduling. He wanted a Life Together.

It seemed a divine objective, and a terrifying one. He wanted to try this thing with Granger – this next adventure. It frightened him far more than any of the others. More than the Keepers, more than the nuns, more than Greyback's mania – but it might make things Enough.

A life together with Granger – whatever form it took – wouldn't be perfect, smooth sailing into a perpetual sunset. This, he knew. They would quarrel often. They'd want to murder each other through new and sensational means. They'd probably call it a mistake, some days. But they would come to understandings. And perhaps, eventually, she would agree to live at the Manor with him, and fill its lofty halls with warmth. Or, perhaps, he would move into her cottage, and do something about the mess of books in that front room. Perhaps, one day, they would have children, and those children would have childhoods free of pain and war. Or perhaps they would simply enjoy each other, and go wherever the wind – or Granger's do-gooding – took them. Or perhaps they would become gentlemen thieves. Or adopt orphans and instill moral fibres in them.

But he was getting ahead of himself with these speculations. He had to ask her, first.

Draco had a conversation with his mother. He explained a great many things that had heretofore been kept secret – the rings, Granger living at the Manor, his unwise, not-allowed Feelings. He had expected, at the very least, annoyance, if not anger, at his temerity on all fronts. Instead, his mother grew teary, and asked a question.

“And you’re – happy, aren’t you?” she sniffed.

“Yes,” said Draco with unusual sincerity – and a wide, wide smile. “Then so am I.”

She took him in her thin arms and hugged him.

“And,” said Narcissa into his shoulder, “I will gladly admit that I was wrong – she did exist, after all.”

“Who?”

“The perfect witch you were waiting for.”

~

A few days before Christmas, Draco invited Granger to the Manor for dinner.

Much to his annoyance, he was late getting home that evening, having been occupied with chasing after a lich in Grimsby. He stepped out of the Floo to find the Manor resplendent with Christmas decorations – tinsel of twinned silver and gold, white clusters of candles, and garlands wafting the scent of pine.

Tupey dusted him off. Henriette, a quill behind her ear and a scroll of parchment in her hand, interrogated Draco on a few items for the dinner menu. Draco had little interest in the matter – he had absolutely no appetite, given that his intestines were a knot of nerves.

“Is she here yet?” he asked.

“Colleague Healer Granger went for a walk,” said Tupey. “We told her that you would be late, sir.” “Colleague Healer Granger,” repeated Draco.

“Sir?”

Draco grasped at his pocket. “My hope is that – my hope is that she won’t be Colleague Healer Granger for much longer.”

Both house-elves turned to look at him with wide eyes. Tupey’s feather duster quivered.

“I hope she’ll become something else – if she’ll have me,” said Draco, feeling rather quivery himself.

Henriette dropped her parchment. Her small hands clasped at her heart. The elves flung themselves at him. Each hugged one of his thighs.

“You must change, Monsieur,” said Henriette, stepping back and growing businesslike. “You smell like un cadavre.”

“Yes, well – the undead in Grimsby, you know–”

Ten minutes later, Draco had been whipped into the shower and whirled into fresh robes. He was then equipped with life advice from Henriette, such as the importance of being humble and sincere, et surtout! Surtout! not bungling this, Monsieur, or she would be cross.

In spite of her severe words, her eyes brimmed with tears as she helped him with his cloak. Tupey sobbed into his feather duster. Draco dearly hoped that he would be giving them a reason to smile soon – otherwise, he would be joining them in the crying.

He stepped outside and found Granger’s footprints in the snow. He followed them, feeling rather like a man on a mission.

Possibly the most significant mission of his life. What a feeling – what a hideous, vulnerable, glorious feeling.

The air smelled of just-before snow.

As Draco walked, memories of their year together unwound before him in a soft chronology. The February day in Glastonbury, their quarrel at Ostara, banoffee pie scarfed down like barbarians. Beltane and its seas and smoke. Chocolate by a fountain. Solstice and sun-drenched Provence.

Healing and inadvertent disclosures at St. Mungo's. Lingering too long under wisteria. Lughnasadh's gentle meander down memory lane. Laughing fits with mud in their mouths and the magic of Mabon. A stolen dance. Samhain and the night in Spain. Triumphs on the battlefield amongst fire and blood. A kiss under sanctified rain.

He felt a sweet sort of sadness that something was over – but there swelled in him, also, a hope that something new and wonderful was about to begin.

There was a strange loveliness to the evening sky. Snow clouds threatened, but the sun danced amongst them, sifting delicate gold here and there through the grey. It washed light and dark over the grounds in a pale, luminous impasto.

Granger's footprints led to the rose garden's snow-ivied walls.

Rose bushes, charmed to resist the cold, dripped with icicles that fixed the light into frozen glints. The roses themselves looked even more opulent than usual under their pelerines of snow. Heavy heads bent under the weight of it, glowing lustres of ruby or pink or crimson through the white.

There is something of a fairy tale about roses under snow – in the frosted leaves, in the bending stalks, in blossoms unscarred, touching petal to petal like the lips of lovers. Something of a love story, something of a happily ever after.

Draco picked a rose – a deep red one, the colour of romance, of heart-blood.

The stirring beauty of the rose garden was made more beautiful, still, by the woman walking through it.

She had paced out a circle of footprints around the fountain. Her nose and cheeks were nipped pink by the cold. She smiled as he approached.

In her hands, a sheaf of papers. In his hands, a rose.

“What are you up to?” she asked, when he approached her with it.

“Mischief, as usual,” said Draco. He slid the rose into her hair and stood back to contemplate the effect. “Gilding the lily, really – holding a lantern to the sun.”

Granger eyed him with amusement and suspicion, even as she blushed. She touched her fingertips to the petals. “Thank you. It’s lovely.”

“And what are you up to?” asked Draco.

“Reeling,” said Granger. She waved her papers at him. “I’ve just got back from the lab. We’ve received some preliminary results.”

“Good?”

“More than good – fantastic. Beyond what I could’ve hoped.”

She came to his side and showed him the results, the incomprehensible rows of data that made her so happy. She explained things in a rush of enthusiasm, how these and those numbers were so promising, that this and that anticipated side-

effect had occurred only minimally, interspersed with exclamations of “Look!” and “Can you imagine?”

Draco nodded and pretended to understand and said that it was all bloody good news, well done, well fucking done.

Granger beamed. She clutched the results to her chest, spun upon her heel, took in a breath, and let it out in a warm mist.

With a new serenity, she folded her papers and pressed them into her coat. Now she looked at Draco with a soft, smiling delight. A great peace descended on her – the peace that follows years of effort and persistence, when those efforts have, at long last, borne fruit. She had accomplished the impossible. She had achieved a dream.

Draco felt that rush of admiration and affection that had grown terribly familiar, when Granger was around – the press at his heart, the headiness. Extraordinary witch. Incredible woman. Beloved, beloved, beloved.

The sun shone from behind clouds.

“It’s the winter solstice today,” said Granger, looking up at it.
“Yule.”

“Is it? What – a Pagan holiday, and we haven’t some asterisky adventure to frolic off to?” “Strange, isn’t it?”

“Shall we nip away to the Orkney Islands before dinner?”

Granger laughed. “It’s a fascinating astronomical event in its own right. Solstitium’s literal meaning is ‘the sun stands still’ – and it will. Quite soon, I think. And then the days will grow longer again. A time for new beginnings, according to the old ways.”

“New beginnings,” repeated Draco. “That is – rather convenient.” “Oh?”

Draco found himself, again, seized by that fool’s courage – as well as the squeeze of nerves. “I – have something for you,” said Draco.

His voice verged, suddenly, on the shaky. His voice was never shaky. He had wanted to be suave. But this was Granger, ergo, no suave. Blast it all to hell.

Granger turned her attention from the sky to him. Her focus was curious, gentle.

With fingers that felt a bit trembly, Draco took out the ring. It sat in his palm, a simple silver band. “You fixed it,” gasped Granger in delight. “Well done!”

“I did. I’d like you to – have it.”

She looked up at him. “To wear it again?”

“No. Well, yes. But I mean – have it.”

“Have it?” Granger searched his eyes. “But – these are your family rings.”

Right. He was botching this completely and he was going to have to spell it out for her, even as his heart was doing its utmost to block his throat.

“Yes – of course – you’re right. These are my family rings.” He paused, took a breath, and continued. “And I’d – what I’m trying to say – badly – is that I’d like you to be part of my family. Or – for me to be part of yours. Or for us to make a new one, together – or any iteration you’d like. What I’m trying to ask is – if you’d give it a go with me –”

His voice caught. Now she was beginning to understand. Her lips parted. A few snowflakes drifted down and caught in her hair, on the rose, and left melting kisses on her cheek.

“Potter and Weasley asked me what my – intentions were, with you,” continued Draco. “And I hadn’t an answer – didn’t know I had any. But I do. I want to be with you – in whatever capacity you’ll have me.”

Now there were tears in her eyes.

He forged ahead – it was too late to turn back now. “I love you – I adore you – I want us to be together. Together-together. I, frankly, would like to spend the rest of my life with you, but we can do stupid dates first, or a proper courtship, or – an engagement (though I rather think that we got engaged in March, as much as you would deny it) – or anything you’d like.”

She gasped out a sob that was, somehow, also a sound of delight.

“Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Yes – I am. If you want to – obviously – but I would also be happy simply being with you – whatever that might mean – whatever you’d like it to mean. I don’t bloody know – I’m rubbish at this. Something about you reduces me to a blithering fool. I realise asking for the rest of our lives is probably too much, too fast, so–”

“Yes,” said Granger.

“Yes?” repeated Draco. “You – want to?”

She approached. She held his cold hand in her warm ones, and drew it, ring and all, towards her heart. Tears mingled with the snow-melt on her cheek. “Yes, I want to – yes to everything. To whatever it might mean. Yes to stupid dates, yes to being together-together, yes to – to marrying you, to spending the rest of my life with you. Yes to every blithering word.”

“Are you – certain? I’m – the worst of blitherers – of men in general –”

She cut him off with a kiss and, in a voice choked with emotion, whispered, “I love you,” against his lips.

His head spun. His soul flew. He kissed her back, then his overfull heart surged out wants in a breathless sequence against her mouth. “I want more time with you – I want us to have the same bed. I want you to outwit me daily. I want to give you, gods, so many things. I want quickies in bathrooms – dances – photographs in lockets –”

Tears or snowflakes clung to her lashes. She gasped another yes against his lips.

“I’m the luckiest idiot who ever walked this earth,” said Draco, holding her face, pressing his forehead against hers.

“I can assure you that that title goes to me,” said Granger in a voice that shook. “You’re Granger – contradiction in terms.”

She laughed amongst the tears. “How do you make me – so happy–”

“Shall we – shall we have one last, grand adventure together?”

She could speak no further. She nodded, then pressed her face into his chest.

She had said yes. She had kissed yeses into his mouth. He wanted to weep, he wanted to crush her, he wanted to drop onto one knee, he wanted everything, all of this stupid love thing, he wanted it rife with cliché, another kiss, another moment, forever and ever–

He felt the warmth of her breath through his cloak. She put her small, shaking grasp around him and made a serious attempt to squeeze the life out of him.

And – his long list notwithstanding – he didn’t want anything more than this. This witch in his arms, doing her utmost to crack his ribs.

He had, at last, found his enough.

The sun was setting. The stars glittered their lovely awakening.

As they had been in this very garden so many months ago, they were, once again, only a man and a woman amongst green boughs and a rustling breeze.

Only, this time, the violent polarities that had kept them apart drew them together. After all, fire loves her darkness. After all, the sinner loves his angel. Autumn, laughing, dances her leaves into the high skies of her winter. The moon spins in gyre after gyre, chasing his beloved sun.

Only, this time, the terrible incompatibilities had grown irrelevant – fallen away – mattered for naught. They were two souls who had come near enough to feel the other's glow, but now, at last, they met, touched, tangled.

He slipped the ring onto her finger. He had removed all of the thresholds. She would feel everything. The rings connected. He felt the surge of her heart and she, with a gasp, felt his.

He held her to him, lifted her, and spun her, laughing, amongst swirling nebulae of snowflakes catching the sun.

She was his and he was utterly hers.

In snow-felted twilight, under spilling skies and starshine and a sun standing still, they kissed, they promised, they loved. What cared they about universes colliding? Let them collide. Let their joined heartbeats cleave constellations and startle the eternal stars.



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DRACO
MALFOY

"RIFE WITH
HISTORICAL
INACCURACIES."
- S. SNAPE

HERMIONE
GRANGER



"PURE SHIT."
- T. RIDDLE

Draco Malfoy
& THE MORTIFYING
ORDEAL OF BEING
IN LOVE

BY ITHISSELF CARE
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