

## Good Reason

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# Good Reason

by [morriganmercy](#)

## Summary

Hermione reluctantly runs a bar. When Draco comes in for a drink one night, he makes his interest immediately and insistently known. But the absolute last thing Hermione needs right now is to shag someone ten years younger than her with biceps bigger than his brain.

...Probably.

## Notes

Hello and welcome! :) I come bearing another short, no plot just vibes, fluffy, smutty muggle au multichap! Those who enjoyed The Girl Next Door will like it here (I hope!!). The first scene of this fic was inspired by an extremely dramione-coded interaction I witnessed at a bar. It quickly spiraled from there 😊

\*I do feel like the Himbo Draco tag bears a little disclaimer: this is my attempt at a take on this trope. Turns out I'm not really capable of writing a Draco that isn't clever, but this one is certainly less intellectual than we usually see him portrayed. The real himbo energy (and the reason I wanted to write a characterization like this in the first place) comes from the fact that this Draco is extremely easy-going, lighthearted, and really only intense about his feelings for Hermione. He is eager, earnest, unashamed, and at times lovably (hopefully!!) bumbling in his pursuit of her. We tend to write our best girl as overworked and overwrought (in character, I fear), and I really wanted this Draco to be a foil to that. Someone who could waltz into her life and say "here's a wacky idea: what if everything was actually gonna work out great? And it's gonna be easy???" She deserves that okay!! Okay.\*

Thank you very much for being here! This will probably be my last dramione multichap for a little while (she says when the last one is over a year old 🤪). For those who didn't see the announcement on social media, I signed with a wonderful angel of an agent to represent me for my debut novel. I will still be around (they would have to drag me out of fandom kicking and screaming!!), but it will be less so as I pivot into original fic for a spell. That is a sentence I never would have been able to type without all of you, so from the bottom of my heart, thank you thank you for every single word of mine you've read. All of the love and support means more to me than I can ever say!!!

Okay, enough from me!! Please enjoy! Tags will be updated as they become relevant because I'm feeling saucy. Updates on Mondays as usual ❤️



# One

## Chapter Notes

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

Hermione is thrilled they're at capacity. Really, she is.

*"Do you have prosecco for negronis? We don't want them if you don't have prosecco."*

Being back behind the bar is wonderful.

*"Can I get a 1942 and orange juice?"*

She loves the nostalgia of it.

*"I'll have a neat bourbon on the rocks."*

She needs to hire another bartender immediately.

Lavender is great, her best really. But Hermione is going to have to come up with a permanent backup if Lavender continues to call off sick every month like clockwork. Either the poor girl suffers the worst periods known to man, or she's a werewolf.

Neither make for good customer service.

"I got them," Pansy says, pointing to a trio of girls as she skirts past Hermione.

"Thank you," Hermione says. The one in the middle is giving off strong mojito vibes, and if Hermione is forced to muddle right now, she might scream. She turns for the other end of the bar where a blonde guy has been waiting.

"What can I get you?"

He turns from the conversation happening in the group behind him.

And then he stares. And *stares*.

She'd be tempted to think he's merely terrified at the way the humidity in the crowded room has transformed her ponytail into a sentient creature, but after his grey eyes flit over her face, they drop to her chest. She waits the eons-long second for them to dart back up, and then raises her brows impatiently.

But he just smiles. "Hi," he says.

She could punch him.

She says, "Hi," instead.

“How are you?”

“Busy,” Hermione snaps. “Are you drinking?”

He looks mildly flustered. “Oh, uh, yeah. I’ll have a beer.”

“Amazing,” she deadpans. “We have more than one.”

“Oh, right,” he says. His eyes scan over the row of taps beside her, then flick to the cooler of bottles behind the bar like it’s his first time in a pub. From the looks of him, it almost could be. Hermione prays for strength.

“What’s your favourite beer?” he asks her.

“Tequila.”

His face breaks into a grin. He has an annoyingly nice smile. Doesn’t make him any less punchable. “Yeah,” he says. “I’ll have that.”

Hermione nods, turning to grab her favourite tequila. If he didn’t want to pay for top shelf, then he should have been more specific. She pours him a shot, slipping her second to last lime wedge onto the rim of the glass.

“Can I get you one?” he asks.

“Sure,” Hermione says, pouring a second without missing a beat. There’s a cute brunette a little ways down the bar, and Hermione leans across to tap her on the shoulder. “This is from him,” she says, sliding the shot over.

The girl picks it up curiously, leaning forward to see who Hermione’s indicating. Her eyes go wide when she sees him, and she turns back to giggle with her friends before lifting the glass to him and saying, “Thanks.”

His lips purse in a polite smile as he returns the gesture, but his eyes slant back to Hermione before he swallows the shot.

Hermione pretends not to notice, turning for the computer to ring in the drinks.

“Behind!” Harry calls as she nearly crashes into him and the full rack of pint glasses he’s carrying.

“Christ,” she mutters, grabbing his shoulder for a second to steady herself as he passes. “I need limes Harry,” she calls after him.

“Got it,” he calls back, wiping his forearm under his fringe.

Hermione’s fingers fly over the touch screen, and she turns back to the blonde guy with a total on the tip of her tongue.

He's already holding out a card, and she takes it with a smirk at the sight of his pout. "Oh! Did you mean for me to *drink* that?" she asks. "Sorry, I didn't realise."

"No worries," he says easily. "I'll take that beer when you have a chance."

Hermione glances over her shoulder as she swipes his card. "Which beer was that again?"

"Surprise me," he says.

She rolls her eyes, reaching into the fridge and popping the top on a ubiquitous brown bottle. "Surprise, it's a Coors."

He grins again. "Perfect."

Her head shakes as she punches it into the computer.

"I'm Draco, by the way."

"I know," Hermione says, holding up his card between two fingers as she hands it back.

She's already pointing at the next customer when he asks, "What's your name?"

She scoops up a glass of ice, throwing, "Hermione," over her shoulder as she reaches for the vodka.

"It's nice to meet you, Hermione."

She lets her eyes flick up as the glass fills with cranberry. He has dimples.

*Extremely* annoying.

She hands off the vodka cran, taking the card offered in exchange.

"I'm gonna go do my job now," she tells Draco.

If he says anything in response, she doesn't hear it.

"You'll never make tips with an attitude like that," Pansy says as she slides behind Hermione at the computer.

"I don't make tips," Hermione argues, reaching across her for the Crown.

"Yeah, but I do," Pansy says over the rattle of ice in the shaker. "Would it kill you to smile? He's cute."

Hermione snorts. "He's an infant."

"I've never seen an infant with arms like that."

Hermione's teeth grit. She doesn't need to look to know what Pansy's talking about, which is highly aggravating.

“You flirt with him then,” Hermione says.

“Love to,” Pansy says, turning to strain her shaker across three shot glasses. “But he hasn’t taken his eyes off you. Looks like he’s watching a bloody tennis match, following you back and forth.”

Hermione glances over against her better judgment.

Draco has moved from his spot at the bar—back with the group he came in with—but he’s positioned himself on the far side of them. Watching her.

He pauses with the beer bottle pressed to his lower lip when he sees her looking, and she tears her eyes away from his face before he can smile again. Unfortunately, the position of his arm has her gaze snagging on the way his bicep swells under the sleeve of his t-shirt. The garment isn’t even tight enough for her to mock, like he’s desperate to show off. It seems more that that’s just the way he looks in clothes that fit.

The computer spits out the receipt she’s been waiting on, and Hermione snatches it with far more force than necessary. It rips across the middle.

“Bloody fucking hell,” she mutters, retrieving the lingering scrap and shoving both mangled halves at the poor gent who’s just trying to close out his tab.

“Easy,” Pansy says through a laugh. “Wouldn’t want people to think you’re tightly wound.”

“I’m fine,” Hermione snaps.

“Are you?” Pansy says. “Because at my last tally, it’s been almost a year, and that’s bad for everyone.”

Hermione’s jaw clenches as Pansy slinks away with a smug look on her face.

Hermione’s almost glad when the next group orders six different specialty shots complete with additions and substitutions. She lets the tedium of mixing them push every other *annoying* thought from her mind.

The next guy gets a rum and coke, then two gin and tonics for the girls beside him. The lady after that lets Hermione get halfway through making a sidecar before realising what she actually wanted was a Manhattan.

Hermione tosses the contents of the shaker, bending to scoop up more ice.

“I’m getting low on—”

“Here,” Neville says from behind her, and she moves automatically out of the way so he can dump the fresh tub in his arms on top.

“Thanks, Nev,” she calls over the racket, already pouring the whiskey.

She finishes the Manhattan, perching a garnish pick with a single house-made cherry across the glass.

She slides it over to the now-pleased customer, already turning to scan along the length of the bar. Miraculously, the crowd has thinned a bit. Pansy's handling a couple at the end and another is chatting beside them, but no one is trying to flag her down. No fingers waving in the air, no desperate eyes.

Well, almost none.

Draco is back.

"Another beer?" she asks, ditching the empty bottle he sets on the bar.

"Please."

"My version, or yours?" she asks.

He smiles. "Both."

She grabs the tequila with a smirk, pouring him a shot before snagging another beer from the fridge.

"Thanks," he says as she sets it down. He picks up the shot glass but doesn't drink it. He's watching her.

Hermione lifts her brows. "Need something else?"

He licks his lips. *Not* that she's looking. "One for you?" he ventures.

Persistent.

She shakes her head, grabbing the bottle again and pouring another shot. The little trick she pulled earlier usually works better to deter this sort of thing. Hermione would be long dead if she drank everything customers tried to buy her, but it's a Friday and she could use one.

She lifts the glass toward him. "Thank you," she says before tapping it down on the bar and throwing it back.

"Cheers," he says and does the same.

Hermione plucks a lime wedge out of the caddy and bites into it with a pleasant shiver.

Draco holds her gaze as she sucks the juice from the fruit, and she makes an excuse to break it, turning to toss the rind over the sink and into the bin.

She collects Draco's empty glass, taking a detour to ring in the new round of drinks, but when she turns back, the lull in customers is still in full effect. There's no one calling her away.

Draco sits down on the stool in front of him, propping his forearms on the bar. Hermione rolls her eyes in favour of looking at them.

“Shouldn’t you be spending your time with your friends?” she asks, gesturing with a tilt of her head as she picks up a towel to wipe down the station in front of her.

“Nah,” Draco says, not deigning to take his eyes off her long enough to look back at them. “I see them all the time.”

“Co-workers?” she inquires for some unknown fucking reason.

“Two of them, yeah,” he says. “But we all play in a football league together.”

Oh, *good*. Absolutely smashing. She wonders if it’s possible that his hair could still have that perfectly tousled look if they came straight from a practise.

Hermione swallows, only humming a response.

“We’ve been here a few times actually,” says Draco. “But I’ve never seen you before. Are you new?”

Hermione lets out a huff of a laugh. “No, I’m not new.”

“She’s the owner,” Pansy says as she twirls by.

Hermione lobs a glare at her retreating back. “You’re fired.”

Pansy spins, grinning wide. “No, I’m not.”

Hermione rolls her eyes back to Draco. “I don’t usually work the bar anymore, but we’re understaffed tonight.”

“Owner,” he says, brows raised. “Wow.”

Something in his voice makes her eyes narrow. “What’s with the tone of surprise?”

“Oh, nothing,” he says quickly. “Just... if you run a bar, I’d think that you’d... you know, like it more.”

Hermione blinks. Fuck, she really does need to smile more.

“It wasn’t always a bar,” she explains, pointing to the darkened glass doors behind him. Draco turns on the stool, craning his neck to look through the crowd. “I inherited the bookshop next door, along with the mountain of debt that came with it. Unfortunately, people seem to care more about drinking coffee than reading books these days, so adding the cafe was the only way out from under water.”

A guy appears at the bar asking for an old-fashioned, and Hermione continues as she makes it.

"Three years ago, a developer bought this whole end of the street, and with the new terms of our lease, it was either tack on a liquor license or lose it all."

Draco watches her peel a strip of orange rind into the short glass.

She shrugs as she hands it over to the bloke beside him. "We do ten times the revenue in booze that we ever did in books. How this place became a mecca for insufferable yuppies, I'll never know, but it keeps the doors open on the shop, so."

If Draco correctly intuits that she is one hundred percent counting him among that number, he doesn't show it.

"You inherited it?" he asks.

She nods, a small smile lifting her lips. "From my grandparents. I learned to read sitting on the counter next to the till."

He returns her smile. "I love reading."

Hermione lifts her brows. "Oh, really? What's something good you've read lately?"

He panics. She can see it clear as day. She takes great pleasure in watching him cast about for something impressive. "*Crime and Punishment*," he blurts.

She only barely suppresses her snort. What a choice. "Wooow," she says, leaning her elbows on the bar. "Tolstoy. A classic."

Draco nods before taking a relieved sip of his beer. "Love Tolstoy."

"That's interesting," she says. "Because *Crime and Punishment* is Dostoevsky."

He chokes.

"You must've been thinking of *War and Peace*," she offers.

"Right," he croaks. "That must be it."

She arches a brow.

He clears his throat, reaching up to rub a hand over the back of his neck. "I'm actually, er, not much of a reader these days."

"Not much of a liar, either," Hermione says, pushing back off the bar.

"Usually I'm better," he argues.

She barks out a laugh. "Oh, have I heard that before."

"You make me nervous," he says, eyes shining with mischief. "I'm sure you've heard that, too."

Hermione's head is shaking slowly at this nonsense. She needs to put a stop to it.

Draco leans forward, arms flexing. "So, when does the owner get off?"

Hermione lets out a humourless chuckle, thinking morosely of her 5AM alarm to prep the cafe.

"Never."

"And that's kinda the problem, isn't it?" Pansy says, skirting by them again.

Hermione's quicker this time, and she hits Pansy square in the back with a stream of frigid water from the soda gun.

Pansy screeches satisfyingly, and several people whoop at their antics.

Draco is beaming at her, and Hermione can't help the way it's making her stomach feel light.

Actually, that's probably from the shot.

"Well, since you're so busy," Draco says, leaning to the side to retrieve his wallet from a pocket. "I'd better go ahead and give you this now."

Hermione extends her hand, taking the crisp white business card he holds out to her.

"Ooh, consulting," she says with exaggerated relish. "Well, if we need our synergistics optimised, then I know who to call."

She half-turns, flicking the card back toward the register. It slides under a stack of receipts.

Draco leans around her to look, his brow furrowing slightly. "My personal number is actually on there as well, so any pain points that I might be able to relieve—day or night—"

"Thank you," she interrupts. "But I can assure you, that won't be necessary."

His head tilts. "What makes you so sure?"

Hermione debates for the space of a few seconds. He really is so goddamn cute. She wants to punch him again.

Eventually, her morbid curiosity gets the better of her.

"Let me see your ID."

Draco blinks, clearly caught off guard. It doesn't take long for him to cotton on, though.

"They carded me at the door," he says defensively.

"And now I'm carding you again."

It's his turn to debate, and like her, it only takes a few seconds. He thumbs the plastic card out of his wallet and hands it over.

One glance at his birth date has a shocked laugh punching out of her chest. It only *takes* one glance because the difference in years between them makes a nice, big, round number.

Draco's lips are pursed with reluctant resignation as she hands his ID back.

"So, that's a no, then?" he says.

"That's a no," she agrees.

"Doesn't seem like a very good reason."

She laughs. "Trust me, it is. In fact, it's *ten* good reasons."

She lets the emphasis sit heavy in her voice in case he'd underestimated what he was dealing with, but he remains undeterred.

"You know, they say age is just a number."

"Yeah," Hermione says. "And your number is 23."

"Are you really going to hold that against me?"

"Yes," she says emphatically. "Absolutely. Of course, I am."

He sucks his teeth in disappointment, but he still can't keep the smile off his face. It's light. Playful. It would be rapidly eroding her resolve if she didn't know better.

He draws in one more deep breath and lets it out on a sigh. His teeth rake across his bottom lip before he says, "Damn," and stands with a shake of his head.

When he finally turns to rejoin his friends, Hermione can feel the flush on her face.

Pansy appears out of thin air beside her. "Did you get his number?"

"No," Hermione says, turning her back to rest against the bar. "Well, yes, but I'm not doing it."

"Why not?!" Pansy nearly screeches again.

"Because he's 23."

"And?"

Hermione gives her an exasperated look. "And I was 23 a decade ago."

Pansy looks utterly bemused. "So what? You look 27 at most, and that's just around the eyes."

She lets Hermione swat her arm good-naturedly. “I’m serious,” Hermione says. “What am I supposed to do with someone that young?”

Pansy’s eyes flick up over her shoulder. “Well, based on the way he’s looking at you, I’d go with getting fucked through the mattress.”

Hermione flushes again.

“If nothing else, he’ll be energetic,” Pansy adds dreamily, letting her head tilt.

Hermione snaps her fingers in front of Pansy’s face. “Hey!”

Pansy’s smirk is devilish, but she’s drawn away by someone needing a pint. Hermione watches her fill the glass, and when Pansy turns back and sees her expression, she sobers at once.

“Hermione, you work too hard, and you worry too much. You deserve to have some fun.”

Hermione sighs, stretching out the ache in her neck. “I think that time has passed.”

Pansy’s eyes roll dramatically. “Fine, then. I’m sure you’ll meet someone boring and age-appropriate to marry any day now. I mean, it worked out *so well* the first time.”

Hermione cuts her eyes to Pansy with a scowl. “Harsh.”

Pansy just shrugs. “23-year-old Hermione should have been at the club. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for her.”

Hermione’s lips part in surprise at the way that hits her. It’s not the first time she’s lamented the things she missed out on in her twenties. But those had all been hypothetical. Notions of flirtations and flings and all manner of affairs available to people a little more carefree than Hermione had ever really managed.

But thinking of the missed potential now, with just such a scenario so boldly on offer...

It almost sounds like a good reason.

Hermione turns back to face the crowd, and her skin prickles with the knowledge that if she lifted her gaze, Draco’s would be waiting to meet it.

Thankfully, someone steps in front of her. And they need a drink.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

I must give a special shout out to my brilliant beta [naginisLinguini](#) for the "1942 and orange juice" request which actually happened in her presence, much to the chagrin of the bartender and everyone else within earshot. I'd had this idea kicking around for a while, but it was that outraged middle-of-the-night text which spurred me into finally putting fingers to keys. So, thank you for that (and everything else!!) katie <333

I hope you enjoyed this cheeky first chapter! Up next: In a shocking surprise to no one except Hermione, Draco will not be giving up that easily 😊

I'd love to know what you thought! Comments make my day, and you can also find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

I've also been doing little chats on ig live Sundays at 3pm ET, so feel free to join there if you'd like to talk about this fic in real time!

Okay, until next week!! 🎉

## Two

### Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the amazing response to the first chapter!! I am right there with you: Pansy for employee of the month for the next year straight 🌟

\*\*A quick but important point of clarification: a few commenters mentioned being heartbroken at the idea of the inherited bookshop becoming a bar, and to that I say, AS YOU SHOULD BE. That is not what has happened here!! I promise you fluff and then open the story in the smoldering remains of Hermione's childhood dreams?? Never! The bar is located \*next door\* to the bookshop. The doors that Hermione points at to show Draco are the doors leading into the bookshop through the shared wall. They're dark because it's nighttime and it's closed. When Hermione said they needed to "add the cafe," in my mind, she spent her entire life savings and probably leveraged herself to the tits to take over the space next door to the bookshop for the cafe. Then, with the rent increase, the \*cafe\* is what became the bar (they still serve coffee/food during the day). (Hopefully this all would have become clear in later chapters, but I couldn't bear to see another comment in this vein in the meantime 😢) Hermione speaks negatively about the situation because she does not want to have to run these other businesses; she just wants people to buy books 😞 But this is a success story! She is a savvy business boss lady, despite! The bar thrives and the bookshop survives! It is alive and well, I promise!! See, look, here's a scene set in it! 😊

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

Hermione spends late Sunday morning hunched over the shabby little desk in her office.

She hates doing inventory. Almost as much as she hates making the staff schedules.

She lets her forehead fall into one hand, fingers rubbing over her eyes.

A gentle knock has her straightening back up. A young woman is standing in the open doorway. "Hi," she says. "I'm looking for Hermione?"

"That's me," Hermione says. "How can I help you?"

She smiles, stepping forward into the office. "I'm Daphne Greengrass. I'm here for an interview."

Hermione blinks. For a moment, she wonders if the three hours of sleep she's been running on have finally caught up with her. Had she scheduled interviews for a new bartender and completely forgotten? She glances at the half-written job posting on her computer screen.

Daphne clears her throat. "Um, a friend mentioned that there was an opening."

Hermione stares, willing her last two brain cells to communicate with each other. “A friend,” she repeats.

Daphne just nods, leaning toward the desk to hand over a very professional looking CV. Hermione takes the page numbly, eyes scanning over the woman in front of her as she struggles to process.

Daphne is dressed tidily, her blonde hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail. She has a lovely, open face and a distinct air of capable togetherness about her.

If Pansy had another bartender friend, Hermione can’t imagine why she never mentioned it before.

“Uh, sorry, hi,” Hermione says belatedly, standing to shake Daphne’s hand. “Please, have a seat.”

Daphne sits in the chair across from Hermione’s desk, and Hermione scans over her CV.

“Wow,” Hermione says after a moment. “You have a lot of experience.” Far more than Hermione even.

Daphne smiles. “My first job was in a restaurant, and I fell in love with it. I tended bar all through uni, and I followed one of the owners to a little craft cocktail and gastropub when I finished. It’s been great, but I’m ready for a change. I could use something a little more fast-paced.”

Hermione offers an exhausted chuckle. “Well, we certainly have that here. I only wish I shared your enthusiasm for it.”

Daphne gives her a soft smile as Hermione looks back down over the document in her hands.

“This is really very impressive,” Hermione says genuinely. “You’re more than qualified. But our scheduling is a bit of a mess at the moment, if I’m honest. I have another bartender I really want to keep, but I do need a reliable backup for her. In terms of hours, I could offer you—”

She breaks off when she glances up to see the confusion on Daphne’s face.

“Sorry,” Daphne says, obviously reading the awkward moment. “I was under the impression that this position was for a bar manager.”

Hermione blinks again. “A manager?” Hermione is the manager.

“Yes,” Daphne says slowly, brows creasing. “Someone to run the bar so you can focus on the parts of the business you enjoy more.” She lifts a hand toward the door, gesturing to the bookshop beyond.

The pieces finally click into place in Hermione’s mind. Her eyes fall shut with sudden comprehension.

*A friend.* The absolute nerve of him.

When she looks back at Daphne, she's wearing a slightly sheepish expression.

"Thank you so much for coming in, Daphne," Hermione tells her. "I need to talk with my team, but I will give you a call tomorrow."

Daphne nods, getting to her feet and holding out her hand again. "It was lovely to meet you, Hermione."

"Likewise."

Hermione watches her go, listening for the chime of the bell above the shop door. She pushes back her chair and makes a beeline over to the bar. She rustles through the general chaos surrounding the register until her fingers close over a crisp, white rectangle.

She pulls out her phone, punching in the number with an indignant finger. She sends the message without thinking.

### ***A bar manager?***

She glares down at the little bubble of text, immediately irritated when he doesn't respond right away.

She pockets her phone and marches back to her office. She doesn't know who he thinks he is. She's *managing* just fine on her own.

Her chair creaks as she drops into it, and Hermione is confronted with Daphne's CV once again. She reads through the list of responsibilities she'd taken on at her last job, the experience she has with inventory, ordering, scheduling, training.

Hermione could afford her easily. Which Draco would know if he's been to the bar a few times and seen it at capacity on every occasion.

She glares at her phone some more.

Hermione attempts to focus back on her work, but now, in addition to the normal annoyance of the tasks, she's irked by the suspicion that Daphne could easily handle every single one of them.

When Luna knocks on the office door an hour later, Hermione is staring longingly at the CV with a thumbnail clamped between her teeth.

"Hey," Hermione says, glancing up. "Taking lunch?"

"If that's okay," Luna says with a nod.

"Of course," Hermione gets to her feet.

"Only one customer in the shop," Luna tells her.

“Okay, thanks, Luna.”

Luna nods before heading out the backdoor to the courtyard.

Hermione rolls her shoulders with a groan before stepping out onto the floor of the bookshop. She sinks down onto the stool behind the till, setting her still-silent phone on the counter.

As soon as she lets go, however, it pings to life. Hermione snatches it up, nearly fumbling it onto the ground in her haste.

Her thumbnail is back between her teeth as she reads the text.

***a good consultant can provide solutions before the client has even ID-ed the real problem ;)***

Hermione’s heart thumps in her chest.

Is that what he’s done? Provide her with an answer to a question she wasn’t even asking? Loathe as she is to admit it, that’s what Daphne feels like. She feels like a lifeline.

At the same time, she *cannot* believe the cheek of him.

“Now, what in the world could have you smiling like that?”

Hermione’s head snaps up at the voice, and her mouth drops open.

Draco is standing at the counter.

Hermione gapes at him like a fish.

He flashes her a grin, slipping his phone back in his pocket. “Sorry about the delay,” he says. “I was in a meeting.”

Hermione’s head shakes helplessly. She can feel the heat on her cheeks, but there’s nothing to be done about it.

He looks sinfully good in a light blue button-down, the same infuriatingly posh tousle to his perfect hair. It takes her a full second to process the way he’s grinning *down* at her, his full height on display without the disadvantage of the elevated floor behind the bar.

“How was your morning?” he asks when she simply continues staring.

She huffs a little laugh. “Enlightening.”

“Oh?” His brows raise. “I’m glad to hear it.”

She shakes her head again as she holds up her phone. “I’m not your client.”

“No,” he agrees. “But you are my concern.”

At her skeptical look, he licks his lips. “Let’s just say I have a vested interest in freeing up some of your time.”

God, it’s fucking smooth. She *hates* that she likes it.

“I’m fairly certain I made it clear that wouldn’t be necessary.”

He merely shrugs a shoulder, the very picture of casualness in the face of the renewed rejection. “Either way. Daph is great at what she does. You won’t be disappointed.”

Hermione arches a brow. “You seem to think very highly of your *friend*.”

Draco takes the insinuation in stride, only smiling wider. “She’s more like family.”

Hermione’s inclined to believe him. If he’s really trying to sleep with her, it would be an odd move to send a girlfriend or even an ex to come work for her. Plus, Daphne has a handful of years on him. Not that that means much given Hermione’s present situation.

“Well, I think you’re probably right about her,” Hermione offers.

“I’m probably right about a lot of things.”

Hermione wants to roll her eyes, but something about the way Draco’s are glittering holds her gaze. She’s no stranger to flirting, but she can’t remember it ever feeling like this.

He lets the moment linger for another second before heaving a dramatic sigh. “Well, if I can’t convince you to give me a chance, I guess I’ll have to find some other way to occupy my time.”

He sets two books on the counter.

*Crime and Punishment* and *War and Peace*.

Hermione lets out a sound worryingly close to a giggle. She actually presses a hand over her mouth to suppress it.

“I’m told this one is a classic,” Draco says.

“Mm,” Hermione hums, gathering herself. “Perfect for a bit of light reading.”

Draco laughs, picking up one of the brick-like tomes in each hand and curling them up toward his shoulders like weights. “Could have skipped the 5AM workout if I’d known.”

The fabric of his shirt pulls tight at the movement, and Hermione is beset with a plague of unholy thoughts.

It takes the heavy thump of him dropping them onto the counter again to rouse her out of the momentary reverie.

She snags the scanner out of its cradle, ringing up the books.

Draco hands over his card once again, and Hermione tucks his receipt inside the front cover of *Crime and Punishment*.

“We have a strict no-return policy,” she tells him.

“Guess I’ll have to find another excuse to come see you again, then.”

Her teeth sink into her lip, trying and failing to fight a smile.

“Have a nice day,” she says pointedly.

Draco smiles. “Goodbye, Hermione.”

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, a very short one today I know!! Pls forgive, all chapters from here on out are 5k+ this was just the only organic place to break this one 😞

Up next: Well, Hermione has gone and given him her number now hasn’t she! Silly girl!

Thank you so much for reading!! It makes me so so happy to have people excited for a new story. There is nothing (nothing!!!!) I love more than creating for you all.

Comments are my love language, literally.

Also available on various other platforms: [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Bluesky](#)

And thank you as always to my lovely beta [naginiLinguini](#) ❤️

# Three

## Chapter Notes

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

Hermione is stepping out of the shower the following day when her phone pings with a text.

She tucks her towel under her arms before sliding open the screen.

It's a picture from Draco, and she automatically sinks down onto her bed in order to inspect it more closely.

Most of the image is taken up by text, an excerpt from *Crime and Punishment*, but his hand and a fair bit of forearm are in the frame where he's holding the stiff binding open.

It's—

It's a really nice hand. Her eyes trace over the long, straight fingers, the veins snaking beneath smooth, pale skin. She can see what looks like the black fabric of his trousers, as if the book is in his lap. She swallows, the bare skin of his arm making her wonder if he isn't wearing a shirt.

It takes her entirely too long to realise there's a message that goes with the photo.

***this is bloody depressing***

Hermione smirks, sending back, ***You should read it in the original Russian.***

The typing indicator appears, then blinks out of sight. He types again and then stops. Hermione lets him try again before taking mercy.

***(That was a joke.)***

He replies at once.

***oh thank christ***

***i knew i was out of my league but fuck***

Hermione smiles, laying back onto the bed in her towel.

***Are you liking it? Depression notwithstanding.***

***actually i am***

***Good. I'm glad :)***

Hermione feels her real smile falter as she stares at the one she's put on the screen. What the fuck is she doing? Why is she encouraging this? She chews her lip for a second before

quickly typing out a follow-up.

***I hope that line works better for you the next time you use it.***

The indicator pops up to show Draco typing, but when he stops this time, Hermione isn't smirking. Her stomach sinks as he starts and changes his mind again.

Eventually, he decides on, ***it can hardly go worse***, and the guilt has Hermione setting her phone face down on the mattress.

She covers her face with both hands and lays like that until her next alarm goes off.

\*\*\*

Daphne's first official day is Wednesday.

She's an immediate and undeniable success.

Her training feels more like a cooperative effort than anything, and while Hermione may not be the best at asking for help, she can certainly take constructive criticism. She appreciates the fact that Daphne isn't afraid to point out the places where it's immediately obvious to her that things could be running more smoothly. She's quick, personable, and extremely industrious. The team loves her at once.

Lavender is back, looking eager if still a little peaky. When Hermione explains the situation to Daphne, she simply nods once. "I know someone good who's always looking to pick up extra shifts. I'll reach out."

Hermione could cry.

The bar gets busy fast with the midweek rush (Hermione refuses to utter the words *hump day*), but Daphne slots in seamlessly. A certain someone Hermione has been trying very hard not to think about was right, she's great at what she does.

Hermione pulls out her phone and opens the chat with Draco. It's been silent for the last two days, but she doesn't blame him. Persistence is one thing, but she couldn't expect him to chase forever. Not that she *wanted* him to chase at all. It wasn't like she was playing hard to get. She's too old for games, and that's the whole problem.

She's not going to encourage the flirtation, but she does owe him something for the relief she's feeling right now. It's only a little after nine; not too late. She types out a simple message.

***Thank you.***

She watches the screen just long enough to make sure it sends, but she won't wait for him to reply.

Turns out, she doesn't have to. Her phone vibrates while it's still in her hand.

*you're welcome*

\*\*\*

Hermione shepherds the last of the late night stragglers across the now brightly lit room, out the front door, and toward their rides. A sigh of relief always accompanies the click of the lock behind them.

“Good to go?” Pansy calls from behind the bar.

“Go ahead,” Hermione tells her.

She grins as she connects her phone to the sound system, starting the first track in the designated closing playlist.

It’s loud, louder than they play the music during business hours, but there’s a Pavlovian satisfaction to the set of songs. Another night in the books, the sweet relief of home on the horizon.

Hermione sits at one of the bar stools, watching the flurry of activity for a moment. Lavender is counting out tips while Pansy balances the registers. They both sing along to the playlist, their hips swaying in time with the beat.

Harry zigzags between them, taking out the bags of rubbish, collecting up the last of the glassware.

The two girls turn just as he’s coming back through, and they catch him in the middle, sandwiching him between them. Even though he has a box of straws in one hand and napkins in the other, Lavender grabs his wrists while Pansy holds his waist. They maneuver him like a marionette, making him move to the music. (He will not do it on his own.)

Harry rolls his eyes and huffs and gives every impression of being the most exasperated person on the planet, but he doesn’t move away until the girls relent.

Hermione watches the small, private smile that lights his face as he turns to restock the caddies.

Based on the grin Daphne’s wearing while she checks the cash count against the night’s sales, she sees it too.

Something very warm and sticky sweet builds in Hermione’s chest as she watches. It’s an understanding she never would have come to until she was looking in from the outside.

The people in front of her love the bar.

Hermione is the only one who felt forced into it, who looked at it as a necessary evil from day one. This little family she’s collected chose to be here. They choose it every night.

For the first time, Hermione feels overwhelmingly grateful that this is a place she can give them.

It's the height of irony that there's only one person she really wants to share this revelation with.

She actually pulls out her phone again, but it's too late now. Much too late.

\*\*\*

The impulse doesn't leave her.

Even after locking up and seeing everyone safely on their way. As she treks home to her flat in the dead of night. Through a hot shower and comfy clothes and even-better-the-next-day takeaway.

She thinks of him.

It doesn't make sense, but after daydreaming through the third episode of her favourite guilty pleasure reality show, she gives up on caring.

She watches the sky grow pale with pre-dawn light, feeling happier than she has in a long time. Inexplicable as it may be, she knows that he's a part of that.

When she picks up her phone for the dozenth time that night, the clock on the display reads 5:34AM. It triggers a memory, and Hermione pauses the TV, sitting up a little straighter on the sofa to type out a message.

### ***Do you really wake up at 5AM to work out?***

She privately congratulates herself on the casual tone. It's ~~possible~~ probable that he's already moved on to the next prospect by now. Someone that looks like him surely has no shortage of them. But that's fine; if he doesn't want to respond then he won't. If he does, then she'll simply say good morning and offer a coffee sometime as a more proper thanks for sending Daphne her way. Simple. No big deal.

She sets her phone face down on the arm of the sofa and drums her fingernails over the back of it for a few seconds before restarting her show.

She turns her phone face up after a minute in case she won't hear it over the TV.

When his text comes in two minutes after that, the ping is so loud it might as well be a gunshot. Hermione jolts under her blanket before reaching calmly for her phone like a mature and rational adult. She almost hits her head on the coffee table as she quickly dives to retrieve it from where she's knocked it to the floor.

She's half-hanging off the sofa, one palm braced on the carpet when she finally gets the screen unlocked. The picture that he sent loads, and she goes ahead and falls the rest of the way onto the floor.

He is at the gym. At what looks like a set up for bench press to be specific. He's leaned forward on the bench, his elbows braced on his knees and the bill of a hat covering the top half of his face. His phone covers the rest. It's no matter; Hermione isn't looking at his face.

He's wearing black shorts and a white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. And he's sweaty.

Hermione's mouth waters as she devours the image. With the angle of his arms, she can see the edge of his pecs and his abs and something very defined between them that she doesn't even know the name of. And then she looks at his legs.

Her hands are slightly shaky as she goes to type out a response. She'll say something casual like *Wow, that's dedication* or maybe flirtier like *Looks like it's paying off ;)*

When she hits send, what appears on the screen is, ***How soon can you get here?***

She stares down at it in disbelief, watching as he types and sends back, ***where?***

Her heart thuds in her chest. It's not too late. She can just block him and forget this ever happened.

She sends her address and holds her breath.

Well, she means to. He responds so quickly, it ends up more like a pant.

### **20 minutes**

Hermione jumps up off the floor.

“Oh, my god,” she says and dashes to the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” she hisses at her reflection as she swipes on a quick coat of mascara. She shakes her head at the lack of response before tugging her hair out of its bun. She flips her head over, fluffing her curls at the roots with her fingers. She was shooting for sultry and ends up with insane, but she doesn't have time for more.

She turns to survey her arse in the mirror. The clingy lounge pants are actually one of the more flattering bottoms she owns, and the thin camisole she has on top isn't too bad either. She eyes her chest and considers wrangling the girls into something padded that will have them sitting closer to where they did ten years ago.

She doesn't, on principle.

She's just rinsing the toothpaste out of her mouth when he knocks. 18 minutes later.

Her hair gets one last adjustment before she goes out into the hall. She forces a deep, calming breath into her lungs and tells herself it helped.

When she pulls open the door, Draco is standing there in a fresh set of gym clothes, smiling down at her from beneath the black hat.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hi,” she attempts to return, but the spicy scent of his soap, lingering from what must have been the world's fastest shower, hits her right in the middle of the syllable, and it comes out

more like a sigh.

“That was quick,” she adds to cover it.

He shrugs. “I was right around the corner.” His tone is casual enough, but she notices his chest seems to be rising and falling rather quickly, as though he’d recently run.

She smiles at the thought, stepping back to let him in. “Sorry to cut your workout short.”

He chuckles, toeing off his shoes and emptying the pockets of his shorts—phone, wallet, keys—on the little table next to the door. “There’ll be another one tomorrow.”

She watches him make himself comfortable, and yet, somehow, still isn’t prepared for what comes next.

When he turns to face her again, expression intent, her knees go wobbly.

“Would you like tea? It’s, um, bedtime for me so I don’t have any coffee going, but I can make some—”

“I’m all right,” he says lightly, taking a step toward her.

She nods, attempts to swallow, and then realises, “What about breakfast? You were exercising, you must be starving—”

“Hermione.” He takes another step, right into her space, and turns the hat backwards so she knows he means business. “I’ve been hard since you sent your address. I don’t want breakfast.”

Her mouth falls open, and he smiles, reaching up to cup her unhinged jaw.

She’s mildly perturbed that with his hand on her face, she can’t look down to see whether he was being serious. But then he’s kissing her, his arm wrapping at her waist and pulling her against him, and she decides that, yes, in this case, *feeling* really is the scientifically superior method of observation.

She sighs into the kiss, her body going lax as liquid warmth pools just below where she can feel him pressing into her stomach. She savours the heat of him, of his tongue in her mouth, the eager intensity of his kiss. He slides both hands down over her back to squeeze her arse, and he groans.

“This way,” Hermione murmurs, stumbling backward a step toward her bedroom. Draco follows, taking advantage of her slightly turned head to attach his mouth to her neck.

Hermione moans, her fingers digging into the muscle of his shoulders. She bumps into the door frame, and he presses her against it, grinding his hips forward with a desperate sound.

She’s lightheaded with the sudden rush of arousal. A crazed sort of need grips her as his tongue presses over the pulse in her throat.

“In here,” she tries again, nearly whining.

“Yeah,” Draco pants and grips her under the thighs, hoisting her up onto his hips.

It’s only a few short steps to the bed, and he turns to sit on it, leaving Hermione straddled on her knees over his lap.

She grips the hem of his t-shirt and yanks it off over his head. The hat goes with it.

“God,” she murmurs before pulling his mouth back to hers again.

His hands are everywhere, skimming over her back, her neck, her thighs, her arse. She arches into every touch like a cat, but there’s a tension in his movements—a restraint she cannot abide.

“Draco,” she pants, hands squeezing at his upper arms. “You’re not going to break me. I know you’re strong—I want to feel it.”

His breath leaves him in a rush, and then Hermione’s does as well. He crushes her against his chest. And *that*—the feel of his unbridled desire—makes her wetter than anything else so far.

He cuffs the back of her neck, pulling down hard against her shoulders and grinding her onto his cock. “Fuck,” he grunts, flexing his hips beneath her.

Hermione lets out a broken moan against his open mouth, and his tongue flicks across hers again. She bites back into the kiss, pinching his lower lip between her teeth and making him hiss.

His answering grip on her arse is bruising, and when his hands slide upward again, his fingers catching on the edge of her top, she leans back and raises her arms.

Draco doesn’t need coaxing. He pulls the tank top up over her head and off, dropping it onto the floor beside them.

“Fuck,” he says again, immediately covering her tits with his hands.

Hermione’s arms land around his shoulders, and she holds on tight as the first press of his mouth has her arching backwards on his lap. He wraps an arm at her waist again, letting her bend as his tongue teases over her nipple.

“Oh, god,” she gasps, clutching his head to her chest. He brings up a hand and rubs his thumb over the skin made slick by his mouth. Hermione shakes. Her hips shift helplessly over the thick ridge of his erection, making him moan.

“Fuck,” she whispers when he shifts his attention to the other side. His breaths are heavy, every exhale blooming warmth across her chest, and when he closes his mouth over the inside of her breast and sucks hard enough to leave a mark, she should be furious. Instead, she nearly comes.

“Draco...” she pants.

He groans in response, pulling up another bruise below the first.

“Draco—” His fingers pinch lightly at her nipple, forcing out another moan instead of the rest of her sentence.

She resorts to digging her fingers into his hair and pulling his face back up to hers as her cunt pulses dangerously. “Draco!”

He blinks hazy eyes at her, his mouth wet.

“That’s enough,” she breathes, her rocking hips belying the words. “Unless you want me to come right here on your lap.”

His eyelids fall shut as he grips her waist, helping her move over him. “I want you to come however you want.”

“Good answer,” she says and dips her tongue back into his mouth. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Yeah,” he says.

It’s not a question, but she says, “Yeah,” sighing as he clutches her against the warmth of his chest.

He stands before turning and laying her back onto the bed. Hermione’s arms go over her head as his fingers hook into the waistband of her bottoms. She lifts her hips helpfully, and he pulls the pants and her underwear off in one.

“Fuck, Hermione,” he says, looking down at her.

She bites her lip, drawing one foot up along her other calf.

He reaches into his pocket and drops two condoms onto the mattress before shucking off his shorts and boxers.

Hermione attempts to maintain some level of stoicism despite the fact that, naked, he looks carved from marble. Rather than licking her lips at his, frankly, magnificent cock—as is her instinct—she arches a brow at the multiple prophylactics. “Optimistic.”

He shakes his head, stroking a slow hand over himself. “Necessary. You are fucking incredible.”

Hermione feels the blush all the way down to her breasts and decides that, actually, stoicism is overrated. Surely, the earnestness of youth is a far better approach.

“So are you,” she says and reaches for him.

He kneels onto the bed, laying himself down over her and kissing her so hard that her head sinks back into the down of her pillow. She spreads her legs to accommodate his hips, and the tip of his cock is wet, leaking, where it grazes her thigh.

Though, she has absolutely no room to talk. When Draco brings a hand between them, she can *hear* his fingers sink into her.

His exhale is a gust of heat in the crook of her shoulder as she writhes under the touch.

“God—damn,” he breathes, feeling her from the inside with a slow press and pull of his fingers.

“I told you...” Hermione pants. “That it was enough.” He rubs over a particularly sensitive spot, and her cunt clenches.

“Are you sure?” he asks, teasing his lips along her jaw.

“Yes.”

He presses again, making her gasp. “You don’t want to come like this?”

The smug edge to his voice is as attractive as it is infuriating, but thankfully, two can play this game.

She closes her hand around his cock and strokes hard from root to tip. “Do you?”

He chokes back a grunt, his hips sinking automatically into her fist. His mouth falls open in a ragged pant as she squeezes tighter. “Fuck—”

He has to pull his fingers out to still her hand.

“That’s what I thought,” she gloats.

He sits back on his heels, and the sun must be up by now—his face is bright with amusement and the tender golden light of morning.

It’s breathtaking.

He’s still grinning when he rips the condom packet open with his teeth, and Hermione worries for one heart-stopping second that she may have gravely miscalculated the stakes of the situation.

When he leans over her this time, he doesn’t let her reach for him. He catches both of her wrists in one hand and pins them to the mattress above her head. His grip is like iron, the strength of it making her breath catch. One glance at his satisfied expression is enough to remind her that it is exactly what she asked for. She arches up into the lean line of him stretched over her and thinks that she cannot remember the last time she felt this present in her body.

And then he pushes inside her and anything remotely resembling a thought vanishes from her brain.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans, sinking down onto one elbow. “God—fuck—you feel so good.”

Hermione, full to the brim and sublimely stretched, puts her face in his shoulder and delivers the eloquent response: “*Hunnngh.*”

He draws back, and his hips sink flush with her thighs on the next thrust. She sees the back of her skull.

Draco keeps up a litany of curses and praise as he fucks her, and thankfully, soon becomes too overwhelmed by the tight, wet (his words) heat of her to maintain his grip on her wrists. She gladly introduces her nails to his back instead.

“Shit—” he breathes over her lips. “I didn’t—*ah fuck*—think you were gonna—let me do this.”

Hermione squeezes shamelessly at the flex of his arse. “Don’t make me—regret it,” she says despite the fact that she can feel her brow creasing as he drives deep into the back of her cunt.

She clenches powerfully, and Draco moans into her neck. He shoves an arm under her lower back and lifts her up into him. “Fuck, I wanna make you come on my cock. Wanna—feel it.”

“Yes,” Hermione gasps. “God—like that.”

The pleasure builds steadily within her, humming in her limbs and tightening between her hips.

“You gonna let me come inside you?” Draco asks. “Want me to fill you up?”

Hermione moans as she pulses around him. “Yeah—*yeah.*” It’s fucking hot even with the condom; she sinks her teeth into the meat of his shoulder before she can tell him to take it off.

Draco groans in response, gooseflesh tightening the skin under her hands. “God, I wanna see you full of me—”

Hermione’s mouth drops open as it swells within her.

“Wanna see you—*oh shit—*”

“*Fuck.*” She clutches at him. “Don’t stop, I’m—”

Draco crushes their mouths back together, and Hermione comes moaning against his tongue. He pounds into her hard, grunting against her lips—and then her cheek, her chin as the tension spools out of her and her head lolls.

He grinds his hips deeper on a groan, pulsing inside her, and Hermione is forced to appreciate his euphoric expression through fluttering lashes as the aftershocks roll mercilessly around him.

When he brings his mouth back to hers, the kiss is softer, slower, but no less filthy. Hermione tastes the barest hint of salt, from his lips or hers, she can’t be sure. Draco gives a satisfied hum into it as he stills on top of her. Hermione wonders vaguely whether she should be

worried about the way it causes a slight pinching behind her ribs, but her mental faculties have yet to return beyond the awareness of *hot, wet, press, pull*.

When Draco rolls off of her, her arms flop bonelessly onto the bed. And when he stands, it's all she can do to turn her head to watch the shift of his arse as he pads over to the attached bath. He pulls off the condom with a practised motion, and then, in seemingly the space of one slow blink, he's back—kneeling onto the bed and laying down between her legs.

“What—” Hermione’s question is terminated abruptly by the presence of his mouth on her cunt.

She sucks in a gasp, arching up into the sudden warmth. “Oh god—”

He hums with his lips against her clit, and her eyes roll. Time stretches. She’s still coming down from her orgasm, and yet somehow, is halfway to another.

“Fuck, you’re so wet.” Draco runs his tongue up the length of her slit, and she lets out a low moan at the slick slide against her sensitive entrance.

He reaches up with one hand to palm her breast, his eyes following, and Hermione gasps out a pant as he presses his thumb over the marks he left there.

There’s a glint of something possessive in his gaze that she should not like but clearly can’t conceal her reaction to. Because he doesn’t ask before dipping his mouth to her thigh and sucking another bruise into the tender skin there.

Hermione whines, legs twisting against his head, but he only relents long enough to bring his tongue back to her clit.

“Draco—” She digs her hands into his hair, thinking to pull him away. Instead, she comes again with a sharp cry and an indecent thrust against his face.

“God,” she breathes, legs shaking.

Draco gets to his knees, wiping a careless back-of-the-hand across his shining chin and pressing his other thumb to her clit.

Hermione jolts, overstimulated at the contact and the sight of him hard again. She can only whimper through a few rough circles before she’s rolling onto her front to escape the onslaught.

“Fuck,” Draco says, filling his palms with her arse and squeezing. “Stay just like that.”

She does—doesn’t have much of a choice—but she still watches him roll on the second condom from the corner of her eye.

The want that flares through her at the sight feels impossible.

His hands go back to her arse, spreading her cheeks and commenting lavishly on how she looks from this angle. It’s generous; she feels like a pile of wet spaghetti.

He gets a grip on her hip and lifts enough to slot back inside her. Hermione's lower lip drags dry against the cotton of the pillow as she moans into it with his first thrust.

"*Ohh, fuck,*" Draco groans. He lets his weight fall forward onto his hand, and the duvet spits out a tiny feather at the impact. Hermione's fingers wring the sheets as his cock presses perfectly against her front wall.

The noise she makes isn't a word, but it still feels like a curse. She cannot comprehend how good it feels.

Draco sinks down against her back, the slip of sweat on his chest. "Fuck, you're perfect," he breathes across her ear. "Hermione—"

She chokes back the surge of hysterical laughter that nearly escapes her throat. Her emotional centers are going haywire. Tears prick her eyes as she says, "I'm going to come again."

"Yeah," he grunts. "Yeah, come for me."

It kind of feels like she already is. She doesn't actually know what's going on. Instead of reaching a peak and falling, she just keeps peaking.

Draco's hand comes down over the back of hers, and he laces their fingers together. An anguished sound leaves her chest.

"Deeper," she begs. "Wanna feel you—coming against me."

Draco lets out a guttural moan, his hips slamming into her arse. Her spine bends at the angle, and two words she's never strung together before in her life slip from between her lips.

"Good boy."

He comes with a bitten off cry, his lips against her temple. It takes the throb of his cock for her orgasm to finally make up its mind, but she still doesn't fall. She floats—rocked like a boat on wave after wave of pleasure.

She soaks in the bliss for a minute, keeping at bay the clawing vulnerability promised by her wet lashes and shaking limbs.

It doesn't really work.

Reality seeps back in, sharp and cold, and Hermione remembers that she never understood how people could do this with strangers. Why she suddenly thought that she could be one of them—that having this once would be *fun*—

She can feel every beat of his heart as it races against her back. Their breathing is synced, panting in unison, and she's just supposed to—

Draco chokes.

She hears it—the exact instant his deep inhale is obstructed by... something. He starts coughing, which is an extremely odd sensation with him still inside her.

“Sorry,” he croaks, quickly lifting himself off. Hermione watches with raised brows as he manages to keep whatever it is out of his lungs, though just barely. His brow furrows as he works his tongue inside his mouth. His lips smack a few times before he finally reaches up and withdraws from between them... a tiny—soggy—feather.

He stares at it, dumbfounded, and then looks at Hermione.

She bursts out laughing. Draco follows, falling back against the pillows. “Christ,” he rasps, and they both laugh harder. Hermione curls forward, her forehead pressing into his arm. Draco puts a hand on his stomach like it hurts.

“Fucking hell,” he says another minute later, shaking his head and wiping his streaming eyes. He still has the feather clamped between his fingers, and he looks around as though unsure what to do with it. He spots the box of tissues on Hermione’s nightstand and leans to grab one. He disposes of the condom in it as well, wrapping it into a neat little package and setting it on the floor next to the bed.

When he lays back down next to Hermione, she’s still chuckling. “This is why you shouldn’t go home with strange women,” she says sagely. “Goose down is one of those lesser known murder weapons.”

“Mm,” Draco hums, running a hand down along her side. “Worth it.”

## Chapter End Notes

Breeding kink + condoms, diabolical i know. I miss magic 😭

Silly, lighthearted moments like this will be a theme! Hermione will continue attempting to panic over having her world rocked by a walking set of abs (relatable), and Draco will continue being too chaotically sweet to let her. We love to see it.

Thank you so much for reading and for your wonderful comments! They truly make my days ❤️

You can also find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

## Four

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the amazing comments on the last chapter!! And to everyone who commented on Draco's (lack of a) refractory period: he knew he had ONE SHOT (one opportunity)!! Very motivating!

Speaking of, there's a switch to Draco's POV after the first scene break here. Why is it there instead of at a chapter break? An excellent question!

Also, a super long chapter. Damn smut!!

Also also, I usually try not to do this for WIPs, but this first line picks up immediately after the last one of the previous chapter. Sorry to those reading a week later, I really do love you so much I promise!

Here are the preceding lines to jog your memory:

When he lays back down next to Hermione, she's still chuckling. "This is why you shouldn't go home with strange women," she says sagely. "Goose down is one of those lesser known murder weapons."

"Mm," Draco hums, running a hand down along her side. "Worth it."

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

Hermione's teeth dig into her lip as she blushes.

"That was—" Draco's phone pings from the other room, interrupting him. "That was amazing," he tries again. "You—" Two more pings sound in quick succession.

"Sorry," he says, cringing slightly. "Work."

"It's fine."

He smiles, leaning in to kiss her. His phone rings as soon as their lips touch.

*"Christ!"* He swings his legs off the bed with a growl, pulling on his boxers before stalking out to the living room.

Hermione rolls onto her back and stares up at the ceiling, trying very hard to manage the sinking sensation in her chest. It's a weekday—of course he needs to leave. He was always going to leave at some point, and a couple more hours spent lounging about wouldn't have changed anything.

He got what he wanted.

And so had she.

She's surprised when Draco appears back in the doorway, his now silent phone clutched in his hand.

"Sorry about that," he says, setting it face down on the nightstand.

"No problem," Hermione says numbly as he gets back into the bed. He gathers her against his chest, and she doesn't mean to smell how good he smells again, but her nose is kind of tucked next to his armpit and she can't help it.

Her eyes sink closed. Whatever combination of body wash/deodorant/cologne he uses should be outlawed as a public safety hazard. She feels like she could scale a chainlink fence to get a whiff of it.

A sigh ruffles the top of her hair. "It was really nice seeing you first thing in the morning," he says.

She hums her agreement. "Thanks for coming on such short notice."

He chuckles. "One of my specialties."

Hermione can't contain her smile.

"Though, I'm pretty sure I promised you day or night."

She leans back to look up at him. "That's true. You did."

Draco's grin is easy, his eyes bright and restless over her face. "Can I take you to dinner tonight?"

Hermione feels her own smile fall.

"Or tomorrow, if you're working."

She blinks at him. "Why?"

He narrows his eyes playfully. "Ah, yes, I see the confusion. I know some people like to do the food part before the sex part, but I've never been big on social conventions."

Hermione sits up, out of his grip. She looks at him sidelong, and then pulls up her knees and looks at those instead. "You don't have to do that."

"No," Draco admits. "But I do have to eat. And I'd like to do that with you, if you want."

She swallows past the lump forming in her throat. She wasn't prepared for an invitation for *more*, and it puts into perfect clarity what she hadn't quite grasped before. Maybe she really had needed to be thoroughly shagged by a very sweet and very fit 23-year-old boy, but she

absolutely *does not* need to get her heart broken by one. And that is exactly what's on the docket if she allows this to continue. She can survive the aftermath of this one encounter (remains to be seen), but she knows for a fact that she cannot take the wondering and the worrying and the waiting that will come if she lets him add her to his roster.

"That's really not necessary," she says.

Draco looks at her for a beat, and then his head tilts minutely to indicate the rumpled bed beneath them. "That's all you were after, then?"

"No," Hermione says evenly. "But that's just it. I'm looking for... more."

"Like going to dinner," Draco supplies helpfully.

"No. Well, yes, but..." she trails off lamely.

"But not with me," he finishes for her. His tone is still light, still playful, and Hermione doesn't know how he can manage it.

Draco sighs. "Look, if you want to wait until I've finished the book, I understand. It may take me a few years, but at least we'll have plenty to talk about."

Hermione breathes a laugh in spite of herself. Looking at his crooked smile is actually quite painful.

"You're very sweet, Draco," she says softly. "I just think we want different things."

"Which is a bit odd," Draco says. "Seeing as the only thing I've *told* you I want is to take you to dinner."

Hermione doesn't take the bait. "I know what it's like to be 23."

"Yeah?" Draco says, arching a brow. "And what did you want when you were my age?"

"That's—" she cuts herself off, and he looks far too pleased with himself. Despite the fact that it runs counter to the point she was attempting to make, it does illustrate nicely the difference in life experience between them.

"I was married before," Hermione says plainly.

"Well, so was I."

Hermione's lips part in shock.

For his part, Draco looks like he hadn't intended to say it quite like that. He softens the defiant lift of his chin.

"Well, I was engaged," he corrects.

Hermione doesn't have the presence of mind to respond to that either, and he winces slightly.  
“Well... I had the ring.”

He reaches up to rub a hand over the back of his neck, and Hermione's lips twitch into a smile. She raises her brows in invitation.

“It was a family ring,” he mumbles, looking down.

Despite her better judgment, Hermione lifts her hand and brushes her fingers through the front of his hair.

“You really are an atrocious liar,” she says fondly.

Draco chuckles. “I heard somewhere it’s bad for the soul.”

Hermione leans back into the pillows, looking at him in this new light. “You had the ring, but you never proposed?”

He shakes his head, looking like he regrets bringing it up altogether.

“Why not?”

“Because she asked me not to.”

Hermione feels her forehead crease with confusion. “Why?”

Draco draws in a slow breath, a hesitation marking his expression that makes perfect sense once he’s spoken. “Because she was dying.”

Hermione sucks in a sharp inhale.

“It was slow,” he explains, like he’d anticipated her reaction. “We had a lot of time to prepare, but... she said she didn’t want to make promises she knew she couldn’t keep.”

“Oh, Draco—”

“Personally,” he continues with a wry smile. “I don’t think she ever loved me quite as much as I loved her—it was our parents who decided that we’d be together—but I’m still very grateful for the time I had with her.”

Hermione has no idea what to say other than, “I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” Draco says, but his head is shaking. “I shouldn’t have—I didn’t mean to bring it up like that.”

Hermione takes his hand where it’s laying on the bed between them. “It’s all right,” she says. She understands what he was trying to do. “I’m glad to know. About you.”

Draco squeezes her fingers a bit. “It’s been quite some time now, and it’s gotten easier. Thanks to Daphne in large part.”

“Daphne?” Hermione asks.

He smiles. “Astoria’s sister.”

Hermione remembers suddenly. *She’s more like family*, he said.

“She was there for me in a way no one else could be. We were there for each other, you know?”

“That’s—lovely,” Hermione says, overwhelmed. “Though I can’t say I’m surprised. She is rather remarkable.” She clears her throat. “That’s—that’s actually why I asked you over. Earlier. To say thank you. For her.”

He quirks a brow. “Oh, is that why?”

Hermione flushes scarlet. “Yes. I-I definitely meant to mention it.”

Draco rolls back on top of her, caging her between his arms. “Well then, my sincerest apologies for misreading the situation.”

“No, it’s my fault,” she says, slightly breathless. “I could have been more clear.”

Draco shakes his head, brushing his nose against hers. “I think you were perfectly clear.”

She tilts her chin up into his kiss, sighing as he lets his weight sink slowly onto her. Hermione’s arms wrap around his back, and she squeezes far too tight. It kills her to think of that kind of pain in someone so young, so bright.

When Draco pulls back, he casts a defeated glance at the alarm clock on her nightstand. “I’m sorry. I really do need to go.”

“It’s all right,” Hermione says, touching her fingertips to his cheek. “We can talk more tonight?”

She gets to feel the grin spread across his face.

“Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

\*\*\*

Draco kisses her so hard she lets out a muffled giggle against his lips.

“Okay, tonight,” he breathes, and then kisses her again.

Hermione’s body shifts beneath him, and he lets out a pained noise at the prospect of leaving her naked in bed when he could easily be hard again in two minutes.

There must be a wire crossed somewhere in his brain because even that small moment of intimacy between them feels monumental. It makes him want her even more. It makes him

want to tell her everything.

Her tongue slips against his, and he quickly revises his earlier assessment. Thirty seconds is all he would need—

“Fuck.” He tears himself away, grabbing his phone from the nightstand and cringing at the blanket of notifications on the screen. “I’m going.”

“Okay,” she laughs.

He allows himself one last long glance at her, and his eyes snag on the marks she’d let him leave. Fuck, her tits are amazing. Realistically, he could just quit his job. It’s not like he needs the money.

“Go, Draco.”

“Right.” He stands, pulling on his shorts and fishing his hat out of his t-shirt. “I’m making a reservation, so you can’t change your mind.”

“I won’t.” She bites her lip. Her cheeks are pink.

Draco ducks down and kisses one. It’s warm against his lips. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll text you,” he calls, half-running down the hall.

“Can’t wait,” she says with a tone that he chooses not to interpret as sarcasm.

He has one shoe on when he remembers the condom.

“Fuck,” he says, stumbling back into her bedroom. “Sorry.” He snatches up the tissue. “I’ll just—”

“Oh, my god,” Hermione laughs. “Get out of my house.”

“Right. Gone.” He kisses her again.

“Bye.”

“Goodbye, Draco.”

\*\*\*

Draco really should have just quit.

He daydreams through all three of his meetings before lunch, and in the final one, it takes Blaise nudging his shoulder for him to realise he’s been asked a direct question.

“Er, yes,” he says quickly, dropping a furtive hand over the bulge at his crotch. “That is definitely something we’ll be looking at.”

The expressions around the room shift into varying levels of bemusement.

“Going forward,” he tacks on hopefully.

It doesn’t help.

“Let’s put a pin in that, and we’ll circle back to it during the roundup tomorrow,” Blaise says.

There’s a tentative nod or two, and Draco straightens up, clearing his throat. “Right. That’s all I had.”

Blaise barely suppresses his scoff as the others gather up their belongings and begin to stand. “What the fuck is wrong with you today?” he mutters, snapping his laptop closed.

“Don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, please. You know you go all splotchy when you try to lie.”

“I’m not lying,” Draco says, getting to his feet. “I’m trying to be discreet.”

Blaise turns for the door and then does a double take at Draco’s slowly flagging erection. “Christ. Try harder,” he says with a grimace.

“You’re the one who insisted on interrupting me mid-fantasy,” Draco says, following him out into the hall.

“Actually, that was Jeffries, and thank God for it, or some poor soul would have been scraping your splooge off the bottom of the conference room table.”

“Oi,” says Theo, coming around the corner. “I thought I was the only one splooging in the conference room.”

“I had it perfectly under control,” Draco says loftily.

“Pitching a tent on a video call with our third-biggest client is not under control,” Blaise argues.

“Who was the lucky dream lady?” Theo asks, stepping through Draco’s office door after Blaise.

Draco mimes zipping his lips as he drops into his chair.

“What the fuck is that?”

“He’s being discreet,” Blaise explains.

“Oh. Here I thought he was being a wanker.”

Draco shrugs, and his hand lands subconsciously on the copy of *Crime and Punishment* sitting on his desk.

Unfortunately, both of his friends clock the movement.

“No,” says Blaise.

“Not the bookshop bartender,” says Theo.

“Bar owner,” Draco corrects.

“You’ve got to let it go, mate.”

“Give me your phone, I’ll delete her number. You can bow out gracefully.”

Draco feels himself go splotchy.

“No,” says Blaise.

“The bookshop bartender?!” says Theo.

Draco can’t suppress his grin.

Blaise shakes his head. “She seemed like such a reasonable lady.”

“Falling for the old ‘I’ll read this 1,000-page Russian classic if that’s what it takes,’ ” Theo adds. “I’ve lost all respect for her.”

Draco spins the book on the desk to show the receipt marking his place 400 pages in.

Their mouths drop open identically.

Draco tries not to be too offended by their reaction. In truth, he had enjoyed reading quite a bit when he was younger. Doing it for pleasure had simply dropped by the wayside once he’d started being assigned books for school. He’d spent most of his free time on sports by then, anyway. But he had missed the feeling of falling into a story.

“I am agog,” Theo says finally.

“I can see that,” says Draco.

“Well, how was it?” asks Blaise.

“It’s quite good,” Draco says, pulling back the cover and letting the pages feather past his thumb. “A bit grim, but—”

“*Not the book, you nit.*”

“Oh. That.” Draco grins again.

“Do you even need to ask?” Theo says with a little whistle. “I mean, Mother, may I.”

“None of that, now,” Draco says, pointing a warning finger. “That’s my future wife you’re talking about.”

Theo blanches. “Now, Draco. We’ve been over this. You must wait until at least the third date to bring up marriage.”

Draco runs a finger under the edge of his collar.

“You didn’t,” says Blaise.

“Technically, she brought it up this morning.”

“This morning!” Blaise roars. “That’s where you were while our slide deck was imploding? Getting your dick wet?!?”

“Well, yes.”

Blaise’s phone dings in his hand, and he growls at the notification. “All right, you—” He points at Theo. “Lunch, we’re working. And you—” He levels a look at Draco. “Go rub one out. We have Mathieson at 2, and I need your head in the game.”

Draco would argue if it wasn’t actually a good idea.

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Despite his midday activities, Draco still has time to eat over his laptop and make a reservation at a suitably expensive yet not too ostentatious restaurant. He sends Hermione a text with the details, though he’s sure to mention that he’ll be picking her up. She doesn’t respond, but he hadn’t expected her to. She’ll likely be sleeping for another hour or two.

Right on schedule, he feels his pocket vibrate just as they’re leaving the meeting with Mathieson (a slam dunk, by the by).

Draco taps out a quick reply, telling Hermione that he hopes she slept well and that he’s excited to see her tonight. He indulges a little in envisioning that she stayed just like he left her and she’s texting him now still sleep-warm and rumpled and naked.

Blaise lets out a dramatically dreamy sigh from next to him.

“Something to say, Zabini?”

“No, no.” He holds up his thumbs and forefingers at right angles to make a frame over Draco’s face. “Just memorialising this moment for my best man speech.”

“Keep taking the piss and I’ll give it to Theo.”

“You won’t. He’s dreadful at public speaking.”

That is true. Draco sucks his teeth.

Blaise reaches up and squeezes Draco’s cheeks into a fish face. “Guess you’re stuck with me, gorgeous.”

“Not for long,” Draco says, pulling back with a wince. “I’m off.”

“Wha—” Blaise looks down at his watch as Draco turns. “It’s not even 3!”

Draco calls back over his shoulder. “I need to get my car washed.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

Draco turns to flip him off, walking backward for a few steps.

Blaise sighs. “No proposing on the first date!”

“No promises!”

\*\*\*

Draco was mostly kidding, but when he sees Hermione, he can’t help the way his stomach somersaults.

She looks fucking incredible in a dark red dress that fits like it was made for her. The hem hits below her knee, but the way it sits on her curves is somehow tasteful and still insanely sexy. Her hair is loose like he’d hoped it would be, the curls big and fluffy and begging for him to bury his fingers into them.

She descends the stairs slowly in her heels, and Draco feels like a fucking fairytale prince waiting at the bottom for her.

“Fuck,” he says when she reaches him.

Hermione laughs, her eyes sparkling in the setting sun.

“Shit, sorry,” he says. “Hi.” He takes her face in both hands, but her lips are painted perfectly, gloss shining bright on the swell of them, and so he only kisses her cheek. *Christ*, she smells even better than she looks. Like sweet flowers and pressed powder and something warm you might drink at Christmas.

“Hello, Draco.”

“You look amazing.”

“Thank you,” she says, dipping her head once he’s released her. She lets her eyes trace over him. “So do you.”

He preens a bit under her attention. Black on black is his signature look, though this is his best fitting suit. He’s left the shirt collar open, no tie, and Hermione seems to appreciate it. She puts one finger lightly on the edge of his collarbone and purrs, “Very dashing.”

He shivers; he’s man enough to admit it. No one has ever called him *dashing* before, yet he’s immediately certain that it was exactly what he was going for.

“Thank you,” he says, and she looks up at him through her lashes at the way his tone has darkened.

He clears his throat. “Shall we?”

She nods. “Let’s.”

He steps aside to open the car door for her, and Hermione’s eyes go slightly wide. She slides in without comment, though once he’s made his way around to the other side, she’s watching him with a lifted brow.

“This is... nice.”

“Ah, thanks,” Draco says, feeling more awkward than he was expecting. “It’s mainly to impress clients.”

Hermione leans her head back against the seat, a sultry smile on her lips. “I’m not your client.”

“No.” Draco agrees as readily as he had the last time. “But I am trying to impress you.”

She hums.

“Is it working?” he asks, glancing over at her. Her lips part on an inhale, and he loses his nerve. “Actually, no, don’t answer that.”

Her laugh sounds like velvet.

\*\*\*

He likes to think Hermione is at least a little impressed by the restaurant.

She takes her time looking around as they’re led to their table, her eyes lingering particularly on the rather magnificent bar taking up one wall of the dining room.

She gives Draco a slightly surprised smile when he pulls out her chair. Like he’s charmed her. It makes his head feel fuzzy.

He takes his own seat across from her, pleased with the table they’ve been given. “If you’re not picky, I recommend the chef’s menu.”

Hermione gives a little nod, closing the leather menu folder and setting her hands demurely on top of it.

“Well, that was easy,” Draco says, a little taken aback.

“I’m finding myself susceptible to suggestion as of late.”

He smiles. “I find that admirable, you know.”

“I just bet you do.”

The waiter arrives, catching the tail end of Draco's maniacal grinning. He orders the tasting menu for both of them and after a quick confirmatory glance at Hermione, the wine pairing to go with it.

The sommelier appears nearly as soon as the words are out of his mouth, and the first course isn't far behind.

Draco sips at a delightful white wine hailing from somewhere sunny and with a westerly wind, and enjoys the decadent experience that is watching Hermione attend a (single) Michelin-starred meal.

She listens intently to the description of every course as though she might be quizzed on it later. And as she eats, Draco can see her considering the ingredients and the preparation she's learned about. She comments frequently on both, savouring the flavours and sometimes spending a full minute in silent contemplation as she conjures up the perfect word to describe a particularly complex one.

It is... *so* fucking fun to watch her mind at work.

He'd known, of course, from their first interaction that she was sharp, criminally competent, and that he was so vastly outmatched. But there was also something satisfying about the way she treated him like he wasn't even close to worth her time.

He feels like he's earned the right to be here with her now.

Hermione lowers her wine glass from her mouth, and Draco realises belatedly that the way he's looking at her is probably not suitable for public consumption.

She licks her lips, setting the glass carefully beside her dessert plate. "Thank you for taking me out tonight."

"It's my pleasure."

She fiddles with the edge of the napkin in her lap. "I'm still not entirely sure why you insisted on it."

Despite what could be read as nervous body language, Draco knows that isn't insecurity talking. She is well aware she's a catch; it's him she's unsure of.

"Because I very much wanted to see you again."

Hermione sighs. "You don't even know me."

"I know enough to know that I want to know more."

She directs her smile toward her lap, like she likes that answer more than she wants to show.

Draco is now only *mostly* sure that it wasn't insecurity talking, in which case—

"Hermione, you are beautiful and brilliant, and you take such obvious pride in what you do. And I find that very attractive. You work hard for what you want, you don't like to fail, and you're adaptable in the face of adversity. I respect the hell out of that. You care deeply for the people you feel responsible for, even to your own detriment, and I—"

He breaks off, realising his voice was rising. "I find that endearing because... I'm the same way."

Hermione blinks at him across the table, her lips slightly parted. She presses a hand to her chest.

"Draco—"

"But you already knew all of that," he continues. "So, let me tell you about me instead. I'm not good at casual. I come on too strong, and I move too fast. I don't like dating more than one person at once because it feels disingenuous, and I don't like the people I'm dating seeing anyone else because I'm a classic only child who never learned to share."

Hermione smiles at this.

"I was raised for—" *don't say marriage* "—to take courtship seriously. I'm not saying I've never slept around because I have, but it's not what I prefer. When you were my age, you were married and probably thinking about kids. And what I'm trying to tell you is that's exactly what I expected to be doing, too. You look at me and see someone just starting out in life who has no idea what he wants; I look in the mirror and see someone who's five years behind schedule."

He takes a breath, choosing his next words carefully. "If the only reason you asked me over this morning was because you thought you'd never have to see me again, then that's fine. But if you like me—if you enjoy my company as much as I do yours—then please don't make the mistake of thinking I'm not serious about you. Because I am."

Hermione licks her lips again. Her throat bobs with a swallow. She looks very much like she'd like to reach for her wine glass.

"Er," says Draco. "I did mention the bit about coming on strong, didn't I?"

"Yes," she says, smiling wide. "You did."

"Pretty sure I also mentioned marriage—wasn't supposed to do that."

"I liked it."

Draco's breath catches. "Yeah?"

She nods, and when she does finally reach for her glass, it doesn't appear to be out of desperation at all. "After my divorce, I decided to try dating apps for a bit. And I cannot tell you how depressing it was to sort through profile after profile of men in their late thirties who thought it was reasonable to answer the prompt 'what are you looking for' with some version of 'still figuring it out.'"

Draco shakes his head. “Yes, but see, when I decided to try dating again, I put down ‘a wife.’”

Hermione snorts into her wine glass, quickly bringing up her napkin and pressing it to her lips.

“An answer that,” Draco goes on, “my friends were more than happy to let me know, was probably equally insane.”

“I think that’s a perfectly lovely answer,” Hermione says, though she is still chuckling.

“Thank you,” Draco says indulgently. “Though I soon learned that simply finding someone who was willing to marry me was not going to make me feel whole again.”

Hermione’s eyes soften, the candlelight flickering gold in them.

“So, I guess the more correct answer would have been that I was looking for *my* wife. A subtle distinction, perhaps, but I’d grown up with marriage always as the goal. Making sure it was to the right person had really never occurred to me.”

Hermione is still just looking at him, so he takes a sip from his own glass. “Stupid, I guess,” he mutters into it.

“No,” she says, her voice quiet but firm. “That is a situation with which I am, unfortunately, very familiar.”

Draco swallows heavily as he considers asking the question he’s been wondering about all day. “How long were you married?”

Hermione sighs, twisting the stem of her glass between her fingers. “Almost ten years.”

It’s longer than he was expecting, and from her reaction, it shows on his face.

“Yeah,” she says before taking a healthy sip. “It’s been pointed out that I don’t like failing.”

Draco presses his lips into what he hopes is an understanding smile. “What happened?”

She shrugs with a little mirthless laugh. “Nothing. That was the hardest part.”

Her head shakes slowly, like she’s searching for a suitable explanation. “We were young, childhood sweethearts, and everyone—our families, our friends—just assumed we’d stay together. So, we got married because that’s what you do when you get to a certain age and you don’t have a reason to split up. And for a while, it was fine.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear on one side, and the gesture strikes Draco as very young.

“I just kept waiting to feel ready for the next thing. I kept thinking I would know when it was time, when we were... ready.” She repeats the word begrudgingly, like she’d have preferred another but can’t think of anything better to describe the feeling.

“Time was passing, and I was getting older, and our friends were starting families, and I just—” She breaks off, looking down. “It took me far too long to realise that I had been *ready* for quite some time. I just wasn’t ever going to feel ready with him.”

Draco waits, and after a moment, Hermione straightens back up, shifting a little in her seat.

“It wasn’t much of a marriage, really, at the end. We split amicably, and he remarried quickly. He has two kids now, and I—”

She swallows the rest of whatever she was about to say, giving Draco a conspiratorial look instead. “Well, it’s easier for a man, you know—starting over at almost thirty. The women on the apps all know *exactly* what they want. Ron’s a great father, and I’m happy for him.”

“You don’t have to be,” Draco says, leaning forward to stage whisper. “I won’t tell.”

Hermione smiles so wide it looks like it hurts. She touches her fingertips to her cheek. “It does get exhausting, being gracious all the time.”

“Yeah, fuck him.”

She laughs, a full, rich sound. “No, it was no one’s fault. We just weren’t right for each other.”

“All right, fine,” Draco concedes. “But I give you full leave to be bitter whenever you need.”

She tilts her head, considering him. “You know, I don’t feel the need just now.”

“No?” says Draco. His cheeks heat under the weight of her gaze.

Her head shakes slowly, one fingertip tracing her lower lip.

“How do you feel, then?” His voice has gone husky.

“I feel like we should get the bill.”

\*\*\*

Draco’s hand shakes slightly as he signs the check.

Hermione is eyeing him much like she had the portion of A5 wagyu beef in the main course, and it’s making his dick twitch to life in the middle of this very fine establishment.

Miraculously, it seems that he has not scared her off yet.

She takes his arm when she stands and keeps a tight grip on him while they wait for the valet to bring the car around.

Draco sees her safely inside, and then crosses behind the car to get in himself.

As soon as he does, she launches herself across the console, grabbing his face and kissing him hard. Draco’s grunt of surprise quickly devolves into something more indecent as he

angles himself to get his hands on as much of her as possible. His fingers sink into her hair, like they'd been itching to do for hours, and he feels the hinge of her jaw work against his palm as she deepens the kiss. She tastes like dark chocolate and the sweet dessert red. Draco moans at the feel of her tongue against his.

A polite knuckle knocks the window after another minute, and Hermione pulls back with a breathless laugh. The windows are darkly tinted, but they're probably blocking traffic.

Draco drags his teeth over his lower lip. "Back to your place?" he asks, finally putting the car in gear.

"Absolutely not," Hermione says, dropping her mouth to his neck. "I have to see where you park this thing."

"Right," Draco breathes. She gets his earlobe between her teeth, and the steering wheel jerks. "*Ah*, fuck."

"Steady on," she chides, doing something with her tongue that makes all the hair on his body stand on end.

"Christ," he groans.

She drops her hand to his crotch, squeezing the length of him where he's hard against his leg.

"Fuck, Hermione—"

"How long will it be?"

"Longer if I put us into a ditch."

She hums, sucking on the tender skin of his neck while her fingers find the button of his trousers. His cock jumps hopefully.

"More than ten minutes?"

"*Ah*—uh, no? I live close."

"Very well, then. You'll have to wait."

He doesn't know whether to sigh in relief or sob. She keeps up the teasing strokes, tracing her fingers maddeningly over the sensitive ridge of his head.

When a red light halts his progress, Draco turns his face back toward her and kisses her again. His fingers press into the back of her neck, and she gives him a long answering squeeze, making his hips flex up into her hand.

A horn honks behind them.

"Fuck," Draco bites out, wrenching his head forward.

Hermione laughs, her breath warm on his ear, and he nearly takes out the right side of the gate leading into the parking garage. An orange traffic pylon gets it, but those are made to bounce back, right?

Draco lurches into a spot, slamming the car into park. Hermione is already halfway out the door.

Draco follows, his own door slamming behind him with far more force than necessary. He meets her at the back of the car and immediately presses her against the sleek surface of it.

He groans at the pressure against his straining cock as Hermione pants into his mouth.

“Want you—”

“God, yes—”

“Now—”

He stumbles back a few steps, pulling her with him. Halfway to the lift he strips off his suit jacket and drapes it strategically over his crotch in case they run into Mrs. Nelson on the way. Hermione cackles when she notices, the sound reverberating madly around the concrete structure.

When the lift car arrives, it is, mercifully, empty. He backs Hermione against the wall of that, too, attaching his mouth to her neck.

“You—are a menace.”

She moans, her fingers digging into his hair as he licks hard over the pulse in her throat.

The door gives a plaintive *ding*, and Draco pulls free long enough to punch the button for the penthouse.

“I knew it,” Hermione gasps.

Draco smirks against her lips as the floors beep past.

When the lift opens on the top floor, Hermione disentangles herself from Draco’s hold long enough for him to unlock his front door and push it open for her.

Her heels echo loudly over the polished floor as she steps inside. She turns a full rotation, shaking her head.

“Gracious. I’m in the wrong business.”

“Consulting isn’t a business,” Draco says, tossing his suit jacket over a chair he never sits in. “It’s a racket.”

Hermione gives a considering hum as he plasters himself to her front again. “You know what the real racket is...” she muses.

“Hm?”

“The landed gentry.”

Draco winces. *Damn.* He knew it was probably too much to hope that she would think he was just a really *really* good consultant.

“Ah, well, yes,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

Hermione’s eyes go wide in the dim light. “No,” she gasps theatrically, gripping the front of his shirt in her fists. “Not the greatest racket of them all.”

He purses his lips in a flat expression of guilt.

“The peerage?” she breathes.

“I promise you needn’t call me Lord.”

“Don’t worry,” she laughs, “I shan’t.” Her brows lift. “But your father?”

Draco winces again. “Let’s burn that bridge when we get to it, shall we?”

She lets out a slightly hysterical giggle as he continues backing her across the living space. She’s tipsy, he realises. He wonders when was the last time she let that happen.

“Loord Maalfooy,” she says, drawing out the vowels. “I’m so sorry, but it sounds like the name of a B-list supervillain.”

“It is rather unfortunate, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” she murmurs, trailing her fingers down his front. “It could be kind of sexy under the right circumstances.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Her breath catches as her back hits the floor-to-ceiling windows comprising one entire wall of the room. “Yeah,” she says, letting her head fall to the side. The pad of her finger squeaks against the glass as she traces a curve down it. “This is quite a good villainous lair.”

Draco grins against her cheek. “You think so?”

“O, yes,” Hermione says gravely. “I think it could inspire one to be quite naughty indeed.”

A hand that he hadn’t realised was even in the vicinity of his crotch suddenly squeezes his cock again. He groans, burying his face in her shoulder. “That sounds—promising.”

She gives another sultry hum, turning his back to the glass instead and dropping to her knees.

Draco stares down at her as her deft fingers make quick work of his belt buckle.

“I’ve never sucked a Lord’s cock before,” she says conversationally.

Draco says, “*Glurghh*,” in clever reply.

She lowers his fly and the front of his boxers, and then the warmth of her palm is curving around him, pulling him out.

“Fuck,” he pants, watching as the leaking tip smears against the soft skin of her cheek.

“Wanted your cock in my mouth ever since I saw it,” she says, licking a firm stripe up the underside of him. She closes her lips over his head and sucks hard.

“Christ,” Draco breathes, his fingers plunging into her curls. Her mouth is hot and wet and—

“Well,” she goes on, pulling off with a *pop* and lifting her eyes to his. “Even before that, if I’m honest.”

Draco has the vague impression that if there were any blood left in his brain, he’d be really pleased by that statement. As it is, the feel of her hand sliding tight and slick over his length is too pleasing to leave room for anything else.

She keeps her gaze on his face as she opens her mouth and sinks down until he hits the back of her throat.

“Ohh, fuck,” Draco moans, gripping her jaw as she pulls back with her lips pressed tight.

Her eyes are all smirk as she takes him in again, and again. Her tongue rolls against his crown, and his legs shake.

“Fuck, *fuck*.” He gathers as much of her hair as he can, holding it away from her face in a fist behind her head. It’s so thick that his thumb barely touches his fingers around it.

“God, you’re gorgeous,” he says, the words falling out. “Fuck, Hermione—”

She gives an appreciative hum, and Draco feels his balls draw up tight.

“Shit,” he gasps out. “Wait.”

He doesn’t mean to pull her hair, but thankfully, she doesn’t seem offended. She pulls off but continues stroking him hard, the tip of his cock pressed to her tongue. “Go on,” she says, breathless. “You’re fine.”

Draco groans. Her mouth is hazy with the remnants of her lipstick, her chin shiny with spit. She looks so deliciously debauched, and it would feel *so* good. He hardens even further in her fist, and has to close his own hand over hers.

There’s another thing about him. One he didn’t mention at dinner. The thing where he tends to say things in bed that most women don’t appreciate on a one night stand. Or sometimes ever.

And as much as he’d loved to see Hermione’s mouth full of his come, that’s not really where he wants it.

“Let me fuck you.”

“Yeah,” Hermione says like it’s obvious, and licks a drip of precome from his slit.

He hisses. “I mean, now,” he clarifies. “Instead.”

She lifts her eyes to his again.

“Let me finish inside you.”

He watches her pupils blow wide in the light of the city outside. She licks her lips.

“You want me to?” he asks, his voice gravel.

She nods slowly like she’s dazed.

Draco hikes his pants back up with one hand and hoists her to her feet with the other. He sweeps one arm behind her legs and catches her in a bridal hold. Hermione lets out a little squeak of surprise, and Draco curls his arms upward until he can press his face into her side. He bites at the skin below her ribs through her dress, and she squeals.

“Draco—!” He grins as she clutches at his shoulders like he might drop her.

“You asked for strong,” he reminds her, nuzzling against the warmth of her body.

She just moans in response.

He does eventually drop her. Onto his bed.

She bounces a bit on the mattress, and Draco leans over her, getting a grip on the straps of her dress.

“There’s a zip!” she says, slightly panicked.

“Oh, right.” He shakes his head, marshalling himself. Not too much strength, then.

She lets out a breathless laugh, raising one arm to show him. Draco works the tiny zipper down, careful not to pinch her skin. She shrugs her shoulders out of the straps and lets him pull the dress down over her legs and off.

His cock is half-covered by his boxers again, but he still reaches down and squeezes it as he looks at her. She’s flushed, eyes bright and chest heaving under his gaze. She’s worn a matching set of lingerie for the occasion. Red lace. And the center of her underwear is darkened with wet.

A guttural noise leaves his chest at the sight, and he lays himself down between her legs.

She sucks in a gasp as he closes his mouth over the thin fabric covering her, pulling at it with his lips before letting the elastic snap back into place. His eyes roll at the taste of her arousal.

“Oh, god,” she moans as he licks and kisses her through the delicate lace.

"Did you get this wet from sucking me?" he asks.

Her back arches off the bed when he circles her clit with the tip of his tongue. A broken cry is his only answer.

"So fucking hot," he murmurs. He layers broad strokes over her entrance until his tongue slips beneath the fabric on one.

"Draco," she moans, clutching at his head. "I thought you were going to fuck me."

"I will," he promises and pulls her knickers to the side.

She comes hard and fast against his mouth, a stiletto heel raking across his back.

"Fuck," she pants as her legs slide off his shoulders. A curl has fallen over her face, and it flutters with each of her heavy breaths. She might be the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

Draco gets back to his feet, toeing off his shoes as he unbuttons his shirt. Hermione watches him undress through heavy lids, unmoving until he's standing naked next to the bed.

He digs a condom out of his nightstand drawer, and Hermione licks her lips as he rolls it on.

He picks up one of her feet as he kneels back on the bed, lifting it until he can press a kiss to the inside of her knee, her shin. Even her legs smell good. They're soft and smooth, made supple with vanilla-scented lotion. He kisses her ankle bone as he slips the pointy shoe off her foot and drops it next to the bed. She smiles up at him as he repeats the process on the other side.

As much as he likes the look of her knickers all wet and used, tucked hurriedly next to her glistening cunt, he hooks his fingers under the waistband of them, drawing them down when she lifts her hips to help.

He runs his palms up her thighs, her sides as he crawls over her on the bed. He slides one hand behind her back, pulling her up into him for a kiss.

It's slow, indulgent, and she gives a surprised murmur into it when he unhooks the clasp of her bra.

"Impressive," she says, laying back onto the pillows as he pulls it off her arms.

"Excellent."

She smiles into his kiss as he lays himself on top of her. Her arms wrap around his back at once, drawing him down into her, and it soothes something in the back of Draco's mind. He sinks into the feel of her body moving beneath him, the writhing roll of her need.

He ducks his head to her chest, reveling in the dig of her fingers into his hair as he teases her nipple with his tongue.

“Fuck,” she whines, pressing up into his mouth as her back arches. He sucks eagerly at her, feeling the rock of her hips against his stomach.

“Draco—” He switches to the other side, pulling her nipple into a willing peak as his thumb presses into the marks at her cleavage. He decides this breast deserves one as well, and sucks a red bruise into the swell of her flesh.

Hermione gasps, her fingers tightening in his hair. But she does not pull him away.

Draco lifts his head with a smirk when he’s done, and her eyes are locked on her own chest.

His hips press forward, catching the tip of his cock between her legs, and she moans.

“Please,” she whispers, shifting desperately for more contact.

Draco covers her mouth with his own, tasting the moment when he pushes inside her. He savours the hitch of her breath, that urgent sound in the back of her throat. He feels drunk on it.

An answering noise rumbles through his own chest as he sinks fully down into the tight, wet, *fucking perfect*, heat of her.

Her spine curls beneath him, canting her hips up into his strokes. His mouth drops open at the feel of her opening for him, his cock sliding between her walls, filling her. Every inch of his body tightens with the rightness of it. He lets his weight drop onto his elbows, getting a hand back in her hair.

She whines when he uses it to tilt her face up to him. He can feel the pleasure tightening within her.

“Look at you.”

Her nails dig into his shoulders as her head presses back into the pillow.

“Draco—”

“Are you gonna come for me?”

“Yes.” Her brow creases, and he presses his lips to it. “Come with me,” she gasps. Her hand drops to his arse, her fingers digging into the muscle, pulling him forward. “Draco—I need it.”

“Fuck—” His heart pounds against her chest as it surges up within him. His hips snap forward, making her cry out. “Fuck, I’m gonna come so deep inside you.”

“Oh, god,” she moans and starts to shudder beneath him.

Draco pours into her as she pulses around him. A long, low groan drags out of him along with what feels like everything else. He empties his cock into her cunt and then throbs at the thought of it.

Hermione makes a somewhat disbelieving sound as she stills. She follows it up with an exhausted chuckle. Draco can feel his own blissed out expression as he pants into her neck.

He turns his head enough to press a kiss below her ear.

She gives a contented hum, dragging her nails up his back—in a soothing motion this time. Draco shivers again.

“Fucking hell,” she sighs.

He gives a breathless grunt of agreement.

She continues tracing patterns over his back, up into his hair, down his arms. Draco attempts not to drool on her shoulder.

“Am I crushing you?” he manages to ask after what might have been a century.

“No.”

“Okay, good. Because I need a minute.”

“It’s been a minute,” she says lightly.

“I need another one.”

Hermione laughs, and her inner walls clench around him again.

“Ah.” His hips twitch forward on impulse.

She gives a little gasp. “Take your time.”

“No,” he says, groaning as he lifts himself off of her. “Any longer and you’ll put me to sleep.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” she says with a smile.

“Be careful what you wish for,” he warns, collapsing on his back next to her. His body sings with satisfaction, and he finds himself thinking dazedly that he’s never quite appreciated how lovely his ceiling is.

Hermione rolls onto her side to look at him.

Draco licks his lips before turning his head to meet her gaze.

When he does, her face is serious, a little line of worry marking the space between her brows.

“What is it?” he asks.

“You’re... so different from what I expected, Draco. I’m sorry.”

He makes a little *tsk* sound with his tongue and reaches for her hand. He lifts it to his lips.  
“Don’t be. I’m glad you gave me a chance.”

“I hate the way that sounds.”

He grins, kissing the inside of her wrist, too. “Sounds pretty lucky to me.”

She tries to maintain her pout, but he tugs on her arm, forcing her to roll onto her front where he can reach her. He cups her jaw and kisses her softly on the lips.

“Will you stay?”

Her lashes brush his cheek as she opens her eyes to look at him. They’re the sweetest honey brown this close. She considers it long enough for Draco’s heart to give a harsh thump of anxiety.

*Too much, too fast, too strong—*

“Yes.”

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this peek into Draco's side of the story. There's more to him than meets the eye 😊 (See Hermione!!)

Up next: Jeepers, these two just cannot stay away from each other! Should be fine, right?

Thank you so much for reading! I'm having such a blast sharing this story <3 (Also if you saw that chapter count go up, no you didn't!!!)

Immense thanks also to my lovely beta katie [naginiLinguini](#)! It's her birthday this weekend so everyone go read all of her amazing works and show her some love!!

You can also hang out with me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

## Five

### Chapter Notes

This is somehow way hornier than I was expecting. And the crowd is... not surprised at all??

Please note, there is a whiff of dub con here. I mean, they're both into it, buuut, yeah. I think it's hot as a fun little surprise (so does Draco), but take care if you're sensitive to what could have been a serious boundary being crossed.

Also—feels a little redundant to warn on a breeding kink fic, but just in case!—there is discussion around birth control and pregnancy (outside the bedroom, too).

But first! FLUFFFFFFF  schmoopy buckets of the stuff!

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

Being a creature of habit, Draco is already lightly awake when his alarm goes off the following morning. He silences it quickly, and Hermione doesn't even twitch beside him.

He rubs a hand over his eyes, stretching with a yawn. The sky outside is just starting to lighten, and he smiles at the early warmth of the day pressing into the deep blue outside his windows. It's what makes summer his favourite time of year—waking up with the sun.

He rolls onto his side and appreciates the Hermione-shaped bump in the blankets. The light in the room is still far too fragile to even be graded on a scale of brightness, and so, he doesn't feel too guilty waking her into it.

She's cocooned in an impossible pocket of warmth beneath the covers, and a pleased hum of surprise slips out of him as he molds his body to her back. She braided her hair into a single thick plait before bed, but a little halo of fuzz has escaped in the night. It tickles his cheek. She stirs slowly, shifting with small, sleepy sounds. Draco wraps his arm over her waist and can't help groaning a little when she arches her back, her arse pressing into his crotch.

That seems to bring her into awareness.

He presses a kiss to the side of her head. “Good morning.”

Hermione grumbles, nuzzling into the pillow.

“How did you sleep?”

“I'll let you know when I wake up.”

He smiles at the morning rasp in her voice.

“I wanted to say goodbye before I left.”

Another grumble. “You seem to have an awful lot of demands on your time for someone promising *courtship*.<sup>”</sup>

“Oh, there’s always time for courtship.” Though he does make a mental note to revisit the idea of quitting his job.

“Guess I wouldn’t know,” she murmurs. “Never been courted before.”

Draco shakes his head. “I find that both tragic and slightly appalling.”

“Funny, I feel the same way about a 5AM alarm.”

He breathes a laugh, missing her already. “So I take it you don’t want to come?”

“Mmm,” she hums like she’s actually considering it. “No, thank you. I think five orgasms in 24 hours might be my limit for now.”

Draco shakes with silent laughter, but she’s not done.

“Might be more than I’ve had in the last five years combined, now that I think on it.”

He chokes on his own spit.

“Partnered, of course,” she clarifies.

“Hermione...” he trails off, reeling a bit. “I meant come to the gym.”

“*Oh.* Well, then, allow me to upgrade my ‘no, thank you’ to a *fuck, no.*”

He buries his face in her hair. “My god. To think I almost didn’t ask.”

“No making fun of the aging divorcée. It’s all very sad you know.”

“I don’t know,” Draco murmurs, letting his hand snake lower. “I think it could be quite sexy under the right circumstances.”

Hermione tries to hide her smile in the pillow, but it’s creasing the whole side of her face. “Villain,” she mutters.

He nips at her jaw. “When can I see you again?”

She stretches her arms, groaning. “That depends, what day is it?”

“There’s a good chance it’s Friday.”

“Hmm. Well, since it is still Daphne’s first week, I really hate to abandon her on a weekend. I know she’s perfectly capable, but—”

"That's fine," Draco says quickly, attempting to hide his elation at the fact that her mind went to as soon as possible.

Hermione shifts around to face him, but she still doesn't open her eyes. She cuddles into his chest, drawing in a deep, slow breath from somewhere a less generous person might classify as his armpit. "So, Monday?"

"Monday, then."

She gives a contented grumble this time.

Draco kisses her forehead. "Stay as long as you like. There's a button to lock the door from the outside."

"Trusting the commoner with free reign? Such a benevolent ruler."

"Well, the gold bars are in the safe, so."

"Always been more of a diamond girl anyway."

*"Noted."*

Her nose scrunches, but he can still see the blush on it.

"I'll see you soon."

She cracks one eye open to give him a smile.

Draco considers the potential of waking up with the sun in the dead of winter.

"Goodbye."

She's asleep again before he's out the door.

\*\*\*

There's a flower shop down the street from the gym, and by the time Draco has finished his workout, showered, and changed for work, they're open. He's walked by it a million times, but he's never been inside.

A bell over the door jingles to announce his presence, and a kindly-looking lady with curly grey hair bustles out from the back.

"Good morning, dear. What can I do for you?"

Draco hates to send an arrangement without knowing Hermione's preferences, so he just pokes around for a bit, picking out the blooms that remind him the most of her. The florist seems charmed by this approach, and she helps him round out the bouquet with complimentary accents.

"You have a good eye," she says, nodding to the huge cup-shaped flowers that form the centerpiece. "These are quite special."

Draco smiles, pleased. "It's for someone special."

She bustles back over to the register. "And who might that be?"

Draco pulls up Hermione's address from their messages and pays an expedited fee for delivery.

He's at his desk when he gets a text from her.

**Nice try.**

Which means she found the money he left for her to order a ride home.

He sends back, **worth a shot**, though he'd expected as much.

The typing indicator appears, followed by, **I appreciate the gesture** ❤️

He's only moderately smug typing **you're welcome** :) when he knows what's waiting for her at home.

He's in a meeting half an hour later when his pocket starts vibrating. He props his elbow on the table, covering his smile with his hand. Theo throws him a look, brows raised at the sound of the buzzing. When they wrap up, and Draco steps out into the hall, there's a stack of notifications on his screen.

**Oh my god Draco!!**

**These are GORGEOUS**

**How did you have time for this??**

**Ugh I can literally hear you saying always time for courtship don't bother**

**I am impressed!**

**The peonies** 😍

**Thank you so much**

**Omg your note**

**I'm—** 😅

**Well you'll see but**

**Ugh I'm flustered**

**Oh god I'm texting you so much I'm so sorry**

**Okay last one, thank you!!!** ❤️

Draco's cheeks hurt from smiling. He'd debated quite a bit on what to write for the note, resisting the urge to be overly sentimental. He'd eventually settled on, *I'm glad you were understaffed that night*, which felt like a fun and flirty way to say *I am on my knees thanking the universe we met* without being overbearing. Clearly, she liked it.

His phone chirps with an appointment reminder, and he taps out a quick reply.

*i'm glad you like them hermione* ❤

*I \*love\* them*, she corrects.

Draco grins. He likes that word very much.

*even better :)))*

\*\*\*

When Draco returns from his appointment, his afternoon is chock-a-block full of bullshit. Which is, frankly, insulting, given that he's confirmed several times that it is, in fact, Friday. He double-checks *again* when an email comes in at 4:47 with several bulleted questions, two of which are in red. He ignores it on principle.

(He responds at 4:53 so Blaise will let him keep his balls.)

Suffice it to say that when he steps through his front door and catches the lingering hint of Hermione's perfume, it is an *utterly* welcome reprieve from the tedium of the day.

He goes into his bedroom and smirks at the sight of the unmade bed. Hermione does not strike him as the untidy sort, and indeed, the dramatic tangle of sheets suggests the intentionality of a tableau. He wonders if he's meant to infer that she'd treated herself to 'O' number six before leaving this morning.

The thought sends a low thrum of arousal buzzing through him, and it only sharpens when he steps forward and sees what she's left for him. The red lace knickers are laid out in the center of the bed along with a note of her own.

Draco picks up the slip of paper and reads, *I'm glad you came in for that "beer" xx.*

There's a kiss print over the exes, bright red like she'd applied a fresh coat of lipstick to achieve it. He flips the note over, and then sits heavily onto the mattress.

It's written on the back of the merchant copy of his tab from that night at the bar—complete with the tequila-infused scrawl of his signature along the bottom.

Draco stares down at it, grinning like a loon. He can't imagine when she might have gone back for it, but the little rectangle is creased into quarters, like she could have had it in her wallet.

He turns it back over to read the words again, his head shaking slowly. He understands the teary face she'd sent a little better now.

Draco reaches for the book on his nightstand, showing the note to the peering eye on the cover. "Not bad, eh, Fyodor?"

He swaps out the receipt marking his place with this new one.

*thank you for your note* 😊

She responds after a minute.

***Now I feel bad about the underwear lol. Not exactly a stunning bouquet 😂***

Draco's teeth drag over his lower lip.

***i \*love\* them***

The typing indicator flashes a few times, and he imagines her blushing, biting her thumbnail, trying to decide what to say.

In the end, she settles for sending a simple heart and typing, ***I don't want them back.***

He snorts a laugh.

***i think that's for the best***

\*\*\*

Draco gets into the tangled sheets that night, but what he does with the red lace knickers to achieve *his* next 'O' is not up for discussion because he is discreet and also a gentleman. And because there's a chance it's illegal.

He picks up his phone to text Hermione only a cool one thousand times; he successfully resists the urge nine hundred and ninety-nine of them.

But it's just a simple goodnight text! Nothing wrong with that. Perfectly chill and not at all clingy. It's *polite*, in fact. Dare he say, even expected?

He repeats this like a mantra for the hour it takes for her to respond, though he knows full well she's working.

When his phone finally chimes from where he'd left it across the room (so casual and carefree, is he), he nearly pulls a hamstring rushing to retrieve it.

***Goodnight, Draco 😊 sweet dreams 😊***

He sinks back down into his place on the sofa, getting comfortable with a pleased sort of wiggle. He picks up his book from where he'd abandoned it on the arm and gives a good-natured scoff at the cover. "And you were worried," he tells it.

\*\*\*

Unfortunately, Saturday is worse.

Draco tacks on a 5k to his workout in an attempt to exorcise some of his worse impulses.

It is shockingly ineffective.

He bullies Theo into faffing about the shops for a bit. Theo bullies him when he lingers too long in front of a jewelry display.

“I wasn’t looking *at it*,” he says. “I was just *looking* and it was there.”

Theo reaches over and presses a finger to what must be a red blotch on his neck. “Don’t lie, Draco. It does dreadful things to your complexion.”

“Piss off,” Draco snaps, swatting at his hand.

“Ah, right you are,” says Theo. He waggles his brows. “I’ve got a date.”

“What?” Draco barks. “That’s bloody rude.”

“Couldn’t agree more, old chap. Wasn’t up to me.”

“Fine. Go, then.”

Theo gives him a little salute, emphasising his middle finger before he turns. He calls back over his shoulder, “No diamonds on the second date!”

Draco sneers, already dialing Blaise’s number. He doesn’t answer, and Draco decides that the entire concept of a best man is antiquated and probably rooted in misogyny.

He calls his mother instead.

Narcissa answers the phone as she always does—as though they were already in the middle of a conversation.

Draco hums his acknowledgment at her barrage of opening statements, attempting to get answers to her questions in edgewise.

“Well, with you working—are you still working, dear?”

“Yes, Mother, I’m still working.” Though for how much longer—up for debate.

She sighs as though he’d said he was still skydiving twice a day. “Well, you know how your father worries.”

(Lucius in no way worries about Draco’s work load.)

“Mm.”

“And with his health—”

(He is in perfect physical condition.)

“Millions of people work a 9-5, Mother. I assure you it’s perfectly safe.”

Another sigh. “Oh, I just don’t know, dear. We never see you anymore.”

(It's been two weeks.)

"Yes, that's why I'm calling. It's been too long."

"Oh, darling. Come for tea, won't you? I know it's so far—"

(It's a two-hour drive.)

"It's no trouble, Mother. I'll come tomorrow, hm?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful, dear. I'll have Ondine prepare your favourite."

"That sounds lovely."

(It is not worth fighting it.)

"Did you hear Theodore is courting the younger Abbott girl?"

Draco pinches the bridge of his nose. "I did. Just recently, in fact."

"She's a sweet girl—a little silly, but—oh, I just don't know, Draco. You were always such a serious child."

He fails to keep the contradiction internal at that one. "Was I?"

"You know your father and I only want you to be happy."

"If I told you I was happy, would you believe me?"

She makes a small clucking sound, and he can just see her hand, delicately flicking the idea away. "Oh, how does anyone know if they're happy, Draco? This world today—oh, I just don't know."

He smiles. "That is an excellent point, Mother. Listen, I've got to run, but I'll see you tomorrow."

"Always so busy," she sighs. "If it's too much trouble, don't bother yourself. I know you're always working."

"I don't work on Sundays, Mother. It's not a bother. I'll see you in the afternoon."

"Please be careful, darling. I heard there might be rain."

He nods even though she can't see him. "Not to worry. I spend countless hours driving in the rain."

She audibly shudders. "Oh, Draco! Don't say such things to me. I think maybe you shouldn't come."

"I'm going to see you at 2 o'clock, all right? Tomorrow. Give my love to Father, won't you?"

“Oh, yes, yes, of course. I love you, Draco.”

“I love you, too, Mother. Goodnight.”

He ends the call, shaking his head and smiling down at his phone. He rubs a hand over his forehead.

Well. After all that, Draco reckons he could use a drink.

\*\*\*

Draco takes his time in the shower—for personal reasons. Then, he takes his time in the mirror—for other, different personal reasons. He stands in his closet and attempts to find a shirt that says *Hey! What are the odds of running into you, here, in the place I knew you'd be??*

He unbuttons his first choice and looks for something with a little more insouciance around the collar.

\*\*\*

By the time he's suitably coiffed, it's after nine and the pub is in full swing. The booths around the perimeter are all overflowing, either with pulled-up chairs or people standing around the edges. Each of the high tops in the center of the room is occupied, and a layer of patrons two or three deep throngs the bar.

Despite the unsavory reasons she had to do it, Draco can't help but be proud of what Hermione's built.

He starts forward, into the fray, but the first person he runs into is Daphne, almost literally.

“Pardon,” she says, scooting by him. Then she turns, smiling wide. “Oh! Hello, you!”

“Hey, Daph.” He accepts her hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Oh, you know.” He shrugs, letting the shirt speak for itself. “Thought I'd pop round for a pint, see how things are going.”

She makes that same little clucking sound all society ladies are trained in and pinches his cheek. “Sweet.”

Draco smiles, nodding, but the gesture gets interrupted by the appearance of Hermione at the end of the bar. She stops one of the barbacks as he passes her—a younger man with glasses and a shock of messy black hair. They exchange words, going back and forth a few times, and then they both laugh. She gives him a pat on the shoulder before he rushes off, and Draco marvels at the difference in her since the last time he was in the pub.

She's smiling.

Hermione steps out from behind the bar, and Draco's head tilts to get her fully in view. She's wearing a black sleeveless dress that hits just above her knee. It's close-fitting but still so... professional. A shiny silver zipper runs up the entire length of the front, elevating it just slightly for the nightlife setting. The front part of her hair is pinned back to show off the lovely line of her neck, and he can't help but notice that her throat is bare. Even so, she looks bloody gorgeous.

Draco only realises that he's been staring, moon-eyed, when Daphne steps in front of him, blocking his view.

She smacks his arm with the back of her hand. "Draco Malfoy! Tell me you did not recommend me for this job so you could get in good with the boss."

"Okay," he says, smiling. "I won't tell you that."

She hits him again. "Scamp. All those questions you were asking. Here I thought you cared. You were after intel."

"First of all, I do care. And, second, it's not like that. I—I really like her."

Daphne clucks again, looking back at Hermione. "I really like her, too. So I expect you to do the thing properly."

Draco scoffs, putting a hand to his chest. "Excuse me. To whom do you think you're speaking?"

Daphne's eyes narrow, but she's smiling. "Good point."

As if she can feel her ears burning, Hermione glances over in their direction. Draco's stomach tightens with dread at the veil of shock that drops over her when she sees him.

It's too much. He knew it. They already have a date set for Monday, for fuck's sake. It's too fucking much. He hasn't been this excited about someone in so fucking long, and now he's gone and—

Hermione's face transforms. A smile stretches across it, and then kind of... just keeps going? She smiles at least a hundred and fifty percent of one person's usual allotted amount. Her cheeks go pink and her eyes shine, and Draco can confidently say that no one—*ever*—in his life has looked so incandescently happy to see him.

"Oh, my," Daphne murmurs beside him. "That is *quite* a look."

"So it is," Draco says, doing his best to match it.

Daphne bumps her shoulder into his. "Well, it's about time! I'm so h-appy for you, Draco."

Her voice cracks a little, and he glances over at her. "Hey, now."

"Ugh, sorry." She squeezes her eyes shut, shaking her head. "It just sneaks up on me sometimes, you know?"

He does. “I know.”

She gathers herself quickly, laughing a little. “How many years has it been since we cried together?”

Draco smiles, though not at the memories. “A few.”

She nods. “Let’s make it a few more, yeah?”

“Deal.”

She squeezes his arm briefly before using it to give him a shove. “Go on, then. Go get your girl!”

“Thanks, Daph.”

She smirks. “No, thank *you*.” When she turns, weaving back through the crowd, her ponytail swings behind her.

Draco eventually makes his way to the end of the bar where Hermione is waiting. He doesn’t want to overstep in her place of business, but she steps for him. She steps right into his space, raising up onto her toes to hug him tight around the ribs.

He hugs her back, letting his eyes sink closed. She smells so fucking good, and she’s so soft and warm. It’s like holding Christmas morning in his arms.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Well, you see. There I was, business as usual. When I suddenly—and quite inexplicably, mind you—found myself absolutely *desperate* with thirst.”

Hermione gives a little gasp, lowering back down onto her heels to look up at him. “Oh, that sounds really serious. People don’t realise how dangerous dehydration can be.”

“Really?” Draco adopts a dramatic grimace. “Worse than goose down?”

She giggles, pressing her fingertips to her lips. “O, yes.”

“Well, then, I’m glad I came.”

Her teeth press into her lower lip for a second. “Me too.”

Draco might be hovering an inch above the ground, but he doesn’t bother to check.

“Now,” she says significantly, slipping out of his grip to step behind the bar. “To address this thirst, maybe you’d like to tell me what kind of beer you actually like?”

Draco braces his hands on the polished wood, leaning forward. “Well, Coors is my favourite, but that’s mostly for sentimental reasons.”

She shakes her head, turning to grab one. “Who knew I was condemning you to a life sentence with that fateful choice.”

“Thankfully, I have very plebian tastes.”

Hermione pauses with the bottle opener poised in the air. Her brows raise.

“In beer,” he quickly clarifies, flushing. “I’ve terribly high standards for everything else.”

She pops the top with a smirk, but instead of handing the bottle over, she takes a sip for herself.

“So, how have you been for the last...” She looks down at her wrist, though all she has on it is a thin silver bracelet. “Forty hours.”

“Quite good,” says Draco. “Generally productive and not at all mad with longing.”

She breathes a laugh through her nose, grinning.

“You?” he asks.

She hands the bottle over to him. “The same.”

“Oh, good!” He takes a sip, nodding merrily. “Glad to hear it.”

“Mm.”

She studies him for a few seconds, and then asks, “Would you like to go exploring with me?”

Draco gives a small, surprised laugh, but a genuine answer comes readily. “I would like nothing more.”

She nods, stepping out from behind the bar. She takes the bottle from his hand as she passes and says, “Come on, then,” gesturing with a tilt of her head.

Draco follows her through the crowd and over to the darkened glass doors of the bookshop. She hands off the beer to him, taking out a set of keys.

He takes a sip as he watches her unlock the doors, but he turns to cast a quick glance back out at the crowded pub before stepping through after her. As far as he can tell, no one is paying them any mind.

She closes the doors again once he’s through, and the lock slides back into place with a decisive click.

Hermione stows the keys in a pocket of the dress, drifting slowly forward into the shop. The overhead lights are off; only the glow of the bar and the streetlamps outside illuminate the space. It cuts dramatic shadows over the tall stacks—splashes of light and dark along the parquet floor.

"It looks so different at night," Draco says. His voice is hushed despite the noise from next door. He feels like a teenager sneaking away from the party.

"I know," Hermione says, winding through the shelves. She runs her fingers along the rows of spines. "Growing up, I spent *so* many hours down here in the dark. Waiting to find the right book to reveal a secret passageway." She puts a fingertip on top of one volume and tilts it away from the shelf. The gesture triggers such a nostalgic wave of *déjà vu* in him that Draco lets out an audible breath.

"Or looking for the right section of text to open a portal to a secret magical land."

Hermione takes down a book of poetry and lets it fall open to the center. She runs a finger slowly over the stanzas before closing it again with a quiet thump.

"I used to do the same thing," Draco says. "In our library. When I was younger. God, I haven't thought of that in years."

Hermione takes the bottle from him and drinks a healthy swig. "*In our library*, he says casually."

Draco takes the beer back with a smirk. "It's nothing grand." (It is.) "More of a study, really." (It spans three floors.)

Hermione smiles at him as she slides the book back onto the shelf. "I don't believe you."

"Wise," says Draco. "I'm a horrible liar."

Her laugh is soft as starlight in the darkness.

Draco watches her tip-toe her fingertips along the shelves as she wanders. The books are interspersed, used with new, and Hermione nods when he comments on it.

"It creates more accessibility, having used versions available. And some of them are donated so the margins are even lower. Plus, some people like the character of a secondhand book, myself included."

She pauses, eyeing a gilded spine. "Though... I do have the expensive habit of buying rare special editions when I see them, even if I know they're unlikely to sell. I just like having them on my shelves."

"No wonder you needed the bar."

Hermione's cheeks lift in a smile, and she tilts the book out from the shelf, testing.

When nothing happens, she gives a little *tsk* and roams on.

"What was your magical land like?" he asks her.

She gives a considering hum, casting her gaze up to the rafters for a second. "Well, there was a castle, for starters."

“Have to have one of those,” Draco agrees.

She gives him a significant look over her shoulder. “Maybe a dragon or two.”

“Also an excellent choice.”

She drifts toward the children’s books on the wall next to the register. “Undoubtedly some vague malevolent force, and whatever special item I needed to defeat it. An unbeatable sword; an enchanted cauldron to brew protective potions; a diary containing the memories of an ancient heroine of the realm.”

She turns back to face him. “Heavily influenced by whatever I was reading at the time, of course.”

Draco looks at her and thinks that she could conquer anything.

“I always had some kind of creature sidekick in mine,” he tells her, remembering. “I wasn’t allowed pets growing up. My father had his hunting hounds, and there were the bloody peacocks, of course. But—I never got to have an animal as a friend. I always loved stories where the main character had a magical companion that could understand them.”

Hermione smiles softly, and her fingers linger over his for a moment when she takes the bottle back. There’s only one sip left.

“What would your magical power be?” she asks.

“Oh, easy—flying.”

“Really?”

“Are you kidding? Of course. The freedom of it. The exhilaration. Being able to just *go* and watch the world fall away beneath you. I can’t imagine anything better.”

Hermione beams up at him, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth.

“What would yours be?”

Her smile doesn’t fall so much as... fade. Her eyes unfocus somewhere over his shoulder, and her thumbnail scrapes absently at the corner of the bottle’s label.

She turns away from him after a moment, facing the counter. The amber glass makes a hollow thunk when she sets it down next to the till. Empty.

Draco looks at the line of her shoulders, but when she doesn’t turn back, he lifts his eyes to follow her gaze.

On the wall behind the register, is a collection of photographs. Lots of people are featured there, though the most frequent two must be Hermione’s grandparents—the original store owners. They’re shown posing together, and with a variety of others. Maybe famous authors who visited the shop. Draco wishes he could recognise them.

One photo shows them with a young man and woman who can only be Hermione's parents; they're a perfect two halves of her.

And she's there, too, of course, on the wall of fame. Hermione, ranging from a toddler to today, is pictured in various places around the shop. Posing with the sign out front; legs dangling between the bannisters in the loft; sitting on the very counter in front of them with a picture book in her hands. In a few of the photos, she's clutching a giant mass of ginger fur in her arms—a cat so big, it must have been part lion.

"Time travel," she says softly.

Draco steps up against her back, wrapping his arms at her waist. She puts her hands on top of his.

"There are some moments I would *really* love to visit again."

He appreciates, for the first time, that for Hermione to have inherited the shop, her grandparents wouldn't have had the chance to see the way she's saved it.

"I'm sure they'd be proud of you."

Her grip tightens on his arm for a moment. "I know."

She leans her head back against his shoulder. "There are also a few things I'd like the chance to change."

"Time is a tricky thing," Draco says against her hair. "You know, some people believe that for every decision we make, the timeline splits into all of the possible alternatives. So, somewhere out there, in another universe, those times when you wish you'd done something different—you did."

Hermione turns in his arms, and then she raises her hand to his cheek. "I like that idea very much, Draco."

He smiles under her touch.

"Although, that means there are some timelines where we never met," she says.

Draco considers this. "I like to think there are infinitely more where we did."

She traces the edge of his mouth. "I'm glad I get to live in this one."

"Me too," he breathes against her fingers.

Hermione's eyes move back and forth between his as she leans closer. "All right," she says quietly. "At the risk of creating a paradox in the space-time continuum which sucks the universe into a black hole or something, I will trade traveling back in time for the ability to slow it down."

Her thumb drags over the swell of his bottom lip, and her words come out dripping like dark honey. “There are some moments I could spend *hours* in.”

Draco’s tongue touches the pad of her finger, and he feels her ribcage expand under his hands. He could spend an *eternity* right here, he thinks—held in the dusty twilight of a dream, secreted away, the world kept at bay behind a thin pane of glass.

“Now we’re talking.”

Hermione smiles, and when her eyes flick upward as she considers something else, the movement brushes their noses together.

“Either that,” she says. “Or be able to turn invisible.”

“Oh, no, no,” Draco breathes, lifting a hand to smooth his thumb over the curve of her cheekbone. “What a terrible waste that would be.”

She’s still smiling when she kisses him, and Draco drinks in the sweetness of it. Her arms slide around his neck as he opens her lips under his own, and the first brush of her tongue sends heat flaring through him. She puts some weight into her hold, pulling him down to her, and he presses her back against the wooden counter. She gives a little moan of pleasure, her nails raking through the short hair at the back of his head.

“I can’t believe you came here tonight,” she breathes.

“Too much?”

“No. And I can’t believe that either.”

Draco deepens the kiss, levelled by the strength of his desire after less than two days. The tenderness of the preceding moment only makes him want her all the more.

His hand slides down to her arse, squeezing as he pulls her against him. He loves the feel of her pressed flush to his body. Loves the idea than anyone could look through the doors and see them there. Even though they’d appear as nothing more than moving shadows in the darkness. Even though Hermione owns the shop—and they’re grown ups, they’re *allowed*—it feels so illicit to kiss her like this.

Hermione’s mouth turns urgent, her teeth catching at his lips. His fingers sink into her hair as he angles her head just so, licking across her tongue. She makes a sharp, needy sound, and her hips press forward into the hardness at his front.

When she pulls back, breathless, her lips are shining in the dim.

Draco wonders for a second if she’ll tell him she needs to get back to work. He’d be fine with it if she did. He’s just happy to have seen her. He’ll need to wait a minute for the raging hard on to subside, of course. Or maybe she could let him out the back—

“Come on,” she says, and takes him by the hand.

Out the back it is, then. She tows him into the depths of the shop, through a door labelled for employees only. It leads into a long, narrow hall running parallel to the street. He blinks under the sudden bright lights. The corridor seems to connect all of the neighboring storefronts.

An exit sign glows red above them, but Hermione turns to the right instead. The keys jingle in her hand again as she opens an office door.

She pushes him inside and flips the deadbolt into place behind him.

Draco's blood-starved brain only catches on to what's happening when she backs him into the wall behind the desk.

Now, *this*. This is illicit.

Her fingers run down the row of buttons on his shirt. "Take this off."

One pings onto the floor in his rush to comply.

"Fuck," Hermione breathes, running her hands down his bare chest. His cock swells with the hunger in her eyes. He knows she likes his body; knows it was probably her main attraction to him initially. Maybe not anymore—at least he hopes—but the way her fingers dig into the muscle of his pecs is still very satisfying to a primal part of him. His nipples draw tight at the contact, and she pitches forward, pressing an open-mouthed kiss over one of them.

Draco's head hits the wall behind him with a familiar hollow thunk. Like the bottle, it is now empty.

He hisses at the pinch of her teeth, and his fingers tangle in her curls. When her tongue trails up the side of his throat, his restraint snaps. He tugs the bottom of the dress up over her hips and gets himself two handfuls of her arse.

Hermione moans, hitching one leg up against his thigh. Draco takes the invitation and leans down to slide his hand lower. Her nails dig into his biceps as he groans at the feel of the damp fabric between her legs.

"Fuck, Hermione—" He presses his fingers up against her entrance, and she whines in his ear.

"Fuck me, Draco."

"Yeah," he breathes, letting her foot drop back to the ground.

Hermione shoves her rolling chair out of the way with a clang, and then picks up a single file folder and throws it into the seat. The rest of her workspace is practically empty, immaculately tidy.

(He knew it.)

She drags him forward by the belt, perching her arse on the edge of the desk like she has every intention of laying herself back onto it.

Draco groans at the thought, and then again as she gets a grip on his cock. She already has it out by the time Draco remembers to tell her the good news.

“I got tested yesterday,” he pants.

Hermione pauses her stroking to look up at him.

“I’m not interested in being with anyone else,” he says.

Her lips part for a breath before she speaks. “Draco, that’s—very considerate, but I’m—I’m not on birth control.”

His cock gives an extremely inappropriate twitch, and a trickle of precome drips over her knuckle.

“Oh, right,” he says quickly. He clears his throat. “Of course.”

He reaches into his pocket for the condom he keeps in his wallet just in case, but Hermione stops him with a grip on his wrist.

When he glances back up, she isn’t looking at him. Her eyes are trained on the wall beside them. Where a calendar is pinned.

Her brow furrows as she scans over the grid of boxes for a moment, and then she swallows.

When she looks back at him, her pupils are blown wide.

“It should be fine,” she says, and her hand tightens on his cock again.

“What?” he croaks.

“It’s fine,” she breathes. She reaches up with her other hand to pull him down into a kiss. “Don’t wear it.”

His vision actually swims with the strength of his arousal.

“Hermione—”

“I want to feel you.”

He falls forward, pushing her back onto the desk with something worryingly like a growl. The edge hits just above her shoulders, and her hair drapes off of the back.

“You want me to fuck you raw?”

She moans, her legs drawing up. “Yes.”

He presses his fingers back over her cunt. The cotton of her knickers is soaked, clinging to her lips.

“You want my come inside you?”

“Yes. God—”

Draco reaches up and yanks down the zipper on the front of her dress, opening the whole thing down the middle.

Hermione’s chest heaves.

“Fucking hell, Hermione.” He pulls her sensible skin-tone knickers to the side and rubs his thumb over the whole wet mess of her. Her back arches up off the desk.

“You want to risk it?”

Her eyelashes flutter, but she pants. “It’ll be fine.”

Draco shakes his head, stroking a rough hand over himself and squeezing a shiny bead of precome to the tip of his cock.

“Look,” he says, sounding frantic.

She does, tucking her chin to her chest as he presses his cock to her clit. Her knees quiver where they’re spread around his hips.

When he draws back, a glistening strand connects them. “You’re sure?” His voice is cracked. Manic.

“Yes, yes—”

This is so stupid.

It is *so* fucking hot.

He drags the head of his cock through her folds, groaning at the slick warmth of it. His jaw drops as he watches her spread around him, the way her chest hitches when he presses forward.

“Say you want to risk it.”

Her cunt clenches though he’s barely inside her. “It’ll be fine—”

He lets himself fuck into her in a shallow thrust. He’s still stroking the base of his cock, and he can feel the surge down his length as another stream of precome spills out.

“Tell me you know the risk, Hermione.”

She bites her lip, and he wants to tell her it’s already too late. It’s already inside her.

“I want to risk it.”

An inhuman noise leaves him as he leans forward and grips the edge of the desk above her head. She’s so wet that he slides in to the hilt in one sharp thrust. He can’t blame her though, he’s harder than he’s ever been in his life.

“Fuuck,” he moans as Hermione cries out.

Her hands fly to his back, nails digging in.

Draco’s face goes slack at the perfect grip of her cunt. *Feeling* her—every ridge and bump—

“God, you feel so *fucking* good like this.” His words come out sounding slurred.

“Yeah,” she pants as he sinks into her again. “Yeah, so good.”

He kisses her, a desperate, filthy thing, and when he bottoms out in the back of her cunt, the head of his cock pressed to her cervix, Hermione clenches around him with a whine. Even her tongue in his mouth can’t stop the words from coming out.

“Are you gonna come on my cock with no protection?”

She moans, her walls fluttering already. His head shakes, forehead against her temple. “I can’t believe you. You’re *smarter* than this, Hermione.”

Her face pinches on a cry, and he’d swear she gets even wetter. “It’s—fine,” she whimpers. And then, “You can pull out.”

If Draco was anywhere other than halfway out of his mind, he might laugh. He certainly walked himself right into that. As it is, he just continues driving into her, gasping out a desperate, “Yeah, yeah, I’ll pull out.”

It’s the obvious solution. He really should have thought of it himself.

He grinds his hips deeper, and Hermione nearly screams. Her legs wrap at his back as she cries, “Oh, god. Like that.”

The desk screeches against the floor as it shifts forward a few inches.

“Fuck, Draco—” He can feel her tightening. Her voice veers toward a sob. “It’s so good. *Oh*, I’m gonna come so hard.”

That’s all the warning he gets. The first waves of her orgasm explode around him, and Draco’s jaw clenches so tight he thinks it’ll be sore for days.

Moans pour from the arched line of her throat as she clenches down on him again and again. Draco pounds into her, keeping the same pace even as he feels himself harden even further with his own impending release.

Heat scorches through him at the way she looks, sounds, *feels* falling apart beneath him. He draws it out as long as he can for her, but eventually—

“I’m gonna come,” he gasps out. The pleasure rushes up, fast and unyielding. “Oh, fuck. I’m gonna come.”

He rears up off of her, reaching down quickly to pull out.

Hermione’s ankles lock behind him.

He jerks his hips back, but she’s gripping him too tight, he can’t get his hand between them.

“Shit. Fuck.”

He can’t—

“*Hermione*—”

He can’t stop.

His hand slaps uselessly back onto the desk as it slams into him. He starts to come, staring down at her and noting—distantly—that she looks just as shocked as he feels.

“I’m coming,” he says stupidly. God, it feels so good. “I’m coming inside you.”

He can’t help the way his hips still rock forward, fucking her through it.

Hermione’s eyes roll back, her nails digging into his biceps, and unless he’s very much mistaken, she comes again.

Draco watches with his jaw hanging open.

Her cunt pulses around him, impossibly slick with his spend, and his cock throbs in an attempt to continue filling her.

Black spots form at the edge of his vision, and he worries that his balls may have sent some of his life force out as well.

He blinks several times, finally stilling inside her. Hermione’s wide-eyed face comes back into focus.

They gasp out, “I’m sorry,” at the same time.

“I tried—” Draco starts.

“—don’t know what came over me,” Hermione finishes.

His head drops to hang between his shoulders with relief.

“I’m so sorry, Draco, I—”

“Hermione.” He gives a tired laugh. “I just came so hard it probably triggered a 100-meter tsunami off the coast, so—please—do not let your final act before the entire country gets wiped off the map be *apologising* for not letting me pull out.”

It seems this statement is ridiculous enough to shock Hermione out of her guilt. She puts both hands over her face and laughs.

Draco smiles, even as the renewed clenching around his sensitised dick makes him groan.

“A tsunami, eh?”

“Most likely,” Draco says. “Do you think we’ll both fit on this desk when the flood waters come?”

Hermione grins up at him. “I’m afraid you’re on your own.”

“Damn,” he mutters. “Tell my mother I’m sorry, won’t you?”

“Please don’t talk about your mother while you’re still inside me.”

“Good shout.”

Draco leans back, standing to his full height and wrapping his hands under Hermione’s thighs to keep her pulled tight to him. There’s a little squeak from beneath her as she slides forward on the desk.

He’s still mostly hard, and he can’t resist pulsing his hips into her, just a little.

“Fuck,” he says, looking down at where they’re joined. “That was...” He can’t think of anything to describe it.

Hermione bites her lip, blushing.

Draco pulls out of her slowly, already hot with arousal at the knowledge of what he’ll see. He grips the base of his cock, squeezing as the tip slips free. A pearly bead of his come gathers at her entrance. Draco presses his thumb to her clit, and she flinches with a little gasp.

The bead becomes a drip.

Draco groans again, swiping his finger over it.

“Dangerous,” he says, arching a brow at her.

The flush on her cheeks has spread down to her chest. “It will be fine.”

“So you said.”

He rubs his thumb back up, circling the slickness over her clit. She lets out a reedy whine, her legs trembling.

“Want another one?” he asks her.

“No.” She doesn’t sound entirely sure, but he relents.

He watches another drop leak out, and then pulls her knickers back over, covering her.

The dark stain of wetness seeps through at once, and Hermione moans as he gives the soaked fabric a satisfied little pat.

“I like this dress.”

She laughs again, dropping her hands onto her exposed front. “Very convenient,” she agrees. Her palms slide up to cup her breasts almost absently.

Draco didn’t even take off her bra, but he can still see the marks he left in the days before. They’ve purpled nicely in the intervening time.

“I like the way you look right now.”

Hermione’s eyes focus back on him, and he lets his gaze rake over her. His come leaking into her knickers; bruises from his mouth on her chest; her hair wild and her face flushed from taking his cock. He slides his hands up over her as he leans forward, cupping his palm at her jaw.

“You look like you’re mine.”

Hermione’s eyes flare with heat, her lips parting. She turns her face just enough to open her mouth around his thumb. It’s still slick with his come, and she sucks it eagerly clean.

Draco’s spent cock twitches.

“Good,” she says, pressing a kiss to the pad of his finger. “Because I feel like yours, too.”

## Chapter End Notes

Sooo, yeah 😊 There’s that! 😅 For those who are not familiar with breeding kink, the risk of pregnancy (real or roleplayed) is def part of the excitement. I’m counting pretty much everything Draco says after she tells him not to put on the condom as dirty talk, but it doubles nicely as some enthusiastic consent too, which we love. Ironic though, given what Hermione does 😂

Obligatory PSA: The rhythm method of birth control (Hermione letting Draco skip the condom because she \*estimates\* that she has already ovulated this month) is only ~75% effective at preventing pregnancy, and that is \*if you have a regular cycle.\* Safety would have gone up a little if she’d let him pull out, but 😬 whoops!!

Also, for anyone wondering if I will ever write a muggle au without making them talk about magic and/or alternate universes? The answer is no. No, I will not :)

Up next: Hermione in no way panics about what just happened 😊

Thank you so much for reading! I'd love to know what you thought <3

You can also find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

# Six

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all once again for so many fun comments on the last chapter!! 😊 For those who mentioned my PSA--it doesn't happen too often, but I have had several people over the years mention that they learned something from one of my fics that they really probably should have learned in sex ed 😅 So while I do not endorse anything on AO3 as a valid replacement, I'll do my part when I can 😊 Given the state of things (esp in the US), it can't hurt 😊

A small note: There are no angst tags on this story because to me that implies conflict between the main pairing, but there will be some heavier moments that they share together. This chapter includes one of them. Please take care if you're sensitive to discussion around illness and grief.

This is ultimately a story about second chances, and about how the right kind of love can help to heal even what you thought you'd already accepted. (And also my own personal propaganda that falling in love recklessly fast can be just as exciting as a slow burn!!) I know I'm not alone in feeling that the days have been especially dark lately, so I hope this helps bring you some light. Enjoy ❤️

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

Hermione gets back on birth control.

Dr. Pomfrey's fingers clack over the keyboard as she pulls up Hermione's chart.

"Not due for your next pap smear for another year," she says under her breath, clicking through to the next page. "Were there any side effects or other concerns you had about the pill when you were on it before?"

"No," Hermione says, shaking her head.

"What have you been doing for birth control in the meantime?"

"Erm." The paper on the exam table crinkles as she shifts. Her fingers rub self-consciously over the bare spot on her ring finger. "There wasn't really—" She clears her throat. "Just condoms. As needed."

Dr. Pomfrey nods, though the incessant clacking makes Hermione wonder what she could possibly be typing.

"Okay, well, we'll do a pregnancy test today—just as a precaution—but assuming it comes back negative, I'll get this sent over to the chemist. If it comes back positive—" She gives

Hermione a significant look, softened with what is probably supposed to be a pleasant smile. “Then you’ll be hearing from me.”

“Right,” Hermione croaks. Except that it *will not* come back positive.

“So, you’ll start this new pack on the first day of your next period, which—” The mouse wheel rolls as she scrolls back up, “—should be soon.”

“Yes.” Extremely soon, Hermione thinks. *Imminent*, even.

“After that, take it every day at the same time.” Dr. Pomfrey waves a hand. “You know the drill.”

“Yes,” Hermione repeats.

“Okay, then.” She gives her knees a little pat before standing from her rolling stool. “I’ll give you this—” She hands Hermione a labelled specimen cup. “And feel free to call if you have any questions or concerns.”

“Okay, thank you.” Hermione’s throat feels like sandpaper.

“Have a nice rest of your day, Hermione.”

She swallows, and Dr. Pomfrey is already mostly out the door when she manages, “You too.”

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A nurse directs her to the nearest lavatory when she steps out of the exam room.

“Just leave it in there when you’ve finished, dear.”

Hermione nods, closing the door behind herself with slightly trembling hands.

She sets the cup on the little stainless steel shelf over the sink and gives herself a good, long look in the mirror.

“What are you doing?” she murmurs.

Now that the (very thick) fog of arousal from (insanely hot) sex has lifted, Hermione finds herself a bit concerned about her recent decision-making skills. Looking at them in the—well, if not the harsh light of day, then the harsh light of medical grade fluorescents—they’re rather unflattering.

She pulls out her phone and types a quick question into Google.

As she suspected, even if by some cosmic tragedy she actually *was* ovulating when they had sex the other night, two days isn’t long enough for it to show up on a urine test.

Hermione glances back at the mirror. It doesn’t make her any less likely to actually be pregnant, but at least Dr. Pomfrey won’t know how reckless she’d been. Worse comes to

worst, she can find a new doctor.

She looks at the specimen cup and tries very hard to make herself reach for it.

Her stomach churns.

She presses a hand to it, shaking her head. Too soon for morning sickness, too.

Plus, it's 3 o'clock.

Hermione goes back to her phone. She knows she isn't pregnant. And more than that, she *believes* it. Which means that the real source of her anxiety is the reason she made this appointment in the first place: to get back on birth control so she can keep having sex with Draco. Full-contact, highly tactile sex in which he finishes inside her and looks as though the experience is something akin to the birth of a universe.

She wants to keep seeing him.

Utterly *terrifying*.

She calls Pansy.

"Hello?" Pansy's voice sounds incredulous.

"Hey."

"Oh, I thought this was gonna be a butt dial. I don't know how you're the only person in the 21st century who still manages to do that."

"Can we skip the jokes about how I'm ancient? I think I'm having a third-life crisis."

This statement—coming from Hermione "I'll ask for help when I'm dead" Granger—snaps Pansy straight to attention.

"What? What's wrong? Where are you? I thought you were next door?"

"I had to step out."

"What's going on?"

Hermione swallows. "Erm, do you remember the flirty blonde guy from like a week ago?"

Pansy gasps. "The sexy infant!?"

Hermione puts her forehead into her hand. "Can you not—"

"You went for it?! Oh, my god, I'm so proud of you! How was it???"

Hermione lets out a huff of a laugh. "Let me put it this way: I'm about to take a pregnancy test."

Pansy splutters, and then the distinct sound of breaking glass comes through the line. Hermione claps her palm over her mouth.

“Okay,” Pansy says. “You are not allowed to take that out of my paycheck.”

“I would never.”

“You think you might be pregnant??”

“No,” says Hermione. “It’s a formality; I’m at the gyno. Though—” She can’t help smirking a little. “Not for lack of trying on his part.”

“Oh, my god,” Pansy says, potentially bouncing a little. “This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and it didn’t even happen to me.”

“I’ve seen him three times in the last five days.”

“O-Oh.” Pansy’s voice cracks with surprise. “Well, that’s—yeah! I mean, good enough for a repeat performance? We love that.”

Hermione’s hand is sweating where she’s gripping the phone. “I think I really like him.”

“Ah. Okay. Crisis territory, got it. Look, Hermione, just relax. This is totally manageable. Expected, even. It’s been a long time since you’ve had any good dick, and your body was starved. Now that it’s had a taste again, it’s desperate to keep the good thing. It’s just chemical. It’s not him.”

“I think it might be him.”

“Right, okay. But as soon as you go out with someone else, and get the good-dick chemicals from another source—”

Hermione’s head is shaking. “I don’t want to go out with someone else.”

“Hermione—”

“I think he really likes me, too.”

She hears Pansy take in a measured inhale. “Okay, and, of course, he would be an idiot not to, but... Babe, there is a chance that he is an idiot.”

Hermione’s reflection frowns, but maybe she needs to hear this.

When she doesn’t respond, Pansy continues. “You know, because he’s—”

“Twenty-three,” Hermione finishes.

“Yes, and—”

“Extremely hot.”

“Right, that,” says Pansy. “Both things that can lead to idiocy.”

“But, Pansy, the things he’s said to me—”

“Okay, sure. But let us remember that what a man says in bed is not applicable to non-bed situations. ‘I love you’ during sex means ‘I love fucking you.’”

“I’m not talking about during sex,” Hermione argues. Though, that could be a separate conversation all on its own. She blushes a bit. “He took me to dinner. He insisted on it. And he talked very candidly about what he’s looking for. Something serious. Long-term. A *wife*.<sup>1</sup>”

There’s another crash of breaking glass. “Okay,” says Pansy. “That one is on me because, clearly, this is a hands-free conversation. For a second, I thought you said ‘wife.’”

Hermione’s lips purse.

“Did I lose you, or just my mind?”

“He said wife,” Hermione confirms.

“O-Okay. Well—that—erm. Wh—?” Pansy exhales without forming any additional letters.

“Exactly. Hence the crisis.”

“But Hermione—my darling—does that mean—? Are you saying that you could actually see yourself with this guy?”

Hermione bites down on the answer she really wants to give. “I’m happy, Pansy. I want to keep seeing him.”

“Well, shit.” Pansy laughs. “I’m gonna have some great material for my maid of honour speech.”

Hermione flushes, touching her fingertips to her warm cheek. “Do you think it’s wrong—I mean, if I’m not sure about that yet—”

“Hermione Granger,” Pansy says gravely. “If you told me you wanted to marry him after a week, I’d have you committed and then pay an Etsy witch to check for love spells.”

Hermione breathes a relieved laugh. “Okay.”

“If you’re having fun and you’re happy, then just give it some time. It would only be wrong if you knew for certain that you *couldn’t* see yourself with him. But—given the present conversation, and everything I know about you (which is everything), I’m assuming that is not the case.”

“No,” Hermione says. A cloud of butterflies buffets the backs of her ribs. “It is not.”

“Amazing,” says Pansy. “Crisis averted. What would you do without—oh, my god...”

“What?”

“Hold on.” The speaker goes muffled as Pansy talks to someone else at the bar.

Hermione waits, and when Pansy comes back on the line, Hermione can practically hear her smile.

“You know what, forget everything I said. If you don’t marry this idiot immediately, I might beat you to it.”

A thrill of excitement zips through Hermione’s chest. “What are you talking about?”

Pansy sighs. “You’ll see.”

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When Hermione returns to the pub, she finds Pansy leaned against the bar next to another stunning floral arrangement. Hermione grins, stepping forward to run her finger over the velvet petal of an apricot garden rose. The entire bouquet is a riot of colour, impossibly varied, and it puts her in mind of the most glorious wildflower meadow. Stems protrude at all angles and lengths, and green tendrils curl between them. It’s rambunctious—with all of the carefree abundance she loves about summer.

She can’t believe him; the last one he sent is only a few days old, still fresh and beautiful.

Pansy hands over the card. “Please tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

Hermione feels her eyes go wide. What could he possibly have written? She plucks the card out of its little envelope.

*Hermione,*

*Thought your desk could use one as well. (It's been through a lot lately.)  
Can't wait to see you tonight.*

*Draco xx*

Hermione snorts, her cheeks heating.

“In your office?” Pansy says. “Really?”

“I don’t know what you could possibly mean.”

“Uh huh,” Pansy says, smirking. “Good for you, Granger. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Yes, it has been quite an illuminating week.”

“I’m all ears,” says Pansy.

“I’m well aware,” says Hermione. She tucks the card back into the blooms and picks up the crystal vase.

“You neglected to mention during your *crisis* that you already had another date set.”

“I did, didn’t I?” says Hermione as she passes her.

The edges of Pansy’s bob swing as she shakes her head. “Where is he taking you?”

Hermione turns, walking backward for a few steps. “I guess I’ll find out.”

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Draco takes her to his favourite restaurant this time.

A breeze plays across Hermione’s hair as they wait in line, and she fluffs some of it back over her shoulder with her hand.

“Am I meant to take from this that you’re no longer trying to impress me, or am I meant to be impressed that Lord Draco Malfoy—of astonishing means—is truly a man of the people?”

Draco looks down at her, unruffled. “The only thing impressive here is the falafel.”

She smiles, and when a strand of hair blows in front of her face. Draco reaches up to brush it back.

“Besides,” he says. “It’s much too beautiful a night to be indoors.”

This is true. The setting sun is glowing orange on the horizon, and it is the absolute perfect temperature for enjoying a leisurely meal under an open sky.

Draco told her it would be casual, but she hadn’t expected this. He orders for them when it’s their turn at the stall, and despite herself, Hermione is still a little impressed.

They receive their wraps in a brown paper bag, and Hermione carries the drinks as Draco leads her across the street to a stone bench in the neighbouring park.

“It certainly smells good,” Hermione says, unwrapping the foil.

“Just wait.”

She takes a bite and feels her brow furrow in disbelief. “Oh, my god,” she says with her mouth full.

Draco grins. “I told you.”

“This is so good.”

“I know it is.”

"I'm—" Hermione takes another bite. It's crispy and fluffy and the *flavours*—“Oh, my god,” she moans. “It's *so* good.”

Draco laughs around his own mouthful. “When I first found this place, I came every day for two weeks straight. Eventually, I had to do a kind of intervention so I wouldn't end up getting sick of it.” He chuckles. “It's been a couple years now and I still *always* want it.”

Hermione licks a drip of tahini from her thumb. She can see why.

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In addition to the best falafel she's ever had, Hermione is treated to the story of Draco's life.

It's one of those languid, sprawling sort of dates in which they drift from place to place and find that, at the conclusion of their activities at each one, they still aren't ready to be done.

At dinner, she hears about growing up in Wiltshire, his tutors, and the Manor. Then, it's boarding school and summers abroad over a pint. She asks about his time at university when they stop for a scoop of gelato, but they're back at Draco's flat for a nightcap by the time Hermione works up her nerve to ask about Astoria.

They're on the sofa, and Draco has her feet in his lap. (It was rather a lot of walking.)

Hermione holds her glass of brandy in both hands and says, “What was she like?”

Draco smiles softly, tracing his thumb over the arch of her foot. “She was like we all were as children: exactly what we'd been trained to be. She was pretty and polite and quiet.”

Hermione leans her head against the cushion, watching him.

“We were six when our parents signed the betrothal contract,” Draco tells her. “And they presented Astoria to me like a gift. She had ruffles on her dress and a ribbon in her hair, and I remember thinking it was so strange—I was never allowed to play with dolls, but then they'd given me a life-size one all my own.”

Draco grimaces, his head shaking. “It sounds awful when I say it like that, but they literally told me, ‘she's yours.’ Mine to take care of.”

He looks at Hermione then. “It probably fucked me up a bit, to be honest.”

“That is a lot to put on a child,” she says.

Something loosens in his expression, and he takes a sip of his drink. “We were fifteen when she first got sick, and I—took it hard.”

Hermione's heart hurts.

“It wasn't that I felt it was my fault,” Draco explains. “I just felt so helpless. I was supposed to be the one to protect her. But I couldn't protect her from her own blood.”

Hermione gives a pained nod, but he's looking down into his glass. "We were supposed to marry at eighteen, and I still would have done it, of course, but—she barely made it that long anyway."

"Draco—"

He glances up, and at the expression on her face, shifts forward slightly. He sets his drink on the table and grips Hermione's bent knee instead. He leans toward her, his face intent like it's incredibly important for her to understand what he says next.

"The saddest part was that she never had the chance to be anything other than what they made her. When we were younger, she always wanted to play the games that I liked, or to talk about the things that interested me. I was embarrassingly old by the time I realised that we weren't actually a perfect match; Astoria was just trying to be the perfect capital 'L' Lady. And even once it became clear that that wasn't going to matter anymore, that her treatment wasn't going to work, she still didn't—"

He shakes his head, drawing in a long breath and slowing his words again. "I wondered for years whether she ever would have trusted me enough to be herself if she'd lived. I knew she hadn't chosen me, but it still gutted me to think that she didn't believe I could learn to love whoever she truly was. Or that she couldn't learn to love me."

Hermione looks at Draco and thinks that it would be impossible for someone to know him and not love him.

"I was closer to her than anyone except her sister," he says quietly. "But even at the end... she never really let me in." His mouth twists into a sadly wry smile. "Of course, who could blame her? Dying is not a very ladylike thing to do."

Hermione puts her hand over his where it's still resting on her knee. "I cannot begin to imagine what it was like for her, Draco, but I have to think that being loved by you—having the promise of a future with you—and then losing that on top of everything else, must have been... so unbelievably painful. Maybe, she felt distant to you because she simply could not bear to be closer."

Draco's eyes flick back and forth between hers in a desperate search as he digests her words. His brow furrows, and Hermione can tell immediately that this is a scenario he has not considered before. He looks away, swallowing heavily and blinking several times. When he meets her eyes again, his own are glassy.

"And now I'm going to let you in on a secret that we women usually like to play close to the vest," Hermione says. She leans forward conspiratorially. "Pretending to like something, or know about something, or *care* about something that the boy you like cares about—that is what a teenage girl does when she has a crush."

Draco blinks again. "Really?"

"God, yes," Hermione groans. "The sheer amount of statistics, and trivia, and strategy that I learned about the game of cricket—" She shudders dramatically, and Draco snorts a laugh.

She pretends not to notice when he wipes the side of his hand under his eye.

“When I was thirteen,” she goes on. “Ron complimented another girl at school on the band t-shirt she was wearing, and I spent the next month learning five albums worth of music that I was absolutely *bored to tears* listening to.”

“You did not,” Draco laughs.

“It haunts me to this day. The books I could have read instead.”

“What was the band?”

Hermione shakes her head, waving her palms back and forth for emphasis. “No, no, I can’t say. It’s too mortifying.” A thought strikes her. “Oh, my god. Looking back, I’d bet anything that girl was wearing the shirt for the exact same reason. It’s the only explanation.”

Draco’s shoulders shake as he chuckles. Hermione’s chest aches watching him.

He quiets after a moment, and she tilts her head toward him. “I have no doubt that Astoria was a perfect lady, but I also think she was aware you hadn’t chosen her either, and I bet she very much wanted you to like her.”

Draco’s head shakes slowly again, but he’s smiling a little this time. It’s a brittle, fragile-looking expression, but it’s relieved.

“Thank you,” he says.

Hermione nods, and he wraps his hand around her ankle.

“I’ve never talked about her like this—with someone who didn’t know her. I hope it—I mean, it doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course not,” Hermione says honestly. “She’s a part of you. I feel very privileged to know about her. And to know your heart and how you think about things.”

He nods, though he doesn’t look entirely convinced.

Hermione laughs lightly. “Draco, I can hardly hold having a first love against you. Ron was my best friend for the majority of my life. He was all of my firsts. And on our wedding day, I would have said that it was impossible for me to ever love anyone more—”

“Okay,” Draco says, holding up a hand. His eyes drop closed. “That’s—I get it.”

She chuckles, and he shakes his head again. “Congratulations. You take the prize for emotional maturity.”

“Well.” She raises her brows.

“Excellent point,” Draco says. “Bring him up again in ten years, and we’ll see how I do then.”

Hermione freezes, and though she was already sitting still, Draco still senses the sudden tension.

“Er, I didn’t—” He breaks off, wiping his hand down over his face. He breathes a short laugh and then leans forward to grab his drink again. He finishes it in one gulp. “Fuck it.” The glass clinks resolutely against the coffee table when he sets it down. “That’s exactly what I meant.”

Hermione’s heart kicks into a conspicuous rhythm against her ribs.

“You look positively terrified at the thought,” he says. His tone is teasing, though she gets the impression it’s equally at his expense as hers.

“I’m not,” she says. “*That* is what’s terrifying.”

Draco’s lips press together, but he can’t suppress his smile.

“It’s just going to take some getting used to the idea that you could possibly mean it.”

He nods, his eyes intent on her. “I did say ‘mine.’”

Hermione nods, too. “And I said ‘yours.’”

It’s quite a thrill—how preposterous it is.

“I’ll take it,” he says. “Even if it’s just for now.”

It won’t be. Not for her. But she appreciates the offer of an out all the same.

Draco gives her ankle a little tug where he’s still holding it. “Come here, please.”

She goes.

Hermione clammers to her knees, setting her own empty glass beside his and turning to curl into his lap.

Draco’s arms wrap around her. He hugs her tight to his chest.

“Have I mentioned that you’re brilliant?” The words brush his lips over her hair.

She traces the open collar of his shirt. “You have, and thank you, but it doesn’t take brilliance to see what is plain.”

His cheek presses against her head when he smiles. “And yet, you couldn’t see that I was genuinely interested.”

“That’s different,” Hermione says with a sniff.

Draco’s head tilts back in exaggerated thought. “What’s that saying about books and covers?”

“Hm.” Hermione shrugs. “Nothing is coming to mind.”

He laughs, taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger and forcing her to meet his eyes.  
“How long will it take for you to admit that I was right?”

Hermione smirks. “Ask me again in ten years.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and cheering on these (admittedly insane) babies!! I love how much y'all love them 😊

(Also, will gaslight anyone who mentions the chapter count.)

Up next: Good golden retrievers get treats!! ☺

You can also find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

# Seven

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the wonderful comments on the last chapter 😊

To make up for the heartstring tugging, have another super long fluffy and smutty one! I'm actually considering adding dead dove: do not eat to this so people will know to take the fluff tags seriously 💀 Not really 😅 but I am also not taking responsibility for any dental expenses incurred due to tooth rotting, so consume at your own risk!! (And enjoy 🍑)

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

For someone who adheres so assiduously to a routine, Draco doesn't seem to mind at all the way Hermione disrupts it.

He takes a long lunch on Wednesday, stopping by the cafe for a coffee and a kiss.

Padma—freshly back from holiday and, thusly, out of the loop—fumbles the portafilter at the sight of their greeting.

They break apart at the loud clang of metal on metal, and Padma murmurs a quick, "Pardon."

Hermione runs a furtive finger over her lower lip and clears her throat. "Erm, Padma, this is Draco." She gestures between them. "Draco, this is Padma. She's our best latte artist."

Padma glances up with a politely pleased smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," he says.

Padma detours her gaze to Hermione for a second before turning to grab the milk. She arches a dark brow.

Hermione clears her throat again.

"Have you eaten?" Draco asks beside her.

"I have," she says.

He nods, satisfied, and Hermione's head tilts. "Have you?"

"Yes," he says.

"Just checking up on me?" she asks under the scream of steam from behind the counter.

“Yes,” he says again.

Hermione feels herself blush. In truth, if she hasn’t popped over to the cafe for something by 2 o’clock, one of the girls will leave a sandwich on her desk.

“Well, I could still use a break,” she says, smiling up at him. “Do you fancy a walk? If you don’t have to get back right away, that is.”

Draco takes his phone out of his pocket and turns it off. “Love to.”

“Here you go,” Padma says, sliding a to-go cup onto the counter.

“Thanks, Padma,” Draco says as he takes it.

“Have a nice walk.”

Hermione throws a pointed look over her shoulder at her tone, but Padma just gives a little wave with her fingers.

“I’ll only be a few minutes,” Hermione assures her.

Padma adopts an indulgent expression. “Take your time.”

The sky is overcast when they step out of the shop, but they seem safe from rain for the moment at least.

They stroll, passing the other storefronts lining the street, and Hermione makes yet another attempt at determining what it is that Draco actually does at his job.

“I answer emails, and I attend meetings,” he says blandly.

“Yes, but what do you discuss in the meetings?”

“Usually things that could have been in an email.”

Hermione latches onto this. “Okay, but then what is in the emails?”

“Mostly scheduling for future meetings.”

“Oh, my god.”

He grins, slipping his hand into hers and lacing their fingers together.

Hermione snatches her hand away with a gasp, and Draco’s face falls.

“Sorry,” he says quickly, “I didn’t—”

He breaks off when he notices the way she has her palm pressed to her abdomen. “Hermione? Are you okay?”

Her eyes pinch shut as another squeeze of pain rolls through her. “Yes, I’m fine. It’s just a cramp.”

“Oh,” he says, looking relieved. “When did you eat? You should stretch it.”

He takes her elbow and begins lifting it over her head to stretch her side.

“Draco.” She laughs. “It’s not a muscle cramp. It’s a menstrual cramp.”

“Oh.” He lowers her arm, looking sheepish. Then, “*Oh.*”

“Oh, indeed.”

Two streaks of colour appear high on his cheeks. “Well, erm, that’s good. I mean, not good that you’re in pain, of course, but—”

“Yes,” she says gently, cutting off his rambling. “It’s good.”

He clears his throat. Neither of them had addressed what they’d done that night.

Draco likely assumed that Hermione would bring it up if it became relevant, but now that she’s back on the pill, it won’t.

She takes his hand, starting forward again. “I told you it would be fine,” she says lightly.

“So you did.”

She looks up at him beside her. “Were you worried?”

He squeezes her hand in his. “Not even a little bit.”

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Hermione neglects to mention that she’s back on birth control.

It isn’t a conscious omission; it just hadn’t come up during the obvious risk-free days of her period. Draco was more than happy to fuck her luxuriantly against the wall of his shower without protection, and he was always already off in the morning by the time her phone chirped out a reminder to take her pill.

She honestly completely forgets that he doesn’t know. At least, until the first time she sees him after her cycle is finished.

Her phone rings on the nightstand, and Hermione sets her book aside with a smile. She’s been tied up for the last couple days, only able to text, and she hadn’t expected to talk to him tonight either.

“Hello, there.”

“Hi,” Draco says with what sounds like a huge sigh of relief. “You answered.”

“Of course, I did,” she says. “You called.”

He gives a pleased hum and asks how she is. Hermione finds herself examining the timbre of his voice. It’s low, almost like he just woke up, but there’s also an unusual kind of smoothness to it.

“I’m very well, thank you,” she says. “How are you?”

“Good.” The word drags. “I just—hm—wanted to hear your voice.”

“Draco.” She smiles against the phone. “Are you drunk?”

“Ah,” he says. “Now, that—is an interesting question.”

She snickers. “Let’s give it an interesting answer then, shall we?”

“Mm, right-o. Have you ever had a green tea shot?”

“Oh, dear.”

“They’re really—very good.”

Her head shakes. “I thought you were at a client dinner?”

“Was,” he says. “Client likes to—” He hiccups. “—Drink.”

She suspects the infamous Blaise may also be involved. “Wow. I admire your commitment to customer satisfaction.”

Draco gives a pompous little laugh. “Always striving to deliver creative solutions to ensure all stakeholders are aligned on mission vision—” Another hiccup. “Anyway, what are you wearing?”

Hermione bites her lip, looking down at her ratty t-shirt and worn out sleep pants.

“I’m naked.”

Draco makes a strangled sound. “Really?”

“Mhmm.”

“Why are you naked?” he breathes.

Hermione spools some silk into her tone. “Because I was missing you.”

“Oh, god,” he groans. “Hermione—”

“Where are you?” she asks before continuing.

“Waiting for the tube.”

She snorts. “Well, seeing as I’d hate for you to be arrested, perhaps phone sex is not the wisest choice while you are compromised and in public.”

He gives a slight whine, and she pictures his head tipping back against a wall. “Can I call you back when I get home?”

“Mm, no.”

“No?” he says, devastated.

“You’d better come here instead.”

He gasps. “Yeah?”

“Yes, I think you may require adult supervision.”

There is a muffled crash which Hermione strongly suspects was Draco running into a metal bin as he rushes to a different line. “I think you might be right,” he says. “Though, for the record, I am—*hiccup*—also an adult.”

“Nearly,” she agrees.

“Okay.” His voice goes breathless as he runs. “I’ll be there in ten minutes. Don’t get dressed.”

“I won’t,” she says solemnly.

“Okay, I lo—” He breaks off, coughing a little. “I-I’ll see you soon.”

Hermione turns her face into the pillow with a silent scream. “See you soon.”

He ends the call, and Hermione stands to get dressed. She swaps her sleep clothes for a pair of jeans and one of Draco’s hooded sweatshirts. She pulls on a pair of trainers and grabs her keys from the dish by the front door.

It’s a short walk to the station, plenty of time for her to beat Draco’s train. She skips down the steps and finds a place out of the way to wait.

After a few minutes of scrolling on her phone, she glances up at the rumble of the approaching train. A smile breaks over her face as the doors open and the crowd files out.

Draco is easy to spot, what with the height, and the hair, and the suit. Gosh, he really is just so very attractive. She indulges a bit in watching without him knowing she’s there. She wouldn’t know he was drunk if she didn’t know him. His expression is simply intent, set on his destination. Which is, of course, her.

She calls out to him.

He startles a bit at the unexpected sound of his name, and when he finds her, his reaction time is adorably impaired.

He blinks through a long moment of confusion, and then—it's like the sun rises on his face. He breaks into a wide grin, his eyes alight with happy surprise.

He shoulders his way through the crowd and scoops her soundly up into his arms.

She's ready for it, clinging tightly to his neck as her legs wrap at his waist. Despite his slightly bloodshot eyes, and the fact that she can smell the Jameson on him, he's entirely steady on his feet.

"Hermione," he sighs, crushing her to his chest.

"Hello, darling."

"God, I love seeing you."

Hermione presses her smile into the warmth of his neck. She'd been too curious to pass up the opportunity to experience a drunk Draco, but it turns out... he's remarkably like the sober version. She leans back to look at him. "I love seeing you, too."

His hands slide onto her bum, and his smile falters as he seemingly assesses the denim beneath his fingers. "You got dressed."

"I know," she says, frowning, abashed. There is some eyelash work as well. "But I just *couldn't* wait for you to get there."

Draco is exceedingly mollified by this. He kisses her.

Hermione hums into it, gripping his jaw. He kisses her like it's been a year. He kisses her like it's been a hundred.

His hands tighten on her arse, pulling her against the hard plane of his stomach, and Hermione wishes desperately that she could snap her fingers and teleport them straight to her bedroom. As it is, she's forced to confront the fact that if he keeps it up, she'll be the one at risk of public indecency.

Draco pulls back, though his eyes stay closed. "Will you get naked again at home?"

She nips at his lip. "I swear."

He kisses her again, hard but brief. Hermione smacks her lips when he's done.

"You taste like peach schnapps."

Draco nods as though this is unsurprising. "I think I had all of it."

Hermione gives a suitable gasp. "Surely not all of it."

He nods even more seriously, his head rocking so that his chin nearly touches his chest. "The whole—peach."

Hermione laughs, her heart full to bursting with fondness. “You are too cute for words. Did you know that?”

“Funny,” he says, kissing the tip of her nose. “I was gonna say the same thing about you.”

“You still could,” she points out.

Draco grins, looking down at her chest. “You look very cute in my clothes.”

“Ooh, sorry,” she says with a wince. “This is definitely mine now.”

He shrugs, making her bounce a little. “What’s mine is yours.”

Hermione’s heart gives an erratic thump.

“Shall we?” says Draco, oblivious.

“Let’s.”

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“Tea, I think,” says Hermione when they step through the door. She drops her keys back into the dish, toeing off her shoes.

Draco does the same, and his dress socks appear slightly slippery on the hardwood. He shifts his feet back and forth a few times like he’s on skates and then seeks refuge on the rug. “Tea sounds lovely.”

Hermione puts a hand on her hip. “Would you like it now or after your shower?”

If he was sober, he would know that she is poking fun at his need to bathe a minimum of twice a day, but in his current state, his head just wiggles a little as he debates. “After, I think —hey!”

He catches her laughing, and then literally catches her around the waist when she dashes to the kitchen. She squeals as he tickles her ribs.

“I’ll have you know that I have City all over me. And The Underground. And at least one full shot—that Blaise spilled, not me—”

“I know,” she gasps between laughs. “I can smell it.”

“I should think that you’d want me to be clean—”

“I assure you, no one appreciates your commitment to hygiene more.”

“And yet,” he wails. “You insist on teasing me so cruelly.”

She manages to twist in his grip, getting her back to the counter. “Only because you take it so well.”

Draco becomes distracted from getting the last word with kissing her again.

She sighs against his lips, tilting her head instinctively to give him better access. His hands slide under the hem of the hoodie, up onto the bare skin of her back.

“Draco—” she murmurs.

“*Hermione...*”

His fingers strum the band of her bra, and she stops him with a hand on his chest. “Go cleanse,” she says.

He goes, only the lure of a hot shower more attractive than her, but he drags his teeth over his lower lip as he does, so she’ll know he’s conflicted. His head pokes back around the corner after a second. “You swore,” he reminds her.

“I remember,” she assures him.

He nods, appeased, and the water turns on a moment later.

Hermione waits until it turns off to start the kettle. She takes down two teacups from the cupboard, and then pauses with them in midair at the sound of the hair dryer.

She scoffs a laugh. He *would*.

Draco appears after another minute, clad only in his boxer briefs. His hair is styled flawlessly in its usual tousled swoop.

“Don’t panic,” he says. “But your hair dryer has mutated a terrifying fanged mouth.”

“It’s called a diffuser,” she informs him. “It’s for curls.”

“Oh,” he says seriously, reaching up to tug gently on one of her ringlets. “We must keep it then.”

She smiles and lifts a hand to brush through the front of his hair. “Looks like you managed just fine.”

“I borrowed some mousse.”

Hermione shakes her head. Oh, to be able to achieve the perfect hairstyle with two minutes and one random product.

“What’s mine is yours,” she tells him.

Draco beams.

She’s tempted to think the shower has sobered him a bit, but then he sways, leaning his hip into the counter as though he meant to do it.

The kettle clicks off behind her, and Draco reaches for it.

“Here,” she says, pressing a tall glass of water into his hand instead. “This first.”

He takes it and touches her cheek with his other hand like it’s the kindest thing anyone has ever done for him.

He finishes the water in three giant gulps.

“Good boy,” she says playfully.

The glass slips from his hand where he was attempting to set it in the sink, and Draco flushes at the clatter.

Hermione’s brows raise.

“I’ll take this, shall I?” He disappears into the sitting room with the tea tray before she can stop him.

She takes a beat to process—and let him compose himself—before following with the kettle.

When she does, Draco is stood on the opposite side of the room, inspecting her bookshelf and, she imagines, trying very hard to look casual. She expects that if he was wearing anything other than his underwear, he’d have his hands tucked in his pockets. He’s got them folded behind his back like an old man instead.

She pours the hot water over their tea bags and waits.

Draco makes his way slowly across the room, cataloguing each item on display as if he’s in a museum. He’s seen all of it before, of course, but maybe the alcohol is making him sentimental.

He picks up a framed photograph from the mantle, and Hermione sets the sugar bowl down to join him.

“Crookshanks,” Draco says, smiling down at the grumpy-faced cat.

“The one and only.”

“Did you name the shop after him?” Draco asks.

Hermione smiles at the thought. “No, he was named after the shop. Crook was my grandparents’ last name.”

“Oh.”

“Plus, he was very bandy-legged.”

Draco frowns. “It’s not his fault his legs were crooked.”

“It was said with love, darling. I promise.”

He only gives a small murmur of acknowledgment. His thumb swipes a fine layer of dust off the glass.

“Was he cute as a kitten?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Hermione says. “He just showed up in the shop one day when I was thirteen. He looked pretty much exactly like he does there.”

Draco looks up, horrified. “What?”

“What?” Hermione says.

“But—where was he when he was a kitten?”

“I don’t know. I expect he was, you know...”

From the look on his face, Draco does know. And the thought of a kitten on the street seems to be more than he can bear. His mouth tugs down into a ridiculous frown and his eyes shine with tears.

“But who took care of him?” he whispers.

“He must have taken care of himself.”

“Oh, no.” Draco’s eyes squeeze shut, and he gives a single dry sob.

“Draco.” Hermione wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug. His forehead thunks heavily onto her shoulder.

“He was very tough,” she says, rubbing a hand over Draco’s back.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I’m sure he loved being an alley cat.”

“And he had a happy life after? In the shop?”

“Very happy,” she confirms. “He was spoiled rotten. Spent all day napping in the sun and getting belly rubs.”

Draco picks his head back up to look at the photo again. “That’s good.”

Hermione thinks for a moment before adding, “He always hated Ron.”

Draco’s face breaks into a grin. “What a good cat.”

“He was the best.”

“When did he die?”

Hermione counts back. “Five years ago now. A little bit after the divorce.”

Draco nods. “He had to make sure you went through with it.”

Her lips part on a soft gasp. She looks down at the photo, and her own eyes burn.

“I suppose he did,” she says.

Draco glances up at the wobble in her voice. He sets the frame back in its place and slides both hands under her hair to cup her head. He presses his lips to her forehead.

“Tea,” he says.

Hermione smiles, nodding against his chin.

Draco joins her on the sofa this time, sitting down so close that Hermione has to hide her smile in her teacup.

He makes a small noise of delight when he sees his own cup already prepared. He takes a sip and turns a radiant smile on her.

“You know how I take it.”

This is also not new, but Hermione is unutterably charmed that he’s a sappy drunk.

“Is it good?” she asks.

“It’s perfect.” He puts his hand over hers, playing idly with her fingers. “You’re perfect.”

Hermione blushes in spite of herself. She sets her cup back in its saucer. “You’re sweet.”

He lifts her palm to his mouth and kisses it. “I mean it,” he murmurs.

“I know you do.”

When he lets go, she traces her fingertips along his jaw, down the slope of his neck. His eyes drop closed when she touches his chest.

“I missed you,” he says.

Hermione draws in a slow breath. “I missed you, too.” It’s freeing to admit it.

“Yeah?” He puts his hand on her thigh, and it’s hot even through the denim.

“Yes.”

Draco takes a too-big sip of tea, wincing as it burns going down. Hermione bites back her smile. He sets the cup back on the tray and turns toward her.

He brings his other hand to her leg and slides them both up, his thumbs along the inner seams of her jeans. “How much?”

“Very much.”

He licks his lips, pressing one hand between her legs as the other smooths up over her stomach. The heat of his touch sends warmth seeping through her, and she feels her eyelashes flutter.

“You thought of me?” he asks. His voice is so low it rasps in his throat.

She nods. It wasn’t true at the moment she’d answered the phone, but another time, it very well could have been.

His palm slides to the center of her chest, his fingers spanning the width of it.

“What did you think of?”

“Your hands.”

She moans as he squeezes her breast through her bra. He pulls the edge of the cup down with his thumb, grazing across her nipple. She slides lower on the sofa as her hips shift, and he leans forward, putting more weight into his touch.

“And your mouth.”

He kisses her. Hermione sighs at the slow slide of his tongue against hers. It is so impossibly good.

“Did you touch yourself?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says and reaches down to where his other hand is rubbing between her legs. She puts her hand over his, and he presses his fingers up into the give of her covered entrance.

Her head falls back on a moan.

“Fuck, Hermione.” He pants into her neck. “I want you—”

She nods.

“—All the time,” he finishes.

“I know,” she says because she does. “I—” She kisses him again. “Me too.”

He groans, shifting on top of her, and Hermione grows dissatisfied with their position on the sofa.

“Come on,” she whispers, pushing at his shoulders.

He sits back, and she lets out an involuntary noise at the sight of his erection straining against the fabric of his briefs.

“God,” she says and scrambles to her feet with a tug on his hand.

Draco follows, pressing himself tight to her front as he kisses her. She drops her hand between them and squeezes hard around his length. Draco’s step falters, and he bumps the

coffee table with his shin. Tea sloshes over the rim of Hermione's cup.

"Fuck," he groans against her cheek. His hands rake up under the hoodie, pulling it roughly over her head. She bites back into his kiss, revelling in the thought of him even more uninhibited than usual.

He has her bra off by the time they reach her room, and she falls gratefully back onto the bed. He falls on top of her.

Hermione's head presses back against the mattress as his tongue curls around her nipple. Her hips tilt against his stomach, and she's wet already.

The smell of her soap on him is like a drug.

He fills his palm with her breast, pressing the swell of it against her chest. "God, you're so beautiful," he says. "Every time I see you, I can't believe it."

Hermione moans. "I look even better with your mouth on me."

"Fuck." He closes his lips over a fading bruise from the last time and sucks hard.

Hermione cries out, digging her fingers into his hair. She's wearing him everywhere: her breasts, her stomach, her arse, her thighs. It sends a jolt of arousal through her every time she looks in the mirror.

He follows the marks like a roadmap, moving down her body. He teases the skin below her belly button as he undoes her jeans, and her legs are already shaking as she helps him slide them off.

Her knickers follow immediately after, and Draco lowers himself between her legs.

"Can I?" he asks, kissing the crease of her thigh.

"Yeah." She shifts back onto the pillows to give him room. "Yes."

He smiles before pressing his tongue onto her clit.

She moans at the warmth and the wet and the perfect pressure.

"Tell me what you like."

Hermione's eyes pop open. "You know what I like," she says with a little laugh. He can get her off like this in record time.

"I want you to tell me," he says with his lips against her. His breaths are heavy, the words laboured. "Want it to be good." He licks a stripe over her entrance and groans. His shoulders press into her thighs as he shifts against the bed. "Want to—get it right."

Realisation scorches through her, and Hermione drops a hand into his hair. "Fuck, okay, I—"

He sucks her clit between his lips.

“*Shit*. You’re so good at this, I—I always come so fast. I like it when you go slow and tease me.”

Draco hums against her, pressing a kiss to her pubic bone. He traces his tongue along her outer lips, just barely grazing the wetness at her center.

“Yes,” Hermione says, her hips twitching. “Like that.”

Draco’s fingers dig into her thighs as he continues the carefully teasing strokes. She sinks into it, letting her heel drag against his back as she writhes. The pitch of her moans climbs as she tells him how good it is.

On one pass, he gets greedy, rolling his tongue firmly against her clit and closing his mouth over her without warning. Hermione gasps, clutching at his head as her stomach clenches.

He murmurs what might be an apology as she shudders. “No, fuck, I like that too,” she says. “When it feels like you’re losing control.”

He groans, redirecting his teasing efforts into agonisingly slow strokes over the length of her slit. Hermione moans—half pleasure, half frustration, complete indulgence.

“*God*, that feels so good.”

Every touch tightens the coil of tension curling within her.

He presses his tongue to her clit again, and she whines, “Fuck, right there.”

It should feel ridiculous—as if he might not know where her clit is—but his entire head moves under her hands as he circles her, and he’s so fucking into it that she couldn’t care less about what’s coming out of her mouth.

“Use your lips,” she tells him.

He closes them over her, sucking, and her back arches up off the mattress.

“Yes, yes.” Her hips roll against his face. “Oh, it’s so good. Draco, you’re *so good*.”

A noise vibrates deep in his chest, and his fingers dig so hard into the flesh of her arse that she knows she’ll have bruises from that, too. Hermione realises suddenly that she’s experiencing a secondhand lack of inhibition. A contact high from his buzz.

She threads her fingers into his hair, petting him, putting every ounce of approval she can into the touch.

His tongue drags over her again, and she gasps, “Just like that, baby.”

Draco lets out a sharp moan against her.

The pleasure swells, ratcheting higher, until she tips into that hysterical edge of euphoria where she could laugh or cry. “Fuck, that’s perfect. I—” She groans, her head pressing back into the pillow. “It’s so good, I—I want to come.”

He murmurs his assent, pulling her clit back between his lips. “Oh, *fuck*—” Hermione clings to the build, savouring it for as long as she can, but—

“*Ohh*, you’re gonna make me come.”

And with one more pulsing pull, he does.

The tension snaps, sending pleasure surging through her in wave after powerful wave. She shudders under his mouth, light spiking behind her closed lids. She assumes she’s also making some kind of unholy noise, but the only thing she can hear is a high-pitched ringing in her ears.

Draco coaxes her through the aftershocks, his tongue dipping into her entrance to taste them. He sucks the wetness slowly from her lips and then presses a kiss to her clit that makes her flinch.

She manages to get her eyes open by the time he lifts his head.

His face is flushed—his hair mussed and his lips swollen pink. He licks them, but all he says is, “Another one.”

All Hermione can say is, “Okay.”

He gets to his knees and presses the middle two fingers of his left hand inside her. Her knees draw up on instinct, her stomach clenching with a whine.

“Fuuck,” he says at the feel of her.

Draco wipes his other hand over his mouth and then plants it next to her head, leaning over her for leverage. The quick press of his fingers against her front wall makes her cunt pulse around him again, but it’s the obscene noise of it that has her eyes pinching shut.

“God,” he groans, lowering his forehead to hers.

Hermione’s knees press together, but it doesn’t help. The pleasure is inexorable, already burning hot through her again.

She wraps her arms around Draco’s neck, tilting her chin up to kiss him, but he stays just out of reach.

“Draco.” She tries to pull him to her, but he’s too strong.

“Yeah?” he says, grinning down at her as she whimpers.

“Kiss me.”

He traces his tongue over her lower lip. “Come for me again and I will.”

His palm presses over her clit, and her moan comes out tight through a smile.

“Right there?” he teases.

“Yeah.” Hermione’s nails dig into his shoulder, but she can’t resist moving one hand down to feel the flex of his arm as he works his fingers inside her.

“Fuck,” she whines, her feet tangling in the blankets.

“Harder?”

“Yeah,” she pants, nodding as she braces herself with a grip on his bicep. Then, “Oh, god.”

Her jaw drops as the increased pressure on her g-spot makes her clench powerfully. A fresh rush of wetness seeps around his fingers.

“*There we go,*” he says like the exertion is nothing.

“I’m gonna come,” she whines.

“Yeah,” he says against her open mouth. “Let me feel you.”

Her hand goes to his wrist, squeezing as it builds sharply. “Oh, fuck, it’s so good. Draco—”

He kisses her, moaning against her lips like he couldn’t wait another second. Hermione comes with his tongue in her mouth.

He works her through it, kneading his hand against her cunt until she melts into a puddle against the mattress.

“Fuck,” she breathes, legs trembling slightly.

“God, you’re so fucking hot.”

Hermione’s eyes slip closed as she grins. “No, you.”

Draco huffs a laugh above her and presses another long kiss to her lips. The mattress shifts a little beneath her as he stands from the bed, and she opens her eyes again to watch him drop his boxers.

She sighs as he kneels back between her spread legs, working a slow hand over himself.

He touches her gently with the fingers of his other hand, spreading her lips to look at her. He leans forward and groans a little as he rubs the head of his cock along her seam.

“God, I wish I could fuck you like this.”

For a second, Hermione thinks he’s talking about their position. But... there’s nothing special about it.

The tip of his cock grazes her clit, and she gives a hum of pleasure. Draco glances up at the noise and then shakes his head as though to clear it. He leans back over her, to kiss her she thinks.

He pulls open the nightstand drawer instead.

When he sits back on his heels with a condom in his hand, Hermione remembers that he doesn't know.

"I'm—uh—still a little drunk," he says with a lopsided smile. "So, sorry if it takes longer than usual."

Hermione breathes a laugh. Somehow, she doesn't think that will be a problem.

She reaches up and snatches the foil packet out of his grip, flicking it carelessly across the room.

Draco freezes, his empty hands still held up in front of him. He looks at her, and then turns his head to look at the condom on the floor. He glances back with a questioning expression, as though wondering if he's meant to fetch it.

"Let's skip it," Hermione says.

He blinks. "Sorry?"

"You heard me."

"But—" His brow furrows for a long moment, and then he shakes his head as though he can't do the math in his current state. Or maybe, because he's not entirely sure what math he's supposed to be doing. Either way, even drunk, he seems to know that if it was safe before, it definitely can't be now. "Hermione—"

She sits up, gripping his cock in her fist.

Draco chokes back a grunt.

"I don't care about the risk," she says. "Your cock feels too good like this."

His eyelashes flutter as she strokes him hard. "Fuck—"

"I need you," she adds, letting some desperation slip in. "All of you." She swipes her thumb over the bead of precome forming at his tip.

Draco's hips twitch, and he looks at her pleadingly, like he can't believe *he* has to be the rational one in this situation.

"Hermione, I—" He groans low in his chest on her next stroke. "Fuck." His brow creases like he's in pain. "You—you shouldn't trust me to pull out right now."

Hermione feels a devilish grin spread over her face. "Okay," she says. "Lay down."

“Huh?”

She pushes him by the shoulder until he topples over. He rolls onto his back, and she turns to straddle his hips.

“Oh, god.” He groans at the press of her wet cunt onto his cock.

“Do you trust *me*?” she asks.

He swallows heavily. “Yeah. Yes.”

Hermione leans down and kisses him with a smile. “Good answer.”

He doesn’t need to know exactly what it is he’s trusting her about.

She raises up onto her knees and takes him in hand again. Draco’s fingers dig into her thighs as she drags the head of his cock through her folds.

“Are you sure?” he asks, his voice choked. She can see the tendons straining in his neck.

Hermione sinks down onto him in answer.

A high-pitched sound punches out of her chest as he hits deeper than she was expecting. “Shit,” she breathes, her palm slapping down onto his chest. He must have been holding some back when he’s been on top.

“Fuck, Hermione—” Draco’s mouth drops open as she rocks forward into him.

She moans at the fullness, the stretch, leaving five little marks of her own below his collarbone.

“God—” Her voice cuts out as she works herself slowly back again, sitting fully into the pressure against her cervix. She whines, reaching for Draco’s hand. He groans as she presses his palm against her stomach.

“So fucking deep,” she says, rolling her hips.

“Fuck,” he pants. “You feel—so good.”

By happy coincidence, having his hand pressed to her stomach puts his thumb right above her clit, and when she rocks forward again, the friction against it makes her clench around him. “Ah—”

He’s already caught on, circling her eagerly. “Yeah,” she gasps. “Like that.” Hermione whimpers at another build of pleasure so strong it’s almost painful.

Draco gives an answering groan as she tightens, and she’s nearly overcome by the sight of him below her. Her fingers dig into the swell of his pecs, feeling the heat of his skin under her palms. It’s slightly sticky with the threat of sweat, and some animal part of her delights in it.

She puts two fingers into his open mouth.

Draco moans around them, closing his eyes for a moment as he sucks hard. The texture of his tongue—the heat and the wet—pushes Hermione right to the edge.

His hips tilt beneath her, hitting something just right, and she gasps. She shifts her hand to grip his jaw, smearing spit over his chin.

“Fuck, baby, you’re gonna make me come on your cock.”

Draco’s brows lift as he stares up at her. “Yeah?” His pupils have nearly eclipsed all the grey. “It’s good?”

“So good,” she says as it tingles over her skin. “You’re so good for me.”

He whines, rocking up into her again. “Please, Hermione. Please let me see you.”

She cries out as it floods through her, and her hand falls to the pillow beside his head as her spine curls. The contractions are even more intense in this position, and her knees squeeze against his sides with each one.

Draco’s hands go to her arse, helping her to ride him through it. A lazy grin slips onto her face at the string of curses he’s muttering.

Then, his grip tightens suddenly, and she feels his thighs tense beneath her.

“Shit,” he breathes. “I—fuck—I’m gonna come.”

Hermione lifts her hips just enough to sink onto him again, and again. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Hermione—” he grits out. He plants his feet flat on the mattress, and for a second, she thinks he might buck her off. He easily could. He could throw her into the next room if he wanted to.

But he doesn’t want to, and Hermione knows it.

He clutches at her, his eyes begging her to do what he can’t. “I can’t stop.”

“Don’t stop.” She doesn’t slow her bouncing. “You better come so hard for me. I wanna feel you here.” She presses her hand back over the bulge of him inside her, and Draco’s eyes roll back.

His grip turns crushing on her hips, the muscles of his chest bunching beneath her palms. He fucks up into her with everything he has.

“Yeah,” she gasps at the first pulse. “That’s it.”

He lets out an anguished groan, and Hermione’s mouth drops open as the feel of him throbbing inside her triggers a belated wave of aftershocks. She can feel him soaking her, slicking the way for his strokes. “Yeah, fill me up,” she babbles.

Draco grinds his hips deeper with a grunt, making her flinch, and she feels another distinct pulse against her cervix. “*Ohh, good boy.*”

“Fuck,” he says with something like a sob. His head falls back onto the pillow, his heart pounding under her hands.

Hermione smirks down at his dazed expression, at the red streaks on his cheeks, the blotchy flush on his neck. She’s almost tempted to take mercy on him, but... not really.

She lifts herself on her knees until his cock slips free. It slaps wetly against his stomach, and he groans. Then, she takes it in her hand again and he *really* groans.

“*Ah, fuck—*” His eyes widen as his come begins to drip out of her and onto his shaft. It’s quite an impressive amount. She gathers it with her fist, stroking him lightly and making his legs shake. Then she fits him back at her entrance and lowers herself down again. He can get soft inside her.

Draco chokes at the sensation, his head pressing back. Hermione leans forward and licks the arched line of his throat.

His hand comes down heavily on the back of her head, and he tilts his chin down at once to find her mouth. He kisses her hard, his lips pulling and desperate.

Hermione hums into it, beyond pleased. She actually wonders if any other human being has ever felt this good. Her afterglow must be visible from space.

Draco pulls back from the kiss, and his expression is so sincere that Hermione decides to come clean lest any post-nut clarity should threaten his high.

“I’m on birth control.”

Draco blinks—once, and then twice more. His brow creases.

“I started back on the pill a week ago,” she explains.

She watches the realisation slide down over his face in slow motion. His forehead smooths out, and then his eyes drop closed, and finally, a wide smile curves his mouth.

A laugh puffs out of him.

“Jesus Christ.”

Hermione giggles, and he wraps his arms over her shoulders, squashing her against his chest.

“You—” He trails off, unable to come up with anything else.

“I meant to mention it,” she says.

“Yeah,” he laughs. “Seems like something you would.”

She nips at his chin. “But since I hadn’t...”

Draco’s head shakes back and forth against the pillow. “Bloody hell. Thanks for that.”

Hermione grins, arching a brow. “My pleasure.”

He lets out another tired chuckle. “I really thought...”

“That I would take advantage of you in your vulnerable state?” Hermione says, pretending at outrage. She tsks. “I think we should have *at least* one sober conversation about it before I have your children.”

Draco swallows, his eyes intent on hers. “Yeah. We should.”

It takes Hermione a second to realise that all of the laughter is gone from his face.

Her lips part, and then her mouth goes dry. The race of his heart has slowed, but now Hermione can feel her own flinging itself against her ribs. She shifts, hoping he won’t notice it too, but the movement causes his softening cock to slip free from her.

They both make small sounds at the change, and Hermione uses the excuse of the wet mess between them to extricate herself from under the weight of his gaze.

“Here,” she says, stretching for a tissue on the nightstand. “I’ll get you something better.”

“Thanks,” Draco says as he takes it.

Hermione avoids his eye as she climbs off the bed, but she can’t avoid it for long. By the time she’s squeezing the warm water out of a washcloth, Draco is there in the doorway, and she meets his gaze in the mirror.

“Here you go,” she says, her voice unnaturally high. “I’m just gonna—” She gestures weirdly over her shoulder before disappearing into the stall that separates the toilet from the rest of the room. The pocket door rattles as she slides it closed.

Hermione sits and puts her face in her hands. She listens to Draco clean up at the sink, and tries very hard not to panic.

She looks at the slice of light under the door and gives up any hope of sneaking out to grab her phone. She tries to imagine what Pansy would say instead.

*What a man says in bed is not applicable to non-bed situations.*

Technically, they were still in the bed when he said it. *And* he’s drunk. Surely that’s a double whammy of *disregard*.

Hermione nods. It’s just dirty talk, and she let herself get carried away. It’s understandable. If the men on the apps were sure about anything, it was that they didn’t want (any more) kids, and so, she’s just been caught off guard by Draco’s enthusiastic reaction to the risk of it. It doesn’t mean—

Hermione freezes with her hand outstretched for the loo roll.

On their first date, during the monologue in which he was, apparently, not supposed to mention marriage, he had definitely mentioned children as well.

She considers for a second whether he might have been serious just now. In the next second, she decides that she actually can't handle that consideration at the moment. And, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine, she doesn't have to.

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When she finally emerges, Draco is brushing his teeth with the toothbrush he keeps at her place now. He smirks at her in the mirror like he is very well aware of the mental gauntlet she was running on the other side of the door.

She holds the eye contact this time, even as she feels herself blush.

She washes her hands, pulling them out of the way for him to spit into the sink.

He stows the brush in the ceramic cup next to hers, and turns to use the toilet himself. Hermione retrieves her own toothbrush and is concentrating on applying the appropriate amount of fluoride toothpaste to it when Draco's palm cracks suddenly over one of her arsecheeks.

She yelps, jolting forward and glancing up to see his falsely contrite face looming over her shoulder.

"Sorry," he says, rubbing a warm hand over the stinging patch. "If you could see it from this angle you'd understand."

Hermione watches her reflection flush.

"In fact..." he muses. He takes her by the shoulders and turns her around to face him.

He groans, and Hermione twists to look in spite of herself.

The pink outline of his hand is accented by two purple lovebites. The other cheek sports a shockingly well-defined bite mark. The sight sends a shiver of warmth through Hermione's core.

Draco slides both palms down to grip her arse. He squeezes her cheeks, and then makes them jiggle a bit with his hands.

"Christ," he mutters. He shakes his head, giving her a look in the mirror like she has no one to blame but herself.

Hermione can hardly stand the pleased prickle over her skin, and she turns back to face the mirror. It doesn't really help. Her front is marked just as thoroughly, including a new one rather high up on her left breast. She's going to have to be mindful with her tops.

She's struck with a sudden, vivid image of her neckline shifting and Draco getting a glimpse of it while they're out in public. It does something extremely shameful to her insides.

Maybe he's thinking along similar lines because his hands skim up her front, cupping her breasts, and he presses his index finger over the mark. Hermione bites down on her lip to suppress a whine.

Unfortunately, that doesn't go unnoticed either. When she raises her gaze from Draco's hands to his eyes, he's smirking again.

She flushes as one big palm slides up to cover the front of her throat. He tips her head back against his shoulder and kisses her.

It's sinful—that lips and tongue can feel that good. There is absolutely some kind of dark magic involved.

Plus, he tastes like her spearmint toothpaste.

Hermione's eyes are slow to open when he releases her, and she actually leans forward to brace herself on the counter when he steps back.

He's hard again, and as he turns—and Hermione is confronted with *his* backside—she finds herself thinking along the very dangerous lines of *fuck modern medicine*.

Draco steps in front of the toilet, looks down at it, and then looks at his very erect cock. He slants an unamused glance at Hermione, shaking his head again with a sigh.

She presses a palm over her mouth to stifle her laugh, and he rolls his eyes as he pulls the door closed.

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When Draco gets into the bed beside her, Hermione hands him two ibuprofen and another glass of water.

He takes the pills from her hand with a softness around his eyes that makes her heart squeeze.

"You're so good to me," he says and swallows them back.

"No, you," she says lightly.

He sets the glass on his bedside table and turns back to face her. Her lamp is the only light left on in the flat, and there's something extraordinary about what the warmth of it does to the shade of Draco's eyes. Hermione thinks that she could spend an eternity looking into them.

With the intensity of her focus, she immediately notices the slight furrow of his brow when it forms.

"What is it?" she asks.

Draco smiles, because of course he does, but his gaze does drop momentarily to where he's been running his fingers gently over and between her own.

His chest swells on an inhale before he looks up again.

She's not sure she'll ever get used to the way he looks at her.

"I—really want to tell you something," he says. "But I don't want you to think it's because I'm drunk."

Hermione becomes suddenly and palpably aware of the blood in her veins. Mainly, the way it thumps in her throat and roars in her ears.

She swallows against another rising tide of panic, and finds that it actually tastes much more like anticipation.

Or exhilaration.

Or maybe even the effervescence of incandescent happiness.

Hermione smiles, too.

"That actually works out nicely," she says. "Because I really want to tell you something, too."

His eyes widen. "You do?" he breathes.

Hermione's chin trembles, but she turns it into a nod. "Yes, I do."

Draco smiles wide—wider than she knew his face was even capable of. He cups her cheek in his hand. His eyes shine in the lamplight. "Will you tell me another time, then?"

Hermione continues nodding. "I will. Frequently, in fact. Potentially, ad nauseam."

Draco covers her mouth with his own before any more nonsense can issue from it.  
"Impossible."

## Chapter End Notes

Fic number two in my extremely rare pair series: Draco Malfoy/a hair dryer 😊

Aaand one last hurrah for the condoms + breeding kink combo before putting it to bed.  
We had a good ride 🤩

I talked early on on live about how this Draco is sooo Provider by Sleep Token-coded. He wants to, can, and will Get It Right. If you caught that, come here and get your big ole smooch.

(Also, I can only gaslight so hard, so yes, the chapter count did increase again but 10 is the final number!!) (If you don't believe me, I don't blame you.)

Up next: Omg more fluff??!! Who could've seen that coming! If these two are gonna be in love then maybe it's time for Hermione to meet some of Draco's friends 😍

Thank you so much for reading! Hearing from y'all makes my week :))))

You can also find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

# Eight

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of the wonderful comments on the last chapter 😊 I probably should have mentioned this earlier, but it feels more relevant with the extended ensemble cast in this chapter anyway. I am playing fast and loose with the ages of everyone in this story. I envision Pansy about 5 years younger than Hermione with Daphne around the same. Draco, Theo, and Blaise are the same age, and everyone else is somewhere in between. And, Hogwarts houses are not any indication of prior relationships between the characters. I'm just sticking people in where I feel like it.

Also, this chapter is somehow 11.1k 😱 I have no idea how that happened. I couldn't even split it—it's all one day for Christ's sake. Anyway, I hope you enjoy alllllll of it 😊

Also also, this was already written before the change, but AGGRESSIVE BISEXUAL REP BECAUSE WE WILL NOT BE ERASED!!!

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

Hermione has a newfound appreciation for a 5AM alarm.

It's much like the relief of checking the clock and finding that you still have hours more to sleep, but with the added benefit of snuggles. Or murmured words of adoration. Or sometimes, like this morning, the hot press of Draco's mouth against her center.

Hermione's back arches, and she squeezes the disembodied hand protruding from under the covers to fondle her breast. She comes with a soft cry, the fingers of her other hand sifting gently through Draco's hair as he finishes kissing at her.

When she finally peels back the blankets, he gets to his knees with a grin, hovering over her bright as the moon in the blue light of the room.

"Good morning," he chirps.

Hermione, whose mouth has not yet been exercised so thoroughly, delivers her greeting with a slightly sticky tongue behind her smile. "Good morning, early bird."

Draco beams at this endearment and lowers his hips to press his erection against her front. "I may be the early bird, but you can still have the worm."

Hermione's face contorts with a grimace of revulsion. Her involuntary *yuck* is only slightly softened with a laugh.

Draco shakes his head, looking equally queasy at the unfortunate euphemism. “That was—horrible. Please forget I ever said it.”

Hermione closes her eyes, bringing a hand up and wiggling her fingers in front of her forehead. “Time travel,” she mutters.

Draco gives a pleased laugh, and she repeats her greeting.

He opts for a peck this time.

Hermione looks up at him, the very embodiment of bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. “Aren’t you hungover?”

Draco pauses, his head tilting in consideration as though he’d completely forgotten the state of himself the night before.

“No,” he says with a little shrug.

Hermione groans. If she were to get that drunk, she’d be dead to the world for a minimum of three days. And, potentially, just dead.

“So unfair,” she groused.

Draco leans down to bury his face in her neck. “It’s because you took *such* good care of me.”

“Oh, please.” Hermione rolls her eyes, even as her shoulder draws up against the tickle of his kisses. He refuses to relent until she squeals, her legs writhing beneath him.

When he pulls back, his eyes are shining. “Hey,” he says softly, brushing a curl back from her cheek. He gives her a significant look. “Can I tell you something?”

Hermione’s heart sings, but she shakes her head playfully. “Not while I have morning breath.”

Draco gives her an indulgent smile and kisses her forehead. “Later, then.”

“Later.”

“I have practise after work,” he reminds her.

She nods. “I have a meeting at 5, anyway.”

“I’ll see you after, then?”

She smiles. “It’s a date.”

“No, it’s not,” he says. “But I could plan one if you want?”

“No,” she says gently. She’d need to wash her hair for that. “I just want to see you.”

“All right, then.”

He kisses her on the cheek before getting out of the bed. Hermione arches a brow at the impressive bob of his cock.

“Did you want to do something about that?” she asks.

Draco wraps a hand around himself, squeezing as his eyes drag over her half-covered form.

“Nah,” he says. “A little pent-up energy is good for the gym. It’s leg day.”

“I see,” says Hermione, though she most certainly does not.

“Now, stop looking at it like that or it’ll never go away.”

“Oh, sorry.” Hermione rolls onto her front, helpfully averting her eyes. If the covers happen to slip below the curve of her arse when she arches her back a little, then it’s purely coincidental.

She smirks against the pillow at the *tsk* of Draco’s tongue.

The mattress dips as he kneels back between her legs.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” His hands squeeze her cheeks before sliding below her hips to pull her up onto her knees.

“I don’t know what you—*oh!*”

The air punches out of her lungs as he fills her fully on the first thrust.

“Fuck,” he groans, fingers wrapping at her waist.

Hermione moans as he pulls back and sinks in again. Her palms brace flat against the padded headboard. “What about your—workout?”

Draco gives a grunt. “This won’t take long.”

She turns liquid under a wave of heat as he works her back onto him, using the grip of her body to get himself off. Hermione puts her face in the pillow for the benefit of the neighbours.

When he’s finished, she sinks back down onto her stomach, legs trembling from another orgasm. Draco pulls the covers up over her and tucks them tenderly around her shoulders.

She hums when he presses a kiss to the side of her head, already sliding swiftly back into sleep. “M’sorry about your pent-up energy.”

He breathes a laugh against her ear. “No shortage of that around you, love.”

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It’s actually a fairly busy day in the shop, and Hermione is crouched in the cloud of dust she’s just blown off the top of a stunning early-edition Austen when her alarm sounds at 5. She

silences it at once.

Her head shakes as she stares down at the treasure in her hands. She checks the box it came in with, but there's no name or other identifying information. The next book in the stack is a paperback of *The Da Vinci Code*.

It never ceases to baffle her, how many people have gems like this sitting in an attic somewhere.

She takes it over to the workbench, switching on a lamp to better assess the condition. A thorough cleaning reveals immaculate leather and glittering gilt. There is some light spotting on the pages, but that would be nearly impossible to avoid at this age. Hermione turns each of them slowly, the white cotton of her gloves scratching gently along the edges.

She swallows against the lump tightening her throat as she closes the cover with an airy thump. She slips the book into an acid-free sleeve and sets it purposefully aside. Any longer with it in her hands and it will never make it out of them.

When she glances at her phone, it's nearly half-past, and she still hasn't heard the bell.

She checks the front of the store anyway before calling.

The shop partners with a local wildlife rescue, and Hermione straightens up their display of merchandise next to the counter as the line rings. They do bookmarks, stickers, and enamel pins. The owner has also recently introduced a line of truly awful furred hats, but it's for a good cause.

He was meant to be bringing the next batch today.

When the call connects, Hermione's ear is immediately assaulted by an almighty roar.

"Hagrid???"

There's a moment of rustling before a gruff voice answers. "Ah, 'lo, Hermione! Sorry, I'm —" There's a yowling screech, and Hagrid yelps in pain. "—late."

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, fine. I've just got a wildcat in. Got caught in a fence, poor thing."

"A wildcat?" she repeats, incredulous. The creature gives another throaty roar. "Sounds more like a tiger."

He gives a strained laugh. "Oh, no. She's just—*ah-yowch*—a plucky little thing."

Hermione is well used to Hagrid laughing off the injuries he sustains in his work. Every time she sees him he's sporting scratches, or stitches, or once, what she would have sworn was a burn.

"Well, if you've got your hands full, I could come by—"

“Ah, no, no, no!” he says quickly. “Don’t bother yourself. I’ll come—*gahh*—tomorrow.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a great new hat for you. Hedgehog. Made with real shed quills.”

Hermione’s lips press together. “Sounds... cosy.”

“I bet it does even better than the beaver one.”

“It’d be hard not to.”

“Okay, well I’d best be—*oof*—going, then.”

“Take care,” Hermione says through a wince.

“Ta.” The line cuts off on another terrifying shriek and Hermione spends a second looking down at her phone and wondering if it is at all possible that Hagrid’s gotten his hands on a pterodactyl.

She shrugs the thought away after another moment.

Her thumb moves automatically to bring up Draco’s contact, but then she remembers he’s at practise.

Checking the time—they’ll have just started.

Her nails drum against the back of her phone as she considers. She *could* use a walk. *And* some fresh air after the cramped storeroom. And Draco had seemed to *very much* enjoy being surprised by her the night before.

Hermione goes over to the stairs, the second one creaking loudly under her weight. She leans against the railing to bring the back of the loft into view.

“Luna,” she calls.

Luna turns from where she’s dusting the top shelf on a ladder. Her long skirt swishes at the movement, dusting the bottom one.

“I’m off for the day. You’re all right to close up?”

“Of course,” she says. “Have a splendid evening, Hermione.”

Hermione smiles. “You too.”

Luna stretches to reach the very back corner, a pointed foot extending out behind her like a ballerina, and Hermione’s hands tighten reflexively on the wood. “Please be careful up there.”

Luna turns a radiant smile on her. “I cherish your concern, Hermione, but please don’t worry. You’ve looked so much lighter lately without it.”

Hermione blinks, her lips parting. Even after years, Luna's little kernels of wisdom can still take her out at the knees.

"Thank you," she says quietly.

Luna hops down, sliding her hands down the ladder rails without touching a single rung and landing far softer than should be allowed from that height, even with her skirt puffing out in a parachute.

The casual display of grace does nothing to dispel Hermione's suspicions that the girl may actually be part fairy.

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By the time Hermione reaches the park where Draco's football team practises, a light layer of sweat is beading along her hairline. She pauses, taking the claw clip out of her hair and pinching it between her teeth as she flips her head over and re-piles her curls.

She crosses through the scattered shade of the trees, over to the clearing where a group of people are engaged in a vigorous bout of running back and forth.

They're vocal as they scrimmage, a good measure of laughter and jeers mingled in with what seem to be actual play-related shouts.

As always, Draco is easy to spot. He's dressed in perfectly generic exercise attire—white t-shirt, black shorts—but Hermione seems to be experiencing a classically conditioned response stemming from the first time she saw him such an ensemble. Or maybe, the sight of his speed and agility would be this titillating no matter what he was wearing.

She watches him zigzag down the pitch, passing the ball and receiving it back as he weaves through the defenders. The sun is still high in the sky at this hour, and Hermione lifts a palm to aid her sunglasses in shading her eyes.

Draco must catch the movement out of the corner of his eye because he glances in her direction. Hermione smiles, raising her hand a little further to wave.

He comes to a stop with the ball resting against the inside of his foot, and his face splits in a grin. His hand seems to be on its way to a wave as well when his feet get taken out from under him by a brutal slide tackle.

Hermione drops the paper bag in her hands to clap them over her mouth with a gasp.

Draco seems to fall in slow motion, his legs over his head, and by the time he hits the ground, Hermione is already bereft. She's already on the fourth stage of grief. The hit was so hard he's surely paralysed, his spine broken in three places.

But before she can even draw breath into her hollow lungs, Draco springs to his feet. He gives her a more sheepish smile this time, a new grass stain on his side, but he still waves before sprinting off again.

“Jesus Christ,” Hermione croaks.

She retrieves the bag with one hand, pressing the other to her chest.

There’s a skirmish at the other end of the field, and a tall girl with a long black ponytail streaks away with the ball. Draco parallels her down the pitch, taking her pass and dodging a defender by sending the ball between his legs. He passes it back across, and, at his shout, she sends it to a sandy-haired bloke coming up the other side. He kicks the ball back across to Draco, at least four feet in the air. Draco jumps, catching the pass in a perfect scissor kick. He ends up back on the ground, but even though the keeper lays out for his shot, the ball swishes soundly into the back corner of the net.

There is a general uproar at the score. High fives and back claps abound.

Draco makes a point to find the slide tackler as he jogs back down the pitch, sharing a few choice words and bumping into his chest in that silly way that boys do. The other man—a rather mean looking fellow (though Hermione is now biased) with short black hair—puffs back, apparently willing to dish out as much trash talk as he’s receiving.

Hermione is too far away to hear what is said, but Draco wears a cocky grin throughout the exchange, even when he receives a shove to the chest. Someone gives a wolf whistle, and Draco’s eyes lift over his opponent’s shoulder to find hers before he lines back up for the kick-off.

It’s all very arousing.

Thankfully, Hermione only has to endure another seven minutes.

When they finish, the team scatters leisurely, returning to the cluster of bags left at the edge of the field. Except for Draco. He makes a beeline over to where she’s watching.

Hermione pushes her sunglasses up onto her hair as he runs toward her, and he calls out a pleased, “Hey!” when he’s still ten feet away.

Her, “Hi,” in return gets half-swallowed by his kiss.

Hermione is bent backwards by his momentum, and even though he wraps an arm at her waist, she still clutches his shirt for purchase.

“Ah, sorry,” Draco says, pulling back quickly. “I’m sweaty.”

She licks her lips, swaying a bit on her feet. He smells like freshly mown grass. “It’s fine,” she sighs.

Draco grips the hem of his t-shirt and lifts it to scrub over his face. Hermione internally amends her earlier assessment. The unwarned public display of abs leaves her nowhere near fine. She definitely swoons a bit, and hopes he’ll blame it on the heat.

“There,” he says and kisses her again.

Maybe it actually is the heat. She feels almost drunk.

“What are you doing here?” Draco asks.

“My meeting was cancelled, so I thought I’d see if I could catch you playing.”

Draco grins. “I was so happy to look up and see you.”

Hermione can’t resist returning his smile despite what happened. “Sorry if I distracted you.”

He waves a hand in dismissal, rolling his eyes. “Flint will take any excuse to play dirty.”

“I thought he killed you.”

Draco laughs and reaches to take her hand. “Not today.”

He glances down when he finds her grip already occupied by something else.

“What’s this?” he asks.

“Oh, it’s for you,” she says, holding out the forgotten paper bag. Draco takes it and unfolds the top. His eyes go wide at the aroma. “No...”

Hermione bites her lip.

“You brought me falafel?”

“I thought you might be hungry after.”

Draco puts his face in the bag, inhaling deep and then moaning a touch indecently. “Fuck, Hermione, I could kiss you.”

“You could,” she agrees.

He does.

“Thank you,” he murmurs against her lips.

“You’re welcome.”

“How did I get so lucky?”

Hermione flushes. She’d be tempted to say that it’s just falafel, but—in addition to her firsthand knowledge that it is *not* just any old wrap—she knows it’s more than that.

For all of the regrets Hermione has about her marriage, she really had liked being a wife.

Knowing someone—what they like and how to please them, and getting to do it—is maybe what she’s missed most about having a partner.

Draco releases her, glancing back down into the bag. He goes very still for a moment.

She watches as he reaches in and carefully retrieves the single gerbera daisy she'd plucked from the planter box outside the shop.

"Is this for me, too?" he asks, almost shy.

"Of course," she says.

Draco, who has sent Hermione potentially every flower that's passed through London over the last few weeks, looks unaccountably touched by the gesture.

"Thank you," he says, admiring the white petals as he spins the stem gently between his fingers.

"You're welcome, darling."

Draco tucks the flower into the breast pocket of his t-shirt like a boutonniere before reaching for her hand again.

"You know," he says, pulling her in close. "I've been meaning to tell you something."

Hermione grins. "Me too."

His teeth press into his bottom lip for a second, and then he glances over his shoulder as though reassessing the moment.

"Come meet the team," he says instead.

"Oh—" A flash of alarm shoots through Hermione. She hadn't anticipated that, though she obviously should've. Now she worries that it will seem like she was attempting to rush him into introducing her to his friends by showing up here.

But, then, this is Draco; it would be a feat to rush him into anything. He drags her determinedly forward by the hand.

The team are still milling about, grabbing water and chatting. They all look to be about Draco's age, mid-twenties at most. Hermione touches a hand to her hair and considers putting her sunglasses back down over her eyes.

But she doesn't want to be rude.

"Lads," Draco says, getting their attention. He wraps a hand tightly around her shoulder. "I want you to meet my girlfriend, Hermione."

Hermione feels herself go pink, both at being addressed thus and at the comfortable, confident way Draco says it.

"Hello," she says, giving a little wave.

A chorus of greetings returns, but Draco points to each of the players individually.

“That’s Dean, Katie and Angelina, Seamus, Cho—”

Hermione shakes each of their hands in turn. Murmuring *hi* and *nice to meet you*.

“Flint—”

Her smile goes a little fixed.

Draco continues, unfazed. “This is Demelza, McLag—actually, you don’t need to know him.”

“Oi!” says the keeper, and the rest of the team chuckles at his expense. “You can call me Cormac,” he tells her.

For some reason, the words *no, thank you* appear in Hermione’s mind. She still shakes his meaty hand when he presents it, though she doesn’t care much for his leering grin.

She meets a Crabbe and Goyle next and her eyes widen at the sheer size of them. They both have incongruously gentle grips.

“And where’s—?”

Draco gets interrupted by two more players jogging up, and Hermione’s smile stretches automatically. Even without the process of elimination, she would know who they are.

“Did we miss the introductions?” Blaise asks. “Good thing I don’t need one.” He extends a hand to her. “I’m Draco’s best mate.”

Hermione takes it with great relish. “Oh! So you must be Theo!”

Blaise’s face, which might actually be comprised of the most aesthetically pleasing set of features on the planet, collapses in shock.

The real Theo barks out a laugh beside him. “Oh, she *is* brilliant,” he says to Draco.

Draco’s fingers squeeze against Hermione’s arm.

Blaise recovers swiftly, still holding her hand. “I understand the confusion,” he says gravely. “We don’t like for him to feel left out. His hair will start to come out in clumps. Like a cat.”

Hermione snorts as Theo shoulders Blaise out of the way, shaking the sweat-dampened curls out of his eyes. “Don’t listen to him,” Theo says. He clips the back of Blaise’s neatly buzzed head with a swipe. “He only wishes he had enough hair to form a respectable clump.”

“I have to let you have *something*,” Blaise argues.

Hermione’s shoulders shake beneath Draco’s grip, and she turns her head to gaze up at him. “Are they always like this?” she asks, though she already knows the answer to that, too.

Draco sighs. “Now you see why I’ve kept them away.”

"I'm glad you brought that up," Theo says, stepping closer to lower his voice. "Hermione." He puts his other hand on top of hers where he's holding it. "When you're ready to find someone serious, who's willing to settle down and commit, I just want you to keep in mind that I am nearly a year older, almost two centimeters taller, and far, *far* richer than Draco."

Hermione looks at him, assessing the glittering sincerity in his dark blue eyes, the sober set of his generous smile.

"You're a better liar, I'll grant you that."

Theo grins, his eyes flicking up to Draco's beside her. He winks before releasing her.

"But thank you for the consideration," she says, and glances back at Blaise. "It's very nice to meet both of you."

Technically, she served them the night she first met Draco, so she tacks on, "Properly."

"The pleasure is ours," says Blaise.

"Though you also pour a mean pint," says Theo.

"Hermione owns Crook's," Draco explains to the group at large.

"The pub?" asks Dean.

"It's also a bookshop," says Draco.

Seamus makes an Irish sound of epiphany. "Ach! Me mam was going on and on the other day about the books she got from some crooks. And how the crooks always have the best. And I said to her, 'Mam, why're you going to *criminals* to get yer wee books? Surely we can find ye some decent poetry on the up and up.'"

Hermione laughs. "Yes, despite the name, it's all very above board."

Seamus nods, impressed. "According to her, you've got the best selection of German poetry outside of Berlin."

Hermione smiles, her heart full. "My gran loved Rilke."

"Well, I'll be coming to you for a recommendation 'round Mother's Day."

"Please, do," Hermione says. "If I come across something special, I'll set it aside for you."

"Ach," says Seamus, putting a hand over his heart like she's wounded him. "Yer too kind." He shifts his gaze to Draco and points a warning finger. "Keep this one."

Hermione glances over, and Draco turns his head to smile down at her. "I plan to."

She feels herself blush again.

“Speaking of German poetry,” Blaise cuts in. “There’s a cheeky little Hefeweizen waiting with my name on it.”

“We were planning to go for a drink,” Draco tells her.

“Oh, right,” Hermione says, slipping out of his grip. “Well, then, I’ll just—” She jerks her thumb in the direction she’d come from.

Draco’s brow furrows. “No. Come.”

“Oh, no, I—”

There’s an outbreak of complaints at her hesitance. She hears a few *you should comes* and a least one *come on, Hermione*.

“I don’t want to intrude,” she says honestly.

“Now that would be a trick,” Theo says, sliding his arm across her shoulders and marching her forward. “We’re going to your bar.”

The acceptance glows warm in her chest, and she allows herself to be led.

Then, she wonders suddenly if they were planning to eat at the pub, as well. And maybe now Draco will feel awkward with his bag of falafel.

She glances back to give him an out. “If you want to save that—”

She breaks off when she sees that, somehow, he’s already inhaled half of it.

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They catch the pub in a lull between the after work folks and the nighttime crowd, and Hermione sees Daphne glance up at once as Blaise and Theo lead the group in.

“Oh, no,” she calls, coming out from behind the bar. “*Out.*” She points to the front door, a theatrical scowl on her face. “We have a strict no scoundrels policy—”

Her eyes go round when she spots Hermione.

“Oh,” she says in her normal tone, her hand dropping to her side. “Hermione, hi, I-I didn’t see you.”

“I was hiding behind all the scoundrels.”

Daphne flushes.

“Are you in the habit of turning away lots of clientele?” Hermione teases.

Daphne breathes a laugh, seemingly relieved that she isn’t about to be fired. “Only the most unsavoury sort.”

“McLaggen can wait outside, then,” Draco says.

“*Oi!*”

“If I vouch for them, will that be sufficient?” Hermione asks.

“I suppose I can make an exception,” Daphne says.

Blaise takes Daphne’s hands, bending at the waist in a dramatic bow over them. “You are a paragon of graciousness, my lady.”

Daphne rolls her eyes, but as soon as Blaise releases her, Theo takes her by the arms and drops her into a dramatic dip. “Truly, Lady, your benevolence is eclipsed only by your beauty.”

Daphne hits him upside the head.

Hermione smiles at the antics of the lifelong friends, especially at the way Blaise and Theo lean in to kiss either side of Daphne’s face once she’s propped back on her feet.

“Enough,” she says, pushing them away, but her smile betrays her.

Hermione glances at Draco for his reaction, but he’s already looking at her. She’s discovered that he wears the black hat when he hasn’t had a chance to style his hair, but he keeps it backwards so he can kiss her unencumbered.

He demonstrates this now. “You have a good place here,” he says with his lips at her temple.

“It’s better now,” she tells him.

The rest of the team calls from where they’ve taken over two tables, and Daphne follows as the four of them go to join them. Hermione slides in on the end next to Draco, with Theo and Blaise across from them.

“What are we drinking?” Daphne asks the other half of the group. She nods along with the orders, and Hermione half-rises out of her chair. “I’ll help you with them,” she says.

Daphne looks as though she’s slapped her. “Don’t be absurd.”

Hermione sits quickly again. “All right, well, whatever they want is on the house.”

This suggestion, too, is roundly shouted down. There comes a pitter patter of credit cards raining down onto the tables.

Draco puts his arm back around her shoulders and hugs her tight to his side. “Nice try,” he says against her ear.

There’s more than one signet ring of the type Draco sometimes wears in the group, and Hermione shakes her head, muttering, “Bloody aristocrats.”

When Daphne returns with the drinks, Pansy comes with her, carrying one of the trays.

“Don’t you look cosy,” she says as she sets a margarita in front of Hermione.

“Thank you,” Hermione says primly.

Pansy bestows a flash of teeth on Draco before spinning away to help another group coming in.

“You’re a dream, darling,” Theo says as Daphne hands him a pint of Guinness. He takes a sip, craning his neck to survey the bar. “Now, on to important matters. Who’s working tonight? And which of them is single?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be courting an Abbott?” Draco asks.

“Ah.” Theo gives a dramatic wince. “Alas, no. The search for the next Nott consort continues. It seems Lady Abbott failed to thoroughly interrogate her daughter’s preferences before arranging the date. Irreconcilable differences, you see.”

“Like what?” Draco asks.

“Well, top of the list was my having a dick.” Theo looks at Hermione and mouths, “*A big one.*”

Draco snorts beside her, and Hermione suppresses a smile as she hears the voice of Sir David Attenborough in her mind explaining the phenomenon.

*As a sign of respect, potential competitor males will mimic sexual advances in order to demonstrate their approval of a selected mate.*

“You should give her a ring, Daph,” Theo suggests.

“Harriet Abbott is about five years too young for me I’m afraid.”

Hermione chokes on a bit of lime pulp.

Daphne flushes again.

Theo decides, tactfully, to return to the topic at hand. “What about him?” he asks, jerking his chin to indicate Neville as he gathers up empty glassware from the bar.

“Don’t waste your time, mate,” Blaise chimes in. “You know how it is in places like this. They’re all sleeping with each other already.”

They both look to Hermione for confirmation, and she feels her brow crease. “I don’t think that sort of thing really goes on here.”

Daphne laughs at this. Loudly.

When Hermione glances up at her, startled, Daphne's face falls. "Oh," she says hoarsely. "I thought you were joking."

Hermione blinks at her, and then turns to scan the bar. "Excuse me," she says numbly and stands.

Pansy glances up from the stream of liquor she's pouring when Hermione arrives in front of her.

"Is everyone in this bar sleeping together?" Hermione asks.

"No," Pansy says evenly. "Everyone in this bar is working."

Hermione opens her mouth to respond, but Pansy claps the top of the shaker on and proceeds to create an inordinate racket.

Hermione waits with pursed lips and narrowed eyes.

Pansy flicks her gaze up again as she strains the cocktail into a coupe. "Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to, Granger."

"I most certainly do want the answer to this one," Hermione says.

"All right, then." Pansy delivers the drink and then makes a show of wiping her hands on a rag.

"Do you remember that time last winter when Harry and Lavender weren't speaking for two weeks?"

"What?" Hermione gasps, hand to her chest. Her children, fighting? "No."

"Exactly," says Pansy. "Because we're all big boys and girls who can handle our shit. No one wants Mother Hen to worry."

Hermione drops her hand pointedly. "They were together?"

Pansy cackles. "The bisexual disaster twins? No, that would be too easy for everyone. Instead of fucking it out, they insist on fighting over anyone with a pulse who comes within a kilometer of this place."

"Oh, dear."

"Indeed. Remember that French girl who never made a single drink right and still pulled triple the tips of everyone else?"

"Fleur?"

Pansy nods. "She was the first."

“Wow.” Fleur *had* been unearthly beautiful, even if she insisted on making every cocktail in an inscrutable manner which she called ‘ze French way.’

“And then there was that sweetie pie Scot with the jumpers.”

“Aw, Oliver?”

Pansy waggles her brows. “Oliver *Wood*.”

“Goodness.”

“Most recently, it was Viktor.”

Hermione frowns. They’ve never had a Viktor.

“Krum,” Pansy elaborates.

“The Smirnoff rep??”

Pansy nods gravely. “When I tell you no one is safe.”

Hermione’s processing of this is interrupted by the bang of the doors to the back swinging open. Neville comes out with a full keg hoisted up against his chest. He lowers it beside them with a grunt of exertion, and given the way Pansy’s watching him, Hermione can’t help but examine the sound with fresh ears. She’s relieved when he ducks out of view behind the bar.

The girls are silent for the short interval in which he swaps out the tap, and when he stands again, exertion ruddy on his round cheeks, his hand strays distinctly into the territory of Pansy’s arse.

“There ya go,” he says.

Thankfully, he notices Hermione then, sparing her from witnessing the impending pat on the bottom. His arm slaps down against his side like a soldier coming to attention.

“H-Hey, boss,” he says.

“Please don’t call me that, Neville,” Hermione tells him yet again.

“Right. Sorry, boss.”

She gives him pained look which he returns.

“I’d better—” he says, and then turns on the spot and vanishes.

Hermione returns her gaze to Pansy’s smirking face.

“You’re dating Neville?!”

“Dry humping in the walk-in is not dating,” Pansy says.

“You do it in the walk-in?!”

“Only in July.” She winks.

“Oh, my god.”

“Please calm down.”

“I am calm,” Hermione shrieks in a whisper.

“Very convincing.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione says. “It’s just... it’s *Neville*.”

“The shy ones always have the filthiest—”

“Oh, god. Don’t.”

Pansy tilts her head toward the taps. “That keg weighs more than me.”

“Stop.” Hermione claps her hands over her ears as Pansy laughs.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” Hermione says.

“Can’t you?”

That is fair.

Pansy sighs. “I didn’t tell you because we aren’t dating. No one here is. We don’t date, so we can’t break up, and then you don’t have to restaff your bar.”

“But...” Hermione frowns again. “You should be able to. If you want. Forget the bar.”

Pansy smirks. “Stow the pity, Granger. There’s some fun to be had in the grey areas.” She leans sideways to look deliberately behind Hermione. “Not everyone is ready for marriage after the third date.”

“Very well,” says Hermione, blushing. “Speaking of. I should probably get back.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Pansy says, still looking. “He’s having a fine time. With you over here, he gets to stare at your arse.”

Hermione’s jaw drops. “He is not.”

“He’s looking at it like it’s been lost at sea.”

Hermione laughs into her hand.

“In fact,” Pansy says, her expression turning sly. “Come here. I want to tell you a secret.”

Hermione steps up onto the foot rail and bends forward to lean over the bar.

Several shouts go up from the table behind her.

Pansy cackles again. “He just slopped half his beer onto the table.”

“Good lord,” says Hermione, though she is undeniably pleased.

“That’s the thing about infants,” Pansy sighs. “They need constant supervision.”

Hermione, still leaned across the bar, gives her shoulder a shove.

“I’m sure his fine motor skills will develop quickly,” says Pansy, undeterred by the physical provocation.

“I assure you his fine motor skills are *perfectly* fine.”

Pansy’s eyes glint. “That’s what I like to hear.”

Hermione steps back from the bar. “Tell Neville he can stop hiding now.”

Pansy gives her a salute. “Will do, boss.”

Hermione’s head is still shaking when she sits back in her chair. Draco’s arm immediately envelops her back into his body like a missing limb. She does him the courtesy of not noticing the pile of damp napkins in the center of the table.

“So,” says Theo, practically rubbing his hands together with naughty intent. “What’s the verdict?”

“They are all sleeping together,” Hermione declares. “But they’re also all single, so do with that what you will.”

Theo’s face lights. “No! Even the one with the green eyes and the scar?”

“Harry,” Hermione says with a nod.

“Harry,” Theo repeats, making the syllables sound indecent. He indicates his own forehead with two fingers. “How did he get it?”

“A car crash. When he was a baby.” Hermione doesn’t mention the tragic part; it isn’t her story to tell. “*Don’t* ask him about it.”

Theo adopts an intensely serious expression. It ages him several years. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Though I should probably warn you,” Hermione says. “If you plan to go after Harry, it sounds as though you’ll be receiving Lavender’s attention as a package deal.”

“Oh, we met her last week,” Blaise says. “The blonde with the sexy canines,” he reminds Theo.

Theo turns back to Hermione, his interest redoubled. “Are they lovers?”

She smirks. “Worse.”

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It’s fun, being immersed in the group of friends.

Hermione mostly listens—sussing out who knows who how and from where—though she does get pulled into a conversation with Cho diagonally across the table. She’s going to school for archaeology.

Draco doesn’t seem to mind at all the way Hermione ends up leaning half into his lap as the noise around them climbs. His hand stays warm against her nape, and she can feel him absently coiling and uncoiling an errant curl as he chats.

It isn’t until Pansy delivers the next round that Hermione realises Draco and the other boys hadn’t ordered anything. Daphne just knew what they would drink.

She snatches up Draco’s pint, taking a careful sip.

He regards her quizzically, brows lifting, until she narrows her eyes in meticulous assessment.

“Stella?”

Draco grins. “Very nice.”

Hermione rolls her eyes. “Practically the most popular draught and yet you couldn’t come up with it.”

He shakes his head. “Once I’d seen you, I was lucky to remember the word beer.”

Hermione hides her ridiculous smile back in the foam.

\*\*\*

The next round is accompanied by plates of piping hot chips, and Hermione hums around her first bite. She makes a mental note to give Justin a raise for his excellent work at the fryer.

Distracted, she only catches the tail end of something Blaise says about being in New York.

“Oh, did you live there?” she asks.

“No, no,” Blaise says. “I just got back from a trip.”

“Oh, how lucky!” she says. “I’ve always wanted to go. Do you have pictures?”

Blaise appears positively chuffed by this question. He takes out his phone at once. “Yes, I do.”

Hermione leans forward eagerly, *oohing* and *ahhing* in earnest over his photos of the city. Blaise adds in tidbits of context where needed. He swipes to show one that looks like it was

taken in the VIP section of a nightclub. The camera flash is harsh against the hazy light of lasers in the background. He swipes again and Hermione actually gasps at the ethereal being on the screen.

“That’s Adaeze,” says Blaise. “She’s a model.”

“Rightly so,” sighs Hermione.

The next few are mostly blurry, and Blaise swipes through them quickly. “I think these are all the same—”

A video begins playing, and Hermione only has a chance to register the shining expanse of bare skin before Draco’s hand slides down over her wide eyes.

“Ah—er—that’s a bit of me and Adaeze,” says Blaise, clearing his throat. “Sorry about that.”

“Nice one, mate,” says Theo, accentuating the ribbing with what sounds like a clap on the back.

When Draco releases her, Blaise is firmly back on his side of the table, phone put contritely away.

Hermione looks at Draco, one brow arched. “So, I take it you’ve seen these already?”

He seems amused at the suggestion. “I was treated to a play-by-play of the evening. My spider sense was tingling.”

Hermione finds that she would quite like to hear the play-by-play.

Instead, she offers to Blaise, “You must’ve gone to The Met the next day.”

He nods graciously, smiling. “It’s on my other roll of film.”

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Dean and Seamus, who seem to have snuck in a few shots while the others weren’t looking, appear at the end of the table one point. Seamus tugs gently at Hermione’s sleeve to get her attention and asks for permission to see the bookshop.

“Of course,” Hermione says with a laugh. “But you don’t need me.” She points to the brightly lit doors. “It’s still open.”

“Oh,” Seamus says and looks. His eyes overshoot it a bit.

“Or… I could give you a tour?”

“Ach!” he says, rocking back on his heels. “That’d be grand.”

In the end, the whole team tags along. Seamus stands guard at the doors, inspecting hands and sending anyone with sticky mitts off to wash. Once they’re inside, he loudly shushes any

merry-making as though it's a library.

"This is Luna," Hermione says when she peers, owlish, from behind a shelf at the commotion. "She can help you find anything you need."

Luna emerges, nodding at the group. When she sees Draco, her head tilts. "Hello again."

"Nice to see you," says Draco.

"How are you getting on?"

"Very well, thank you. I've already finished the first."

"Hm," Luna says, an almost displeased slant to her mouth that Hermione's never seen before.

Angelina, who apparently has actually been meaning to pick something up, asks Luna about a new release. A debut. Enemies-to-lovers. Romantasy.

Luna smiles wide—a much more fitting expression. "Right this way."

Half of the group follows her, and Hermione looks at Draco. "Luna helped you before?"

"The first time I came in," he says. "Though *helped* might be a bit of a stretch."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I told her what I was looking for—the Russians—she said no."

"No?" Hermione checks, disturbed.

"No," Draco confirms. "She said she could suggest something much more compatible with my aura. She actually recommended another author, but I've forgotten the name." He smirks. "As you know, I had good reason for getting the books I did."

"Yes," Hermione says, now actually wondering how many of her staff routinely refuse service to customers.

"I'll have to check back after Leo to see what she had in mind."

Hermione pauses, glancing at him, but he's looking out over the shop. Her lips purse. It would be an... unorthodox sales technique, but then, it is Luna.

Hermione's fretting is summarily abolished when the team returns. Angelina has her book in hand. Cho has one, too. Goyle is holding three.

Flint looks down at them and says, "I didn't know you could read."

Hermione rings up the books with glee.

Cormac McLag-something takes a hat down off the rack next to the counter and checks the tag. He turns to Hermione with a hideously lewd expression and asks, "Does this come from

real *beavers*?" He pets it.

Hermione hisses a *yes* through gritted teeth, reminding herself that it is for the animals.

He redeems himself in the only way possible: by buying it.

When they venture back to the pub side of things, Seamus and Dean begin to sing.

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An hour later, Hermione is giggling afresh over the inadvertent screening of Blaise's sex tape. Clinging to Draco's arm as they meander home, she asks him how he copes with knowing that his best mate has a nicer cock than him.

Draco insists that she didn't see anything, and that if she had, she would know that statement is patently false.

Hermione muses about how lucky she was to see Blaise's dick on the same day she met him.

Draco assures her that this does not place her among a select number.

Hermione laughs with her whole body.

The city bustles by them, and the sheer quantity of exuberant happiness inside her heart is so vast that guilt begins to tinge the edges. She wishes she could share some of it around; her ribs might split from the strain.

When she unlocks her front door, her limbs are heavy with the drowsing effect of a few drinks that didn't have a chance to accumulate into intoxication.

Draco follows her to the bedroom where he states his unsurprising intention to go wash up.

"Want to come?" he offers.

"Ugh, no," Hermione says regretfully. "The next time I get out of that shower it will be with clean hair, but I won't subject you to the harrowing spectacle that is hair wash day."

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose you could get out first while I carried on," she continues, digging her phone out of her bag. "If you feel like watching a movie while you wait. Or, you know, all six seasons of *The Sopranos*."

"What's *The Sopranos*?" Draco asks.

Hermione's eyes fall shut. *It's only a 20-time Emmy-winning show that probably finished before you were born.*

"It's—" She turns just as Draco grips the collar of his t-shirt and pulls it off over his head. "—not important," she breathes.

He regards her with mild concern. “Is it really that much trouble to wash your hair?”

“It’s essentially a full body workout,” she laments.

“I like working out,” says Draco.

Hermione gives a mirthless laugh as she rifles through a drawer for a pair of lounge shorts. “I wish I could say the same. I can hardly lift my arms by the time I’m through.”

“I have very strong arms.”

Hermione glances up, thumb on the button of her jeans. Her throat drags with a swallow at Draco’s expression. She eyes said arms. Her voice comes out low. “I know you do, baby.”

Draco approaches her slowly, like she might spook. He reaches up and removes the claw clip from her hair, letting the whole mass of it tumble down around her shoulders. Hermione rues her stiff and obviously oily roots. He sets the clip carefully on top of her bureau and then brings his fingertips to rest against her temples.

Hermione considers protesting. (But he still smells like sweat and grass, and she can feel the heat of him this close, and it makes doing anything other than what will make him touch her exceedingly difficult.) When she doesn’t, he slides his fingers into her hair, digging hard against her scalp.

Hermione collapses into the warmth of his chest with a whimpering moan. Oil be damned.

“Hermione.” The syllables rumble against her forehead. “Let me wash your hair for you.”

She shivers, but still has the presence of mind to warn him. “It’s a big commitment.”

“I’m a committed sort of person.”

“There are a lot of steps, specific techniques.”

“I’m very good at taking instruction.”

“That is true,” she murmurs.

Blunt nails scratch over the back of her head, and she drools on his left pectoral.

“You know I would do anything to spare you blood, sweat, and tears,” he says.

“There will still be sweat when we get to the diffuser.”

He chuckles, and the sound feels like it originates inside her own chest. “Is that a yes?”

His fingers curl, pulling lightly against her scalp, and Hermione moans, “*Yess*,” though she’s forgotten entirely what they were discussing.

“Let’s go, then.”

They undress while the water heats, and once naked, Draco squints up at the lights over the vanity.

“Hold on,” he says and goes out.

He comes back a minute later with two candles from the sitting room and a box of matches.

“For ambience,” he explains, lighting them. He flicks off the overheads and gives a satisfied nod. “Much better.”

Hermione looks at him in the warm glow of the flickering light and thinks that there may still be some tears, as well.

Steam pours out when he opens the shower door for her, and Hermione sighs as she steps into the stream. Draco follows, setting his phone on the built-in shelf. A mellow sort of song plays through it.

He wraps his arms around her, sharing the spray for a minute, and Hermione thinks it’s very nice—this ambience.

She lets Draco wash first, being the undeniably dirtier of the two. They take turns under the showerhead as he lathers and scrubs, and in the time that it takes him to wash his entire body, head to toe, Hermione has (mostly) succeeded in getting her hair thoroughly wet.

She switches the flow to the handheld attachment and presses it firmly against her scalp to get the rest.

“The first shampoo is a clarifying one,” she tells him, pointing.

Draco picks up the bottle she indicates and says, “*First* shampoo?”

Hermione arches a brow. “Oh, darling. Buckle up.”

He takes this in stride, holding out his palms for her to appropriately dose it.

The first press of his fingers back into her hair has her moaning again. She closes her eyes and lets her head hang between her shoulders. He uses the strength of his hands to work the suds in deep, and Hermione reaches up to grip his biceps as he does.

“*God* ...”

“Good?” he asks.

She gives a shuddered groan in reply.

“Good,” he says.

With the extent of *how* good it is, it’s a chore not to slump completely against Draco’s chest. She braces her hands on the wall behind him to give him room to work.

A new track begins playing, similar to the first, and Hermione appreciates the soothing instrumental laid over a slow, steady beat. Much better than the frustratingly shapeless ambient sounds of a typical spa experience.

“I like this,” she murmurs, unsuccessful in her attempts to keep her face out of Draco’s cleavage. “Who’s the artist?”

“Dunno,” Draco says. “I just put on a lo-fi playlist.”

“What’s lo-fi?”

“Er,” he says. “I don’t actually know what it stands for, but it’s just music that sounds like this.”

“Mm. It’s nice.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

He tilts her head back to get her hairline, and Hermione has to grip his shoulders to keep her feet.

“Hermione—love.” He sounds slightly concerned. Maybe at the fact that he’s supporting nearly her whole body weight by her head; but then he laughs a bit so it’s okay. “Why don’t you sit?”

Oh, what a marvelous suggestion. She sinks onto the floor.

Draco sits behind her, legs spread so she can lean back into the support of his body. He uses the handheld sprayer to rinse her hair, the edge of one hand pressed to her forehead to shield her eyes.

Hermione worries distantly that she’ll become so liquid with relaxation that she flows straight down the drain.

Draco presses a kiss to her squeaky clean temple and she thinks, *Worth it.*

“Hydrating shampoo next?”

She peels one eye open to check for the green bottle, and nods. Such a smart boy.

Draco leans around her to prop the sprayer back in its cradle while he lathers. The stream hits blissfully in the center of her chest.

The massaging begins again. Likewise the moaning.

“If I had less of an ego, those sounds might make me worry you’ve been faking it,” Draco says.

“Noo, it just actually feels that good.”

*“That good?”*

He puts some pressure into his grip and Hermione’s foot comes up against the opposite wall. “Nearly,” she sighs.

Even with the rush of the water, she can hear the sound of him filing that away.

He maneuvers the dead weight of her head with ease, and at her instruction, works the lather of this shampoo carefully through her ends.

There’s a slight tug, and Draco murmurs an apology. “It’s—erm—gone a bit tangly.”

“We’ll get there,” she assures him.

He rinses again. Hermione’s every exhale is a sigh.

Draco applies a conditioner next, starting obediently from the bottom up. After a minute or two of working it through, the touches stop.

“Erm,” he says again.

“What?”

He brings his hands in front to show her his palms matted with shed hair.

“Ah, yes,” she says. “Just put that anywhere.”

“Is it—? I mean—are you okay?”

Hermione laughs. “I assure you that is the usual amount.”

“But—” She feels him grip the remaining metric ton attached to her head. “How??”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

He continues raking his fingers gently through, pausing occasionally to grow the abstract art on the tile wall.

She directs him to the wide tooth comb next, smiling placidly at the gentle scrape of it across her scalp. He works meticulously until it glides easily through every section.

This product doesn’t necessarily need to be massaged into the roots, but Hermione figures it can’t hurt to let him anyway. Especially when the slippery solution encourages him to slide his thumbs in a hard press along her cervical spine.

“Godd,” she groans.

He begins kneading the backs of her shoulders next. She really might cry.

“I forgot to ask,” Draco says. “How was the middle part of your day?”

“Oh!” Hermione says, remembering. “It was wonderful. I found an incredibly special volume in a box of donations.”

Draco gives a hum of interest.

“It was one of Jane Austen’s, published in—”

“Ah!” says Draco. “*That* was the author Luna recommended.”

Hermione’s eyes pop open. Then, she puts her hands over her face and laughs. How could she have ever doubted her first and most trusted employee? She adds another line item to her mental to-do list: a raise for Luna, too.

“Sorry,” Draco says for the interruption. “Tell me about it.”

She does just that while he rinses out the conditioner and applies a thick nourishing mask. Hermione assists in coiling her hair loosely on top of her head before laying back again.

“This one needs to sit for five minutes.”

Draco sets a timer on his phone.

He shifts a little behind her, getting comfortable for the wait. His hands, left idle, drift down to cup her breasts.

It’s done somewhat absently, without clear intent. He undulates his fingers against the swell of them as one might do with a stress ball.

He lifts, pressing her cleavage together and creating a valley for the water to gather in. When it’s full, he opens the dam, dropping a flood over her stomach. He repeats this.

Hermione looks down over her cheeks to watch, amused. The touch could not be less sexual.

And yet.

All it takes is the slightest graze. His palms skim faintly across her nipples as he adjusts his grip, and they immediately take interest. She watches the skin pull tight as they stiffen into sensitive peaks. And now, protruding that slight bit, they become more prone to future grazing.

His hands brush them once, and then again. Hermione’s lip part on an inhale.

Whether consciously or not, she doesn’t know, but Draco’s fingers are drawn to this new feature of his playthings. He places his thumbs against the very tips of her nipples and circles them, seemingly just to watch the way they bend under the pressure.

Hermione’s eyelashes flutter as warmth spreads through her at the delicate touch. She focuses on keeping her breathing even, betraying nothing as he continues.

Then he presses them between his thumb and forefinger and *squeezes*.

Her head tilts back into his shoulder with an unbidden whine.

“That feel good?” Draco asks, because of course he knows exactly what he’s doing.

“Yes,” she breathes, the jig being up. She puts her hands over her head and grips the back of his neck. “Draco—”

“God, I love the way you say my name.”

He rolls her nipples between his fingers, and she swears she can feel it in her clit. The heat concentrates there, pulsing as he teases her. She names him again, and he groans.

His hands cup her once more, letting the water gather again. The angle of the spray hits her nipple just right, and she cries out at the jolt of pleasure.

“Fuck, you’re so sensitive,” Draco murmurs, his chin brushing the side of her head. “Could you come like this?”

“I don’t know,” she says. She never has before, but, *Christ*, she feels close. “Maybe.”

He lets the water flood out from between her breasts, but this time, she registers the way the warmth flows over her entire front, down between her legs. She moans at the rush of wetness, outside and in.

“Let’s see, then.” He gives a tug that makes her yip.

“Fuck, *Draco*—”

Her heels slot into the corners of the walls, her hips shifting helplessly as he focuses his efforts.

“God, you’re so sexy. You have no idea.”

He reverts to the maddening rolling motion, making her gasp. “Oh, god. It feels—” Hermione’s mouth drops open on a whine as her cunt clenches around nothing.

He ducks his head, lips brushing her ear. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Her nails dig into his neck as it rises in her. “*Ohh*, Draco, I’m—”

The timer goes off.

Draco, bless him, freezes as though every hair will drop out of her head if the mask is left on one second too long.

“Ten minutes is fine, too,” she blurts.

He laughs against her cheek, reminding her of the tangibility of his mouth. She yanks it down to hers. The angle is clumsy, but she’s long past needing finesse. She just wants the hot press of his tongue against hers. He obliges.

Draco fumbles for his phone on the shelf, dislodging the comb, Hermione's razor, and from the feel of it, a loofah before managing to silence the timer.

His hands return to their task, and Hermione moans into his mouth.

"Touch me," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she breathes, pulling his left hand down between her legs. "I want your fingers. Want you to—*ohh god*—feel me."

The first brush is heaven. He rubs indulgently over her cunt, spreading the slickness up to her clit. "Let me feel you, then."

She grips his arm, teetering immediately back on the edge. "Yes," she moans. "Like that."

Draco circles her clit until she tells him she's going to come. Then he sinks two fingers into her and makes her come on those instead.

She pants in the humid air as the tide of pleasure recedes. He leaves his hand where it is, fielding the occasional straggling aftershock.

"Oh my—god," she says.

"Dunno what all the fuss was about. You seem to enjoy this whole hair washing business quite a bit."

Hermione laughs, the sound sliding into a groan as he removes his fingers. She watches them disappear over her shoulder en route to his mouth.

"Thank you," she sighs.

"My pleasure."

Well, no. Not yet. Hermione struggles to sit up, but Draco's arm draped across her chest prevents it.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Hermione tilts her head backwards to look at him. She can feel him hard against her back. "Don't you want me to return the favour?"

"Are we done here?"

The question is clearly rhetorical given that her hair is still coated with the mask. Though the coil has unwound into a heavy drape along her arm.

"No."

"Then, no."

“But—”

“Hermione,” he laughs. “I can wait. This is for you, remember?”

“Well, what if *I want* to?”

This, she knows immediately, will be the winning argument. “You never let me suck you off,” she pouts.

“That is not true,” he says.

“I don’t get to make you come.” Said as though it is a flagrant infringement of her inalienable rights.

“Yes, you—Hermione—”

His grip has loosened enough for her to curl onto her side, allowing for maximum pout impact.

“You know why,” he says, sounding strained.

She traces a finger down the hard line of his cock, and says, “I know,” morosely.

He gives a disbelieving huff, and Hermione curves her palm around him. “I just thought it could be fun,” she sighs. “Since we’re in the shower, you could come all over me if you wanted to.”

A choked sound leaves his throat, and Hermione looks up at him through her wet lashes. “But—if you don’t want to, I understand.”

Draco’s eyes fall shut as she strokes him, but she doesn’t have time to wipe the smirk off her face before he opens them again.

He arches a brow and says, “Fine, then.”

Hermione happily shifts onto her knees as he gets to his feet.

“We should rinse this first though,” she says, touching her hair.

Draco breathes a laugh. “Whatever you want, love.”

He rinses her hair while she sucks his cock.

He mostly manages to keep his composure, though she does get sprayed in the face once when she swallows him into the back of her throat.

She pulls off, making dramatic choking noises to great effect.

“Fuck, sorry,” he pants. “Are you all right?”

He actually rolls his eyes when he sees her smirk this time. “Menace,” he mutters.

Then, at his normal volume, “This is done.” He puts the sprayer back in its cradle and sifts his fingers into the silky curtain of her hair.

“Lovely,” she says. “You’re the best.”

She slides him back into her mouth, and he grits out, “No, you.”

Once Draco’s full attention is on the matter at hand (so to speak), it doesn’t take long at all. She sucks hard at him, savouring the weight on her tongue.

“Fuck, Hermione—” He cups her jaw in both hands. “Look at me.”

She does.

He’s leaned back against the wall, a flush on his neck and chest and wet strands of hair in front of his eyes. She puts her thumbs in the v-line of his hips and hollows her cheeks.

Draco moans. His fingers brush the hair plastered over her breast. “It’s so long,” he says.

Hermione’s lips tighten in a would-be smile.

“*God*, you feel so good.” He thumbs at her bottom lip where it’s stretched around him. “You were right. I should let you do this more.”

Hermione licks hard against the underside of his cock in a show of agreement.

“Shit.” His hips pulse forward beneath her hands, making her throat close in reflex. “Oh, fuck —you’re gonna make me come.”

Hermione moans as he moves one hand back into her hair.

“Yeah. That’s what you wanted, right? You want my come in your mouth?”

Her chest vibrates again, both at the words and at the way his fist tightens at the back of her head.

“You want—” He breaks off on a harsh exhale, and the first pulse hits her tongue as he groans.

Draco pulls her roughly off of him, jerking the rest over her face. She opens her mouth wide and gets a stripe across her cheek and tongue. Some hits her chin. Some her chest. One drip lands on her thigh.

“Fuck,” Draco says, slowing his strokes. There’s quite a bit on his cock, too.

After sufficient display, Hermione swallows what’s in her mouth and leans forward for a lick.

Draco surprises her by reaching down and gripping her under the arms. He hoists her to her feet, already turning them. Her back hits the wall with a wet slap, and he hitches her thigh up

over his hip.

She gasps as he drives into her. She doesn't know what you'd call the sound Draco makes. It raises goosebumps on her heated skin.

He fucks into her in three deep thrusts and then stills. Hermione's cunt clenches belatedly around him.

"Christ," he says, like maybe he's a little surprised, too.

"That's hot," pops unceremoniously out of Hermione's mouth.

Draco grins at this articulate assessment, brushing a curl back from her come-streaked cheek lest they have to start all over again.

He opens her lips with his own while she wonders if he has any clue who Paris Hilton is.

After, Draco carefully cleans his come off her, even though that falls outside the bounds of the hair wash day routine.

"Now, for the fun part," Hermione says, shutting off the tap.

Draco towels off and retrieves the basket of styling products from under Hermione's sink. She flips her head over while he applies curl cream and mousse with exceptionally devout prayer hands. He likes scrunching in the gel the best.

She knows this because he says, "Ooh, I like scrunching in the gel the best."

When her sacrificial t-shirt is dripping wet—and her curls no longer are—she gets out the diffuser.

Draco excuses himself again and comes back with a chair from the kitchen for her to sit in. He claims this is for a more advantageous angle. She knows better.

She shows him the technique with the power off so he can hear her explanations. She demonstrates the perfect plop, and how to prevent a middle part from flattening the crown. Draco receives these instructions with the intensity of a surgeon scrubbing in. The effect is only slightly diminished by the towel wrapped low on his hips.

"How long?" he asks. Not out of impatience, nor boredom, but from a deep need to Get It Right.

Hermione, much oppressed, tells him, "An hour or more."

Draco casts an aghast glance at her puny arms and—she sees it so clearly—internally vows that she will never have to endure this injustice alone again.

He says, "Good thing we have all night," and Hermione loves him.

This is not a revelation, but she still sits with it for a bit while the drone of the hair dryer fills the small room. She observes him from every angle—head tilting this way and that—and finds that her conclusion remains the same. She loves the set of his brow as he concentrates on cupping each section of curls. Loves the silent *gah* he says when one piece repeatedly escapes. And the way he meets her eyes and smiles each time he pauses to hold the prongs to her scalp? She *loves* that.

(Those are just the most immediate three on a very long list.)

Is it fast? Yes. Inadvisable? Probably. But nothing will make it any less true.

After twenty minutes or so, her curls have shrunken up into their defined ringlets, safely ensconced the cast of the gel. Draco pinches the bottom of one, drawing it down in experiment. His eyes go bright with pride at the way it springs gaily out of his grip.

“I love you,” Hermione says.

He sees that her mouth moves, but he cannot hear the words. He looks down at the controls on the dryer and then switches it off.

“Hm?” he asks, brows raised.

Hermione debates. Should she say *nothing* and let it lie for another hour or three? After all, that is all the time that is left. Draco will go to her bed tonight as a lover. He will hold her in a loving embrace. He might even make love to her again—in a less unserious way than they’ve just done. But, for certain, he will not let another day dawn without telling her how he feels.

Hermione decides to beat him to the punch.

“I said, ‘I need to tell you something.’”

Draco obviously saw her mouth clearly enough to know that that is not what she said. And since he knows what she means by this statement, it isn’t hard for him to narrow down the true shapes of the letters he saw her lips form.

She will walk into the next life with the way he looks at that moment branded onto her heart.

“Right now?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Must be important.”

“Life or death, really,” she agrees.

“Let’s hear it, then.”

She stands from the chair, letting her towel drop, and loops her arms around his neck. The hair dryer slides into the sink, and Hermione doesn’t even worry about the electrocution hazard.

As she looks at him, she realises that in all the fuss over her, his hair has been left to air dry, untouched. There's the slightest wave to the strands, and it is a cowlick on the right side of his forehead that creates the signature swoop.

Hermione runs her fingers through it. Lovingly.

"I love you, Draco."

He leans down to kiss her, but with the way he's smiling, it's all teeth. Hermione doesn't particularly mind.

"I'm—so glad you told me."

"It needed to be said. But the question remains: is it life, or is it death?"

Draco takes her hand from his face and places it on his chest. "I love you, Hermione."

Against her palm, his heart beats out its frantic evidence.

"Life, then," she says.

## Chapter End Notes

The fact that this chapter is over 11k is really the best metaphor for how fucking involved a curly hair routine is 😂

I get asked frequently if I am a plotter or a pantser, and I \*feel\* like a plotter because I know essentially everything that is going to happen before I sit down to write. But I don't make an official outline ahead of time, it's just in my head, and I add in a lot of things as I go, so idk.

This chapter felt like it had more on-the-fly changes than usual, so I thought I would give a little overview of my process (for anyone interested) and then maybe y'all can tell me where you think I land!

1. Waking up scene - I would have actually preferred to have this chapter be set an ambiguous amount of days after the last, but by having it be the next morning, I got to include 23yo Draco's lack of hangover which was too perfect of an age gap commentary to exclude once I thought of it. This also allowed me to carry on the "tell you something" love confession euphemism, since it wouldn't have really made sense for them to continue it over multiple days I don't think. After having Draco almost slip and say it, I knew I wanted to have the real confession be on screen.

2. The bookshop scene - This was originally just supposed to be canon/magical world-alluding fluff with H's convos with Hagrid and Luna. Jane got added in as I was writing to tie in to Luna's recommendation later. Also, \*which\* Austen novel it is was left

intentionally unspecified. Please feel free to insert whichever you would be most excited to find. Or which you think Hermione would.

3. Watching the football practice/meeting the team - This scene stayed exactly as I originally imagined it, including the falafel. It's actually why I introduced the falafel on their second date. Also, I did a small back flip when I thought of the "speaking of German poetry" line. I keep a running list of lines I want to include at the bottom of my doc so I can jot one down anytime it occurs to me. That one was a product of a laying-in-bed-can't-sleep brainstorm over how to transition the end of the convo with Seamus to them leaving for the pub.

4. At the pub - The convos with Blaise, Theo, and Pansy were all also exactly as I planned, but the team going over to the bookshop was improv'd. I had planned to include Draco just telling Hermione about Luna being "unhelpful," but I'm so glad I expanded this scene. The "I didn't know you could read." and McLaggen being gross about beavers ended up being some of my favorite parts. Also, yes, Angelina was 100% buying TIUTFFYE, thank you very much.

5. Hair Wash Day - Originally, in my mind, this scene was just "Draco washes Hermione's hair and gets her off during the deep condition step" (men written by women, amirite). The bj was 1000% her idea. I was right there with Draco saying wait, no, this is not the plan. She did not listen. Ah, well 🤷‍♀️ Also, the "it's a workout/i like working out" exchange was definitely another sequence I had thought of prior and giggled over. Also also, if this story is set in 2025, then Draco was born in 2002 (\*shudder\*), which means he was 5 when The Sopranos and The Simple Life finales aired.

6. Diffusing induced love confessions - Hermione's love confession under the noise of the hair dryer was also something I had planned ahead of time, and I'm not sure why that visual appealed to me so much, but it really did. Something about having the chance to take it back/put it off and deciding not to? Also, Draco seeing her mouth move and not knowing what she said, but then immediately recognizing the way the words looked once he \*knew\* what she'd said seemed so romantic?? Is it just me??? I do think it also ended up mirroring Draco's almost slip nicely—they both sort of say it once before really saying it. Idk, I just liked it haha. That was where my planning ended. All of the dialogue after—the life and death bit—was done on the spot during my first draft. I really really love how it came out.

So, yeah. That's what this chapter looked like from my perspective! I hope you found this interesting :) Please weigh in if you wish: is this plotty or pantsy?

Either way, thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed this extra long chapter! <3

Up next: I owe you one sober conversation ☺

# Nine

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for such fun comments on the last chapter!! I am so glad so many of you felt seen by the hair washing moment 😊❤️

A small warning: This chapter has one of those emotionally heavy moments that I mentioned before. No angst between our main two, but take care if you're sensitive to discussion around the having (and not having) of children.

Enjoy ❤️

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

Sundays become reserved for leisure.

With the shop and the bar open seven days a week—and the weekends the busiest time for both—it's been a long time since Hermione has found the designated day of rest particularly restful.

Draco changes that. Sunday is the one day he holds firm on not working, which means it's her only chance at uninterrupted access to him. And more than that, he helps her see the benefit of a break in the routine. She shoves as many of her tasks into the week as possible, and on Saturday night, leaves her life's work in a collection of very capable hands.

Which is how she ends up sitting out front of the café down the street from Draco's flat with the late Sunday morning sun warming the tips of her toes where the shadow of the awning ends. She stretches out her legs, propping the wedge heels of her espadrilles on the pavement and admiring the fresh pedicure in the open front.

Draco's hand shifts on her leg at the change, and the edge of her dress bunches a bit against his palm.

Somehow, it's hotter than the sunlight scorching the street.

Hermione takes another sip of her coffee, and the robust roast sits richly on her tongue. It's the best coffee she's ever tasted, and not in a sentimental everything-is-better-in-this-moment sort of way; it is the kind of coffee that could make someone who would've insisted they weren't picky about such things turn to snobbish tendencies.

Draco's thumb brushes softly over the side of her knee, and she leans her head against his shoulder. (Perhaps it is a touch of sentimentality, too, but just the *slightest* bit.)

“Look,” Draco says, squeezing her leg to get her attention. She hadn’t even realised her eyes had drifted closed. He tilts his head in gesture. “Us in another universe.”

Hermione follows his gaze a few feet away to where a female pigeon is attempting to peck at the remains of a dropped croissant. A large male, entirely uninterested in the food stuffs, interrupts her meal by peacocking insistently in proud circles around her.

“Oh, dear,” says Hermione. “The poor thing, just trying to get her daily crumbs.”

The female darts back and forth to avoid his advances. The male steps on the croissant.

“Rather obvious about it, isn’t he?” Draco says.

“She looks quite harassed.”

“Nah, persistence is key. She’s warming up to him.”

“I highly doubt—”

Suddenly, for esoteric reasons known only to the fairer of the species, she squats in an unmistakably inviting gesture. The male leaps (literally) at his chance, mounting her back. The whole thing is done in a flash of ruffling feathers.

“Oh!”

“You were saying?” invites Draco.

“What do you know,” says Hermione. “It *is* us.”

“No… now I’m not so sure. I like to think the first time lasted longer than that.”

“Well, that was probably quite long in pigeon-years.”

Draco turns his head to chuckle against her temple. “Kind of you, love.”

“If he comes back right away for round two, then we’ll know for sure.”

“Liked that move, did you?”

Hermione’s head shakes against his chin. “Who could survive a double tap? I’m merely mortal, after all.”

Draco puts his hand on her cheek and turns her face to him. “Debatable,” he says and kisses her.

The sun shines a little brighter and the pigeons coo a little louder and the coffee tastes even better like this.

“Ready?” he asks when he pulls back.

“Yes,” Hermione says.

Sunday strolls on.

Draco laces their fingers together as they walk, but Hermione still wraps her other hand at his upper arm lest any unsuspecting passersby should fail to grasp the depth of their new love.

It's not far to the small market Draco favours. They've been navigating a kind of joint-custody situation between their homes, rotating back and forth approximately every four days with alternating weekends. The arrangement actually arranged itself fairly organically around doing the shopping. They stock one flat with a few days worth of groceries, and when the food runs out, they shop for the other one.

It took Hermione a while to understand how much Draco enjoys doing this type of domestic thing. Part of her is still convinced that it is at least partially borne out of a life spent with staff to manage everything for him. As though he finds going out and buying food at a store rather than having a classically trained French chef prepare it for you all very quaint. As though the normal tasks that billions of people do every day are merely whimsical side quests along the journey of life.

In fairness, she does enjoy grocery shopping much more these days.

"Ah, hold on," Draco says outside the store. He crouches to fix a loose lace on his shoe.

Hermione couldn't say what it was that made her glance over in that moment while she waited—there wasn't any sort of audible fuss—but once she has, her eyes remain caught on the scene beside them.

A young mother is trying to finagle her infant into one of those carriers that straps to the chest, but she's trying to put it on herself at the same time as the baby and its legs are tangling in the straps. She gets one arm through, but as soon as she tries to adjust it tighter, the whole thing slithers off again. She gives up and tries to set the baby back in its stroller, but the folding mechanism has already been triggered, and it starts to collapse as soon as she puts any weight on it. An exhausted frustration ripples off of her, giving Hermione the impression that this trial is threatening to be the last straw of the day when it isn't even noon.

The mother glances at the rickety wrought iron table she's set her nappy bag on and visibly weighs the option of placing her baby on it for a second while she gets organised.

"Hermione?"

Hermione realises that Draco has been speaking to the side of her face. She puts a hand on his arm before starting forward.

"Excuse me," she says gently.

The mother glances up, a defeated curl to her shoulders as she clutches her baby to her chest. The little one has begun to catch on to her mother's struggle and is wriggling helpfully.

"I'm so sorry," Hermione says. "But—can I help?"

“Oh, no,” the woman says reflexively. “We’re fine—” The carrier slips from her grip, and when she darts a hand down to catch it, she bumps the nappy bag and sends it tumbling off of the wobbly table.

“Ah!” She gives a quiet, embarrassed cry as the contents spill out. “*Shite.*”

Draco jumps into action, halting the progress of a runaway bottle as it rolls off down the pavement. “Here,” he says. “Let me.”

“Oh, thank you,” says the woman as he rights the bag. He carefully brushes off two nappies and a pack of wipes before placing them back inside.

When the woman’s eyes meet Hermione’s again, there is something near breaking in them.

“Would you—?” She can hardly bring herself to finish the request. Hermione watches her swallow past the acrid taste of perceived failure. “If you wouldn’t mind holding her—just for a second.”

“Of course,” Hermione says. “Not at all.”

She steps closer and places gentle hands beneath the baby’s arms as her mother shifts her into the embrace of a stranger.

“I’m Hermione, by the way.”

The mother gives her a shaky smile. “I’m Emma.” Her eyes fall to her daughter, and the expression gets a second wind. “And she’s called Maeve.”

“Maeve,” Hermione repeats as she gets the baby against her side. “There we go.” She cradles her head with one hand while the other finds support under her padded bum. Maeve is a dense little thing, still with the scrunchy posture of only a few months. She blinks giant, infant-dark blue eyes at Hermione before turning to root enthusiastically against the front of her shoulder. “It’s very nice to meet you,” Hermione tells the baby. She takes one chubby little hand in hers. “I’m Hermione, and this is—”

Her voice fails for a moment when she glances up at Draco. He’s watching her with a look of such fierce tenderness that only a small puff of air brushes over the top of Maeve’s blonde fuzz.

“—Draco.”

He blinks at the sound of his name, refocusing. Hermione moves Maeve’s curled fist in a wave.

Draco smiles and says, “Hi, there.” He holds up one index finger and scrunches it a few times in miniature greeting. He still has the bottle in his other hand.

“Oh, she likes you,” says Emma, translating Maeve’s gurgling. The gummy smile speaks for itself.

A blaze of pink brands the tops of Draco's cheeks.

Emma gets the final snap into place and, seeing that Maeve is still in good hands, turns her attention to the stroller. "This latch will be the death of me," she mutters as she bends to inspect it.

Hermione lets her cheek rest atop Maeve's head, inhaling the powdery scent of milk and warm softness. Maeve drools questingly along her collarbone.

"Sorry, darling," Hermione murmurs. "I don't have anything for you."

Maeve disagrees and takes possession of a handful of Hermione's hair.

A satisfying click sounds from the hinge of the stroller, and Emma stands tall again. "Finally."

Hermione gives Maeve a little bounce of farewell. "All right, little one. Mum needs you back."

She and Emma make the hand off, sliding Maeve securely into her seat. Maeve, however, is reluctant to let go of the exchange entirely.

"Ah, your hair!" Emma makes quick work of prying open Maeve's impressively firm fist. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," Hermione laughs, wincing good-naturedly as a few strands part with her scalp. "I've got plenty to go around."

Emma finishes unwinding it from Maeve's fingers and then puts a contented hand on her baby's back.

"Thank you," she says.

"Any time," Hermione says. "I didn't have baby snuggles on my shopping list, but turns out that was just what I needed."

"You hear that?" Emma murmurs to the top of Maeve's head. "You're a hit." She looks at Draco. "Thanks," she says and holds out a hand to him.

"Sure," Draco says and shakes it.

Emma presses her laugh into a tight smile and has time to flick her eyes to Hermione before Draco realises she'd meant for him to hand over the bottle.

"Oh, right," he says, shaking his head.

Emma pops the bottle back in the bag and lifts Maeve's hand in farewell. "Say *bye, nice people.*"

They wave goodbye.

When the pair of them is gone, a moment passes in which nothing happens. Hermione stares straight ahead, acutely aware of the saliva drying on her skin. The strap of her dress needs fixing. Neither she nor Draco move.

Hermione's feet flex against the curved arch of her sandals. She's suddenly unsteady—thrown off balance by the lack of a few extra pounds in her arms.

She puts a hand on Draco's side, and he turns to face her. He moves the strap of her dress back onto the center of her shoulder.

"You've got a little—" he says, seeing the drool.

"Oh," says Hermione, as though she hadn't noticed.

He uses the sleeve of his nice linen shirt to wipe it off. Though he has it rolled to the elbow, and it makes the gesture rather awkward. Hermione almost smiles.

Draco swallows with effort. "Shall we?"

She nods.

He retrieves a shopping basket, and they stand similarly in the produce section.

Maybe a minute passes before Draco picks up a package of raspberries and says, "These look nice."

"Yes," Hermione says. "Very nice."

He puts them back down instead of in the basket.

They wander toward the tomatoes.

"I could do a caprese," says Draco.

"Yes, that sounds nice."

He puts some in. Other random veg follow.

Near the pasta, Draco looks at her. Hermione, ridiculously, feels ridiculous. She grabs a bag of cavatappi to avoid the feeling.

She looks at Draco as he picks out a selection of yoghurts. When he sees her looking, he goes blotchy.

They end up having to make another lap through the store because, though caprese only has three main ingredients, they forgot two of them on the first time around.

\*\*\*

Back in Draco's kitchen, they embark on a treasure hunt of discovery in the shopping bags.

Hermione is returned enough to form to tease Draco about the aubergine he selected and the way it resembles a scrotum.

“It’s far more stately than that,” he insists. “More like a cleft chin.”

“I pity the poor soul with this ballsack on their face.”

He scoffs. “Of the two of us, I think I’m more qualified to say what does and does not resemble a pair of bollocks.”

She weighs the fruit in her hand. “Maybe it’s the size?” she muses. She holds it up next to her head. “You know, enlarged to show detail?”

Draco arches a brow. “You are in treacherous waters.”

“Or maybe it’s just the angle. You don’t get to see them the way I do.”

He reaches dramatically for the aubergine, taking the opportunity to pin her to the counter with his hips. “Clearly, you need further study.”

Hermione smirks. “You are the arbiter of the testicles in this house.”

“I don’t know what that word means, but based on context: You can play with my balls whenever you wish, darling.”

“Your generosity is inspiring.”

“It’s been said.”

Hermione giggles and relinquishes the aubergine. “What are you planning to do with it, anyway?”

“Er.” Draco clears his throat. “No clue. I was as surprised to see it as you.”

Heat prickles over Hermione’s cheeks as she looks up at him. “...Roasted might be nice.”

“Yes,” he agrees quietly. “That could be good.”

Meeting his gaze feels like holding a live wire in her bare hand.

“Shall we make the salad?”

“Let’s.”

They turn to slicing and tossing. Hermione makes a careful chiffonade of the basil. They work silently, alone with their thoughts. Except that they are the same thoughts, so they aren’t really alone at all.

“Want to watch something?” Draco asks when they’ve served up their bowls.

“Yes, please,” says Hermione, together in this thought as well.

“We could start *The Sopranos* ?”

“God, no,” she laughs. “Something easy.”

Draco, a newly-minted Austen aficionado, puts on *Pride and Prejudice* (2005).

They eat and they watch, and Hermione drifts.

Her elbow is propped on a pillow that Draco insisted he buy for her. In fact, it was the product of their very first shopping trip together. Hermione is a notorious sofa sleeper and hasn’t seen the end of a movie on the first try since she turned thirty. Learning this, Draco determined that she needed a comfier pillow than the ones that had been chosen for the sole purpose of “looking good in the corners of the couch.”

(This only furthered her day-one suspicion that his penthouse was decorated by someone who did a four-year degree in the subject.)

Draco himself approaches sleep as he does all other things: deliberately. He does it only in its proper place and for several hours at a time. (Otherwise, “what is the point?”)

But despite her objections that his throw pillows were fine for a nap (even though they are a *bit* mushy, and the feathers are a *tad* pokey), he was adamant. And so, they came home with a semi-decorative square that doesn’t match the colour palette of the room at all but does have undeniably good neck support.

She dozes on it frequently.

It is this kind of behaviour which leads her mind down the perilous path of thinking that maybe he wouldn’t mind too much the look of rubber bumpers on the edges of the coffee table. Or the eyesore of a plastic gate blocking the entrance to the hall.

She sets down her empty bowl and sits back with her head leaned against Draco’s shoulder. His arm curls around her automatically. His fingertips graze her arm as he toys with the ends of her hair.

On the screen, Mr. Collins is giving his commendation to the boiled potatoes. Hermione is looking at a pack ‘n play in the corner that does not exist.

She turns her head to look up at Draco instead. Feeling this, he looks down. She lifts her chin in solicitation of a kiss. He obliges.

He draws back after a second, thinking she means it to be quick. On this thought, for once, their minds differ. Hermione puts her hand on his face and pulls him back in. Draco, as ever, obliges her.

He tilts his head to better accommodate the angle, opening his mouth to hers. Hermione feels the movement under her hand as well as against her lips. His cheek is still soft and smooth from the morning’s shave, the sharp line of his jaw defined against her palm. She wonders how someone can be so beautiful when seen with eyes closed.

She sits up further into the kiss, and his arm comes across to sweep along her waist. An ache blooms, breathtaking, inside her.

When Hermione moves to straddle his lap, Draco displays the first sign of hesitation. She rucks up her sundress over her knees, and his hands are slow to land back on her hips. He still returns her kiss, still lets her take, but for the first time since the first time, his movements are marked with restraint.

Hermione loops her arms around his neck and kisses him hard enough to sink his head back into the cushion. She puts her entire weight into willing him to trust her.

It's normally something hard-won in relationships, and—like most things—difficult to build in a whirlwind, but the man beneath her might be the most solid foundation on which she's ever stood.

He follows her lead like water along its natural course. She breathes into the press of his palms over her ribs. Sighs across the slide of his tongue. Settles in deeper at the shift of his hips.

His fingers sink into her hair when she begins on the buttons of his shirt. She gets it open, but there's a t-shirt beneath. She only has the presence to yank it up enough to get her hands below. Hermione melts into him, dipped wrist to elbow in warmth. The muscles of his stomach tense at the touch, and a constrained breath brushes her chin.

He reaches beneath the fabric of her skirt to help, dragging layers out of the way of her need. She sinks down onto him with his fingers still curled in the crotch of her knickers.

At the bottom, they share a harsh breath of relief. Hers in. His out. And in, and out, and in again.

The strap of her dress falls off her shoulder. Draco does not fix it this time.

He puts his hand on her face and his mouth on her throat. His lips paint the pattern of promise across her tenderest skin, and how, pray, is she meant to endure this level of devotion?

The answer comes swiftly: she isn't; not in one piece.

At the peak, there is another shared breath, a new relief, and the filling of her with potential.

Hermione makes tight fists in the back of his shirt, squeezes her eyes shut tighter still. But though she clamps down on the rising tide of emotion with all the force she can muster, the jolt of the first sob through her body cannot possibly go unnoticed.

Draco's hand slides under her hair to cup the nape of her neck as she fails to suppress the second and third as well.

He holds her as she cries for the way happiness can be sharp as a knife. It lays open the heart of her, cutting through stitches she hadn't consciously placed, until she's left with the sting of a fresh wound and the certainty that it is for the better.

It hadn't healed well the first time at all.

"I'm sorry," she hiccups into the puddle forming at Draco's neck. Her mascara is on the collar of his impossibly soft t-shirt that's probably made from organic fair-trade cotton and hand sewn by someone making a living wage.

"Don't you dare," he says and tightens his hold.

Hermione is no stranger to his strength—she'd once requested it herself, after all—but this is different from the bruising grip of desire or the crushing force of need. His arms around her now feel like something steadfast, unwavering, immutable.

Like he literally has her back.

It makes her want to be brave. As brave as he's been with her.

She leans back to look at him.

Even prepared for the gentleness of his expression, a fresh tear spills out of each eye. Draco brings his hands up at once to brush them away. Quickly seeing that this will not be sufficient, he leans forward to retrieve her napkin from lunch. He takes advantage of the shift to slip out of her and tuck himself away. The placket of his (formerly) neatly-pressed trousers takes the worst of the mess.

(He also pauses the movie so that she doesn't have to worry about Lizzy seeing her like this.)

Hermione lets him dab carefully across her cheeks, under her nose.

"I went on fifty first dates after my divorce."

Draco pauses his ministrations, his eyes flicking back up to hers.

Her voice sounds wretched and thick.

It suits the story.

"Most of them were awful, the rest were just okay. I still went on second dates with almost half of them."

"Thorough," Draco says, the corner of his mouth twitching.

That's a generous word for it.

"There were only a handful I saw more than that, and only one I—"

She breaks off, looking away. "Only one I thought I could see a future with."

Draco receives this information with utter stillness.

"We'd been seeing each other for a decent bit, and I had started to think..." She can't bring herself to say it. "Then, one day, we were in the middle of a perfectly normal conversation

when he said something so incredibly heinous that he might as well have slapped me. It was—so diametrically opposed to everything I thought I knew about this person. I was horrified that I'd even considered—”

She has to physically shake the thought away.

“Needless to say, I never saw him again. That episode scared me off for a good long while, but... eventually, I went back to the apps.”

Draco watches her shoulders sink on a sigh.

“It wasn’t that I thought it would be easy to find someone new to share my life with, but, I must admit, I was entirely unprepared for how difficult it would be.”

His head dips in the scantest gesture that could still be called a nod.

Hermione licks her lips, and they are chapping. “For my thirtieth birthday, the staff threw me a party at the bar, and I went home—alone—and cried so hard I made myself sick.”

“Hermione—”

The pitch of her voice climbs, and more tears fall, but she can’t stop now. It is her deepest shame, but she needs him to hear it. To understand. “I was beginning to think that maybe the divorce had been a mistake, and that I was being—punished for my selfishness.”

Draco takes her face in his hands and presses his lips hard to her forehead. “It is not selfish to want to be happy.”

She sobs again, swiping at her cheeks with both hands. “I thought I had thrown away my chance at having a family. That I should have tried harder—done anything—to make it work.”

“You did,” he says. “I know you, and I know that you did everything you could.”

No one has ever said that to her before. And even though he didn’t know her then, it helps.

She meets his eyes again, blinking through her clumped lashes.

“Later that week, I went to a clinic to see about using a—erm, you know—a donor.”

Draco’s nod is more pronounced this time, but a pinch of concern has formed between his brows.

“I picked up an informational pamphlet and a flyer on promotional pricing, and—they sat on my kitchen table for two weeks. I c-couldn’t bring myself to look at them. I knew what I wanted, but I just—I didn’t want to do it alone.”

Her voice breaks again. Every drop of moisture should be wrung from her body by now, but more drips off her chin anyway.

“I didn’t mean to give up. I didn’t even know that I had. Until you—you—”

Draco takes her back in his arms and hugs her tight. It’s just as well. Words can’t do it justice. She doesn’t know how to explain the mourning of something you never had. All she knows is that it is a desecration of the laws of physics—how heavy the weight of absence can be. Especially when it is only a few pounds.

Draco lets her get the rest of it out. He brushes the hair from her face and gathers it into a twist where it’s making the back of her neck sweat. He retrieves his own napkin from the table, and starts again on her face.

She hates to think of the state of it, but he doesn’t seem too bothered.

When her cheeks are dry, he leans forward and kisses one. It is a long, lingering press of uncomplicated affection.

Then he sits back.

His chin puckers with thought, and for a second, Hermione is gripped with dread at what he will say. She doesn’t think she can bear his pity.

“I always thought two kids would be nice,” he says simply. “A boy and a girl. Just for the full variety of experience.”

Hermione smiles.

“Although,” he continues. “Three would be a lot of fun, too. Then you get the whole spectrum of dynamics—eldest, middle, and baby. But then, of course, there is something special about just having one. It’s no guarantee that siblings will get along, and there are undoubtedly some experiences that can’t be replicated once you have more. And, I mean, look how we turned out.”

Hermione nods, her cheeks trembling with the effort of her grin. “I’d always thought two, as well.”

“Perfect,” Draco says, as though that settles it.

“Would you be disappointed without a boy?” she asks. “Having such an emphasis on legacy \_\_\_”

His head is shaking before she can finish the sentence. “Two girls would be—just lovely.”

“Okay,” Hermione says.

“Have you thought about names?”

Her heart does something acrobatic inside her chest. “Yes,” she says with a wibbly chin.

Draco nods, leaning forward again. He comes back with his phone this time.

“Shall we compare?” He opens his Notes app.

“Draco—” she breathes.

“I’ve added a few new ones recently. And—” He glances back up at her. “I quite liked Maeve, as well.”

She likes Maeve, too, but she has to ask, “New ones?”

He smiles. “Well, yes. It feels a bit different, picturing them now.” He brings a hand back up to cup her cheek. “They’d get your eyes, you know.”

Hermione’s lips part in shock. She supposes that, if she’d thought, she would have known that—in a secondary school biology, Punnett square sort of way.

But she *hadn’t* thought. Hadn’t let herself consider the way the traits might shake out in a child that is half her and half him.

The fact that he has—

“Draco.” His name comes out sounding vulnerable in her mouth. Like if he’s not careful, she might swallow him whole.

“Yes,” he says evenly.

“I don’t want you to feel—” She pauses, and then decides to start over. “I know that you know, with my age, there isn’t—an abundance of time. For me.”

He sets his phone aside, brows lifting in invitation for her to get to the point.

“I just hate the idea of you feeling—I mean to say, I know it’s a lot of pressure.”

“Ohh,” Draco says, eyes widening in sudden comprehension. “So, that’s what this feeling is? I kept wondering. Every time we’re together, it’s just this awful, inescapable, all-consuming *crushing*. It must be all the pressure I’m under.”

Hermione’s lips purse. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I,” says Draco. “Any more and I’ll start to go sparkly around the edges.”

She sighs, trying very hard to keep her lips from lifting. “If you love me, and you feel as though you’re my last hope, I think it would be very hard for you to say no.”

Draco scoffs. “Leaving aside the ‘if’ in that sentence—which I find quite offensive—how’s this for you? I want to be your last everything.”

Hermione finds it incredible that he can still surprise her.

“No pressure.” He *smirks*.

She breathes a laugh through her nose and then has to sniffle it back.

“Now.” He brings his palms down on her thighs in a little pat. “I’m glad you brought up diamonds.”

“You brought up diamonds.”

“Well, by God, someone needed to.”

Hermione tilts forward to laugh with her forehead against his shoulder.

Draco’s hands skim up over her back as his head shakes. “All this talk of children.” He gives a tsk. “You’re getting way ahead of yourself.”

“All we’ve done since we met is get ahead of ourselves.”

“Speak for yourself,” Draco says. He lifts his wrist to check the date on his watch. “*I’m* right on schedule.”

## Chapter End Notes

I really want to note that this scene is not meant to be any sort of social commentary on being a single and/or childless woman in her thirties. (The only commentary is on the atrocious dating scene, but I digress.) The emotions that Hermione displays and describes here are personal to her character, and are not meant to represent the way I think a woman *\*should\** feel in this situation. Hopefully that didn’t need to be disclaimed, but just in case. I am a firm believer that women can lead exceptionally fulfilling lives without experiencing motherhood. Signed, a woman in her thirties who might not experience motherhood.

Anyway! Thank you so much for reading, I really hope you enjoyed this one! 😊

Up next: Well, if you can’t see what’s coming next then I haven’t done my job at all 😅  
Hopefully not *\*exactly\** like you expect, but if you have your suspicions, trust them 😊

You can also find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

# Ten

## Chapter Notes

All right. Yes, the chapter count did go up. I truly have nothing to say for myself. (That's a lie, see the end notes for a \*lengthy\* explanation with spoilers from this chapter.)

But in my defense—this chapter is really two chapters in one already, so pls forgive 😊

Another super long one (15k 💀) filled with canon-referring indulgent fluff. Who said muggle AUs can't be magical?? 🤣

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting. This past week was rough for me, and your comments really make all the difference ❤️

Also on a technical note: for anyone else who gets bothered by these sorts of continuity things—the exact timing of this story is about to be revealed, and because I set it in August, it means that Draco is \*freshly\* 23 and Hermione is now turning 33 during this chapter. I figure this still works since in Ch 1, she is reacting to the difference in their birth years (which would still be ten years apart) and also because for some reason, since my late 20s, I am always mentally preparing for the year I'm about to reach—so much so that sometimes I will actually say the wrong age if someone asks me a few months out. So let's just say that by August, Hermione was already feeling very 33.

Okay, enough from me! Please enjoy ❤️

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

Draco waits until his tenth official date with Hermione to propose.

He isn't counting the times when he's simply gone 'round to hers or vice versa. And definitely not the sprawling sets of days in which they bounce back and forth between their flats with only the most serious of obligations pulling them apart. (Though those *are* his favourite.)

This will be the tenth time that they make a plan, set a time, and dress for the occasion.

It also happens to be Hermione's birthday, which makes for a rather brilliant cover, if he does say so himself.

He'd known since their first date that he wouldn't be waiting long to propose, but the specific timing had actually been borne out of a rather odd coincidence.

He was walking down Charing Cross Road when he caught a long flash of white fur out of the corner of his eye. The second glance of his double take confirmed the presence of a pure

white ferret right there in broad daylight, darting around the corner of a building. Draco followed at once, of course, pulling out his phone in hopes of getting a picture.

It was quick, slipping down a narrow alley and sliding between bins. Draco kept a close but careful distance. Finally, it paused, perching perfectly atop a low brick wall and even standing up onto its back legs to pose. Draco happily snapped a shot as it trained its black, beady gaze on him.

Hermione was going to freak out.

A door banged open in the distance, and the creature was gone, but Draco had gotten it. He tapped open the photo to see.

He blinked.

There was nothing on the screen.

Well, there was a low brick wall and the stack of crates beside it. But there was no ferret. There wasn't even a single white hair.

Slippery little bastard. Draco could have sworn—

He shrugged, pocketing his phone and glancing up at his surroundings. His brow furrowed as he took in the unfamiliar street. He'd never seen this part of the city before.

He looked up at the sign over the storefront beside him.

It read *Ollivander's* with the 'O' formed by the band of a diamond solitaire ring.

The paint on the sign was peeling, and the windows were so thick with grime that Draco couldn't see inside, but despite that... he felt an inexorable pull toward the door.

He half expected it to be locked and long abandoned, but it opened smoothly when he pulled, and a tinkling bell announced his arrival.

He squinted into the dim interior.

It was unlike any jewelry store he'd ever seen. Instead of rows of brightly lit, glass-fronted display cases, the large room was filled with towering wooden shelves of little ring boxes in dusty black velvet.

Draco started forward slowly, his neck craning to the ceiling. There had to be thousands. How would he ever begin to look through them all?

Then, there was a rumbling clatter as a man rocketed into view on a sliding ladder at his left.

The hiss of falling dust filled Draco's shocked silence at his appearance.

"Hello!" The man called, jumping down from his perch. There was a strained quality to his voice, as though he'd recently suffered laryngitis.

“Hello,” said Draco.

“What can I do for you, my boy?”

Draco swallowed. The man, Ollivander presumably, had a mass of wild grey hair and unsettlingly pale blue eyes. They gave Draco the impression of looking straight to the center of him.

“I’m—looking for an engagement ring.”

“Naturally! Naturally!” Ollivander cried. “Tell me everything.”

“Er,” said Draco, nonplussed at this request. “About the ring I’d like?”

“No, no, my dear boy. About your wife!”

Draco blinked again. He decided that, however eccentric this Ollivander may be, the man knew what he was about.

“Everything?”

Ollivander stepped behind a counter, gesturing vigorously for Draco to come forward. “Everything,” he confirmed. He opened a massive leather book, sending up another plume of dust. The pages were filled with dozens of complicated looking charts. A drawer in the counter rattled open, and Ollivander began setting out all sorts of strange instruments.

“Er,” said Draco again.

Ollivander affixed a pair pince-nez spectacles to the bridge of his nose and then blinked up at him.

“Start with the basics.”

“All right.” Draco began. “Her name is Hermione Granger.”

“Wonderful, wonderful,” Ollivander muttered, flipping to a page filled with a matrix of letters and numbers. He bent clear in half, using a slide rule to locate each letter in Hermione’s name and making note of the corresponding number on another chart with a preposterous feather quill.

“Birthdate?”

Draco gave it.

“Mhmm, yes. Born here in London?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t suppose you know the time?”

Draco looked at his watch. “Half past four.”

Ollivander flipped to another page, frowning before he glanced up. “Are you certain?”

Draco looked at his watch again.

“The time of her birth, dear boy!”

Draco started at the sudden shout. “Oh—no, I’ve no idea.”

Ollivander grumbled, a little rudely, to be honest. “Would be better to know.”

“I could ask?” Draco offered.

“No, no, there’s no time.”

Draco had no idea what was meant by *that*, but he began to sweat nonetheless.

“Is she particularly earthy to you?”

“What?” Draco croaked. His gut reaction, horribly, was to say *yes*. But—was Ollivander asking if he considered his girlfriend to be like dirt?

“She’s a Virgo, an earth sign,” Ollivander explained. “But do the traits suit her?”

“Oh—I—”

“Is she practical? Analytical? Anxious? Reliable? Modest? Loyal? Critical?”

“Er—” He couldn’t remember what came after reliable.

“On a scale of 1-5, five being strongly agree, one being strongly disagree.”

“Right. Okay.”

Ollivander began calling out adjectives, and Draco did his best to assign an accurate number. He felt that some really needed a more nuanced explanation.

“Quickly, my boy!” Ollivander cried. “You know her!”

Draco threw caution to the wind and answered rapid-fire.

“Now we’re getting somewhere!”

The pages of the book snapped as he flicked madly back and forth through them.

“How tall is she?”

Draco thought. “Maybe one hundred and—”

“Relative to you, son!” Ollivander jabbed a finger into his chest from across the counter, and Draco actually jumped back.

“Oh! Er—” He held up his hand sort of under his chin.

“Lovely!”

Draco got the impression that Mr Ollivander was having a grand old time. *His* hands were shaking.

“What did you notice first about her?”

Finally, an easy one. “Her hair.”

“A true romantic! What next?”

Draco thought. Under any other circumstance, it would have been her smile. But that first night—

“Her scowl,” he said fondly.

Ollivander threw back his head and hooted. “*Fantastic!*”

If the old man was this animated with every customer, no wonder his voice was shot.

He flipped to a new page. “Tell me about her face.”

“Her—face?”

“Yes. Everything.”

“Well, I mean, she’s beautiful. Very... symmetrical? Her eyes—”

Ollivander squinted up at Draco, unimpressed. “Do you love this woman or not?”

Draco scoffed. He loved her an inordinate amount, thank you very much. That was just the problem. He could describe a sunset, but if someone’s never seen one, there’s no hope of truly capturing it.

“If I could show you a picture—”

“A picture! Why didn’t you say! Let’s have it!”

Draco started again. He recovered quickly though, digging his phone out of his pocket. He swiped through a few options before settling on one from only a few days before. In it, Hermione is tucked into the corner of the sofa, her favorite pillow in her lap. There is a book on top of it, but it’s closed. She’s wearing a simple tank top and an easy smile, and she is bathed beautifully in golden hour light. He remembered how jealous he’d felt when he noticed it—that the sun got to kiss so much of her skin at once.

He held the phone out, and Ollivander snatched it up. “*Beautiful! Beautiful!*”

Draco had the feeling that was less a commentary on Hermione’s looks and more enthusiasm for the wealth of data contained in the image.

Ollivander set the phone flat on the counter and pinched to zoom in on Hermione's face. He used a pair of precision calipers to measure the length of her nose, the fullness of her lips, the space between her eyebrows. He peered through something that looked like a kaleidoscope, with a wheel of multicoloured stained glass on the end. He used it to assign a numerical code to the specific shades in her eyes.

"Now, her hands."

Draco nodded, scrolling to find another picture. Maybe one of their Sunday morning coffees, her fingers wrapped around the cup. But he got far luckier than that. He found one from an early morning in which she was none too pleased to be photographed. In the first shot, her palm was held up to block the camera. In the next, it was turned to cover her face. And it was her left.

Ollivander nearly swooned when he saw them. "Oh, well done, you!"

Though it was all rather absurd, Draco was pleased.

Ollivander overlaid a piece of translucent sketching paper onto the screen, and the quill made elegant swoops through the air as he mapped the lines on Hermione's palm. He compared them to an illustration of an ancient-looking tree of life, matching up the angles with the branches.

Then, he used the calipers to measure every conceivable aspect of Hermione's fourth finger. Draco swallowed. It began to feel very real.

"All right," declared Ollivander with sudden gravity. "Hold this."

A heavy metal instrument was placed into Draco's hands. He stared down at the rectangular mess of gears.

"Up to your eyes, boy!"

Draco jolted, and then lifted the box in front of his face. Indeed, there was a notch for his nose, and two holes to look through.

The blur of Ollivander moved on the other side, twisting and clicking levers into place.

"Now, close your eyes," he instructed.

Draco did.

Ollivander spoke in a hushed, dramatic voice. It sounded like rough wool. "You are down on one knee, the box is in your hand. She's said yes, oh joy! You slide the ring onto her finger, and—look! What do you see? One or two?"

Draco looked. A creaky spring opened alternating windows, and he was presented with two different diamonds. One was round-ish, the other pinched into points at the ends. Both were dazzling.

The windows closed.

“Er—could I see them again?”

“No!” cried Ollivander. “Trust your gut!”

“Oh, right. Erm, one, then.”

“Brilliant! One or two?”

Two new options appeared. A square. And a—round square?

“Two.”

“Yes! That’s it!”

It continued, more and more rapid, until all Draco had to go on was a flash of faceted light and the concept of a shape. The settings grew in complexity, with helper diamonds accumulating on the sides like barnacles. Draco tried to imagine them on Hermione’s hand, but what if she’d prefer something different? More classic, or more simple. Or—

“You’re thinking too much!” called Ollivander. “You already know the answer!”

Draco relented, letting his intuition guide him.

“That’s it!” cried Ollivander again. “It’s already set in stone!” He cackled madly at the pun while Draco gripped the counter, his stomach going funny.

And then—just as abruptly as it had begun, the process came to an end. Ollivander snatched the viewing instrument out of his hands, and Draco blinked the sparkles out of his eyes. He glanced down at the counter, expecting to see a small mountain of example rings.

But there was nothing. Just the furious scribble of Ollivander’s quill as he made his final tallies.

Draco gave up on attempting to figure out what the bloody hell was going on.

“Ohh,” said Ollivander, long and low. He was bent so close to the parchment that Draco worried the tip of his nose might smudge the ink. “Yes, yes...”

He gasped, straightening up so abruptly that Draco jumped back again. “Perfect!” he cried.

Draco watched with an expression of bemused shock as Ollivander tore out from behind the counter and down one of the long rows of shelves. He clambered onto another ladder and crawled nearly to the cobwebbed rafters. Draco cast a nervous glance at the wooden structure as it creaked and swayed under the ringmaker’s enthusiasm.

In the next blink, he was back, one of the countless black velvet boxes in his hand.

Draco’s breathing grew shallow.

Ollivander set out one final instrument. A thin stand was set in the middle of a rotating base, and at the top was a holder in the shape of a crescent moon, clearly awaiting a ring.

Ollivander flipped a switch behind the counter and all of the lights in the shop went out. There was the creak of the ring box hinge, a delicate clink of metal, and then a spotlight shone from the center of the holder, illuminating the ring from below.

Draco's heart lurched into his throat. There were three stones in the setting: a large center round, flanked by two smaller pear cut diamonds with their points laid along the band. It was simple, but interesting. Eye-catching, yet elegant. Impressive without being ostentatious.

It fucking looked like Hermione.

"It's—perfect," he breathed.

"It was waiting for you." Ollivander spun the display holder with a gentle finger, sending a cascade of sparkling stars over the interior of the shop. He must have dislodged some additional dust in his retrieval of the ring because Draco's eyes suddenly began to water.

He asked, "May I?" and then cleared his throat at the way it came out.

"Of course, my dear boy. It's hers. You can't very well leave it here."

Draco smiled at the thought and reached carefully to take the ring in his hand. It felt warm against his palm. Heated from the spotlight, Draco reasoned. But... there was also a kind of expectant energy to it. Like it knew this hand was not its final home.

Draco shook his head to clear it. What a strange idea that had been.

Ollivander handed over the box, and Draco slipped the ring safely inside. The ring box was shaped slightly different to a standard one: wider and flatter, and generally more compact. He didn't mind. It would make it much easier to conceal in a pocket.

It settled into the bottom of his front one with a pleasant weight.

Draco filled out a slip of paper with his banking information while Ollivander signed a certificate of authenticity.

Draco took out the box to look at the ring once more. "I don't know how to thank you."

Ollivander smiled, creasing the corners of his cool, clear eyes. "Honour it with great love."

The words sank into Draco's chest like a warm sip of drink, and he nodded, solemn with the charge.

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Invigorated by the makings of a plan, Draco stopped at the flower shop on the way home.

Pomona glanced up from a half-filled pot and actually clapped her hands together at the sight of him. A little cloud of soil puffed out from between her palms.

“Oh, goodie,” she said. “I was hoping you’d stop in. Otherwise, I would have had to call.”

“Oh?” said Draco, intrigued.

“Come see.” She waved him forward, bustling excitedly back into the attached greenhouse. “I’ve just got these in.”

*These* were a collection of plants featuring gorgeous, globe-shaped flowers in a rich wine red. Row after row of thin pointed petals curled around themselves to form a honeycomb of holes.

“Dahlias,” Pomona said. “One of my absolute favorites for fall.”

“They’re stunning,” said Draco.

“The dark red—a classic for romance, of course. I trust that will suit?”

“Yes, that will do nicely.”

“Any other top notes for the occasion?”

Draco’s hand found the ring box in his pocket. “Celebration.”

“Oh?” said Pomona, bustling some more on the spot. She raised a brow that was curiously excited yet not interrogative. “Lovely. I’ve got just the ticket.”

She cast another appraising glance at the dahlias before moving away. “Such a bold red... also good for confidence, you know.”

Draco gave a measured hum of interest at this anecdote.

“And.” She slanted a look back at him. “Dahlias in general—associated with embracing positive change.”

He smiled. “Here’s hoping.”

They spent the next ten minutes building out the rest of the arrangement, but Draco always gave Pomona final authority to take whatever liberties she saw fit. She was the expert after all, and she had yet to disappoint.

“And when are we delivering?” she asked as he swiped his card.

Draco double-checked the day of the week. “Friday next.”

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Thankfully, Hermione was more than amenable to the idea of Draco planning her birthday celebration. In fact, she seemed quite touched by the suggestion.

An auspicious start.

“But.” She propped her chin on his chest, tracing the arch of one rib with her fingertip.  
“Please, don’t go to any trouble.”

Draco’s head tilted against the pillow as he looked at her. What a thing to say about her own birthday.

“Have you considered that you might actually be worth a great deal of trouble, my love?”

Hermione blushed prettily. “You know what I mean.”

“And *I* mean, truly copious amounts of consideration and just—staggering levels of effort.”

She giggled and attempted to hide it in his side, but Draco was quicker. He hoisted her up onto his chest just so that he could roll on top of her. She squealed, the sound vibrating against his lips as he pressed kisses into the scrunch of her neck.

When she was suitably breathless, he propped his weight on one elbow to brush the hair back from her face.

“Let me ask you this,” he said. “Do I look troubled to you?”

Hermione blinked up at him through heavy lids. And after a moment, she shook her head.

Draco nodded, dipping his head to brush his nose along hers. “Then let’s say you stop worrying about that.”

“Okay,” she said.

And she did. Draco made sure of it.

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The thing about irony is, once you’ve realised you’re in its clutches, it’s much too late to escape.

It is Friday next, and Draco is in trouble.

“No, you’re not,” he says aloud, like any sane person would do. “Everything is going to be fine.”

All of his copious consideration had not clued him in to the fact that maybe it was not the wisest choice to decide to prepare Hermione’s birthday/proposal dinner himself.

She deserves a personal touch for the occasion, of course; it’s just that—Draco doesn’t have a lot of experience with cooking.

He likes shopping—the selecting and purchasing. And assembling! (A cheese board hates to see him coming.)

But actually transforming food from one state to another—e.g. raw, unsafe, inedible into delicious delicacy—is another story entirely.

He was never allowed to spend much time in the Manor kitchens growing up. And though Ondine never threw him out when he grew curious, neither did she advocate for him to stay when he was caught.

And so, faced with a recipe full of words like sauté and carmelise and braise, Draco did what any modern child does when faced with parental-shaped gaps in their education.

He turned to strangers on the internet.

He's learned that Hermione's favourite cuisine is Italian. She has never once turned down pizza, or pasta, or really anything with a chance of parmesan topping it. And so, he's making bolognese. And, masochistically, the tagliatelle to go with it.

The tutorial video he found is very detailed, but also... oddly sexual? He doesn't see how letting the egg whites drip suggestively off of two fingers will help with incorporating the yolks into the flour well. Nor why he should possibly need to spank the plump ball of pasta dough before he begins rolling it out.

(He still does both, just in case.)

He does appreciate the foresight of the bloke to demonstrate the techniques topless, though. That had definitely saved Draco's best shirt from an untimely splatter of tomato.

In a stroke of divine providence (that Draco will absolutely be claiming as excellent planning), the ragù needs to do its thing on the stovetop for three hours. (Even more high maintenance than Hermione's hair, this sauce.) Which leaves him a nice stretch of time to shower (again), and dress, and do all of the last minute preparations.

He tucks candles of all shapes and sizes into every available surface of his living space, even standing on a chair to place some at random in the three-dimensional light fixture his decorator had insisted on for over the table. With the lights off, the candles could almost be floating.

Pomona's flowers make for a stunning centerpiece in the table setting. He stands back, and then shifts the vase a centimeter to the right. Owing to her florist's sense of intuition (and likely Draco's excessive tipping), she'd also sent along an assortment of additional unarranged stems. He's placed these in glassware around the room, out on the terrace—

An alarm chimes on his phone, and he dashes back into the kitchen.

With a final stir, the ragù is ready for its last quarter hour. He runs through a quick checklist. Pot of water standing by for the pasta. Antipasto cooling in the fridge. The wine, breathing. Draco should emulate it.

He forces a deep inhale in through his nose.

Hermione knocks, and he chokes on thin air.

She's two minutes early!

He runs a nervous hand along the edge of his hair. No, he's not nervous. He's fine. Everything will be perfect.

(And she will still love him, even if it's not.)

He opens the door, and all of his anxieties slough off his shoulders like the fall of a heavy cloak at the sight of the, frankly, *outrageously* gorgeous woman on the other side.

"Hi," she says.

Draco pulls her into a tight hug. He cannot help it. "Hello," he breathes.

"Missed me?" she teases.

"Always." He could not be more sincere.

He releases her and takes the opportunity to look at her properly. She's wearing a delicate silk dress in a shade that flirts capriciously with both silver and gold. It is light and airy and yet still refined. The drape of it hints maddeningly at the curves beneath.

"You look... absolutely ravishing."

Hermione grins. "Why thank you."

Her gaze drops to his own ensemble, but instead of returning the compliment, a playful smile crosses her lips before she steps forward and presses them firmly against his own.

Draco gives a muffled hum of surprise as her hands curl into his shirt, pulling him down into the kiss. Her mouth opens under his, the tip of her tongue tracing his lip. This is not a simple kiss of greeting, but whatever it is, Draco returns it eagerly. He braces one hand against the doorframe as he leans into her.

When Hermione finally pulls back, she brings up a hand to wipe a smudge of gloss from his lips.

"Well," he says, breathless. "That was nice."

Hermione smiles that same sultry smile. "You're not the only one skilled at taking instruction."

To this, Draco says, brilliantly, "Huh?"

She drops her eyes pointedly to his front once more, and he looks down to see that he's still wearing his apron that says *Kiss the Cook*.

"Christ," he mutters, ripping it off over his head. "Theo."

Hermione nods as though that is all the explanation that's needed.

“Come in,” he says, finally, taking her by the hand.

“It smells divine,” she says as he tows her down the hall.

“I hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving, actually. I—”

She breaks off, and Draco actually feels her hand go slack in his grip. He turns to see her wide-eyed expression.

“Oh, Draco...”

He leaves her to survey the space, retrieving his suit jacket from where it had been draped safely out of the way over one of the chairs.

Hermione’s hands drift up to cover her mouth as she takes in the candles, and the flowers, and the—

*Shit*, he forgot the music. No matter; that’s easily sorted. He’s already made a playlist.

She turns easily back into him when he puts his arms around her. Her hands smooth up over his jacket lapels.

“This is more the effect I was going for,” he says.

“You are unfairly handsome no matter what you wear.”

He bends to smile against her ear. “Happy birthday.”

Her curls brush his cheek as her head shakes. “This is so beautiful.”

“It was no trouble.” He winks, just to see her blush.

“I didn’t know you were planning to cook.”

“Yes, well, that would have ruined the surprise.”

Her eyes land on the thick ribbons of tagliatelle draped over a pair of chopsticks propped between two canisters. “You know how to make fresh pasta?”

“Er, I do now,” he says. “And bolognese. Much more erotic than I’d anticipated.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Wait until you taste it.”

Hermione, clearly interpreting this as assurance rather than foreboding, says, “I can’t wait.”

“Well, you’ll have to,” he says, guiding her forward with a hand at her back. “First, it’s drinks on the terrace for the sunset, I think.”

“If you insist,” Hermione says, smiling wide.

They step out into the cooling day, and he leaves her at the railing to make their drinks. He’s assembled the ingredients for aperol spritzs on the bar cart, but as he pops the cork on the prosecco, he finds himself very aware of Hermione’s presence at his back.

“You know it’s quite nerve-wracking, preparing a drink for a bartender.”

“I shall be judging very harshly.”

Draco smiles as he fits an orange slice onto the rim of her glass. That was one of Ollivander’s adjectives that he’d struggled with. Critical of herself: 5; of others: not so much.

When he turns, Hermione isn’t even watching him. She has her face tilted up to soak in the last warm breath of the sky.

She takes the drink he offers her, and receives his toast, as well.

“To you,” he says.

Hermione’s nose scrunches at the attention, but she clinks her glass against his, and to his delight, murmurs a quiet *to me*.

Today, she will allow it.

They drink, and Draco raises his brows in expectance. Hermione licks her lips, appraising.

“You’re hired.”

Draco loves her tremendously.

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He brings out the antipasto to go with their aperitifs, and they sit on the patio loveseat and force it to live up to its name.

They munch on cured meats, marinated olives, and mozzarella pearls, and watch the city lights rally to chase away the oncoming night.

Hermione takes off her shoes and tucks her feet up onto the cushion, unmodest at the way the silk slips to pool high on her thighs. The brush of Draco’s thumb leaves a shiny streak of olive oil on her calf.

“Is this dress new?” he asks.

She nods around the last sip of her drink.

“You went shopping without me?” He pretends to pout.

“Well, since it is my birthday, I thought I’d treat myself.”

“I like treating you.”

She smirks. “That would have ruined the surprise.”

Hermione leans to set her glass on the table, and Draco catches her hand when it’s empty. It’s cold from the ice, her fingertips damp with condensation. He brings them to his lips.

The heat of his touch against the chill of a mid-September night makes goosebumps break out over Hermione’s skin. His eyes feast over them, that texture of arousal. He follows them up the length of her arm to one freckled shoulder, and then down to where the thin dress does nothing to conceal the tightened skin of her chest.

Her palm cups his jaw when he kisses her wrist.

“You look so good it feels like *my* birthday,” he murmurs.

Hermione lets out a sigh, moving like liquid as he draws her in. His hands close over fine fabric and, even finer still, skin. The sauce will keep, he thinks, kissing her. The recipe had assured that the flavours, like so many things, would only get better with time.

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When they make it back inside, Draco turns on the flame under the water. “It’ll only be a few minutes.”

Hermione hums a response, admiring the table setting. He takes advantage of her distraction to start the music. He raises the volume slowly, letting the melody fade into the air as though it had been there all along.

Hermione runs her fingertip over a pointed burgundy petal. “I love dahlias,” she says.

Draco smiles. “I’m glad.”

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When the pasta is cooked and the dinner is served, Draco’s staggering levels of effort are immediately rewarded the second Hermione takes her first bite of the meal.

Her eyes dip closed, and she brings a hand up to cover the indecent sound she makes.

“Good?” he asks.

“So good,” she says.

Draco hopes his blush isn’t visible in the candlelight. He busies himself with trying a bite, and is relieved to find that it is actually really fucking good.

Hermione is generous with her compliments throughout the meal—the music (once she notices it), the food, the wine.

(The wine ought to be good. Draco had to trade Blaise a week at the Malfoy ski chalet for access to his mother's wine cellar. Everything in the cavern under the Manor is French.)

Draco receives the praise with varying degrees of casualness, but he suspects he cannot fully contain how pleased he is that she's pleased.

In between the acclaim, they chat, and talking to Hermione is easy, like it always is. Draco hears about her day—the saleslady who helped her at the boutique and the cute dog she saw walking home—and he thinks about talking to Hermione forever.

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She excuses herself to the loo after the main course, leaving Draco the perfect opportunity to slip into his bedroom. He pulls open the drawer of his nightstand and retrieves the ring box from the back of it. It slips neatly into his pocket and sits there, unnaturally weighty with expectation.

When Hermione returns, her lips freshly glossed, Draco is serving up dessert. He forms a quenelle of hazelnut gelato for each of them—made this morning in his new ice cream maker (an exciting and dangerous acquisition.) They each also get a square of tiramisu (store bought; please be serious.)

Hermione's tiramisu gets a candle.

She smiles down at it as he places a flute of prosecco at her right.

“Shall I sing?”

Her head tilts. “I've never heard you sing before. Do you have a nice voice?”

“No formal training, but I think I could warble my way through the birthday song. Too bad I never got that piano in here.”

Hermione's laugh makes the flame flicker. “I think we can let the thought count on this one.”

“As you wish.”

She spends another moment smiling at him before looking down at the candle again. Then, she closes her eyes.

Draco's eyes are open, but he is wishing, too.

She blows out the candle, and he waits for her to try the first bite. Her brow creases when she tastes the gelato.

“Hazelnut?”

“Yes,” Draco says. “It's your favourite, isn't it?”

“Yes, but—” Her head shakes. “How did you know that?”

“You ordered it the night I took you for falafel.”

She blinks. “Did I?”

“Yes. You were excited they had it. Pistachio would have been your second choice, you said.”

Hermione stares, spoon held aloft.

“Is it—all right?” he asks. “I had to go to three stores to find the extract.”

“You made it?” Hermione’s voice cracks. That happens to Draco sometimes, too, when he has dairy.

“Yes. Did you know there was a machine to make ice cream?” He laughs, shrugging. “It’s quite fun. Well, except for when you accidentally scramble the eggs and have to start over. That’s less fun. But the churning part—”

“Draco.”

He cuts off his rambling. Her gelato is melting. “Are you sure you like it?”

Hermione seems to come back to herself. “Yes,” she says, taking another spoonful. “I love it.”

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As Hermione seems to enjoy the dessert as much as she had dinner, Draco finds that his relief at the success of the meal is being rapidly counteracted by renewed nerves at the next part of the plan. He watches her with reckless abandon, committing each moment firmly into his memory.

“Please, stop that.”

Draco pauses with his prosecco halfway to his mouth. “What?”

“The way you’re looking at me.”

He looks at her. She dabs delicately over the small smile on her lips with her napkin.

“How am I looking at you?”

“Like something’s different.”

Draco gulps, caught.

Hermione folds her hands in her lap. “You’re thinking I look older.”

He lets out a relieved gust of air, finally taking a sip of his drink. “I think you look even more beautiful than you did when I left you this morning.”

She grins. “Liar.”

“Well, I do think that,” he says. “But, you’re right, that isn’t what I was thinking at that particular moment.”

“What were you thinking, then?”

“I was thinking that I’d like for you to dance with me.”

Hermione’s lips part in surprise.

“You were?”

Draco stands, setting his napkin on the table before crossing to stand beside her. He offers her his hand.

Her teeth press into her lower lip as she takes it.

Draco leads her to the center of the living room, surreptitiously notching up the volume of the music via the phone in his pocket. Despite the inherent romanticism of the language, it had taken a bit of searching to find something in Italian more interesting than what you might hear in a hotel lobby but not quite so passionate as an operatic aria.

The current track features soft, sweeping strings and a smoothly crooning voice. Oh—and a saxophone. Perfect.

He wraps his arm at Hermione’s waist. She drapes hers along his shoulder. He pulls her in close, and they begin to sway.

Draco has spent a not-small amount of time in very close proximity to Hermione recently. Hugging, kissing, holding her while she sleeps. He knows the feel of her in his joints—the curl of an elbow, the bend of his knee. Ollivander had wanted to know Hermione’s height relative to him. In this moment, it makes perfect sense.

When Hermione speaks, her voice is hushed against his shoulder. “We haven’t danced together either.”

Draco dips his head to press his lips to her temple. “What do you know. It’s a perfect fit.”

Her lungs empty into the crook of his neck.

“Draco, this—tonight—it’s the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me.”

Draco’s eyes drop closed. He knows that she means it with the purest of intentions. That she isn’t really comparing. And Draco usually isn’t thinking about it either—the experiences she’s already had with someone else. But on a night like tonight, it is harder not to wonder.

Until she leans back to look up at him, her eyes soft and glinting gold in the candlelight. With her looking at him like that, it’s easy to imagine that they are the only two people who have ever existed.

“You deserve the world,” he tells her.

He watches a flutter of resistance cross her features as she struggles to accept that.

“You make me feel like that’s true.”

He leans closer, letting his words whisper across her lips. “Good. Because it is. And I would very much like to be the one to give it to you.”

Her smile catches against his top lip. “You’re off to a good start.”

“Time for the next step then, I suppose.”

He takes the ring box out of his pocket.

To his relief, Hermione looks pleasantly surprised but not shocked at its appearance.

“Draco,” she says. “You did not need to do all of this and still get me a present.”

Draco chuckles. “Good, because this isn’t a birthday present.”

He opens the box.

Oh. *There’s* the shock. Well, nothing for it now.

He lowers down onto one knee. Hermione follows onto hers.

“Er. Hermione—love. You’re supposed to stay standing.”

She grips his wrist, staring at the ring. “What are you doing?”

“Erm, I thought it would be obvious.”

“I thought—” Her hand comes up absently to touch the hollow of her throat.

Ah. She thought it was going to be a necklace inside the box. At the moment, he’s rather wishing that it was.

She turns wide eyes up to him. They flit rapidly back and forth between his own. “You’re proposing?”

“I had thought to, yes.”

“Oh, my god.”

“I’m suddenly less inclined.”

“Draco—” She puts her hands on his face. “My darling. I love you so much, but... it’s only been a month.”

It’s been a month and eleven days, but somehow he doesn’t feel that distinction will serve him at this juncture.

“It’s too soon,” he surmises.

“It is much too soon.” She says the words like an apology. Like she would do anything for them not to be true.

“I see.”

Hermione looks back at the ring. Her heart breaks right in front of him. “Oh, Draco, this is... It’s so beautiful. It’s *stunning*.”

“You like it?”

Her head shakes as though that word is unsuitable. “I couldn’t have imagined something more perfect.”

He’d gotten that right at least. “It was made for you.”

She glances back up. “What? When did—How was there time?”

“I’m actually not certain how it worked,” he says. “And there’s a chance I sustained a head injury chasing a ferret and the entire thing was a coma dream, but—” He shakes his head. “It’s a strange story, but it’s yours.”

Hermione doesn’t seem to have a clue what he’s talking about, which is fair. He’s glad they’re already sitting down; he’s feeling slightly faint.

He wishes someone would turn off that bloody saxophone.

“Are you quite cross with me?” he asks.

Hermione’s head snaps up. “What?” she gasps.

“For making you say no. And ruining your birthday.”

She looks positively horrified. “Draco, I’m not saying no.”

“You’re not?”

“No!”

“What are you saying, then?” Certainly not yes.

“I’m saying... not yet.”

Draco sits with this for a moment. Something in his chest loosens. “Not yet.”

“It’s just...” Hermione chews her lip. “I’m trying to be reasonable. Things have been wonderful so far, and it’s not as though I think they won’t continue to be. Wonderful, that is. But it’s just been so little time. Things could crop up.”

Draco feels himself nod. “Right. Of course.” Things could crop up. Like wheat. “Like what?” he asks.

“Like...” Hermione appears to cast about, and he’s heartened at the realisation that this is a concern she thinks she *ought* to have, rather than one she actually does. “Differences in... beliefs. Personal philosophy.”

Draco believes he loves her. He’s not sure he has a personal philosophy. If he does, he’s certain it’s adaptable.

“I haven’t even met your parents,” she adds.

Draco’s spine goes rigid. This concern, he can handle head on. “I don’t need their approval, Hermione.”

“It’s not about approval,” she says. “They’re your family. And if I put on this ring, then we will be family, too.”

That’s true. He hadn’t thought—

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.” She touches his lips, her expression crumbling. “Please don’t apologise, Draco. You haven’t ruined anything.”

That assurance is actually quite helpful in getting his lungs to work again.

“Should have led with the speech,” he says. “If you’d heard it, there’s no way you’d say no.”

Hermione gives a damp chuckle. “That’s probably true. And I’m not saying no.”

“Right.” He looks down at the ring. “I suppose it’s too late to claim this as a birthday gift?”

She laughs in earnest, wiping her hand under her nose. “Christ. That damn candle. Talk about ‘be careful what you wish for.’”

Draco’s heart pole vaults out of his stomach. “You—? Hermione—I’m getting mixed signals here.”

Her hands are still on his face, just touching him nicely. She worms forward a bit, inching into his lap.

“Draco,” she breathes. “Please don’t think that I don’t want to be with you. I do. I’ve never wanted anything more.”

“That’s—” He swallows. All of his organ systems seem to be coming back online. “If you could say a bit more—in that vein, please.”

Hermione presses her lips to his cheek, his jaw. “Are you familiar with the phrase ‘too good to be true’?”

He breathes a laugh. “I’ve heard it, yes.”

Her lips graze across his on the way to his other cheek. “Sometimes—like when I saw you down on one knee—I feel like I’ll startle awake to find this has all been the desperate heart-dream of a very lonely woman.”

The ring box snaps shut with a muted thump as Draco drops it to put his arms around her.

She leans back to meet his eye again. “I would marry you tomorrow if I thought it was the right thing, Draco.”

He can see the conviction clearly in her face, but his mouth betrays him. “You would?”

“Yes.” He smiles as she kisses over his brow. “And I think we would probably be the two happiest people who ever lived.”

“Yes. Most likely,” he agrees. “But... something could crop up.”

“It could. Ten years is a long time.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“I know,” Hermione whispers. “But it’s still there.”

Draco cannot argue with that, so he turns his cheek back into the brush of her lips.

“But I’m not going anywhere,” she says. “Are you?”

“No,” he promises.

“Then, can we just—take a little more time? Just to make sure?”

Draco had just promised to give her the world. Surely that includes all the time in it, too. His fingers slide into her hair as he cups her cheek. “When you say yes to me, Hermione, I want it to be the easiest thing you’ve ever done.”

A soft sound leaves her mouth at that, making the kiss that follows feel bruising in comparison. His head rocks back on his neck as her lips close over his.

“You make it very hard—to be responsible.”

Draco smiles against the bite of her teeth. “*You* make it very hard—” Her weight shifts over his lap, and the rest of his sentence ends up in her mouth. He lets it go. The first half is true enough.

“Thank you,” Hermione pants against his lips. “Thank you for the beautiful dinner and that beautiful ring and all of the beautiful words I know you were going to say.”

“They were going to be good,” Draco agrees.

“I know,” she says, her grip on his collar turning desperate. “I know. Draco, it’s—it’s still the most romantic night of my life.”

Those words hit him like an electric shock. Followed quickly by the realisation that the night is not over.

The fabric of her dress bunches against his hands as he lays her back onto the living room floor.

Hermione’s head falls to the side as he puts his mouth to her throat, and when he looks back up, her eyes are on the ring box.

“Maybe—” she says, and then cuts herself off.

Draco grins against her jaw. He’s getting warmer already.

Hermione’s hands dig into his hair as he moves lower. He hadn’t gotten to hear a *yes* from her when it counted, but, luckily, he knows another way.

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Pomona does nothing to stifle her surprise at seeing him back in the flower shop so soon.

“Good morning,” she says, expression wary.

“Morning.”

“Need something?”

“Yes,” says Draco. “Perhaps a bit smaller than the usual. Unassuming. Hopeful, but with maybe an undertone of apology.”

Pomona’s kind eyes narrow into slits. Her hands curl into fists on her ample hips.

“Just the slightest undertone,” he clarifies.

“Hm,” is all she says.

Draco pinches the bridge of his nose. “I also need something for my mother.”

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A lightly amused expression is playing over Hermione’s face as he secures his mother’s arrangement behind the driver’s seat.

“Something to say, Miss Granger?”

“Not a word.”

“It’s going to be a long drive, then.”

She giggles a bit, leaning her head back against the seat to smile at him as he gets in. He picks up her hand from her lap and kisses the back of it before settling it under his own on the gearshift.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“They’ll love you.”

Her eyebrow shifts to indicate polite doubt.

“They will. Even if you weren’t everything any parent could dream of for their son—which you are—there’s a trump card at play.”

“Oh, and what is that?”

“*I* love you.”

Hermione’s teeth rake over her lip as she smiles. “Still?”

“Even more.”

It sounds like a line, but it’s the truth. The events of the previous night only served to demonstrate with crystal clarity that when it comes to their relationship (and eventual marriage), Hermione wants to Get It Right. How could he not love her more for that?

She spreads her fingers to lace them between his on the leather. “I love you, too.”

“I know you do.” He gives her a squeeze and shifts into gear.

As much as he’s dreading what awaits, Draco is glad of the excuse for a drive. His hand settles into place on the wheel, the tires humming smooth over the pavement. It’s only a few minutes, though, before Hermione’s smirk wears him thin.

“I’m going to have to insist that you share with the class,” he says.

“It’s nothing,” she says. “Just—well, when I mentioned meeting your parents, I didn’t expect you’d plan it for so soon.”

“You should know better than to give me an action item if you don’t want it delivered on.”

Draco cannot make time pass any faster, but this, he can do.

“Touché.”

“Besides, my mother was so pleased I think I heard her swoon over the phone.”

“Maybe that was at the news of you bringing home a commoner.”

“Nonsense. Narcissa Malfoy has the broadest mind you could possibly find amongst a group of exceptionally narrow-minded people.”

(Also, he'd already told his mother about Hermione two weeks ago.)

Hermione giggles again, and Draco takes his eyes off the road to look at her. She's wearing a modest tea-length dress in a dusky blue, and her curls are pinned up into a tight twist. He reaches over to touch one of the loose pieces at her temple.

“Don't worry,” he tells her. “They will do such a thorough job of embarrassing themselves that anything you might *mistakenly* perceive as a misstep on your part will be vastly overshadowed.”

Her head tilts gently into his touch. “Thank you.”

“You may want to reserve that for 24 hours.”

She smiles. “I think it's going to be fun.”

“That is very cute of you.”

Draco puts his hand back on the wheel. His fingers drum lightly against it.

“So,” he says after another minute.

Hermione's head turns from the window to look at him.

“I was thinking... Since we have a couple hours to kill, maybe there's something we should discuss.”

Her brows raise in his periphery. “What did you have in mind?”

“Could you tell me your personal philosophy?”

She snorts a laugh.

“So that I can figure out what I should say for mine,” he teases.

“Christ,” she mutters, face in her hands. “I'm such an arsehole, I can't believe I said that.”

“I am genuinely curious what you meant.”

“No more than I am. I can guarantee you that.”

“Well, let's talk it out, then.”

Hermione turns a bit in her seat to face him. “All right. I suppose I meant—just a general outlook. How you approach life. For instance, you seem to adhere to the belief that things will generally work out for the best.”

Draco nods. “Yes, I think that's true.”

“Which is notable,” Hermione says. “Because—well. Things have not always worked out for you.”

He knows, even without looking, that she means Astoria. “There was nothing I could do about that.”

“I know,” Hermione says. “But the fact that it hasn’t made you fearful about life—or angry —”

“I was angry. At the time, I was furious at how unfair it was. But, no, it didn’t make me think that life would always be unfair to me. If anything, it made me appreciate it more. How fleeting it can be.”

Hermione puts her hand over his on the shifter. “I think that’s quite remarkable.”

Draco’s thumb brushes her pinky. “You seem to adhere more to the belief that good things come if you work for them. Earn them. That—good things take time.”

“Yes,” Hermione says quietly. “I think I do.”

“I don’t think that makes us incompatible.”

“No,” she says. “Because you’re patient, too.”

Draco laughs. “Don’t make me out to be a saint, Hermione. I was raised with extremely little control over my circumstances, and I learned very early on to accept what I couldn’t change (which was everything), and to simply make the best of it. And even though I know that, you could probably still take advantage of it. If you were manipulative, I mean. I would tolerate a lot.”

“I would never,” she says seriously. “Not intentionally.”

“I know.” He does.

“I have to think you were brought up quite differently, though.” He looks sidelong at her. “I’m imagining a very early independent streak.”

Hermione nods, smiling to herself. “Yes, my parents were fairly hands off. I was—well, precocious, I suppose, but with plenty of the negative connotation. I’m afraid I would have been quite insolent if they’d insisted on being authoritative.”

Draco amuses himself with an image of a miniature Hermione, arms crossed and foot stomping. “Stubborn little thing, were you?”

“A bit,” she admits.

It’s hard to remember exactly, but Draco reckons he’d rated that adjective a 3.

“Maybe our kids will end up with a good mix, then.” He glances over, checking whether that was an overstep.

Hermione regards him dreamily. “Maybe so. Or, we’ll end up with one total push over and one little tyrant.”

“As long as we know who to blame.”

She gives his arm a playful swat, and then curls her hand around it.

When Draco looks again, her face is set with grim concentration.

“What is it?”

She blinks, glancing over at him. “Well, I know you weren’t voicing a real concern about me trying to manipulate you, but maybe we should talk about any actual deal-breakers that we have.”

“Deal-breakers?”

“Yeah, you know—transgressions that we wouldn’t be able to forgive in a relationship.”

“Oh.”

“It’s fine if you need to think about it.”

“All right. I’ll think.”

He does. No wonder she looked grim.

“Do you want to say yours?” he asks after a bit of unsuccessful imagining.

“Sure.” Hermione adjusts her posture, turning business-like. “Well, the first goes without saying, but I suppose I will, just for thoroughness: any violence toward myself, or a child, or an animal. Next would be any infidelity—emotional or—”

“Jesus,” Draco says. “Hold on. I—I did it wrong.” Worst he could come up with was leaving a wet towel on the good leather chair.

“I’m not saying I think you would do these things,” Hermione clarifies. “That’s why they’re deal-breakers.”

“Right. No.” How bad were these dates she went on? “I guess—I just have a hard time picturing you doing something we couldn’t come back from.”

“Okay, then. How about something you wouldn’t want to have to come back from?”

That—feels more reasonable. Draco thinks again.

After a minute or so, Hermione offers up another scenario, less business-like this time. “I know we haven’t had a serious argument yet, but if we did... If you ever said something intentionally hurtful—like bringing up an insecurity of mine or something sensitive I’d told

you in confidence—if you used it solely for the purpose of being cruel, I would have a very hard time forgetting it.”

Draco feels sick at the idea, and how specific it is. He takes her hand again, holding it tight. “I would never.”

Hermione nods, a little shakily, and Draco considers the fact that her prohibitions on violence did not include ex-husbands.

“Did you want to say one?” she asks.

He clears his throat. “Right, well, I agree about infidelity. Any and all—please don’t make me consider it further.”

“Done.”

“Aside from that… I really don’t like the idea of you talking about me to someone else in a way that you wouldn’t say to me personally. If I’ve upset you, or frustrated you, I’d much rather you told me directly. I mean, I understand venting, but—I guess what I really hate is the idea of someone else knowing—or understanding—your feelings about something better than I do.”

Draco glances to the side to make sure that was intelligible. Hermione’s brow is furrowed.

“Maybe that’s unreasonable.”

“No, no,” she says quickly. “I understand perfectly. I don’t think I would have done that, but I’m glad you told me.”

Draco nods.

“I feel similarly about lying,” Hermione says. “It’s not just whatever truth you’re concealing, but now you’ve also made a fool out of me for believing and behaving as though what you’ve told me is true.”

“Yes, exactly,” says Draco. “I would feel like an idiot being around one of your friends and then finding out later that they knew something about our relationship that I didn’t.”

“Exactly.” Hermione nods. “Good one.”

“Hey, thanks.”

She moves his hand into her lap. “Thank you for talking about this with me. I know it isn’t fun.”

“Sure,” Draco says. “I’m only slightly nauseous. Sweaty. Hands clammy—you can probably feel it.”

She laughs, patting his damp palm. “Maybe we can table it for now, and just agree to bring it up any time either of us wants to share a new one.”

“Right. Good. That won’t make me insane at all.”

“I didn’t mean in direct response to—”

“I know.” He picks up her hand and kisses it. “I’m teasing. I want to know anything you want to tell me whenever you want to say it.”

Hermione smiles. “Okay.”

She reaches behind his head to sift her fingers through his hair. “How about an easier one?”

Draco blinks slowly at the scratch of her nails. “That would be wonderful.”

“What makes you feel the most loved?”

Draco breathes a laugh, turning to look at her. “The most? Hermione, darling, that won’t be easy at all.”

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When they arrive at the Manor, Draco parks in the circular drive in front of the main doors of the house.

Hermione steps out of the car slowly, eyes wide as she scans over the estate. She clutches his mother’s bouquet to her chest.

Draco is getting the bags when they are greeted, strangely, by a shout from across the lawn.

He turns to see his father striding toward them in his riding boots and breeches. His hair is loose, windswept around his shoulders, and his stock is untied, his white shirt open to the third button. The aura is giving very much Fabio, and Draco is immediately annoyed.

“Hello, Father,” he says grudgingly, shaking the hand he’s presented with. “How are you?”

“Fine, fine. Good day for a hunt.”

Draco’s expression sours further. The impression that his father could not leave off from assaulting the local wildlife long enough to prepare for their visit is not a favourable one.

(He’ll need to remember to clarify to Hermione that no actual foxes are harmed by the hounds during the proceedings; the only thing meeting an unfortunate fate at the hands of his father’s LARPing is a convincingly scented plushie.)

“How was the drive?”

“Fine,” Draco says shortly. “Father, may I introduce Hermione Granger.” He puts his hand at Hermione’s back. “Hermione, I’d like you to meet my father, Lucius Malfoy.”

Lucius steps forward and takes Hermione’s hand in both of his.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Hermione says. “Thank you for having me.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Lucius says. “You are most welcome.”

Looking at the two of them shaking hands, Draco is suddenly struck with an exceptionally horrid thought. The difference in age between his father and Hermione is only a few years more than the one between Hermione and himself. He feels his fingers curl into the fabric of her dress.

Hermione nods her thanks again, and Draco tells himself that the faint blush on her cheeks is due to nerves and not the fact that the peek of dark chest hair in his father’s open shirt is reminiscent of Mr Darcy in the mist.

Why is his chest hair so dark, anyway? Draco’s isn’t. And why is his shirt so billowy? Doesn’t he have a tailor??

“Hermione,” Lucius repeats, unaware of his many offenses. “*The Winter’s Tale?*”

Draco becomes freshly annoyed. Aside from the inanity of the comment, and the knowledge that Hermione gets it all the time, (and the fact that Draco didn’t know the reference when he met her), it makes it seem like his father is only just learning her name when Draco himself has spoken to him about her.

“That’s right,” Hermione says graciously.

Lucius sniffs. “Not my favourite of The Bard’s works.”

*Christ.* Draco’s lips purse with pain.

Hermione smiles with teeth. “Nor mine.”

Lucius gives a small *hmpf* of amusement at this.

“Where’s Mother?” Draco interjects. “I’m sure she’d be perfectly mortified to know that you’re conducting introductions on the lawn.”

Lucius shifts his gaze to Draco, and it is neither steely nor penetrating. “Too right, you are, Draco,” he says with a nod of mock deference. And to Hermione, “Please, this way.”

He holds out an arm to indicate the stairs, leaving Draco to get the luggage. Hermione slides him a slightly shell-shocked look as his father hovers a hand at her back while she ascends the steps, and Draco thinks that, actually, he won’t clarify about the foxes.

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As soon as they’re inside, Narcissa appears in a flurry of frantic exuberance.

Instead of waiting for a formal introduction, she swoops down upon Hermione, exchanging the bony bump of a kiss at her cheek for the arrangement of flowers in an odd sort of half-hug.

Draco observes the scene with a persistent wince. His mother brings to every interaction the sort of neurotic energy that one would so hope for in a soothing, maternal figure.

Hermione's mouth opens several times to speak. Perhaps to reiterate her thanks for the invitation. Or to say something complimentary about the foyer. Or, you know, to say anything at all. Her efforts come to nothing.

But the unrelenting pour of salutation from Narcissa, at least, conveys that she was aware of Hermione's existence beyond the preceding moment. So, that's something.

Narcissa's gaze snags on Lucius out of the corner of her eye, and it seems that the state of him is objectionable enough to render her speechless. A feat, even momentarily.

"Lucius," she says, looking perfectly mortified. Her hand twitches up as though she'd thought to cover their guest's eyes.

Draco finds himself sympathetic to this impulse.

"What *are* you wearing?" she asks without waiting for answer. "Can't you go and dress."

Lucius repeats his indulgent nod. "Certainly. My apologies." He gives them a formal bow, making his *blouse* drape open over his pecs. Draco actually throws up his hands a bit.

"If you'll excuse me," his father says.

Draco will, and none too soon.

Narcissa gives a small, awkward laugh when he's gone. "Well, come, come!"

She ushers them forward, insisting upon their desperate need for refreshment after their long journey.

(Two and a quarter hours with traffic.)

"Just leave those, darling," Narcissa says over her shoulder.

Draco drops the bags by the foot of the stairs to be magicked up to their rooms by an invisible member of the staff.

A pair of disembodied hands emerge from the hall as they exit the foyer, taking the bouquet Narcissa hands off to be put into water.

They take tea in the drawing room.

No sooner has Draco's arse touched the cushion than a footman appears in the doorway with the flowers freshly trimmed and arranged in a crystal vase.

"Thank you, Dobbs," Narcissa says as he sets them on the table. She looks over the bouquet at Hermione. "So thoughtful of you."

Dobbs is well on his way to merging back into the scenery when Draco calls out. “Dobby.”

He can practically see the little man’s overlarge ears twitch with amusement at the use of Draco’s childhood nickname for him. He turns, and Draco gestures beside him. “I’d like you to meet the woman I’m seeing, Hermione Granger.”

“Of course, sir,” Dobbs says in the same squeaky voice as always. He crosses the room with a nod, and Hermione stands to take his hand. The slight widening of his round eyes is subtle, but Draco sees it.

“Dobbs has been with our family since before I was born,” he tells Hermione.

“Oh, it’s very nice to meet you, Mr Dobbs.”

Dobbs bends his neck over her hand, making the top of his bald head glint under the chandelier. “It is an honour to meet you, Ms Granger. I hope you enjoy your visit, and if there’s anything at all that you need, please, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” Hermione says. “That’s very kind.”

He takes his leave with another nod. Hermione takes her seat.

Narcissa regards them from the other side of the table like they’ve just done an impromptu bit of circus performing.

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Lucius joins them before long, and he’s managed to guide all of his buttons successfully into their holes this time.

Draco sits, and watches his parents make their best attempt at refraining from subjecting his girlfriend to an interrogation.

Unfortunately, as far as attempts go, it’s really a rather poor one.

He nibbles at a small cake, and tries to deflect the attention where he can. He isn’t able to do much.

Fortunately, Hermione is a talented conversationalist, and she suffers the brunt of their burning curiosity with remarkable poise.

Draco hadn’t mentioned her age. On principle. (Also, what would he have said? Bringing it up specifically would have given it much more significance than he feels it holds between them.)

But this is the most Draco has ever watched Hermione speak to someone that isn’t him, and as he does, a new appreciation is dawning over him.

She has such an expressive face. She becomes fully immersed in every story, the emotions bright and clear on her face like she’s living it in the moment. Even when she’s listening, she

does it intently. Her brows never get a rest.

This is one of the things Draco loves most about her, he's sure, even if he hadn't explicitly noticed it before.

And then he looks at his mother. And he can *see* her attempting to count the lines on Hermione's forehead like the rings on a tree.

His father says something that makes Hermione laugh. Her eyes crinkle at the corners with genuine mirth, and when her smile fades, the faintest echo of it remains.

Narcissa sips her tea, running sums.

Thanks in part to a religious application of SPF, Draco can't imagine Narcissa putting Hermione higher than 27 based on her appearance alone. But in speaking—her wisdom and her worldliness tell a longer story.

He regrets not mentioning it now, just to save her from the clumsily probing questions that are sure to begin any moment.

"How is Daphne doing, Draco? Do you still see much of her?"

Draco blinks at the subject change. A pang of guilt goes through his gut for that last unfair thought. "Er, yes. She's doing great. I see her all the time. Though, not as much as Hermione does."

Narcissa's head swivels back to Hermione. "Oh?"

"Draco recommended Daphne for a position at the bar," Hermione explains. "She runs it pretty much single-handedly these days."

"Oh," says Narcissa again. Draco wonders if she's ever been inside a bar. "How—nice."

"She's been a lifesaver."

Narcissa's smile goes soft at the edges. "She is something special, isn't she?" Narcissa sighs. "After everything that happened—" She glances at Draco. "Well, a part of me always thought..."

She trails off just in time to leave everyone at the table without a single doubt of what exactly it was that she *thought*.

"Cissa," Lucius says lowly, confirming that Draco is not having an aneurysm, and that his mother did actually decide to take the conversation in the direction of other potential women he could be dating.

"I know it's inappropriate to say," she says, waving a hand like that absolves her.

"For more than one reason," Draco points out, pointedly.

Hermione, thank fuck, appears highly amused behind her teacup.

His mother, clearly stricken with a sudden bought of verbal diarrhoea, decides to double down. “You two just grew so close, I thought maybe—”

Draco’s cup clatters against his saucer. The saucer clatters against the table. Draco turns his entire body to face his mother. “Aside from the *excruciatingly* obvious reason why that *never* would have happened—Daphne prefers eating cunt.”

Narcissa gasps. “Draco!”

His father joins Hermione in smirking into his beverage.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Draco says. “I thought we were saying things we know are inappropriate.”

His mother gives a little scoff, and then, richly, looks at Hermione. “I’m so sorry,” she says in apology for Draco’s outburst.

Hermione shakes her head. “It’s quite all right.”

Draco looks at Hermione, too. He sighs in a way that communicates his deep remorse and also reminds her that this was her idea. Hermione smiles: message received.

Lucius finishes his tea and gets to his feet. “Perhaps Hermione would like to see the library.”

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Draco walks alongside his father as Narcissa leads the tour several paces ahead. She points out the genre of each section and any notable items in that portion of the collection.

More than once, Draco sees Hermione grip the wooden edge of a shelf to steady herself as Narcissa explains the provenance of some brittle-backed tome or another.

She casts a wide-eyed glance back at him, and Draco gives a little nod of moral support.

Narcissa loops her arm through Hermione’s elbow, towing her away before she’s had a chance to process the several stacks dedicated to folklore and fairytale.

“How’s work?” Lucius asks.

“Fine,” Draco says. “I brought in a new seven-figure client last week.”

“Well done.”

“I’m thinking of quitting.”

“Oh?” Lucius says mildly. “Any particular reason?”

Draco shrugs. “Shifting priorities.”

His father nods, and they catch a glimpse of Hermione's skirt disappearing down an aisle up ahead.

"This is the first time I've seen you alongside someone not selected by your mother," Lucius says.

"Yes." Draco had endured a few dinners with society girls at the Manor, but he's never brought anyone home before.

"You must be serious about her."

"I intend to marry her, if she'll have me."

Lucius nods again without breaking stride. Clearly, he had assumed as much.

They walk on, and Draco hears Hermione fail to stifle a gasp over something in the section on early meso-America. She comes into view again as Narcissa drags her up the stairs to the second level. She has a heavy volume bound in red leather tucked under one arm, unable to part with it.

"She was married before," Draco says. He's not really sure why.

Lucius does pause at that. Draco stops beside him. His father's expression leads him to think that he wasn't brought up short by this revelation, but rather, he wants Draco's full attention for what he says next.

"You easily could have been, as well."

That's—true. Draco had never really considered how close he'd come to being a widower.

"You know you don't need my approval, Draco."

"I know."

On the day they buried his betrothed, Lucius had offered him neither condolences, which would have been unwelcome, nor regrets, which would have been unwise. Instead, his father had given him a promise: that from then on, Draco would have complete freedom in the choices he made about his life.

Lucius smiles. "But if you want my opinion, then I think she seems lovely."

"She is."

"And is she good for you?"

"Yes. And I think I'm good for her, too."

Lucius puts his hand on Draco's shoulder. "Then I wish you two the best."

"Lucius!"

They look up to see Narcissa leading Hermione back down onto the main floor. Hermione has a rather glassy-eyed look about her. A few curls have sprung loose from the twist to cluster at her nape.

“Hermione would like to see the gardens before it gets too late.”

Hermione glances sideways, making it abundantly clear that this is the first she’s hearing of this desire.

Lucius breathes a laugh beside him. He gives Draco’s shoulder a squeeze before letting go.  
“But of course. Right this way.”

Hermione takes the arm he offers her, verging on pitiful in how powerless she is to determine her own fate. Draco tried to warn her.

As they turn to leave, Draco calls out. “Hermione—darling.”

She glances back over her shoulder.

“Please, remind me later,” he says. “I have something that I need to tell you. It’s really very important.”

Hermione grins, digging her teeth into her bottom lip in an attempt to contain it. “Me too,” she tells him.

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“—just lovely. Really lovely, darling.”

“Yes. She is.”

Narcissa’s fingers dig into Draco’s arm as they crunch over the gravel path winding through the formal garden.

“Such presence of mind. And she’s *so* well-read.”

“She owns a book store, Mother.”

“I know. How enterprising.”

“She didn’t start—oh, never mind.”

Draco watches his father indicate each of his rose varieties, listing their pedigrees and their quirks. Hermione listens—you guessed it—intently, nodding and giving a frown of interest when he points out the darker hue edging the petals of one hybrid.

“She has a grace about her, you know,” Narcissa carries on. “Such self-possession. She’s so... fully formed in her person.”

Draco, who was bracing for a backhanded *mature*, loses his footing. The phrase ‘fully formed’ turns his stomach a bit. As though his mother was expecting him to turn up with a foetus.

“She’s 33,” he says, putting both of them out of their misery. “As of yesterday.”

Narcissa turns wide eyes on him. “Who?”

“Mother.” He scolds her with a wince.

“Oh, well, that’s none of my business!”

“Too true.”

They’ve reached Lucius’s pride-and-joy, and Hermione leans in close to observe the characteristic whorled pattern of the petals. She crosses one arm over her middle, and the other hand comes up to touch absently at the hollow of her throat.

“Her birthday was yesterday?” Narcissa asks. “Oh, Draco, couldn’t you have gotten her a necklace?”

Draco presses two fingers into the center of his forehead. Hard.

“What a marvelous suggestion, Mother. Thank you.”

“If you’re serious about her, I suggest you don’t dawdle.”

Draco pulls them abruptly to a stop. “I fear you are losing your gift of subtlety, Mother.”

Her chin tucks back in shock. “I’m only saying—”

“Yes, but I do not need you to tell me that. I know how it works.”

Narcissa blinks huge, doubtful eyes, and Draco realises that his mother does not think he’s fully formed.

“Right,” he announces to the group at large. “I need a drink.”

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Draco makes it through dinner only throttling his silverware.

Hermione, light of his life, no—angel sent from on high, withstands the evening with considerably more aplomb.

They’ve barely made it through the salad before Hermione’s failed marriage gets brought up—which means his father told his mother, and his mother decided it was suitable dinner conversation—leading Draco to set down his wine glass and ask his parents, point-blank, “Have you both actually lost your minds?”

“Draco,” Hermione laughs, laying a hand on his arm. “It’s fine.”

He looks at her long and hopefully hard enough to communicate that she is under no obligation to discuss anything she does not wish to. And also that they can leave at a moment's notice, she only need say. His nostrils flare to indicate that they can also burn the house down on the way out, if she gives him the go ahead.

But Hermione has a grace about her, you know. So, she simply smiles and gives a brief but honest overview of her first marriage and how it ended. All the while, her thumb tracks a slow figure eight over the bones in Draco's wrist.

His parents listen and give sympathetic nods at the appropriate intervals, and in a masterful bit of timing on the part of his beloved, his mother has a (tiny) mouthful of food when Hermione finishes her telling.

This leaves Lucius room to ask how Draco and Hermione met.

The skillful pivot in subject, along with the apologetic glance his father sends him across the table, quenches the worst of Draco's plans for fiery revenge.

"Oh, erm." Hermione looks at Draco, blushing faintly. "Well, Draco came in to the bar one night for a drink. And we chatted. And he... made it known that he would like to take me out sometime."

"Oh," Narcissa says. Her brows twitch in an effort to furrow as she attempts to picture the scene. "How... romantic."

"She said no the first time," says Draco.

Hermione's lips part on a sharp breath, and Draco freezes.

*She said no the first time.*

His mother says something in reply to this, but Draco doesn't hear it. His eyes remain locked on Hermione, and after a few seconds, her mouth curves up into a tentative smile.

Draco feels his own face shifting to match it.

He's not giving up. He already knew this, of course, but the reminder that it had taken a bit of persistence to get past her defences in the first place cements it. Look how far they've come since then.

Draco shifts his hand under Hermione's touch, turning his palm up to clasp her fingers between his own.

A haze of contentment settles over their corner of the table like a shield, and it is strong enough to deflect all of his parents' audacity.

At least until dessert.

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Draco stomps up the marble stairs to the second floor, Hermione trailing behind him, and finds that his mother has put them in one of the two-bedroom guest suites. Hermione's bag in one room. Draco's in the other.

Something cracks in Draco's resolve, and he is fairly certain that it was the last straw.

"Fuck's sake," he says, letting out a slightly manic laugh. "I swear to Christ she does it just to test me."

"Draco—" Hermione says quellingly.

His head shakes. "Why do they think they can—*ugh*. It drives me *fucking*—" His fists clench at his sides.

"Darling." Hermione takes his hand, and it is all he can do not to pull it away from her. He can feel himself regressing, turning straight back into a petulant child. He hates to have her see him like this.

"I am so sorry, Hermione."

"It's really fine," she insists. "It's bothering you far more than me. But—parents are like that. I get the same way around mine."

Draco highly doubts that it is the same, but he appreciates the sentiment nonetheless. And the fact that she really doesn't seem bothered. Other than on his behalf.

He takes her face in his hands. "Why are you so good? You don't have to be so good all the time."

She smiles, gripping his wrists as he kisses her forehead. "Lifetime of practice."

Draco lets out a breath against her hair. "I just—can't stand to see someone disrespect you, and because of me—"

His teeth grit together. He's hot all over. *Itchy*. He wants to unzip his skin and start fresh.

"Draco, why don't you have a shower."

His eyes drop closed on a relieved laugh. Yes. He'll have a shower.

"Why are you so brilliant?"

"Lifetime of—"

He kisses her.

Hermione sighs into it, looping her arms around his neck.

"God, I love you. You were supposed to remind me to tell you."

"I'm reminding you now," she says.

So she is.

After some time, Draco pulls back with effort. “Want to come in with me?”

Hermione gasps. “And risk my virtue?” She gives his chest a little slap. “How dare you suggest such a thing. I will be in my room.”

“Are you sure it’s not just because you know I’ll need it cold?”

She smirks, stepping out of his arms and closing the door behind her before Draco can start on his buttons.

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When he’s dried off from the shower, Draco pulls on a pair of grey joggers.

He goes to Hermione’s room and opens the door without knocking. She’s stood at the foot of the bed in an emerald green satin nightie, tucking her dress into her bag.

She gasps again, and grabs the throw blanket from the bed, clutching it up to her chest.  
“Draco! My virtue!”

Draco crosses the room slowly, debauching her with his eyes. When he reaches her side, he hovers his hand over the back of her thigh, just feeling the heat of her skin before he touches her. He lets his fingertips trail up to where the bottom curve of her arsecheek is not quite covered by the short hem. Hermione reaches up to grip his arm, her eyelashes fluttering closed.

“My love,” he says, low. “I hate to tell you this, but your virtue is hanging on by a thread.”

Up a little higher, he finds a positively tiny pair of matching knickers.

“Or perhaps,” he amends. “A g-string?”

Hermione gasps a laugh at the sudden snap of elastic. “I see you’re feeling better.”

“Mm,” he agrees. “And not a moment too soon. We have somewhere very important to be.”

She arches a brow. “Oh?”

“You know better than anyone that a library looks different at night.”

Hermione’s smile is blinding.

“Come on.” He pulls her by the hand.

Hermione baulks, digging her feet in to the plush rug. She looks down at herself. “Like this?”

“Don’t worry, Mother will have taken her tranquiliser by now.”

“Draco!”

"And my father is much too boring and decrepit with age to be doing something so daring as wandering the halls past ten o'clock."

"Decrepit?" Hermione repeats. "Is that what you would call it?"

"Why? How would you describe my father's physique?"

Hermione's mouth snaps shut, sensing the trap. "Did he have one? I didn't notice."

"Good girl." Draco looks down at her bare feet. "You may put on socks if you wish."

She does wish.

Hermione pads silently next to him as they make their way down the hall. She peers around the first corner. "What about... someone else?"

"Well, all the servants are chained up in the dungeon, so."

"Draco Malfoy, you are incorrigible."

"I know. Now, come along."

Her resistance diminishes the closer they come to the library, until, when they make the final turn, Hermione drops his hand to skip forward. She places both palms on the ornate wood door and looks back at him.

Draco waits just one extra second to appreciate the rabid anticipation on her features.

"Go on, then."

She gives an excited squeal and pushes open the door.

The enormous room is dark, save for the moonlight streaming in through the south windows. Draco lights a taper and fits it into a brass holder for her.

"For ambience," he says as he holds it out.

Hermione's head shakes as she takes it, making shadows dance over the glowing bronze of her skin. "Too good to be true," she says.

Draco pinches her bum, earning him a yelp.

"To make sure you aren't dreaming," he explains.

Hands full of candle dish, she resorts to kicking his shin, but she's only wearing socks, and it doesn't hurt at all.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he says. "Pick one."

Hermione whimpers.

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It takes her nearly an hour to make a selection.

Draco isn't complaining. Every time she stands on tip toes and stretches to reach a higher shelf, the nightie pulls up to tease him with her perfect arse.

It's chilly in the library—all those windows. But Hermione is too preoccupied with her search to be deterred by the occasional shiver. If Draco were a gentleman, he'd offer her a jacket, or his shirt. But thankfully, he has neither. The soft fabric of the nightdress clings wonderfully to her pebbled nipples.

Her hair is loose down over her back now, but it's kinked in some places—the curls a little wonky from the pins.

Draco follows her from aisle to aisle, nursing an erection she hasn't even noticed.

A respectable pile of contenders gathers on the table, but the eventual winner is a small book bound in dark blue leather. The silver gilt on the cover simply says *Sonnets*.

"I'm feeling romantic," Hermione explains, a little sheepish.

"Splendid," says Draco.

He leads her to an antique chaise, where she sits. She sets the candle on the table beside her, and then glances up at Draco. It occurs to her that he does not have a book.

"You're not going to read?" she asks.

"No."

She gives a little laugh. "You plan to just watch me?"

Draco grins. That's one way to put it. "Yes," he says, getting to his knees. "I'm going to watch you—from my favourite vantage."

Hermione's throat bobs with a swallow. "I see."

Draco puts his hand on her chest and pushes her gently back into a recline. His fingertips get distracted on the way back down.

Hermione's ribs expand under his touch as her back arches into the cushion. "Oh..."

Draco's mouth goes wet.

It's a heady sense of power, being able to reduce her to vowels with the slightest touch.

Knowing what a little squeeze will do.

"Ah—"

Or a rolling pinch.

“Fuck—”

Her legs spread as she slides lower on the sofa, and Draco presses his thumb onto the triangle of fabric over her front.

The skin of her inner thigh is whisper-soft against his cheek.

“Draco—”

“Oh, I forgot to mention. I’m also going to listen.”

He rubs a slow circle over her covered clit, and Hermione lets out an uneven sigh.

“You want me to read—aloud? While you—?”

He puts his lips to the satin and hums his agreement, making her jolt. “What can I say? I am also feeling romantic.”

“Oh, god—”

“Ready when you are, love.”

He returns his lips to her thigh, kissing gently over the crease to demonstrate that he will be waiting for her to begin before he does. Hermione sucks in a shaky breath.

The spine of the book crackles a bit as she opens it.

Draco pulls her knickers to the side.

Overall, she does quite a good job of keeping her voice steady as she reads. Draco takes it easy on her, starting slow, and he can hear clearly where all of the lines break.

His fingers dig into her thighs as he takes her inner lips into his mouth, caressing them with his tongue. He’s grateful for the excuse to draw this out; he could spend all night with his mouth on her cunt. He traces the tip of his tongue along her entrance, and her breath shudders in her chest. A line about a soft breeze comes out light as air.

Draco closes his lips over her clit, and the rest of the stanza finishes in a considerably higher pitch. He reaches down to subdue his cock with a firm squeeze around the tip. There’s a damp spot forming on his joggers.

Breathy moans are starting to punctuate the poems at irregular intervals, and her increased wetness is making it very difficult for Draco to adhere to the whole slow and steady thing. Hermione’s hips begin moving in a consistent rhythm against his face. Her speaking rhythm—suffers for it. After the second fumbled beat in as many lines, Draco says, “I thought this was iambic pentameter.”

“Fuck you,” she pants.

He smirks. “Good shout.”

Draco sucks her clit back between his lips. The book falls closed on Hermione’s stomach as she digs a hand into his hair. “Oh, fuck—like that.”

He knows, but it’s nice to hear, anyway.

“Yes, Draco. *Ohh*, it’s so good.”

He moans against her, and her hips curl upward as the last of the tension tightens.

“Fuck, baby, it’s too good. I-I’m gonna come.”

*Shit.* Draco has to put a hand back on his cock.

Waves of relief break over her with a sharp cry, and he gets to taste every one of them on his tongue.

She comes down with a series of soft hums, watching him lavish her through heavy lids.

Draco sits back, at length, and wipes a hand over his chin.

“Mm,” Hermione says.

“Indeed,” he agrees. He laughs when he sees that she’s managed to keep her place in the book with one finger.

Draco stands, shoving his joggers down out of the way before sitting beside her on the sofa.

“Oh,” she says placidly. “Are we fucking now?”

“No,” says Draco, gathering her up. “But it is quite cold in here. I’d appreciate it if you would warm my cock.”

“Oh. Certainly.”

She doesn’t move herself, but she allows Draco to hoist her up and over his lap in a loose sway of limbs. She smiles serenely down at him as he brushes the hair back over her shoulder. He loves how she gets directly after an orgasm—all liquid relaxation and content compliance.

He takes his cock in hand, indulging in a few strokes before getting a grip under her thigh and guiding her up onto him.

Hermione puts a hand on his shoulder, her mouth dropping open as she spreads around him.

Draco groans into the incredible softness of her satiny cleavage.

“Fuck, Hermione—”

She slides down over him like molten rapture, making it impossible to believe that Draco had been so stressed out only earlier that evening. Surely, he was mistaken. That was some other poor sod. For no one with access to this level of bliss would ever waste a single second being put out.

“Gods,” he says as she sinks fully onto him. (More than one must take credit for her.)

She lets her thighs relax a bit more, and then sucks in a little gasp at the pressure against her cervix.

Draco’s eyes roll as he grips her arse for dear life. “Fuck *me*.”

“It’s so deep like this,” she says in unnecessary explanation. As if he can’t feel the head of his cock pressed snug against her.

“Hush, or I’ll come.”

Her cunt pulses around him. “*Fuck*, it feels so full when you’re still.”

“Christ—where’s your book?”

He needs her mouth full of sonnet before she makes him lose it entirely. The tight grip of her is already almost more than he can bear.

“Oh, here.”

She opens it behind his head, propping her forearms on the wooden trim of the chaise. The slight forward shift makes Draco’s cock throb.

She begins reading again, and Draco lets his eyes fall closed at the rhythm. That doesn’t last long, though. Her tits are right in his face, after all.

His hands slide up under the nightie, and Hermione reads the same line twice.

Draco tries to keep still. He really does. But his hips are being extremely disobedient. Hermione’s head lolls at the subtle movement, the space between her words stretching until she’s practically whispering them against Draco’s ear.

The nightgown slips off one shoulder, and Draco takes a rosy nipple in his mouth.

“*Fuck*, I’ll come,” Hermione warns.

“No,” Draco says, belying his own words with a deep thrust. “Not yet.”

Her nails dig into the back of his neck as her walls flutter around him.

Draco slides one hand under the g-string.

Hermione clenches around him with a gasp, and the book falls to the polished floor with an ear-splitting crack.

“Oh, my god,” Hermione moans.

“Yeah,” Draco says, fucking up into her again.

“Someone will have heard that.”

“It’s a big house,” says Draco.

“What if your father comes to check—”

“You had better not be thinking about my father right now.”

Hermione’s jaw drops on his next thrust, wetness seeping around the base of Draco’s cock. “I should think you wouldn’t want him to see me like this.”

That is an extremely compelling argument. Although...

Draco’s fingers grip her arse hard enough to bruise. “Maybe I’d like him to get a clear picture of just who you belong to.”

“Christ, Draco,” Hermione says, but he can feel her tightening up again.

“Possessiveness not a deal-breaker?” he asks, teeth on her collarbone.

“It bloody should be,” she pants.

Draco closes his mouth over the inside of her breast and sucks a red mark into the tender skin.

“Ah—”

“That’s a shame,” Draco says. “Cause it makes me so fucking hard knowing that you’re mine.”

“God.” Hermione’s thighs work as she rides him harder. “I am. I’m yours, Draco. I’m—*oh fuck*—I’m gonna come.”

Draco is, too. He’s powerless to the feeling of her falling apart on top of him. Her cunt clenches mercilessly around him as her orgasm hits, and he lets himself follow her over the edge into ecstasy.

Her hips grind down onto him, working her clit against his abdomen, and Draco fills her with pulse after pulse of his come.

Hermione stills gradually, panting, and he watches as she presses an unconscious hand to her belly. Draco’s cock throbs with one last desperate attempt.

“Shit,” Hermione breathes, kissing him. It’s haphazard and a little sloppy, and Draco cannot get enough.

“I love fucking you,” Draco says.

Hermione laughs loudly at this for some reason. Her head shakes when she sees his bemused expression. “Straight to the point. I like it.” Her lips press against his again. “I love fucking you, too, baby.”

Draco’s fingers tighten reflexively on her back at that word.

Hermione glances down between them. “Hm,” she says.

“Yeah,” Draco agrees. “If I get come on this chaise, my father will skin me alive.”

“Picturesque.”

“Hold on.” Draco scoots to the edge of the cushion and then gets a grip under Hermione’s legs. He stands, walking them the short distance back to the large mahogany table.

“Show off,” Hermione says.

He winks, laying her back onto the dark surface. He rifles through the drawers on the side, past pens and bits of paper and—a feather quill, what the fuck? Draco frowns, but in the next drawer down, he finds a clean cloth in a soft-sided case. Probably for cleaning his father’s spectacles.

He uses it to clean Hermione.

“Will someone miss that?” she asks.

“No one I’m worried about.”

Hermione smiles, reaching up to touch his chest. “You look very like him, you know.”

Draco snorts. “Maybe in twenty years.”

“A girl can dream.”

Draco pinches her bum again.

Hermione’s smile fades into something more pensive as she looks up at him. “Seeing you with him, it—” She breaks off, and Draco pauses, listening. “It makes me feel like I’m getting away with something.”

Draco’s brow creases with confusion, and Hermione sits up on the table. “I have no doubt that you will be—an exquisite male specimen at 33, and 43, and if I had met you then, I’m sure I would have fallen for you just as fast.”

Draco doesn’t know exactly where she’s going with this, but he likes the direction so far. Hermione’s hands sweep down over his arms.

“But then—to also get you now, and have all of this time, too—” She bites her lip. “It feels like a steal.”

Draco cups her face in his hands and kisses her. “There is no one I would rather give my time to.”

Her hand presses over his heart as she kisses him back.

“And who knows,” he adds. “Maybe my chest hair will darken up over time.”

Hermione laughs, scratching through the golden curls in the center of his chest. “You know, they say blondes have more fun.”

Draco bends over to press her back onto the table with a grin. “You know, I think they might be right.”

## Chapter End Notes

Sooo, here's the thing 😅 Even though this chapter is very obviously two chapters (the proposal and the parent visit), I couldn't bring myself to post them separately. In fact, I had planned to post everything from the proposal to the end of the fic at once (hence the chapter count set at 10). And I planned it this way because (and this is a \*me\* problem) I was worried about people commenting negatively on Hermione refusing the proposal without having the whole HEA to follow it up. And that's lame, I realize. It didn't worry me enough to change the story, because I'm going to tell it the way I think it needs to be done. But! People tend to really love and want to protect Dracos, and this one is such a cinnamon roll that I almost can't blame someone for being mad at Hermione even though she's right!!! So, this is a compromise. There are lots of things in the second half of the chapter that I included specifically to back up her initial refusal. I hope it's enough to soften the blow lol.

I also want to say a bit about my process here and what I was attempting to achieve. I opened the chapter with Draco mentioning that it's their tenth date to anchor the reader in the fact that this is happening FAST. We don't know exactly how long that is, but presumably not very long. But with everything that follows, I wanted the reader to be just as absorbed in the planning and excitement as Draco is. That is why I went into so much about the magic of the ring selection and the detail of the meal prep (also cause it was fun), but I wanted it to be immersive in his expectation of how things were going to go. That way, y'all are right there beside him in the rug pull moment when she's clearly not expecting it. Then! Hermione tells you concretely that it's only been a month!!! I was hoping this would be a back to reality feeling for the reader. Like, oh shit. That \*is\* so fast. It's fast for anyone, but with the age gap on top?? I think Hermione's response is very valid (clearly, I wrote it lol 😅).

There is also another factor at play here, and that is all the fun stuff that I wanted to do after the initial proposal that wouldn't have happened if she just accepted right away, so yeah! It is also (selfishly) plot informed. That would have been clearer if I'd been able to post the whole ending all at once, but this one is LONG ENOUGH 💀

This is a very roundabout way of saying thank you for coming on this journey with me and for trusting me with these two very precious individuals. Their HEA is coming I SWEAR. (Really they've been living it since Ch 4, but you know what I mean).

This fic has been SUCH a labor of love, and I hope you love reading it as much as I have writing it 

You can also find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

# Eleven

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of the love on the last chapter. I know it was a long one, so it means so much to me to have people still go through and pull out all of their favorite lines 😊 It's truly the best.

Another looong one to wrap up (shocking, I know). Please enjoy, and I will see you in the end notes for many tearful proclamations ❤️

TW for the fellow emetophobics: there is vomiting in this chapter, but it is for comic effect and not too graphically described

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

It takes Draco considerably longer to find *Ollivander's* again without the aid of the ferret.

When he'd searched online for an address, he was unable to find any trace of the shop. He retraces his steps as closely as he can from memory, but keeps ending up at the same dead end of a solid brick wall. He turns away from it, once again, and takes out his phone.

"It was Ollivander's, wasn't it?" he says aloud, wondering if he has the spelling wrong.

A sudden whoosh of cool air rushes past him, and Draco turns instinctively to block his face. When he does, he finds that the wall behind him is gone.

He actually brings up a hand to rub at his eyes. Ollivander's shop is *right there*, just across a street that definitely was *not* there before.

He looks back down at his phone to check where exactly he is, but now the map won't load. No signal.

Draco shrugs. Better not to think too hard on it.

The bell over the door tinkles as he enters, and this time, Ollivander is already at the counter, bent over his giant leather book.

He glances up at Draco's entrance, and then jumps back with a theatrical gasp of shock. He presses his palms flat back against the shelf behind him like he'd looked up to find Death himself darkening his doorstep.

"Er, hello," says Draco.

"What's this?" says Ollivander.

Rude, Draco thinks.

“She said no??” croaks Ollivander. “I knew she wasn’t wearing it, but I thought maybe you were just taking your time! I-I’ve never had a no!”

“Er, no,” says Draco. “She didn’t say no. But what do you mean you knew?”

Ollivander falls forward to brace his hands on the counter. Parchment crinkles under the desperate curl of his fingers. “What did she say?”

Draco would really like to press the whole Ollivander knowing she wasn’t wearing the ring thing, but the old man looks two seconds away from keeling over. “She said… not yet.”

Ollivander’s mouth drops open, and then he throws back his head to give a hoarse shout of laughter. Some of the parchment ends up in the air.

“Ho ho!” he shouts. “Tricky customer!”

He waves Draco forward as vigorously as he had the last time.

“From the top!” he cries, pulling out the instruments again.

“But—the last ring—was perfect. I thought it was, you know, the *one*.”

Ollivander pauses, his eyes narrowing. “Is your Hermione just *one* thing, always, all the time? Couldn’t she be ten different versions of herself and still be perfect?”

Draco blinks. “Well, yes, I—”

“You’d better sit,” Ollivander interrupts, making a ridiculously dramatic gesture of invitation. When Draco glances beside him, there’s a bright red plush stool at the counter.

“Where did—?”

“Drink this.” Ollivander shoves a tiny china cup into his hands. It’s filled with a dark tea, murky with floating leaves. “And we’ll know where to begin.”

Draco huffs a small laugh of disbelief… and then sits on the stool. “Cheers,” he says, and drinks.

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With the new ring tucked safely in his pocket, Draco turns to go. He pauses with his hand on the doorknob, looking back at Ollivander.

“Say, you don’t happen to do necklaces, do you?”

Ollivander does not, which leaves Draco to brave the bright and shiny world of conventional jewelry sales.

Instead of holding a vial of pink liquid up to his nose and attempting to identify the specific notes of Hermione's scent in it, he just walks past the display cases and looks for something he likes.

It doesn't take long.

They sleep at Hermione's place that night, and Draco turns off his alarm. He still wakes in the early morning out of habit, which is handy because that's when Hermione sleeps the soundest. He retrieves the necklace from the pocket of his trousers draped over the chair in her bedroom.

It takes a bit of finagling to get the clasp secured without snagging her hair, but he eventually manages.

He straightens the round diamond pendant until it's sitting perfectly framed under her collarbones. He kisses one, and only then does she shift a bit.

Draco lays back down beside her and allows himself to drift off once more.

Hermione's quiet rustling wakes him a couple hours later. Her leg brushes against his beneath the sheets.

"You're still here," she murmurs.

"Rest day," he says.

"Mmm." She turns onto her side to snuggle into his chest, forming a lovely line of cleavage under the diamond.

Draco smiles and presses a kiss to the top of her head. "Good morning."

"Morning."

He drags his fingers up along her spine, kneading between her shoulders.

Hermione makes a noise between a moan and a sigh. "Hold that thought," she says. "I have to pee."

"I'll be right here."

She gets out of the bed, and Draco rolls onto his back. Waiting.

She goes straight to the toilet, but when the pocket door rattles back open, he hears the quiet *pat pat* of her bare feet over the tile as she walks to the sink.

The tap turns on, followed by an adorably squeaky yawn.

Then, she gasps.

Draco grins up at the ceiling, the expression widening even further as she emits a kind of strangled shriek.

She appears back in the doorway with soap suds still on her wrists.

“Draco!” She touches the diamond. “I told you not to get me anything for my birthday!”

“It’s not your birthday,” he says. “It’s Wednesday.”

She makes a loud *tsk* with her tongue, and one foot slaps against the tile again in a pouty stomp.

“It looks good on you,” he says.

Hermione’s face is already pink with excitement, but she touches her cheek as it flushes further. “You really didn’t need to do this.”

“I know. But I really wanted to.”

She sighs.

“If you don’t like it—”

Hermione jumps back on the bed, cutting him off with a kiss.

Draco smiles into it as the pendant drapes off her neck to tickle his chin. “Happy Wednesday, Hermione.”

\*\*\*

As the weeks pass, Draco finds that he has to do very little to prompt Hermione into having Important Conversations. Most of the time, she brings up the topics herself.

They talk about big, lofty things like religion and the afterlife. They talk very practically about the equitable division of labour in the home.

They learn about each other from the outside in, and Draco learns quite a bit about himself in the process.

And every Sunday, they try a new flavour in the ice cream maker.

“What about a sorbet?” Hermione asks. “That could be nice.”

“Oh, yeah,” Draco says, remembering. He goes to his trusty YouTube channel. “I think I saw a tutorial for one actually.” He finds the video and pulls it up for Hermione. “Here,” he says, handing off his phone. “I think I have mint.” He gets up from the sofa to check.

The video is backed by cheesy music as always, but Draco still hears Hermione say an involuntary *oh!* at one part. She must be excited about the idea of cantaloupe.

Draco finds the package of mint, but it’s gone all shrivelly. They’ll need to get more.

“Oh!” Hermione fumbles the phone into her lap.

“What’s wrong?” Draco asks.

She turns to him with wide eyes. “Draco, why is this man... *tonguing* the seeds out of this melon?”

“Oh, that.” Draco cringes. “Yeah, I think he might be a nymphomaniac, but his recipes are really good.”

Hermione blinks. She looks back down at the phone, and then picks it up by the corner between two fingers as though leery of fluids coming through the screen.

“Have you been putting your mouth on all of our food?” she asks.

Draco laughs, tossing the sad mint into the bin. “Only when I’m eating it.”

\*\*\*

In early November, Pomona is tucking a few small garden roses into an array of chrysanthemums when she makes an offhand suggestion to Draco.

“If your girl likes flowers as much as you seem to think she does, you should take her to the botanical garden and butterfly conservatory.”

“Oh?” he says, immediately intrigued.

“It’s climate controlled—so it’s especially nice now that winter is right around the corner. A little tropical oasis in all this dreariness.”

“That sounds lovely.” He takes out his phone. “What did you say it was called?”

“Oh, you won’t find it online. Here.” She pulls a pen out of the pocket of her apron and writes down an address on a bouquet message card. “It’s the Scamander family who runs it. They have a foundation devoted to conservation.”

Oh, Hermione will love that. Draco takes the card, and the smooth surface is slightly warm in his hand. He glances back up at Pomona, but she just smiles.

“If you go, let me know how you like it,” she says.

“Thanks,” Draco murmurs, looking at the address again. “I will.”

\*\*\*

Draco drops off the bouquet in Hermione’s flat, tossing the previous, fading one and giving the vase a good wash before placing in the new stems.

He takes out the card Pomona had given him and turns it over in his hands. Hermione is tied up at a book convention all weekend, and he doesn’t really have anything else to do.

He goes for a drive.

The Scamander Family Foundation Botanical Garden and Nature Conservatory isn't far outside the city, and Draco is surprised he's never heard of it before. It sounds like the sort of place his mother would support, serving on the board and planning extravagant galas to benefit the butterflies.

He parks in the small paved lot out front, and about five feet from the front door, an intense wave of *deja vu* washes over him. It's tangible, like walking through an invisible waterfall in the air. Maybe his mother *had* brought him here when he was younger.

Draco pays for a daily admission at the front desk, and spends about ten minutes walking around the grounds. As he does, an expectant tingling begins building at his fingertips.

He realises before too long that it is the makings of A Plan.

\*\*\*

Hermione has also never heard of the Scamander Family Foundation Botanical Garden and Nature Conservatory, but she is immediately excited for a visit when Draco mentions it.

He doesn't mention that he's already been there (twice) in recent weeks without her.

On the day, the sky outside is a stretch of grey slate, threatening the first snow of the year at any second. Draco opens Hermione's door, and takes her hand as she steps out of the car. He keeps it as they cross the small lot, and he feels her grip tighten momentarily in his just before they step inside.

"I just—" she starts.

Draco looks over at her, and her brow is furrowed with concentration. "I just had the strangest sensation."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Like—this place is familiar, but... I know I've never been here."

Draco had forgotten in the meantime, but it's precisely the way he'd felt the first time upon arriving. "Like you knew it was here, even though you didn't."

"Yes," says Hermione. "Did you have that, too?"

"Yeah," says Draco.

"How odd."

As this is hardly the oddest thing Draco has experienced lately, he hadn't given it much thought. But this is Hermione, patron saint of giving things much thought. He waits for a minute while she looks around them, puzzling.

“Hm.”

“Shall we?” Draco tries. It’s quite cold, and Hermione hadn’t put on gloves.

“Yes...” she says slowly. “I suppose.”

Luckily, stepping inside immediately recenters her focus.

Draco pays for two daily admissions, and the lady behind the front desk gives them a brilliant smile. “Enjoy.”

The first part of the establishment is set up like a museum, still indoors. Large informational placards explain the mission of the foundation and give facts about the many various species under their care.

Over 100 in all, including birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and of course, the stars of the show—butterflies. They hail from tropical climates all over the world, and each is critically threatened in the wild.

Draco already knows this, but he hears about it again, secondhand, as Hermione reads through every single word on the educational displays.

A video showing the life cycle of a monarch butterfly begins playing when they walk by the screen—motion activated, he guesses—and Hermione watches in rapture the progression from egg to larva (with five distinct instars) to adult butterfly.

“More than 4,000 kilometers, they migrate, Draco!”

“I see that.”

“And they’re the fourth generation that year! The last butterflies to see the wintering grounds were their great-grandparents.”

“Incredible.”

“How can they possibly know where to go??”

“I haven’t a clue.”

Hermione makes a soft sound of awe, and Draco watches her watch the video a second time.

The next display is devoted to a tiny butterfly with beautiful powder blue wings. The little Miami Blue, they learn, is the most endangered butterfly species in the world. The only known population in the wild is described—very grimly, in Draco’s opinion—as ‘a few scattered individuals’ on the Marquesas islands in the Key West National Wildlife Refuge in Florida.

“Oh...”

When Draco looks over, Hermione has her fingertips pressed to her lips. Her eyes shine with emotion, so bright Draco could almost read the backlit placard in the reflection of them.

“Only a few,” she says.

“Yes,” Draco says, a little choked up himself. “But they have a breeding population here. Maybe we’ll see one.”

Hermione glances quickly at him, and he smiles. “This way.”

They move through a two-door airlock system to enter the gardens themselves, and the rush of warm, humid air is an immediate relief. A geodesic dome of frosted glass forms the ceiling of the greenhouse, and it is bright with the diffused ambient light of a simulated sun. They might as well have stepped through a portal to some equatorial rainforest—4,000 kilometers from the pervasive chill of November London.

“Oh, my god,” Hermione breathes from beside him.

Draco understands the sentiment. Aside from the lush greenery and stunning exotic flowers—which would be worth a visit all on their own—the air is filled with hundreds of butterflies.

They float from bloom to bloom, going about their butterfly business and creating within the gardens a constantly changing display of color and movement.

“They’re so beautiful.”

“Yes,” Draco says, watching the flutter of joy across her features. “They are.”

They make their way slowly along the meandering paths, checking carefully before placing each step. Beside them, creaks and streams run through the leaf litter under the plants, making habitats for—

“A newt!” Hermione grips his sleeve, pointing to a submerged rock. “Look, Draco!”

“Holy shit.” A large black newt sits in a calm pool of the flow. Vibrant orange decorates its head and dots along either side of its spine.

“A crocodile newt,” Hermione reads from a nearby display. “Oh, he’s gorgeous.”

“He really is.”

A nearby splash draws Draco attention, and he feels his eyes go wide.

“Native to the highlands of Vietnam—” Hermione reads.

“Hermione.”

“They eat worms and isopods—”

*“Hermione.”*

“I’m not exactly sure what an isopod is—” She pulls out her phone to bloody look it up.

Draco puts his hand down on top of her head and forces it to turn. She gasps, reaching out to grip his shirt again.

Two giant flamingos are standing barely a meter away, the water still rippling in the pond behind them.

“*Oh, my god,*” she yells in a whisper.

“Hullo, there,” Draco says to the birds at full volume.

They give exuberant honking quacks in reply.

“Holy shit,” he laughs.

“Look, they’re called Bert and Ernie. And, oh, my god—they’ve successfully raised two chicks together!”

“Well done, lads,” Draco says.

They honk some more and then turn to nibble their bills together in a clacking kiss of celebration.

“Oh, they’re so precious.”

They really are.

Hermione glances around them, seemingly only just noticing that they’re alone inside the dome. “This facility is incredible, I can’t believe we’re the only ones here.”

Draco swallows. “Mm.”

“The sign out front said that they run on donations and the price of admission, but I don’t see how they can afford it with such little traffic. We’ll have to leave a little extra when we go.”

Somehow Draco thinks they’ll pull through, but he says, “Yes, of course,” and it is only the providence of a fritillary landing on Hermione’s forehead at that exact moment that keeps her from noticing him going splotchy.

She freezes, eyes round and mouth open in a grin as the cheetah print wings flap slowly open and closed above the bridge of her nose.

“Hold still,” he says unnecessarily. He gets out his phone and snaps a series of photos. This time, he triple checks whether the butterfly actually appears in them.

(It does.)

After another minute, it flutters away, off in search of something sweeter than Hermione's skin. (Draco wishes it luck.)

"Let's see what's over here," he suggests.

Hermione follows him over to the shared wall between the main building and the greenhouse. A large portion is comprised of windows, showcasing the work of the scientists behind the scenes.

A tall, skinny bloke in a lab coat waves from inside when he sees them looking in. They wave back.

He brings over a thin stick to the window, fitting it into a holder alongside dozens of others. Attached to the sticks via invisible strands of silk are a hundred different chrysalises... sees? Chrysalis? A hundred varieties of chrysalis.

"Oh, look at those!" Hermione points to a row of pods that look like they're made of solid polished gold.

"Whoa," Draco breathes. He's never seen anything so shiny and metallic in the natural world.

"They belong to the caterpillar of the Orange-spotted Tiger Clearwing," Hermione says.  
"How remarkable!"

They really are.

The scientist waves again to get their attention. He points down to the lower corner where a black chrysalis is twitching.

"Oh, my god, Draco! This one is eclosing!"

Draco chuckles. How the fuck does she know the word for it?

"*Thank you!*" she mouths at the glass.

The man nods and turns back to his work.

"Let's sit," Draco says.

Hermione quickly drops into the grass to watch. Draco sits behind her, pulling her into the vee of his legs with his arms wrapped at her middle.

The life inside the chrysalis shifts, ready to expand out into the world. The covering splits at the bottom, wider and wider in slow pushes like breaths.

Both of them are so absorbed in the show that they don't notice the presence of someone else until she's right there beside them.

It's the lady from the front desk. She offers them glasses of sparkling cider and a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries.

“Oh!” says Hermione, reaching tentatively to take both. “How kind, thank you.”

The employee leaves a second plate for the strawberry tops, and informs them that if they place them red side up, the butterflies will come to nectar from them.

Hermione is beside herself at this news.

She turns to Draco with an expression of pleasant bemusement, and misses the wink the staff member sends him.

“They must be really desperate for repeat customers,” Hermione says when the woman is gone.

“Yes.” Draco smiles against the back of her head as she turns forward once more. “That must be it.”

They enjoy their snack and leave plenty of red for the butterflies to enjoy theirs.

The eclosion continues in steady pushes. As the head begins to emerge, two thin knees protrude from either side of the splits, anchoring the emerging butterfly to its perch. It gradually eases down, wings folded in and reminding Draco of how a bat sleeps. Then, the abdomen drops out, swinging the center of gravity downward so that the butterfly is dangling only by its two sets of legs.

Hermione gasps, but the little thing maintains its grip. It hangs there, still twitching slightly.

“Now it will pump fluid through its wings to give them structure,” Hermione tells him.

“No shit,” murmurs Draco. He should have read the placards more closely.

The wings slowly unfurl, pressed together over the back and showing them the bright grey undersides. An almost random pattern of black dots them, though one dot is ringed with orange.

After another few minutes, the butterfly spreads its wings just slightly, showing off a sliver of shiny powder blue.

“Oh!” Hermione says, leaning quickly forward. “Draco, I think it’s a Miami Blue.”

She points to the identification chart next to the window, and indeed, the pattern on the wings matches perfectly.

Draco’s chest goes tight with the miracle of life. “Well, look at that,” he says. “There’s one more now.”

“Oh, I can’t believe we got to see that. What incredible timing.”

“Yes, it is.” Draco clears his throat. “Hermione. As you know, I’ve been thinking about new beginnings.”

She goes rigid in his arms, and then swings around to look at him.

“Oh, my god.”

Draco takes the ring box out of his pocket and opens it. He was prepared for a similar reaction, even though it’s been three (wonderful) months now.

(After all, she’d turned him down the second time as well.)

“Draco—” She breaks off when she looks down at the box. “This is a different ring.”

“This is a different proposal.”

She puts her hands on her cheeks. “Oh, it’s—just as beautiful. How is that possible?”

“That’s a great question,” says Draco, chuckling a little.

For some reason, his calm seems to unmoor her. She grips his shirt, stressed at the prospect of refusing him again.

“Draco, things have still been so good, and I love you more every day—”

He waits for the ‘but.’ He knows they’re still on the right track, but he has felt a bit of a plateau in their progress lately. He suspects that, like meeting the parents, there is some other milestone Hermione has been unconsciously waiting on. If he wants them to move past it, he needs to bring it to her forefront.

“—but we haven’t even lived together.”

*Bingo.*

Draco smiles. He could argue the fact that they have only spent what would account for a very meager handful of nights apart since their first date, but he knows the real thing is different. “Then let’s live together.”

Hermione mouths soundlessly for a moment. “Really?”

“Yes. Did you think I was proposing marriage? Presumptuous. Let’s start with a merger.”

She lets out a shocked laugh, but it is pleased. “You want me to move into the penthouse?”

“Or I can move into your flat.”

“What? That broom cupboard?”

He laughs. “It is hardly a broom cupboard. I’d be happy to live there if you wanted to stay. I know—I mean, that was the last place you lived with Crookshanks. I would understand if you don’t want to leave those memories behind.”

“Oh, Draco.” She touches his face, her head shaking. “It was just somewhere to go after the divorce. I never planned to stay so long.”

“Then, yes, I want you to move into the penthouse.”

Her chin trembles. “You’d be okay with—? I mean, you’d make room for me?”

“Hermione, I would throw out everything I’ve ever owned if it meant coming home to you.”

She smiles. “Please don’t do that.”

“If you insist.”

Hermione takes his face in her hands and kisses him. When she pulls back, she looks down at the ring.

“I know what this looks like,” Draco says. “But it’s actually a house warming gift.”

She laughs, her eyes a little wet. She reaches out and touches a gentle fingertip to the solitary stone, which is more than she’d brought herself to do last time.

But, after a moment, she pulls her hand away. Draco closes the box.

“I’m sor—”

“Don’t,” he says, preempting her. He hugs her tight to him, murmuring against her hair. “It’s still a good day.”

“It is,” she agrees. “Such a good day. Thank you so much.”

“It’s not over,” he tells her. “Come on.”

They attend a private tour of the facility, getting to see the conservation efforts up close. The staff are enthusiastic with their explanations despite the omnipresent sense of polite confusion at the fact that though Hermione clearly isn’t wearing a ring, both of them are in exceptionally high spirits.

\*\*\*

They spend the evenings of the following week packing up Hermione’s flat.

She scrawls a messy *BOOKS* on the top of maybe the dozenth cardboard box and stands to survey the lot of them.

“Well,” she says, her voice uncharacteristically small. “This will be a good excuse to purge some of my personal collection.”

Draco’s brow furrows as he fails to find the logic in this. (And fails to find the end on this bloody roll of tape.) “Why would you do that?” he says. There are two bedrooms in his flat he hardly uses. “If anything, you’ll have room for more.”

Hermione becomes distracted from the packing with kissing him.

\*\*\*

Living with Hermione is just as wonderful as Draco knew it would be. They slot into a new routine seamlessly, and though he monitors her closely for them, she shows no signs of regret.

Draco basks in the simple luxury of having Hermione there all the time.

At least, until two weeks after her official move in date.

He wakes from the depths of sleep to the immediate, innate knowledge that something is Very Wrong. He sits straight up in the bed and the Knowledge transforms into a grim certainty of exactly what is about to happen. Only by the grace of some semi-benevolent god does he make it to the toilet in time before vomiting spectacularly.

As much as he would like to attempt to do it quietly, Draco has no illusions of controlling this exorcism.

A gentle hand rubs over his back after the worst of it has past, and he groans into the toilet bowl.

“Darling. Are you all right?”

Oh, his brilliant Hermione—not her brightest moment.

Draco says, “Euughh.”

“Sorry, stupid question. Here.”

She hands him a cool, damp cloth and he slumps back against the wall to wipe his face. “You should go,” he says. “Save yourself. It could be contagious.”

“I’m sure it’s just food poisoning,” she says. “I told you that crab roll looked dodgy.”

Draco cracks an eye open to peer at her. “No, you didn’t.”

“Oh. Well, I thought it. Who gets a crab roll from—”

Draco hunches back over the toilet and vomits some more. “Stop saying crab roll,” he gasps.

“Sorry, sorry.”

She pets him again which is nice.

“I’ll get you some water.”

Draco wants to tell her not to bother, but that sounds like so much effort. She brings back a bottle and cracks the top on it for him. So thoughtful. She sets it within reach, and he follows it with his eyes from his position against the wall.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

She gives a sympathetic nod and takes his cloth to make it cool again.

Draco's existence fragments into half-hour intervals of horrifying upheaval. In between, he slips into a nearly-comatose state of suspended animation. Time outside of this has no meaning.

"Draco," Hermione says softly. "I just noticed your phone vibrating. You have a bunch of notifications, and—oh, Blaise is calling."

"Oh, fuck," Draco groans. "My meeting."

Hermione answers the phone just as another bout of retching kicks off.

"Good morning, Blaise."

"Hermione! Darling!" Blaise's voice comes through the speakerphone. "Hearing your dulcet tones is such an improvement to the day I'm having."

"Yes, we're having a bit of a day ourselves," Hermione says. "Draco has food poisoning."

"Oh, is that what that is?" Blaise says. "I thought you were watching *Jurassic Park*."

"Wanker," Draco moans. He waves Hermione to come closer. He forgot to put his slide deck in the shared drive last night.

"Hold on," Hermione says. "Draco needs to tell you something."

She holds the phone down to him. Draco scream-vomits into the toilet.

"Thanks, Dray," Blaise says. "I'll take that under advisement."

"Oh, darling." Hermione pats at his clammy forehead with the cloth.

"Since the last version of the slide deck on the shared drive is from ten days ago, I'm assuming you saved it out somewhere?" Blaise says.

Draco nods, clutching the porcelain.

"He's nodding."

"Do me a favour, H. Smack him."

Draco shakes his head, but Hermione just smooths a gentle hand over his hair. She would never.

"I think it will carry more weight coming from you," she says.

"Yeah, I'll enjoy it more, too."

Draco retches with an inhuman sound.

"Should I call emergency services?" Blaise asks.

“No, I think he’ll pull through.”

“I meant to evacuate you.”

It’s objectively funny, but Hermione doesn’t laugh because she is the best, most loyal girlfriend ever. Draco loves her so much, even if her voice wobbles a bit when she replies.

“I appreciate the concern, Blaise, but we’ll manage.”

“All right. I’ve got Theo here at Draco’s workstation.”

“Is he alive?” comes Theo’s voice into the mix.

“Barely, from the sound of it.”

“Aw, Coco, no, what happened?”

“Bad crab roll,” Hermione answers for him.

Draco dry heaves. “*Stop saying crab roll.*”

“Oof, you hate to see it,” says Theo. “Hi, Hermione.”

“Hi, Theo.”

“All right, Draco,” says Blaise. “What’s your password?”

Draco sucks in a shuddering breath. “Hermione Malfoy 2025.”

“*Jesus Christ,*” says Theo.

From Blaise, “You keep manifesting, King, but it is December, you may want to get a move on.”

Draco squeezes his eyes shut, and Hermione rubs his back with a little more gusto.

“Coco, it’s not working.”

“All caps,” he rasps.

“Oh, my god,” says Blaise.

“Hermione, get out of there. He’s a psychopath,” says Theo.

“I don’t know how we missed the signs.”

Draco wheezes. “Fuck both of you.”

“Is that all, boys?” Hermione says, and it is impossible that Draco should find her stern tone hot at a time like this.

“One sec. Is it SynTech-acquisition\_final\_v2\_edit\_finalFinal?”

“Yes,” Draco whimpers.

“Brilliant. Feel better, Dray,” says Blaise.

Draco gets, “Kisses,” from Theo, to which he replies with a gurgling burp. “Er,” says Theo. “On second thought—”

Hermione cuts off the call, plunging the bathroom into merciful silence. Draco’s head thunks back against the wall. “Twats.”

“I’m so sorry you had to do that.”

“Guess that’s why there’s protocol.”

Draco’s eyes drift shut.

“Do you want to try some water?”

“Not just yet.”

“Okay.” Hermione crouches beside him, putting a hand on his knee. “What do you need?”

At that moment, a horrendous bubbling roils deep in Draco’s bowels, alerting him to a countdown of T-minus two minutes before an eruption of volcanic proportions.

“I need you to go.”

“Draco, I’m not leaving you—”

“Just ten minutes. Please. Will you go to the little store on the corner and get me some ginger ale?”

Hermione’s lips purse. His unwillingness to drink even water one minute ago does make it a hard sell, but this is life or death. She’s facing nuclear fallout.

“Leave my phone,” he says. “If I pass out and die, I’ll call.”

She smiles, giving his knee a little squeeze. “All right. Ten minutes.”

She stands to go, and Draco’s face contorts with pain. “Hermione—hurry.”

\*\*\*

When she returns, Draco is retching again.

She brushes the hair back from his face and wipes at his streaming eyes. “I’m so sorry I made you live here,” he says. “This place is hell.”

“It’s going to be all right,” she soothes.

“If I die—”

“Draco, you’re not going to die.”

“What if I ask nicely?”

She giggles. “See, who’s going to make me laugh if you die?”

This is a shockingly effective argument.

Draco clings to life.

\*\*\*

The active phase of the ordeal only lasts a few hours, but it takes years from Draco’s life. He must doze off on the floor, because when he wakes up, he finds Hermione’s special pillow beneath his head.

She comes to sit beside him as he sips at the water and manages to keep it down. He eats one corner off the cracker she hands him.

“Ready to get back in bed?”

He wants nothing more, but he can’t go like this. He looks across the bathroom at the shower. Why is it so bloody far away?

“Good idea,” she says, though he hadn’t spoken. “You’ll feel better once you get cleaned up.”

She’s right, but Draco is all shaky and shivery, and he’s not sure he can stand. “I don’t think I can.”

“I’ll help you,” she says simply.

Because of course she will.

“Okay.”

Hermione gets up to turn on the water, and then she takes off all of her clothes. Draco is only in his boxers, but it’s still a feat to get him naked.

She half-carries him draped over her shoulders, and deposits him safely on the floor of the shower. She sits down behind him and pulls him back to lay against her chest.

Draco sighs.

“Let me know when you’re ready for a wash.”

“Okay.”

They sit like that while Draco recovers from the short journey, and Hermione doesn’t seem annoyed at all that he needs her to tweak the water temperature every three minutes.

When his heart doesn't feel like a hummingbird trapped in his chest anymore, he tells Hermione that he's ready.

She lathers up a loofah and begins the methodical process of washing him.

She lifts the dead weight of his arm by the wrist to soap under his armpit. "Christ, you're heavy," she says.

Given his state, he feels the need to remind her. "It's because I'm very big and powerful."

"I know you are, baby."

He turns to cuddle his cheek against her breast.

"Hair, too?" she checks.

"Yes, please," he murmurs. "I think I sweated quite a bit."

"You got it."

Hermione gently washes his hair. It's quick—just a simple 1-2 step, but Draco can tell from the careful massage of her fingers that she would do one hundred steps if he needed her to.

When he's fully rinsed and squeaky clean, he indulges in a few more minutes of just laying against her in the rejuvenating spray. Her hands come to rest on his chest, one thumb stroking slowly over his sternum.

"What? Not going to jerk me off?"

Hermione snorts, and though his eyes are closed, he can feel her head tilting to the side to look over his shoulder.

"I've never seen a penis look so sad."

Draco puts a protective hand over it. "Don't. He'll hear you."

Hermione drops her voice to a stage whisper. "Besides, I think you've lost enough fluids for one day."

Draco's stomach tenses with a laugh, and he groans. "I will never forgive you for making that comparison."

"Worth it."

"I love you," he tells her.

"I love you, too."

"Still?"

She kisses the top of his wet head. "Even more."

\*\*\*

Hermione's parents visit from Australia for the holidays, and they spend Christmas Eve with them in a rented cottage in the countryside.

A perfect layer of snow ices the rooftops like gingerbread, and Draco helps Mr Granger (call me Richard) keep the wood rack stocked with split oak.

Mrs Granger (please, it's Jean) makes a hearty stew that smells like everything good that could possibly go into a pot, and they sit at a raw wood table in the kitchen to eat bowls of it with thick, crusty slices of bread. The chairs creak every time someone moves, but it is hardly audible over the carols on the radio and the laughter in the air.

After dinner, they sip spiced cider and teach Draco to play rummy. Hermione's parents tease her mercilessly when she comes in last, and though she makes a great show of Not Caring In The Slightest about the pile of points under her name, Draco can tell that she would much rather throw a strop.

He puts his hand on her corduroyed thigh under the table, and she rewards him with a soft smile. Her cheeks are rosy from the drink (and the ribbing), and Draco thinks that he would very much like to kiss one.

He helps Richard with the washing up instead.

They stand side by side at the sink while Hermione and Jean chat at the table behind them. The two ladies catch up, trading stories of people Draco mostly doesn't know, so he lets the actual words fade and listens to the character of their voices instead. They sound very alike, mother and daughter. The cadence of Hermione's speech slips into something slightly different than what Draco is used to, but it sounds no less natural. He cleans a bowl with a sponge and realises that this is how she sounded speaking for the first half of her life. Falling back into a rhythm with the person she's maybe spoken to most in all of those years.

"Oh, Hermione, I wanted to show you..."

The voices trail into the sitting room as Draco takes another bowl from Richard and begins drying it. His thoughts drift to how he and Hermione speak with each other now. The phrases he's picked up from her. The inside jokes. A whole language borne out of their proximity.

It isn't until the older man turns to look over his shoulder that Draco realises he can no longer hear the flow of conversation from the other room.

Richard snorts a laugh. "Subtle, Jeanie," he says.

Draco looks beside him, handing off the dish towel when Richard reaches for it. He dries his hands, regarding Draco thoughtfully.

Richard seems to be under the impression that this time alone together was curated, and though he obviously wouldn't have made a point to carve it out himself, he doesn't seem keen on wasting it either.

"Did you know that in five years, Hermione hasn't introduced us to anyone she's dated?" Richard asks. "Except for you."

"Yes," says Draco. "I did know that."

"For a long time, she didn't even mention anyone she was seeing."

Draco knows this, too, but he just presses his lips into a flat smile of acknowledgment.

"How long have you two been together?"

"A little over five months."

Richard nods. "Must be serious, then."

Draco nods, too. "I intend to marry her, if she'll have me."

Richard flips the dish towel up over his shoulder and leans back against the counter with his arms crossed. It is such a profoundly *paternal* move that Draco finds himself taking notes.

"My daughter is a grown woman, Draco," he says. "She's had a very clear picture of who she is and what she wants since she was three years old, and the last thirty years certainly haven't changed that."

The words come out of Draco's mouth before he can stop them. "She's fully formed in her person."

Richard makes a small noise of surprise, his brows raising. "Nicely put."

Draco smiles briefly.

"My point is," Richard continues. "If you want to ask Hermione to marry you, you don't need my permission to do it."

Incidentally, on one of their early dates, Hermione had made her views on the whole 'asking for permission' thing very clear during a tangent off of some other conversation. Which is why Draco has already proposed twice without it. (Though Richard clearly doesn't know that.)

"I appreciate that, sir," Draco says.

He thinks to just leave it there, but something makes him linger in the conversation. Maybe it's the heat of the roaring fire in the little cottage. Or the warmth from the whisky in the cider. Or just the remarkably kind brown eyes of someone who helped raise the person Draco loves so much.

"But what would you say if someone—maybe a person whose parents didn't place such an emphasis on establishing a strong sense of self—if that person, hypothetically, wanted to ask for your blessing..."

Richard smiles. This family all have such nice teeth. “I would tell them that people will line up to give you advice about what it takes to make a marriage work. And every single one of them will have their own opinions about what a relationship should look like and how the roles should shake out. But, from the moment I learned of Hermione’s existence, I have only been interested in her health and her happiness. I couldn’t give less of a fuck about the rest.”

Draco swallows, his throat suddenly tight. “We have similar interests.”

Richard holds out a hand to him. “Then, if you want my blessing, Draco. You have it.”

Draco takes his hand, and his grip is firm and sure. “Thank you.”

Richard grabs the whisky bottle from the counter and pours a finger into Draco’s empty cider mug. He measures out a dram for himself before Draco finds his voice again.

“Mr—er, Richard. Could I ask you one more thing?”

“Let’s hear it,” he says as he hands Draco his drink.

Draco murmurs a quiet *thanks*, holding the mug in both hands. “What did you think when Hermione told you she and Ron were splitting up?”

Richard’s head tilts, clearly not expecting the question, but he doesn’t seem offended. He takes a sip of whisky, and one side of his mouth tips up into a wry smile. “I thought that I’d never heard of a happy marriage ending in divorce.”

After giving Draco a beat to digest this, he steps forward to clink the rim of his mug against Draco’s with a little nod.

Draco watches him leave the kitchen to rejoin his family, and finds that—that really is all there is to say about that.

\*\*\*

That night, Draco and Hermione crawl into the tiny double bed under the sloped ceiling in the cottage’s second bedroom.

They lay facing each other with their hands tucked under their cheeks in the soft glow off the moonbright snow outside the window.

“I love your parents,” Draco whispers.

Hermione smiles, making her cheek scrunch. “They love you, too. I knew they would.”

Draco had known that, no matter how he was received, it wouldn’t have changed things between him and Hermione, but... it is really nice to have the support.

“Happy Christmas, Hermione.”

“Happy Christmas, Draco.”

He shifts forward to kiss her, but at the movement, the ancient bed frame creaks like an elephant has sat on it. Draco cringes, and even that triggers the wood to pop like a gunshot.

“For my virtue,” Hermione whispers.

They shake with badly suppressed laughter, and the bed creaks obscenely.

\*\*\*

Early in the new year, Hermione accompanies Draco on a trip to meet with several very important clients in New York City.

She vibrates with constant energy in the week leading up to their departure, and even eight hours in the air is not enough to impede her exhilaration.

Over the mid-Atlantic, Draco teases that if the plane were to stall, they’d only need to shove Hermione in the fuel tank and she could power them the rest of the way on high-octane excitement.

She scoffs. “Sod the rest of you. If we go down, I’m swimming ‘til I see the Statue of Liberty.”

\*\*\*

When Draco pushes open the door to their hotel room, Hermione’s jaw drops. “Oh, my god. I can’t believe the company is paying to put you up *here*.”

“It is nice,” Draco agrees.

She drops her bag and, heedless of the flurries dotting the night sky outside, runs to throw open the balcony doors. A torrent of city sound pours in, but not enough to cover Hermione’s squeal.

Draco takes his time in joining her. He sets their suitcases on the provided luggage racks and turns on the lamps around the room.

When he steps up behind Hermione at the railing, she bounces a little on her toes. “Oh, there’s so much to see, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep.”

Draco leans down to smirk against her ear. “Then you’ll fit right in.”

She laughs, a cloud of steam. When she turns and sees what he has in his hands, her brow creases.

“The hotel sent up champagne?”

“Blaise,” Draco says, handing her a flute. “Pre-congratulations for closing the deal.”

“Oh.” Hermione takes it happily.

Draco holds his glass up for her to toast. “Welcome to New York.”

Hermione beams, touching her glass to his before drinking.

She shivers, but seems to have no intention of going back inside. She sets her glass on the round table beside her to retrieve the printed itinerary from her coat pocket.

“Ah! I still can’t believe I get to see *Wicked* on Broadway!” She glances up at him. “I mean, you know about my thing with witches.”

“I think it’s the social justice angle that really does it for you.”

Hermione giggles but doesn’t deny it.

She looks back down at her paper. “It’s a shame your meeting is at ten tomorrow. We could have—”

“Oh, actually.” Draco clears his throat. “I forgot to tell you. My meetings tomorrow got pushed, so we actually have the whole day.”

Hermione’s head snaps up. “What? Pushed to when?”

“They actually had to reschedule for after the trip, so I’ll just do them remotely. You know how it is with CEOs.” Draco chuckles in what he hopes is a convincing manner.

Hermione’s expression lets him know that he has fallen far short of the mark.

“Oh, my god,” she breathes. “You’re blotching.”

“What?” says Draco, touching his neck. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“The collar of my coat is just a little rough.”

“It’s cashmere.”

“Fuck.”

“Oh, my god,” she says again. “There were never any meetings, were there?”

“Hermione—”

“Oh, my god!” The January wind snatches the itinerary out of her slackened grip, and it is only Draco’s quick reflexes that save them from being stalked clear across Manhattan.

He folds the paper back along its well-worn creases and puts it in his coat pocket. When he takes his hand back out, he brings the ring box with it.

(Well, it’s not as though he was going to pack it.)

“I was not planning to do this tonight,” he tells her.

Hermione’s wide eyes shine with every light in Times Square. Melted snowflakes glint in her hair like a crown of diamonds. The city pulses chaotically beneath them, and Draco can feel the beat of it in his veins.

“But, seeing as I’ve wanted to marry you every day for the last six months, I suppose nothing really makes any moment more right than another.”

“Draco—”

He opens the box, and Hermione looks down at yet another of Ollivander’s creations. “Oh...” she says, her hands coming up to her face. The ring sparkles hopefully from its velvet cushion.

She looks up at him, and... Bloody hell, she looks like she might say yes. He should say the speech.

“Oh, Draco,” Hermione says first. “I want to say yes...”

She trails off, leaving only the sound of Draco’s heart thudding in his ears. He waits for the ‘but.’

Hermione’s mouth moves in a decidedly undecided fashion. “I—” she says.

He feels his eyes widen.

“Draco, I—”

Understanding hits him like a clarion call. There is nothing left. No milestone. No benchmark. She is stalling now for no good reason.

Draco snaps the ring box closed, smirking at the way her face falls. If she wants it, she’s going to have to be quicker than that.

He braces his hands on the railing on either side of her and leans down to put their eye to eye. “You what, Hermione?”

Their breath mists in the scant space between them.

“I-I want you to be sure.”

“I’m sure,” says Draco. “Are you?”

She doesn’t answer but reaches up to grip the lapels of his coat. “You’re so young. Things could change. You could change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

"But Draco... I know what it's like to feel trapped, and I can't—I can't bear the thought of doing that to you."

Draco takes her face in his hands. "You are not trapped anymore, Hermione. You got out. You did that for yourself."

"I know, but you—" She swallows. "Draco, you are so committed. So devoted. I-I've never felt anything like it, but I worry... Could you—? I just worry that you wouldn't..."

Ah.

"You think I wouldn't leave you."

Tears pool along Hermione's lower lashes.

Draco has to give her credit; she's right to think it. He'd given her every reason. He told her that he was raised for marriage. That he was brought up to grin and bear it. That he couldn't imagine anything they couldn't come back from. That he would tolerate a lot.

But Hermione knows firsthand what it is like to watch a love die right in front of you, and she cherishes Draco enough to never wish that on him. Even if it means losing him someday.

Fuck, if he doesn't love her more for it.

He swipes his thumb under her eye and says, in what is surely the strangest promise ever made during a proposal, "I would. If I needed to, I would leave you."

"You're lying."

*Damnit.*

Draco calls upon every lesson he's learned sitting in on contract negotiations. He searches for a loophole.

"How about this? On the day I wake up and realise I'm no longer in love with you, I'll draw up the papers myself."

Hermione's lip trembles. "Draco—"

"I'm afraid that's the best I can do, Hermione. Is it enough?"

She lets out a harsh breath. And then she nods.

"Good," Draco says, stepping forward to press his lips to her throat. "Because now we both know that you want to marry me."

"I—" Hermione gasps as his hands slip beneath her coat, cold fingers finding the hem of her jumper.

"Yes. So you said." He's still smirking when he kisses her.

Hermione's arms twine around his neck, desperate to show her devotion. Draco lets the possessive clutch of his hands communicate that he—his desire—is not going anywhere.

His hands slide down over her arse, getting a grip on her thighs and hiking her up onto his hips.

Hermione's grip tightens on his shoulders, her kiss nearly biting. "I love you," she pants.

"I know," says Draco. "And you want to marry me."

Hermione moans her reply as he pulls her tight against his front.

He walks them back inside, kicking the door closed behind them.

"And you know what else?" he murmurs. He sets her back on her feet to peel off her clothes, layer by layer until she's bare. "I think you've wanted to all along."

Hermione shivers as he presses her back onto the bed, his mouth closing over her shoulder. "I-I'm just trying to be reasonable."

"I know," Draco croons, a little meanly. He cups his hand against her wet cunt. "You're trying so hard."

He makes her come on his fingers while he's still in his cashmere.

"Draco," she whines, reaching for him when he steps away from her.

He shushes her as he undresses. "I know what you want."

He puts her into the bedding, and then puts himself into her.

"You want to be my wife."

Hermione moans, her nails raking over his back as she pulls him down on top of her. Draco puts his teeth on her jaw.

"Were you worried? That I'd get tired of waiting?"

"No," she breathes, opening for him.

"Good, because I can wait a year if you want me to. I can wait ten."

Her cunt clenches on his cock even though it's cruel of him to say. Hermione does not have ten years to wait.

"I won't stop asking," he promises. "You just tell me when."

She gasps, her knees drawing up to take him deeper. Always deeper.

Draco sits back onto his heels, wrapping his hands at her waist and pulling her arse up onto his thighs. Her back arches on a sharp cry as the head of his cock presses into her cervix.

“Oh, god,” she moans, her hands scrabbling to grip his wrists.

“Right there?”

“Yes, yes.”

“That’s right. Because you want me to put a baby in you, too.”

A spasm jolts through her like an electric shock, and Draco groans at the tightness on his cock. Maybe a little more brazen than his usual talk, but—

“Fuck, don’t even try to deny it, love. You get so wet just thinking about it.”

“Draco—”

He works her onto him, a little faster, a high-pitched sound punching out on every thrust. She looks so fucking gorgeous spread out like this, her clit sitting plush and untouched above where she’s taking him.

“You want it, don’t you?”

“Please,” she cries. “More.”

“Yeah?” Draco shifts one hand to press over her belly, feeling himself move inside her. “You want me to come for you? Put it right here where you need it?”

“Fuck. Yes. Please, yes.”

She tightens beautifully around him, the drag of every stroke drawing him closer. He sinks into it and feels the pleasure spread like sound through his bones. She’s right there, pushed to the edge by his cock alone.

“You want me to come inside you? Just like this?”

“Yes—”

“You gonna take good care of it? Make a baby for me?”

Hermione’s body goes taut like a bow, strung out with desperation. She puts her hands over his on her stomach.

“Yes,” she babbles. “Yes, I promise.”

“Fuck.” Draco groans at what that does to him. He slides his hand down, his thumb finding her clit. “Then you know what I need. Come on, love.”

It’s like she comes together instead of falling apart. All of the tension straining her limbs goes inward, bearing down on him and forcing him to give her what she wants.

He does. How can he not? It pours out of him as he tells her how good she feels, how deep she’s taking him, how hard he’s coming for her.

She stills slowly beneath him, a shadow playing in the dip of her stomach on every deep breath. Draco lets his weight fall forward onto one hand, sinking down onto her and pressing out any lingering doubt.

He kisses her slowly, reverently, and lets her kiss him back just the same.

“Draco—” she murmurs.

“Don’t,” he says, tasting the apology on her lips. He brings up a hand to brush the hair back from her face. “It’ll still be a good trip, yeah?”

Her eyes track slowly over his face as his thumb brushes the corner of her mouth. A smile stretches beneath it.

“Yeah.”

He presses his lips back to hers, savouring the moment as though they have all the time in the world. Which they do, because Draco is patient.

Fate, however, is less so.

\*\*\*

At 8AM in London, Hermione’s phone chimes, as it does every morning, with a reminder to take her birth control pill.

But Hermione is not in London. She is in New York City where it is 3AM and she is sinking down into another sleep cycle after a long day of travel and a very exhausting arrival.

The sound of the tone just barely breaks through the surface, and she squints at the full brightness of the screen lighting the room.

A clumsy, fumbling palm dismisses the notification on the way to knocking the phone clear off the unfamiliar nightstand.

It clatters to the floor.

Draco jerks into awareness beside her, flinging an arm across her middle. “Whassat?” he gasps.

“Dunno,” she murmurs. “My phone.”

He deflates with relief, curling the protective arm around her and drawing her in tight against him. “Mm,” he says.

Hermione stretches, luxuriating in the warmth of his naked body. She makes to wrap her arm around his waist and encounters something interesting.

“You’re hard.”

“Happens,” Draco says. “Earlier was so hot.”

So it was.

Hermione gives him an experimental squeeze. For science.

Draco groans, hips pushing into her hand. His own arm shifts around until she feels the brush of fingers against her center.

“You’re wet.”

Even two half-conscious people can put that puzzle together.

A hand grips her thigh, pulling it up over his hip. Hermione rolls to accommodate it, and her breath leaves her on a moan as he slots back inside her.

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It isn’t until the following morning, when Hermione wakes to find the reminder notification waiting patiently on her screen, that she remembers to take her pill.

Her brow furrows as she looks down at the little days assigned to each one in the pack. Somehow, they’re off by one. But she’s never missed a pill before, so it must be some kind of clerical error.

She takes the pill for that day, and in a very un-Hermione-ish way, doesn’t give it another thought.

### *Six weeks later*

Draco is yanked from the depths of the most luxurious post-fuck nap by a wet slap against his chest.

His hand flinches instinctively to cover his balls, but apparently, he’d maintained consciousness long enough after finishing to pull on his boxers.

He squints down at what appears to be a white plastic stick sitting between his pecs. He picks it up, turning it over in his hands. There’s a little window with two faintly pink lines in it, but no indication of where the stick had come from.

Maybe it fell from the ceiling? He looks up.

“Draco!”

He glances back down to find Hermione standing at the foot of the bed. Another stick hits him in the chest, answering one of his questions at least.

He inspects this one and finds that instead of two pink lines, there is a little plus in the window. A thought plops free from the sleep-congealed mass of his brain. He sits up, looking at the symbol.

It sure seems like a positive sign.

“Hermione—”

His reflexes have recovered enough to catch the third stick, which has a very helpful word stamped clearly in its window.

“You’re pregnant??”

“I’m pregnant!”

Draco jumps to his feet, which—seeing as he’s still firmly centered on the mattress—makes it look like he’s preparing to jump on the bed.

(Which is exactly what he wants to do, but upon further inspection, it appears that Hermione was flinging the sticks at him out of pure shock, and it would be best to maintain some composure.)

(A note: this is hard to do while running on a mattress.)

Draco lands on the floor in front of her hard enough to make the knickknacks on the dresser rattle. He wraps his arms around her and lifts her into a hug.

“You’re pregnant!”

Hermione makes a small, shocked sound, and he sets her back down to take her face in his hands. She’s wearing her brown sherpa dressing gown, the one that makes her look like a teddy bear. He kisses her.

“I’m on birth control,” Hermione says.

“It’s a miracle!” says Draco.

“It’s a 0.4% chance.”

He kisses her again. “Sounds pretty miraculous to me.”

She grips his forearms. Her hands are cold. “But, Draco, we’re so busy. What are we going to do?”

Draco curls her hands into his palms. “What are you talking about? I’ll quit my job, of course.”

Hermione’s mouth drops open. “What? I can’t let you do that! Your career—”

Draco laughs, kind of in her face which he regrets. “It’s not a career, Hermione. It was just something to do.” He puts his hand on her fuzzy stomach. “This—you—a family—that is what I was meant for.”

Hermione begins to cry.

“No, no, shh,” he soothes, rubbing over her arms. “It’s going to be perfect. I can help out at the shop. I’ll need to read more, of course, to be able to help the customers.”

That’s a fucking daunting thought. But he’ll have nine months to get ready.

“Or! We can hire another clerk,” he says. This is a great suggestion in case Hermione has forgotten that money won’t be an issue.

She cries harder.

“Just until you’re ready to go back!” he clarifies. “I know you’d never want to give up the shop. Our baby can grow up there, learning to read sitting next to the till, just like you did. And we can have our family picture on the wall of fame.”

Draco sobs suddenly. “Sorry,” he says, wiping a hand over his face. “It’s just hitting me a bit.”

Hermione puts her hands on his wet cheeks. “Draco—”

His thoughts are going a mile a minute, but something about her tone cuts straight to the center of him. He looks at her, really looks, and he sees her fear.

He can barely reconcile it because he knows how badly she wants this, wants them. But... this is his Hermione, who needs 5-7 business months to make an important decision. And even if she does want it, she might not be ready for this one, right now.

“Hermione,” he says, softer. “You know, of course, that—whatever you want to do—I’ll support you. It’s your choice, if—”

Hermione’s head shakes, so vigorously that a tear flies off her cheek. “No, Draco. That’s not—not that.”

“Okay,” he breathes. He cups her jaw, tilting her face up to him. “Then, Hermione, my love, what are you afraid of?”

“It just—” She licks her lips. They’re quivering. “It can’t be this easy.”

Relief hits Draco like a tidal wave. He laughs, and it comes out bright and full from his chest. “It won’t be easy,” he tells her. “It will be exhaustion and worry and doubt. And we will argue over silly things like sugar before bed and screen time. And there will be times when we’re certain that we’ve done irreparable damage to this child by letting them get their way so that we can have a moment of peace, but none of that will matter. It won’t. Because they will be so loved, and so cared for, and we will give them the best life that we possibly can, and they will turn out great, even if we fuck it up a little.”

Hermione sobs, big, shoulder-shaking lungfuls of tears. But she is smiling.

“Hermione—” Draco’s voice breaks, but he doesn’t care. “You’re going to be such a good mum.”

She nods, her chin trembling.

“And I’ll be right there with you,” he adds. “We’ll do it together. Even if—we don’t have to get married.”

“No,” Hermione says quickly. “I want to.”

Draco’s heart stalls for a beat. “What? You do?”

“Yes,” she says emphatically, gripping his arms. “Draco, I want to marry you.”

“Holy shit,” he breathes. Then, “Hold on!”

He runs for his nightstand and trips over the corner of the duvet. “Ow, fuck,” he says as he smashes his shin on the bed frame.

He yanks open the drawer, making the contents slide into a pile at the back. He limps back to Hermione with four ring boxes clutched to his chest between two hands.

“Draco—” she says, her eyes round. “You kept them all?”

“Of course,” he says, dropping them onto the mattress. “They’re all yours.”

She smiles down at him as he lowers onto one knee. This time, she stays standing.

“Hermione,” he begins. He reaches up and grabs her by the hips, needing to hold her. “I know we’ve gone about this in a roundabout way, and now you’re pregnant, and you’ve basically already said yes, but I’m glad I asked you before, so that you know that’s not why I want to get married.”

“I know,” she says gently.

“And I know that’s not why you’re saying yes,” he says. “I know that you’ve wanted this for a long time, and I’m so thankful that you loved me enough to do what was right for me, even if I didn’t know it for myself.”

She touches his lips, but Draco keeps speaking, brushing the words across her fingertips. “I hope that you can trust me to do the same for you, because all I want is to make you feel safe, and treasured, and to make sure that you get everything you could possibly want out of this life.”

He takes a breath, letting himself smile. “I know you like to pretend that you’ve lived a hundred lifetimes, but you are still so fucking young, and you’re going to change just as much in the next decade as I am. And I want to be there with you when you do. I want to

learn from you, and with you, and I want to be a part of the person you'll be when you're 50, or 100."

Hermione begins crying again, but it's softer this time. Just the slow drip of tears down her cheeks.

Inspiration appears, complete and perfect, inside him.

"Ich geh doch immer auf dich zu mit meinem ganzen Gehn."

Hermione's lips part, a rough inhale sucking past them. "Is that—Rilke?" she asks.

Draco smiles. "In the original German."

But he is inspired again to taste the words in his mother tongue, and feel the truth of them the way Rilke must have when he wrote them.

"When I go toward you, it is with my whole life."

Hermione sways a bit, like maybe she'll go onto her knees after all. Draco wraps it up.

"Will you let me give you my whole life, Hermione? Will you marry me?"

She's already nodding, but Draco still watches, rapt, as her mouth forms the word he has so longed to hear.

"Yes," she says. "Yes, I will."

Draco stands, hugging her tight again. He kisses her, uncaring about the smear of fluids between them. (He's pretty sure he has her pee on his chest anyway.) "I love you so much," he murmurs.

"I love you more."

Impossible, but Draco lets her have it.

He ducks quickly back down onto his knees and inches the flaps of her dressing gown apart enough to press a kiss to her belly. "Did you get all of that?" he asks it. "It applies to you, too."

Hermione's hands land softly on top of his head, and he looks up at her. "We're going to get married."

"Yes."

"And we're going to have this baby."

"Yes."

He stands. "And we're going to get married."

She giggles, kissing him again. “Yes.”

Draco turns back to the bed and creaks open each of the ring boxes.

“This one was going to be for one year,” Draco explains of the fourth.

She surveys the 12-total-carat smorgasbord.

“It’s gorgeous. They all are, but, Draco—what am I supposed to do with these?”

He shrugs. “Rotate through them based on your mood. Or wear all four at once and start a rap career.”

She snorts a laugh.

“We’ll need to hire security if you want to go that route.”

“Draco—”

“Or pick your favourite, and we can donate the rest to orphans.”

“That seems a highly inappropriate donation.”

“Nonsense. I always thought diamonds deserved a slot on Maslow’s hierarchy. They’re man’s best friend after all.”

“That’s dogs.”

“They deserve a slot, too.”

She laughs in earnest. “Did you know that I love you ferociously?” she asks.

“I do now,” Draco says, grinning.

Hermione looks back down at the rings. After a moment, she points. “This one.”

“Yeah?” Draco takes the first ring out of its box.

She nods. “I wanted so badly to say yes the first time.”

Draco swallows heavily, but a fresh tear still spills onto his cheek. “You did?”

“I did.”

He can hardly breathe for happiness. Draco takes her left hand in his, and places the ring at the tip of her fourth finger. He pauses, and the moment teeters, the end of something.

He leans forward to rest his forehead against hers. “Could you just—humour me a little?” he asks. “Since I had to ask a few times?”

Hermione tilts her chin up to kiss him. “Yes, Draco,” she says. “Yes, yes, yes, yes—”

He slides the ring onto her finger, and it is a perfect fit.

They both cry some more.

“Now what?” Draco asks, laughing.

Hermione shakes her head. “I suppose I’ll need to plan a wedding.” She winces a little, putting a hand over her stomach. “I would prefer it wasn’t—obvious.”

Draco waves away this concern. “Forget that. My mother can plan a wedding in a fortnight. And Pomona can do the flowers.”

“Who’s Pomona?”

Draco smiles, tucking the hair back behind her ear. “She’s been your personal florist for the last seven months.”

“Gracious,” says Hermione. “What a thing to have.”

“Besides,” Draco says. “I meant what do you want to do today. Do you want to celebrate? Call your parents? Let it sink in for a bit?”

“Um.” Hermione looks down at the ring. The February sun is already dying for the day, but the last rays still send sparks glittering out from her hand. “God, it’s beautiful.”

Draco invokes each of his senses separately to commit the moment to memory. The golden light on her face. The warmth of her hand, and the scent of her hair. The salt of his tears and hers. And under all of it, the cosy quiet of a soft Sunday.

“Yes,” he says. “It is.”

Hermione glances back up at him, smiling. “I think I’d like for it to be just us today. Something simple. I was looking forward to unpacking a new shipment at the shop.”

Draco brings her knuckles to his lips and kisses them. “That sounds perfect.”

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Hermione spends the car ride over attempting to determine if she feels different.

The trouble is, with so much happiness inside her, there could hardly be room for anything else. It flows through her in waves, welling up and leaking out at random.

“Here,” Draco says, retrieving a paper napkin from the console.

“Thanks,” she laughs. “I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

“I do.”

An excellent point. She dabs at her cheeks.

When she's finished, Draco reaches over and takes her hand in her lap.

"Do you think—" she begins. "For the wedding—I don't know if the butterfly garden does private events, but—"

"They'll do it," Draco says. He squeezes her hand. "That would be perfect. I'll call first thing tomorrow."

"Okay. Thank you." Hermione has to dab some more.

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At the shop, Draco follows her to the storeroom. She shows him the boxes she was planning to unpack, and they begin on them together.

Her progress is slow, distracted as she is with watching him and envisioning the whole of their beautiful lives laid out before them.

(And with dabbing, seemingly always more dabbing.)

After a half hour or so, Draco glances over at her and says, "Hm?"

Hermione blinks at him. "I didn't say anything."

"Oh." His brow creases. "I thought I heard—"

Hermione hears it this time, too. From the corner, like the squeak of a rusty spring.

Draco turns, standing to peer over the endless stack of donations to be sorted.

He makes a small, choked sound and bends down.

When he stands again, Hermione already knows what he's going to have, but her chest still cracks open at the sight of the tiny orange kitten in his hands. It looks absolutely absurd cupped against his broad chest.

"Oh," Draco says, his voice an octave higher than Hermione has ever heard it. "It's so small."

The kitten creaks its meow in agreement, and Hermione actually tips her face up to the dusty ceiling.

She thanks the Universe for the sign and assures it that she is reading the message, loud and clear.

Draco looks up at her again, and the question is written plainly in his eyes, even under the pooling tears.

But Hermione, who has made him ask for so much, will not let him ask for this.

She steps over the boxes and crosses the cramped room to them. The kitten receives her scratch with an enthusiastic head butt, meowing again and sounding more cat-like already

with practise.

Hermione looks up at Draco and tells him, “Let’s keep it.”

## Chapter End Notes

I really don't think I can accurately convey how much writing and sharing this story has meant to me. You have all been so generous with your love and support for these two, which doesn't surprise me as much as the way you've made me feel like you couldn't wait to find out what would happen next. To feel that I've made something compelling out of 'nothing bad happens and everyone gets what they want' is really so special, and that is all down to you lovely readers.

The original book that I'm working on right now is very heavy and quite dark at times, and though I adore it completely, it has been so nice to have such a fluffy outlet to turn to when I need a break. Thank you for giving that to me 

Some notes: I know that engagement rings are something that people can feel verrrry strongly about. I am not one of those people, and I couldn't begin to tell you what sort of ring Hermione would prefer based on what we know of her character. So, the ring I described in detail in the last chapter is mine since it is objectively the most beautiful perfect ring on the planet, obvs 😊 I tend to think she wouldn't be super picky (or maybe she would, but there would be plenty of combos she could love), so the existence of other, equally perfect rings in Ollivander's shop is a bit of a nod to that.

The butterfly garden is inspired by a real place in Key West, FL which I highly recommend a visit to if you ever have the chance. I did some embellishing of course, but it is still very magical in real life.

The line Draco quotes from Rilke is from a poem in his Book of Hours (I, 51). Technically, the speaker of the poem is addressing God not a lover, but this Draco and I find that distinction irrelevant.

In editing this chapter, I realized that I lost a few lines of text last week in a copy/paste somewhere. They were at the very beginning of when Draco and Lucius are speaking while Hermione gets a tour of the library. I've since added them, but if you read right when the chapter was posted they weren't there. Draco mentions quitting his job which I felt was a nice addition to the throughline of this throughout the story. Especially since we didn't have it in the few preceding chapters in Hermione's POV (since, as we learn here, he's never mentioned this intention to her 😊). Draco also mentions landing a seven-figure client like it's no big deal which also plays into the sense I was trying to cultivate that Draco does actually do very important, high stakes work, he just doesn't particularly care about it beyond not letting down Blaise.

And finally, someone commented early on that if these two weren't married and pregnant by the end of the story they wanted their money back, so I deeply hope that you will take engaged + pregnant + tiny baby kitten as a fair exchange. (At least until the epilogue that will definitely be coming because I have no self control.)

Thank you so much for reading. I would love nothing more than to hear what you thought. I will still be around, but it might be awhile before you see anything else on AO3 from me. I hope you'll have a chance to read the original work that was created in tandem with this some day ❤️

In the meantime, you can find me on [TikTok](#), [Twitter](#), and now [Instagram](#) and [Bluesky](#)!

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