

Remain Nameless

pinned half of it back. She was dressed in a pale pink long-sleeve tee shirt and jeans. The color of her shirt flattered her skin tone. Near and simple.

The longer he looked, the easier it was to notice the slight darkness under her eyes, the little lines at the edge of her brown eyes and a few at the corners of her mouth. Draco knew she'd more than likely had her share of sleepless nights. But from what? She'd won, hadn't she? Her side victorious, she'd ridden off into the sunset a war heroine in the arms of Weasley, beloved by him, Potter, and the rest of the wizarding world.

No, her facial lines were more likely caused by laughing, smiling, and of tired mornings spent with her children and her husband. But wait, was she married with a family? Draco sorted through memories but couldn't seem to dredge up any surrounding an announcement of her nuptials with the Weasel or any birth notices. Her ring finger was bare, but it would be so like her to be one of those modern witches who didn't wear a wedding band.

"Can I help you with something, Malfoy?"

Still.

"No, why do you ask?" *Smooth.*

She arched an eyebrow at him, as if the answer were obvious. "Your gaze has been practically burning a hole through my head this entire time."

Draco frowned at her. "It has not. I merely seem to find myself without any reading material this morning and was just thinking."

"About what?"

You. I have a hundred million questions and I'm bored to fucking tears over here.

Instead of answering, he merely shrugged. Hermione rolled her eyes and started rifling through her stack of books and papers.

"Here. I've finished with it already and you can read the quidditch pages." She handed the weekend edition of The Daily Prophet to him. Draco, once again working as if *imprisoned*, leaned forward and accepted the paper from her. His brain began screaming at him about the absurdness of the situation, but Draco shut off his thoughts.

Draco quickly scanned the sports section, but it was full of information he already knew. The Prophet was generally a day or so behind his own scouting reports. He was soon bored again. *Fuck it all*, he thought. *I might have to light myself on fire for entertainment.*

And even while his brain kept shouting "don't, don't, just fucking don't!" his mouth never received the signal.

"What are you working on?"

She raised her eyes from the page and looked at him. She regarded him pensively for almost a full minute and Draco felt like he was being evaluated by her personal, internal deduction system. What was she looking for? He didn't break her gaze, as if she were a particularly wrathful Hippogriff, ready to charge at the slightest hint of mal intent. Finally, he must have passed her test, because she cordially replied.

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"I'm writing up a report to rebut a particularly ill-informed piece about giants that was printed in Tuesday's Prophet. It was the kind of prejudiced dreck that's going to set my department's efforts back quite a bit."

Draco smirked, because he had been right about her career path. Merlin, was Granger predictable. "So you do work in the Department of Saving All Helpless Creatures, then?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, Malfoy. I work in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Though, to be fair, I actually like your name better."

It was Draco's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Granger put down her writing tool, and Draco smiled internally. He was about to be on the receiving end of a Hermione Granger intellectual rant and Merlin, he hadn't felt this normal since his Fifth Year at school.

"Well, think about what the words mean. Regulation. Control. As if these beings don't have powers and wills of their own. It's just pure wizarding arrogance, honestly, to want to control creatures instead of respecting and appreciating them. There is so much we just do not know about the capabilities and habits of magical creatures because wizards have been so intent in learning how to dominate and subdue that they've never bothered with truly understanding the magic that flows through every living thing. The 12 uses for dragon's blood, for example—"

"Granger, I did take Care of Magical Creatures 100, you know."

"Yes, and what a wonderful pupil you were in that class," she replied and shot him a withering glare, but Draco felt himself breaking into a grin.

"My point is, despite the way you were poking fun at my department earlier, I would be more partial to something as saccharine as that, given our current name." She paused to take a sip from the mug in front of her, and Draco wondered what she ordered when she came in every morning.

"And you? You're a talent scout, isn't that right? I've seen you a few times at Ginny's matches."

Draco nodded and noticed as he went to take a sip from his mug that he was just about finished with his drink. His natural reason for remaining at the table was disappearing quickly.

"Yes, I handle the southern part of England mostly, so I don't usually go to Harpies matches."

"You're with that big agency in Diagon Alley, Whisp's and...?"

"Whisp and Wright, named after—"

"Kemmworthy Whisp, the author of *Quidditch Through the Ages* and Bowman Wright, the maker of the first Snitch."

Draco gaped at her. Maybe she wasn't so predictable after all. Was there any piece of knowledge she didn't have tucked away in that gigantic brain of hers? "You've read *Quidditch Through the Ages*?"

"Of course! Not that it's ever helped me on a broom, mind you, but I did learn quite a bit about the history and the rules."

Draco shook his head. "Merlin, Granger, I think the day I hear of a book you haven't read, I may just die of shock."

And then she smiled at him. Hermione Granger smiled at him. There was no impatience or scorn,

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but genuine amusement at his teasing.

Draco picked up his mug. It was empty now. The charade had ended.

“Well I’ve got to get going.” He didn’t. He had nothing and no one waiting for him. Just a long stretch of a weekend most likely spent poring over old family documents. He stood and handed her paper back.

“You said you come here every morning before work?” Hermione asked and he nodded.

“Then I guess I’ll see you around, Malfoy.” She gave him a tentative, polite smile. The kind you give a work colleague you recognize as you pass in the hall. Draco returned it.

“See you around, Granger.”

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“No Granger, stay. I’ll go elsewhere,” he muttered and she stopped her rustling. Before she could get a word out, he turned on his heel and walked off to find another seat.

Finding another seat presented itself as another mortifying challenge. For while Draco had wasted time arguing with Hermione over a table, the café had gotten busy with their Saturday, mid-morning rush. There were literally no seats anywhere. Draco was left standing like a prat holding a blueberry scone on a plate and a mug of coffee that was getting colder by the minute.

He glanced back over at Granger. Her head was back down again and she was writing once more.

Fuck it, he thought, let’s really make this morning interesting. This will probably be my last time here.

Draco approached her table and stopped short. She must have sensed his presence, because she sighed and looked up.

“And what have I done now to offend you Malfoy?” Her brow was arched warily, and Draco felt that familiar tug of nostalgia once more. How many times back at Hogwarts had she regarded him with that exact, so uniquely *Hermione Granger* is *hacked off at you* expression?

“Ern, there’s nowhere else to sit,” he grunted feebly, and gestured his eyes to his plate and cup, showing her why he wanted a table in the first place. Draco watched as her eyes went from his face, to his hands, to the empty chair on the other side of the table, and back up to his face. Her mouth was set in a thin line. He had overstepped, he realized. They weren’t old friends. He had no right to approach her like this. To even speak to her. That cold, sinking feeling set in again as he remembered what he was to her.

“Or I can just go, I didn’t mean to—”

She cut him off with an impatient wave of her hand. “Don’t be ridiculous Malfoy, here, I’ll make some room.” She pulled her various notebooks toward her and neatly stacked them on her side of the table. Draco blinked in surprise, but his body moved as if *imperius*, and before he could even register what he was doing, he had set down his coffee and plate and was seated across from Hermione Granger.

She regarded him impassively for a moment, before opening her notebook and resuming her writing. Draco let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and finally sipped his coffee. Silence settled over their table as Hermione’s writing tool whizzed across her page. Draco tried not to stare at her, not to think about the absolute absurdity of this situation. But he just couldn’t help himself.

They must look so normal to Muggle eyes, the pair of them at this table. Draco eating his scone in two bites, while Hermione busied herself writing. They looked like any other pair of acquaintances, just sitting in a café together. But of course, the truth was so much uglier than that, at least where it concerned Draco.

He pushed the dark thoughts away by staring at the witch across from him. He was halfway through his coffee and hadn’t brought any reading material today. Staring at Granger would have to do for entertainment.

He hadn’t been this close to her in years. While her hair was much more settled, much neater than it had been in their school days, there was still that inescapable hint of wildness to it despite her having

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ber that he had spoken to her.

"I'm sorry?"

Draco felt himself deflating a bit, but tried steeling himself once more. He wasn't going to be made into a fool.

"Don't play dumb, Granger, you know this is my table and you're just taking up the space to get under my skin," he hissed.

Why were her brows so infuriatingly knit in confusion? He'd called her on her power play, couldn't she just own up to it already? She was taking an agonizingly long time to supply him with an answer. When she did finally reply, she still seemed to be putting everything together.

"But I don't know what you... but... but this is a Muggle café?" As the words spilled out of her mouth in shock her brain finally seemed to be firing at its usual rate, and her confusion subsided slightly as she responded to his original question.

"Did you just claim this was *your table*, Malfoy?"

Was she bloody deaf? Why did she still have that stupid, befuddled look on her face? He noticed her eyes sweep to either side of him, glance behind him, and then finally back to take in his face, as if checking to see if this was all a mirage or a joke. Well, she was certainly putting up a very good show of looking surprised.

"Yes, *my table*, which you very well know it is, because I sit here every morning!" He wasn't going to back down this easy. But Merlin, was that a little bubble of nostalgia coming to the surface inside him? When was the last time he'd verbally sparred with Hermione Granger?

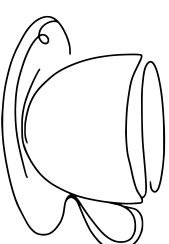
She set down the writing instrument on her notebook, and Draco noticed now that the table was covered with several other journals and books. Meeting his level gaze, she narrowed her eyes at him.

"You come here every morning? Are you following me?"

Draco's face went from angered to indignant at her accusation. "Following you? I was here first! I've been coming here every morning before work for the last four years, minding my own business at this very table, which you have now seen fit to taunt me with by sitting at it!"

She snorted. She actually snorted. "Oh grow up Malfoy, no one is taunting you! And for your information, I've been coming here every morning for the past *three* years and haven't seen you once! And it's the weekend! Now I'm not going to even bother to ask why you're frequenting a Muggle establishment or why your paranoid mind thinks I live my life to spite you, but if this *bloody table* means so much to you, I'll just leave!" She huffed as she closed her notebook and made to gather the rest of her things from the table.

With a rapid feeling of dread, Draco knew now that he was such a fucking idiot. He could feel color rushing to his face as he realized what a horrendous mistake he had just made. He had completely and utterly embarrassed himself in front of *Hermione fucking Granger* with a childish argument and not only had he blown his cover, but made a complete ass of himself in front of her in the process. Damn it all, he was going to need to find a new coffee shop after today, preferably on another planet, far away from Granger.



Chapter Two

"Malfoy. Draco Malfoy. You had a coffee date with Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes, Draco Malfoy. And no, it was very much *not* a date, and for Merlin's sake keep your voice down, Ginny!"

Hermione whipped her head to either side of the Weasleys' kitchen, but it was mercifully empty, save for her and Ginny Potter. Molly had asked the pair of them to retrieve a few extra place settings for dinner, and Hermione had kept at the chance for some alone time with Ginny. Private conversations were such a rarity at the weekly Sunday dinners at the Burrow, and Hermione needed to talk about her strange encounter with someone not named Harry or Ron.

"But you go to a *Muggle* café. And he just sat down at your table?"

"Sort of. He stalked over in that arrogant way of his and accused me of stealing his table to spite him."

Ginny gave her a wide-eyed, searching look. "That's just so odd! Not the arrogant part, obviously, but the fact that you both visit the same place... it's weird. And that he managed a civil conversation with you."

Hermione furrowed her brow as she remembered their conversation. It had felt odd at first.

"How did he look?" Ginny's question broke through her reminiscence.

Lonely. Thin. Tired. Broken, but trying. Exactly like me.

"Lost." Hermione softly replied. Ginny nodded sympathetically.

"I can imagine. I don't think he really has anyone in his life."

"Girls?"

Molly Weasley's shriek broke through the quiet of the kitchen, causing both women to jump and almost drop the plates in their hands.

"Honestly, I could have come and gotten these plates myself in the time it's taken you! Come on now, you two can gossip later!" She chivied them out of the kitchen and back to the dining room.

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“Sorry Mum,” Ginny offered meekly as they passed.

Hermione stuck close to Ginny before they reached the rest of the group gathered. “Ginny, don’t tell anyone, please. About Malfoy. I think Harry and Ron would be weird about it. And it really was nothing,” she whispered.

“Of course, Hermione, I won’t tell.”



Ginny kept half of her promise to Hermione. As she and Harry got ready for bed that night, she told her husband about Hermione’s encounter with Draco. Harry placed his glasses on the night stand and turned to his wife with a frown on his face.

“Hermione had a coffee date with Malfoy?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “No, nothing like that. They just had a sort of... reconnection over coffee, you could say. Hermione said it was actually a pleasant chat.”

Harry’s frown deepened. “Don’t tell Ron, all right? Hermione didn’t even want me to tell you.”

“I won’t tell Ron,” Harry promised her, and intended to keep his word. As Ginny drifted off to sleep beside him, Harry was wide awake. He remembered the discretion he once promised Draco Malfoy six or so years ago, when he’d received a visitor on his door step. He’d kept his word then, and had almost forgotten all about it. Harry pushed the memory away, but couldn’t help but wonder about the path Draco’s life had taken since the end of the war.



It was Monday morning, and Draco was wide awake at 5:05 AM. This time however, it seemed anticipation rather than pain had woken him at this early hour. Perhaps he should adjust his routine to just a bit earlier if his body clock was getting him up at this hour? *I am in control of this.*

He bought his coffee, and then waited at his table. This morning, Hermione Granger did not disappoint. She entered, dressed for work as usual, swept some hair aside and turned her head toward him. She gave him a small smile and a nod, then went to retrieve her usual order.

On her way out, she raised her hand in farewell, and Draco returned the gesture.

Well look at you, convincingly portraying a normal, functioning human. Draco told his taunting subconscious to fuck off.

For every day of the work week, Hermione and Draco performed their little polite social ritual. Draco avoided going to the café over the weekend, taking advantage of the rare nice weather to do some lying over the land behind his home. Did Granger go to the café that weekend? He decided he was entirely too fixated on what Granger did in her spare time, and so took to practicing a few dangerous broom maneuvers to distract himself. *I am in control of this.*

The next work week brought the same behavior and Draco accepted that it was now embedded into his morning routine. Get coffee. Sit down. Look up when Granger enters. Nod politely. Track her movements as she places her order. Return her wave out the door. Repeat Monday through Friday.

Trust Granger to flip the script of his new, carefully cultivated routine. Ten minutes after her usual

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only reason he was getting out of bed in the morning. Some days his gaze practically burned through her as he willied her to just glance over. *Come on Granger, look at me, change over here all indignant and call me a prat.* Some days he was terrified about what would happen when she did finally see him. Would she recoil in fear and call him a Death Eater? He’d had enough of that reaction from the general public to last him a lifetime, thank you very much.

Though it had been years since he’d had insults, hexes and even drinks thrown at him in public, that wasn’t the type of experience one quickly forgot. Time had healed some wounds apparently. He didn’t even receive that many Howlers anymore.

With a jolt, Draco remembered that he had seen Granger more than a few times over the years. She was often seen in one of the boxes at Holyhead Harp’s quidditch matches. Draco didn’t attend many of their games, because they weren’t one of the teams on his client roster, but remembered now that the Weasley girl played Chaser for them. It made sense that Granger would attend to support her sister-in-law.

So just how would Hermione Granger react to seeing him? Three weeks in, and Draco still did not have an answer.

When mid-morning hit on Saturday, Draco had a craving for a blueberry scone. He almost never visited his café on the weekend, but since it was a good sign that he had an appetite, he was going to just go with it. The older woman behind the counter made some comment about not usually seeing him on the weekends, and Draco merely shrugged as she smiled and handed him his scone and coffee.

He’d never tell his house elves, but the blueberry scones at this Muggle café were fucking divine, and nothing they tried even came close. He also inwardly cringed at what his mother would say if she knew of his little morning routine. But upon further reflection, Draco decided that she had long ago lost the right to comment on his life choices, especially if she spent most of the year traveling the continent.

Draco turned to head to his usual table and froze. Someone was already sitting there. Sure, there were other empty tables, but that was *his* table. Just as he was debating what kind of magic this situation required, the woman sitting there looked up from her notebook and swept some hair out of her face.

Hermione fucking Granger.

So she had noticed him. She must have, how else would she have known to pick that particular table in this particular coffee shop if not to mentally fuck with him? Breathing heavily through his nostrils, Draco strode angrily up to where she sat.

“Seriously Granger? Do you think this is funny?”

She started at the sound of her name, but it was nothing compared to the shock on her face as she looked up to see who had spoken. Draco realized he’d never seen Hermione look dumbstruck before. The Gryffindor swot who always knew the answer to everything looked positively flummoxed at the sight before her.

The seconds lengthened as he seethed in front of her confused face. She finally seemed to remem-

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they went on their merry way to their fulfilling career.
And she hadn't noticed him.



Draco wasn't sure how he got through his reports that day at work. Before he knew it, it was the end of the work day and he was sitting in front of his dinner at home. More than once that day in his office, his thoughts had drifted to Granger. What was she doing at the coffee shop? *Obviously getting coffee, mom*, his subconscious drawled. Yes, but did she do that often? How did she know about that particular café?

Draco surmised it must be on her way to work. The downtown entrance to the Ministry wasn't far from where he walked to Diagon Alley each morning. She must stop there before work too. But in four years of sitting there almost every week day morning he had never seen her once. And Draco would think he would have noticed Granger. But she hadn't even glanced in his direction.

The next morning, Draco woke after only a few hours of sleep again. Although no nightmares had woken him, he'd been restless all the same. And he couldn't help the curiosity that burned through him. Maybe he should go early for coffee again, just to see what happened.

And there she was. At almost the exact same time as the morning before, Hermione Granger walked in, made polite conversation with the workers behind the counter, received her portable cup, and went on her way without looking at Draco.

Over the weekend, Draco spent more time than he would have liked to admit thinking about Hermione Granger. It was odd, wasn't it, for her to stop into a café in the morning? Surely she was married to Weasley by now and had a litter of horrible-haired children to wrangle in the morning? But she had definitely been wearing formal looking Muggle clothes both mornings and carrying what seemed to be a case for an office. He wracked his brain trying to remember the career highlights of the brightest witch of their age. Something in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures? That sounded like her, given her odd proclivity for house elf rights.

When Monday morning rolled around, Draco went in early again. He did the same thing for the rest of the work week too.

Most days, Granger was like clockwork. Push open the door, sweep some hair back, walk confidently to the counter. But on two days, Draco could tell she was running late and feeling stressed. Her bag half clapped, hair not tied back as neatly, she half walked/half ran to the counter to grasp out a hurried order before practically sprinting out the door again.

Draco couldn't explain his behavior but had a few theories when he continued to do this earlier routine into the next week. It really came down to curiosity: just how would Hermione Granger react to his presence? And just how long was it going to take for her to turn her bloody head his way?

It wasn't until his third week of this new pattern that Draco realized this weird little game was the

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arrival time on the third Monday of this morning acknowledgement ritual, Granger practically ran up to Malfoy's table.

"Couldn't watch this for me could you? Thanks!"

Before Draco could even begin to form a response, she dumped her bag and several notebooks right in front of him and dashed off to the counter. She was definitely having one of those mornings where she seemed somehow both over-prepared and overwhelmed for whatever was going on at her office.

Granger hurried back with her drink and began stuffing as much of her possessions as she could into her bag, which Draco could see now was magically expanding to fit the literal library she seemed to carry around with her.

"Cheers Malfoy, see you tomorrow!" And with that, she swung her bag over her shoulder and scurried out the door before he could even muster a "See you, Granger."

That had certainly been interesting. Hermione Granger had, for a brief minute, trusted Draco Malfoy enough with her personal possessions to leave them in his care.

They were not friends. They were barely acquaintances. And yet, she'd trusted him and then thanked him, for absolutely no reason.

The following work week, their routine remained the same. Though it may have been all in Draco's head, but it did seem as if her smile got a little wider each time. It started to look like a true smile, rather than a tight-lipped one of social obligation. But he surely imagined this.

Then one Monday, Hermione arrived about 15 minutes before her usual time. She smiled at Draco, but instead of continuing to the counter, she approached his table. Oh sweet fucking Merlin, what could she possibly have to say to him?

"Hi, mind if I join you for a bit? I've got some extra time before work."

Draco cycled through several responses in his head:

Why?

Seriously, why?

Is this a joke?

Do you think I'm a joke?

What the fuck has gotten into you Granger? Don't you remember every awful, horrible thing I said to you at school?

But he went with the more rational response of "Sure," and nodded his head at the empty chair across from him.

She smiled, *again with the smiling*, and set her bag down. "Do you want anything? The masala chai is my absolute favorite here, I get it every morning." So that's what she ordered.

Draco shook his head and indicated his mostly full cup. "No, I'm all set."

This was weird, right? Hermione Granger just offered to fetch him some coffee, like it was no big deal. Like he hadn't been a nasty, disgusting bully to her for years. Like she hadn't been tortured to near death in his own home. And now she was returning to a table they shared, like this was a normal, natural situation.

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Hermione sat back down and blew on her hot tea before taking a sip. But instead of reaching down to extract one of the many papers or books hidden in the fathomless depths of her work bag, she asked him, “So, how was your weekend?”

How was my weekend? How was my fucking weekend? Fuck it all, if this was some weird, alternate dimension, then Draco was going to just play along until he was strapped back to reality. Draco realized he must have taken a bit too long to answer, because the pleasant look on Hermione’s face was crumbling into one of doubt and concern.

Sorry Granger, but I spend so much time in my own fucked-up mind that human conversation seems to have eluded me.

“Ern, it was fine. Did a bit of flying since the weather was so nice.” *Sweet Salazar Slytherin*, he was talking about the bloody weather.

“It was nice, wasn’t it? I actually went to my parents’ for a visit and helped my mum put in a fence around the garden. But do you have to travel often on weekends? I’m not sure when you do your scouting since quidditch is in the off season right now.”

“Oh, er, yeah, I usually go to the office during the week to file reports in the morning and then apparate to a couple teams’ training sessions during the day. Scrimmagings will be on the weekends, but it’s just in the mornings and those don’t start for a month yet.”

Why was he yammering on about all this?

“It must be nice to get to travel so often, even if it’s locally. I’ve put in requests for several international conferences, but we’ll see which get approved by the budgetary committee. They definitely don’t seem very keen on sending me to the goblin talks this year, but I’ve had success at the various discussions on Mer-people, which means another trip to the Mediterranean, probably next spring.”

“I didn’t know they let you leave the country so much, doesn’t the Ministry fall apart without your brilliance?”

“Yes, and then I return and all is right in the world again, so you’re welcome,” she smirked at him over her cup.

Hermione glanced down at her wrist and drained her tea. “I’d better be off, see you tomorrow Malfoy.”

She said it like it was normal, like he was normal. Draco ran a shaking hand through his white-blond hair. It was probably time to discuss this at his next appointment. *I am in control of this.*



Hermione was messing with his routine, again. Now the mornings began with her entering, sweeping pieces of her hair back, approaching Draco and asking “Mind if I join you for a bit?”

Draco would always respond “sure,” and nod at the chair.



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On Wednesday, Draco left his office just before 11, and walked a few blocks further into Diagon

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or his thoughts were going to burn him up from the inside and turn him into the shell of a man he’d barely avoided becoming.

Lucius was dead, anyway. Some days, like today, Draco envied him.

The dead had it so easy. They didn’t have to watch their entire life crumble around them. They didn’t have to haul their bodies out of bed each morning knowing that the world would be a better place without them.

Because the nightmares never left.



Draco couldn’t make it until 7:30 AM. Routine be damned, he needed his coffee now. He apparated an hour earlier than normal, hoping the café would be open and was relieved to see it was lit up and serving patrons. It was much less busy this early in the morning, and Draco was able to sit at his daily table without bothering to subtly cast a Muggle Repelling Charm.

Draco sat at the same table every weekday morning. It was the perfect spot in the café. Set a few tables in from the window, so he could see out and watch people walking by without them noticing his stare, plus far enough away from the door but with a clear view of it. Draco had developed a habit of clocking every exit in any room he entered.

The ceramic mug was hot and comforting in his hands, but none of the warmth seemed to spread to the rest of his body. He set it down and stared forlornly down at the brown liquid within. Really, what was the point of any of this charade? The getting dressed, drinking coffee, going to work, going home, not sleeping and having to do it all again? What value was any of this? What value was he? He had no one, offered nothing. If he were to just fall out of the world tomorrow, would anyone even notice?

Draco picked up his mug to gulp down the rest of his drink when the café door swung open and captured his attention. The young woman who had just entered swept some brown hair out of her face, then stopped to adjust a clasp on her bag. Draco’s hands began shaking violently as his heart thudded. He quickly set down his mug before his shaking hands caused it to drop and shatter. A cold, sickening panic coursed through him as Hermione Granger strode confidently to the café counter to place an order.

Hermione fucking Granger.

He was too far away to hear exactly what she said to the barista, but heard her friendly polite tone, a light laugh, then she received a beverage and offered her thanks.

He could hide. He could bolt, right now, and she wouldn’t see him.

Any second now. Any second, Granger would turn slightly and see him. She would see him and scowl. Or maybe her nose would turn up in disgust. Or maybe she would step back in fear. Either way, the second Granger laid eyes on him in a Muggle café, she would have a reaction.

But she was leaving. She walked right out the door, cup in hand and a small, relaxed smile on her face. The smile of someone who had completed the first pleasant stop on their morning routine as

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Thursday was the worst morning of all. It was the nightmare in his rotation of horrifying memories that haunted him most. His whole body was shaking as he tried to forget the sounds of Hermione Granger's screams. The wide, fearful look she had shot him just as his Aunt Bellatrix pushed her to the floor of the Manor's drawing room. *Help me, it had said, please, help me.* But he couldn't. And he didn't.

His watch read 4:13 in the morning. The shaking finally stopped and was replaced with an incapable dread. Draco would never be rid of these memories. Though it was going on 9 years after the Final Battle, he didn't see a way out of his own head.

He'd been this low before, of course. For the first year post-war he'd tried to drown himself in Firewhisky, Dreamless Sleep potion in combination with other brews, and the attentions of Pansy. But Pansy wanted to immediately start her life as the next Mrs. Malfoy, complete with outdated pureblood traditions and attitudes and soon got tired of Draco's melancholy ways. Draco got tired of her harping on about Mudbloods and blood traitors taking over the country and trying to rebuild the world, and what in Merlin's name had he ever seen in her anyway?

Dealing with Pansy's constant tirades about how the world was changing for the worse was, quite simply, exhausting. Didn't the stupid hint realize that none of it fucking mattered anyway? Where had all this blood purity nonsense gotten them? It got Lucius Malfoy a cell in Azkaban for life, along with most of their school mates' parents. Crabbe was dead. Narcissa was only free but for the grace of Harry Potter.

And Draco? A two-year probationary sentence that included an already-lifted international travel ban. Of course he also had vomit-inducing nightmares, mandatory healer appointments and was taking more medicinal and recreational potions than he could count.

So when Pansy opened her stupid mouth for the millionth time to whinge about muggleborns, Draco finally snapped. He'd probably been cruel, and called her all sorts of horrible names, but he really needed to cut whatever fraying cord still tied them together.

She'd called him a junkie, a pathetic excuse of a man, and a stain on his family name. Draco had laughed in her face and said if she were so intent on marrying a traditional Malfoy man, well he knew the Azkaban cell number of her perfect match.

The next few years were spent in a haze of Dreamless Sleep potion addiction, more healer appointments and once he'd passed his NEWTs (remotely, of course), he got the hell out of his mother's new home. The Ministry had seized Malfoy Manor immediately following the final battle at Hogwarts, since it had obviously served as the home-base for the Dark Lord's sinister operations, and Draco couldn't care less what happened to his childhood home.

Draco thought if he could get away from that horrible place, he'd be able to breathe. And this had worked, for a time. But his nightmares never stayed away long. Draco even kicked the sleep potion addiction and got himself a job. He could picture his father's curling lip and sneer if he knew Draco worked for a living. Malfoys didn't work. It was beneath the landed gentry of pureblood society to have to *earn* a living. While he certainly didn't need the gold, Draco did need something to occupy his time

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Alley. He entered a familiar polished brownstone, and walked up one flight of stairs to Healer Browning's private practice. Draco was always exactly on time, meaning the front-desk witch would show him in directly, and he wouldn't have to bother with idle chit-chat.

Draco settled on a comfortable leather sofa and steeled himself for his monthly appointment. Across from him, in a high-backed leather chair, sat the only person in the world who knew just how far Draco Malfoy had come in almost nine years.

Draco had been assigned two years of mandatory healer appointments as part of his sentencing after the war. The appointments in the beginning were twice a week, and the first few months had been particularly tough.

Now, years later, Draco kept himself to monthly, voluntary, paid appointments. Only Draco's boss knew where he went every third Wednesday of the month at precisely 11 o'clock. But people in the quidditch industry kept such weird in-office hours. Flooding or apparating to various training facilities or to meet with players that no one else thought anything of it.

"Good morning, Draco, and how have you been since we last met?"

Browning began every single session with this question. A bald man with keen, almost-black eyes slightly magnified by his gold-rimmed spectacles, Draco would hazard a guess that he was in his mid to late 60s. Too old to have gone to Hogwarts with Lucius. A quill floated just beside the healer's chair, poised over the parchment and ready to record Draco's response, or rather, to record Browning's impression of Draco's response.

"Ern, fine, I guess." Draco never felt like he had an adequate response to this opening question. *Oh fine you know, briefly stiched, but now I seem to have entered an alternate reality where I meet up with Hermione Granger every morning over coffee and so the thoughts of self-harm have been pushed to the back burner for now.*

"I see." *Scratch, scratch*, went the quill. "Anything specific you would like to add about your recent emotional state?"

Draco sighed. This was the dance they did every appointment. Draco gave a vague, non-descript statement about his feelings and Browning dug in and the quill scratched the parchment until Draco gave him an opening.

"Well I was having nightmares again." *Scratch, scratch, scratch.*

"And what did these nightmares entail?"

Draco shifted in his seat. He'd opened the wound, maybe Browning could suck out the poison.

"Ern, the usual ones. The Dark Lord making me torture people or he's torturing people... and that giant snake..." Draco shuddered as he trailed off.

Scratch, scratch.

"And did you take any poisons to stave off these nightmares?" His tone was professional, neutral. Draco had been here long enough to know it wasn't an accusation, but a request for accurate information.

"No, I didn't use." Browning nodded, but offered no praise. Draco had been clean of Dreamless Sleep Potion for years now. He took a Calming Draught every now and then on really bad days, but

Remain Nameless

that wasn't addictive.

"And how has work been?"

No scratching any more. He must have reached his conclusion of Draco's mental state already. No more need for quill calculations just now.

"Fine, same as usual."

"Have you heard from your mother recently?"

"Yes, she's still in Vienna, I think she may be extending her stay."

"And how do you feel about that?"

Draco shrugged. His mother was a grown woman with nothing but Draco to tie her to her home country. She could do as she liked. Plus it was easier to ignore Narcissa's passive aggressive comments about Draco's lack of a wife, or any sort of meaningful relationship, when they came via letter.

"It's fine, really. I think it's still easier for her abroad."

"And what have you been doing in your personal time?"

Ah, there was the million Galleon question. Browning knew Draco too well by now, and his previous month's surly responses of "nothing at all" and "just larking about on a broom" had surely gone down as "worsome" on the parchment.

Well sod it all, there was no one else in his life he could talk to about the Granger situation. This is why he was paying Browning after all.

"I actually sort of... reconnected with an old classmate of mine." That was *technically* correct.

"Indeed? And where did this take place?" Though it wasn't evident in his voice, Draco speculated that Browning was surprised. After all, the only friend Draco even mentioned (or had, really) was Theodore Nott.

"At that Muggle café I always go to. Turns out she visits each morning as well."

"Was she a friend of yours from Hogwarts?"

Draco laughed, actually laughed, at his question. "Merlin, no. I'm certain that she hated my existence."

That's as much detail as Browning was going to get this time. Because Browning already knew all about Hermione Granger. There were probably rolls and rolls of parchment about Hermione Granger filed away from Draco's previous sessions. His first several years of healing had involved a lot of confessions and regret, about her, specifically. But he wasn't going down that road, not today. *Scratch, scratch. That bloody quill.*

"So was this an unpleasant meeting?"

"Ern, at first, but we managed to talk a bit. We haven't seen each other in years so I think it was more a shock than anything."

"And these meetings have continued?"

"Yes. She recently started sitting at my table with me."

"What do you talk about with her?"

Draco shrugged. "It's only been a few times. We've stuck to work topics."

routine. I am in control of this.



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The following morning, Draco's nightmares let him have until 4:48 AM. Another recurring favorite had taken over his dreams: the one where Voldemort made him torture the wandmaker, Olivander. Draco reached over to grab his wand off the nightstand, trying not to think about using it on the man who'd made it for him and how broken he'd looked after several rounds of the Cruciatius Curse.

Draco forced himself downstairs for the performative task of sitting in front of breakfast food. He brooded over his tea until 7:30, then apparated to the coffee shop. He sipped his drink and stared at nothing. His eyes couldn't seem to focus on any of the reading material he brought with him. On to the office. Unfortunately there was no field work to be done this particular week, and he'd tried to bury himself in paperwork until the work day ended. *Routine. Routine. I am in control of this.*

On Wednesday morning, he woke himself up with limbs thrashing. His nightmares had taken him to the Astronomy Tower of Hogwarts, but in this version, he'd leapt in front of Snape's Killing Curse, and instead of Dumbledore's broken body falling from the tower, it had been Draco plummeting to his death. He had woke just before hitting the ground. It was 5:22 AM.

He stood in front of a gilded mirror in the bathroom, shaving razor in hand. He had finished his morning shave a few minutes ago, but couldn't put the razor down. He stared at the tool in his hand, wondering if it really could deliver a fatal cut to his wrist. Would it be painful? It was a very expensive, sharp instrument.

No one would care. Sure, the house elves would have to clean up after him, but would they really be bothered by it?

Mother would care. For a little while. Anyway, if she really wanted to continue this charade of the Malfoy family, she'd be here right now, wouldn't she? No spending most of the year visiting with various relatives scattered about Europe.

Theo Nott would care. But when was the last time they'd even spent time together anyway? In fact, if Draco thought back over the past year, their weekly meet ups at the pub had dwindled significantly. Draco couldn't even remember the last time they'd gotten together.

He could almost hear Pansy Parkinson's reaction in his head. "*Did you hear about poor Draco Malfoy? I'm not surprised, really, he went completely mad after the fall of the Dark Lord. But did you know I almost married him?*"

Yes, that would be typical Pansy. Entertaining various high-society types with her creepy, older Bulgarian husband, gossiping about what it was like to attend Hogwarts with people like Malfoy and Potter during the second rise of You-Know-Who. Draco heard she had two kids already.

To the rest of the wizarding world, he would be a cautionary tale. *Have you ever heard of the Malfoy family? Those pureblood aristocrats who were in Your Grace-Who's inner circle? Anyway, the last of their line just offed himself.*

Draco suddenly let out a snort of laughter. He just remembered the reason this blade was so expensive: it was charmed to only cut hair and would be unable to nick his skin.

Remain Nameless

It had been a test of sorts, at first. *Go out into the world. Spend some time among those different from you. You'll find people aren't so different after all.* Draco had deemed this absolutely rubbish. Healer advice at first, but then decided to take it as a challenge. Why the bloody hell should he be afraid of venturing outside the magical world? He knew firsthand there were far worse things to fear.

So instead of taking it as the lesson in expanding his horizons (as he was intended to), Draco meticulously planned out his first ever visit to a Muggle establishment four years ago.

He'd apparated to a nearby alley and strolled up and down the block. Familiarity and comfort he only a few blocks ahead where the Muggle world ended and the magical world began at the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron, but Draco was determined. He had gone to Gringotts the week before and for the first time in his life, exchanged wizarding money for Muggle currency.

The café seemed innocuous enough. A busy morning shift, people dressed for work (he assumed) bustling in and out to get their caffeine fix. He'd also been careful to forego robes in favor of a plain suit. Obviously, Muggle Studies had not been a part of his education, but he knew enough to at least dress the part.

As soon as he'd stepped inside, the scent memory from his previous encounter with Amortentia hit him powerfully, and he actually smiled. The fresh coffee smelled so good, and try as he might at home over the next few weeks, neither he, nor the house elves, had been able to replicate the quality of the brew these Muggles came out with.

Four years later, and Draco had his routine down. Once 7:30 AM hit, he'd apparate to the alley, straighten the tie of his suit, double check his inside breast pocket for his wand, then stroll into the café. The Muggles behind the counter definitely recognized him after all these years, but as he was one of the regulars, knew his habits by now. They knew which morning regulars wanted a friendly chat, and which just wanted their coffee and to be on their way, and Draco definitely fell into the latter category of customers. It was part of the reason Draco was so attached to the place.

He picked up his steaming cup, resisted the urge to also order a blueberry scone as he still felt a bit queasy, and took to his usual table. There, like he did every morning, he could bury his nose in scouting reports or any manner of Quidditch magazines (charmed to look like a Muggle newspaper), or just sit back and savor his morning drink.

This being one of the mornings he would describe as "not so great," he nursed his coffee and tried not to dwell on the fact that he knew he looked awful. He'd always been pale, but a night of terrible quality sleep and the shadows under his eyes became shockingly prominent against his skin.

Coffee finished, he heaved himself to his feet to get to work. *Why, though? Really, what is the point of any of this?*

Draco didn't like how often he'd been thinking this lately. He quickened his pace to the office.

By the time he reached his small office and closed the door, he was practically panting for breath. He loosened his tie under his robes and tried to control his breathing, hands clutching the rim of his desk. *I am in control of this.*

He sat down once he felt calmer and pulled some memos toward him. *Routine, routine, routine, keep the*

Hey Jude!9

"How does spending time with her make you feel?"

How did it feel? It felt like he was barely holding it together. She, of all people, should shun him. Or yell at him. Curse him. Spit at him. Take out her wand and blast him off the face of the earth. It was crushing guilt and relief and confusion all at once when he looked at Hermione Granger every morning. And she acted like everything was so bloody normal!

"Overwhelmed."



On both Thursday and Friday morning, Hermione asked if she could sit with Draco, and Draco now said "of course."

But over the weekend, alone in his large, country home, Draco was left to brood on this new peace with Granger. Surely she must have told Weasley about this? And Potter. Yes, definitely. They were probably having a right little laugh about Granger having coffee with the lonely, pathetic ferret every morning. The little ferret Death Eater who was so afraid of some wizarding establishments that he'd sunk so low as to have to patron a Muggle café.

Come Monday, Draco had endured a sleepless weekend and was in a rather foul mood. Then in came Granger, walking over to his table with that damn smile on her face as she pulled out the chair across from him and sat down. *Wait a minute.*

"Morning!" she said brightly. She took out her paper, laid it on the table, then walked away to get her tea.

But she hadn't even asked him if she could sit with him today! Just gone and plopped her crap down like she bloody owned the place and never mind what Draco thought! The impertinence on her part! *I am in control of this.*

And then she was back with her steaming mug and sitting down, again, without even bothering to ask how he might feel about her presence.

"Good weekend? I meant to take some time off and go see my parents again, but then did you see that they're discussing lifting that ban on unicorn hair in retail clothing? I had to send so many owls out, my home is starting to resemble a post office." She paused to breathe and sip her tea and Draco finally seized his opening.

"Granger." He said slowly. "What the hell are you doing?"

She stared at him, confused. "Sorry, what? What do you mean?"

Draco huffed in annoyance. "What are you doing here? With me?"

He was pleased to see a slight blush creep up her cheeks. Good, he had some effect on her, and now he wasn't the only one uncomfortable.

"I thought that, you know... I was just... did you want me to leave?"

"No?" Did his response need to be that quick and desperate? Now Granger only looked more confused.

"Ok," she began slowly. "I just thought that you were... all right with me joining you. If I've done

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something to offend you then I'm—"

"No! It's not that!" He cut her off because he knew exactly where her sentence was going and if he heard those words from her, he was going to need about 14 Calming Draughts to get through the day.

"Then what is it?" Oh Merlin, now she looked concerned and her pity was going to make him physically ill.

"Look, I just want to know... why did you approach me at all? Why do you keep coming over here every morning?" He hoped he didn't sound too pathetic, but fuck, he needed to *know*.

Hermione regarded him thoughtfully and he saw the comprehension dawning in her eyes. She knew exactly what he was asking.

"Every time I looked at you, I saw me." Draco noticed her hands were gripping her mug tightly, as if it were tethering her to the table. She took a deep breath and continued. "Please don't... please don't be offended. I know I'm over stepping. But I recognized a very specific look on you that I'd only ever seen when I looked in the mirror."

She stopped here, perhaps to give Draco the chance to yell at her or argue or simply walk out, but Draco felt as if an invisible force held him there and not for all the gold in the world would he leave right now. If there was just the slimmest chance that one other person on this blasted earth could understand, then he was going to take it. Even if that person was Hermione Granger.

"I don't think that I can explain it properly. I've been coming to this place every morning because it gives me the briefest of moments to exist anonymously. I don't have to live up to all the expectations around me. I can just *be*. I'm not 'the brightest witch of her age' or 'Harry Potter's brainy female sidekick.' I'm just a woman on her way to work who really enjoys her morning tea. But lately I think I'm relying too much on this feeling. I'm worried if I let this emotion take over... if I need to feel this way more and more... then what does that say about the life I lead?"

So, recently when I kept seeing you here, I thought I imagined it. Every day I looked over at you just to make sure I hadn't dreamt you up. Because you were such a stark reminder of my hidden, magical life that I was pushing aside for the morning, but your presence kept shocking me out of it. And when you looked at me... I felt like you were maybe here for the same reasons as me. To just exist peacefully for this little bit of the day. Does that make sense?"

It did make sense. It made so much fucking sense to Draco that he felt a strange mixture of raw grief and claion coursing through him. But before he could give himself over to these feelings, he needed to know one more thing.

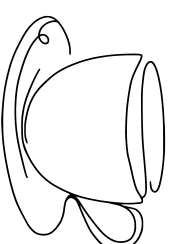
"And what does your husband think of our morning meetings?"

Hermione wrinkled her brow in confusion. "Who?"

"Your husband. Weasley."

"Ron?" She let out a rather undignified snort of laughter as she giggled and Draco wasn't sure he got the joke. When she recovered from her giggling bout, she gave him the full answer.

"Ron and I haven't been together for quite a number of years now. We're still best friends, obviously, but no, Ron and I are neither married nor dating. He's been with Padma Patil for a while now,



Chapter One

January 2007

Tangled sheets and sweat, followed by sleeplessness and shivering. It would be dramatic stuff indeed if it weren't so commonplace these days. Draco Malfoy finally stopped trying to find a comfortable sleeping position and settled onto his back. Gray eyes opened and stared at the ceiling, counting handsome panels of an impeccably furnished bedroom. It was probably dawn, or close to it. He rolled over to grab his wristwatch off the mahogany side table. 4:46 in the morning. How nice of his nightmares to let him have a bit of a lie-in.

You could call him afraid of sleep if you wanted at this point, but he was in no hurry to try and slumber just now. He had just awoken from one of his *absolute favorite* trips down memory lane: the one where the Muggle Studies professor gets eaten by a giant snake on his family's dining room table, mere feet from him.

Draco threw his legs over the edge of his bed, and put his head in his hands between his knees. Deep breath. And another. *You're still breathing. You're still here. I am in control of this.*

Dressed in a black suit for work and seated at the end of a long table, he found the energy to raise a cup of tea to his lips every few minutes. The impressive display of breakfast foods lay untouched before him. The house elves had, as they did every morning, clearly tried to entice him, but it was no use. Draco knew it would feel like ash in his mouth, and he wouldn't keep it down anyway.

He existed trance-like, lingering over a long-cold saucer of tea until past 7:30. Coffee. He could muster the energy for a good, strong cup of coffee. *Keep your routine. I am in control of this.*

The smell of freshly brewed hot coffee was one of the scents Draco recognized wafting out of the cauldron of Amortentia in Professor Slughorn's potions classroom from his Sixth Year. Of course, he'd had some slightly more pressing things on his mind that particular year, and so he'd completely forgotten all about it. That is until he stepped inside a Muggle café not far from where he'd recenter the magical world via Diagon Alley.

Hey Jude!9

do you remember her?”

“I think so. Our year, Ravenclaw? Didn’t he show her a spectacularly awful time at the Yule Ball in Fourth Year?”

“Oh yes, he made a fool of himself a few times over that evening,” she replied with a smirk. “It’s actually a rather sweet in-joke between the two of them now.”

Draco sneered but decided to keep the derogatory comments about Ron to himself. “So tell me Granger, did you marry one of his many brothers? Weren’t there another 15 or so waiting in the wings?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “No, and since it seems like you’re going to interrogate me on how pathetically un-wed I am at my age, I’ll save you the trouble. I’m quite unattached at the moment.”

Draco blanched. “Oh, um, I wasn’t trying to mock you...” Well great, she’d gone and assumed the worst of him, but she now looked equally as horrified.

“Oh! I just thought you... well it doesn’t matter,” she trailed off in a small voice as a thick, awkward silence descended around them. It was only fair of her to assume awfulness on his part. After all, what had he ever done to inspire any sort of faith that he wasn’t always a ruthless bully?

I am in control of this.

“Well, turnabout’s fair play, Granger. I get weekly letters from my own mother reminding me that I am, how did you put it? Pathetically un-wed at my age. She does also love to inform me that I have yet to produce an heir nor does it seem like I am even trying to succeed at relationship-building.”

It was only a brief moment, but Draco caught her blink of surprise at his confessional olive branch before she offered him a tentative smile.

“That does sound rather interfering. My parents are mercifully not so nosy about my love life. Wish I could say the same for Ginny.”

She looked down at her watch and frowned. Was she actually regretting having to leave his presence?

“I do have to get going though. See you tomorrow?” He nodded and she stood up to leave for work. “Granger, wait.” He was going to sound desperate and childish but he had to make sure.

“What you said... about why you came over to talk to me? You did explain it properly, I guess I just thought you might be... laughing at me,” he finished bitterly, furious with himself for revealing his fear to her.

“No, Malfoy. I would never do that.” *Not even to you*, was left unsaid but Draco could practically hear the words leave her lips.



He tried not to imbibe alcohol during the work week, but his conversation with Hermione this morning had him summoning the firewhisky as soon as he returned home from work that evening. He poured himself a tumbler and settled in front of the fire in his bedroom. Draco swirled the amber liquid around the crystal glass, while Hermione’s words played back in his mind.

SELLING FANFICTION IS ILLEGAL.
DON’T DO IT.
IF YOU BOUGHT THIS, SHAME ON
YOU.
IF YOU BOUND THIS YOURSELF.
IM SO PROUD OF YOU!

XOXO -SENNA



Remain Nameless

"I don't have to live up to all the expectations around me. I can just *be*." That's how Hermione had described her presence at the coffee shop. And though they could not be more different (pureblood and Muggleborn, Slytherin and Gryffindor, pariah and heroine) she'd said she recognized a sameness between them. If you washed away the specifics of their backgrounds and choices, Draco realized she was right.

Hadn't they both been just children, tasked with things most adults would have covered from? They probably even shared a few overlapping nightmares. They had both survived, against all odds. And reading into her confession this morning, it seems they both were just doing their damn best to not crumble from within.

So she hadn't married Weasley after all. That was certainly an interesting fact. Draco had of course assumed they'd been unhappily married for some time now with at least four children between them. But then, if he actually thought about what he knew of Granger, and remembering her words today, it did make sense. Everyone in the world would have expected Granger and Weasley to do just exactly that. He wondered why things had ended between them, but knew he could never ask. Hermione seemed quite over that relationship if her giggling fit were anything to go on.

Draco downed the whisky in one gulp and decided he didn't much feel like eating dinner.



"Good morning"

"Granger."

Hermione sat down across from Draco with a shy smile and he quelled the urge to roll his eyes and make a biting comment. No need to be a prat so soon.

She looked tired today. Did she spend most of last night awake reliving yesterday's conversation too? He probably looked like a walking corpse.

"Malfoy, about yesterday..."

Oh, Merlin, here we go. Of course she would want to discuss her bloody feelings about their chat.

"Don't Granger, it's fine, just don't—"

"No, look Malfoy, I want you to know that I wasn't trying to—"

"Granger, seriously it doesn't matter, just forget it, and... bloody hell who are we kidding?" He hadn't meant to let his irritation seep through, but she had gotten right under his skin within one minute and his plan to be cordial was blown to bits.

"What do you mean?"

"*What are we kidding?* You and me, we're not... well, it's just odd is all and don't you think it's naïve to pretend we're just old school chums reuniting? We were never that and you know it. There's too much bad history here."

Why, why, why was he doing this? Why did he feel the need to blow up everything in his life? *Because of what you did. Because of everything you did. Especially to her.*

"You're right." She replied quietly, Draco nodded sullenly, knowing that whatever these mornings

had meant to him, that it no longer mattered. Granger would leave now, as she should, and he'd remain here. A nameless person in the world, alone but for the voices in his own head.

But she didn't leave. Instead, Hermione cleared her throat, pushed back some of her curls off her shoulder and held her hand out to him.

"Hello, I'm Hermione Granger."

Draco stared at her extended hand. His gaze flicked up to her brown eyes and he could detect no deceit, no mockery. Granger was all warmth and earnestness. He stared back at her hand and all it represented. A chance. A clean slate. And at this point for Draco, a lifeline.

He took her proffered hand.

"Draco Malfoy."

Remain Nameless

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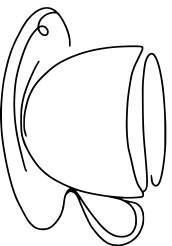
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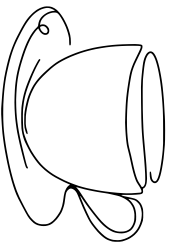


How did it feel? It felt like he was barely holding it together. She, of all people, should shun him. Or yell at him. Curse him. Spit at him. Take out her wand and blast him off the face of the earth. It was crushing guilt and relief and confusion all at once when he looked at Hermione Granger.

The monotony of Draco's daily routine had become both a lifeline and a noose. But this new habit of grabbing coffee with Hermione Granger is quickly becoming a reason to get out of bed and is unfortunately forcing him to re-evaluate his inconsequential existence.

Hermione is living her life in fragments, separate pieces scattered about, and she can't find a way to step back and let the full picture form. Why are morning meetings with Draco Malfoy the only thing that make sense anymore?





Chapter Three

Hermione couldn't quite understand what had made her offer her handshake to Draco. It was something in his voice: not quite angry, not at her anyway. Anger at himself, maybe, or at the world around him. It was also something in his gray eyes: the hesitation to accept her offer of a fresh start. And Hermione knew then that Draco was far more afraid of her than she was of him.

"So did the handshake help or was he still acting odd?"

Hermione and Ginny volunteered themselves to grab extra cutlery from the kitchen so Hermione could fill in her friend without being overheard.

"No, it honestly seemed to clear the air. The rest of the week was more or less perfectly normal. Though he did speak rather rudely about my proposed centaur legislation."

"Does this mean you two are... friends now?"

Before Hermione could answer, another voice cut through the kitchen. "Gin, your mum sent me back here to help, or rather, see what in Merlin's name is taking those girls so long; it's just silverware!"

Hermione and Ginny giggled at Harry's rather accurate impression of Molly Weasley. As they finally set about gathering the cutlery they promised, Harry let Hermione walk ahead and fell back in step with Ginny.

"Anything I should be concerned about?" he whispered to Ginny. His wife merely grinned up at him, giving nothing away. "No, and don't you dare pester her, nosy. Hermione's a grown witch, her business is her own."



April 2007

"Oh come on, that is an absolutely ridiculous portion of the budget."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Granger, you're smart and all, but I'll never understand your blind spot when it comes to quidditch."

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By HexJude19



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Hermione huffed and sat back in her seat. “Are you telling me you’re not the least bit perturbed at the percent of the Ministry’s budget that is allocated for supporting the Department of Magical Games and Sports?”

Draco grinned. “Well Granger, since my livelihood depends on that poor, struggling sport known as quidditch, I think you’ll find I’m rather encouraged by it.”

Hermione let out an indignant snort, then seemed to catch herself and averted her gaze from Draco, looking slightly ashamed.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, I just... nothing”

“Oh spit it out, Granger.”

Hermione sighed, but still wouldn’t meet his gaze. Draco noticed a light pink beginning of a blush working its way up her face.

“I was going to make a rather snarky quip about your wealth but... well we’d been getting along so well these past few weeks and I didn’t want to ruin that by being childish and insulting”

This was true. Every day before work this month had been rather pleasant for the two of them. Draco was still having the occasional nightmare, and if the bags under Hermione’s eyes on certain days were any indication, she too suffered from her share of sleepless nights. But despite the night terrors, Draco knew if he could just survive until he arrived at the cafe, then his day seemed to turn right around. During an office-wide meeting last week, Draco had even responded with “good” when a colleague asked how he was doing. It caused the man’s eyebrow to raise, which made Draco retreat back to more neutral responses. But he couldn’t stop thinking about how the word “good” had rolled right off his tongue.

“You’d hardly wound me Granger, I could live ten lifetimes and barely scratch the surface of gold in my family’s vault. I don’t need to work to make ends meet.”

“Then why do you?”

This line of questioning had been cropping up more and more as of late. Conversations that began innocently enough (quidditch, Ministry budgets, chocolate frog cards, etc.) somehow veered into more serious territory before either could stop.

Too personal, Granger. I work because I’d go fucking crazy with nothing to do all day but mope around my enormous country home and probably drink myself to death. If I don’t occupy my time constantly my thoughts drift to horrible memories I’d rather not visit, and a lot of those memories just happen to revolve around you and your friends. I work because quidditch is one of the only things in my life that doesn’t trigger that awful constricting feeling in my chest and after years of heading appointments I still don’t know what the fuck I’m supposed to be doing in this world.

Draco decided on a noncommittal shrug of his shoulders. “I like staying busy and I enjoy quidditch. I’m not good enough to play professionally, but I’ve a good eye for skilled players, so scouting seemed like a logical fit.”

Hermione nodded and seemed relieved to not have ruined this morning’s conversation. “Yes, Ginny told me you’re basically responsible for the recent success of the Wimbourne Wasps, because of

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the roster you recommended.”

“Weasley said that?”

“Potter.”

“Hub?”

“It’s Ginny Potter now. She’s been married to Harry several years now.”

“And you and Ginny *Potter* have been discussing me, have you?” Draco didn’t mean for it to come out like an accusation, but based on Hermione’s hardened expression, he could see that it had.

“Relax Malfoy, she knows that I’ve been seeing you—I mean, not *seeing* you—but that we... that we’re...” She was growing more flustered by the second and Draco opted to sit back and watch her impassively as she struggled with her words. “That we see each other—I mean *meet* each other—for coffee... in the mornings before work...”

Draco smirked at her and even though she was blushing furiously now, she still managed an eye roll at him. “All right, I’ve got to be off, see you tomorrow.”

“See you Granger. I look forward to hearing more about your friends complimenting me tomorrow.”

This earned him another eye roll and Draco tried to ignore the thought that had floated into his brain: *Granger’s quite pretty when she’s flustered.*



“Did you like being an only child?”

Draco traced his index finger around the rim of his mug as he considered Hermione’s question. It was a question he’d already had to answer for Healer Browning years ago, but the circumstances of that line of questioning could not have been more different. Granger was simply curious.

“Of course. No need to compete for attention or inheritance,” Draco replied practically. Most of his pureblood contemporaries were only children: Pansy, Blaise, Goyle, Theo, Flint, Montague, Pucey...

“I go back and forth on it myself.”

Draco blinked in surprise. Somewhere in his brain he’d already known this about Granger but her constant proximity to the Weasley horde had obscured this fact.

“I mean, to your point on attention I’d agree with you,” she continued. “It was rather nice growing up to have my parents focused on just me. When you’re little, you feel kind of... special.”

Oh, yes, Draco had been told just how special he was many times growing up. *You’re a pureblood. You’re a Malfoy. You’re the sole heir. This makes you special. This makes you better.*

“As I got older... well I think it would have been nice to have a brother or sister to help with—to ease some burdens...” she trailed off quietly and Draco noticed a tightness around her mouth and a dimness to her usually bright eyes.

“You and Potter must have bonded over that,” he replied with a smirk, trying to steer the morning back to safer waters.

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Hermione let out a hollow laugh. “Harry and I could not have had more different childhoods.”
“Wasn’t Potter raised by Muggles too?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, as if to see if he were kidding. “You think Harry and I had similar upbringings because we were both raised by Muggles?”

“Well hell Granger, it’s not like I’d know anything about that!”

“Because learning anything about Muggles is beneath your notice, right?”

Yes? Maybe? Fuck, I don’t know.

He had paused too long. She was looking at him with the same expression she long ago reserved just for him at Hogwarts: hurt, disappointed, and slightly perturbed.

She stood suddenly and crammed several books into her bag without bothering to properly clasp it. “I think I’ll head to work now, see you Malfoy,” Hermione said briskly and swept away without a backward glance.

Fuck. It was Friday, so he wouldn’t see her again until Monday morning. What a way to kick off the weekend. *I am in control of this.*



Hermione took a long sip from the hot mug of mulled cider in front of her. It had been a cooler spring evening to begin with, and as the night wound down and the temperature dropped further, Hermione was thankful to enjoy this specialty brew of Molly Weasley.

Her stomach was pleasantly full, though that could be said after any meal at The Burrow. Little Teddy Lupin had his head of aqua hair pressed against her side as he succumbed to sleepiness after quite the meal. “Little” may start to be inaccurate at the rate he was growing. Hermione couldn’t believe he was 9-years-old already. It felt like just yesterday that Remus had barged excitedly into Shell Cottage to announce the birth of his son and name Harry godfather.

Said godfather was sitting on Teddy’s other side, grazing fondly down at the snoozing child. “Looks like someone had too much of a good birthday dinner. I’d better get him back to Andromeda’s.”

Harry grinned at Hermione before gently shaking Teddy awake and planting a goodnight kiss on Hermione’s cheek. Hermione smiled sadly at the retreating pair. Harry had more than fulfilled the duty of godfather in the way he looked after Teddy, though Hermione’s heart ached that it was necessary at all for Harry to step in as a father figure. Teddy had Tonks’ heart-shaped face, but his eyes and the seriousness of his brow were all Remus.

Hermione was pulled from her thoughts as Ron slid into the seat next to her. He wordlessly grabbed her mug from her hands to steal a sip. Hermione giggled and shifted closer to lay her head on Ron’s shoulder. Even though they were strictly friends now, it was still so easy to be this comfortable and affectionate with him, and Padma was never the jealous type. Hermione felt her own eyelids growing heavy as she leaned against Ron and watched moths flutter low over the candles on the table.

Absently she wondered if Malfoy had anyone in his life like this. He didn’t mention any friends and had only made a few occasional references to his own mother. Hermione began turning over her

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memories of their recent conversations and if he mentioned any person of importance to him. Perhaps her initial assessment of Malfoy had been correct and he truly was utterly isolated in this world. Unbidden, their conversation Friday morning reared its head and Hermione chewed her lower lip. Why had his comments on Muggle upbringing bothered her so much? He hadn't said anything nasty, but she had felt unnerved all the same. Perhaps it had been a low blow on Hermione's part. They were sitting in a Muggle café together after all.

"Anything new with you Hermione?"

Ron's voice brought her out of her ruminations on Malfoy. "Hmm? No, not really. Still trying to get some political clout behind that centaur legislation."

Ron chuckled softly. "That's work, Hermione, I meant what's new with *you*."

Not this again. "In good Ron, promise." It didn't sound like a lie, and Hermione wondered when this type of speaking in stock phrases of reassurances to her friends had become so natural.

"You can talk to me, you know," came his gruff reply. "Or anyone here, really. You've got family here, you know that right?"

Sometimes Ron was so caring it made her heart constrict. After the war was over and the dust settled and the horrible work of grieving began, Hermione couldn't believe how Ron had stepped up. He became chief caretaker of everyone in his family, putting a hold on his own healing as he tried to mend the emotional scars of his parents, his brothers, his sister, and even Harry.

"I know, Ron. Unfortunately I'm just busy at work right now, no time for much else." She reluctantly pulled away and stood to leave. Ron gave her a small frown, but didn't push her.

"Ok, but let's grab lunch this week."

Hermione nodded and then waved down the table to Padma, Luna, and the rest of the assembled Weasleys as she made her way to the apparition point just beyond the yard. Though her heart was full of love for those around her, and her belly full of good food, she couldn't help but feel empty when she arrived back in her bedroom.

As she drifted to sleep that night, her thoughts became consumed by what she would say tomorrow morning when she faced a certain blond wizard.



"Hi."

Draco tried to tame the surge of hope that coursed through him as Hermione tentatively approached his table Monday morning.

"Granger?" He released her name on a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Hermione dropped her bag and went to retrieve her tea. When she returned, she held out a plate to him. "Blueberry scone? I know they're your favorite here."

A peace offering.

Draco accepted the plate. "Er... thanks," came his gruff reply. Hermione gave a small smile and settled in her chair across from him.

Muggles around for her to transfigure or conjure an umbrella or duplicate Draco's.

Turning around to watch the show, he waited under the dryness and comfort of his black umbrella. Hermione gingerly opened the door, made way for a couple rushing inside, and then stood frozen under the awning. It was her last defense against the impending downpour, and he watched her face go from fear to grim resignation. She began unbuttoning her grey suit jacket and Draco realized with growing horror that she was intending to use her flimsy little jacket to cover her hair, which meant her white blouse underneath would be completely exposed to the rain and within seconds, most likely become absolutely see-through. It was truly a desperate sight.

Cursing his sudden calling to chivalry and chalking it up to not wanting to be late, he stalked up to her. "Oh don't be so ridiculous Granger, come here!"

He yanked her forward by her forearm and pinned her to his side, under the safety of his umbrella. She gave a small yelp and had to brace her body and re-gain her balance by throwing one arm around his waist and the other behind his back.

Neither of them said a word as he practically marched them down the street together. Draco concentrated on counting his breaths, but also on not breathing too heavily, and did he always have to focus this much on just breathing? *I am in control of this.*

She was much shorter than he'd ever noticed before, the top of her head would barely touch his chin, if she were embracing him from the front, instead of from the side. Which is, of course, not at all the position they were currently in. They were certainly not *embracing* by any means. He was merely escorting a lady in need to her place of employment. Polite and proper. It wasn't his ruddy fault she chose this particular morning to be forgetful.

Hermione adjusted her grip slightly to match his longer stride and tightened her grip on him. Startled at the movement, Draco sucked in a breath and in doing so, inhaled the scent of her hair. *I Am. In Control. Of This.*

Draco had always imagined when they were still at school that Hermione Granger's hair would smell like a bale of hay. He realized now that was an obviously stupid and childish opinion, and was proven to be resoundingly incorrect. Hermione Granger's hair smelled like a type of flower he did not recognize, but if his life depended on it, he would say it was definitely a floral scent. It was nothing he remembered from the Manor's gardens growing up, nothing he currently grew on his own land, and definitely nothing in the Hogwarts' greenhouses, so what was it?

"I um... think it's safe for me to make my own now." She slowly withdrew her arms from around him as they approached the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron. She removed one of her Muggle writing instruments from her bag and easily transfigured it into an umbrella.

"Thanks Malfoy, see you tomorrow," she mumbled and practically ran in the opposite direction without waiting for a reply.

And as he tapped his wand once at the base of his collar so his suit transfigured into his work robes, he wondered why neither of them thought to run through the rain and then perform a series of simple Drying Charms before getting to work.



Draco was trying to pay attention, really, he was. It was a privilege that his boss let him and just a few others be involved in this consulting project with the Ministry. But it wasn't his fault that the Ministry worker currently speaking in such a droning voice that his mind was forced to wander in order to keep him awake. And of course, his mind didn't feel much like wandering, more like focusing in on one train of thought in particular.

Hermione Granger and her mass of honey-colored, floral-scented, wavy hair had been flush against his side this morning. Her arms had gripped tightly around his back and mid-section. If he focused in on the memory, he could still feel how her warm hands had lightly bunched his dress-shirt as she clasped at him for balance. He now knew the feeling of Granger's hands on his body. *I am in control of this.*

Merlin's fucking beard he needed to get laid. If having a woman hold him like that for a mere few minutes was enough to distract his thoughts, he must be truly desperate for a shag. It was probably the novelty of the situation. He'd never been that physically close to Granger in his entire life, so it was probably just the surprise of having to put his arm around her that was screwing with his head. None of this mattered anyway, because there was no way Granger was sitting at work obsessing about his arm being around her.

Draco's head snapped to attention as he heard his boss, Bellamy Wright-Johnson, mention his name. Pushing away all thoughts of his morning brush with Granger's hands, he listened in as his boss gave him the cue to present the financials for this morning.

During the years when no Quidditch World Cup was held, many countries around Europe organized several international exhibition matches to raise money for various relief charities. This year, England would be matched against France, and Draco's firm was always contracted to help select players to fill the English roster. This was the third year Draco was asked by his superiors to be on the selection committee, and he brought with him one of his special talents: as a wealthy Pureblood heir who knew how to handle vast sums of gold, Draco was quite skilled at drawing up budgets. Since this match was an international event with English pride on the line, the players would need proper team uniforms, as well as agree to which model broom to select for the team. Plus the cost of security, medi-wizards, vendors and protective enchantment teams from the Ministry to work on the selected stadium.

Once Draco had finished going over his prepared report to assembled members of his office, the Department of Magical Games and Sports, the Department of International Magical Cooperation, plus a few Ministry public relations flacks, he resumed his seat and Bellamy gave him a curt nod of approval.

"Any additional questions about the presented budget?" asked Bellamy.

A witch with auburn hair from the International Department who looked vaguely familiar to Draco raised her hand from the other end of the long conference table.

"The budget will suit our needs, and I don't see any reason my department won't approve the plan.

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I want to put in a request to add an interpreter to our negotiations with the French delegation. Translation spells are pretty rubbish when it comes to in-person meetings and we'd like a *proper* translator this year."

At the young witch's mention of a "proper translator" the wizard on Draco's right gave a chuckle under his breath. Draco shot a glare at Cormac McLaggen, wondering what the fuck the prat had found so amusing.

Some other department head spoke up to answer the witch's question and a back and forth ensued about finding a suitable candidate. Draco rolled his eyes and spoke up, "I can do it."

Every head in the room snapped to stare at him, suspiciously. Draco stared back, unmuffled.

"You? You can speak French?" asked the witch.

"I wouldn't offer if I wasn't fluent," he said it as politely as he could muster. The witch regarded him for a few seconds then nodded.

The meeting began wrapping up then as the assembled workers gathered their notes and made their way back to their respective offices. Draco followed Bellamy and the rest of his colleagues as they shuffled out of the conference room, but a voice called out as he reached the door.

"Hey, Malfoy!"

It was the young witch with auburn hair who had asked about the French translator. As she approached him, Draco realized he did know her. She held out her hand.

"Susan Bones, we were in the same year at Hogwarts."

Oh. Right. Fuck. Death Eaters had murdered her aunt, Amelia Bones. Fantastic.

"Ern, hi," he shook her hand awkwardly.

"Sorry to question you like that in front of everybody, it's just, after last year's mishap with Russia, I had to make sure."

"What happened last year?"

Just then, McLaggen sidled past the pair with raised eyebrows and winked at Susan. "Good to see you, Bones," he purred and gave her a roguish smile as he left the room.

Draco rolled his eyes but it was nothing compared to the open contempt gracing Susan's face.

"That McLaggen happened last year. That arse told me he was fluent in Russian."

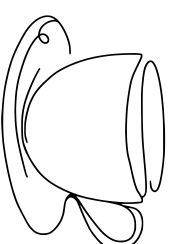
"Is he?"

Susan snorted. "Absolutely not. He no-showed to the meeting and we had to rely on those translation spells, it was painful. When I confronted him, he merely shrugged and told me he never said he could specifically speak Russian, just that he had quite *the gift for different tongues*, if I caught his meaning?"

"I don't quite understand—"

"He just wanted to get in my pants." She said bluntly.

"Oh." Draco flushed, unsure of how to respond. Susan simply shrugged. "He's a prick. Anyway, thanks for offering to be our interpreter. I suppose I'll be working with you next month." She shook his hand again, then swept out of the room.



Chapter Five

July 2007

A downpour the likes of which this summer hadn't seen yet was occurring outside. But inside the entryway of the café, Hermione was fretting the likes of which Draco had never seen.

"What on earth is the matter with you?"

But she paid him no mind, just kept reaching further and further into her magically expanded bag and muttering "oh no, no, no, there's no way I don't have one!"

People kept having to scoot around and between them as they left or entered the café while Hermione kept frantically searching her bag and Draco huffed in impatience.

"Oh I don't believe this, I forgot an umbrella!"

Draco smirked. "You mean in the entire house, library, and office you've got stuffed in there, you forgot something as simple as an umbrella? Tough luck, it looks pretty nasty out there."

"Oh shut up." She gave up her search and then looked fearfully outside at the storm and then hopefully up at him.

His smirk only deepened. "Not a chance, Granger."

She actually stomped her little foot. Like a child. "Come on Malfoy! Give me your umbrella! I have to present my rune translation to the Mer-People liaison as soon as I get to work!"

"No way! It's not my fault you're so ill-prepared for the elements this morning."

"Some gentleman you are! Didn't you have etiquette lessons during your pampered little aristocratic childhood?"

"Twice a week. But that doesn't change the fact that I need my umbrella because as I already told you I have a very important meeting with the Ministry reps and the higher-ups at my firm this morning. A meeting which you are going to make me late for, so best of luck Granger."

Draco opened his own umbrella and strode out into the pounding rain, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from chuckling. Little Miss Know-it-All was in quite a conundrum: there were too many

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We're... we're whatever we are.

She smiled serenely at him and then walked away from the table. Before he knew what was happening, she returned with a blueberry scone and plopped it in front of him.

"Happy birthday Malfoy!" she said cheerfully, and much too loudly for his taste. She sat down again and shot him another smile. He fixed her with the iciest glare he could muster, but his hand was already moving toward the baked treat.

Hermione chuckled triumphantly and began rummaging around in her bag. Draco froze. "Granger, I swear to Merlin, if you're about to pull birthday candles out of your bag-that-holds-your-entire-life I don't care how many people I have to obliviate this morning. *I will hex your hair purple.*"

"Relax Malfoy, I'm merely getting out my copy of the centaur bill, but of course, I could start serenading you with 'Happy Birthday' if you like?"

He leveled her with another glare and ate the scone in two bites, before she came up with any further public displays of embarrassment.

Granger looked at her watch and frowned. "On second thought, could we discuss this while we walk? I've got a department-wide presentation to attend this morning."

Hermione, to Draco's surprise, was receptive to many of his suggested edits to her bill's preamble. Most of his critiques had to do with the more emotional wording she was prone to using, advising her to appeal more to the public benefit, and what wizardkind stood to gain from her proposals.

She nodded thoughtfully as they reached their parting point. "Hm, this is certainly something to consider in my next draft. I'm still waiting to hear about the outcome of the current version. See you tomorrow?"

"Goodbye Granger."

He waited until she was a little further away before he called out. "By the way Granger, my birthday was June 5th."

I am in control of this

Hey Jude!9



Hermione did not tell Ginny about the "Umbrella Incident." She wasn't quite sure how she would phrase her own explanation of what had occurred. "Well he grabbed me by the arm and really, I had no choice but to hold him around the middle and yes, I could feel how lean and fit he is underneath those expensive suits and yes he did smell rather nice, and he probably thinks I have all the grace of a drunken baboon the way I was clawing at his pricey dress shirt just so I wouldn't fall on my own face."

Hermione snorted and buried her head in her hands for a moment. It sounded so ridiculous even inside her own head. There was no way Draco Malfoy had spent his entire weekend thinking about her arms around him, so she should probably just try and forget all about it.

But of course, stupid Ginny and her crass thoughts from a few weekends ago kept reverberating around her head. Maybe "crass" was a bit hyperbolic, but really, did Ginny think Malfoy attractive?

Objectively speaking, fine, Hermione could admit if you held a wand to her throat, that yes, most people would consider Draco Malfoy to be an attractive-looking male. He had a very distinct appearance with that shocking white-blond hair, paired with silvery-gray eyes and a pale complexion that somehow suited him instead of making him look like an underfed vampire. He was pleasingly tall, and his face had all the sharp-angled features and jawline of aristocratic ancestors, and he carried himself well in those dark, tailored suits of his. And now Hermione could even say that underneath his suits he had appealing lean musculature...

No. Stop. That's not appropriate.

Hermione sighed to herself and pushed open the café door to see the object of her current thoughts sitting in all his rigid, elite posture at their usual table.

Was it her imagination or did his mouth perform the tiniest of quicks upward when he spotted her?

"Good morning," she slung her bag over the chair across from him.

"Granger. You cut your hair."

Startled by his comment on her appearance, her widened eyes met his neutral gaze. The impassiveness she found there only made her more flustered.

"Oh! I mean yes... I did... yesterday, before dinner at the Weasleys', just a trim." Hermione looked away and fiddled with a strap on her bag.

"I'll just go grab my tea, do you want anything?"

"No, thank you," he murmured and Hermione tried not to think that most women would probably find the low timbre of his voice appealing as well. She averted her eyes and swept up to the counter.

It wasn't like he said he *liked* how her hair looked, or that it looked nice at all. Merlin, why was she so bent out of shape over an impartial comment about her hair? She was being silly and vain. But it was odd that he noticed at all.

When they were dining, Ron had once asked her what kind of charm she used on her hair to get it to always be the same length and she'd looked at him like he had three heads. There was one memorable incident where she had chopped half of it off and came home hoping to elicit some sort of opinion from Ron. She had to practically yell at him that she'd just returned from the salon and *didn't* he notice

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anything different about her hair before he shrugged and said it still looked the same to him.

The elderly woman behind the counter returned Hermione's bright greeting, but when she handed Hermione her masala chai she also slid her a plate with a score.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't order this."

The woman gave her a conspiratorial grin. "This is for that handsome boyfriend of yours, lux. He might try to hide it, but no customer of mine eats my blueberry scones like he's never tasted anything so good in his life before."

Hermione gawked back at the woman. "He's not my boyfriend... he's just my... I mean, we're not... he's not..." she sputtered but the woman's smile didn't dim.

"Yes, well, whatever he may be to you, he's a good tipper, so tell him it's on the house."

Hermione felt her face turn an unfortunate shade of red. She was just friends with Draco. *But that's not true*, said a sly voice in her head. *When did he ever give you the impression of friendship? You're some sort of familiar acquaintance at best.*

Hermione sighed as she approached the table and set the plate in front of Draco. He raised one perfectly arched pale eyebrow at her. *Stop Admiring His Features.*

"You have an admirer behind the counter," she said by way of explanation and jerked her head toward the older woman. She expected him to smirk. She expected him to throw out a quip about the power of his dashing good looks netting him free treats from old ladies.

She didn't expect his face to blanch and him to look increasingly uncomfortable. "I don't need... well that was just completely unnecessary, what the bloody hell is wrong with that woman?"

Hermione shrugged, confused by his discomfort. "I'm sure it's because you're a loyal regular and she's a savvy business owner. She said you tip well."

He shifted in his seat and his eyes darted toward the door, toward the exit. "Well she really doesn't need to be giving away pily scones to people like *me*."

"Is it because she's a Muggle?"

His expression flipped from awkward discomfort to affront. "What the hell Granger, no! Why do you always..." he sighed and ran a hand through his blond hair. "Just forget it," he spat out in quiet resignation.

Merlin, he could be so mercurial. As mercurial as those silvery eyes?

They had walked in silence to work and he only offered her a gruff "See you Granger," when they parted ways for their respective offices. She could tell by the stiff way he squared his shoulders as he turned away that something was bothering him. His lovely, defined, broad shoulders...

Hermione scolded her subconscious and scowled the rest of her way to work. Maybe she should finally take Ginny or Padma up on their offers to set her up with someone if her hormones were going to act this ridiculous over *Draco bloody Malfoy*.



Hey Jude!9

fancying Draco Malfoy at school?"

She merely shrugged again and Hermione actually missed when it was easy to embarrass Ginny back when she was 12-years-old. Now it seemed she had not an ounce of shame.

"I didn't say I *fantasized* that bullying git... just objectively, that he was quite good-looking. Too bad he had such a horrid personality and my sighs were set elsewhere." She cast a positively hungry look Harry's way and Hermione wrinkled her nose.

"I'm still here you know, save the lustful longing for when you're home alone with your husband, please."

As Ginny snorted but continued to stare at Harry, Hermione's thoughts drifted to the fact that Draco wore perfectly tailored suits every morning, but there was certainly nothing wrong with admiring the way a man dressed. Nothing wrong at all.



"Good weekend?"

Draco had not had a very good weekend, but he would rather not admit that to Granger. His days had been spent in the company of his mother, whom he loved dearly, but her hints about finding him a suitable wife were becoming quite tiresome. Add to that his nighttime horrors of his mother being tortured, often something that got triggered when she came back from months-long trips, and he'd have to say this had not been one of his better birthday weekends.

"All right, I would say. My mother is back in the country for a bit." That was sort of a truthful answer.

"That's nice, you must miss her while she's abroad. Is she staying with you?"

"No, she has her own home." It was the old Lestranger estate, but Draco left that particular detail out.

"How often does she come back to England?"

"Twice a year, usually, for a few months at a time. She'll come for the Christmas and New Year season and then always for my birth—for the summer." He hadn't meant to say, He'd hadn't meant for her to know.

Her eyes widened. "Oh my goodness, was it your birthday this weekend?"

"No."

"You are *such* a liar. It was, wasn't it? I can't believe you didn't say anything!"

Draco raised an eyebrow at her. "And why would I tell you?" *Why do you even care?*

But now Granger was doing that thing where she half-franted, half-muttered to herself. "...should have known... didn't think to... no wonder... well I'll just have to... you know you really should have let me know!"

Draco sneered. "Whatever for, Granger? What, going to buy me a present now?" *We're not friends*

Remain Nameless

Draco nodded and allowed his mind to drift back to Granger's centaur legislation waiting for him in his study while Narcissa went on a lengthy monologue about the merits of English cuisine over Vietnamese cooking. His mother need never know just how he was occupying his free time.



"You let that little ferret look at your work? You never share that with me?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ginny's complaint. "Ginny, when have you ever shown interest in centaur rights?"

"Right now!"

"But I *have* talked about this bill with you. You fell asleep after two minutes!"

"I did not! I was just... testing my eyes!"

Both women giggled at Ginny's obvious lie. Hermione picked at the remains of her slice of blackberry pie (was there any dish Molly Weasley hadn't mastered?) and watched as Ron and Harry clasped Teddy and Victoire around the orchard. The children were only allowed on brooms under adult supervision and only several feet off the ground, but it still made Hermione nervous.

"And you trust *him* enough to share your work?"

Hermione shrugged, unsure if "trust" was the right word. "He's intelligent enough and blunt. I'm interested in his perspective and I know he won't sugarcoat his opinion."

She turned to face Ginny, and noticed the younger woman was chewing her bottom lip in concern.

"What is it?"

Ginny shook her head slightly. "How's he looking these days?"

Certainly less wan than usual, but Hermione could still tell sleeping through the night was difficult most mornings. After their small misunderstanding over the sleeping potion, he seemed a little looser around her, verbally anyway. Hermione didn't think she ever saw someone so impeccably dressed in a coffee shop, nor someone with such perfect posture. Though it might have earned Draco some sympathy points with Ginny, Hermione had not told her, or anyone, about Draco's past potion addiction and successful sobriety.

"Fine," she answered and Ginny's eyebrows shot into her hair.

"Oh, he's *fine* is he?"

"Ginny Potter, that is not what I meant and you know it."

Ginny smirked and waggled her eyebrows anyway. "You can't tell me you don't find him a little bit attractive?"

"And you do, all of a sudden?"

Ginny merely shrugged. "Well, these days I only see him from a distance at a few quidditch matches during the year, so I guess I wouldn't know. But you can't deny he was one of the more attractive boys in your year."

Hermione almost spit her bite of pie out. "You what? Ginny, tell me you did not just admit to

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The weather was pleasant and temperate for midday, July as Draco walked through Diagon Alley at lunch time. He had just finished with Healer Browning for the month and felt a little drained. He took a longer route than usual on his walk back to the office, hoping some fresh air would revive him for the rest of the work day.

It had been a particularly trying appointment, mostly because his conversation with Granger last week had him in quite the sour mood.

What he had been trying to articulate was his horror at this Muggle woman, this woman who owed him nothing, who didn't know anything about his shameful past, would think kindly of him. It made bile rise in his throat to have her think Draco was some nice, regular customer, when he used to be in favor of exterminating people like her. That's what he'd meant when he emphasized "someone like *me*." Someone evil. Someone vile. Someone tainted.

And of course, Granger had assumed he was being a pureblood, elitist, prejudiced asshole. Not that he blamed her, but it still stung.

Browning had again asked Draco during his session about his new "friend." Draco felt an uncomfortable sensation in his chest at that word. He wasn't sure that he and Granger were friends. Whatever was going on between them each morning had remained nameless and without definition. Draco didn't see the need to label anything.

As he always did, because after all, this was why Draco paid him for his services, Browning pushed back.

"Why don't you think you're friends?"

Draco shrugged. "She has plenty of friends. I don't think she'd count me as one."

Browning peered over his glasses, hands folded together. "Why not? You spend time together five days a week by choice, do you not?"

That was true enough, and it was always the most stimulating part of his day. He wondered if Granger felt the same.

"I don't think a friendship with someone like me is something she'd be interested in pursuing."

Scratch, scratch, scratch went the floating quill against the parchment.

"Are you interested?"

Browning's question caught him off guard. "In being friends with Gr—*with her*?" He almost let the cat out of the bag there. Was it wise to keep lying to your own healer? Probably not, Draco reasoned, but he still couldn't bring himself to mention that the witch he spent most mornings with happened to be his former subject of verbal abuse, and then physical torture in his own home. If he had to watch Browning pull out all of the long-filred away rolls of parchment from years past where he'd had full-blown, vomit-inducing panic attacks when discussing his former treatment of Hermione Granger, there was no amount of whiskey or Calming Draught that could help.

Browning let Draco's question hang in the air. Salazar, this man never let him off the hook.

"I don't know. I don't need any more friends." It was a pathetic answer and Draco knew his healer would see right through it.

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“Because you have too many friends?” *Oh, fuck you.*

Draco managed to keep his expletives inside, but mustered an icy and contemptuous reply that conveyed his feelings all the same. “I don’t need any more.”

Scratch, scratch.

“You haven’t mentioned Theo Nott in a while, when was the last time you saw him?”

Touché, old cadger

Draco grimaced, knowing he’d been had. “Not for a month or so. I think his job keeps him busy.”

Browning directed his attention to the suspended parchment in front of him while Draco chewed on the inside of his cheek. He finally couldn’t stop the question on his mind from tumbling out of his mouth.

“How would I know if we’re friends? How would I know if she even wants that?” Draco hated how insecure he sounded. Malloy’s didn’t need friends. They made alliances and worked networks and played the social game so cunningly that there was no need for something as trite as friendship. That’s how Draco was raised anyway. *And look where that attitude landed you...*

“Well, from what you’ve told me, you willingly meet before work, some days you engage in spirited debates, sometimes you argue. You talk about your weekends as well as your careers. She challenges you, but you seem to enjoy conversing with her. She helped you successfully navigate a panic attack, and seems happy to be seen out with you, even if it is in the Muggle world. You said you bullied her in school, but Draco, don’t you think if she still held your past actions against you, she would have told you so by now? It’s been many months, yes? This doesn’t sound like a friendship to you?”

Draco tipped his head back and forth and fought against a strange feeling emanating from within. It had been so very long since he felt it, that it took him a few minutes to realize that feeling could only be classified as *hope*.

“You’ve only ever met up with her in the mornings for coffee, correct?”

“Yes, but I walk with her to work too.”

Scratch, scratch.

“If you’re interested in cultivating this friendship outside the confines of morning coffee, why don’t you invite her out for a different activity on a night or the weekend? Go down the pub or out to dinner like you would with Theo.” Draco blanched and stared at the floor of the office.

“I’m not sure she’d want that,” he’d muttered at the floor. *Do I even want that?*

A familiar laugh writhed Draco back to the present. Granger’s laugh. He could have sworn he’d just heard it from somewhere near. Scouring the streets around him, his eyes landed on the back of her curl covered head.

She was sitting at a table outside Florean Fortescue’s ice cream parlor. And across from her sat someone who made Draco’s blood run cold: Ron Weasley.

Draco hissed in a breath and darted behind the corner of the nearest brick building. For a minute he considered turning around and going back to Browning’s office and demanding an emergency session. He often avoided this strip of Diagon Alley, due to the amount of damage it had incurred at

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chance.

Who knew what the once-covered and opulent beyond reason Malloy Manor looked like these days? Ministry confiscation meant Draco only received his family’s artifacts, heirlooms, and documents after they’d gone through a stringent magical inspection by the government to ensure nothing dark magic related made its way back to Draco or Narcissa.

Draco couldn’t have cared less. Let them burn that fucking place to the ground. Every inch of his once grand home was tainted, and if someone else wanted the handsome dining room table upon which a giant snake had eaten a woman, then have at it.

Draco had barely scratched the surface of his inheritance to purchase Franklin House, itself an impressive country manor in Berkshire, though not quite on the scale of his childhood home. Narcissa had a wing to herself when she visited, but she also had her own English home for when she deigned to return to her home country.

“How was Vienna?” Draco asked to be polite. His mother detailed her many experiences in her weekly letters to Draco since she’d been gone after the New Year, but figured she would want to chat about her time there anyway. As Narcissa launched into a lengthy account of all the various gals she attended with her far-flung Black relations the last few months, Draco allowed his mind to wander.

Granger had mentioned on their Friday morning walk to work that her bill to restructure boundaries for centaur-designated lands was still at a standstill. Of course, being a bleeding-heart Gryffindor, her political tactic was to appeal to the humanity of lawmakers. And when Draco reminded her, rather harshly, he’d admit, that most wizards didn’t regard centaurs as much more than savage beasts, she’d just about bit his head off.

“Temper, temper, Granger. How do you expect to curry any political favor if you flare up just when I’m merely pointing out a *fact* of society?”

That earned him a fair bit of grumbling from her end about how she didn’t need “underhanded Slytherin lessons from him, thank you very much.” Still, he’d convinced her to at least let him read the preamble to her bill as a fresh pair of eyes and he’d already annotated a few sections where the wording could be—

“Draco!”

He jumped slightly as his mother’s sharp voice cut through his wandering thoughts. He had the grace to look a bit sheepish.

“Sorry Mother, what were you saying?”

“I was inquiring about how you have been occupying your free time as of late when you’re not flitting to and from quidditch matches. I’m sure you’re aware that the Greengrass sisters are back in England?”

Draco indulged himself in an eye roll. His mother had all the subtlety of a Howler. “I’ve no idea about what they get up to, but I did see Theo last night.”

Narcissa lit up at the mention of Theo, as she had always been rather fond of him. “Oh you must invite Theodore and his mother around for dinner while I’m here.”

Remain Nameless

“good old days.” Hadn’t they all seen enough torture and death over whose blood was purest? It was truly exhausting to adhere to that outdated ideology in such a fanatical way, and so Draco and Theo began isolating themselves more and more until just the two of them were meeting almost weekly to drink and talk, but mostly drink.

That is until this past year when Theo had practically been a ghost to Draco. Maybe he had a girlfriend now? Draco tried to fight the jealous feeling at how Theo’s clean forearm opened up many doors that had been closed to Draco: a Ministry job and the chance for normal relationships.

Theo was still on his philosophical bend when Draco tuned back in. “What I meant was . . . all that nonsense about Muggles . . . none of it mattered. Muggles aren’t poor and dirty or some sort of weird animals. They’re just people . . . and I’m not sure I . . . I just think our parents were wrong, is all.”

Draco shrugged, not sure he understood what had brought these feelings to the surface for Theo. If he really thought about it, Draco would have to admit he almost agreed. He truthfully didn’t know much about the Muggle world besides that one café, but if he did learn anything from the war 9 years ago it was that everyone looked the same when hit with a Killing Curse, no matter the amount of magic in your blood.

“Still seeing your healer?” Draco grunted.

“Yep. You?”

“Once a month.”

The two old friends lapsed into a thoughtful silence and nursed their drinks.

I am in control of this



Draco paced in front of the fireplace in the room just off the hall of his home. Right on time, the fireplace lit up green and the next moment Draco’s mother dusted herself off gracefully as she went to embrace her son.

“Happy birthday, darling,” she pecked his cheek and took a step back to survey him. Draco felt it best to cut off any concerning remarks over his thinness or tired-looking eyes.

“Thank you, Mother. Tea service is ready out in the garden.”

The large gardens behind Draco’s home were flourishing this time of year, but they were still a pale imitation of the once grand landscape that used to accentuate the grounds of Malfoy Manor.

After hot, fresh-brewed coffee, the second recognizable scent Draco pinpointed from his brief brush with Amortentia was the smell of his mother’s rose garden in the summer. The scent of the flowers was so strong that it seemed to permeate all around the grounds and Draco always associated the smell with memories of summer, of learning to fly on a broom, or running to hide after stealing extra sweets out of the kitchen with Theo and Crabbe.

But the gardens at the Manor were summarily destroyed the summer after his Sixth Year. Between random Death Eaters practicing hexes all over the grounds or Fenrir Greyback and members of his disgusting pack preferring to sleep outside, his mother’s beautifully cultivated roses didn’t stand a

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the hands of Death Eaters during the war. Draco knew he couldn’t risk going into several of these establishments, lest he be gawked at or cursed at, Fortescue’s absolutely included on that list.

He observed Granger and Weasley from a safe distance, and was amazed at how Granger’s laugh had carried so far. Had he ever made her laugh that loud? Of course not. They weren’t friends. This was friendship embodied right in front of his eyes: two people sharing a public table, looking to all the world carefree and happy and filled with adoration at their pure and beautiful relationship.

Draco was burning with curiosity now as he continued watching the pair. How had these two not ended up married? They certainly looked the part. Everything about their mannerisms and facial expressions showed nothing but uninhibited warmth and affection for one another. It looked so effortless. What kind of sight did Draco make with Granger? It most definitely could not look this easy, this natural. He watched as they stood and hugged one another tightly. Weasley dropped a kiss on the top of her head before they parted.

Sorry Header Browning, but after witnessing this sickening display of saccharine tenderness, no way was Draco going to put his pride on the line only to be rebuffed. *I am in control of this.*

There was no room in Hermione Granger’s life for someone like Draco, and there never would be.



August 2007

“Read this headline and tell me what it says to you.”

Draco looked up from his coffee to see Hermione brandishing this morning’s copy of *The Prophet* in front of his face. He accepted the paper and saw “Record Number of Muggleborns Set to Begin First Year at Hogwarts.” Nothing jumped out to Draco.

“Not sure what I’m meant to be looking for . . . it’s pretty straightforward.”

Hermione tutted impatiently and wrenched the paper back from him.

“You don’t see any problem with the paper calling attention to these new students’ blood status?”

Draco frowned, still unsure of what kind of response was required of him.

“Are you familiar with the concept of ‘othering?’” Draco shook his head, and tried not to feel stupid.

She laid the paper down on the table between them and drew an impressive breath. *Here it comes, a Hermione Granger dissertation.* He bit back a grin so she wouldn’t think he was making fun of her.

“It was a tactic Voldemort—” Draco winced at the name, but she plowed on. “—Voldemort wielded particularly well. Not that he was by any stretch of the imagination the first wizard or even the first person to use it, but you still see the effects of it today. Simply put, it means painting one group of people as the ideal standard, in the case of wizardkind, that means pureblood wizards. Any human not born into that standard should aspire to be most like the pureblood wizard. To hold their values, to put them on a pedestal, to carry out their wishes and traditions as if those wishes and traditions were the best way. The only way.

Remain Nameless

Now, any person who does not fit into this mold, in this case Muggleborns or Squibs, is an ‘other.’ They are different, and because they are different, they are lesser. And no one wants to be inferior, so systems and laws are propped up that favor the pureblood among us, and sometimes these attitudes are adopted by people whose blood would not be considered pure by any means, but out of fear, or apathy or greed. Now, it’s not always as dramatic as legalizing something as barbaric as Muggle hunting for example,” she paused here to shiver. “Sometimes ‘othering’ is as innocuous as a headline in a newspaper.”

She ran her finger along the text again. “Why does it matter these children are Muggleborn? What purpose does this label serve in the context of news? They are just as magical as any other child with magical parents. So yes, this is a factual headline, and an innocent sounding one at that. But all it really does is divide. It tells these children, *you are different. You belong in a different tribe.* No matter how well you hone your magical skills you will never be considered a true witch or wizard in the eyes of society. You will have this moniker of ‘Muggleborn’ follow you forever. A constant reminder that no matter what you achieve, it’s never enough. ‘Oh you’re talented at Charms? That’s great, *for a Muggleborn.*’ There’s always that verbal asterisk hanging just beside your every accomplishment.”

Hermione sighed and stowed the paper back in her bag. Draco wasn’t sure what type of reply she wanted from him, but she didn’t seem to be asking for one as she gazed thoughtfully out the café window.

“I just thought, after all these years, after everything we fought for, that maybe we’d evolved beyond this type of divisive thinking by now,” she said quietly, a touch of sadness in her voice.

Now this, Draco could not abide. He could handle Granger when she was grumpy. Or when she was being petulant, or prissy, or snotty, or annoying, or even just bloody furious with him, but sad and defeated Granger? Well that was not natural.

“Change the way they think then,” he declared.

“Pardon?”

Draco rolled his eyes, but pressed on. “You heard me, Granger. Change the discourse. Start an educational crusade, it’s what you do.”

Hermione goggled back at him and opened and closed her mouth a few times. When she finally found her voice again, Draco was pleased to hear the indignant, righteous tone imbued within it. “And just how do you propose I go about doing that? Why don’t I write a letter to the editor to be published in the Prophet about how this article offended my *delicate, Muggleborn sensibilities* while trying to properly explain the sociological theory of—”

“Merlin, Granger, you’re not going to accomplish what you want in a bloody *letter to the editor*.”

The look she cast him was positively venomous. He guessed most people did not dare interrupt Hermione Granger mid-sentence. No, most people, her dear friends Potter and the Weasel included, let their eyes glaze over and became passive observers in the conversation. He’d witnessed this behavior many times from her dinner Gryffindor housemates in school and always wondered why she bothered to put up with such friends of obviously lesser intellect.

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lowed once before blurring out a “Thank you” and turning away quickly not waiting for a reply.

And thus began another new morning routine, Monday through Friday: Draco and Hermione now walked the few blocks together from the café to their respective places of employment before parting ways.



June 2007

“Happy birthday mate!”

Theodore Nott clinked his glass of lager against Draco’s and took a long sip. Draco took one as well, savoring the pleasant taste of the alcohol, the company of his friend, and the fact that it was a Friday. It almost felt like he was a normal person, capable of feeling contentment.

“What’s new? I see the Wasps already have an early lead in the league, probably thanks to you.”

Yes, quidditch, that was a safe topic. Because Draco wasn’t quite sure how to discuss with even his closest friend that for several months now he’d been spending every morning before work in the company of Hermione Granger, by choice.

They talked sport for a bit, then Draco inquired about Theo’s job in the Department of Finance at the Ministry.

“They must be keeping you busy; I haven’t seen you in months.”

Theo nodded, but then something passed over his face and he set his drink down. Draco noticed his friend had gone quiet and now sat with a furrowed brow.

After a beat, Theo spoke. “Do you think our parents were wrong?”

Draco slowly lowered his glass from his lips. “You’ll have to be more specific, I’m afraid.”

Theo sighed and ran a hand through his brown hair. “About... all of it, really. All the pureblood crap.”

“Where is this coming from Theo?”

His friend sighed again. “I’ve been thinking a lot about how we were raised lately. It... wasn’t healthy was it?”

“I suppose not,” Draco responded dully and enviously eyed the fact that Theo was able to have rolled up sleeves in public, having never taken the Dark Mark. Theo and Draco had been friends long before Hogwarts, and their friendship continued after the world fell apart. Even if at Hogwarts Draco had reveled in ruling over his Slytherin cronies and Theo preferred to stay out of the spotlight and excel at his studies, they maintained friendly terms.

But with Voldemort gone, it turned out they had more in common than they’d appreciated before. Both of their fathers had bought in to the Death Eater way, and paid with their lives. Their widowed mothers both existed as sort of ghostly heiresses, still retaining some standing in pureblood social circles throughout Europe.

Draco and Theo both continued their healing beyond the mandatory sessions. Neither of them cared to reconnect with some of their old Slytherin peers who seemed to never shut up about the

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to keep anything but water down just now. He took his time until the water was almost gone and the constricting feeling in his chest had eased.

With an immense effort, Draco raised his head. "What did you do with it?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"Poured it down the sink in the restroom," she replied.

"Good."

He braved eye contact. Granger still looked concerned but also resolute. She wasn't going anywhere.

"How long have you been clean?"

"Six and a half years."

"That's amazing, Malfoy."

Draco snorted and broke a piece off the scone. It did taste rather wonderful, almost like eating chocolate after facing Dementors. He finished the rest in two bites.

"Yes, I'm bloody *magnificent* for being reduced to a quivering mess at the sight of a fucking vial."

Well his sarcasm reflex was still intact.

"I'm serious, Malfoy," she said in a severe tone. "Not everyone has that kind of strength. You should be proud of yourself."

He let out another derisive snort. "Granger, pride is not something I lack. I rather think that quality has gotten me into enough trouble over the years, don't you?"

Granger rolled her eyes. "Oh, just take the compliment, you prat."

"My, my, Granger, is this how you treat someone having a public episode? Kick them when they're down, eh?" Draco managed a weak grin and earned a good-natured eye roll this time.

He checked his watch suddenly. "Don't you have to get going?"

She shrugged. "I can be a few minutes late every now and then. I'll just make sure you get to your office."

"I don't need a chaperone to walk to work."

"No, this is for my protection." He raised an eyebrow at her response. "You see, if you collapse on the way in, well I was the last person to see you, wasn't I? It wouldn't take much convincing from you to have your solicitor go after me for plotting some sort of malicious action against you."

She couldn't keep her lips from twitching into a devious grin. And despite the fact that he had been so close to breaking six years' worth of sobriety a matter of minutes ago, Draco found himself grinning for the second time that morning.

"Please Granger, it would be too easy. You know I only employ the best solicitors. I'd bring you up on attempted murder in no time."

She let out a giggle. "Can you stand then? I don't want to be accused of not helping an injured man."

They left the café together and in the same direction for work. Their paths diverged as Draco reached the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron and Hermione kept on a few more blocks to the Ministry. "Granger?" he called when she was ten feet away. She turned and looked back and Draco swal-

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"What do you suggest then?"

Draco resumed his habit of tracing his pointer finger around the edge of his mug while he chose his words carefully.

"Wouldn't it be better to go to the root of the problem? Wouldn't you agree that the kind of mind-set-changing rhetoric you're after should start from a young age?" Draco can't believe Granger hasn't considered this before. "Start this at Hogwarts. Go re-vamp the Muggle Studies curriculum or... I don't know, start some kind of cultural awareness initiative that all First Years have to take. Hell, make Muggle Studies a required subject."

Hermione's jaw actually dropped. Draco ceased his finger's ministrations on the rim of his cup and leaned closer to her, feeding alive with ideas for her.

"Didn't you always whine about that class in Hogwarts being an absolute joke? That most of the textbook matter consisted of teaching wizards about things like dish-washing machines and heli-motors?"

"Helicopters," she corrected him quietly.

"Exactly! Wouldn't your passion and ire be best suited to the education of generations of magical children about... about... I don't know, all that eloquent shit you said before? The 'othering' thing?"

She looked stupefied. Granger blinked slowly several times as she stared back at him, and Draco began to grow self-conscious. Had he said too much? Had he offended her somehow? She looked like she had never seen him before in her whole life.

"Malfoy," she began slowly. "I can't just quit my job and go become a teacher. I'm not qualified to teach."

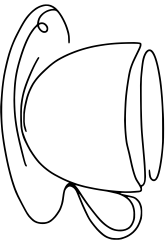
He scoffed at this ridiculous excuse. "Please, of course you can. McGonagall's still in charge at Hogwarts, right? She'd probably fire the entire staff if it meant bringing her star pupil on board as a professor."

Granger shook her head and smiled. "No, it's nothing to do with McGonagall. I just know that I'm not cut out to teach students. I'm far too impatient and speaking in front of hordes of children day in and day out makes me break out in a sweat. And I like my career!"

Draco scoffed again. "Yes, well, my point is, you can complain about cultural attitudes or you can do something to change them. But one fight for you at a time I guess, otherwise who on this planet would stand up for the rights of niffles and kelpies?"

Granger rolled her eyes, but her smile remained. "Speaking of, let's get going. I have some more legislation to tinker with this morning." She drained her tea and stood.

"Besides, I wouldn't want to get McGonagall's hopes up. I have to turn down her offer to teach Defense every single year."



Chapter Six

September 2007

Draco's weekend had been spent answering dozens of owls and Floo calls with his solicitors and financial advisors. One of the advisors was in quite a mood over the state of some Malfoy funds allocated for charitable donation. Apparently, this was one such donation that had been missed during Draco's and his financial team's sweep of every single revenue stream that flowed from and to his family's vaults.

When Draco became the official head of the family immediately after the war following his father's imprisonment, the one prudent thing he did after the Ministry reinstated access to all his family's accounts was to comb through each and every document. At that time it was the perfect task for a wealthy recluse with a potion addiction and a nagging girlfriend he constantly sought to avoid. A Knut did not go missing without him knowing how it was being spent. Even years later, this was how Draco spent much of his free time: poring over financial statements and documents to either move funds, rescind monies, or invest into more reputable endeavors.

All political donations had ceased immediately. Draco never wanted to have the Malfoy name indebted to any political faction (Ministry-associated or otherwise) ever again. This had been a rather astute move on his part; apparently, one could save a lot of gold if they weren't constantly bribing Ministry officials and lining the pockets of shady political lobbyists for nefarious purposes. Not having to fund the schemes of a mad dark wizard and house dozens of Death Eaters helped too.

Draco terminated any and all contracts to do with the Black family gold and gave control of all of Bellatrix's remaining estate and assets to his mother. The Malfoy name was going to be pure as a fucking newborn unicorn, at least on paper.

He kept all respectable charitable donations, like the ones that funded most of St. Mungo's or the rebuilding of Hogwarts. The situation one of his advisors had discovered was one that had not occurred in years.

ready to right all the world's wrongs. She was digging around in her bag and then glanced surreptitiously side to side before holding something out to him.

"Here, take this," she whispered and Draco saw she held out a vial that was half full.

Mo.

Mo.

"Granger," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Is that what I think it is?" His palms were already starting to feel damp.

"Yes, it's Dreamless Sleep. I took half last night and threw it in my bag this morning to remind myself to get to the apothecary at lunch."

She was still holding the vial out to him. Draco tore his eyes away and looked out the window and tried to count to 10 in his head.

"It's really no trouble Malfoy, I was going to pick up some more today. You look like you could use some for the weekend."

He could use some. It would be so easy. It's only half a vial.

Mo. No. I am in control of this.

Draco tried to steady his breathing, but his pulse would not slow down. The room was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm and the air around him thinning. He didn't realize his hands were trembling until he attempted to undo the top button of his collared shirt.

"Malfoy, what's wrong?"

Her voice sounded concerned and far away. She was still holding the vial up where he could reach.

One move and his hand could close around it. He could take it tonight, drift into a blissful blackness and maybe never wake up.

He finally succeeded in undoing his top button, but the air still felt thin. He pressed both of his palms flat onto the table in between them and willed them to stay as if they were obeying a Permanent Sticking Charm.

"Granger." He ground out. "Granger. I need you to put that away. Now." *Just stare at the table, just keep your eyes down here. Don't look at it. Don't take it. I am in control of this.*

"But why—oh! Oh God!"

He heard her chair scrape away from the table as she walked quickly away. He didn't dare raise his head for the next few minutes as he tried to will both his pulse and his breathing to steady. Well now she knew. He was an addict and he could never touch that brew again. Just add it to the list of reasons Hermione Granger should stay far, far away from the likes of Draco.

Had he not been in the midst of coming out of a panic attack, the glass of water that suddenly nudged against one of his hands would have made him jump out of his seat. The glass of water was followed by a plate with a large blueberry scone.

"Drink what you can, it will help," came her quiet voice. Draco slowly raised a hand and gripped the glass. He took a small sip and felt it drop down into an empty stomach.

"You'll feel better with some food too," she murmured. Draco nodded, but felt he wouldn't be able

Remain Nameless

"Did you have an early meeting at the Ministry?"

Her eyes snapped up again, but now her gaze was softer, almost pining. What was he missing here?

"No I, uh... I took a personal day." She made an awkward sort of frown and lowered her eyes again. And he really should have dropped the subject then. He really, really, should have. It would have been polite and proper to heed the behavioral cues she gave. But Granger was never cagey like this and damn if he hated not getting direct answers to questions.

"Well tell me it was at least for something amusing, Granger, and you're just hungover because you look like you only got an 'E' instead of an 'O' on one of your OWLs."

Granger let out a sigh and folded her paper shut. She looked so defeated and Draco had a moment of panic that he'd inadvertently done something awful.

"Every year on May 2nd, Harry and I take the day off and Ron closes the joke shop. Everyone spends the day at the Burrow with the Weasleys and we... well, we spend time together and try to honor the people we lost by... by being together and remembering them fondly. As the years have passed, it has gotten easier, but it's still just... hard." She trailed off and swallowed a lump in her throat as Draco felt his stomach drop out.

How could he fucking forget? Yesterday had been the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. No wonder she hadn't shown up. Why would she want to spend that particular day with a fucking Death Eater? No, Granger would seek solace with the Weasley horde and Potter and a whole host of Gryffindor heroes as they toasted their victory over evil and talked about their feelings and cried and hugged and were comforted by the fact that people like Draco had been defeated. And why should she want to see his face? What a fun reminder for her that he'd been part of the group that had murdered Fred Weasley and Lavender Brown and Remus Lupin and...

"Malfoy?"

Draco stood suddenly and averted his eyes. "Just remembered I have an earlier practice to observe, see you Granger."

He swept out of the café without a backward glance.



Friday, May 4, 2007

Another morning, another corpse looking back at him from the mirror. Last night's terror inside his dreams was watching Crabbe fall to his death in the Firefly in the Room of Requirement. He could actually feel the flames licking at his skin and woke up in a pool of sweat.

So it was no surprise to him that Granger commented on his appearance immediately that morning.

"Malfoy, you really don't look good."

Draco shrugged and tried to ignore the way the coffee was roiling in his empty stomach. He probably should have eaten something this morning. Granger looked like her normal self today, peppy and

Hey Jude!9

"I'm not sure how we missed it, Mr. Malfoy. But this is definitely going through a back channel to fund illegal dragon poaching excursions."

Draco sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "All right, well I guess it isn't too shocking. Many of those 'reserved creature land' charities have turned out to be game-hunting fronts for rich pricks. Terminate the donation and redirect the gold back to the main vault at Gringotts."

"Unfortunately sir, given where we are in the fiscal year, I think it would be more prudent to redistribute the funds in a different manner. This gold has already been ear-marked for donation in your annual budget, so my advice, and the advice of the rest of the group, would be to find an alternate channel for donation."

The rest of the Floo call had turned into a back and forth about which cause merited the money. It was a bit difficult to pinpoint how to spend such an amount. Give too much to one charity, then they'd expect that same amount every year, not to mention it could look a bit dodgy to dole out such a large sum all at once. The public might suspect ulterior motives on account of Draco's surname. No decisions were made just then and they'd disconnected from the Floo as Draco promised to conduct some research on a specific cause to redirect the funds.

Speaking of money, a question had been niggling at Draco's brain since his conversation last month with Granger about Muggleborn children.

"How do they afford it?"

"I'm not a Legilimens, Malfoy, how does who afford what?"

Draco huffed impatiently, which between huffing and eye-rolling, you'd think that he'd invented a new form of language for specifically conversing with Hermione Granger because these gestures took up a hefty percentage of his communication with her.

"How do kids with Muggle parents afford to go to Hogwarts?"

"Hogwarts is free." She didn't even look up from her notebook.

"Obviously, I meant all the supplies and magical accessories."

Hermione frowned and finally met his eyes. "Are you under the impression that all Muggles are poor?"

Draco shrugged and looked away, feeling chastened. Of course Lucius, like his father before him, handed down the belief that all Muggle life was a waste. That Muggles were filthy, belligerent, untrustworthy and not fit to breathe the same air as their wizarding betters. Coming to his coffee shop every day for a few years had taught Draco this was clearly untrue. Several times each morning Draco spotted male Muggles in suits that looked as expensive as the ones he himself wore.

"Do you know what a dentist is?" Draco shook his head and Hermione sighed. "All right, so you know how at St. Mungo's, some healers specialize in different areas? Well, both my parents are Muggle healers called dentists that specialize in healing diseases of the teeth and gums. Their practice is both medicinal and cosmetic in nature. It's considered a highly skilled profession and happens to be a rather lucrative one at that."

"Was that a roundabout way of telling me you come from money? Very gauche of you, Granger."

Remain Nameless

She chuckled at his bluntness and he felt his face pull into a genuine grin at the sound.

"Let me put it this way: if I were not a witch and went through life as a Muggle student, my parents could afford to send me to the best private schools in England, and most likely, a top-tier university either here or abroad, should I wish to continue my education. I've never wanted for anything material in my life, and we were the kind of family that could afford at least two vacations abroad each year. Does that answer your question?"

Draco smirked and fought the urge to burst out laughing. He was picturing the look on his father's face if he were alive to have Draco explain that Queen of Muggleborns Hermione Granger did not spawn from destitute Muggles.

"Hmm I guess I can no longer classify you as a peasant. But did you ever own albino peacocks? Only the most unnecessary of pets could indicate your level of wealth."

"I did have a hermit crab when I was 6."

Draco playfully scoffed. "Not exotic enough Granger, sorry. No, I quite think your peasant status was accurate."

She responded with a playful roll of her eyes and returned to a notebook. After a few moments, she stopped writing and was staring thoughtfully out of the window, brow slightly furrowed and mouth set in a firm line. It was a look Draco was starting to anticipate with interest and burning curiosity. This Granger expression meant she was about to think up an idea, either brilliant or stupidly self-righteous but always intriguing, and then choose, of all people, him to share it with.

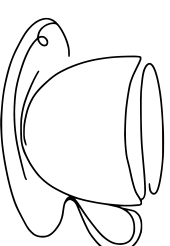
"What children with non-magical parents actually need is a beginner's curriculum to the world of magic. Can you imagine how overwhelming it is to learn this about yourself a mere few months before you're expected to move away to a remote castle in Scotland, apart from your family for most of the year? You're a part of this vast, ancient culture and you didn't even know dragons or flying broomsticks existed until now?"

Hermione took out another one of her many notebooks and her Muggle writing instrument. Draco had admired the little tool on many occasions, and she informed him it was called a "pen" and functioned like a self-inking quill. He didn't dare admit it aloud, but it seemed much more practical than having to cart around quills and ink bottles and seemed much less of a mess-risk. She began scribbling furiously and Draco felt a little put out that she was opting to write out her thoughts instead of voicing them aloud.

He needed to grab her attention again. "Is that what it was like for you?"

Hermione rounded off her sentence then looked up at him as she considered her answer. Draco realized he never fully appreciated how jarring it must be to learn about magic when you were already 10 or 11-years-old.

"I knew I was different," she practically whispered, almost reverently and Draco was rapt with attention. "The first instance of my abilities that I can remember occurred when I was 6. My mother and I were at the public library and she was busy chatting with one of her friends. There was a book up high on a shelf and I remember wanting that book so badly, right then, and I didn't feel like waiting



Chapter Four

Thursday, May 3, 2007

Draco had slept poorly last night. He had dreamt about the night he had taken the Dark Mark on his arm. A burning sensation like he'd never experienced in his whole life coursed through his arm and spread to the rest of his body. And he remembered as he jerked awake and clutched at his arm, how that was the one time in his life that he had seen a look of fear in his mother's eyes. It was only for a few seconds, then the smooth, impassive mask was back in place. But Draco never forgot the look in Narcissa Malfoy's eyes as her only child had a dark symbol burned into his skin by a mad man.

His reflection showed all the hallmarks of a shifty night of sleep. Despite spending all of yesterday out in the sun, he was starting to resemble the Bloody Baron: gaunt, deathly pale, purple-gray bags under his eyes. Maybe he'd start an argument with Granger today about pixies just to feel something this morning.

If she shines at all. She doesn't owe me a thing

Draco pursed his lips and tried not to once again think about how the Muggleborn witch had wormed her way into his daily work week routine.

Granger did arrive at her usual time, but Draco was surprised to see she looked like sleep was also a distant concept.

"Morning," she said brightly, but had to beat back a yawn as she sat down.

"Granger."

She wordlessly began unloading her various books and journals on the table and disappeared behind her newspaper.

Draco cleared his throat. "Were you feeling ill yesterday?"

Her eyes were sharp as they snapped from her paper to meet his gaze.

"No, I wasn't ill."

She lowered her eyes again to her reading and Draco felt that familiar prickle of irritation.

Wednesday, May 2, 2007

She never showed.

Draco frowned into his coffee and consulted his watch again. He tried to remember if she'd said anything yesterday about not being able to meet this morning. Maybe she was sick? Surely even Granger took a sick day every once in a while.

When it became too late for him to wait around any longer, lest he actually be tardy to work, Draco huffed in irritation and left. He practically stomped all the way to work despite the weather being particularly temperate and sunny. He brushed past his boss with a cursory grunt of "morning," before continuing his stomp parade to his office.

"Malloy?" his boss poked his head around his door. Fuck, maybe he had been too short with him. "Sir?"

"Aren't you meant to be observing Puddlemore's reserve squad for free agents today?"

Draco blanched. Fucking fuck. He'd completely forgot he was supposed to apparate straight there 15 minutes ago.

"Oh, er, yes sir, I just realized.... I forgot... one of my reports.... I'm heading there now." Draco was never late. What the hell had he been thinking?

"Are you feeling all right?"

Bellamy Wighthe-Johnson did not often inquire about the personal lives or feelings of his employees, so Draco knew he must look like an absolute horror-show this morning. After waving off his boss once more, Draco was on his way and apparated to the Puddlemore practice pitch.

For the rest of the morning and through the afternoon, Draco lost himself in his favorite game. Quidditch kept every one of his senses busy as he observed the fast-flying players, zooming around and above him while he jotted down observations and consulted last season's stats. The quidditch season officially kicked off next weekend and the team managers and coaches had until midweek to solidify their starting rosters and reserve players.

The quidditch world was an ideal place for someone with a murky history like Draco Malloy to seek gainful employment. No one gave a shit about your background or surname so long as you cared about the sport, were knowledgeable, and filed decent recommendations to teams about recruitment and retention. Especially if you were as adept as Draco was at figuring out the best rosters for specific players.

And despite the satisfaction he felt, Draco was unnerved that all it took was for Granger to no-show that morning to completely throw him off. He didn't know how to reconcile the fact that it seemed to be the only thing getting him out of bed in the morning. *I am in control of this.*



for my mother to come reach up for me. It was at least three feet above my head, but then it wiggled itself out from between the other books and floated gently down into my hands."

Her eyes were alight at the memory. She was positively sparkling with the knowledge of her own magic. "Little things like that kept happening as I got older. I wanted more dessert? Suddenly the ice cream bowl refilled itself. I felt a little cold in the night? My blanket tucked itself snugly around my body without my lifting a finger. A boy was teasing me on the playground? The sweets he was stuffing in his face suddenly became beetles."

Draco grimaced. "That's truly disgusting. I don't think I'll be accepting any scores from you in the future."

She smirked back. "As if you could resist."

"Oh Granger," he purred. "I can resist a great many things, but I'm certain you could find the right way to tempt me." A bright flush appeared on her cheeks and Draco blinked and broke eye contact. What the ever loving fuck was he doing? Did he just flirt with her? *I am in control of this.*

Draco cleared his throat and tried to steer the conversation back into neutral territory. "What happened when you got your Hogwarts letter?"

The remnants of the blush remained, but her eyes took on a dreamy, faraway glaze. "I've never felt so validated in my whole life. My dad thought it was utter nonsense, of course. I think he almost contacted the police to report some nutter sending strange letters to his daughter about magic and a made-up school." She paused here, and Draco was startled to see her eyes looked a touch wet.

"But my mother... I think she *knew*. Deep down, she knew I was a different child. That there was something not quite normal about me. I remember when the second letter came, she gave my dad this look. This look of... of insistent belief. As fantastical and ridiculous as it is to learn your daughter is a witch, I think she was trying to convince him that this somehow made sense. By the time McGonagall showed up on our doorstep to truly explain it all, I know my mum already believed. McGonagall did have to turn into a cat for my dad to get on board though."

Draco chuckled at the image of no-nonsense McGonagall becoming so exasperated that she had to become her animagus form to prove a point to a Muggle man.

"I just hope these children aren't afraid or intimidated by it all. It can reduce anyone to a pile of nerves to learn all this information at once," she reasoned.

Draco cut in. "But you weren't that way. As I remember you were stomping up and down the train cars of the Hogwarts Express, a prissy little First Year spouting off facts about Transfiguration and Switching Spells."

She giggled and Draco tried his hardest to smother the growing feeling of elation that he had made her laugh. "Yes, well I was exceptional wasn't I? Exceptional *for a Muggleborn*."

No, you're just exceptional.

The thought floated across his mind and almost out of his mouth, so Draco hastily sipped at his coffee instead.

Granger broke the silence with a quiet question. "Malloy, why did you ask me about Muggleborn

Remain Nameless

students?"

Draco didn't quite know the answer to that himself, so he shrugged and diverted her with another question. "What were you writing down just now?"

That distracted her sufficiently. "I couldn't stop thinking about what you said to me last month. About how I should consider an educational program on Muggle life for Hogwarts. But I think something that could really help students with non-magical parents would be to properly acquaint them with the magical world before they're dropped into Diagon Alley and told to exchange money with a goblin and buy a magic wand."

She turned the notebook in her hand towards Draco and he finally saw what she had been writing. Comprehensive would not even begin to describe her plan. "Granger this is... ambitious," he remarked as his silver eyes scanned the pages.

She beamed so hard he thought her face might split in two. "I know! I really think this would be an elegant solution, don't you? If the Ministry could supply some representatives from the Muggle Relations Department they could liaise with the Education Department and make first contact with Muggle parents. A lot less awkward than a letter delivered via owl don't you think?"

He nodded. "Right, and saves McGonagall from running around to all these homes."

"Yes, exactly! This burden shouldn't fall squarely on the professors. Now, a joint budget for something like this would also include a representative to escort the families to Diagon Alley. It took us ages to complete our first shopping trip and I think half the time my poor father was trying not to be sick. It really was a baptism by fire, having to learn how to exchange money and then finding all the correct shops. I bet we got overcharged by quite a few shops that day," she finished flatly.

"What's this bit about an orientation here?" inquired Draco as he pointed further down the page.

"Right, so this is an idea I copied directly from most Muggle university programs. Basically, all incoming new students, but in this case we're only talking about Muggleborn First-Years, are invited to come up to the school a few weeks early. I modified this a bit from the university orientation model. Maybe a month or so before term, these students would all take the Hogwarts Express and then spend two weeks at Hogwarts learning about the world of magic. Sort of an adapted History of Magic curriculum."

"Not taught by Binns, I hope?"

Hermione shuddered. "Oh Merlin, no. Perhaps the Muggles Studies professor or each of the professors could take a turn helping these children understand what it means to be a witch or wizard. Not just goblin rebellion dates, but things like... like how portraits move! Or that ghosts exist! Or that Bertie Bott's Beans are seriously every flavor!"

"Wait, you're including sweets in this educational plan of yours?"

"You would too if your first green jelly bean turned out to taste like pond scum," she grinned at the memory.

"Blech, point taken."

Draco's eyes scanned over the rest of her plan. She had clearly put a lot of thought into how best

Hey Jude!

Draco blinked in surprise at his words. "Shit, Potter. That was sort of profound."

Potter smirked and ruffled his always untidy black hair. "It was something my grandfather told me and I never forgot. Thinking the world is black and white tends to lead to problems."

Draco looked away and stared into the fireplace. His mother's cousin seemed like a fascinating wizard and Draco found himself growing curious about the type of person he was in life. Sirius and Regulus Black apparently had more to them than being names his mother avoided speaking and whom Bellatrix had branded as family traitors.

A movement in front of him caught his eye. Potter was holding his hand out. Draco briefly flushed back to being 11-years-old on the train to Hogwarts, trying to form an alliance with a young Harry Potter. Potter had spurned his offer of friendship then, but here he was, offering a sort of penance to Draco.

Draco's eyes flicked between the hand outstretched and those bright green eyes. "Before you offer that, I should probably also say sorry for being such a little shite to you at school for so many years," he said weakly.

Potter shrugged. "Forgiven, Malfoy. It was... really big of you to come here."

Draco shook his hand. "Thanks Potter," he mumbled.

Potter retracted a bit back as their hands dropped and cleared his throat. "How did you find the house through the wards anyway?"

"Ah well, that was a tricky little bit of blood magic. Purplebooks are notoriously protective of their property. As a direct descendant of the Blacks, I'm allowed through, provided I swear an oath not to harm the legal owner. I found it in a very old French deed outlining the house's protection plans and succession rules."

Potter was starting to look a little uncomfortable and Draco took that as his cue to leave. "Don't worry, I'm the only Black descendant left besides my mother."

"You're not," Potter replied quietly.

"Sorry?"

Potter cleared his throat again. "You're not the last of the Blacks. Your mother's sister Antonia is still alive and her grandson, Teddy Lupin. They come round often."

Draco was dumbstruck. He'd completely forgotten about his mother's other sister. How fucked up was it that Harry Potter of all people was a better authority on his own kin?

Unbidden, a horrifying memory floated to the surface. "Draco, will you babysit the cubs?" Draco pushed away the thought of a sneering pale face and gleaming red eyes with difficulty. About time for some more potions...

"Oh. Right. Well, I should go I think."

Potter looked like he wanted to say something else about his estranged family but thought better of it. "I'll walk you out. Ron should be back any minute."

Draco followed him silently, neither man speaking until they reached the front door. "Potter... I'd be very... grateful if you didn't tell anyone about my visit." Fuck, how many times today had he had to swallow his pride in front of Potter? And while Potter did smirk at him, his reply to Draco was most unexpected. "What is it about you Slytherins never wanting people to discover the best of you?"

Draco had no idea how to respond, having no clue what that was supposed to mean, but Potter saved him from trying. "I promise, Malfoy. And... and if you ever did feel the need to come back for another chat... well, you know how to find me now."

Remain Nameless

"She saved mine."

Draco's head snapped up to meet Potter's gaze. "She saved my life Malfoy. I meant what I said at her trial. Without your mother, who knows how that bottle would have ended."

Draco nodded solemnly, then resumed staring at Potter's face. Eye contact with the savior of the wizarding world was a little too intense for his liking. He ran a shaking hand through his platinum hair. So much for that Calming Draught being effective.

"And thanks you for saving me as well, and not leaving me to burn to death by Firewhyr?" A few more deep breaths.

"I also need to... to... look, about that night at the Manor..."

"Do you want something to drink?" Potter interrupted him and stood.

"Pardon?"

"A drink, Malfoy. Can I offer you something to drink? Firewhisky? Butterbeer? You look like you need one."

"Can't," he muttered. "On too many potions." Merlin this situation was absurd. Potter shrugged and summoned himself a glass of amber liquid. When his host had settled back with his drink, Draco knew it was time for the hard part. Thanking Potter for Mother's life and his was easy; Draco had meant what he said. But reliving that night at the Manor... well there was a reason it had taken him almost two years to approach Potter.

"That night... at my family's home. I know that... I should have done something more. Helped you or Granger or—"

"He would have killed you. Or Bellatrix would have. You and your parents."

"But I didn't do anything and I read the letter you submitted to my sentencing—"

"Malfoy there's no shame in protecting your loved ones—"

"Do you always interrupt people when they are trying to apologize to you?" he angrily spat.

Potter held up a placating hand. "All I'm saying is, you did what you could, and I wanted the Wizengamot to know that. You knew it was us and you said nothing definitive. Just that little bit of uncertainty bought us some precious time. You could have easily identified us handed us over to Voldemort, and had your family's place restored in his eyes. I know he made you do... awful things..."

Draco shivered despite the warmth of the fire. "Doesn't matter now anyway, Potter." He said shortly. "Your side won and people like me deserve what's coming to them. For what it's worth, I'm sorry for my part in your suffering."

There, he'd done it. He'd given an apology to Potter. His leader would be ever so proud. Did he feel any better? A weight lifted? Hard to tell with all the medicinal liquid in his veins. Maybe that part came later.

Potter fixed Draco with a hard stare. "Look Malfoy. I've never liked you, I've never liked your family. That doesn't mean I think you need to pay for the crime of protecting those you love. One of Voldemort's greatest strengths was manipulation. He knew you'd do anything to protect your parents. And I can't fault you for that."

Potter heaved a sigh and stood. Setting his glass down on a side table, he approached Malfoy's chair until he was standing over him. "But he always, always underestimated the power of love. Your mother loved you so much she defied Voldemort when it mattered most. We're really not so different from one another."

Draco started. "Oh yes, we're twins you and me. The Boy Who Lived to Save Us All. Again and the disgraced former Death Eater."

"The world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters."

Hey Jude!9

to introduce children with Muggle parents to their newfound magical world. He noticed she'd even sketched out the first few lesson plans, which included sections on flying and quidditch, cuisines, creatures, and popular culture. Hermione Granger was nothing if not thorough, especially when she was passionate about a cause.

"Granger, this is an impressive idea and all, but have you considered how much gold this is going to cost?" As soon as he asked, Draco wished he'd never spoken. All the air seemed to deflate out of her as she sighed resignedly.

"Oh trust me, I know. There certainly isn't enough in Hogwarts' own fund for this. And I can't imagine the Ministry stepping in to boost a plan that will directly benefit Muggleborn children. It's a shame they wouldn't see that this would benefit all the students. You'd be putting all the First Years on more equal footing and the Muggleborn children won't feel like they've come to their new school with all this catching up to do before they've even been assigned homework."

She closed the notebook and drained the last of her tea. "It's only a fun idea I had, thanks for listening. I need another tea to go if I'm going to make it through the stacks of parchment in my in-tray this morning, need anything?" Draco shook his head as Hermione went to grab a to-go order.

He had no idea what made him act so impulsively. While Hermione was busy at the counter with her back to him, Draco nudged her notebook open, and quietly tore out the pages with her education plan on them, and stuffed them inside the inner breast pocket of his suit.

He handed her the closed notebook along with her work bag as she approached and Hermione stowed her notebook away as they left the café, none the wiser to Draco's theft.



Eight crumpled pieces of parchment, three glasses of firewhisky, and one Calming Draught later, Draco could say he was reasonably pleased with the letter he'd drafted to Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. As he watched his eagle owl take flight into the night, he tried to ignore the dulled, but ever present, feeling of dread that he just might have gotten in over his head.



Draco knew she was going to be at this match, because she'd told him so, two days ago at the café. But that didn't stop his pulse from quickening in surprise when he spied Hermione through his omnisculars across the stadium in the Potter-Weasley box.

She was laughing at something Potter had just said to her. Potter followed up quickly with something else, but this time she gave him a stern look and whacked him on the arm. Now he'd done it. Her hands were gesticulating wildly as she went off on her tirade about some offense he must have caused, and Potter had the grace to look sheepish. Had Granger ever done that with him? No, there hadn't been physical contact between the two of them, ever. Except for that morning with the umbrella, and that hardly counted as voluntary on either of their parts.

"All right, Malfoy?"

Draco almost jumped out of his skin and fumbled with his omnisculars. His heartbeat slowed

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when he turned to see the familiar face who had greeted him.

“Macnair,” Draco drawled in what he hoped was a casual voice. The older wizard leant up against the wide bar that lined the edge of the glass company box for the Whisp and Wright agency. The match had only just started, and most of Draco’s colleagues were hunkered down with elbows planted on the bar, eyes in their omnisculars, observing the quidditch action.

“How’re things? I confess I’m surprised to see you at this match, not your usual territory, no?”

Draco shrugged, not sure why he had even bothered to come himself, but Macnair didn’t need to know this.

“Thought I’d check up on your squad for the year. You’ve put together an impressive roster this season.”

Macnair grinned affably and shook his head. “True enough, but we both know my Tornadoes will most likely meet an early death in playoffs, no thanks to you, you little bastard.”

Draco smirked back and finally did turn his omnisculars towards the quidditch pitch. Macnair was the chief scouting agent for the Tusshill Tornadoes, the biggest rival to Draco’s client, the Winbourne Wasps. Today’s match was between the Tornadoes and the Holyhead Harpies, so Draco didn’t necessarily need to be in attendance. But employees of the company were allowed into this box for any match they liked, and why shouldn’t he take advantage of some free quidditch when his own team had the weekend off?

Watching the game, Draco had to admit, though it burned him a little internally, that Ginny Weasley was a decent flier. She had scored most of her team’s goals this afternoon and was also an excellent passer with her fellow Chasers. At about an hour into the match however, Draco spotted the weak link in the Harpies’ roster. Talented a Chaser as she may be, the Weaslette had been thwarted in her quest for goals several times by some particularly skilled bludger play from the opposition. The Beaters starting for the Harpies today seemed severely outmatched, and the Tornado Beaters were superb.

“Your defensive front is particularly good, I have to admit,” Draco intoned to Macnair as another skillfully beaten bludger knocked the quaffle out of the hands of a Harpies Chaser.

“Aye, if you think they’re good, stick around after the match. You might see something quite spectacular.”

Draco raised an eyebrow in interest, but Macnair didn’t elaborate and turned his attention back to the game. Every now and then, his older colleague would let out little curses, but seemed pleased overall with his team’s play.

Wesley Macnair was too old for Draco to consider him a friend. And Draco was not sentimental enough to think of him as a “mentor” either, though that would most likely be the accurate term.

When Draco was first hired at Whisp and Wright years ago, most of the office avoided him like dragon pox. Macnair in particular seemed especially wary, but then one day a few months after Draco started, he had approached Draco in the company box, held out a lager and introduced himself properly.

After some polite small talk, Macnair revealed his true intentions. “I believe you knew my elder

Hey Jude!9

Draco was worried for a brief second that Potter would have to update his title to *The Boy Who Died of Shock*. Draco checked the way his eyes widened, then in a second narrowed and one of his hands disappeared behind the door, presumably clutched around his wand.

As he’d practiced in his head, Draco mised both his empty hands in front of his chest, showing he had no intention of holding a wand to Potter’s throat.

The hand of Potter’s Draco could see tightened its grip on the door and Draco wondered if he thought about slamming it shut.

“What are you doing here? How did you even get here?”

Draco slowly loosened his hands and shoved them in his pockets. Deep breath. And one more.

“I came to talk to you... about a couple things. I thought this might be the best way.” His voice was hoarse.

Potter’s green eyes looked Draco up and down. He knew he looked a right mess and that his robes were practically hanging off him these days. Potter frowned and opened the door wider. “Better come in out of the rain then.”

He’d already started down a dark, narrow hall, leaving the door open for Draco to come through. Draco pulled his feet to move and followed Potter inside. The door snapping shut behind him echoed off the walls as he hustled to follow his host.

So this was the house that Bellatrix had been so incensed over? Draco remembered how his insane aunt had gone off in a rage after the death of Sirius Black revealed that her “blood traitor of a cousin” had left her extended family home to Harry Potter.

Draco felt it was depressing and foreboding, much like his great aunt and uncle on his mother’s side had been purported to be in life. Potter had led him up one flight of stairs into the first sitting room off a landing.

It was apparent that Potter and Weasley had done their best to remodel the large and once formal sitting room into something resembling the Gryffindor common room. A roaring fire was already blazing at one end surrounded by four handsome high-backed chairs. Draco surmised these were usually occupied by Potter, the She-Weasel, Weasley, and Granger. How odd?

Potter was already sitting and gestured for Draco to take a chair. Draco settled into the chair furthest from his former school, foe and sat up rigidly. Straight-backed and proud. Even if what he was about to do might go down as one of the most humiliating moments in his entire life. Even worse than being turned into a ferret in front of all of Hogsmeade.

Draco took another deep breath and looked into the face of the infuriatingly patient-looking Potter.

“How long will Weasley be gone?”

Potter shrugged but then surprised Draco by grinning. “I think you can bank on about 30 minutes. He’s on the hunt for a particular Muggle brand of bourbon and he likes to flirt with the girl behind the counter at the liquor store.”

Draco sneered but bit back the insult he longed to throw out about Weasley. He had a very important task tonight and schoolboy taunts weren’t going to help. Deep breath. I am in control of this.

“Potter, I have a few things that I would like to... that I need to say to you.” He gulped some air then shifted his gaze to somewhere around Potter’s knee-cap.

“I want to thank you. For how you intervened on my mother’s behalf at her sentencing. I know that because of your testimony, she was kept out of Azkaban. You were more gracious than you needed to be, and for my mother’s life, I thank you.”

Remain Nameless

When Draco opened his eyes again, a glass of water was floating in front of him. He gulped it down eagerly and glared at the floor.

“Draco,” came the gentle prodding of his healer’s voice. “I think this is a good time to remind you of how far you’ve come in your journey. Not only have you been clean of Dreamless Sleep Potion for six years, but you’ve already brought yourself to offer a sincere apology to a former rival you had wronged. Do you remember that?”

How could he ever fucking forget?

It was June 2000, and Draco stood in the rain in an overgrown residential square. Though the rain had broken the humidity somewhat, it was still a rather warm evening, not that it mattered to Draco. The downpour had likely soaked through his skin, but he could barely feel anything. He removed a vial from his inside pocket and examined the remaining Calming Draught within. He’d lost track of how many he’d taken today.

He’d also taken a pain potion, because he liked the numb feeling that particular brew gave his body. He couldn’t remember any nights this week that had gone without Dreamless Sleep, pain potion, or a dangerous combination of both with a dash of Draught of Peace.

Even with all the poisons coursing through his bloodstream, Draco was patient. Draco was prepared. He gripped his wand tightly, waiting for the opportunity to strike. He’d been stationed here every other night for hours, waiting for the right moment. Pansy always whined and sometimes screamed when he returned home at night, offering no explanation of where he’d gone for hours at a time. She probably assumed he had another woman, and Draco felt it might be easier if she believed that story. It was certainly less embarrassing than the actual reason he was staking out 12 Grimmauld Place.

A shimmer. A movement. The opportunity had arrived, and this was Draco’s chance. Ron Weasley emerged from the wards, looked around, and Draco knew he had his wand gripped in his pocket, then walked swiftly down the block. This was it. He had to go now.

Draco approached the darkly looking block of buildings, holding his breath for a moment before walking right up to the space between numbers 11 and 13. He took out a small pocket knife, sliced a thin cut into his palm, and held it to the subtle shimmer of wards. He held it in place for a second, tapped his wand against his bleeding palm and received a greeting, his name, and a brief declaration of peace in French.

It was an obscure bit of ancient blood magic and he had come across it quite accidentally. Poring over old Malfoy and Black documents (trying to weed out which ones were necessary for financial obligations and which were merely anti-Muggle bullshi or instructions for dark artifacts) when he noticed an old deed for 12 Grimmauld Place.

While yes, Harry Potter was the rightful legal and magical owner of the noble and ancient house of Black, Draco was the last living male Black direct descendant. And as long as Draco wished no harm upon the legal owner of the home (which presumably, when this document had been created, would have meant an actual member of the Black family) then Draco had a blood right to at least be granted entry up to the front door. A tricky little bit of pureblood magic that Draco was briefly grateful for to his paranoid ancestors.

Draco tentatively approached the handsome brass knocker on the newly appeared front door. He took several deep breaths and performed a drying charm on his entire body. He raised a shaking hand and rapped the knocker three times. He almost spritely away when he heard the sound of footsteps on the other side.

“Did you seriously forget your wallet again—Malfoy?”

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brother?”

Draco had felt his insides turn to ice. Oh yes, he’d known Walden Macnair. That creepy old bastard of a Death Eater had harbored a particular fondness for gutting Muggle victims as if they were hogs and on several occasions, had cornered Draco to rant about all the despicable things he’d like to do to centaur herds.

“So?” Draco had responded defensively.

“I believe you were there the night he died,” was the cryptic reply. Draco narrowed his eyes, unsure of what type of game the younger Macnair was playing. Draco hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, but heard Walden was eaten alive by an acromantula on the edge of the Forbidden Forest during the Battle of Hogwarts and in all honesty, appreciated the poetry in that sort of demise, for someone who had revelled in the destruction of creatures.

“If you want an apology or condolences for my being in the general vicinity the night that twisted prick met his end, you won’t be hearing it from me today or at any other point in the foreseeable future,” seethed Draco.

Macnair regarded him for a long moment, and Draco thought he might curse him or hurt a drink at him. Shockingly, the older man’s face split into a grin.

“You mistake me, lad. My brother was a piece of shite, just wanted to see if you caught the look on his ugly face when he shrugged the mortal coil.”

Draco realized then why Macnair had been so cold to him at first. He’d been unsure of Draco and his sensibilities. It was a test to see if Draco still upheld Lucius’s (and the Dark Lord’s) teachings. Though Draco didn’t ask for the man’s personal history, Wesley divulged most of his backstory during that first quickditch match long ago. Wesley was something of a black sheep in the Macnair clan. When the first wizarding war broke out, he fled to America, eloped with his Muggleborn sweetheart and severed all ties with his pureblood relations. He told Draco even putting an ocean between himself and his insane brother hadn’t felt like enough distance. Though his wife had begged him to return to England after Voldemort’s initial defeat by an infant Harry Potter, Wesley insisted they remain in the States. They’d only returned to their home country after the Battle of Hogwarts, once both Voldemort and Walden Macnair were confirmed dead.

Wesley had confessed that it wasn’t the Dark Lord so much as his own older brother that scared him. “A few letters managed to find their way to us. The things that deranged bastard said about my wife, about my Lara... I never showed them to her, but I hope my brother is rotting somewhere.” Wesley finished grimly.

Once Wesley Macnair warmed up to him, the rest of the office had followed suit. Though no one was as outwardly friendly as Wesley to Draco, a polite distance from colleagues was much more tolerable than openly contemptuous glares.

A few years later, and only after a few pints, Draco remembered asking Wesley why he’d approached him at all. Wesley had smiled somewhat wistfully as he replied “Aye, lad. I had my suspicions, but I needed to be sure.”

Remain Nameless

"Suspicious of what? That I was nothing more than a junior Death Eater?"

Macnair had shaken his head and rubbed his close-cropped beard. "No, son. That you were a younger version of myself, in a way."

Draco's eyes had widened. "Of course I'm not! You openly defied your family! You ran off and avoided all the... all the..." He sputtered to a stop. Draco didn't have words for all the horrors that Wesley Macnair had avoided by leaving England during Voldemort's reign.

Macnair shook his head calmly. "I didn't say an exact version. Merlin, you need to listen, boy!" Macnair had drained his drink and ran another hand over his beard. "You come from an incredible family. A family with a long legacy. And with that family name comes a burden and a strict path laid out before you. I'm saying I understand what it's like to no longer give a flying shite about the proper pureblood family path. You've made your own way, is all I'm saying, and I know that feeling."

Draco hadn't responded and they'd both lapsed into thoughtful silence. Wesley never brought it up again.

A rousing cheer followed by cries of disappointment brought Draco back to the present. Apparently the Harpies Secker had almost nabbed the snitch, only to be stopped once again by a well-timed bludger from the other team's Beater.

Tuning back into the game, he smirked as he zeroed in on the face of She-Weasel and saw the growing frustration at her team's poor performance brewing on her face. That family was never good at subtlety. As the red-headed Chaser streaked down the far side of the stadium, Draco's gaze through his device landed back on the box he knew Granger to be inside.

She was leaning forward on the bar in front of her, and for all the world appeared to be watching the match intently, but Draco zoomed in to see her gaze seemed unfocused. While the others around her made various excited movements and chatter, their eyes darting all around to watch the game play, Granger continued her absent stare. Her fingers traced the rim of her half-drunk beer in front of her in a slow, methodical manner, much like Draco's habit with his coffee mug in the morning.

It was uncommon for Draco to see her in anything but her smart skirt suits or pantsuits for work. Today she wore jeans and a navy, cable-knit sweater and a Harpies scarf, prioritizing comfort over fashion. Most witches and wizards in the premium boxes used the opportunity to be seen in the latest fashionable robes, but not Granger. Draco smirked and wondered if her wardrobe only contained cozy Muggle clothing and her work suits/robes and nothing else.

Granger kept her circling motion going around the glass rim, then rested her chin in her other hand, looking oblivious to the animated chatter going on behind and next to her. Slowly, one of her fingers unfurled and began a light, back and forth dance along her bottom lip. Draco felt his own fingers twitch at the omniscient dials to zoom in closer on her face. It was a slow and deliberate pace across her lower half of slightly parted lips, matching the rhythm of her finger along her glass rim. Draco tried to swallow and felt his throat had gone dry. Her bottom lip looked impossibly soft as her delicate finger traced back and forth.

Raucous screaming from all around him and throughout the entire stadium made Draco rip his

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"How was your weekend?" she began and Draco knew they were in silent agreement of forgetting about Friday's minor argument.

And Draco tried to control the strange feeling of triumph at the fact that Hermione knew his favorite morning treat.



"Why do you think she reacted that way?"

Draco sighed and picked at his nails. Why did he have to mention to Browning that he had a tiny dust-up with Granger over Muggles? *This is why you boy him, mom.*

"I don't know." *Liar.*

Scratch, scratch, went Browning's quill.

"Would you say this type of reaction is typical of her?"

Draco snorted. *It was unusual in that she didn't sleep me right across the face or call me a ferret, so I guess we can call it an improvement.*

"I should have expected for her to assume the worst of me."

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

"Why is that?"

Draco shrugged and stared at the opposite wall. It was decorated with a handsome bookcase filled with many leather-bound tomes and Draco concentrated on reading some of the titles on the spines while he mulled over a response.

"Probably because I used to be rather rude to her. About her blood status." *Liar. Liar. Liar. You were so much worse than that.*

Scratch, scratch.

"I see. And have you apologized to her for your past behavior?"

Draco snapped his head back to the healer in front of him. "I can't... I can't do that!"

Suddenly the air seemed to be sucked right out of the room and Draco felt like each lungful was a struggle. Browning looked away from the floating parchment and quill to survey Draco over his glasses. Draco tried to focus on the man in his eye-line, but felt a darkness creeping into the edge of his vision and a cold sweat settling on his brow. The pressure in the air was circling in on him, choking the breath from him.

"Draco." Healer Browning's calm voice floated toward him. "Draco. Do you remember your mantra?"

"Yes!" gasped Draco as he loosened his tie and undid the top button of his shirt collar.

"Good, recite it for me. Three breaths in between."

"I...am in...control...of...this." One breath. Another breath. And one more. "I am...in control...of...this." Three short breaths. "I am...in...control of this." And three more. "I am in control...of this." Three breaths, a bit steadier. "I am in control of...this." In and out. In and out. In and out. "I am in control of this."

this is how she looked by the end of every work day: her wild waves no longer contained as they came undone, lock by soft lock, out of the style Granger tried to tame them with each morning for the office.

For his part, Draco had immediately gone home after work and changed into more formal robes and a fresh black suit. He didn't dare spend time analyzing the fact that it took him far longer than usual to decide on what to wear for dinner tonight. He was in front of the large vanity of his bedroom fussing with his hair when he caught a glimpse of his watch and realized he would be late if he didn't stop messing about with his looks like a vapid socialite. This was just dinner with Granger after all, no need to obsess over his appearance so much.

When Hermione turned toward him and shot him a relieved smile, Draco took note of the host's suspicious face casting a surly look at Hermione behind her back. Draco could have kicked himself.

The reason he was still welcome at this particular establishment was because in the years before the war, he used to frequent The Willing Rose with his parents. The Malfoy family had been a most welcome presence in this pureblood sympathizing business, frequented by many members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight in its heyday.

Furious with himself for so easily falling back on the comforts from his old life, Draco drew himself up to his full height as he approached the host.

"Granger," he greeted her, then turned his attention immediately to the host before Hermione could open her mouth to reply. "Is there a reason my companion wasn't seated immediately upon her arrival?" He affected the iciest tone possible and raised a disbelieving brow at the older gentleman, who had the awareness to look momentarily abashed.

"Apologies, sir, I had no idea the young lady was dining with you."

Draco sneered, not believing the slimy wizard for a minute. "Indeed, Granger did you inform this man we had a reservation this evening under my name?" He turned back toward Hermione and noticed she was turning rather pink in the face.

"I did, but Malfoy you don't have to—"

"I thought as much," he cut her off and turned back to the host. "Now, why don't you make yourself useful and show us to our table."

The man nodded meekly and levitated menus in front of him as he led Draco and Hermione to a dimly lit back room. The whole restaurant was decorated in rich burgundy and dark gray furnishings with mahogany tables, chairs, and pillars. Paintings of all sizes adorned the walls, each containing an image of a blood red rose that revolved slowly and almost pulsed inward on itself, the red paint of the petals so lustrous Draco had often wondered if he touched the painting whether his hand would come away wet.

The front dining room was full, but Draco had secured a more private table in the back room, hoping it might make Hermione more comfortable to be seen out in public with him. Now he realized this had all been a giant mistake. No one in this restaurant would pay them any mind anyway; it was mostly old families and no one from the Prophet was allowed on the premises. That's what made upscale, exclusive pureblood businesses so successful: the promise of an extravagant experience under a

modest cloak of privacy. If pureblood families wanted notoriety and attention, they knew how to get it, especially from the high society lapdogs in the wizarding press. But places like The Willing Rose catered to the more refined and secretive inclinations of the old families.

Why he thought this would be a good outing with Granger to test the friendship waters, Draco had no idea and was stewing with regret.

When Hermione had removed the outer cloak of her robes, Draco practically tore it from her hands and shoved it and his roughly at the host. "Please do take care with these. Also, I think a bottle of your finest elf-made wine for the trouble you gave my companion wouldn't be amiss, now would it?" Draco snarled and the host blanched, muttered something that sounded like "Right away, sir," and scuttled off.

Draco took a deep breath and sat down across from Hermione. "You didn't have to do all that," she said quietly.

He scoffed. "I absolutely did, that little flobberworm needed to be put in his place."

Hermione let out a giggle and Draco frowned. "What's the joke?"

She gave him an apologetic smile, but quickly divulged, "It reminded me a bit of when we were in school together. I swear the next words out of your mouth were going to be 'wait until my father hears about this!'"

Draco chuckled at her teasing and felt some of the tension leave his body. "Well, luckily for me, that wouldn't be possible."

Hermione's face paled and she looked completely ashamed. "Oh Merlin, Malfoy I'm so sorry, I forgot. I didn't mean... anything by it..." she trailed off awkwardly and Draco averted his eyes in shame. She was sorry? Sorry that his bastard father was dead? The man had personally tried to murder and/or maim her own friends on more than one occasion and she was sorry?

No, this would not do. Draco couldn't hold it in anymore.

Before he could open his mouth, a wine bottle gracefully floated down on the table and two crystal wine glasses appeared in front of them. The cork jumped from the bottle and the airborne carafe proceeded to pour a generous measure into each of their glasses.

Draco downed half his glass of the ridiculous vintage (*1876, damn*) and noted that Hermione had done the same. Apparently they both needed the liquid courage provided from practically chugging a rather expensive glass of wine in one go. She was looking anywhere but at him and Draco knew this was the time. It was now or never to finally seek his penance from the one person who could truly grant him absolution. He hadn't planned on the night coming to this, but then she'd gone and been that selfless caring person she always was, and Draco was going to burst with the guilt. Countless healing appointments had brought Draco to the point where he finally felt ready to exorcise the demons surrounding his treatment of Hermione Granger.

And with no Calming Draughts, no potions at all in his system, he charged ahead.

Draco set his wine glass down firmly. Her brown eyes finally met his and he sought courage in their warmth. *I am in control of this.* Draco took one last deep breath, and then he took the plunge.

Remain Nameless

"I need to get this all out and Granger, I know how you like interrupting and asking questions when an idea strikes, but please, *please*, if I don't get this all out now, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to."

She nodded, her eyes wide and strangely bright.

He took a deep breath and a generous plug of wine. The bottle got the hint that he was low on liquid and floated over to refill his glass and then Hermione's in turn. *You can do this. You have to fucking do this one thing.*

"I owe you, probably, a lifetime's worth of apologies. When I was a bratty school boy and I went to Hogwarts thinking I was better than everyone... I treated you horribly. Those inherited values and prejudice, courtesy of my family... it shaped everything about my childhood. I honestly believed I was better than you because of my blood status. But a tiny part of me, even then, knew it was all bollocks. When you beat me on every exam, when you were top in every class... I started running out of excuses for why you were inferior. So I stuck with the only thing I could hate about you: your lineage. It was pettiness, plain and simple, Granger. You were better at magic and it burned me up inside. And instead of respecting you for it, I was going to tear you down the only way I knew how: with slurs about you and your family. Reminding you, and everyone else like you, that you could never be an equal in our world built me up for a while, and I could go on pretending that any of that mattered. But it was all bollocks... I know that now." He leaned closer over the table, earnest in expunging these long buried confessions. She was hanging on his every word. The intensity of her eyes both encouraged and frightened him simultaneously.

"As a kid, you were this impossible thing to me. How could someone my father told me was dirty, stupid, less than me... how could that person be so *brilliant*? Everything about magic and our classes, all the friends you had... every single thing seemed to come so easily to you. I couldn't square the two realities in my head so I picked the lazy option. I chose to belittle you and threw myself into hating you and everything you and Potter represented. It wasn't right, and it scares me when I think about how easy it was for me to live in that hatred." He finally paused for a breath.

He gulped the wine again and noticed his hand was trembling. The next part might be his undoing and his body was warning him of the impending stress. Hermione's hand twitched on the table between them and he wondered if she'd thought about grabbing his hand in hers. Draco set his glass down and clutched his hands in his lap. He didn't deserve her kindness.

"I'm sorry for how I treated you in school and for the horrible, awful things I said. I'm sorry I ever called you Mudblood. I'm sorry I ever fucking thought that word in association with you. But most of all, I wish I could take back that night at the Manor." This was killing him inside, ripping open fresh wounds that had scarcely begun to heal, but he forced himself to hold eye contact. The longer Draco talked, the more it felt like when Potter hit him with *Settlesempra* all over again, small and large gasps across his body, bleeding him dry.

"*I could hear you.* I couldn't bring myself to watch, but I could hear her torturing you and I did *nothing*. I'll never be able to take back the fact that I stood by while you screamed, while you suffered. I still have nightmares about what happened that night... because I should have done something, done

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If someone could just *Awake* him right now, that would be awfully convenient. He took a deep lungful of chilly air.

"Right, well, do you have any plans? In the evening, I mean, obviously you're working during the day." Salazar's fucking arse, could he be any more awkward?

Granger continued her state of confusion. *Come on Granger, put it together, please put me out of my fucking misery here.* "Er, no I don't. Why do you ask?"

Damn it all, he really was going to have to say it. *Coward.*

Another deep breath. "If you're free in the evening, which I guess you are, because you just said... would you be up for grabbing some dinner out?"

Her eyes became impossibly wide in shock and Draco wished he could stuff the words right back in his mouth and then oblivate the both of them. That not being a realistic option, he tried to desperately remedy the situation.

"It would just be to talk over dinner, not like a... uh... well, we could talk more about Venice without having to rush off to make it to work on time." He'd been uncomfortably close to using the word "date." Why was he such a bumbling fool all of a sudden?

She still couldn't seem to shake off her shocked expression. "You want to have dinner together?"

Draco rolled his eyes mockingly and made a stab at his usual sardonic tone. "Why yes, Granger, I do believe that's what I asked. Will you join me or not?"

She finally quit gaping at him like a fish and regained some of her composure. "All right then. What time?"

Merlin's beard... that meant yes, right?

"7?" Draco had already made a reservation, but he wasn't about to let that slip.

"Where?"

"Have you been to The Willing Rose? It's in the theatre district." It was one of the only restaurants Draco frequented anymore in Diagon Alley.

"I haven't! I suppose I'll be trying it with you then! Still on for coffee tomorrow morning?"

"Of course Granger."

"See you Malfoy!"

Was he imagining it or did her smile look a little brighter as she turned to leave? Draco shook his head and made his own way to work and tried to ignore the fact that he felt lighter than he had in years. *It's just dinner. One dinner. I am in control of this.*



Remain Nameless

recently discovered off the Italian coast and that some of them didn't even speak Mermish but rather resorted to runes carved on their dwellings and stone tablets to communicate."

"That's right?" And she beamed at him. For Salazar's sake, did no one in Granger's life listen to her when she spoke? She always looked like she wanted to bestow him with an Order of Merlin, First Class, any time he was able to recall something she'd previously said in conversation.

"The conference is a whole week, and I hope to have at least some free time in the mornings or evenings to explore the city. I know they have one of the oldest magical libraries there with scrolls from—"

"Granger, seriously? You're going to Venice to hole up in the library?"

"Well then tell me what I should go see then," she answered with a withering glare. "I take it you've been before?"

"Of course," he sneered, though these days it lacked any malice behind it, at least when it came to Granger. "I'll give you a list of restaurants and wineries. And if you don't make time to visit the Bridge of Two Suns then don't bother going to Venice at all."

"Ooh, what's that? I've never heard of it!"

"What's that Granger? Did you just admit I know something you don't?" he drawled and earned himself an eye roll. "I'm not sure of what the Italians call it, but there's a bridge over one of the canals that operates under some very ancient magic. If you stand on the bridge during sunset and face east, a sort of viewing portal appears and you can see tomorrow morning's sunrise. No one really understands the magic behind it, but the locals use it as a sort of weather predictor for the following day."

She was staring at him while he spoke with that sort of wide-eye fascination and slightly parted lips that set off a curious reaction in his gut as of late.

"Wow, it sounds beautiful, thanks for the recommendation!"

And then there was that. The constant thanking him for the simplest of things. Fuck, you'd think he'd given her one of his kidneys by the sincere way she thanked him all the time for just talking with her or getting her tea or recommending a wine.

"We should get going, I think," Granger's voice broke through his inner monologue and Draco began to panic. His task of asking her to dinner remained unfinished and he was almost out of time. They walked in companionable silence to their normal separation point in front of the Leaky Cauldron, but internally, Draco was a nervous wreck.

"See you tomorrow Malfoy!" she chirped and began walking away. *Do it now, do it now, do it now. I am in control of this.*

"Hcy, Granger, wait!"

She turned around and gave him a curious look. The brisk November breeze played with the ends of her curls and Draco counted the little puffs of her breath made visible in the cold morning air. He then counted several heart beats before he closed the short distance between them, feeling more foolish with each step.

"Tomorrow's Friday," *Woa Smooth.*

She gave him a confused stare at his obvious declaration. "Yes. It is."

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anything, but I was a coward. You should *hate* me."

The next words he spoke pained him, but she needed to know he wouldn't hold her immediate actions against her. "And if after all that, you wanted to walk out of here tonight and never see me again... I would understand." Her eyes still retained that odd, bright quality as silence fell between them.

"Is that what you want?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Sorry?"

"Is that what you want?" Hermione repeated in that same quiet voice. "Has that what all this has been about? Has all our time together in the mornings just been about you working up to this moment?"

"No." His response was firm, but his voice hoarse with emotion. *No, of course not, how could you think that, Granger? Mornings with you are the only reason I leave my bed. I had to do the honorable thing and offer you a way out, please, please, don't fucking leave.*

"I just... couldn't stand seeing you every day, pretending we didn't have this history. And before I blurted it all out at the wrong time and fucked it all up, if I didn't tell you how I regretted everything... it was eating at me constantly, Granger. It's no good acting as if we were simply old school acquaintances."

His breath felt like it was coming in short bursts. He finished his wine and looked down at the table, feeling spent. She had the option to leave, but that didn't mean he had to watch her go. *Always the selfish coward.*

"I forgive you," she said quietly. "And I don't want to walk out. I don't want to stop seeing you in the morning." That swelling feeling of hope filled his chest cavity as her soft words seemed to penetrate his very soul. Her decree of forgiveness coursed through his veins, thrumming along with his magic and building up a powerful wave of emotion. He didn't know how to express the depth of his gratitude, so Draco merely nodded as he found her gaze again and noticed a tear escape her full eyes. She didn't bother wiping it away.

Hermione cleared her throat. "You're wrong, though, about a few things." She took a shaky breath.

"Things were never easy for me, far from it. There were times when I was with Harry during that last year of the war that I felt like giving up. We had this impossible task in front of us and there were times I wanted to fall asleep at night and not wake up the next day. I couldn't tell Harry or Ron, of course, but some days it all felt so monumentally *unfair*. The things we were expected to do." She paused here and gave him a pained smile. Another tear leaked out.

"We were *children*. All of us. You, me, my friends..." she whispered and Draco detected a bitterness to her voice.

She cleared her throat and adopted her usual brisk and bossy affect. "And as for your 'inherited values and prejudice' well that simply is not true. Prejudice isn't inherited, it's *taught*. Children, people, are *taught* to hate. No one enters this world with those types of preconceived beliefs. Make no mistake, Malfoy, it is akin to abuse, forcing those blood purity ideals onto children."

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Draco shook his head. Though he couldn't describe the relief coursing through him that she wasn't completely disgusted with his existence, she needed to know he wasn't a good person. *Why aren't you scared of me Granger? I'm the bad guy in our story*

"I had a choice though, didn't I? Eventually I was old enough to know better," he countered bitterly. Hermione nodded thoughtfully.

"True. But you know better now. It's never too late to make the right choice."

She was being far too lenient and it unnerved him. *Why don't you run from me? Haven't I shown you already? I'm the villain. You screamed and writhed and suffered mere feet from me and I did nothing*

"I could have helped you—"

She cut him off abruptly. "Voldemort would have killed you. You and your entire family!"

"Maybe he should have."

"Don't say that."

She responded immediately in a severe tone, giving Draco a sliver of hope that she might actually care about him in some small way. Her eyes still shone but it seemed her tears were done falling. Draco leaned back in his seat and ran a hand through his hair.

"Well, this wasn't how I imagined my Friday night," he said and earned a shaky laugh from Hermione. She dabbed her eyes completely dry and when she looked up again her expression cleared. "How about we get another bottle?"

Draco happily obliged and motioned to a passing waiter. When they had two full glasses in front of them again, Hermione raised her glass toward him. "To old-new friends."

He clinked his glass against hers, but then set it down. "Are we? Friends?"

Hermione cocked her head to one side; a question in her eyes. "I thought so."

Draco nodded. "All right then. Friends." The word felt odd coming out of his mouth, though not unpleasantly so. A calm settled over their dark table at last, and they both visibly relaxed.



After the emotional start to the evening, things took a turn for the normal as they ordered entrees and talked about their respective work days. At Hermione's suggestion, they took a walk through the theatre district after dinner.

Despite the fact that it was late in the November evening, neither Draco nor Hermione felt particularly cold, especially after splitting two bottles of wine over the course of the meal. For his part, Draco was glad to oblige her suggestion of a walk, if only to clear the slight buzz in his system.

They walked in comfortable silence for a few minutes, close enough that their shoulders were brushing, but neither of them minded. If he concentrated, not that he should, Draco could catch that mysterious floral scent of her hair.

Hermione broke the silence first.

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"Well Draco, I have to admit I think this is a phenomenal step forward for you. Inviting someone out for an activity without a guarantee that they will accept shows a willingness to be vulnerable."

Draco shrugged and tried not to shudder at the healer's mention of vulnerability. Because that's exactly what Draco was in the presence of Hermione Granger. Overwhelmingly vulnerable.



Monday morning came and went. Every time Draco opened his mouth to ask Hermione about dinner on the weekend, some stupid, banal question popped out instead.

On Tuesday, Granger commented on how tired he looked and bought him an extra cup of coffee unprompted, but did he thank her and ask her to dinner then? No, he snapped at her like a surly prick to mind her own sleeping habits, and mulishly drank the coffee she brought him. To her credit, she only briefly smirked when he quietly thanked her as they walked to work.

Wednesday was definitely the morning that Draco was going to pose the question of a weekend dinner. But then Hermione went into one of her passionate monologues about using her Ancient Runes knowledge in studying and relating to some of the oldest Mer-people tribes in the Mediterranean and Draco found himself rapt with attention as she chattered all the way down the street. By the time she waved goodbye, he remembered that he only had two days left in the week to accomplish his seemingly simple task.

And now it was already Thursday and Draco still hadn't asked Hermione about her weekend plans.

"Have you ever visited Venice?"

Her question interrupted the inner pep talk he was giving himself and sufficiently distracted him for the moment.

"This upcoming spring there's an academic conference on the communication methods of magical civilizations and you have to submit a formal proposal for your attendance. They usually don't send someone from my department, you know, because Merfolk liaisons have their own office in the Department for International Magical Cooperation, but given my interest in Ancient Runes—"

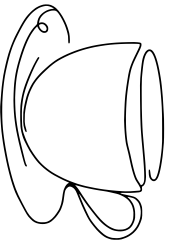
"Don't you mean your utter brilliance and unmatched skills in Ancient Runes?" He interrupted with a smirk. Hermione flushed prettily at his compliment.

"Well, I don't know about all that..." she muttered bashfully and bit lightly on her smiling lips.

"What about Venice?" Draco steered the conversation back to the original topic so she might stop biting her lower lip and he could go back to ignoring that his stomach gave a curious flutter at her reaction to his words.

"Right, so as I was saying, I'm submitting a request to attend the Venice conference to my department head and if that gets approved then I have to work on my submission to the conference review committee, and do you recall yesterday what I was telling you about the ancient Mer-people tribes?"

"I do," Draco cut in eagerly. "You were saying that some of the oldest Mer-colonies were only



Chapter Eight

November 2007

He could do this. He could totally, completely do this. It was absolutely within the capabilities of Draco Malfoy to ask Hermione Granger if she would like to grab dinner some night this weekend. He would be the height of casual when he asked. As friends. Well, almost friends. What would you call the pair of them?

It was Draco's monthly appointment and Healer Browning had finally convinced Draco that this was becoming ridiculous. It of course didn't prevent him from lashing out at the older man.

"If you think I'm acting childish, then bloody well say so!" Draco seethed at him.

Browning merely raised an eyebrow over his spectacles and met Draco's furious glare with one of patience.

"Do you think you're acting childish?"

Draco threw up his hands in frustration. "Well I don't fucking know, that's why I come to you! All I want to know is how I'm supposed to ask her to dinner!"

Browning met him with another calm stare, not once giving in to Draco's emotional outbursts. "You use your words Draco, a simple, straightforward question."

"But I don't want her to think this is uh, a... date or anything..."

"You don't?"

"No." *Liar.*

Wah, wah?

"No," Draco repeated firmly, ignoring the little voice in his head. "A platonic outing. I want to see if she's open to that... because you know, we spend all those mornings together and it feels odd that we haven't... progressed beyond that." *Because apparently progressing in friendship with Granger is something I want now. I am in control of this.*

Scratch, scratch, scratch went the floating quill.

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"About what you said at dinner..." she trailed off and Draco raised his eyebrows and he looked down at her, waiting for her to continue.

"Thank you for apologizing. I know that was probably very difficult for you."

Draco shrugged and averted his eyes. *You have no bloody clue, Granger. But I had to try.*

"It was necessary," he responded stiffly.

Hermione nodded. "Still, it was appreciated."

They began walking along the cobblestones again at a slower pace. The November air was frosty, but Draco still felt pleasantly warm even without casting a charm. Whether it was from the wine, her words, or her company, he couldn't say, and would rather not dwell on it at all.

She spoke softly again. "Despite what you may have thought, I never hated you, you know. It was more a feeling of... disappointment."

"How do you mean?" Draco's heartbeat quickened, wondering if the axe was about to fall.

They came to a stop in front of the ballet theater. Hermione turned to look up fully into his face with a pensive expression.

"When you bullied me at school, I could never bring myself to feel actual hatred for you. Obviously, I didn't particularly like you, as you did quite a lot of damage to my confidence and I shed more than enough tears over you in my early school years..."

Draco cringed at the memories. Merlin, he'd been a prick, hadn't he?

"But it always seemed to me that you had a lot more to offer the world than the life your father wished for you. I know you earned good marks in school, and getting to know you has allowed me to see that you're intelligent, discerning, and ambitious. I want you to know that I saw all that potential in you at a young age, but every time you opened your mouth and spouted off the bloody purity nonsense or goaded Ron for his family's lack of money, it left me feeling disappointed that you would choose to waste your self-worth in that way."

His breath hitched. Her assessment of him was one of the most honest things Draco had ever heard from another person. How could Granger be so comfortable sharing this with him? This must be what it was like to have an actual friend. She hadn't let him entirely off the hook, nor should she, but she'd also listed off things she admired about him. She believed in him. Draco couldn't remember the last time someone had paid him a genuine compliment.

Draco swallowed thickly. "Thank you, Granger. That means a lot... most especially coming from you. I'm so sorry I ever—"

She held up a hand to pause his contrite speech. "Malfoy, look, I've had enough of apologies for tonight. Truthfully, I forgave you a long time ago for your childish behavior. Trust me," she let out a hollow laugh. "I saw enough real horror in my life to dwell too long on your old prejudices from when we were children."

Draco watched as she hugged her arms around herself and turned toward the brightly lit front of the ballet theater. Her brown eyes were staring at something faraway, it seemed. "I also still have nightmares about what your aunt did to me in your home," she continued and Draco bit the inside

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of his cheek and felt his fists clench, a mixture of both shame and fear radiating through him. “And I do forgive you, I do. I know the impossible position you were in with your parents. I’d still like to talk about it, someday, when we’re both ready.”

She turned back to face him, and Draco was puzzled to see a small smile playing about her lips. “Just not tonight. I’m having too nice a time.”

“You are?” he blurted the question and cursed himself for his lack of control. Why did Granger always have him feeling so off kilter? *I am in control of this*

“I am. I’m glad we’re friends, Malfoy.”

“Me too, Granger.”

She gave him another genuine smile and Draco experienced that body-wide warm feeling again. He noticed Granger casting her eyes about and looking slightly awkward. She must be trying to find a way to gently end the evening. How did one usually part from a friend? Draco had a feeling the “later, mate” he exchanged with Theo wouldn’t quite do for Granger. As he struggled internally with how to perform a basic social interaction, he almost missed her speaking up.

“The ballet is back in season after the holidays.” Hermione gestured toward the large, moving posters of dancers adorning the darkened theater doors.

“The Moscow ballet is one of the best and it looks like they’re sticking with a classic show,” he offered.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been to the wizarding ballet,” she admitted quickly.

“Seriously?” he arched a brow at her and she nodded.

“I used to go to Muggle ballets with my parents when I was younger. We made sure to see a performance of The Nutcracker around Christmas every year,” she said, smiling wistfully.

Draco wrinkled his nose but decided against saying anything negative about Muggle ballets with ridiculous sounding names. The Nutcracker?

“We should go then. My family are still patrons of this theater, so I’m fairly certain we have season tickets.”

“Wait, really? You have season tickets to the ballet and you’d take me?”

Draco shrugged and tried to appear nonchalant. He hadn’t gone to a ballet since he was a small child and truth be told, it bored him to tears. But Granger looked so bloody excited, how could he not offer this to her? That was what friendship was all about, right?

But maybe she didn’t want to go with him. Be seen with him in public. He scuffed the toe of his dragon-hide shoe against the cobblestone, and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“Of course, you could take one of your female friends instead. Maybe Weasley or Lovegood?”

Hermione snorted a laugh. “It’s Potter, and good lord no, I can’t take either of them. Ginny would rather be force-fed gillyweed and Luna is convinced that ballets are a conspiracy invented by gizzelles to make humans feel self-conscious.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Never mind. The point is, you’re the only friend that would willingly accompany me. Please? I’ll

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ing match just to get some more practice swings in?”

Maureen shrugged and nudged on one of the long, black braids from her ponytail. “Not sure why that’s any of your business.”

Fine, if you want to be a brat about this

“I don’t think your talents are being put to good use on the Tomadoes. I’m here to see if you’re open to an alternative.”

Maureen Tyler shrugged again and switched to fidgeting with the broom handle slung over her shoulder. *Nervous and trying not to show it*

“Your Wasps don’t need me. What can you actually offer me? I make good money with the Tomadoes and I’m not interested in messing about.”

Draco nodded in agreement. “I respect that. I’m merely asking if an opportunity from another team happened to come your way, would you be open to it? I’m talking about a starting position as a Beater, not wasting away on the bench and settling for secret practice sessions after the real match.”

She shrugged non-committedly again but Draco saw the slight gleam of hope in her eyes. “I’d think on it.”

That was good enough for Draco. He conjured his business card from thin air and handed it to her, only slightly surprised when she actually accepted it. “Let me know if I can be of any future service. Good evening, Miss Tyler.”

Itksome good deed done for the evening. Draco apparated home and wrote Macrair a quick letter. He really needed to stop getting involved in things that were none of his business. At least he had tomorrow morning with Granger to look forward to.

She was supposed to spend time with her parents this weekend. What did Granger get up to with her Muggle parents? Draco always politely inquired about her weekend activities, but noticed her answers were much shorter when it came to her own blood relations. She could wax rhapsodic about her meals and celebrations with the bloody Weasley clan, but when it came to the Grangers, Draco noticed a tightness around her eyes and in the way she spoke.

Maybe he wasn’t the only one with a difficult parental situation. Maybe it was just one more, sad thing they had in common.

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was heading. “No way, I’d never be able to convince McLaggen. He’s only the scout for the Harpies so he can play ‘hide-the-wand’ with the more attractive scouting prospects. Besides, you know this type of collusion is frowned upon by Bellamy, right?”

Macnair waved an impatient hand. “Come off it, you can’t tell me that girl isn’t a bloody beating prodigy! She would be starting on any other squad!”

Draco sized up his colleague and narrowed his eyes. “What’s it to you? Why are you so concerned over this girl?”

Macnair sighed and ran a hand through his dark stubble. “Look, I recruited her right out of Hogwarts. I’m serious when I tell you I’ve never seen a talent for beating like hers. And well... she’s Muggleborn and I don’t think she had a lot of career options after school, to be honest with you. She told me she just wants to bring in enough money to support her father.”

Draco’s frown deepened and he ran a hand impatiently through his own white-blond hair. Why was it his problem that Macnair had developed a soft spot for some Muggleborn girl?

Hear that Malfoy? That’s the sound of the cauldron calling the kettle black...

Fucking hell.

“Look, if she means that much to you, then *you* talk to McLaggen.”

“I can’t, I almost came to blows with him last month because he was sexually harassing Bellamy’s assistant. You went to school with him, right? See if you can’t turn on that old Malfoy charm, you know he’s a sucker for society climbing.”

Draco let out a frustrated sigh, knowing Macnair had a point. That stupid ponce was so fucking transparent with his social aspirations and would do anything to be associated with either the wealthy, famous, or powerful.

“Fine I can try. Can you arrange a meeting with Tyler?”

Macnair smirked. “No time like the present, son. She’ll be back out of the locker room in about three minutes.”

And so Draco found himself leaning against the wall of the darkened stadium tunnel, waiting for Maureen Tyler to emerge. When she finally exited, dressed in a Muggle tracksuit, Draco gave what he hoped was a friendly nod. “Miss Tyler?”

Her face turned into a frown and she crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Can I help you mate?”

Draco approached her confidently and held out his hand. “Draco Malfoy, I don’t know if you’re familiar—?”

“Yeah I know all about you.”

Draco cocked his head in confusion and retracted his outstretched hand. *What the fuck was that supposed to mean?*

“You’re the scout for the Wasps. The whole league knows who you are.” She continued bluntly and Draco tried not to exhale in relief. Given that she was just 19 or 20, their paths at Hogwarts would never have crossed. Which meant he could play the part of the discerning scout.

“Right then, so why don’t I know you? Is it normal for a reserve player to linger after a season-end-

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even pay you for my ticket.”

Draco waved an impatient hand and tried to ignore the swooping sensation in his stomach at the way she’d said “Please.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Fine, I’ll take you to the damn ballet. Pick a date in January or February and we’ll go.”

Hermione clapped her hands together excitedly and Draco tried to ignore the light feeling in his chest at the thought he’d made her happy. He sure was doing a lot of ignoring and suppressing of feelings tonight. *I am in control of this.*

“Excellent! I’ll select the night and let you know Monday.” She looked up into his face, her smile wide and sincere.

“This was nice, Malfoy, thanks for suggesting dinner.”

He inclined his head toward her. “Not at all Granger,” he murmured.

Hermione took a step back and gave him a little wave. “I suppose I’ll see you Monday then. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

He merely gave her a friendly nod before she apparated away and left Draco staring at the empty space she had occupied just moments before.

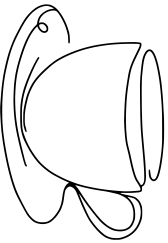
When he returned to his own home moments later, two letters were waiting for him. The first and more exciting letter was from McGonagall. The school governors had accepted her motion to review the fund for children of non-magical parents, and he should receive a list of comments from them after the New Year.

Setting the good news aside, he opened the second, less thrilling piece of post. It was a letter from his mother, currently in France, asking if he might like to visit before she returned to England for the holiday season.

Draco took his mother’s letter to the writing desk of his bedroom. He panned Narcissa a cordial rejection, saying he would be too busy with social obligations for work (this was sort of true) in the upcoming weeks as the Christmas season ramped up and that he could unfortunately not spare the time for a visit. He wrote that he looked forward to her return and pointedly did not address Narcissa’s paragraph detailing the names and attributes of several young French witches who had asked after his well-being.

Draco snorted aloud as he imagined his mother’s reaction to his dinner out with Granger. *Yes Mother, I’m sure those lovely young ladies are concerned about my actual well-being and not whether if a marriage to me would result in a key to the Malfoy vaults at Gringotts. By the way, I just spent the evening in the company of my friend, Hermione Granger. You might have her as being a war heroine and the young woman who was tortured by your sister on our minor’s dancing room floor? Yes, well our time together generally consists of intellectual stimulation at a level most humans dream of because she’s bloody brilliant and—*

Obviously, he would not be writing that to his mother tonight. Instead he included a brief paragraph about his job, and whistled for his owl.



Chapter Nine

The second there was a break after Molly Weasley's impeccable roast dinner and before dessert could be brought to the table, Hermione cast a very significant look down the table at Ginny.

She and Ginny didn't even bother coming up with a pretense for why they both needed to leave the table and go to the pantry off the Burrow's kitchen at the same time. Hermione merely jerked her head toward the kitchen and Ginny dutifully followed.

"Ginny, if I tell you something, will you promise to keep it between us for now? And to also not get protective or mad or—"

"Hermione is someone threatening you?"

"What, no?" Hermione sputtered in confusion.

"Oh, good, so then this is love-life stuff." The red-head's expression immediately brightened as

Hermione goggled at her.

"No! Why are danger and sex always your first two assumptions?"

"Because they're the most exciting?"

Hermione giggled at her friend's earnest enthusiasm but then sobered quickly as she edged closer to divulging her whereabouts Friday night.

"Hermione," began Ginny gently, sensing her friend's hesitation. "You can tell me anything, you know. Harry and the rest of the family don't need to be involved in your personal business unless you choose to involve them. How can I help?"

Hermione took a steadying breath, but then the words still tumbled indegantly out of her mouth in a rush. "HladinnerwithMalfoy!asFridaynight."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "In whatever you just mumbled at me, I heard the words 'dinner' and 'Malfoy' which leads me to conclude that YOU WENT ON A DATE WITH HIM!"

In the resounding silence that followed the shouted end of Ginny's question, Hermione cringed as she heard a fork drop to the table in the adjacent dining room. Hermione shot her friend a glare and

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"Well, did I deliver on my word or not? Didn't I tell you this would be spectacular? She does this after every single match."

Draco nodded, impressed, as he watched the young player gently complete her descent down to land on the quidditch pitch. With the exception of the young woman shouldering her broom down below, the rest of the pitch was deserted. Draco had finally made good on his word to hang around with Wesley Macnair after a match. Considering that Draco's Winbourne Wasps had just wiped the floor with Macnair's Tornadoses, Draco figured the least he could do was linger behind to see what Macnair was so keen to show off.

As the rest of the company box and the crowd gathered in the stadium emptied, Macnair had lifted his omnioculars to his face again and directed Draco to do the same. "Trust me, you'll want to see this."

A young woman in a Tornadoses jersey had remained on the pitch with her broom and a Beater's bat in hand. She kicked off suddenly, and then pointed her wand behind her to release two bludgers from their crate. The two balls shot at her at a ferocious speed, but she batted them away quickly as she flew higher into the air. What followed for the next half hour was a relentless assault by the bludgers and the flurry of the player's bat as she beat back attempt after attempt of the balls to unsat her.

Draco watched as her brow was furrowed in concentration, sweat beginning to flow down the sides of her face as she ferociously swung her bat with an incredible strength and precision. He had never seen this impressive a combination of grace, control, and brute strength. Her shoulders were broad and Draco could see the outline of her bulging biceps even through her jersey. It was clear that she was in spectacular shape and at the distance the bludgers traveled after she whacked them, she wielded her strength expertly.

He heard a soft chuckle next to him as Macnair broke through his thoughts as he watched the young player take her leave of the pitch.

"All right, explain. Why is that girl not in your starting lineup?"

Macnair frowned and sighed. "You know the Tornadoses, it's been a boy's club for their entire existence. That young lass there, Maureen Tyler, has been a reserve Beater for the last two seasons, and you don't even know how many times I've begged the coaches and captain to promote her to a starter."

Draco nodded in understanding. The Tornadoses liked to think of themselves as the all-male answer to the Holyhead Harpies which was obviously moronic, in Draco's opinion. It was nothing of an official ban against female players, of course, but when the only female player in several decades couldn't seem to break out of the reserve pool, well it seemed the whispers about the coaches and team atmosphere were proven correct.

"So why have you revealed this great secret weapon to me? The Wasps have no room for more Beaters on the squad, I'd be laughed out of the room for suggesting it."

Macnair nodded and pressed on. "True, lad, I don't think she's a fit with you either. But can you think of another team that might benefit from her superior skills?"

Draco shook his head, not in ignorance but in disagreement. Now he understood where Macnair

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errors.” She made a note on a separate piece of parchment. Draco could feel the Calming Draught begin to wear off, and was startled at the time when he looked at his watch, noting it was nearing lunch.

“There is just one more matter, Mr. Malfoy,” *Fucking Salazar Slytherin, what now?*

“When do you intend to inform Miss Granger of her eponymous fund? I cannot imagine she would be overly thrilled to read of it in the Prophet. Nor do I think she would appreciate being left in the dark while this is approved without her input.”

Fuck, McGonagall was right. Granger would be rightly hacked off at him if she knew he’d gone behind her back and handed her brainchild off to the Ministry after a bunch of old school governors had their opportunity for a say. But he couldn’t have her trying to stop him either.

“Right before Ministry sign-off?” Draco said firmly. “She can approve the final version or scrap it all then if she wants. But I don’t want to get her hopes up if it doesn’t even make it to that stage.”

McGonagall pursed her lips, and Draco could tell she didn’t approve of this under-handed way of dealing with Granger. Eventually she nodded her assent, and stood with her hand outstretched.

“Well Mr. Malfoy, this was a rather pleasant surprise of a visit. You should have an owl from me before the month is over.”

Draco stood quickly and shook her hand. Then his eyes flicked upward and he tried not to gasp. Dumbledore’s portrait was now quite awake and smiling benignly down at him. But what caused Draco’s breath to catch was the steady, fixed glare of two familiar, intense beetle-black eyes, boring into his own. Draco almost put up his occlumency shields in his mind before remembering that a portrait of Severus Snape could not penetrate his mind, no matter how accurate the likeness. *I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.*

McGonagall gave him an understanding sort of grimace as Draco tore his gaze away from the two previous headmasters. “Lunch is about ready to be served in the Great Hall. Would you care to join me at the staff table?”

Draco shook his head, knowing his Calming Draught had run its course. There was no way he’d be able to sit through a meal with the rest of his old professors and the eyes of hundreds of students on him.

“Thank you Headmistress, but I think I should be heading home. I can see myself out.”

Draco made it to just outside the office door before his shaking hands quickly closed around the vial of Calming Draught. He stopped and tipped the rest of the potion back. On the other side of the door, he heard the amused voice of Dumbledore remark, “I did tell you once before, didn’t I Severus? I truly believe we sort students far too young.”

Draco couldn’t make sense of the comment but could have sworn he heard a snarl in response and the familiar sound of Snape’s swishing black robes as Draco pictured him scowling and sweeping out of frame.



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Ginny had the good grace to finally look embarrassed as she clapped her hands over her own mouth.

Hermione rolled her eyes and cast a quick *Muffliato* in the direction of the pantry door. “It was not. A. Date.” Hermione ground out dangerously. If this was how Ginny reacted to a simple dinner out with Malfoy, then how on earth was Hermione supposed to divulge she’d also be attending a ballet with the man in February?

Ginny lowered her hands, grinning sheepishly. “I’m sorry I went full Ron there, didn’t I?”

Hermione sighed and covered her face in her hands. “I don’t expect anyone to understand or accept this, but we’re friends, me and Malfoy. He’s a lot different from our school days.”

Ginny chewed on her bottom lip nervously, but nodded all the same. “Believe me Hermione, if anyone on the whole planet could convince me of that, it would be you. It doesn’t mean that as soon as this conversation is over that I’m not going to immediately check outside to see if niffles are indeed flying.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ginny’s turn of phrase.

“He apologized to me last night,” she stated softly and Ginny’s eyebrows flew up in surprise.

“For what he used to call you in school?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, for his behavior back then and for the slur he used. He also apologized for what his aunt did to me when the Snatchers brought us to the Manor.” Though the scars from Bellatrix’s knife were long gone, it didn’t stop Hermione from rubbing her left forearm compulsively.

Ginny noticed the movement and frowned. “And he was sincere?” she asked quietly.

“Yes,” Hermione quickly replied. “He really is different, Gin. He’s had to overcome a lot the past few years and I think it matured him quite a lot. But then, we all had to grow up too fast, didn’t we?”

Ginny’s mouth set in a grin line as she nodded. “Too right,” she muttered and Hermione knew her friend understood. No one in their generation had gotten a proper childhood or adolescence. School children turned into soldiers and weapons.

Hermione sighed and hugged her arms around her body and stared at the floor of the pantry.

“Forgiving him was the easy part, but I was worried that once I did, that it would all be over. I feared I was merely a goal on his redemption checklist. Instead, it seemed like he was afraid of *my* reaction. He thought he’d lose my friendship if we talked about our past.” She looked back up at Ginny. “I like being around him, Gin. I enjoy his company. Is that wrong?”

Ginny gave her a sympathetic smile and reached out to squeeze Hermione’s shoulder. “Oh Hermione, of course not. If you feel like he’s—”

Just then the door to the pantry was ripped open and the girls jumped apart to glare at the two intruders. Harry and Ron stood flanking the small doorway, arms crossed with identical devilish grins on their faces. Harry quickly dismissed Hermione’s sound-interfering charm.

“Well, well, what’s this we hear my wife shouting about? How was your date the other night Hermione?”

Hermione rolled her eyes as Ginny mumbled another apology to her. “It. Was. Not. A. Date.” Harry and Ron exchanged smirks, which only further infuriated Hermione. “Why is everyone so

obsessed with my love life or lack thereof?! Ugh, bunch of bloody gossips, the both of you!"

"Well, if it gets serious, we want to make sure he's up to our standards. Would you like to go ahead and tell us the name of this bloke you've been spending all your free time with lately?" asked Ron.

"No, because it's none of your business and it was just one dinner! As friends!" Hermione shoved past her two smirking friends in a huff to see if Moly needed help cleaning up.

Once she was gone, Harry's smile dropped as he turned back to his wife. "So was it just dinner?"

Ginny shot him a quelling glare. "Harry, I won't be put in this position again. This is just like the Yule Ball fiasco with Krum. If Hermione wants to tell you about her personal life, she will. Can you two just leave her be and let her figure this out on her own?"

"I don't like her keeping secrets from us," granted Ron.

"I know," she replied gently. "Please, both of you, trust her judgement."

The boys exchanged small frowns but shrugged in agreement. "Promise you'll hex this guy's balls off if he hurts her?" asked Ron.

"Oh, I'd take quite a bit of pleasure in doing that again," chuckled Ginny. Ron left then but Harry shot his wife a questioning glance before he followed suit. It took a moment for Ginny to realize her verbal slip-up. Damn, Harry was often too perceptive for his own good. Praying her husband wouldn't think too hard about her comment and start making assumptions, Ginny joined the rest of the family back in the dining room. Maybe it was time to dig up that mobile phone Hermione had gifted her last Christmas if they wanted to talk more privately about Malfoy...



December 2007

Now that Draco counted Granger as an official friend, he found it put less pressure on his daily interactions with her. He no longer winced when she said the words "sorry" or "thank you" and he could offer them as well in conversation without breaking into a sweat. Like a normal, adult person.

For example:

"Sorry, Granger, could I borrow your pen thing for a minute? Thanks."

Or, "sorry, but Malfoy could you look at this last line of these new cup-breeding regulations? Thank you, I don't think the wording is quite right."

Maybe Headler Browning had been right about apologizing after all. Draco hadn't needed a Calming Draught in weeks, but did anticipate he would need one for the coming weekend.

The second weekend of every December, Draco's employers at Whisp & Wright threw an extravagant Christmas gala, inviting all the quidditch elite. Employees were expected to attend, and you'd have to be dead to not want to be seen at this particular soiree.

Though Draco was still counted among the living, he dreaded this party every year. He never took a date, spent the required amount of polite time schmoozing with the Wasps' staff and players,

He took a steady breath. "Headmistress, I know I am not a man you consider to be worthy of your trust." Draco thought he might have seen one of her eyebrows briefly raise at his forthrightness, but it was always so hard to tell with McGonagall.

"I know that I was far from a model student. I was often an egotistical little terror and on more than one occasion I did not show you the respect you deserved. And if I played any part in causing you distress over the years, well then I hope you will believe me when I tell you that I am sorry. Since I cannot go back in time to correct all my youthful misdeeds, the best I can offer is a way to move our world forward."

He stopped talking just then, needing to breathe as the air thinned around him. Draco focused on counting his breaths as he waited anxiously for McGonagall's response. He kept counting as he held her gaze, trying to impart the sincerity of his statement with his eyes. *Do you know what this is taking out of me, McGonagall? I'm fucking bleeding out here.*

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy." McGonagall's words were so soft, he struggled to hear them. Her jaw was clenched tightly as if trying to hold an emotion at bay. She cleared her throat abruptly and steered the conversation back to the fund.

"I can see no reason why I should not present this to the school governors. I must warn you now, this may take quite a bit of back and forth. Is owl the most reliable way to negotiate with you?"

Draco blinked in surprise at her sudden flip to business details. "Er, yes, by owl is acceptable."

She nodded curtly. "Excellent. If the governors approve moving forward with the fund, and I must say, you and Miss Granger did most of the tedious work with the lesson planning and financial breakdown already, then we will have a commentary period. During this time each governor will have a chance to submit amendments or edits to the program. Once we have collected all comments, I will provide you with a copy of the agreed upon wording. If you agree to any changes made, then we will present the fund to the Ministry for their approval."

Draco exhaled in relief. This could work. This could bloody work!

"Headmistress, if I may, I have two non-negotiable issues before any changes are made. First, the name of the fund. It was Granger's idea and she put in all the hard work, so her name stays. Second, there will be no information trail leading back to my name. I would like 'anonymous benefactor' on every single financial document. This includes your presentation to the school governors. I would like for this to remain between myself, you, and my financial advisors."

McGonagall fixed him with a bemused look. "Mr. Malfoy, you do understand that an initiative like this combined with the celebrity that accompanies Miss Granger's name... well, there's going to be quite a bit of press attached to the fund, should it become finalized."

"I know," he swallowed nervously. "Which is why I think the school should host a yearly fundraising gala. It will shift the attention from the 'anonymous benefactor' angle and as I said before, we will need more funding after 10 years. I think you'll find more than enough moneyed wizarding families eager to throw gold at a fund like this for the good publicity."

McGonagall nodded again. "I quite agree, an excellent suggestion. I will add that detail for the gov-

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tional initiative for Muggleborn students, all in her name, without telling her first?”

Draco blinked twice, taken aback at her concise and accurate summary. “Ern, yes, that’s uh... pretty much exactly it.”

McGonagall exhaled a long breath through her nostrils and began looking through the parchment again. When she looked back up at Draco, her face was stern and impassive.

“Forgive me if my question seems accusatory, but I must ask. What do you stand to gain from such a grand gesture? You and Miss Granger weren’t exactly close during your time at Hogwarts.”

It was a fair question, thought Draco. And though her tone of voice had been neutral, Draco knew that there were years of experience of her telling him off for being an absolute wanker for most of his academic career... and then the whole him letting Death Eaters into the school and attempting to assassinate Dumbledore thing. Her suspicions of his motives being less than noble were certainly not unfounded from her perspective.

Trust is earned over time, he heard Healer Browning’s voice in his mind.

Draco would have to choose his words very carefully.

“Granger was discussing the merits of the type of program you see on the parchment in front of you, Headmistress. I found her argument surrounding the dearth of information and education Muggle families receive regarding their magical children most persuasive. Obviously, given her own personal life experience, her unique perspective made a compelling case for how this type of cultural initiative would ultimately benefit all pupils of Hogwarts. It was only when I raised the question of funding did she falter.”

Now Draco was in his element. He strode up confidently to the parchment lying between himself and McGonagall on her desk. “If you’ll skip to the back half of Granger’s plan, you will see that I have calculated the amount needed for each tenet of the fund.” He gestured a finger to each component: staff time, Ministry liaisons, supplies, the extra trips for the Hogwarts Express, even down to the cost of operating the school kitchens during the orientation period.

Draco resumed his seat and took a fortifying sip of his tea. “By my advisors’ calculations, the gold I’m supplying for this fund in its current iteration would sustain the program for a decade.”

McGonagall nodded and began folding the parchment together. Once it was re-folded and sealed she leaned forward to survey Draco over her spectacles again. “Mr. Malfoy, you just gave me a logical and practical reason for your involvement. Coupled with Miss Granger’s ideas, I see no reason why this fund should not move forward.”

Draco’s heart soared, and he tried to temper that pesky feeling of hope. Why did he feel like the other bludger was about to drop?

“However,” *Ah, fuck, here it comes*

“You have still not answered my question. What are you personally seeking from this new endeavor?”

There it was again, that suspicion that lurked behind every one of his life’s actions because of his miserable existence as a teenager. *Don’t cock it up again. I am in control of this. You have to start somewhere.*

Hey Jude!9

then downed as much free Ogden’s as he could before ending up pissed and Flooing back home or to Theo’s place.

Come to think of it, he really should owl his friend. He hadn’t seen him in months, and spending proper drunken time together was definitely in order. But Theo had replied to Draco’s most recent owl saying he unfortunately already had plans that particular evening. Draco frowned as he read the letter. It was unlike his friend to be so vague.

Draco was ruminating about Theo’s mysterious absence from his life as of late, when Granger’s impatient huff broke through.

“Ginny told me she can’t come to the Ministry gala this weekend. That means I have to play Harry’s bodyguard all night.”

Draco smirked. “Poor Potter can’t defend himself from the onslaught of female admirers on his own, eh?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You have no idea. Harry is so bloody polite to everyone, they think he’s truly interested. People practically grope him when Ginny’s not around! One year, some drunken witch actually snuck up behind him and snipped off a lock of his hair! A security wizard stunned her before she could run off!”

Draco burst out laughing and Hermione followed suit. “I can actually picture that girl’s horrified face.”

As their laughter died out and they sipped their morning beverages, Draco’s mind began to picture something else. What did Granger look like when she attended the Ministry Christmas gala? Muggle style gowns were all the rage these days, with witches learning how to tastefully wear dresses that exposed much more skin than the usual dress robe. Which way did Granger lean, fashion-wise? Strapless ball gown or opulent robes? And what would she do with her hair? Draco, and probably every other boy at Hogwarts, remembered well her sleek up-do from their Fourth Year at the Yule Ball. Or perhaps she would leave it down for the evening, her soft-looking waves spilling down the inviting bare skin of her shoulders and back...

Sigh.

No.

Granger is your friend. These were not thoughts one had about a friend. Especially such a recent friend. Especially such a recent friend who would most likely not take kindly to any sort of sordid thoughts or feelings about her attractiveness from her former childhood bully.

Merlin, help him, did he have to be such a creep?

But thank Salazar for small mercies. Draco’s employers purposely scheduled their annual gala for the same night as the Ministry one. Having found over the years that combining government officials, quidditch stars, and copious amounts of free alcohol led to slimy behavior and backroom dealing from both parties, the galas conflicted with one another as an avoidance tactic.

Which meant Draco didn’t have to fret about whether or not it would be appropriate to ask Granger if she’d like to attend his company’s party with him. Of course that didn’t stop his mind from con-

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injuring the image of her clutching his arm as he introduced her to people, or how she might lead him over to the dance floor where he could pull her close and...

Stop.

No.

I am in control of this



Draco leaned up against the marble bar, sipping on his second drink of the evening. He'd exhausted all his social charm between various Wasp players, their spouses, reserve players, coaching staff, team owners, and trainers. Now he could quietly stand by the bar alone, enjoy some drinks courtesy of his employer, and silently judge everyone in the room until it became a socially acceptable hour to leave.

One of Draco's favorite train wrecks, Cormac McLaggen, was well on his way to making a spectacular fool of himself. This would be the moron's final week with the agency, as word somehow (Draco would bet half his vaults on Macnair being involved) reached the partners about all the lecherous activity he got up to with the prospects he was supposed to be scouting for the Harpies and suddenly, McLaggen found himself removed from his post. He spent all week talking up the new job his Uncle Tibernus had secured for him at the Ministry, as if the entire office didn't already know the real reason for his sudden departure.

Belamy had swiftly promoted Fiona Moly in McLaggen's place and given that the woman had actually played Keeper for the Harpies before retiring to scout, Draco knew he'd probably have stiff competition at roster-building come next season.

And even though Cormac was no longer technically employed at Whisp & Wright, it hadn't stopped him from showing up to the holiday gala. The poor excuse for a wizard had danced rather lewdly with both Beaters from the Harpies, almost spilled his drink on the Keeper for the Ballycastle Bats, and had just now made an ill-advised attempt to place his hands on the shoulders of a red-headed woman in a stunning silvery dress.

Ginny Potter's wand was at McLaggen's throat faster than he could blink. Draco chuckled into his drink as the graping moron retracted his wandering hands and stammered an apology. The She-Weasel whispered something threatening, based on the oaf's terrified expression, then turned abruptly on her heel to stalk toward the bar. Her eyes caught Draco's and her face grew into a smirk as she stowed her wand away.

Draco thought she might just give him a polite nod as she usually did when they crossed paths in public. Much to his surprise, the redhead continued to make a beeline for him and took up the post right next to his elbow at the bar.

"Hello Malfoy,"

"Weasley,"

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McGonagall blinked rapidly, stared up at Draco as if confirming he was actually sitting in front of her and this wasn't some bizarre dream, then returned her eyes to the parchment. Draco watched nervously and tried not to fidget in his seat while her eyes zipped back and forth across the parchment. He had no idea how much time passed, but he knew interrupting McGonagall while she was information-gathering would be a mistake. He sat quietly and tried to control his breathing as she scanned line after line, her eyes giving nothing away after her initial brush with the shocking title.

She didn't say a word or react at all until she finished reading every single line in front of her. When she'd finally reached the end, she leaned back in her chair and clasped her hands on the desk in front of her, fixing Malfoy with her beady gaze. Draco didn't dare look away.

"Mr. Malfoy, I must again confess that I am at a loss here. Why am I being presented with an admittedly thorough, original, and sorely needed proposal by you and not by Miss Granger herself?"

Draco cleared his throat and shifted uneasily in his seat. "Well, like I said before, Headmistress. This was not my idea. It was Granger's."

"Precisely, Mr. Malfoy, and having had the pleasure of teaching Miss Granger for a number of years I recognize all the hallmarks of her research and skills for planning. I'm still confused as to why I'm speaking with you, and not with her."

Draco shifted again, feeling like he was on trial. *I didn't copy her bloody homework, McGonagall.*

Here goes nothing

"Because she doesn't know about it," he muttered quickly.

For the second time during this appointment (*this has to be a record*), Draco succeeded in shocking Minerva McGonagall into dropping her jaw.

"She doesn't know." The Headmistress repeated faintly. Draco shook his head and thought he should probably try and salvage the situation. This conversation was most definitely not going according to plan.

"It's a bit of a long story, but Granger and I have sort of... reconnected. I guess you could say and umm, she was telling me the other day about this idea she had... and it really all started because she got all worked up over some drivel in the Prophet and you know, Headmistress, how Granger gets when she's passionate about a cause, and well it all just kind of spiraled from there really... and so she had this brilliant idea, per usual, and well if Hermione Granger can't get this done, then what's the point of anything? She has the ideas, I have the gold, but you know her, Headmistress, the second I offer to fund this whole thing she's going to refuse and be bloody stubborn and noble about it... so I may have stolen it out of her notebook while she wasn't looking... and well the timing was perfect, really, I have a pretty large sum of gold that I need to move before the end of the year because it was already supposed to have been donated, but then—"

McGonagall held up a hand and Draco stopped his rambling, clamping his jaw shut in embarrassment at the disjointed and unprofessional rant he'd just issued. *So much for being the eloquent and detached wizardly hen...*

"You thought you could simply establish a very generous and comprehensive cultural and educa-

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McGonagall stood briskly and approached him with her hand extended. "Hello, Mr. Malfoy, thank you for your punctuality. Could I offer you some tea?"

This was positively surreal. He was standing here, shaking hands with his old Transfiguration professor who had just offered him tea. She seemed all business: no grimace, no threat to take points from his house or give him detention. Had it really been that long since he was a student?

"Yes, tea would be great, thank you," he responded softly. With a firm wave of her wand, McGonagall conjured a pot, saucer and several tea accoutrements onto the low table beside the pair of chairs in front of her desk.

"Please, sit." She gestured to the chairs as she took her place behind the desk once more. Draco obeyed, and more to avoid looking at her than anything, busied himself with preparing a rather sugary cup of tea. Tea ready, he could put off the moment no longer, he looked up.

Just behind and above the desk were two portraits containing the images of men that still inspired conflicting feelings in Draco. Professor Dumbledore's portrait was currently empty and Severus Snape's portrait appeared to be asleep. Draco breathed a soft sigh of relief and met McGonagall's eyes instead. She was regarding him broadly over her glasses and now Draco felt like he was a pupil again, which strangely put him at ease.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Mr. Malfoy, I must confess it was somewhat of a shock to receive your letter. I must also confess that I'm not entirely sure how I might be of assistance."

Draco sipped his tea and gently placed the cup back on its saucer on the table, afraid it would rattle in his hands. He took a deep breath. *How said you were trying Prove it.*

"Yes, and thank you for meeting with me Headmistress. As I wrote in my letter, I'm interested in donating some gold in order to fund a new initiative at the school." *Stick with facts. Stick with numbers.*

McGonagall's mouth was set in that firm line he remembered as her default expression. "Indeed. But as we both know, Mr. Malfoy, your family already donates quite a generous sum to the school annually. I'm not sure I understand your request."

Draco pulled the stack of parchment out of his cloak pocket. "This new venture will in no way affect my current donation to the school. As I wrote, I'd like this fund to serve a new and very specific purpose."

He stood then and approached her desk. He unfurled the stack of parchment and laid it gently down in front of her. "This is what I had in mind. And I think once you read through, you'll suspect that I did not come up with this all on my own, and you'd be correct. This wasn't my idea, but the funding will be coming from my vaults."

Draco had done what very few people on the planet had ever done. He got Minerva McGonagall's jaw to drop in shock. He suspected her shock was caused by the name of the fund, written in heavy, bold ink on the first page:

The Hermione J. Granger Fund for Students of Non-Magical Parents

Draco had no idea what the "J" stood for, but Granger's work bag was initiated with "HJG." He made a mental note to ask her about her middle name.

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"Potter."

"Sorry?"

"My last name is Potter now."

"Right, well what's your poison?"

"Ogden's of course."

Draco motioned to the bartender and ordered himself a fresh glass and one for Ginny.

"Cheers," she said flatly, and clinked her glass against his. They were silent for a few minutes, sipping their respective whiskeys.

"So tell me then," Draco drawled to his new companion. "What exactly did you say to McLaggen to make him look like he might wet himself?"

Ginny snorted. "What a complete tosser. I simply told him the name of the ward in St. Mungo's he could find the last man who tried to touch me without permission."

Draco inclined his head toward her in a sign of mild respect then tipped his glass back to take a drink. Ginny chose that precise moment to state matter-of-fact: "Plus I let him know which venereal disease he'd likely contracted from his naked romp with one of my teammates."

Draco spat his drink out as he hastily tried to hold back a bark of laughter which then turned into a hacking cough from the burning alcohol. Ginny thumped his back a few times. "All right there, ferret? It's all right, not all of us can handle our firewhisky," she said in a falsely sweet voice.

Recovering from the embarrassing display of doing a spit-take in public, and from the mind-blowing fact that the littlest Weasley was actually funny, Draco shot her a smirk.

"So, no husband to protect you tonight from the less gentled among us? What's your saintly counterpart up to this evening? Knitting blankets for orphaned unicorns?"

Ginny turned to face him fully, a wide smirk on her face. The female Weasley was unfortunately not as easy to wind up as her brothers. "Why Malfoy, you know perfectly well where Harry is this evening. He's keeping the company of a certain mutual friend of ours."

Draco narrowed his eyes, all traces of humor leaving his face. "I assume you're speaking about Granger," he said evenly.

Ginny nodded and began mindlessly fiddling with an ice cube in her glass. "Yes, Hermione has the unfortunate luxury of attending that ghastly Ministry affair with Harry. Although, I'm glad they can keep each other company tonight. She's quite popular, you know, so many young wizards looking to fill her dance card this evening. Especially with the dress she wore. Being with Harry *should* keep them at bay."

How the hell was he supposed to respond to that statement? Draco knew he was being baited and refused to bite. He contented himself with saying nothing and slowly sipping his drink.

"You haven't complimented my gown yet, Malfoy," Ginny said suddenly and stepped away to give him a little twirl, allowing Draco to eye her from head to toe.

"I do admit, it's quite fetching on you," he replied honestly. The sparkling silver material of the floor-length gown complemented her skin tone and hair color (not an easy feat with that shade of red),

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and the strapless, off the shoulder neckline left her toned arms, shoulders, and back on display.

"Thank you. If you think it looks good on me, you should see Hermione."

"Pardon?"

Ginny grinned like the kneazle that got the cream. "She's wearing this exact same dress tonight, but in a lovely gold hue instead. Only, she is blessed with more curves than myself, so I'm sure her cleavage will attract many a second look."

What the ever-loving fuck was she playing at?

"Are you always this crass about your friends, Weaslette?" he sneered with disdain but Ginny was unbothered.

"It's Potter, and not all of my friends are as gorgeous as Hermione." She shrugged and took a sip of her whisky. "Besides," she added conspiratorially, "can you just *imagine* the look she would give me if she'd heard me say that in front of her?"

Draco shared a wicked grin with his new drinking partner. He could imagine it all too easily. Granger's face would scrunch inward, lips pursed, before she would draw an impressive breath and launch into a tirade about society's expectations on witches to look and dress a certain way, all while completely ignoring the fact that she (probably, Draco imagined) looked beyond breathtaking in her fitted gown.

"Doesn't take much to get Granger to blush," Draco commented with a chuckle.

"Hmm, indeed. Do you make her blush often during your cozy coffee sessions?"

So this was her game: make Draco reveal his intentions. Granger had obviously confided in Ginny about their new friendship and she was here to test Draco. The younger version of himself would have made a derisive comment, insulted the She-Weasel about her inferior family, thrown in a jab at Potter for good measure, and then given her one last sneer before stalking off.

But he wasn't that person anymore. And while Potter's wife had definitely raised his hackles, Draco could tell her jeering question was coming from an instinct to protect Granger. He could respect her motives at least, even if her execution left something to be desired.

"As I'm sure Granger has told you, we do keep a regular morning meeting over coffee. No need to make a scandal out of something innocent," was his measured reply.

Ginny finished off her drink then placed her glass firmly on the bar and turned to Draco, all trace of teasing gone from her expression. "Look, Malfoy. I don't particularly like you, given the history between our families. I certainly don't trust you. But Hermione has decided you're worthy of a second chance, and she is not only the smartest person I know... she is the *best* person I know."

Ginny's eyes bored into his, pleading with him to understand something. "I owe her a debt I can never repay. Do you know how many times she kept Harry and Ron alive during that last year of the war? Not to mention all the bullshit they caused while we were at Hogwarts. I know that without her, my husband would not be alive today. So when I tell you that Hermione is like a sister to me, that she is family, I need you to know how serious that bond is. I know both of you are insistently throwing the 'just friends' line around for now, but listen here, Malfoy—" Her light brown eyes were aglow from a

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not a Hogsmeade weekend for the students. As Draco approached the gates to the school entrance, he patted both breast pockets of his cloak to check he still had the two necessary items for today. One pocket held a full vial of Calming Draught. Draco had already downed one this morning. He would most likely need at least half of this vial after his walk to the Headmistress's office. He hadn't been back to the school since the final battle more than nine years ago. *I am in control of this*.

His other pocket held the thick bundle of parchment he would present to McGonagall. If he maintained his composure, he just might be able to convince her of this idea.

An elderly gentleman dressed in a thick wool sweater and tweed trousers waited just inside the gates. A West Highland terrier trotted around at his heels, little tail wagging back and forth as it watched Draco approach. Flitch must have finally died, leaving a vacancy at the school for yet another cantankerous geezer to stalk the grounds and glare at students.

"Draco Malfoy?" inquired the man in a thick Scottish accent.

"Yes, I have an appointment with the Headmistress."

"Aye, I'm aware. Come on then, and keep up." Draco rolled his eyes at the man's back once the gates had swung forward to grant him entrance. They sure did like to employ surly old men as Hogwarts caretakers.

The terrier wandered back towards Draco and sniffed his shoes a bit before rejoining his master's side. Draco caught up with the man and kept his gaze focused on the front door of the castle. He didn't look left or right until he reached the entrance hall, afraid of what his memory might conjure up if he dared to peek. *Oh yes, I remember, just there is where the Creevey boy was killed, what fond memories! And look, over there is the spot where several of Greyback's charming associates had mutilated another student. Good old Hogswarts!* Draco inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, concentrating on his breathing and trying not to drown in the horrid days gone past.

The two men and the dog trod a familiar path towards the Head's office in silence. Draco again kept his gaze focused only on what was directly in front of him, neither knowing nor caring if they passed any students, staff, or ghosts. Obviously the castle had been expertly restored since he'd last been on the grounds, and Draco didn't know what would be more painful: seeing the destruction still or seeing how everyone had cleaned up and moved on with life.

Finally reaching the stone gangway, the caretaker grunted "Ginger Newt" and motioned for Draco to go inside. "Thank you Mister..."

"McCallister. Come on then, Nessie," he called to the terrier who gave Draco one last sniff then trotted after his master.

Draco stepped on the moving spiral staircase and began counting his breaths in his head. *Fuck it.* He took the Calming Draught out and tipped back half of it before the staircase had stopped. His hand was quite steady as he knocked on the office door. "Come in," called a familiar voice.

Swallowing once, Draco pushed open the door and entered. It looked exactly the same as Draco remembered, the only differences being the body occupying the chair behind the large, handsome desk of the circular room and the absence of a phoenix.

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Her beauty overthrew him, and it hurt to look at her.

His emotions were a confusing swirl within him, so Draco did what he always did in these situations. He fashed out.

Stalking up to her, he gripped Hermione tightly by her upper arms, forcing her to look up into his eyes as he towered over her.

"You have nothing to apologize to me for, do you understand? *Nothing.*" He hissed, gray eyes boring into hers, trying to make her realize his true meaning. *Do you get it yet Granger? Haven't I made it abundantly clear to you what kind of man I am?*

She merely stared back up at him while Draco's eyes pleaded with her to comprehend the full weight of his statement. *I can't even say the words, Granger, even though I know I should. I'm not like you. I'm a fucking coward.*

She didn't look away. Draco's gaze moved down as her lips parted so she could exhale a shaky breath. "Okay," she whispered, her hands trembling in his arms. *Chapter Seven*

He came to his senses then and dropped her arms as if he'd been scalded. He took a few steps back and hung his head in shame at the way he'd touched her without her consent. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

"I didn't mean to... I... I'll see you tomorrow Granger," and he turned and left without a backward glance.



When Draco reached his foyer that night after work, a letter with a familiar wax insignia awaited him. With slightly shaking hands, he tore at the Hogwarts seal to read the response from Minerva McGonagall. He let out the breath he'd been holding as he read through it once and took it up to his bedroom. Summoning a bottle of firewhisky, Draco poured a generous measure as he sank into an armchair by his fireplace. Downing his glass in one go, Draco re-read the letter several times. Though it contained good news, he put the letter and glass down so he could bury his head in his hands and sob.

The next morning, things reverted back to normal between himself and Granger. Although he did notice that the size of the bags under her eyes could only be rivaled by his own.

I'm trying I know it's not enough. I am in control of this.



October 2007

Draco lightened his cloak around him as he apparated into Hogsmeade. He'd selected the closest apparition point to the gates of Hogwarts, hoping to avoid as much of the village as possible. From this point he could reach the gates without having to walk past the Three Broomsticks, an establishment in which he was most unwelcome. At least, that's what Madam Rosmerta's Howler had shrieked at him years ago after he'd written her an apology letter. Draco was sure the landlady's memory was long, and he didn't feel like pressing his luck in such a public manner.

He was grateful that the streets were mostly empty as it was a bit early on Saturday and apparently

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combination of earnest emotion and whisky:

"—my *own brother* didn't deserve her. I can't name a man alive that does. While I know she enjoys your company, I don't know if she's really thought through how the rest of our world would react to your... friendship."

The parish and the heroine. The coward and the savior.

"Don't you think I know that Weasley? Why do you think our time together in public stays mostly within the confines of a *Muggle* café?" Draco spat bitterly and blamed the alcohol for the desperate tone of his revelation.

Ginny's eyes widened as she regarded him seriously for a moment. "It's Potter," she corrected him softly.

Before Draco could truly dissolve into a full-blown panic attack, his shoulder was jostled on his other side by a formidable upper arm.

"Sorry, some of us would like to get a drink before the New Year."

Praising all four Rounders for this well-timed intrusion, Malfoy turned to find Maureen Tyler trying to get the bartender's attention.

"Good evening, Miss Tyler, enjoying the party?" he drawled politely. Maureen had also opted for a flattering Muggle gown, even if the robust muscles of her upper body looked like they were threatening to rip the top half of it in two.

"It's alright," she shrugged. "Heard your bosses sprung for the good tequila this year so I think I should see if the rumor is true." She tried and failed to flag down the bartender again.

Draco cleared his throat and shot a well-timed glare coupled with a crook of his fingers to get the staffer's attention. "Tequila, neat, and two Ogden's" he declared, noting Ginny's empty glass on his other side.

When the drinks were placed in front of him, he slid a firewhisky toward Ginny and heard a quiet "thank you," and slid the tequila toward Maureen, earning him a "cheers."

In his periphery, he noticed Ginny curiously eyeing Maureen's impressive biceps as the younger girl tipped back her glass of liquor. Maybe now he could kill two birds with one stone.

"Miss Tyler, have you met Ginny Weasley?"

Draco took a small amount of pleasure in the way the younger girl's eyes widened and she lowered her glass to the bar hastily. So it seemed Maureen was capable of being star-struck.

"Oh, uh, no. Nice to meet you, I'm Maureen Tyler." She reached across Draco to shake Ginny's hand.

"Ginny Potter. Pleasure to meet you. Is this one recruiting you?" she jerked her head towards Draco.

Maureen smiled nervously while Draco silently encouraged her in his head. *Come on Tyler, I set the quaffle in motion for you here, don't muck this up.*

"No, I'm just a reserve beater for the Tornados," she replied modestly and Ginny scoffed.

"That's not just anything! I heard they *finally* brought on a female talent, how are you enjoying it?" It was clear to Draco that Maureen Tyler did not possess the sort of cunning finesse she would need

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if she ever wanted to get off the bench. He would need to prod this along.

"Tyler here is the best Beater I've seen in years," Draco stated firmly and both women shot him looks of surprise.

"Is that right?" Ginny asked, her interest piqued, while Maureen quietly sputtered something hum-ble.

"Hm, I'd say so. Can you think of any teams that might be in need of such a player once the new season begins?" he asked pointedly. Ginny didn't respond, but Draco saw the understanding click behind her eyes and she turned back to Maureen, eager to chat.

Draco downed his drink in one, and prepared to take his leave for the night. "I'll bid you both a good evening then. Try not to waste any opportunities that fall your way."

He'd only made it a few feet away before he felt a grip on his upper arm. "Malfoy, wait." He turned to find Ginny giving him a serious look.

She dropped her grip on his arm. "What you just said to me? About not wasting opportunities? I think you should take that advice for yourself," she said quietly, shooting him one last meaningful look before rejoining Maureen at the bar.

Draco made it all the way to the coat-check before his hands started shaking. He made it all the way to the Floos before his breaths started coming faster. He made it all the way to his bedroom before his legs almost gave out.

Collapsing shakily on his bed, he gripped his head in his hands and tried to steady his breathing.

I am in control of this. I am in control of this. I am in control of this.



Damn Ginny Weasley and her ill-bred, crass mouth.

It was Monday morning and Draco was supposed to familiarize himself with a Scottish Chaser's goal statistics before a meeting that day. His eyes kept skimming over the first line of the report before his attention would be drawn across the café table. The shoulder of Hermione's work blouse kept sliding to the side as she scribbled furiously in one of her many notebooks. The fabric would slide down, exposing the skin of the top of her shoulder and one of her bra straps bricly before she absent-mindedly tugged the blouse back into place. Draco averted his eyes to his report before the movement started right back up again, not one minute later. After several rounds of this, he had to say something, he couldn't take it anymore. "You should probably get rid of that blouse."

"Excuse me?"

"You've been fidgeting with it every 30 seconds, surely you own clothing that actually fits properly?"

"Well fine, if it's distracting you so much, I'll throw it out later!"

She had no idea, obviously, that it was driving him bloody mad, but he couldn't very well reach over and yank up the shoulder of her blouse. Because friends did not do that sort of thing for friends. And

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"Tell me Granger, what kind of welcome reception would have awaited me from your precious Potter and the Weasley clan? Handshakes and hugs? Then we'd all joke around and happily reminisce about all the fond memories we share? Is that what you envisioned?"

They'd reached a conversation topic they only ever danced around. But now, because of Granger, the outside world had intruded into their little peaceful morning sanctuary, bringing with it the looming threat of dangerous trips back down memory lane. Some nights, alone in his large bed, Draco had wondered how long they could carry on like this: this blissful state of ignorance to the rest of the wizarding world and its opinions of the two of them having coffee together. Of having personal conversations and sharing bits and pieces of their lives, but sharing nothing more than passing mentions of her friends or family, or of his family or their time at Hogwarts. Because if they had to talk about all that in a deeper, more specific way, then the bubble would burst. Draco would burst. He would completely unravel in front of her and all his years of healing would probably go right out the window. And he would have to say the words he'd been too much of a coward to say to Hermione Granger.

"Because if that's what you envisioned, Granger, allow me to completely disabuse you of that notion. If I'd made it over the threshold of that box without getting hexed several times over I'm sure the only thing I could expect from those *wonderful* people you call friends would have been icy glares and possibly even a few fists to the face. So no, Granger. I did not think to come over and just 'say hello.'"

She looked abashed and a little hurt. Good. *I'm not a good person, Granger, can't you see that? Can't you of all people see that? I'm not good for anyone, least of all you.*

She twisted her hands in her lap, but then took a deep breath and shattered Draco's world with just two words.

"I'm sorry."

No. Not this, not now. Not ever.

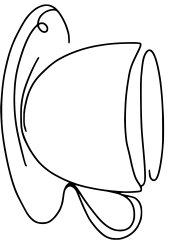
Draco pushed his chair away from the table as quickly as he could and stood up fast. His heart hammered in his chest as he stared down at her. His panicked gaze found the door and he calculated that it would take him less than a dozen steps to reach it. "Don't, Granger." He ground out in warning.

But in typical Hermione Granger fashion, she didn't listen. Didn't heed his warning. Her brown eyes were so full of warmth and earnest emotion that he had to look away. *I am in control of this.*

"Malfoy, look, I'm sorry if I—"

"I can't do this," he muttered and walked swiftly around her and out the door. He didn't ease his pace or turn around for the first block, but then he had to slow down. All of his limbs were shaking and his breathing was ragged. He heard someone running up behind him and squeezed his eyes shut. Of course she would follow him. Of course she'd come to check on him, on his feelings. *Coward.*

"Malfoy," she called softly and like a siren's song, it forced him to turn around and face her. She was standing just a few feet from him in the September sun, the light shining on her flushed pink cheeks and turning some of the strands of her brown hair to gold, while the gentle breeze picked up some of her curls and blew them about. And there was that bright glow of her eyes exuding sincere concern in a way that made his chest constrict painfully.



Chapter Seven

It took Granger roughly three minutes and thirty-two seconds into their Monday morning conversation at the café to bring up Draco being at the Harpies match over the weekend.

"Ginny said you were at her match Saturday."

Draco froze and narrowed his eyes. *Oh she did, did she? And what else did She-Weasel tell you about me?*

"I didn't realize my attendance was of any concern to Ginny Weasley," he spoke in his coldest tone, his fingers taking up their lazy route around his mug.

"It's Potter, and I thought those two teams weren't a matchup you needed to attend for work?"

Nothing, fucking gets past you, does it Granger? Fuck.

Draco shrugged in what he hoped was peak nonchalance. "I have free tickets to any match I want through work, just felt like watching a bit of quidditch, I guess. Not sure why Weasley has her knickers in a twist over it."

Granger rolled her eyes. "It's Potter, and don't be vulgar. She merely mentioned she saw you in your company box during the match, that's all."

But that wasn't all. Because if that was all, then why was Granger suddenly looking apprehensive? "You know," she began in an offhand tone, but Draco could still sense her nervousness.

"If you'd wanted, you could have come over and um, said hello."

Draco gaped at her. "Said hello?" he repeated dumbly. She nodded and swallowed an apparent lump in her throat.

"Yes, I thought, you know, you could have come to our box and um, said hello, you know, to um, me and everyone and maybe, um... hung out..." she was quietly rambling in a very flustered manner and Draco was dumbfounded at her words.

"Hung out. In your box. With you." She stared back at him, suddenly looking fearful at his low tone and sneering face. Good. She should be frightened of him. He wasn't a good person, not like her. Not like her real friends.

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because he couldn't trust his fingers not to linger on the bare skin of her shoulder.

Ginny fucking Weasley and her smart mouth putting forbidden ideas in his head about Granger's body.



As most businesses did every year as the end of December crept nearer, the café was decked out in Christmas cheer. Draco sipped his coffee and watched the swirling snow outside, Muggles rushing about in their silly, puffy winter jackets, oversized boots, and fuzzy hats and scarves.

Once upon a time, the Christmas season was Draco's favorite time of year. The house elves would out-do themselves with all the extravagant puddings, chocolates, tarts, and pies at the end of every night's feast during the week. His family were always invited to the pureblood holiday balls, but then on New Year's Eve, every other party was glaringly outshined by the ball thrown at Malloy Manor by Narcissa.

Draco could remember running about the ballroom with Theo, Crabbe, and Pansy, trying not to be too rambunctious and earn the ire of their elders, and thinking longingly of the future days when they would be old enough to indulge in the copious amounts of alcoholic beverages available.

Those days never came. The Dark Lord's return and subsequent residence in Malloy Manor saw to that. No, now if you asked Draco, he'd say spring was his favorite time of year.

Granger, however, seemed fully invested in the holiday spirit, forgoing her usual masala chai in favor of some peppermint-chocolate concoction buried under a mountain of whipped cream. Draco had just reached for her cup across the table to steal his fifth sip when she lightly snacked his hand away.

"For goodness sake Malloy, go get your own, you spoiled brat."

He gave her an exaggerated pout. "Oh come now, Granger, that's not in the Christmas spirit! What's that Muggle saying of yours? 'Piece of earth for good, willing men?'"

Hermione looked up from her notebook and laughed until she cried. Clutching her sides, she wiped away her tears of laughter, and Draco felt that curious warm feeling at having made her laugh so fully and freely.

"It's 'peace on earth and goodwill to all men.' Honestly, Malloy, what is your interpretation even supposed to mean?"

Draco shrugged and smirked. "It means don't be so bloody stingy with the hot chocolate."

Hermione rolled her eyes and slid her cup towards him, laughing again at the way his eyes lit up.

"What are your plans over the holiday's other than stealing sweets from your friends and mangling famous quotations?"

"You mean besides hearing the near-constant lecture from my mother about how I am still unwed with no heirs in sight?"

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Hermione put down her pen and asked gently, “Do you even want to get married? Start a family?” Draco sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose as he considered his future. It had been years since his last serious relationship and from what he recalled, it had ended rather poorly. Drinking too much alcohol to find the strength to exist each day meant he probably hadn’t been the best romantic partner, or any sort of partner.

“I mean... someday, I suppose. Just... not any time soon. Fucking hell, I can barely take care of myself right now, a spouse and children are out of the fucking question,” he said bitterly.

Hermione gave him a quelling look. “You don’t need to put yourself down like that all the time, Malfoy.”

He frowned at her and shrugged so she would drop the subject. Her incessant need to build up his self-confidence was both invigorating and terrifying.

“I do know what you mean though. It’s difficult to imagine taking care of a small human at this point in my life. There are so many life experiences and career goals I have yet to achieve and I’m not sure how a child or husband would fit in just now. Though you were perhaps too self-deprecating. I do understand what you were saying about feeling as if self-care still has to take priority. Wounds that still need healing.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully. “It seems many of our generation feel the same.” They shared a dark look and sad smiles at his statement. Though many of their Hogwarts peers had paired off or found serious relationships, children among their classmate couples were few so far.

“So,” Hermione brightened back up. “Any exciting parties or traditions you’re looking forward to?”

Draco shrugged. “Christmas is generally pretty quiet. My mother returned from France so I’ll spend the holiday with her and try not to succumb to the urge to give myself a Stinging Jinx to the face while she shows picture after picture of eligible witches under my nose.”

Hermione laughed but was undeterred. “Come on, there has to be something you’re looking forward to!”

“Mother’s New Year’s Eve ball is always quite the affair,” he haltingly offered. His mother had revived her old party several years ago, and despite the shabby ground his family name stood on in some circles, invitations were highly coveted. Draco supposed his father’s death had helped his mother’s reputation in some regard.

“An extravagant ball attended by the expensively dressed and socially elite of wizarding society doesn’t fill you with joy?” she asked, teasingly.

“Hard to be filled with joy in a room full of people you’d actively like to avoid, but Theo is confirmed to attend, thank Merlin.”

“A lot of your other old friends planning to come?” Draco noted the hesitancy in her voice and knew what she really wanted to ask him. *Will you be laughing it up with your old Slytherin friends? Tempted to revert back to your old blood purity ways?*

“No one I really care to see,” was his clipped reply and she took the hint to drop the subject.

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omnioculars from his face. The Tornados Secker had captured the snitch, securing the victory for their team. Macnair pumped his fist a few times in the air in triumph.

“Congratulations. I look forward to watching the Wasps wipe that smug grin right off your face,” drawled Draco and Macnair flipped him off.

The Tornado team began their victory flight around the stadium as the Harpies players flew back to their locker room. Then, the box across the way lit up and Draco realized all the attention was now being paid to the Potter-Weasley box as Ginny joined her extremely famous husband and family. What seemed like thousands of flashbulbs were going off, all focused on the savior of the wizarding world and his in-laws. Potter and his wife gave a few sheepish waves to the crowd then retreated from the edge. Ginny had a barely concealed scowl on her face and Draco wondered which she hated more: that her team had let her down or that she was forced to deal with all the press hoopla surrounding her husband at her place of employment.

People finally began shuffling out of the stadium, but Draco returned his omnioculars to find Granger, who was now speaking with Ginny alone.

Draco watched as Granger and Ginny chatted animatedly near the edge of their box. He watched as the red head pointed vaguely across the way of the stadium, in the general direction of Draco’s company box, but not directly at him. He watched as Granger seemed to straighten up and eagerly scan the boxes on Draco’s side of the stadium. What had She-Weasel said to her to make her look around so enthusiastically?

He watched as Granger seemed unable to find what she was looking for and turned away with a small frown of disappointment to converse with the Weasley matriarch. And then he watched in horror as Ginny Potter’s gaze snapped to somehow connect directly with Draco, as she smirked, and then winked.

He dropped his omnioculars as if they’d burned his flesh. They clattered to the floor and he stooped to pick them up quickly. *I am in control of this*

“All right son?” Inquired Macnair.

Draco could tell his face was flushed and he struggled to keep his voice even. “Yes, of course. I just remembered I have somewhere to be.”

Macnair was eyeing him curiously as Draco turned to leave, to get home and down as much fire-whisky as he could find in his liquor cabinet. “Too bad. Listen, at our next match, you really should hang around after the game. I was serious when I said there’s something spectacular you need to see.”

Draco nodded absently and apparated home, away from Macnair, from all the crowds, and from the knowing gaze of Ginny Potter. *I am in control of this.*

Remain Nameless

Ginny:

“Shame, I was quite looking forward to Percy throwing up in the bushes for the third year in a row.”
“Don’t worry Hermione, I did it myself, but told everyone else it was Ron. Keep spreading that word around for me, would you?”



December 31, 2007

Draco clicked the ballpoint pen in his hand over and over again. He found the delightful little clicking noise it made soothed his frayed nerves.

And his nerves were frayed indeed. When his mother wasn’t chatting his ears off all week about the New Year’s Eve Ball preparations, she was trying to engage Draco in conversation about all the young single, witches on the guest list.

On top of that, all damn week he’d waited for an owl from Granger and finally, *finally*, she’d sent him a note today.

Malfoy,

Thank you for the lovely gift. I must admit I was quite surprised with your chosen gift. I didn’t realize that one could be so much of yours. I find the liberty of making my own of the gift so well, for the birthday. My father is always stressed with the one that from your childhood to the different roles

Draco had rolled his eyes when he read that originally. Of course that little know-it-all would find a way to improve upon his work.

My mother said that she is well, for the birthday. My father is always stressed with the one that from your childhood to the different roles

I hope you had an enjoyable birthday in your very warm surroundings by your friends and your mother and your father that with more than

my entire life’s worth.

See you in the New Year!

Your friends,

Hermione

Draco had read the note so many times today he had it memorized. Her cheap shot about the “coziness” of his mansion and quip about the champagne brought a smirk to his face every time. Granger could have quite the sense of humor, when she wanted.

So her parents knew about him. How did she describe him? “Mum, Dad, this is a gift from my former childhood tormentor, but now we grab coffee together and have become friends because he has had years of healing only to uncover what an utter piece of shite he was as an adolescent and is now trying to live respectably as an adult.”

Draco clicked the pen a few more times and then took a generous sip of champagne from his flute. He chuckled about when he remembered Granger’s quip from her letter and thought she probably wasn’t that far off about the cost.

Hey Jude!

He was now leaning over the balcony high above the snow-covered grounds of his mother’s current home: the LeStrange Estate. Behind him, a grand ballroom was aglow in more gaudy golden decorations than could ever be necessary, while more than 300 guests waltzed and mingled across the marble dance floor. Draco had finally escaped the clutches of his mother and the various witches he’d been forced to dance with for appearances’ sake.

The ostentatious and magically warmed balcony was devoid of guests, meaning Draco could click his pen, down champagne, loosen the bowtie of his dress robes, and breathe in peace. Enough gaitland and holly to decorate most of England lined every free surface, and the whole area was beautifully illuminated by real, live fairies, immobilized and shining brightly against the dark night.

Draco amused himself by imagining Granger’s horrified reaction to how the fairies were being forced to exist for decorative purposes. But just as quickly as his amusement came, it left again, as he looked out across the vast, dark grounds and wondered how Granger was spending her New Year’s Eve. Was she thinking about him at all? She’d at least taken the trouble to send him an owl today.

If he’d asked her, would she have shown up here tonight? Draco frowned into his champagne, knowing the answer. Half the guests in his mother’s ballroom would turn their nose up at Granger because of her blood status, and the other half would put on simpering faces to try and ply favors or goodwill out of a famous war heroine. She’d be sickened by the entire charade.

“There you are Draco!” A familiar, shrill voice that set Draco’s teeth on edge broke through the night air. Sighing and turning around, he returned his pen to his inside breast pocket and greeted the unwelcome intrusion upon his solitude.

“Pansy. Enjoying the party?”

“Of course, your mother is unmatched as a hostess! I dare say I’m not enjoying it as much as all the lucky witches who’ve gotten to dance with you, though.”

Pansy Parkinson (wait no, it was Pansy *Piskin* now, Draco reminded himself) approached Draco draped in far too many jewels and furs, most likely recent Christmas gifts from her husband.

Draco made no response to her comment, knowing precisely where Pansy wanted the conversation to go. He wasn’t going to help her get there.

“Honestly Draco, it really does pain me to see you this way,” she laid a hand gently on his arm as she came to stand beside him on the balcony edge. Draco forced himself to carefully put down his empty champagne flute to turn and look at her fully, her face full of pity and an inflated sense of superiority.

“And what way would that be, Pansy?”

Pansy’s expression of faux-pity only deepened and Draco desperately wanted to hex it off her face, but that would be unbecoming of a gentleman of his upbringing.

“You don’t have to waste your time with *Frenchie* witches. If you’re looking for a wife, Boris and I would happily introduce you to several of his cousins. One of them will be graduating Durmstrang this spring and would love to visit England. I’m sure we could arrange a formal introduction if you’re interested. I dare say the pool of eligible pureblood British witches seems thinner by the day.”

Remain Nameless

Draco glared back at her stonily. “As *lovely* as your offer is, I’m not sure I’d have much in common with a 17-year-old school girl,” he sneered and took some pleasure in his remark getting Pansy to drop her hand and patronizing smile.

“You’re 27 years-old Draco, just when are you planning to fulfill your duty as head of your family? Think of your poor mother! She must feel *awfully* embarrassed at her only son not being able to secure a spouse and sire heirs at his age,” she scathingly countered.

Ah, there was the vindictive bitch he remembered. “You know what’s embarrassing Pansy? *Embarrassing* is agreeing to marry the first pureblood noble that would have you, even if he’s 30 years your senior and speaks roughly 20 words of English. *Embarrassing* is pretending to turn a blind eye while your creepy husband feeds up all the younger witches on the dance floor. *Embarrassing* is popping out three little brains in quick succession because some old, backwards way of thinking demands that you do so, not because you harbor anything close to affection for children.” Draco towered over her, relishing in the angry tears that had begun forming in his ex-girlfriend’s cold blue eyes.

“So tell me, Pansy, who between us should feel embarrassment? Because all I see when I look at you is that same snotty, spoiled little girl who was so desperate for my attention that she tried to Floo to my home completely starkers the night before her own wedding.”

Pansy stepped away from Draco as if she’d been slapped. Her mouth opened and closed furiously several times while she tried to form the right words for a venomous diatribe regarding Draco’s lack of character.

“Why you complete and utter—!”

“Pansy, darling! Narcissa was just looking for you!”

Draco turned to find his savior in the lanky form of Theodore Nott. Grinning broadly and holding two glasses of amber liquid, he jovially approached Pansy and Draco as if he’d happened upon two happily reunited friends instead of sparring exes.

“Nott,” Pansy greeted coldly. “I’m sure whatever Draco’s mother needs can wait while I—”

“Oh no, no, no, Pansy dear, you mustn’t keep the hostess waiting! Especially when one of your angelic children happened to break a rather valuable crystal vase in one of the front parlors.”

Pansy’s face drained of all color as she rushed past Theo back to the ballroom. Theo wordlessly handed Draco a glass of firewhisky and took Pansy’s spot at his elbow.

The two friends sipped their drinks in companionable silence for a few minutes, with Draco relishing in the quiet that had followed Pansy’s departure.

“So,” drawled Draco. “Did one of her little imps actually break a vase?”

“Of course not,” snorted Theo. “But don’t worry about her returning. I passed her charming husband on the way out here. His hand was down his dance partner’s robes and it’s causing quite the stir in one of the darker corners of the ballroom.”

“How quaint. Well, cheers to surviving another one of these ridiculous affairs,” offered Draco, and Theo clinked their glasses together.

Draco sipped slowly and turned to face the friend he hadn’t seen in many months. He looked for

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imagine Malfoy opening up to just anyone about his struggle with Dreamless Sleep addiction. And she certainly had only ever told a handful of people about her guilt over obliterating her parents.

Hermione shook her head, because it didn’t matter anyway. Because one day he would show up to the café, and tell her all about some perfect pureblood princess he was engaged to marry. Despite his recent comments about not being ready for a marriage or a relationship, Hermione knew their days together were ultimately numbered. She knew the pressure he was under from his mother. How long until he caved? What would that mean for Hermione? Back to solitary mornings and lonely weekends while all her friends moved on and coupled up?

How dare he inspire this type of fanciful hope inside her that they could ever be more!

She heard Ginny stand and sigh. “Well Padma, you’re up then.”

Hermione raised her head curiously. What was that supposed to mean?

“Hermione, I’m good friends with Anthony Goldstein, do you remember him?”

Hermione nodded in answer to Padma, remembering a good-looking brunette Ravenclaw boy from Hogwarts. “Of course. He was in Dumbledore’s Army and usually top of your house in marks. I think he works in the Department for Magical Transportation.”

Padma nodded. “Yes, that’s him. He’s been single for quite some time and I happened to mention you the other week and he asked after you. Would you like me to set you two up on a date? I think you’d have a lot in common and I know he’s interested.”

Hermione considered Padma’s suggestion. Yes, a date with a man who didn’t have annoyingly perfect hair and table manners and beautiful suits was exactly what she needed.

“That would be lovely, thank you Padma.”

Padma smiled and then excused herself to rejoin the Weasley Christmas festivities downstairs.

In the quiet that fell upon Padma’s departure, Hermione felt embarrassed and exhausted. She’d shown up to the Weasley’s home on Christmas only to completely unravel and suck the joy right out of the holiday celebrations.

Wiping her eyes, she stood up. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what came over me. Let’s not keep everyone else waiting.”

Ginny shot her a hard, skeptical look that was so reminiscent of Molly it unnerved Hermione.

“There’s enough people being loud downstairs and no one even thinks you’ve arrived yet. We can stay here as long as you like.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I’m honestly just being pathetic, monopolizing Christmas day with my problems. I’ll feel better once I’ve had some of your mother’s cooking.”

“Feelings are never pathetic, Hermione,” Luna piped up softly. “It’s all right to care about someone unexpected. In fact, I think it’s quite beautiful.”

Silence fell after Luna’s profound statement and Hermione found she couldn’t look either woman in the eye. Eventually she sighed and pushed back her hair. “Right, I think spending time with you all is just what I need. And please tell me George spiked the eggnog again this year?”

“No, Mum threatened to hex him into the next century if he pulled that stunt again,” snickered

Remain Nameless

Hermione met her friend's concerned gaze for all of two seconds before her lower lip began to tremble and the tears threatened to spill. She tried to gulp a breath as quietly as possible, and cast a furtive glance around the room. "I need... I need to... I can't—"

"Upstairs, my old room, now. Apparate so no one sees you, I'll be there in five minutes."

Hermione immediately complied and a moment later, sank heavily onto Ginny's childhood bed. The tears that she had managed to control all throughout the day with her parents no longer obeyed her, and flowed silently down her cheeks.

The door opened and Hermione was surprised momentarily by the arrival of Luna instead of Ginny.

"Ginny said you might need a friend for a bit," the blonde said softly. Hermione managed a weak nod and Luna sat down next to her. Wordlessly, Luna pulled one of Hermione's hands into her lap and gently directed Hermione's head onto her shoulder. As Luna began softly stroking her hair, Hermione's tears slowed to a quiet snuffle, and she was grateful to Ginny for sending Luna.

They might not always see eye to eye on reality, but the thing Hermione loved about Luna was her ability to give her affection to her friends so freely. Luna seemed attuned to Hermione's emotional needs, and simply continued to hold her and let Hermione cry out her inner turmoil.

A few silent minutes later and Ginny returned with a concerned-looking Padma in tow.

"Hermione," Ginny coaxed, as she stepped right in front of her. "Do you want to tell us why you showed up here on Christmas looking thoroughly miserable? Something to do with your umm, new friend?"

Ginny was giving her an out by not calling Malfoy by name, but Hermione didn't have the energy to keep being vague. Luna and Padma could know too for all she cared. Hermione was so tired of holding everything inside all the time.

"Malfoy sent me a Christmas gift," Hermione said shakily and when Ginny's eyebrows rose, she took a deep breath. "And it was lovely and thoughtful, but then... but then..." she paused to snuffle and Luna's hand tightened around hers, giving her strength to continue.

"He... he sent something for my parents too. My Muggle parents! He... he wrote this blasted funny, sweet, stupid note and I can't... I can't... I can't do this Ginny!"

Ginny knelt in front of her, and placed her hand on top of hers and Luna's. "Hermione, what can't you do?"

"I can't feel this way about him!" she wailed and wrenched her hand away from both her friends to bury her face in her hands. Didn't they understand? Draco could never return these affections, they only recently even established a friendship not two months ago. Draco Malfoy would never look at her as more than his little know-it-all coffee friend, confined to a space in his life where they never progressed beyond intellectual conversation and career discussions.

But lately hadn't they discussed more personal aspects of their own lives? Weren't they sharing more than just debates on giants' rights or quidditch budgets? They sought each other's advice, looked to each other for support, and revealed some of their darkest moments. It was difficult for her to

Hey Jude!9

signs of overtiredness or stress but found none. Truthfully, Theo looked content and at ease with himself. So what exactly was occupying all his free time lately? It had to be a witch.

"Are you staring at me because you'd like to twirl me about the dance floor too? I'm sorry to disappoint Draco, but I don't swing that way."

Draco snorted decisively. "Please, I've had enough of that blasted dance floor for tonight and possibly the rest of the decade."

"But you're so *popular*! Especially after that spectacular Witch Weekly article!" crowed Theo mischievously. "Let's see, you've glided about with five of those French ladies, two Austrians, Astoria Greengrass, and Tracy Davis."

"Davis wouldn't even look me in the eye. I don't know what mother was hoping for out of that dance."

Theo smirked. "I'm well aware of Narcissa's intentions but I can assure you it was nothing personal from Davis. She'd have much rather been in the arms of one of your female French dance partners from earlier."

"What? But I thought... didn't you have a fling with her during most of our school years?"

Theo nodded grimly. "I did indeed. I'm pretty sure I was the lucky chap that made her realize she preferred witches."

"Is that why she always looks so miserable? Merlin, her parents have really been pressuring her to sign a marriage contract lately, I guess I didn't realize why she seems so unhappy about it all." The two wizards lapsed into thoughtful silence until Draco caught a glare from a witch that happened to be passing by the glass doors leading out to the balcony.

"I don't think Greengrass has forgiven me for the way things ended years ago."

"Well you did date her sister not one month later. Bold move, by the way."

"Is it awful that I still can't tell them apart?"

"Honestly yes, because they don't even look alike and you spent *intimate time* with both. Don't be too hard on yourself, you were in a bad spot when you dated them."

Draco shrugged and looked down into his whisky. The same whisky that he'd relied on far too heavily once he'd managed to shake the potion dependence. It was Theo who had helped Draco navigate this time of his life, always offering up a spare bedroom when Draco drunkenly floored over and ranted about his parents or the sorry state of his life.

But that didn't stop Draco from feeling hurt at his friend's mysterious absences recently. "Going to tell me what's been going on in your life that's kept you so busy lately? Do you even remember the last time we went down the pub?"

Theo gave a noncommittal shrug, but a ghost of a smile rose to his lips. Something good was happening in his friend's life and Draco wanted to know. Draco rolled his eyes at Theo's non-answer when his gaze landed on a string of garland that had fallen from its place over one of the doorways. Reaching into the inner breast pocket of his robes for his wand to fix the decoration before his mother had a fit and fired the nearest house-elf, his hand accidentally brought out the ballpoint pen instead. Before

Remain Nameless

he could switch it out for the wand he'd meant to grab, Theo started and pointed at Draco's chest.

"Was that a pen?"

Draco leveled his friend with a suspicious glare. "How do you know what this is?"

Theo waved his question away with an impatient hand. "But where did you get one? Why do you have it on your person?"

Draco mirrored Theo's shrug from earlier, as the two wizards engaged in a staring contest. Theo broke first.

"Fine, keep your secrets Malfoy, and I'll keep mine." With those parting words, Theo downed the rest of his drink and returned to the ballroom, leaving Draco alone to contemplate the strangeness of his old friend's behavior.

Sighing he turned to the cloudless night sky as he heard the countdown to midnight begin from the loud crowd inside.

As it reached "One!" and the full orchestra struck up a joyful tune to welcome in the New Year, Draco toasted the empty air in front of him before finishing off his whisky. "Happy New Year, Granger," he whispered.



January 2008

"Hi," she greeted him, slightly breathless on their first morning back to the café routine.

"Hi," he responded, hoping it sounded neutral and unaffected and not disgustingly happy at the sight of her approaching the table after more than a week away.

As they resumed their routine from before the holidays of chatting about upcoming work and projects, Draco relished in the feeling of contentment that stole over him.

It was only now, back in Granger's company that he realized what had made him feel so out-of-sorts the entire holiday break. The lavish parties, the company of Europe's pureblood elite and all the stuffy, extraneous decorum that accompanied them had left him feeling strange and empty.

Choosing to go outside that high-society comfort bubble and then pop back in as an observer, Draco wasn't sure how he ever considered that way of life to be normal.

"So you had a good time then? At your mother's New Year's Ball?"

Draco scowled at the memory of that particular night. "Mother was at her most unbearable when it came to setting me up. I think I danced with upwards of a dozen women."

"Oh. That wasn't enjoyable for you?"

Draco shrugged and changed the subject.

None of them were you.

I am in control of this

Hey Jude!9

It smells different from your Hallowe'en parties. I simply can't let believe you wouldn't be serving anything from the upcoming Hallowe'en. And I'd be having fun when the Puddles were off the scene before then. The band that plays like normal and doesn't give anyone B's.

Hermione dropped the note as if it were on fire. With a shaking hand she gingerly picked up the various tubes of magical toothpaste. He'd sent an array of flavors and specialties; one tube promised to whiten, floss and let you breathe one small cloud of mint-flavored smoke in a design of your choosing. Hermione dropped this too and grasped for her wand. With a slightly trembling hand she managed to cast a silencing charm around her room, lock her door, and fling her wand away before she slid from her bed onto her floor with shaking legs.

Room properly warded from her parents' ears, Hermione let out a howling sob and buried her face in her knees. She rocked her body back and forth as her sobs wracked her entire frame. How could he? How could he be so thoughtful? This was too much, it made her feel too much. Hermione couldn't get a grip on her emotions or her breathing, burrowing her face further into her palms to try and stem the tide of feelings that threatened to drown her.

Her breaths came in short, harsh gasps as she thought of her parents in the room below and of the stubborn friend who had wormed his way into her warm, Christmas morning cocoon.

Why did he do this? Why did *Draco Malfoy* send a thoroughly silly, wonderfully perfect present to her *Muggle* parents?

Wasn't it bad enough that she'd already admitted to herself that Draco was attractive? Did he have to go and reveal himself to have a decent heart too? What the hell was Hermione supposed to do with this sharp ache in her chest whenever she thought about him?

"Too much, too much, too much," she whispered hoarsely to herself through her falling tears. Why did Draco's gift throw her into a chest-heaving, tear and snot inducing, panicky state of curled up limbs on her bedroom floor?

For once, Hermione didn't bother to think of an answer and instead simply cried her heart out until the sound of her mother's approaching footsteps to announce the completeness of the gingersnaps forced her to collect herself.

Removing the magic around her door wandlessly, Hermione straightened up, took several slow breaths, and put on the best happy face she could muster to spend Christmas morning with her parents.



Luck was on Hermione's side when she Flooed into the Weasleys' living room before Christmas dinner. Ginny happened to be the only family member passing through the room, and quickly enveloped her in an enthusiastic hug.

"Happy Christmas Hermione! Oh Godric, what's wrong?"

Remain Nameless

even Malfoy's *owl* had learned how to be sardonic?) and swept regally out of her window.

Hermione placed the two packages on her bed and eagerly tore open the letter.

Ergebnisse:

Did you really think I wouldn't send you a Christmas gift after that little power play you pulled on me the other day? I really should have seen that one coming.

It came by back a laugh as she could hear his faint-sounding fine so clearly in her head

[illegible]

Happy Christmas Greetings

Wig

Hermione put the letter aside and opened the first package. Elggan silver and gold wrappings felt away to reveal two handsome leather journals. With curious fingers, Hermione opened one and upon turning to the first blank page, a sheaf of parchment flew out and floated in the air in front of her.

Neat lines of black ink in Draco's hand covered the front and back of the floating page, listing out the detailed instructions of the charmed journals. Reading the first few lines, she saw that this was truly an impressive bit of magic. If she so chose, Hermione could activate a charm that would allow her to write a message in her journal, and that writing would appear instantly in real-time in the companion journal. That message could stay scrawled in both, or she could use another charm to have the words disappear from her page only to reappear on the companion page. Or, her message would stay in black ink on her page, only disappearing once the intended recipient had read the words on their page.

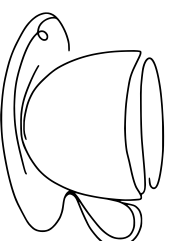
Hermione's eyes whizzed across the front and back of the instructional parchment. There were a dozen different ways the journals could be linked for quick back and forth messages, or even more permanent writing, if she so chose. Picking up both journals in her hands, she turned them over and inspected every inch of their covers and bindings. They were ordinary blank journals, meaning Draco had planned out and performed all the necessary and complicated charms work all on his own. She bit back a grin that threatened to shatter her whole face, impressed and touched at the effort he'd put into this gift.

Smiling happily, she set aside the journals, looking forward to experimenting with all the charmed settings Draco had invented later; down to the one that changed ink color based on urgency or subject matter. She'd have to think for a while about who to gift the companion journal to, though perhaps his initial suggestion of her parents was a good one.

Unwrapping the smaller package, Hermione's brow furrowed in confusion when several small tubes fell onto her bedspread along with a tiny rolled up scroll. Unfurling the little note, she read Draco's handwriting again.

Erasmus

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Chapter Twelve

Draco received a surprise when he walked into the café on Friday morning. For the first time in their entire friendship, Hermione was already seated at their usual table.

“Granger. A little early for you isn’t it?”

She didn't respond, but merely slid a folded piece of parchment across the table, practically bouncing up and down in her chair.

Draco raised an eyebrow in her direction. "And what's this? You weren't serious about actually bringing legal action against me because I ate the last bite of your scone yesterday, were you?"

“Oh, just read it, you prat!”

Draco heaved a dramatic sigh and received the desired eye roll in return. Sometimes it was all too easy to rile Granger up if she hadn't had enough of her tea yet. His grey eyes scanned the parchment and he shot her a genuine grin across the table.

"They approved you to attend the Venice conference? That's excellent!"

"I know, I know, but keep reading!" she ushered him excitedly.

Returning to the letter, his eyes and grin widened as he reached the bottom. "They want you to present on the Mermish Runes? Granger, that's amazing!"

She beamed back at him as he returned her letter and Draco could tell his enthusiasm pleased her. "I got the letter just as I was leaving my office yesterday. I almost sent you an owl last night but I wanted to tell you in person. You're the first one to know."

“Me? Why?”

Him. Not Weasley. Not Potter. Not She-Weasel. Not her parents. *Him*.

Hermione blushed and stammered and Draco groaned inwardly at how lovely it made her look. "Well—be-*because* it was you, really, that helped me along. How many times did you read through my application letter with me?"

"Forty-two, but who's counting?"

Remain Nameless

Hermione tried to shoot him a withering glare, but failed as her delighted grin would not quit. Riding the high of the professional accomplishment she'd achieved, Draco decided to try his luck.

"I think a celebration is in order. Let's try that new place downtown tonight, I hear they stock over 50 different vintages of champagne and I say we don't leave until you've sampled every single one."

That got the grin to slide off her face. Had he said something wrong? Why did she suddenly look like he'd uttered something hurtful?

"I do have plans tonight, actually," she said carefully, no longer meeting his eyes.

"Working late does not count as 'plans' Granger. Especially on a Friday night. Come on, let me take you out."

She still wouldn't look at him. Merlin, could she not take a joke anymore? That was nothing if not a mild jab at her workaholic tendencies. Tendencies he happened to admire in her.

"I am... going out to dinner with someone," she murmured.

"With Weasley?"

"It's Potter."

"Huh?"

"I know you meant Ginny, and again, her last name is Potter and no, not with Ginny."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Whatever, Granger. So what, do you have a date or something?"

When she broke out in a furious blush, Draco felt his insides go cold. He'd guessed correctly, she had a date tonight. *Twenty fucking points to Slytherin.*

"Yes, actually, Padma set me up with Anthony Goldstein. He was in our year, in Ravenclaw."

"I see," he bit out in a clipped tone. Draco had zero memory of whatever Ravenclaw girl she'd just name-dropped, but made a mental note to spend the rest of the work day investigating him. "And where is your new beau taking you tonight?"

"He's not *my anything*, and we're only having dinner at the new Spanish place by Madam Malkin's."

"Sounds lovely," he sneered, lip curling, his tone indicating he thought it anything but lovely. "So will I be invited to the nuptials or were you going to spring that fact on me too when I least expect?"

Hermione went from sheepish to infuriated in roughly .002 seconds.

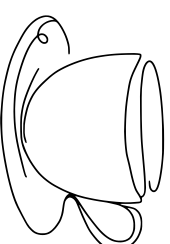
"For Merlin's sake, why do all my friends insist on making such a fuss about me going on *one* date? You probably go on dates all the time!"

Thought that about him, did she? He felt a perverse sort of pleasure in the fact that Hermione Granger was completely, totally, and devastatingly wrong.

Draco laughed bitterly. "Is that what you think Granger? Do tell, when have you ever heard me discuss a date with you? We chat every morning, do we not? Have I once mentioned a night out with a woman?"

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Well it's none of my business what you do in your love life, Malfoy."

Draco leveled his eyes at her and felt a sick thrill of satisfaction when she squirmed slightly under the intensity of his gaze.



Chapter Eleven

December 25, 2007

Stretching her arms overhead, Hermione couldn't help the wide grin as she sat up in bed. It was Christmas morning and she could already smell her father's gingersnap cookies baking in the oven. Waking up in her childhood bedroom, with all the wonderful sounds and smells that accompanied Christmas, Hermione could pretend for a few minutes that everything was back to how it was before the war.

Lost in happy memories, she traced random patterns along her faded pink bedspread. Her parents' home had remained thankfully untouched, and it only took a few days of thorough cleaning spells to undo the year of neglect while her parents had been in Australia. Her parents hadn't redecorated much over the years, which meant it was all too easy for Hermione to feel like a child again when she visited.

A sharp tapping on her window broke her reverie. Along with the cold winter air, a large and austere-looking eagle owl entered her room when she opened the window. It perched on her dresser, gazing imperiously up at her, and Hermione saw a letter and two packages tied to its leg.

As it continued to eye her with disdain (how was that even possible for an owl to do?) she gingerly approached the unfamiliar bird with her palms up. "Hello, it seems you have something for me. May I take the parcels from you?"

The bird merely blinked once and slowly lifted its leg out. Hermione made quick work of relieving its burden, and reached out to gently stroke the top of the owl's head. It recoiled at first, but then allowed her to lightly trace her fingers a few times down its back. She swallowed a giggle at the surly owl, thinking it would be none too amused if she laughed, but Hermione had a pretty good idea who this bird belonged to now.

"Trained you well, hasn't he? I'm sorry I don't have any treats for you here. Is he awaiting a reply?" The owl let out a short hoot that Hermione could only describe as dripping with sarcasm (seriously,

Remain Nameless

The female section of the party all bent their heads to huddle over the magazine as Susan dutifully returned to page 36. Ginny's stomach dropped as she was confronted once again, with the subject of too many of her conversations with her friends these days: Draco sodding Malfoy. The magazine had only included a few photos that Ginny could tell came from his appearances at recent quidditch matches for work. Other men on the list, like McLaggen, had actually volunteered to be photographed personally for their pages.

"Huh." Remarked Cho, after a few beats of silence. No one else seemed brave enough to offer an opinion one way or another.

"All right. I'll say it for the group, the man is ridiculously good-looking," said Susan firmly. Demelza let out a frustrated sigh. "You're right. He's fit. Very, very fit."

Parvati tutted in disapproval. "Come on, none of you are taking this seriously. Malfoy was a *Death Eater*, lest we all forget. I can't believe Romilda thought this was appropriate! He let them into our school!"

Ginny bit her own tongue, tamping down the urge to speak up in Malfoy's defense. She knew that Lavender's death at the hands of Fenrir Greyback still haunted Parvati, and anyone associated with that depraved werewolf or his Death Eater cronies was a sore point for her. Ginny didn't much feel like arguing on Malfoy's behalf, no matter how tragic his circumstances had been, when she still was working through her own feelings on his apparent redeemed character.

Surprisingly, Susan took up the mantle instead.

"He was a scared, stupid kid Parvati," she began gently. "And I don't know how many of you have spent time with him recently, but I worked on a project with him this summer and fall and he was nothing but professional."

The group turned to Susan in surprise and she shrugged. "He helped my department organize the international charity quidditch match with France. Not only is he fluent in French, up close you can observe just how form-fitting those dark, tailored suits are under the robes."

Most of the women released tense giggles and the subject of Malfoy was finally dropped. But Ginny's mind couldn't help but wander back to try and piece together all this new information from Hermione, Luna, Maureen Tyler, and now Susan Bones.

Really raking up those goodtall points these days, aren't we Malfoy? Merlin, maybe niffen have indeed learned to fly...

Hey Jude!9

"Turnabout's fair play, so let's discuss it then, shall we? Here, allow me to paint a picture for you of my glorious and exciting adventures with witches," he sneered and Hermione tried to cut in. "Malfoy, I'm sorry, look I—"

"Women aren't exactly bursting through my Flou for dates. And the ones that are? About one third are all wet in the knickers for my considerable wealth, another third are blood purist creeps who want me to knock them up so they can pop out another generation of Death Eaters, and the last third see me as a challenge for cheap thrills. That last third want the reformed bad boy as some weird notch in their bedpost, like I'm a sort of perverse achievement in a pity game they like to play."

So there you have it, Granger. My extremely limited options are to date a boring heiress who will spend all her time counting my gold, become my father, or date someone whose motivations begin and end with bragging to the rest of our world that they shagged an ex-Death Eater. None of these women actually want *me*."

She had the decency to look chastened once he'd completed his pathetic summary.

"Is that really how you see yourself?"

Draco let out a hollow laugh. "It's the reality of my pitiful love life, why sugarcoat it?"

"I think you have a lot to offer someone as a partner," she replied softly, holding his stare. Draco's heart thumped so hard in his chest, he worried she might actually hear the beating.

Whatever burst of hope her compliment inspired, it was spectacularly squashed by his more irrational and impulsive side.

Here a lot to offer, do I? Apparently not as much as this Ravenclaw prig. I'd offer you the fucking world if you let me, Granger.

Draco stood suddenly, not wanting to be around Hermione another minute more. "Well congratulations on the conference, Granger. Enjoy celebrating properly with your boyfriend," he said flatly, then turned on his heel and swept from the café before she could respond.

He made it roughly 50 paces down the street before he heard his name.

"Malfoy! Malfoy! Wait up, will you?"

Yes it was immature, he knew that, but it didn't stop Draco from increasing the speed of his long stride until he heard Hermione's footsteps pick up into a flat-out run behind him.

Taking pity on her much shorter legs, he slowed and came to a stop. He only had to wait 30 seconds more before she came swiftly around his body to face him head on.

"Why did you leave like that?" she demanded, still panting from her short run, the cold January air most likely burning in her lungs.

"Like what?" he drawled.

Hermione rolled her eyes and flapped her hands dramatically at her sides, dropping her work bag right on the sidewalk but making no move to retrieve it.

"Don't give me that, Malfoy! Why are you upset with me?"

He quirked a disbelieving eyebrow. "I'm not sure what gave you that impression. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an early meeting on the adjustment to maximum broom speeds." Draco made to step

Remain Nameless

around her, but she moved bodily in front of him, cutting off his path.

"You do not!" she huffed. "You told me yourself that meeting was moved to the first week of February because the new broom regulations from the Ministry don't go into effect until next week."

Damn her and her perfect fucking ability to recall every fact he ever uttered. *I give up, witch.*

"Whatever, Granger, just leave it all right? I've got to get to work."

Draco succeeded in stepping around her this time, but noticed the way her shoulders slumped as he passed.

"Why do you care if I go on this date?" she called softly.

Draco schooled his features into the hardened mask of his youth before turning around to face her. Her expression was open, pleading, and raw, so beautifully vulnerable that it hurt like an Unforgivable Curse to his chest.

"You know what Granger? I don't care. I really fucking don't."

This time when he stalked off, she didn't follow.

I am in control of this.



The first thing Draco did when he returned home from work in the evening, was cast the world's strongest Silencing Charm around his bed chambers.

The second thing he did was remove his outer robes, tie, pin, cuff links, wristwatch, suit jacket, and belt, until he was down to only his white dress-shirt and black trousers.

The third thing he did was summon an unopened bottle of firewhisky. Removing the stopper, he summoned a crystal tumbler and poured himself a generous measure.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth things all fell under the category of "glasses of firewhisky consumed by Draco" while he leaned against the mantel and stared into the roaring fire.

Try as he might to dull his memories from this morning with more and more alcohol, he couldn't get Granger's words out of his head.

I think you have a lot to offer someone as a partner.

Like what, Granger? He'd wanted to snarl at her. Vast amounts of gold, sure, but beyond that? Any respectable witch (read: non-Dark Lord sympathizing) would be signing up for a lifetime of polite shunning from those on the right side of the war or drooling from vapid sycophants looking for favors. Those were generally the two extremes of society's feelings towards Draco.

Granger's words burned through his mind again.

Why do you care if I go on this date?

He didn't care. He did not. *Go on a million fucking dates, Granger, while I sit alone and rot away inside this gigantic, empty home, a self-imposed reclusé because I'm so messed up I can't stomach the thought of you being happy without me.*

Hey Jude!9

"You ran into Malfoy? How uh... well how did that go?"

"Quite well!" exclaimed Luna. "I think I left him a little flustered after he apologized to me. Oh, and I invited him to join us here."

Ginny whipped her head toward the door, expecting to see a smirking pale face walk through, but none came.

"Don't worry Ginny, he politely declined. He was busy finishing up his Christmas shopping for Hermione."

Throughout her years-long friendship with Luna, Ginny liked to think she had become quite immune to her friend dropping ridiculous statements. Most of her creature or conspiracy related posting hardly raised an eyebrow from her anymore. But Luna dropping into conversation that Draco Malfoy was running around a few days before Christmas trying to buy Hermione a gift? Well that earned another jaw drop.

Before Ginny could compose herself enough to interrogate Luna, a boisterous voice called out to them.

"Oi! You two started drinking without us?" Scamus strode up to the table with a teasing grin, accompanied by Dean, Parvati, and Padma. Ginny and Luna made room around the table, as their old Dumbledore's Army comrades joined the party.

Strong bonds had formed amongst the group during the awful last year of the war. Under Neville's leadership, this ragtag group of students left behind at Hogwarts grew close as they sought in their own way to support Harry, Ron, and Hermione's mission. Roughly once a month, as many of the group as possible tried to get together at the Hog's Head to catch up and irritate Aberforth.

Soon their group had taken over most of the bar with the arrival of Susan Bones, Ernie MacMillan, Hannah Longbottom (nee Abbott), Terry Boot, Cho Chang, Michael Corner, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Demeza Robbins, and Jimmy Peakes.

Several rounds of butterbeer and firewhisky later, and Parvati produced her magazine's latest issue, containing the always hotly-debated list of Most Eligible Wizarding Bachelors to the delight of the women in the group.

"Seriously Parvati, thank you for finally getting Ron off the list. We've only been dating for four bloody years." Padma complained wryly.

"You're just mad because of how smug he was for months afterward," snickered Ginny, earning an eye roll from Padma as she muttered "insufferable git, I'll show him 'eligible'" under her breath.

"Yes well, I reminded Romilda Vane that she owed me a favor after I convinced Madamé Cournant to design her robes for the Ministry gala," replied Parvati coyly, flipping through the spread. Parvati was well connected in the wizarding fashion world as the fashion correspondent for Witch Weekly.

"Looks like your brother Charlie is the only Weasley this year, Gin," remarked Susan, and turning the page, she wrinkled her nose. "Ugh, Romilda included Cormac McLaggen? That man is a seriously uncouth prick."

"If you think that's bad, flip back to page 36," clipped Parvati.

Remain Nameless

"No thanks Lovegood—"

"Luna."

"Right, no thanks, Luna, I've still got to finish my shopping." He could not get away from this odd which fast enough. How the hell was Granger friends with this person?

The same could be said of you, could it not?

"Oh well, perhaps another time when you will feel more welcome. I hope Hermione enjoys the gift you bought. Have a safe and festive Christmas!"

She left Draco muttering under his breath and began walking away. He counted to ten breaths before he cursed the very day he was ever born before calling her back.

"Lovegood! Wait, please."

"Luna."

"Whatever. Listen, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the time you were... forced to spend in my family's home." He couldn't even bring himself to say the word "imprisoned." *Coward.*

"Oh yes I remember!" She exclaimed happily, as if he'd just brought up some pleasant memory of them bonding over p/ggny puffs.

"Right, well, sorry about... all that. Enjoy your evening with Weasley." Draco made to turn away, but her small hand quickly grabbed his own.

"It's Potter. And I do rather think you were as much a prisoner of the Manor as me. Farewell Draco Malfoy!"

Dropping his hand, she gave him a cheery wave and skipped down the street, completely oblivious to the perplexed stares of passersby.



The door to the Hog's Head creaked open and Ginny looked up excitedly to see Luna stroll in from the snowy street.

"Hey Luna! Got you a butterbeer already," Ginny slid the drink toward her friend.

Luna considered the drink but then shook her head. "Hmm, I think I'll trouble Aberforth for a gillywater instead. Rolf is home from his trip tomorrow and I think we're going to start trying for a child."

Ginny blinked back at her friend in surprise. "All right then, I guess I can finish this one off as well. Did you just apperate from Diagon?"

"Yes, I was performing my annual check for nargles at the apothecary. Levels were low this year, which is a good sign. Oh and I had a lovely conversation with Draco Malfoy."

Ginny's jaw dropped as Luna glided up to the bar to receive her non-alcoholic beverage. When she slid back next to Ginny, the redhead didn't know which question she wanted to ask first of the million that were on her tongue.

Hey Jude!9

"Fuck!" Draco roared and hurled his empty tumbler into the fireplace, where it shattered loudly against the stone and wood.

Pulling a hand roughly through his hair, he growled and all but collapsed into the armchair behind him. Not even bothering with a fresh glass, Draco yanked the bottle of Ogden's off the side table and took several long pulls straight from the bottleneck.

He wanted to be numb, feel nothing. *There's a poison for that...*

No, he wouldn't go back to using. Not over this. *I am in control of this.*

Now Healer Browning's voice was in his head. *When you feel that urge to use, Draco, try to take a moment and sort through why you have the urge. What emotion is the primary driver of your actions?*

Jealousy.

Draco groaned and ran a hand over his face. He was so jealous he was three-quarters of the way through an entire bottle of Ogden's. He was so jealous of some other man taking Granger to dinner he wanted to throw up. He was so jealous of Granger sharing drinks and intimate conversation with this faceless Ravenclaw sod that he wanted to smash every piece of expensive antique furniture he owned not with his wand, but with his bare hands.

Fuck Browning and fuck me, and double-fuck Anthony fucking Goldstein.

Wait no, he didn't want any fucking for Anthony Goldstein.

Glancing up at the clock over the mantel, his bleary eyes saw that it was closing in on 10 o'clock. Surely they would have finished their dinner by now? Draco imagined Goldstein to be the type of pompous date to suggest that Granger "Simply must try the dessert port," even though neither of them had visited this particular eatery before. The Ravenclaw ponce probably took the lead on ordering all the courses too, seeking to woo Granger by attempting the Spanish pronunciations of the dishes.

Jealousy.

Granger probably did know how to correctly pronounce all the dish names. She probably could also list out the ingredients and their region of origin. She would have studied the menu beforehand in anticipation of her evening. And while that worthless prat she'd agreed to spend her Friday night with most likely sought that knowledge to impress his female companion, Draco knew Granger's motives to be entirely different. Granger didn't soak up knowledge on every topic within reach because she wanted to show off. Her accumulation of facts was never boastful in nature. Sure, at Hogwarts she took obvious delight in the praise showered upon her by professors, but Granger's insatiable thirst for knowledge was simply because it thrilled her to discover something new. This unending quest she embarked upon to learn absolutely everything was one of the sexiest things about her.

Wait, wait? Sexiest? That implied that he found more than one thing sexy about Granger. That term indicated that there was a whole entire list ranking the sexiness of Granger's qualities.

Draco pulled the bottle to his lips again and almost finished it off entirely. Fine, all right? Granger was very attractive. He'd obviously noticed her beauty on several occasions, what was the big deal?

She'd really grown into that impossible mane of hair, somehow it looked both wild and soft at the

same time. Speaking of soft, her full, pink lips looked ever so inviting, especially when she was gnawing on the end of a pen, lost in thought. And if she got going on a passion of hers? Those warm brown eyes would light up and burn with an almost blinding intensity. Draco had to will his body not to seize up when she directed them his way, mid-rant. There were days when Draco felt she looked at him like he was worth something. Like he was more than just a failed Death Eater with parental issues and too much money. And the way her skirts hugged her arse...

“Bloody hell,” he mumbled and drained the rest of the bottle in one long pull.

The hands on the clock were edging closer to 11 now. This farce of a date had to be over by now, right? Granger wasn't the type of witch to invite a man to her home on the first date. *And you would know this information, ha?*

Draco furiously chucked the empty bottle of Ogden's into the fireplace where it smashed spectacularly and summoned another bottle.

Jealousy.

He didn't need any damn Dreamless Sleep potions when he could get blind drunk instead. Draco took another long gling from the new bottle and rested it against his knee. What if she did invite Anthony Goldstein over to her place after dinner?

The most fantastical and gut-wrenching vision began playing out in his mind's eye. Granger shyly asking if her date would like to come upstairs for a bit. She'd let him into a flat that probably prioritized comfort over style and with books overflowing everywhere. She'd offer to make coffee or tea and invite him to sit on some monstrosity of a sofa.

Would he make her laugh? What would they even chat about? Probably reminisce about “the good old days” at Hogwarts. And wouldn't it be all too easy for Granger to fall for someone like that? Some boring, well-tread tosser who had the luxury of not being born into a cursed family? How happy their school-year memories must be.

More whisky found its way down Draco's throat. The alcohol couldn't stay the conjured, fictional scene plaguing him.

Abruptly the imaginary scene swam ahead in his mind, shifting to the pair no longer talking, but grazing longingly at each other from across the couch. Draco had no idea what the hell Anthony Goldstein even looked like, but he envisioned a vague, brunette, sort-of-tan person.

And now that unremarkable, non-descript man was moving his face slowly toward Granger. Granger, biting her pouty, pink lips shyly, before accepting a soft kiss from her date.

Draco felt sick to his stomach. This was all in his head, but it still made his gut lurch. The horrifying hallucination moved onward, with Granger touching her date's chest lightly, welcoming his body weight atop her on the sofa. The scene skipped a few chapters ahead and now she was leading her faceless date to her bedroom...

Merlin, this was fucking killing him, taking complete control over his emotional stability.

Jealousy.

So this was it, the price he must pay. The ultimate punishment for Draco Malfoy's sins. He'd avoid-

Draco stopped dead in his tracks as a young woman with long blonde hair and protruberant blue eyes approached him with a confident smile. *Loony? No, Granger said that was cruel... Luna? Luna Lovegood.* Then Draco remembered with a swooping sense of shame that the smiling witch before him was once imprisoned in his Manor's dungeon for a few months.

“Ern, hello Lovegood,” he tentatively replied. Her smile, if it were possible, grew even wider.

“Oh good, you do recognize me! You can call me Luna, if you please. It's been a number of years though, hasn't it? Since we've seen one another?”

“I suppose it has,” he offered, completely unsure of himself or why this witch had bothered to flag him down in the middle of the street.

Luna cocked her head to the side and narrowed her wide eyes slightly. “Did you just buy a present for Hermione?”

What the fuck?

“I—I mean, I... perhaps I did pick up something for Granger, what's it to you?” If Luna Lovegood was bothered at all by his aggressive tone, she didn't show it. She simply shrugged carelessly. “I saw you coming out of her favorite store just now. You also seem to be in rather a hurry, much like the rest of the last-minute Christmas shoppers today, so I assumed you were picking up a gift for someone. Plus, I am aware that the two of you are friends now, which is quite nice, in my opinion.”

“Granger told you we're friends?”

Luna only offered another shrug and those slightly mad, wide eyes. “Not personally, no. But I often overhear her talking with Ginny about you when we're all at the Burrow. Sometimes even my friends can be forgetful of the fact that I have two working ears. They used to be better about hiding their conversations. You seem to be a most perplexing creature, but then Hermione also has been quite happy as of late too, which I gather is your doing.”

Draco opened and closed his mouth, lost for words.

“You know, people always say we look related, but I think my shade is much more yellow.” Without any further warning she walked right into Draco's personal space and lifted a bunch of her hair against the side of his head.

“Hrm, see I was right. My blonde is much more yellow than yours.” She took a step back and gave him an appraising stare.

“Lovegood, what the hell was that?”

“Would you like to join me at the Hog's Head?”

“Would I like to... what?”

Luna Lovegood actually had the audacity after her weird little hair stunt to cross her arms impatiently over her chest and appear annoyed at having to repeat her abrupt and insane question.

“Would you like to join me at the Hog's Head? I'm meeting Ginny and quite a few other friends for drinks and general merriment. Would you like to come and celebrate in the Yuletide spirit?”

Draco didn't know whether to laugh at her, shout at her, or simply turn on his heel and leave her in the middle of the street, babbling nonsense.

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hol from Theo. Very nice gifts, of course, but Granger's more personalized offering yesterday had just about shattered him from the inside.

No one in Draco's life in the past several years, or possibly ever, had put such thought and care into a gift for him. Granger had spent actual spare time (and a fair bit of gold it seemed, on the fountain pen) all to give him a small measure of happiness. That he would rank so highly in her life was as thrilling as it was terrifying.

She'd been so nervous of his reaction, he could tell it would break her apart if he'd responded negatively. He couldn't blame her, this dynamic between them being so new, she probably still anticipated that curled lip of his and a biting insult. But he'd well and truly meant it when he expressed his appreciation. Damn it all, he really was going soft, wasn't he?

And then there was the hug. The hug he would have to think about later, because Draco did not need to be any more indebted to Hermione Granger and so he needed to focus on how to repay this Christmas kindness somehow.

This was why Draco found himself tearing through wizarding London on one of the busiest shopping days of the year. Where the fuck should he even begin?

Jewelry was a laughable option. That was far too serious for a friend, and outside of a few small, delicate looking pieces, she didn't seem to wear much of it anyway.

Dress robes? Dear Merlin, no, he'd probably suffer a public panic attack if he had to discuss his best guess at Granger's measurements with a shop proprietor.

Sweets wouldn't be enough, and he couldn't be sure what her favorite candies were either. He made a mental note to ask her soon.

Wine? Flowers? Both options were too impersonal. Come on, fucking think. What was Granger's passion?

As if the universe wanted to supply the answer for him, Draco found his feet had landed him right outside Flourish and Blots. Of course, books!

Almost an hour later of squeezing past other patrons of the busy book shop and combing through every genre of every section, Draco was no closer to selecting a gift for Hermione. Every time he picked up a book and read the title, he would eventually place it back with a sigh. She'd most likely read every book in here, how the hell was he supposed to select one she didn't already own? He needed something more original than a stupid book.

Circling round to the back again, his eyes landed on a table of handsome leather journals. Picking up two of them, he turned them over in his hands, an idea taking shape. It would take a significant amount of charms work on his part, but he was confident enough in his skills that he could get the journals to do what he needed.

Smiling to himself, he completed his purchase and left the bookstore. Another idea struck him as he stepped back out onto the crowded streets and he knew there was one more stop to make before going home.

"Hello Draco Malfoy!" called a cheerful, dreamy voice.

Hey Jude!9

ed Azkaban and death only to be tortured by his own inner Dementor that delighted in showing him scenes of what he could never, ever, have with Granger.

What would he even do with a proper chance at a date with her? He sure as hell wouldn't waste any time on pleasures if Granger invited him into her flat post-dinner. If she let him, he'd snag her senseless the minute she closed the door behind them, get her right up against a wall and bury his hands in her hair. He'd slowly coax her pretty mouth open with his tongue and swallow every little breath and moan from her. Maybe she'd pull on his hair in turn too, urging him on, and he'd happily oblige, kissing and licking down the exposed skin of her throat and neck until she was gasping in his ear and then—

Draco's eyes snapped open and he froze, completely ashamed of himself as he withdrew his hand from his trousers. He had been stroking his own erection for the last few minutes to his impossible fantasy without even realizing Merlin, he was a pathetic creep.

A lonely, pathetic, creep, who should probably put down the whisky and go to bed and not think about what Granger looks like in a dress. Or out of a dress. Merlin, help him.

Slipping down to his boxers, he settled into bed and tried to will his body to calm down. The alcohol usually did a decent job of dulling his senses, but all Draco could see when he closed his eyes were Granger's big brown eyes.

Big brown eyes that would flutter closed in pleasure while he ravaged the bare skin of her shoulder and collarbone with his lips. His hand once again resumed stroking himself and Draco no longer had the strength to stop. He knew it was wrong. Granger was his friend. But now his mind's eye pictured how it would feel to pick up her lithe frame and grip her backside while her legs wrapped themselves around his torso. Their frantic kissing would reach a fever pitch as he'd walk them to her bed, lay her down gently and crawl up her beautiful body. His hand began working faster, and Draco could feel his climax building. A few swift strokes later and Draco came all over himself to the image of Hermione writhing with pleasure underneath him, moaning his name while he pounded into her.

Draco lay in his bed, quite alone and panting, unsure of how he got to his point. Disgusted with himself, exhaustion and drunkenness eventually combined forces and he fell asleep in mere minutes.



The food was divine. The wine was delectable. The conversation flowed easily.

So why was Hermione, to borrow a quaint turn-of-phrase from Ron, bored out of her gourd?

The evening started off well. She'd met Anthony outside the restaurant and was pleased that he was still quite handsome. They exchanged an awkward handshake that elicited nervous laughs from each of them, and she immediately liked his easy smile.

The restaurant was tapas style, and they had an enjoyable time taking turns selecting small plates to share. Hermione asked Anthony about his life post-Hogwarts, as they ran in adjacent social circles

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and she hadn't kept up with him. While he was talking about how he got started in the Department of Magical Transportation at the Ministry because he'd always been fascinated about how to improve the Floo Network, Hermione found her attention wandering.

She was sitting in the middle of a dimly lit, stylish restaurant with an attractive male who had not once sneered in her direction all evening, yet she couldn't help but feel a bubble of guilt in her gut. Malfoy's expression this morning when she'd told him about her date with Anthony had haunted her all day. As had the callous way he'd dismissed her when she'd chased after him down the street like a bloody lunatic. Honestly, what was wrong with her?

Scratch that, why the hell should she feel guilty? She was a perfectly single young woman and who she chose to spend her Friday evenings with was none of Malfoy's concern.

But was he...? Could he have been...?

No, he wasn't... jealous? Hermione almost snorted into her wine glass at that ridiculous notion and re-focused her attention on Anthony. She shouldn't spare another thought on that self-centered, spoiled, irritating man-child who had completely ruined her Friday morning by lashing out at her for no real reason.

Hermione had been so excited on Thursday evening when she'd received the official notification that she was an invited speaker to The Evolution of Rune Translation and its Effects on Modern Wizarding Culture conference in Venice. And Malfoy had been the first person she'd thought to tell. Malfoy, who'd not only listened to all her theories regarding the communication methods of ancient Merpeople, but had actively engaged in discussions with her, encouraged her to apply, and helped her polish her written statement.

His genuine delight and pride in her accomplishment meant the world to her in that moment. Hermione couldn't ignore the way her heart had fluttered when he'd suggested they go out to dinner to celebrate. But she'd already committed to her date with Anthony.

Speaking of, she should probably be listening to what her date was saying.

"...which of course would solve the privacy issue that sometimes arises when people don't know how to ward their Floos properly," Anthony was saying. Hermione nodded enthusiastically, hoping he hadn't noticed her mind drifting elsewhere.

"I must confess, I'm not a fan of Floo calls, seeing how uncomfortable it can be to kneel the whole time, even with a proper Cushioning Charm. I'd rather just Floo all the way to my destination and conduct the conversation in person. It's such a shame the wizarding world doesn't have the Muggle equivalent of mobile phones."

"Precisely! This is why Muggle Studies was one of my favorite subjects. I think we could learn a lot if we worked on adapting some of their technology," he replied genially.

Hermione smiled as she thought about a certain Christmas gift she'd received. "I was recently given a pair of charmed journals that sort of mimic text messaging. That's probably as close as it gets these days."

Anthony's eyes widened as he went to take a sip of wine. "Someone gave you charmed journals?"

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with no value beyond his good looks.

Hermione wasn't blind, she saw how most women, and some men, in the café eyed Draco every morning. More than a few jealous death glares had been cast Hermione's way since they started sitting together all those months ago. It made sense, really, that he would be ogled openly in the Muggle world. In that world, he was just an anonymous and obnoxiously handsome young man, with alluring white-blond hair, molten silver eyes, and perfectly tailored suits complete with ornate cufflinks.

No one at that Muggle café except for Hermione knew the burden of his past actions and family name that he carried on those broad shoulders. Hermione let out a groan and covered her face in her hands. Of course she noticed his attractiveness, who wouldn't? Yes, *obnoxiously handsome* was accurate, especially when he put on the aristocratic airs, complete with a sneer or a smirk. But when he well and truly smiled? When he smiled because she'd said something funny, or complimented him, or he snaggled the last blueberry scone? That genuine smile made Draco Malfoy devastatingly handsome.

Hermione shook her head and sat upright. She had plenty of work that needed doing before she knocked off for the holidays, and sitting here daydreaming about Malfoy's painfully gorgeous face was certainly not productive. *He's your friend. He's only your friend. Friend. Friend. A friend that you hugged for the very first time today, which is completely normal, really, because you hug Harry and Ron and Neville all the time. And are you usually this jittered after you hug Harry or Ron or Neville?*

Perhaps that young now assistant in their department had left a spare copy of the latest Witch Weekly out on the common area table again?



Saturday, December 22, 2007

Draco tore down the streets of Diagon Alley like a man possessed. He really was a stupendously selfish, short-sighted moron. Why the fuck didn't he think to get Granger a Christmas gift?

He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. Leave it to Granger to give him something impossibly thoughtful that it had just about rendered him speechless yesterday. He'd remembered to thank her properly, right? The morning had honestly been a blur of guilt and shame and other pesky and mael archaic *feelings* that he still hadn't quite sorted through.

But underneath all the angst at being caught flat-footed and embarrassingly empty-handed, a stubborn feeling of unbridled joy was still taking up residence in his chest.

She had thought to go to all that trouble for him? Draco wracked his brain for a recent memory of a Christmas present, or any present, that hadn't come from either his mother or Theo. His childhood years had obviously been filled to the brim with an extravagant number of material items waiting for him come Christmas morning, courtesy of his parents.

Now an adult and with his father gone, Draco's Christmas haul generally comprised new dress robes, cufflinks, and Parisian cologne from his mother, and an expensive bottle of some vintage alco-

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they both let out a gasp of surprise.

"Is that...? Oh wow, it is! He's definitely never been listed before!"

"Is that a recent photo? Merlin, he is *gorgeous*, though, isn't he?"

One of the women clucked her tongue at her friend and scoffed, "Sure, if you can get past that pesky little Dark Mark on his forearm."

Hermione froze, feeling a creeping sense of dread. They couldn't possibly be discussing...

"Sole heir to the Malfoy fortune... generously donates to many philanthropic causes... successful quidditch scout... hasn't been seen publicly with another witch in years..." the woman's friend read aloud and Hermione's heart sank.

"Look, I get that he's outrageously fit and all, but come on, you'd really consider a relationship with someone from that family?"

"Who said anything about a 'relationship'? I certainly wouldn't be looking for anything long-term," the woman giggled.

"Hmm, but long-term might mean a *very* luxurious lifestyle."

"And what happened to being disgusted by his Dark Mark?"

"With the amount of gold in his vaults, I think I could look past it..."

Hermione snatched up her papers and work bag and stormed out of the cafeteria before she could hear another word, leaving half of her lunch forgotten. Swiping at furious tears that sprang suddenly to her eyes, she hurried to her office. Once behind the safety of her closed door, Hermione tried to sort through the feelings that caused the tears. She steadied her breathing and began to focus. She felt angry, obviously. Angry at those women for the callous way they spoke of her friend, and at the cruel nature of gossip in general. Having been on the receiving end of her fair share of negative press and downright defamatory articles from several wizarding publications, she was all too familiar with the viciousness of the magical rumor mill.

From what she'd learned from getting to know Malfoy, he was a very private person as an adult, and he would likely be horrified by the attention this Witch Weekly spread would garner.

Sympathy and hurt were also coursing through her. Hurt on behalf of her friend for the way those women discussed his reputation, and sympathy knowing that many of their world agreed with them. He had been a *child*, forced into a war and performed desperate acts to save his own parents. He'd done what he could during a war to take care of his own, misguided though it may have been. Could either of those witches say the same of their wartime conduct?

And at the bottom of her pile of feelings, she recognized a nagging sense of shame. Just over a year ago, would she not have also thought uncharitable things about Malfoy? When he'd first approached her in the café, did she not also assume the worst of him?

But that didn't excuse the way those stupid women were talking about him! One of them clearly thought of Draco as nothing more than a wealthy pureblood bigot, making despicable assumptions about his character. Nothing that daft woman couldn't overlook for a bit of gold, apparently. While the other viewed Malfoy as a desirable object to play with and then discard, a handsome piece of meat

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Those are exceedingly rare!"

Hermione felt a blush creep up her face. "Well actually, my friend bought a pair of blank journals and performed all the charms work on their own."

Her date's eyes widened again. "That's... honestly impressive. Your friend must have put a significant amount of effort into the magic required."

Yes, Malfoy was a friend. Just a friend. And damn it all, how did he worm his way into their conversation tonight? Hermione drained the rest of her wine glass and poured herself some more from the shared bottle.

Anthony was a perfectly nice, perfectly respectable and agreeable date. She told him about her upcoming trip to Venice in the spring and he asked all the right, polite questions. He asked polite questions about her parents (she left out the obitivating for now, as it wasn't exactly first-date type conversation). He asked polite questions about Harry and the Weasleys.

So why did Hermione feel like chugging this entire bottle of wine? What was missing tonight? Why did all these easy questions and dialogue about her everyday life leave her feeling something close to apathy?

A flash of blond hair behind Anthony made her start. Her eyes zeroed in on the spot that attracted her attention only to see a young blonde woman donning a white winter hat as she left the restaurant. Her hair wasn't quite the right shade, but in that quick moment, Hermione's gaze had been drawn, hoping to see...

To see whom exactly?

"Miss me already, Granger?" she heard his snarky, teasing tone all too easily in her head. "You've eaten an awful lot of dead animals this evening, shouldn't a bleeding heart such as yourself be a vegetarian?" The faux-Malfoy in her mind coupled his quip with that irritating smirk of his. Yes, that would be just like him, starting a debate with her in the middle of a meal over the ethics of meat-eating as someone who worked on behalf of creature rights.

"Um, Hermione?"

Hermione blinked as Anthony called her name again. "Sorry, what were you saying?" She was beyond embarrassed at having been called out for not paying attention. Too busy fantasizing about a quarrelsome, blond git.

"Did you want to order dessert?" Anthony asked again. Hermione looked into light blue eyes and saw nothing but kindness there. He didn't deserve to have a distracted date. With a heavy heart, Hermione demurred, saying she was far too full.

As they left the restaurant, she'd given him an awkward hug and a parting sentiment of "Let's do this again some time... as friends." Smart man that he was (Ravenclaw and all) he'd gotten the hint, if his pained smile was anything to go by.

Apparating home, Hermione sighed as she climbed into bed alone and reached for her mobile. She'd promised Ginny to text her the minute the date was over. Hermione was quite proud of herself for teaching Ginny how to use a mobile, which allowed them to have more private conversations and

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was much quicker than owl post.

H: Hello friend. I'm home now.

G: Already? I'm guessing Anthony is not staying the night?

H: No, of course not!

G: Well, why not? We're adults, Hermione, who cares?

H: I care. Besides, I think this was a one-time thing. I don't see any future dates.

G: That bad?

H: No, not at all. He really was quite lovely company.

G: Quite lovely company? Just say "boring" and save yourself a few words.

H: He wasn't boring, there was simply a lack of spark. It was like going out to dinner with Ron or

Harry.

G: Well I'm proud of you for putting yourself out there. See you Sunday?

H: Of course, give my love to Harry.

Hermione turned off the mobile and relaxed against her pillow. As she turned off the lights, she felt a warm weight settle on her feet and pecked down at Crookshanks flopping down for the night.

"Stilly old thing" she chuckled and closed her eyes. Try as Hermione might, sleep would not come easily. This date should have worked out for her. Anthony was intelligent, kind, and good-looking.

He wasn't who you wanted to be out with tonight. The thought floated across her mind and Hermione sighed.

She'd already given Draco a piece of her heart, as a friend. Each of her friends held a portion of Hermione's heart, in their own way. Ginny as the sister she never had. Harry as her best friend and brother. Ron as her first love. All of the Weasleys, their spouses and partners, Luna and Rolf, these people all took up residence in her chest. Hermione did not view love as a finite resource, but how much of herself could she afford to give Draco without breaking in the process?

She didn't quite know the answer to that question yet, but she did know that the answer did not lie in lukewarm dates with other men.



Draco awoke on Saturday morning feeling like he'd been trampled by a herd of Erupting.

"Crick!" he called hoarsely. A house-elf appeared instantly at his bedside and gave a short bow.

"How can I help you this morning, sir?"

Draco groaned again and clutched his head. "Hangover Potion, please."

"I'll have Watson begin brewing one immediately. It should be ready in 15 minutes. Shall I bring it to you directly?"

Draco waved an impatient hand. A proper shower was in order before he could do anything else.

"No, have it waiting with breakfast. Set out some toast... on second thought, set out every bread-re-

Hey Jude!9

ing through her, and it was perhaps the high from his positive reaction to her gift, the impending holiday break, or all the sugar from her hot chocolate that influenced her impulsivity.

Hermione turned to face him and beamed. "If you get bored over the next week in that big fancy home of yours, send me an owl. Happy Christmas, Malfoy!"

Before he could mutter what surely would have been a stoic response to her effusive goodbye, Hermione stepped lightly toward him, and threw her arms around his middle in a quick hug. Draco's entire body seemed to stiffen in shock before his arms came around her in a tentative embrace. The whole motion lasted but a few seconds, but it was enough for Hermione to relish in the feeling of strong arms wrapped around her shorter frame.

Dropping her arms and ending the hug, she turned quickly on her heel and walked away briskly before he could see the blush staining her face.

Hermione walked away so fast she never noticed that Draco remained rooted to the spot she'd left him, eyes never leaving her back until she disappeared around the corner.



The Ministry cafeteria was less crowded than usual today, which meant for once, Hermione could sit and eat her lunch at one of the covered tables by the enchanted windows. Today's magical weather display was gently falling snow and bright sunshine. Magical Maintenance must be feeling the holiday spirit.

A pair of young witches sat at the table just behind her, gossiping cheerily over the latest issue of *Witch Weekly*. Apparently, the year-end edition had come with a list of 2007's most eligible wizarding bachelors, and the women were eagerly debating the merits of each man.

Hermione tried to tune them out by focusing on her final draft of the crup-breeding regulations, and wondering if she might send a quick letter to Hagrid with a question, when a familiar name broke through her thoughts.

"...Charlie Weasley, oh, absolutely! Plus, he tames dragons, so there's definitely something sort of rugged about him!"

Hermione chuckled under her breath. Poor Charlie, his mother was always trying to set him up with one witch or another. Molly had even made him in years past about what a lovely couple Charlie and Hermione would make, but Hermione had quickly shut that down. Not only would it be beyond weird to date her ex-boyfriend's brother, but she had a growing suspicion that Charlie preferred the company of wizards to witches.

"Oliver Wood, that's a no-brainer there..." sighed one of the witches.

"You love your quidditch players, don't you? Would you offer to handle his broomstick for him?"

The women dissolved into giggles and Hermione bit the inside of her cheek to hide her own mirth.

She heard a rustling of magazine pages behind her as the women flipped to the next suitor and

was waiting for the guillotine to fall. He was taking ages to unwrap it and Hermione only just resisted pulling out her hair. Oh sweet Merlin, why had she thought this was a good idea? Of all the ill-conceived, morose, presumptuous things she could have done, buying Draco Malfoy a Christmas present had to be top of the list. He could afford to buy himself literally anything he wanted, not to mention he probably received all sorts of extravagant items from his mother, so why on earth did she think her meager offering would be appreciated?

A warm, genuine chuckle interrupted her thoughts of self-doubt. "Oh, well played Granger. This is bloody brilliant. Don't even think about borrowing one off me; all these pens belong to me!"

Hermione let out a huge exhale in relief at his gleeful reaction to the packet of ballpoint pens. She'd have to be blind not to notice how he jealously eyed her writing instrument every morning, admiring the ease of use over quills. And now he wouldn't have to interrupt her work every morning by demanding to borrow one.

"I'll have to teach you to hold one properly; your handwriting is atrocious," she teased and he shot back a playful glare.

As he reached for the second present, Hermione held her breath again. The wrapping fell away to reveal a small, handsome leather case. Draco propped it open and picked up the solid gold pen contained within. He held it up with long, graceful fingers to the light, eyeing it curiously, and then rotated it in front of his eyes to read the words Hermione had engraved for him: *Draco Lucius Malfoy*. Turning it over again, his eyes took in the opposite side design, which had a pattern of stars that formed his namesake constellation.

"That's called a fountain pen," she explained quickly. "Muggles usually reserve them for special occasions or for signing important, valuable documents because they're considered a luxury good and status symbol due to the limited amount of ink and manual refilling process, plus the gold material of the pen itself. Since I know you're in charge of all your family's financial obligations, I thought you might like something nice for significant agreements or donations. Of course, if you think it's stupid or don't want to use it I can always—"

"Granger," he interrupted her babbling.

"Yes?"

She watched his throat bob as he swallowed before speaking. "This is the most... You really didn't... you really shouldn't have done this for me."

The gray eyes that met hers were so intense, it made Hermione's breath catch in her throat. The strong, earnest emotion contained there... was it guilt? Shame? She certainly hadn't meant for her gift to make him feel anything negative.

"It was nothing, Malfoy," she assured him softly.

"It's not *nothing*. Th-thank you," he countered, and Hermione detected a slight tremor in his voice. When he finally broke their shared gaze, Hermione still felt like her breathing was unsteady. She had agonized over her decision all week but he had liked her gift!

As they walked silently together to work, Hermione felt the giddiness of the holiday season cours-

lated item Watson feels like preparing?" Yes, lots and lots of bread to soak up all that blasted alcohol. Any thoughts of bacon or eggs made him queasy.

"Very good sir." With a short bow, the house-elf disappeared with a soft crack.

Draco swung his legs over the side of the bed and rested his head in his palms for a minute. Eventually, he found the strength to stand and staggered towards the en-suite bathroom. No, a shower wouldn't do, he could barely hold his weight up. He drew himself a warm bath instead, sighing gratefully as he sunk his body into the comforting soapy water filling the large, marble tub.

Draco closed his eyes and leant his head back, thinking about his immature behavior last night. He'd gotten so rip-roaring drunk that he'd destroyed a glass tumbler, two bottles of whisky, and then capped it all off by wanking himself to sleep. Truly, a memorable evening.

Merlin, what the hell was wrong with him? How was he supposed to look Granger in the eye on Monday, knowing he'd tossed it to lewd thoughts about her?

But then, she'd probably meet him Monday morning telling him all about her wonderful, enchanting date from Friday evening. Draco knew he wouldn't be able to stomach her blabbing away about some other man, eyes all aglow as she fondly reminisced about her romantic night out.

What if Goldstein stayed the night at Granger's place, in her bed? Draco imagined what she looked like in the early morning light, tangled in bed sheets. What if she rolled over, completely nude, ready for a morning shag, kissing her way up Draco's chest...?

Fuck! Was this really happening again? Draco sighed and felt there was nothing else for it, he was going to need to relieve his rapidly hardening member.

In for a Knot, in for a Golden...



Draco wondered if she would even show up at the café Monday morning. He didn't have to wait long to find out, for there she was, entering at her usual time. As she locked eyes with him and walked over, Draco felt something stir in his chest; a cross between relief and guilt. He couldn't quite read her expression, and he didn't know if that was good or bad.

"Good morning," she greeted stiffly.

"Granger," he replied. She dropped her bag like always and left to grab her tea from the counter. Draco may or may not have held his breath the entire time it took her to get her drink and return to sit with him.

"How was your weekend?" That simple question that fell from her lips caused panic to erupt within him. Didn't she want to tell him first about her perfect, amazing evening with Anthony Goldstein? For Merlin's sake could she just put him out of his misery already?

Not only did he want to know about her dumb date, but he had no idea how to answer her question truthfully. *Well Granger, I absolutely destroyed my liver and brain on Friday because I don't know how to handle*

Remain Nameless

negative emotions in a healthy way, so I decided to down two whole bottles of Ogden's. Then I got off thinking about shagging you. Saturday was also just as productive: I rubbed one out in the bath, fantasizing about fucking you, then decided to go flying sans cloak or warming charms in a futile effort to calm my traitorous body down. I even got a heater's club out and skinned bladders for night on two hours until my arms wanted to fall off. But even that didn't stop me from serving my own heater's club (if you catch my disgusting meaning) later that night because apparently you've turned me into a man with the unsophisticated sexual urges of a Third Year who's just discovered the concept of wanting. To cap off my wondrous weekend, I barely slept three hours last night because I woke up screaming from a usual nightmare of my aunt torturing you.

Instead of that unbinged rant, Draco gruffly replied "Fine."

Hermione pursed her lips and fixed him with a hard stare. "Do you want to discuss what happened on Friday?"

Do I want to discuss the fact that I'm wildly jealous of some Ravenclaw twat when I have no right to feel this way?

No, not really, Granger.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he ground out evenly and averted his eyes.

He heard her huff impatiently and looked up to see her throwing her hands up, all indignant. Damn it all, she was even attractive when she was hacked off at him.

"Fine, if that's how you want to be! In case you were interested, which it wouldn't matter in the slightest anyway, the evening with Anthony was most pleasant but I don't plan on seeing him again."

Draco sat up straighter in his chair, hopping his ears hadn't deceived him. "You don't?"

"No," Hermione replied firmly. "It was nice for Padma to set us up, but I don't see the need to go on more dates with someone I'm not interested in pursuing romantically."

Well, well, well. Draco made no response to this bit of news and sipped his coffee. His delicious, heavenly, perfectly hot coffee. Had anything ever tasted so good? He suddenly felt famished and since he'd skipped breakfast, though he might treat himself. This day seemed to be turning right around.

"Fancy a scone?"

"Sorry?"

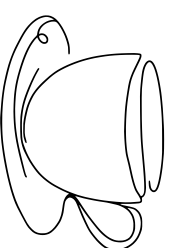
"A scone. My treat. Pick a flavor."

"Oh, blueberry, please."

"You better hope there's more than one of them left, Granger, or you're getting another flavor," he teased and went off to grab the pastries.

When he returned, Hermione was giving him a curiously smug smirk, but Draco thought nothing of it. Instead, he asked her about her conference presentation prep and how she wanted to organize her speech. He asked question after question about her runes studies and Mermish culture and their lively conversation was only interrupted by a startled Hermione glancing at her watch and realizing they were running behind.

Draco didn't mind, he could be a few minutes late every now and then. Was it so bad that he wanted to luxuriate in the fact that Anthony Goldstein had failed in his attempt to secure Granger's affections? This disastrous date had given Draco more mornings with her. He wasn't naïve, he knew



Chapter Ten

Friday, December 21, 2007

Hermione hadn't felt this nervous in quite some time. This was their last morning together before their Christmas break started and they most likely wouldn't see one another until the New Year. It was now or never. But maybe she should just wait and send this through owl post. That way, he could open it in private and she wouldn't need to witness his reaction. She considered her options as she tapped her pen rhythmically against her notebook and shifted her weight to cross and then uncross her legs. Maybe she could just hand it to him when they parted for work and—

"Did you accidentally order espresso again?" His bored drawl tore through her anxious thoughts.

"Sorry?"

"You're fidgeting in your seat like a First Year who just discovered peppermint toads and your face is all blotchy and red. What gives?"

Her eyes widened in mortification at being called out for her odd behavior and appearance and her nervousness increased by ten-fold. Subtlety was clearly not in her skillset.

"Granger, seriously, is something wrong? You look like you're going to—"

"I have something for you!" she blurted loudly and inelegantly and watched his eyebrows raise in surprise.

She waited with bated breath as Draco's mouth opened and then closed in shock, and he seemed confused by what she had practically shouted. Unable to take the awkward silence any longer, Hermione huffed and reached into her bag.

Pulling out two small, wrapped gifts, she placed both on the table next to his hands, biting her lip as he stared them down.

"You got me a gift?" he asked hollowly, not meeting her eyes.

"Two actually," she quipped, making a brave stab at humor.

Draco's face was impassive as he reached a pale hand toward the first and Hermione felt like she

Remain Nameless

"They came to understand that it was done to protect them, eventually. But I can still see it in their eyes. That mistrust. I can hear them thinking it, Malloy: *'How could our own daughter violate our minds?'*"

Draco was incensed on her behalf. "But don't they know about you? Don't they know everything you've done for our world? What you mean to wizardkind?"

Hermione gave him a wam smile. "You know, Ron and I used to ask Harry that question all the time about his family. Now, having experienced it all firsthand... I understand why it's easier to not bother. Of course, my parents know the gist of the war, since I obviously had to explain why it was necessary to hide them across the world. But how could I begin to describe a horcrux, or why it was so important to destroy multiple ones? How could I tell them what the Cruciatus Curse feels like, or why I was tortured? And that's why," she paused to catch her breath, "that's why I spend so much time with the Weasleys."

"Because they understand," Draco replied and she nodded.

"Molly and Arthur are the magical parents I never had. If I want to learn the best way to charm roasted potatoes without ruining them, I ask Molly. If I'm confused about the inner workings of a certain department in the Ministry, I ask Arthur. Even though Ron and I didn't work out, they still treat me like a daughter. I can confide in them, turn to them with my problems, and those conversations don't have to be prefaced with a detailed explanation of what a pain potion does or how portkeys operate."

This glimpse into her personal and family life meant more to Draco than he could properly articulate. What she shared with him added another dimension to the woman he was getting to know as one of his closest friends. Part of him also felt a twinge of guilt at the way he'd cruelly mocked the Weasleys when he was younger. But not Ron though, he was still a git as far as Draco was concerned.

They walked to work silently, Draco mulling over Hermione's story about her parents. "Granger," he said softly as they came to a stop in front of the Leaky Cauldron entrance. "I'm sorry... about your parents."

He swallowed nervously and continued. "I'm sorry if I ever said things to you... that made you feel discouraged from reaching your full, magical potential. You should never have to hide that part of you."

Hermione waved his apology away with an impatient hand. "We've had this conversation already, Malloy. I already forgave you, and the situation with my parents had nothing to do with you."

"I know but, everything you've accomplished, all your achievements... well, they're bloody brilliant and I just thought that... someone in your life should remind you." *Someone should tell you every damn day,* Granger.

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one day Granger would waltz in and tell him that she was ever so sorry, but her relationship with her boyfriend/husband/whatever took top priority, and she could no longer meet him every morning before work. But for now, that day was in a distant future, and Draco would like to keep it there for as long as possible.

"What's your favorite color?" she asked suddenly, as they walked along.

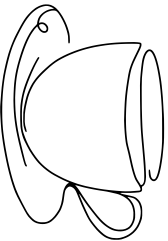
"Gold," Draco answered after a beat. Gold was the color of stitches, of honey, of toffee and many other sweets and desserts. The particular shade of gold he favored also happened to show up in Granger's hair in the sunlight and even in her eyes when she got excited.

"Not green?" she asked teasingly.

"Please," he scoffed, "that would be terribly cliché, don't you think?"

"Hmm, I suppose so," she agreed as they reached their parting point for the morning. "A shame, really, I think green is a good look on you," and with a smirk to rival his own on his best day, she turned and left.

On any other morning, Draco might have pondered both the double meaning of her comment coupled with her sly expression, but he was in too good a mood to get analytical.



Chapter Thirteen

February 2008

Would it be rude to tell her, or rude to let it go? Draco finally opted to risk her ire.

"Uh, Granger?"

"What?"

So she was having one of those mornings, then. The kind of morning where if Draco dared interrupt her writing, she'd bite his head off. Her foul mood was most likely caused by lack of sleep if her appearance were anything to judge by: Purplish bruises under her eyes, a sallow tint to her usually rosy face, and her hair haphazardly thrown in some sort of bun on top of her head. That, and she'd already snapped at Draco for sipping coffee too loudly.

"You have ink on your nose, left cheek, and forehead," he informed her politely, choosing to ignore her childish outburst.

Hermione rolled her eyes and picked up a flimsy paper napkin and attempted to wipe the ink off her face.

"Better?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Ugh!" Glaring at Draco as if he were somehow to blame for her ink-smudged face, Hermione pulled at the sleeve of her work blouse, but before she could use it to clean the ink, Draco protested in horror.

"Granger, have you any sense of decorum? That's not what sleeves are for!"

Huffing indignantly, he reached into his inside jacket pocket and flung a white handkerchief in her direction. Turning it over in her hands, a smile broke over her disgruntled features for the first time that morning. "You *would* carry around monogrammed handkerchiefs," she chuckled and finally managed to remove the ink.

Draco rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Well of course, Granger. I'm a *gentleman*."

HeyJude19

"What about you?" he countered, eager to move away from discussing his family and former friends. Hermione's entire face lit up. "I have the same schedule every year!"

She ignored Draco's muttering of "Of course you do," and plowed on.

"I spend Christmas Eve at my parents, then on Christmas morning we exchange presents and make breakfast together. Then my parents attend Christmas mass at noon and I spend the rest of the day and Christmas dinner at The Burrow. I might stay most of the week there with everyone else, and then New Year's too, since George puts on these truly innovative fireworks displays every year. A lot of the charms on his products haven't usually been tested properly, I probably should have another word with him and Ron about it," she ended with a small frown.

"That sure is a lot of time with the Weasleys. Do your parents mind?"

Draco noticed a little of the light go out from her eyes when he mentioned her parents. Truthfully, he noticed that same reaction every time they discussed her biological family.

She heaved a sigh and Draco got the impression that she was finally going to confide in him about why the topic of her parents was taboo most days. "My relationship with my parents never really recovered after the war. Don't get me wrong, we speak often and I try to visit with them a few times a month, but there's an awkwardness that seems to permeate every conversation or interaction. Especially if I forget myself and use magic around them."

Draco wrinkled his brow in confusion. "I thought you said they were proud when they learned you were a witch? They don't want you using your magic?"

He couldn't think of a higher violation of her natural abilities than being asked to suppress such a core part of her. The brightest witch of their age, discouraged from being magical?

Hermione shook her head. "No, it's more of a trust issue. They're afraid of what my magic can do."

Draco barked out a laugh. "Afraid of *you*? You're the most honorable person on the planet, Granger, I don't see how Muggles should fear some dark deed coming from you!"

Hermione shot him a sad and guilty smile. "No, they've every right to be afraid."

Draco laughed again. "All right, confession time Granger. Did you hit them with a few Tickling Jinxes when you didn't get your way as a child?"

"No," she replied softly. "I obfuscated them during the war. I made them forget they ever had a daughter, implanted new identities in their minds, and made them relocate to Australia. I couldn't let them be tortured for information on me or Harry."

His insides went cold and Draco felt the air being sucked out of the café. All he could do was stare into Hermione's brown eyes, unsure of how to process the weight of her confession. She held his gaze, and though she wasn't crying, there was an unfathomable sadness contained in her stare, as well as a kinship.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry. I know what it's like to perform an unspeakable task to protect family.

"Granger," he took a deep breath. "Granger, that was unbelievably... brave. You saved their lives."

You saved them from unimaginable horrors, courtesy of people like my father. My family were monsters. I'm a monster.

Remain Nameless

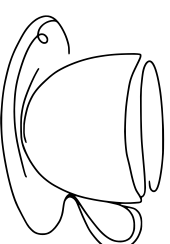
of times, generally calling one another up for a night out when neither had plans. It had been fun for a while, no-strings-attached quick sex, but Cameron put an end to the late-night phone calls for company once he'd met his new girlfriend, and Hermione wished him well.

Which brought Hermione to Draco Malfoy's hands. She hadn't really experienced this particular set yet and already she felt they might snag the number one spot in her rankings. His hands were elegant in a way that made Hermione bite back a sigh. They appeared confident and capable, most of the time, but especially when he absently traced the rim of his coffee mug with those striking long fingers.

From the brief two instances experiencing his grip, Hermione had noted that no callouses were to be found there, he clearly had the unblemished palms of an aristocrat who'd never completed a day of manual labor in his life. She decided not to hold his pampered childhood against him on this one point.

Her thoughts moved to the way his lips had caressed her hand several hours ago, followed by the gentle pressure of his thumb along her knuckles. That low, rich baritone of his farewell coupled with his intense gaze and then disappearing before she could react? Smooth, she had to admit, and unfairly so.

Hermione noticed her reflection in the mirror was now biting her lip and she was once again made acutely aware of the wet arousal between her thighs. She steered her shoulders and marched back to bed. There was absolutely nothing wrong with sexual self-gratification. It was normal. It was healthy. And when Hermione came a few minutes later to the ministrations of her own fingers, she had to bite down on her tongue to prevent herself from crying out the name of a certain male friend she'd have to face on Monday morning.



Chapter Fifteen

"He kissed your hand?"

Hermione nodded as Ginny's brows shot into her hairline after Hermione divulged how the night at the ballet had ended.

Yes, and he looked deeply into my eyes the entire time and it was the single most arousing thing to happen to me in a long time. Further, I have brought myself to climax several times thinking about him.

"Yes. But maybe it was just some old-fashioned, pureblood etiquette thing?"

Hermione had intended to mention the night at the ballet to exactly zero people. But then Malfoy had to go and leave her all flustered and so Hermione required calling in the cavalry: Ginny. This time, Hermione took no chances of being overheard, and invited Ginny over for dinner while Harry worked an overnight raid.

Ginny shot up from Hermione's couch and began pacing around the living room. They'd foregone wine and opted for tea tonight because Hermione wanted a clear head when discussing her "I'm embarrassingly infatuated with Malfoy" situation. She did not reveal to Ginny the name she'd given this situation in her head, nor the fact that her sexual fantasies starred him and only him.

"It's possible, certainly. He is a poncey little prat after all." Ginny conceded and made a face.

"That's not helping Ginny."

Hermione sighed and leaned back against the couch in defeat. "How is it that I have made it to my late twenties and still remain woefully inept at reading men?"

Ginny didn't stop her pacing but shot Hermione a stern look. "You're not woefully inept at anything. Well, maybe quidditch." Hermione let out a sort of laughter and Ginny continued. "Look, I obviously don't know Malfoy the way you do. But I can, objectively, say he is stupidly handsome. I can also, objectively, say that you are positively gorgeous."

Ginny had to hold up an impatient hand as Hermione opened her mouth to protest. "Don't you dare say otherwise or I will hex you across the room. Now," Ginny clasped her hands in front of her as

Remain Nameless

she continued her pacing. “I think sexual attraction between two good-looking people is normal and probably inevitable, but if you’re worried that your attraction to him will cause you to act rashly, we can work on how to give you the upper hand here.”

Hermione swirled her tea around in her mug as she mulled over Ginny’s words. “How?”

“Haughty indifference,” Ginny asserted. “You will act as if absolutely nothing he does is getting under your skin. The longer you can put up a confidence front, the more you will begin to believe it yourself, and then it will become natural. That way, this bout of fancying him won’t lead anywhere further.”

Of course, why would I want this to lead anywhere? Except to perhaps my bedroom?

They’d spent the rest of the evening game-planning Hermione’s behaviors for the next time she met up with Malfoy.

Before approaching the café on Monday morning, Hermione took a moment to collect herself. Remembering everything she had discussed with Ginny about appearing unfluffed at all times, she corrected her posture, poised her head up high and strode purposefully into the café.

“Good morning,” she greeted him coolly. This was working, she thought, so far she had maintained her air of being supremely unaffected in his presence.

“Granger,” he practically purred her name and it immediately caused her stomach to somersault. Damn it all, she was in trouble. This was a horrible, awful, terrible idea. How on earth did Hermione think she could remain nondalant in his company? He’d said *one word*, her surname, and Hermione wanted to melt out of her clothing. Possibly because he’d said it just the way she’d dreamt the other night. The dream where he’d been mere seconds away from bringing her to a mind-bending orgasm.

“Did you have an enjoyable rest of your weekend?” She asked, attempting to keep the conversation neutral and mundane. That was another tactic she’d discussed with Ginny.

Malfoy shrugged his shoulders and took a long sip of his coffee. “All right, I suppose. Some financial documents required my attention, so nothing else occurred that I would classify as *stimulating* as our Saturday evening together.”

He wasn’t even looking at her when he said it, but idly flipping through a quidditch magazine charmed to look like a Muggle newspaper. And Hermione didn’t know if it was his cool detachment or the way he’d seemed to emphasize the word “stimulating” in the most alluring manner possible, but if she didn’t leave the table right then to fetch herself some tea, she very well might launch herself at him and tear off that tightly-fitted suit.

“Ok, well, I’ve got to get my tea,” she awkwardly announced and tried not to sprint from her seat.

This is already going swimmingly.



March 2008

Hey Jude!9

Her breathing was still rapid, her cheeks flushed, her hardened nipples poking through the fabric of her camisole, and she could still feel how wet she was between her legs. How desperate was she if all it took was one kiss on the hand from Malfoy to spur such an explicit sex dream starting him?

But what a dream it had been, she thought with a sigh. If she were being honest with herself, something Hermione tried to do most of the time, she had been more than a little aware of the pull she’d felt toward him all evening. It had begun almost instantly, with how dashing he looked in his formal dress robes. Then, when he’d leaned in close to whisper in her ear just before the balls started, Hermione had fought her body’s instinct to shiver. For a wild moment, she’d envisioned Malfoy lingering there, then closing the distance to place a kiss below her ear. She’d worked harder than necessary to dismiss that fantasy and had tried to focus on the ballet, though most of the time she’d remained acutely aware of how near his body was to hers.

And when she wasn’t crying over the veil scene (how mortifying, by the way, *Martin*) Hermione observed in her peripheral vision the exact location of Malfoy’s hand. Innocently resting on the arm rest between them, it would have been so easy for her to pretend not to notice and “accidentally” go to rest her hand there, only to find his waiting. That man’s hands were more attractive than should be allowed. What would they feel like running all over her bare body?

Hermione had a strange affinity for men’s hands and personally felt that they were an underappreciated part of the male anatomy.

Ron’s hands had been strong and supportive. Made for comfort and, throughout their entire romantic relationship, Hermione always appreciated their warm familiarity. His touch had made her feel safe and could always soothe her in times of distress.

Viktor Krum’s hands had been rough. Not in an aggressive or violent way, more that they were calloused from years of quidditch playing and when he grabbed her during the throes of passion, it would always be firm and purposeful. Physicality had been the foundation of their brief relationship after they reconnected when she broke up with Ron, but they hadn’t had much in common outside of that, and it resulted in another amicable breakup for Hermione.

Daniel’s hands had been gentle. After Viktor, Hermione took a brief detour from dating wizarding men and dipped her toe in the Muggle dating pool. Much to the delight of her parents, Hermione accepted a blind date with the son of one of their patients, and the relationship lasted several months. But Hermione always felt like his hands caressed her in such a tentative way, as if he were afraid of spooking her, and perhaps it was a metaphor for how Hermione could never truly give herself to him in an emotional sense. When the relationship reached the point where she would have to decide if this person was worth divulging her biggest secret (the whole witch thing) Hermione ended things. She swore off Muggle dating after that, knowing that if she had to hold back this essential part of her life, she’d never attain true intimacy with that person.

Cameron’s hands had been hurried. Mostly because he and Hermione were simply taking care of mutual sexual needs as quickly as possible when they were together. He was a Muggle as well, but Hermione wouldn’t exactly classify their time together as “dating.” They’d fooled around a handful

Remain Nameless

ly press his lips to his date's knuckles upon parting. Except this hadn't been a date. And Draco's kiss hadn't been brief by any definition.

Perhaps he was overreacting about the entire situation? Having gone so long without pleasant or pleasurable female company, maybe his feelings for Granger were simply nothing more than a crush driven by lust? Let's consider the facts again.

Fact: Granger was an exceptionally beautiful woman. Fact: Draco was a young, red-blooded male who was not blind. Fact: Draco enjoyed Granger's company. Fact: Granger was an intelligent and engaging conversational partner. Fact: Granger was his friend. Fact: Draco would very much have liked to have pulled her closer and apparated her straight into his bedroom.

Draco groaned and ran his hands through his hair. Facts were clearly of no use to him this evening. Instead, he succumbed to the vision of Granger slowly letting her robes fall open while she straddled his hips and tried not to dwell on the fact that this was the second time today he'd needed to touch himself while thinking about her.



He'd kissed her hand.

Hermione was completely unaware of how much time had passed after Draco disappeared, leaving her standing in the middle of the street. She blinked a few times, then remembered how to apparate and arrived home. With slightly shaking hands, she managed to remove her cloak and dress robes and somehow got ready for bed. She tossed and turned for almost an hour before Crookshanks got fed up with her restlessness and snattered grouchy out of the bedroom with an angry swish of his tail. Eventually, her body surrendered to exhaustion, and she fell into a fitful sleep.

Whatever he was doing with his tongue to her, Hermione hoped it would never, ever stop. Soft, fatherly kisses, followed by a long lick up the length of her entire slit had her trembling all over. And now his tongue was inside her and Hermione felt like screaming until her vocal chords snapped from over exertion. He abruptly pulled his mouth away from between her thighs and began kissing his way up her body. She whimpered against him, and he finally acquiesced to her breathy demands and slid his cock inside her with a groan. Hermione looked into his silvery, lust-filled eye for a moment before capturing his mouth in a scorching kiss. He pulled away roughly as he thrust in and out and moved his lips' attention down to the side of her neck. One hand clutched at his back while the other tangled in his silky, platinum blond hair, and she urged him to please, please, please go faster, go harder. She was so close. He growled into her ear. "That's it, Granger, come for me."

Hermione's eyes flew open. With a strangled cry, she realized her own hand was inside her knickers and had been working herself over in her sleep. She removed her fingers swiftly and sat up in bed, still panting. "Honestly, what is wrong with me?" she mumbled in shame. Throwing aside her covers, Hermione stalked to the bathroom for a glass of water, hoping to calm her very aroused body down. Looking herself over in the mirror, Hermione thought she looked thoroughly not and bothered.

Hey Jude!9

Draco was a creature of habit. To Hermione, this was both equally endearing as it was infuriating. For Merlin's sake, the man would spiral into a scething fit of petulance if the café dare run out of blueberry scones before his arrival.

However, one habit that Hermione was rather fond of, was his suit rotation. During the five-day workweek, Draco wore the same suits in the exact same order. On Mondays and Fridays, he dressed in a black suit, with a white shirt and black tie. The cufflinks and tie pin were a deep emerald green.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Draco wore a black suit with a light gray pinstripe, gray button-up, and black tie. No tie pin, and the cufflinks were a rich amethyst.

But on Wednesdays? Wednesdays had become Hermione's favorite day of the week. On Wednesdays Draco wore a deep navy suit with matching tie, with a pale blue button-up and diamond cufflinks that probably cost more than her parents' house. The silvery hue of Malfoy's eyes was always striking to see, but the blue of his suit and shirt brought out their color in shining prominence.

Today was Wednesday, which meant Hermione spent an inordinate amount of time covertly ogling her well-dressed friend from across the table. This was something she really could not afford to be doing, as she had quite a lot of prep work to complete on her presentation for her upcoming Venice trip in April. But Merlin help her, the man looked good in shades of blue.

"See something you like Granger?" Those eyes bored into hers now, the color of stormy skies over a vast ocean.

Damn it all, she was never going to learn to be subtle, was she?

"No! I mean, yes, I mean—" It really didn't help her mental state or with her ability to express herself when he was smirking at her like that. *Deep breaths, Hermione.*

"You look nice when you wear blue!" She blurted then immediately averted her eyes to her notebook and didn't dare look up at him the rest of the morning.

Someone, please, obliterate me.



Nor that Draco was keeping track, but he had been sitting with Hermione Granger at the same café table before each work day for longer than a whole year now. And what had he learned in all this time?

He knew about her parents, about her failed relationship with the Weasels, and about her continued relationship with the Weasel's family. He knew how she took her tea, she also preferred blueberry scones, and what she looked like during a panic attack. He'd seen her laugh, cry, and positively ignite with rage that one time he'd made an offhand comment about house elves. Draco knew every single stance she took on political topics. He knew which departments in the Ministry were actually doing worthwhile work, and which departments' heads she wouldn't mind pelting with undiluted bubonber pus. Draco knew exactly the type of mood she was in based on how she entered the café each day and how much tea she ordered.

They didn't often discuss the war or school, only because those topics were often too emotionally heavy for the beginning of the day. But in general, he knew all the hallmarks things that most friends knew about one another. Recently, Draco had taken to filling any of his knowledge gaps in "Hermione Granger trivia" by asking random questions as they occurred to him. This was how he learned that purple was her favorite color, her favorite day of the week was Wednesday (she refused to elaborate on her reasoning), her favorite animal was a cat, her corporeal Patronus was an otter, her birthday was September 19, her favorite ice cream flavor was strawberry, and her middle name was Jean, after her mother.

"What's your favorite sweet?" He asked her suddenly, apropos of nothing. Accustomed to his question outbursts by this point, Hermione didn't even look up from her newspaper.

"Magical or Muggle?"

"Either."

"Sugar Quills."

Draco thanked every deity that was ever rumored to have existed that Hermione's head was buried in her paper and she therefore could not witness the way his jaw tightened and his eyes bugged out of his skull as he bit back a longing groan. Merlin's fucking beard, he would willingly hand over his wand to witness her sucking on a Sugar Quill. *So much for not needing to work today...*



Draco had been waiting for an excuse to suggest another social outing to Hermione for the whole month following the ballet, and one had finally arrived. Wesley Macnair had two tickets, very nice box seats no less, to the opera next month and was unable to attend. As his colleague traipsed about the office of Whisp & Wright whinging about how his wife was harping on about giving away the tickets because some cousins of hers were visiting that same weekend, Draco poked his head out of his office door.

"Macnair! I'll take them."

Macnair whirled around in surprise at Draco having volunteered. "You? You want to take these blasted things off my hands?"

Draco nodded and held out his hand expectantly. Macnair regarded him suspiciously for a moment before handing them to Draco. "This is a pair, you realize. Who're you so anxious to suffer with for several hours while some fat witch warbles?"

"Mind your own bloody business. And thank you." Draco warded off any further nosiness on the part of Macnair by slamming his office door tight in his face.

Could Draco have simply just asked Hermione to dinner or even drinks after work? Well of course, but for some reason every time he opened his mouth to ask, he chickened right out. He was still worried that he may have pushed things too far with her after the ballet, and every iteration of asking her

He'd kissed her hand. He'd kissed her fucking hand.

Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Salazar *fucking* Slytherin. What was wrong with him?

"Fuck!" Draco yelled the second he'd reached his bedchambers. Loosening then tipping off his bow tie, he flung himself into an armchair and buried his face in his shaking hands. Sweet fucking Circé, he had to be the most embarrassing person alive. This called for whisky. The glass of amber liquid was halfway to his mouth when he remembered exactly where his lips had just been. He'd tasted Granger's bare skin and it had been fucking divine. *I am in control of this.*

He set the undrunk glass down and rested his head against the back of the armchair, closing his eyes and reliving the last few moments with her in his mind. He'd been looking for any excuse to touch her all evening and after missing opportunity after opportunity he'd gone and made one for himself.

Maybe he'd been too forward. Maybe he'd misread everything in her eyes. Oh fuck, maybe she thought he was creepy and was too shocked by his behavior to react at all. It wasn't like he gave her a chance to respond, he'd just appolated away like an idiot. *I am in control of this.*

There was nothing for it, Draco was besotted with Hermione Granger.

An interesting twist in his young life, and he hadn't even needed a drop of alcohol to arrive at this particular epiphany. Thinking back on the past year, he couldn't pinpoint the exact moment that his feelings had moved beyond platonic. But the longer he sat in his chair in his empty bedroom of his empty home with nothing but the sound of a crackling fire, the louder the thought became in his head.

Since the complete crumbling of his entire life after the second war in which the Dark Lord was once again defeated by a prat with glasses, Draco had endeavored to live only in facts, not beliefs. Fact: his father had been wrong about most everything. Fact: water was wet. Fact: Draco was completely enamored with Granger.

Draco didn't really know what to do about that last one. The best course of action, especially after his mortifying display of slobbering all over her hand, was probably to bury these feelings deep, deep inside and never reveal them. Yes, that sounded healthy. Pragmatic. *Cautiously.*

Call him what you like, but Draco was apparently good at surviving. He'd survived a bloody war when he had no right to, and by Merlin he could survive caring about Granger in a way that made him physically ache.

But what if she brought up his behavior on Monday morning? "Look Malfoy, I'm not sure what kind of game you're playing, but you had no right to stog my hand without my permission and I'd really appreciate you disappearing from my life forever."

Fine, so she probably wouldn't be that harsh, but she would find a way to let him down easy. And then Draco would become the first wizard to discover how to Crucio himself with his own wand.

He needed a plan if she wanted to discuss this. Draco would only acknowledge the hand-kissing if she did first. Then he would wave it off as some weird, outdated pureblood custom. Granger probably thought that anyway, so he could simply lean into her preconceived notions about his dysfunctional heritage. Growing up, he'd witnessed his own father kiss many a witch's hand at social functions, both in greeting and in farewell. It was polite and proper for a young wizard of Draco's upbringing to brief-

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veil to look that way.”

“What way?”

She shrugged and let out another sad sigh. “So realistic. That’s almost exactly how it really looks in the Department of Mysteries.”

They had stopped walking and faced one another. Draco felt a cold stone drop into the pit of his stomach. All Draco knew about Potter and company’s Fifth-Year escapade in the Department of Mysteries was that his father and Bellatrix bungled it so badly that it was the reason for Draco being called up the ranks, so to speak, to take Lucius’s place in the Dark Lord’s inner circle. The details of the scuffle were unknown to him, but he had vivid and nightmare-inducing recollections of the Dark Lord’s rage following the failed mission.

“I didn’t know it was a real artifact,” he offered cautiously.

Hermione stared off into the mid-distance and chewed on her bottom lip. “It’s a difficult object to describe. It radiated this other-worldly power and reeked of ancient magic, but for me, it felt foreboding and dangerous. Some of the others... it seemed to call to them, to entrance them. I didn’t like how it made me feel,” she paused here to shiver. “I was passed out during the dueling. I never saw how Sirius... how he went through...”

She trailed off but then returned her gaze to Draco and offered a small smile. “Anyway, apologies for falling apart like that in public. Thank goodness I had this little thing to assist me in my time of need!” She pulled out his handkerchief and waved it tauntingly in his face.

Draco chuckled. “Must have been quite the chivalrous gentleman, offering you such a fine keepsake to ease your distress.”

“Hm,” she feigned a pensive face. “I’m not so sure I’d call him a chivalrous gentleman as much as a pompous little aristocrat convinced that this mere trinket is enough to make up for all the times he quite rudely stole a bite from my scone.”

Draco pretended to be wounded and put his hand over his heart. “Why Granger, that is a shocking and unfounded accusation! You could really ruin a man’s reputation with that sort of slander.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at his theatrics but lost the battle with the grin that overtook her face. Her grin eventually faded as they stood staring at each other for a moment, and Draco felt a sudden surge of impulsivity, emboldened by the intensity of her eyes.

“But if it’s a gentleman you want,” he trailed off as he stepped closer to her. Draco reached down and took her hand firmly in his own. Lifting it up in front of her wide eyes, Draco pressed a lingering kiss to her knuckles, and then brushed over them once with his thumb before gently letting her hand drop.

“Goodnight Granger,” he murmured as he took a step back, then disappeared.



to dinner sounded like a date in his head.

Which would all be fine and dandy if he didn’t think she’d be completely spooked by him. Besides, if he were honest with himself, his confidence had taken a blow ever since she’d turned him down in favor of her date with Anthony Goldstein back in January.

So Draco did the pragmatic (read: cowardly) thing and waited for an activity to arise. Suggesting a cultural activity seemed like a much safer bet, because there would be a purpose to the evening other than dinner, drinking, and longing looks across a table. Although, Draco could think of many activities he’d like to perform with Hermione...

Clearing his mind of any thoughts of illicit behaviors, Draco broached the topic of a night at the opera as casually as possible.

“Granger, during your posh little childhood did you ever attend the opera?”

She looked up from her tea and quirked an eyebrow at him. Great, he’d already fucked this up. He was going for a laugh, but apparently she didn’t find his prickish tone amusing today.

“No. And before you ask, yes, Muggles do have the opera, it’s just considered an old-fashioned form of entertainment in the Muggle world. Most people our age and younger would prefer to see a film or concert.”

“So you’ve never been?”

“I just told you I’ve never been.”

He was not going to let her snippy attitude deter him. “Perfect. I have tickets for an upcoming performance and you should accompany me.”

Her eyes widened slightly and her mouth opened and closed several times. She seemed at a loss for what to say and Draco tried not to appear affected by the interminable wait for her brain to start working again. You could really kill a man by making him wait this long only to reject him. *If she mentions Anthony Goldstein or any other useless moon as an excuse, I swear on my magic that I will find said useless moon and hex him straight to Jupiter.*

Finally, she seemed to remember how to human, and cleared her throat. “When is the show?”

“Friday the 11th.”

She frowned slightly and opened up her planner. How she was able to locate it so quickly amongst her innumerable notebooks, journals, periodicals, and textbooks, Draco would never know but since this was Granger, he had to assume there was some sort of system in place.

“That’s two days before I leave for Venice.”

“Which means you’ll be over prepared and already packed for your trip and could use a night off.”

She frowned for a minute longer, then with a light shrug of her shoulders smiled up at Draco. “You’re right. Otherwise I’ll be shut in at home, driving myself mad trying to add last minute citations to my presentation.”

“So you’ll come then?” She blushed instantly at his question and Draco wondered if her mind had gone down the same perverted path as his. *I’d love for you to come Granger, let me make you come.*

“Yes, all right,” she responded breathily.

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“Excellent, now I’ll need you to select a restaurant for dinner before the show.”

Draco hoped that phrasing dinner as a foregone conclusion rather than a request might make her more amenable. It was a tactic he often used in contract negotiations with quidditch players; framing a query as a definite instead of a question was usually a sure-fire way to get what he wanted.

She seemed to consider his statement for a minute before nodding again and Draco wondered if someone had cast a Cheering Charm on him, because he was waging an internal battle against grinning like an idiot at her.

“Would you be opposed to dining in Muggle London?” she asked hesitantly. *Granger, I would dine at the bottom of the fucking ocean if you want.*

He shrugged. “Not at all.”

She beamed at him and Draco tried to ignore the way his heart beat faster at the notion that his simple acquiescence to her request was all it took to make her that happy.

“Great, I’ll take you to one of my favorite places!” She looked so ecstatic at the thought of taking Draco to dinner that he was filled with that curious emotion called hope once again. A dangerous emotion, to be sure, but damn if Granger didn’t seem to inspire it in him constantly.

Suddenly, her expression faltered a bit. “Will this be your first time... you know, apart from the café... will this be your first meal at a Muggle restaurant?”

Draco tried not to feel hurt that she still harbored any doubts about his character, but the hesitancy in her voice stung. *That is damned over time, said Healer Browning’s voice once again in his mind.*

“I’ll be fine Granger, don’t worry your pretty little head about me. I promise not to conjure any walzing flamingos in the middle of dinner and utterly obliterate the Statute of Secrecy.”

His dry humor had the desired effect and she was back to smiling. “Yes, please do restrain yourself during your very first visit to a Muggle restaurant and I will do my best to not commit any social faux pas at my first visit to the opera.”

“Hm, seems like it will be a night of firsts for both of us.” He hadn’t meant to say it so suggestively, but now Granger’s smile had vanished and she stared intently back at him. There was something curious in her gaze that rooted Draco to his chair, unable to drop his eyes from hers. How did this happen? When did this happen?

Was she feeling the same confusing swirl of emotions that he was? Did she also lie awake at night wondering what it would feel like for his hands to tangle themselves in her hair? Were her waking hours at the office filled with distracting daydreams about how their bodies might feel pressed together? Did she also notice that their stares at one another lasted several seconds longer than was socially appropriate? Could she tell that his thoughts of her were so all-consuming that he needed to pleasure himself twice a day on average?

“Yes, I suppose it will be,” she agreed softly, and finally looked away.

I am in control of this



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rassed, watery smile, paired with a small shrug of her shoulders. Draco attempted to smirk back in what he hoped was a teasing expression but honestly had no idea how to operate his facial muscles at the moment.

When she turned her attention back to the performance, Draco resumed his covert staring at the side of her neck. Hermione’s hands returned to her lap where she clutched his handkerchief, occasionally twisting and fidgeting with the small scrap of fabric. Draco then realized he’d committed another selfish faux pas that evening: his arm completely hogged the armrest between their seats. Another failed opportunity to act the gentleman. She had nowhere to rest her hands except in her lap. It was also another failed opportunity to have her closer. With her delicate hand resting inches from him, it would be all too easy to “accidentally” brush against it, then perhaps keep it there and clasp it in his own.

The shrill, haunting melody of a phoenix pierced the air but it was nothing compared to the excited gasp that left Hermione’s lips, a sound that ignited rather salacious thoughts in his mind. *I would pay obscene amounts of gold to be the one eliciting that noise from your mouth...*

Hermione’s reverent gaze followed the flight of the phoenix as the live bird made its triumphant ascendance, signifying the finale of the ballet. As the audience rose to applaud the performers, Hermione turned to beam at Draco.

“Thank you so much for taking me.”

I sincerely wish you’d say that to me in an entirely different context.

“Of course, Granger,” he brushed off her thanks.

As they fled out with the rest of the crowd, Draco’s mind raced. Now what? Should he suggest a night cap somewhere? What was the protocol for a non-date with a friend? Unsure of how to proceed, he made a stab at conversation, hoping to draw out the evening.

“So,” he began as they walked along, wandering aimlessly down the street. “May I ask what brought such a non-romantic soul such as yourself to tears?”

She gave him a playful slap on the arm. “I am not non-romantic! Ugh! Why do people always assume that about me? Just because I find it troublesome that, as a female, I’m expected to be enchanted by the story of some winny excuse for a wizard that renders the witch’s ultimate sacrifice utterly meaningless as it applies to her own self-worth and agency does not mean I don’t appreciate romance! I do! I’d love to have someone who thought of me as more than a brainy bookworm, who would bring me flowers or take me out on dates...”

She trailed off abruptly and flushed spectacularly, and Draco didn’t know how to respond in an appropriate manner. What he wanted to do was list off all the fantastical fictional romantic scenarios he’d imagined in his head in the past week alone. He’d romance the hell out of her, if that’s what she desired. But he did not start spouting off all the ways in which he’d very much like to romance Granger because Draco was a pragmatist. *Coward. It’s spelled coward.*

“You avoided my question Granger.”

Hermione sighed and Draco saw a slight shadow cloud her features. “I guess I hadn’t expected the

edly been foolish, but she hadn't seemed to mind.

On stage, the prima ballerina playing the part of Alexandrina pivouetted mournfully over the death of her lover. Next, the evil sorceress would make her grand entrance, disguised as a benevolent savior eager to help the grieving girl. Then Alexandrina would flail gracefully about while she considered the choice presented: move on with her life or take the option of going beyond the veil to rescue her love.

Granger was right, this woman was an idiot for thinking Friedrich was worth the trouble. And did Draco mention that he hated the ballet? He hated the ballet. He was bored to tears.

Chancing a glance over at Hermione, he noticed her rap with attention at the performance unfolding on stage. Draco let his eyes rake over her face, aglow with interest at the dancers, down to her slightly parted lips, further down to her slender neck, and down to the exposed skin of her throat.

Another curled tress escaped her delicate hairstyle and trailed beckoningly along the shoulder closest to Draco. He realized with a jolt that they had never had prolonged closeness like this before. There was always an entire table between their bodies in the morning.

The little brown lock of hair tickling her bare skin continued to taunt him. He no longer had any awareness of what occurred on the stage because reality began and ended with Draco mastering his impulsive control. He could not tear his eyes away from the juncture where her neck met her shoulder. All it would take was one quick movement of his arm. Just a gentle caress of his hand as he brushed the lock of hair aside for her. Would she recoil at his touch? Was it worth the risk?

A large part of his brain screamed "also-fucking-lutely" but his more rational side was putting up a good fight. Draco contented himself with simply observing how the soft curl moved slightly with each rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. It would be so easy; just to reach over, brush it aside, trail his fingers lightly across her back and secure an arm around her. Plenty of other couples were sitting that way.

Except this was not a date. They were not a couple on a date.

Draco still couldn't remove his eyes from her, but focused instead on not breathing too loud. Merlin, if the entire theater couldn't hear him practically gasping for air then they probably could hear the way his heart seemed to be slamming against his chest. He was going to suffocate by just looking at her, he could feel his blood pounding in his ears and felt suddenly feverish.

But then Hermione let out a small, surprised exhalé, and Draco's gaze flicked up to her face. She stared intently up at the stage and tears pooled in her eyes. Wondering what could have prompted such an emotional display, Draco tore his eyes from her and faced front. The stone archway containing the tattered veil that led to the land of the dead had just been revealed and Alexandrina flitted towards it. As the ballerina gracefully twirled herself through it, Draco was alarmed to see several tears tracking their way down Hermione's cheeks. She then fiddled with something in her lap, and Draco saw her pull a piece of fabric out of the sleeve of her robes. It was a white handkerchief. His handkerchief. The initials D.L.M. clearly visible in an elegantly stitched monogram on the edge as she dabbed at her eyes. She'd kept it, and not only that, but deemed it important enough to carry on her person.

Perhaps thinking he had noticed her quiet tears, Hermione turned to him and gave an embar-

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Where was this blasted bowl? And did Molly really even need this specific, super special family heirloom to serve them all salad? As far as Hermione was aware, this was just a regular Sunday evening meal at The Burrow. It was no one's birthday, deathday, anniversary, engagement party, pregnancy announcement, or launch of a new Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes product.

For the life of her, Hermione could not understand why Molly had pulled her aside almost the moment she'd arrived to ask for her help in locating this extremely important bowl. And this was how Hermione found herself combing through the cramped and cluttered pantry off the kitchen, searching for a bowl that may as well have fallen into another dimension because it certainly did not seem to exist in this cupboard.

"Oh hi Hermione! I didn't realize you were here!"

Hermione winched around at the greeting to see the smiling face of Charlie Weasley. She gave him a quick hug. "Hello! Yes, your mother put me to work immediately. She wants me to find some ancient wooden salad bowl that used to belong to your Aunt Muriel, but I've had no luck so far."

Hermione returned to the task in front of her, shifting aside old, rusted out cauldrons and several dusty tomes of Gilderoy Lockhart housekeeping and cooking books. She turned back around when she heard Charlie clear his throat awkwardly.

"I uh... think my mother may have had an ulterior motive here," he said with a sheepish look. When Hermione appeared puzzled, he elaborated. "She sent me back here for the same thing."

Hermione let out a groan and felt both exasperated and embarrassed at Molly's overt meddling in both her and Charlie's love lives. "Oh for goodness sake, I am not interested in pursuing a relationship with you! No offense, Charlie," she added with a sly grin, hoping he wasn't insulted.

"None taken," he chuckled, and she was glad he seemed amused rather than offended.

Hermione slumped against the wall of the pantry cupboard and put her hands over her face. "Am I constantly giving off vibes that I am a pathetic and lonely spinster?"

"No more than I'm giving off the vibe of pathetic and lonely bachelor without a woman to take care of him," Charlie responded wryly. Hermione snuck a peek at him through her hands and let out a laugh.

"I suppose I should break the news once again to your mother that despite this lovely time together in the pantry, we did not emerge engaged."

She pushed herself off the wall and made to move past him, but he placed a cautious hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, if I may, it's all right if you want to tell her you're seeing someone else. I know it's none of her business, but it would probably get her off your back for a bit."

Hermione looked into Charlie's earnest face and contemplated his advice. She could absolutely tell Molly that she didn't need any help in her love life, thank you very much, and that of course she was seeing someone...

Which would be a lie and Hermione hated lying and, coincidentally, did not happen to be excep-

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tionally skilled in the art of deceit. Then she'd have to make up a name and a backstory and the whole thing would spiral out of control in a mortifying fashion.

Because the truth was so odd that Hermione wouldn't even know how to begin to explain. She was single for a reason, and had been for months. That reason being that her feelings for Malfoy had now moved beyond the realm of friendship, and she was so utterly lost as to how to act, think, or feel in his captivating presence.

"You are, aren't you? Seeing someone." Charlie murmured quietly.

She heaved an impressive sigh and hugged her arms around her middle. If her failed experiment with going on a date with Anthony Goldstein had shown her anything, it was that she wasn't sure how to give other men a chance when her mind seemed constantly consumed by Draco.

"No. Not really, anyway," she finally answered.

"But you want to be seeing this person?"

"How did you know I was thinking of a specific person?"

"Hermione," he chuckled lightly. "No one sighs that deeply and gives such a non-answer to a straightforward question about dating unless they already have the person in mind."

Hermione breathed out a huff of air in frustration. "Am I that obvious?" Charlie let out another warm chuckle and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Why aren't you with this bloke then?"

Now wasn't that the million-Galleon question? Another huff, another sigh from Hermione. "I'm not sure if he wants to... well, I think he might, but a relationship with him would be... complicated." Complicated was massively underselling it, but she didn't know a better descriptor. Problematic? Confusing? Unbelievably hot? *Oh Merlin...*

"Now this is odd," laughed Charlie, confusing Hermione.

"What's odd?"

"I never thought I'd see the bravest witch I've ever met acting like a coward."

A coward? Hermione spluttered with rage. "Well what about you then? I've yet to see you bring someone to the Burrow, so what's holding you back Charlie? You can't tell me you've been living like a monk all these years!" She fired back and he sobered instantly.

"It's complicated." He retorted, bitterly. "I guess that makes me a filthy hypocrite, huh?" He gave her a sad smile and Hermione immediately felt guilty. It was so rare to see the effervescent Charlie in such a somber mood that it snuffed out her brief flare of anger.

"That was uncalled for, I'm sorry Charlie."

He waved her apology away. "No, you're right, as usual. I would just hope that," He took a deep breath and dropped his hand from her shoulder. "I would just hope that after all these years you would know that our family loves you, no matter what. You've sacrificed so much for Ron and Harry... for all of us, really. I've always admired you, and I always will. So I want to tell you that if the bravest witch I've ever met can't find the courage to pursue an inconvenient love... well then there's not much hope for the rest of us is there?"

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again. And then he keeps Alexandria around in phoenix form... as a pet! That part set my teeth right on edge, right!"

Draco chuckled at the way the story seemed to get under her skin.

"So you don't find keeping your former lover around as a large bird and handling her down to your children like an heirloom to be terribly romantic? I'm shocked, Granger," he drawled with a smirk.

Hermione playfully rolled her eyes and removed her cloak as they reached their seats on an aisle in the orchestra section. Draco cursed himself for not being quicker in offering to help her remove it. Clearly he was out of practice as a well-bred gentleman on a date if he'd already failed to help his female companion with her cloak. Except this was not a date. So it didn't matter. Because this was not a date.

But then the removal of Hermione's cloak revealed the stunning dress robes she wore underneath and Draco forgot how to breathe temporarily. Again. They were a bright, periwinkle blue, set slightly off her shoulders, meaning Draco was treated to a view of the bare skin of her neck, collarbone, and a good portion of her shoulders.

He busied himself with removing his own cloak and shrinking it so as not to be caught gaping at her. Before they could strike up conversation, the lights went down to signal the ballet was ready to begin and the strappings of the orchestra could be heard in front of them.

Unable to resist and feeling braver in the dark, Draco leaned in close towards Hermione's ear, close enough to breathe in her mysterious floral scent, and murmured, "Despite your misgivings about the plot, I think you'll find yourself quite taken with the Russian version."

"Oh? And what makes you say that?" She whispered back, head turned slightly toward him, bringing her cheek mere inches from his lips.

"Because they use a live phoenix."

She let out the softest little surprised gasp and it took every ounce of his willpower not to lean forward and swallow it with his mouth. Instead, he sat back in his seat and gripped the armrests far tighter than was necessary.

Maybe he would end up liking the ballet after all.



Draco hated the ballet. In mere minutes, he was transported right back to his childhood, being bribed with sweets to sit still and stay quiet through the entire performance. But all the sweets in the world couldn't keep the child version of Draco from finding the ballet mind-numbingly dull. Adult Draco had to agree. This was torturous.

How long was this thing?

Of course his night out with Granger would be an activity that prevented them from talking or interacting in any meaningful way. His flirtatious little whispering before the curtain rose had undoubt-

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shade of burgundy. Her hair, often so impossible to tame, secured in a tight bun atop her head, but already a few of her curls made an escape and the overall effect was lovely.

"Thank you, so do you." She beamed and Draco wondered if he'd said too much, or if his expression had been the giveaway. It seemed that as of late he'd lost the ability to keep his less subtle emotions in check in her presence.

They walked together along with a small crowd toward the theater entrance and Draco sensed Hermione's excitement for the performance.

"I suppose you're familiar with the story? Of the ballet?"

Draco nodded in answer to her question. He'd been dragged to this one several times over the course of his childhood by his parents. But ballet or no, every magical child knew the tale of *The Phoenix and the Tail*.

"It was one of my mother's favorites."

Hermione's face flushed as they reached the lights of the lobby. "I'd never read it. Not until you agreed to take me tonight. Obviously it wasn't a tale from my childhood."

She seemed slightly embarrassed by that admission, and Draco quelled the urge to tease her, as he normally would have. Muggle parents obviously didn't have access to ancient wizarding fairy tales, there was no reason for her to feel ashamed.

"Now that you've done the proper reading for tonight's performance, what did you think?"

That wiped the blush from her cheeks as she put on her best thinking face: brow slightly furrowed, eyes alight, and lips drawn in as she chewed the inside of her bottom lip. If there was one guarantee about Hermione Granger it was that she had an opinion about everything. She would never simply answer "Oh, I like it." She was going to have reasoning and theories and arguments to support whatever she said.

"Obviously, the underlying message of true love overcoming an evil obstacle is quite powerful. And I did do some research on historical wizarding folklore outside of the ones written by Beedle the Bard, and I know this particular story is theorized to be more than 1,000 years old, so I suppose I can forgive the simplistic message in that regard, however." She paused for breath here. "If you view it through a modern lens, I find myself frustrated and disappointed with the character of Friedrich."

"How so? Most witches consider him the ultimate romantic hero."

"But why? See, that's where the story falls apart for me. Alexandria is the real hero of the tale. The entire story is incumbent upon her making this life-altering choice in order to save her true love. But what bothers me is we, the audience, never learn what makes this man so worthy of her sacrifice! She literally goes willingly into the land of the dead to save him, and what is her reward? She's turned into a phoenix and made to live the rest of her days dying and being reborn from her own ashes over and over." Another pause, another breath.

"But Friedrich? How does he come out of this the hero? All we know about his character is that he is supposedly very handsome and is enamored with Alexandria. That's it! He just exists until she rescues him and then he gets to reclaim his family's household, his magic, and goes on to find love

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Hermione felt the prick of tears at Charlie's impassioned speech. She looked into his blue eyes and realized: he's going through the exact same thing, he wants someone he shouldn't. Maybe one day they'd laugh and compare notes on how they each navigated their romantic strife, but for now, it was enough that Hermione knew someone else in this world could completely empathize with her plight.

She flung herself forward and captured him in a fierce hug. "Don't tell anyone Charlie, but I think you might be the brightest in your family."

"I will make no such promises."

A flurry of movement in the entryway to the pantry caused them to spring apart. "Oh my! Well, please don't let me interrupt!" chirped Molly as she scurried away looking as if Christmas had come early.

Charlie and Hermione gave each other panicked glances before bursting out laughing. Once they'd regained their breath, Charlie straightened up. "I should probably go let her down gently."

He made to leave but Hermione called him back. "Charlie... thank you."

He offered her another smile tinged with a bit of sadness. "Any time, I'm rooting for you, Hermione. If you decide to take that leap of faith, not only would you have my support but you may just give the less brave amongst us the kick in the arse we need to stop feeling sorry for ourselves and go after who we want."

Hermione stood silently for a minute, alone in the pantry, letting Charlie's parting words reverberate in her mind. His thoughtful encouragement buoyed her, but there was still one other person who could help her make a decision.

She walked out to the edge of the Burrow's garden and sought out Ginny who was shelling strap-pas over a large bowl at the end of the long wooden table. Popping down next to her friend, she grabbed some peas under the pretense of assisting.

"Your mother just tried to trap me in a cupboard with Charlie. She also saw me hug him and I'm pretty sure is now setting a date for our wedding." Hermione wryly reported to Ginny, who grinned.

"I'm so sorry. She means well enough, though, I think she feels bad that you and Charlie are still both single," replied Ginny.

It was an innocuous enough comment, meant as a compliment, and Ginny was one of her best friends, but Hermione suddenly saw red.

"Is that what you all think of me? *Oh look, here comes poor, desperate, single Hermione. Such a shame really, she spends all her time working and not snagging herself a man. How sad her life turned out,*" she bit out.

Ginny met her petulant declaration with a patient and level gaze. "Hermione, you know that no one here has ever thought that about you," she said softly and Hermione felt a little ashamed of her bitter outburst.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," Hermione assured her, all the anger leaving her body. "Your brother is wonderful, by the way, I just don't see a romantic future there, and neither does he."

They sat in silence for a moment as Hermione tried to marshal her thoughts.

"I think this Friday's trip to the opera with Malfoy might be a date," she confessed quietly.

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Ginny carefully dropped the peas in her hands and regarded Hermione impressively for a moment. “I wasn’t aware your feelings had progressed this much. Now it sounds like this... connection has moved beyond the last phase. Is that what you want?” Her voice was neutral, but Hermione still felt a sting of an accusation behind Ginny’s words. The worst part was she couldn’t even blame her friend for thinking negatively of Malfoy; the bad blood between the Weasleys and Malfoy families went back several decades. While Hermione had been personally privy to Malfoy’s maturation and repentance, Ginny only had second-hand information of his supposed changed character.

She closed her eyes and rubbed her temple, trying to clear her head, but all Hermione saw behind her eyelids was a sly, smirking pale face and white-blond hair.

“Is it wrong, Ginny? Is it wrong to want him?”

Ginny gave her a startled, guilty expression. “Oh Hermione, I would never want you to feel that way, I’m sorry if I—!”

“Oi! Girl! We need you for quidditch! And you’re not allowed to Chase this time!” Ron’s bellow interrupted their tense conversation and both women cringed.

“He has the world’s *worst* timing,” Ginny growled under her breath as her brother stalked over to where they sat. “Relax you git, I’ll be over in a second!” Ginny shouted back and stood to meet Ron before he could butt in on her private conversation with Hermione.

“Go on,” urged Hermione. “I’ll finish these for you.” Hermione shifted over and took up Ginny’s deserted post over the bowl of peas.

“Hermione?” Ginny called back softly. “I think that... well... I think that... actually, you know what?” Ginny paused, her demeanor suddenly switching from somber to fierce and determined. “It really doesn’t matter what I think. Wear your purple dress and text, Floo, or owl me *immediately* Saturday morning.” She threw a parting wink and smirk at Hermione before turning abruptly on her heel and jogging over to the makeshift quidditch field.

Her purple dress, eh? Hermione grinned wickedly to herself and thanked several deities that Molly and Arthur Weasley had continued reproducing until they reached Ginny.



Draco was having an excellent Friday morning. Last night, he’d received an owl from Minerva McGonagall containing all the comments, questions, and concerns laid out by the Hogwarts board of school governors regarding the *Hermione J. Granger Fund for Students of Non-Magical Parents*.

A couple opinions seemed to come from some of the old, pureblood guard, if their thinly veiled disgust at an initiative to benefit Muggleborn students was anything to go on. Some had logistical concerns that clearly stemmed from ignorance of the Muggle world (“Can’t these families travel by Floo powder? Why do we need the additional trip for the Hogwarts Express?”), but they definitely seemed to support the idea of the fund. But by Draco’s count, more than half were fully on board with the

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down at the ground and scuffed lightly at the sidewalk with one of his expensive shoes.

He’s nervous.

“No, it’s just... are you sure you still want to go... with me?”

The anger left her body as Hermione’s heart clenched in anguish for him. He was clearly worried about people seeing them together and damaging her reputation. Being friends with Malfoy the past year, she learned that his self-confidence manifested in peaks and valleys, and that in this moment he seemed to be in quite a deep valley.

“Malfoy,” she began gently, and didn’t continue until he looked her in the eye. “I want to go with *you*. As my friend you should know that I will hold you to your promises. And as your friend, you should know that I do not care one bit about what other people will think or say about the company I keep.” After a beat, he nodded and offered a small smile. “All right then. I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Not a date. This was not a date.



Draco paced back and forth along the cobblestones at the entrance to the theatre district of wizarding London. He’d arrived early, not being able to stand the deafening silence of his home while he waited for time to pass. Why hadn’t he thought to suggest dinner before the show? A little wine might have helped take some of the nervous edge off.

Except there was no reason to be nervously on edge because this was very much not a date. Not a date. Yes he was dressed in very fine black dress robes, but he only owned the finest of robes, so that really wasn’t on purpose. *Was it on purpose the amount of time you spent in front of the mirror, wondering if Granger preferred your hair a certain way?*

Draco let out a frustrated sigh and ran his hand through his pale locks. He’d kept it short and parted to the side the past several years and no longer slicked it back as he had in his schoolboy days. Perhaps looking like his schoolboy self would have been a horrendous mistake, as far as Granger’s memory of him was concerned. Besides, if he’d gone to the trouble of styling his hair, would that look like he wanted this night to be a date? This was not a date.

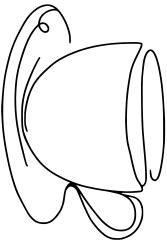
I am in control of this.

Draco finished his current route of pacing and turned quickly to pace back the way he came only to come face to face with Granger herself.

“Hello,” she said with a bright smile.

“Hello. You look nice.” It was a complete and total lie. Hermione looked absolutely exquisite and stole the breath from his body, but that was hardly an appropriate thing to say to a friend.

She had on a touch more makeup than she usually wore for work, her lips painted a tantalizing



Chapter Fourteen

Tomorrow evening's trip to the ballet was not a date. Hermione repeated this to herself the entire week leading up to Saturday. Malfoy had only agreed to go with her because she'd practically begged him to wry back in November. He was only fulfilling this social obligation as a favor to a friend.

It was very much not a date. They weren't even having dinner or drinks before the show, just meeting outside the theater.

Then why had her stomach been in knots all week? Why did she feel jittery at the thought of sitting close to Malfoy in a dark theater? And why couldn't she decide on what to wear? Hermione owned a number of lovely dress robes and gowns, and normally before a formal event, she'd pick one at random or let Ginny choose.

For some reason, Hermione hadn't asked Ginny's opinion this time, nor had she decided for herself just yet. Merlin, she hadn't even thought about what to do with her hair! These decisions plagued her day after day, and at the end of her internal struggle the same thought kept rearing its head: this is not a date.

They'd come upon their parting point for the morning and Hermione felt a restless sort of energy coursing through her. The next time she'd see him would be the following evening, presumably all dressed up and among the wizarding public.

"I'm looking forward to the show tomorrow," she offered tentatively, Malfoy let out a small sigh and refused to meet her gaze.

"About that..." he began and Hermione felt her stomach drop. "Are you sure you still want to go?" Hermione couldn't believe his words. After all that petulant angst he'd given her over choosing to honor her date with Anthony over a night out with him and now he's trying to squirm his way out of their... their... non-date?

"Malfoy you promised! Are you seriously trying to back out now?"

He shook his head swiftly and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Hermione waited while he looked

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idea and had sent along their additions and suggestions for the proposed introductory curriculum. The wheels were in motion for Granger's fund to eventually become a reality. Thus far, McGonagall had kept her word, and Draco's name on all documents still remained "anonymous benefactor."

Since Hermione would be leaving for her Venice trip on Sunday, he'd have a whole week of solo mornings at the café if he wanted to hash out his ideas for responses and edits before work. Then there was the tiny fact that tonight, Draco would be taking Hermione out to the opera. And this time, he hadn't completely cooked it up at the outset; he'd made her select a restaurant for dinner beforehand.

"Want a scone? I didn't have time for breakfast this morning." Her request broke through his scheming for the evening and he nodded.

When she returned with two plates, he looked up to see her awkwardly hovering in front of him.

"They only had one blueberry left, so I randomly picked apricot too. Which one do you want?"

Draco arched an eyebrow at her. He absolutely detested apricots, but Granger stood in front of him with that shy smile of hers, and knowing she also preferred blueberry, he decided to take a brief pause from being the world's most selfish idiot.

"You may have the blueberry today," he said stiffly, and accepted the other, more offensively flavored scone from her. She looked surprised for a moment then shrugged and sat back down. Draco set the disgustingly inferior scone on the table and resumed his underlining and circling of relevant Keeper statistics from the Wasps' reserve squad players.

He was getting better at writing with the pen, but it still required much more concentration than when he brandished a quill against parchment. His muscle memory with quill-writing was obviously far stronger, but if he focused enough with the pen, his writing approached the legible side of written language as opposed to looking like those weird, abstract art displays done by unicorns dipping their horns and hooves in ink and muzzling and stomping a blank canvas. Those actually sold for several thousand Galleons and Draco's mother owned two such pieces.

"Wow, the blueberry is *so* delicious today!"

Granger's exclamation broke through his concentration, but Draco didn't bother giving her attention. She was obviously trying to goad him, but he was determined to get his signature with a pen looking less troll-like. He wanted to get the ballpoint pen strokes perfect on the letters of his name before even touching the gold fountain pen Hermione had gifted him for Christmas.

"I can say, without a doubt, that this scone is perfect and no other baked good has ever tasted so scrumptious." Draco grit his teeth at her voice, but did not give her the satisfaction of reacting to her taunt.

"I really would hate to be the person missing out on this flavor."

He finally looked up and threw her an angry glare, while she batted her eyelashes innocently back.

"Is there a point to your ravings?"

Smiling sweetly she replied, "I merely noticed that you haven't touched your scone yet. And since you normally inhale the blueberry in under 30 seconds and in less than three bites, it would lead me to conclude that you are not so keen on apricot. Now, I'd rather not be the party responsible for your

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ill-humor today, so why don't you simply confess you'd rather have the blueberry and I'll split it with you?"

What was she, a bloody investigative Auror now?

"Yes, well spotted Granger, but maybe you haven't noticed my hands are quite full at the moment, so if you're so desperate to share then you can feed it to me yourself." He dropped his mouth open and leaned over the table jeeringly.

She called his bluff.

Smiling, she broke off a bite-sized portion of the scone with her fingers, and leant forward to place it gently into his waiting mouth. But when her hand was roughly halfway to his lips, the atmosphere shifted. In the brief span of several seconds that it took for her arm to reach towards him, her smirk was gone, replaced with a much more serious expression. All teasing erased from his mind, Draco felt that same thrill of anticipation akin to just before the snitch is released at the beginning of a quidditch match. Her hand hovered for all of a moment, and then her fingers tentatively placed the bit of scone on his tongue. She withdrew her hand carefully, glancing the edge of his lips as she retreated.

Draco exercised every ounce of his self-control to not close his mouth around her index finger to suck and lick every single bit of scone from her dainty digit. He was fairly certain that amount of restraint qualified him for at least an Order of Merlin, Second Class.

Eventually, he remembered that he was supposed to chew and swallow, and not sit there with food hanging out of his open jaw.

"Good?" she asked softly. Draco nodded slowly, even though he hadn't tasted it at all, so consumed were his senses by the thought of her fingers being inside his mouth. She finally averted her eyes and Draco could tell she was flustered, based on the flaming state of her cheeks.

Before he could stop himself, before he could heed any internal warnings, before he could even think about what a monumentally foolish move he was about to make, Draco dropped his papers and pen to the table and aggressively tore at his untouched apricot scone until it was in several pieces.

Hermione stared at his hand as he held up a piece of scone between his thumb and forefinger in front of her face.

"Turnabout's fair play, Granger. Open up." He murmured, his voice low, threading a fine line between menacing and seductive.

Almost as if he'd taken out his wand and compelled her, Hermione leant forward obediently and opened her mouth. Eyes locked on hers, Draco mimicked her actions from moments ago, and slowly placed the treat onto her waiting tongue. But Draco had been rather messy in breaking his apart, and bits of crumbled scone wound up on the corner of her mouth. As his thumb tenderly swept the remaining crumbs past her lips, her tongue suddenly darted out to meet his touch. The sensation of her wet tongue grazing his thumb made him bite down on his own lip in turn, and he noticed Hermione's eyes drawn to his mouth at the movement.

Draco reluctantly removed his hand and leant back in his seat.

"Good?" he asked her in turn.

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morning and she had no one she could Floo. Malfoy's face swam in her vision, but she knew that was out of the question. Firstly, their Floos weren't connected and secondly, she would feel like an absolute blundering moron if she had to explain herself at this time of night. Besides, if she could hang on for a few more hours, she'd be able to see him in person.

The thought of seeing Malfoy in person caused a warmth to spread through her body. She was a little bit furious with her panic-addled brain from this morning. Draco's hands had been gripping her legs and for the life of her, Hermione could not remember the sensation because her mind had been in such a fog.

Damn Malfoy and his curiously attractive hands. The impulse to touch him was so strong today that it resulted in her reaching for his hand before she thanked him and said goodbye. And when that strong hand had squeezed hers in return? Hermione had almost melted into the snow on the sidewalk around them.

Hermione knew he'd been jealous of her date with Anthony after his curious flip in mood when she'd revealed nothing had happened. She was no longer that oblivious Fourth-Year girl who couldn't recognize Ron Weasley's immature reaction over her attending the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum. And she'd denied it to herself then, that Ron would be romantically interested in her. She denied it and denied it for years until she'd been the one to make the first move by kissing him during the final battle at Hogwarts.

Well she was sick of doing the chasing. If Draco wanted something more with her, he could bloody well man-up and ask her.

But would he ever? And how long would Hermione wait around? Maybe he only considered Hermione as a platonic presence in his life.

She felt her limbs begin to quiver again and knew she was going to start spiraling from the stress soon. What was it that Malfoy had suggested this morning? A mantra?

Closing her eyes and hugging her knees even tighter, Hermione fell back on the comforts of her childhood. In the days before magic, before Hogwarts, before her family was irrevocably damaged, there was one song that her father could sing that would never, ever fail to cheer her up.

We all live in a yellow submarine. A yellow submarine. A yellow submarine.

We all live in a yellow submarine. A yellow submarine. A yellow submarine.

and made her tea. So no, she couldn't go to Ron tonight.

Harry and Ginny would probably be asleep too. Luna was abroad with Rolf. She would have to disturb Molly and Arthur, though they had also told Hermione on more than one occasion that she was welcome any time, no matter the issue, and they'd try to help.

But no, she would not intrude on other couples, it wouldn't be fair. Hermione realized, and not for the first time, that everyone around her had someone else.

Except that she did have someone else. In a way.

Her mind jumped to Malfoy and the way he'd been able to shake her out of her panic attack. How he'd shown concern for her well-being. The way his voice sounded when he begged her, "*Please*, come back to me."

It was both alarmingly sweet and a little selfish simultaneously. As she reflected upon their friendship, Hermione knew that she and Malfoy needed one another. A cynical part of Hermione's brain told her that it was because both of them were so pathetically lonely that they clung to this friendship to avoid being alone.

But that wasn't true. Not completely. Speaking for herself, Hermione had plenty of friends and, should she want to, could secure male attention and affection. Draco Malfoy was not her only option. He certainly wasn't a convenient option.

If anything, her embarrassing display of mental instability this morning showed her that he truly did value their friendship. Months ago when he'd apologized to her, Hermione worried that she was merely a pawn in his path to rehabilitate. The thought had been fleeting, and more to do with her lack of self-confidence than in any bad intent on his part. Then, she wondered if Malfoy only kept hanging around because he had no one else in his life and she was a simple distraction.

That was only half true, Hermione reasoned. Malfoy didn't have many people in his life, but Hermione had come to learn that this was a conscious choice, in part. When he talked about how miserable his holidays had been, she realized that, if he chose, he could be the darling of pureblood society. His family remained obnoxiously wealthy, and Narcissa being sort of in the good graces of Harry Potter meant they had a bit of political leverage still. Draco could say the word, and any number of pureblood witches would line up to be the next Mrs. Malfoy.

The same could be said of his former Slytherin cronies. The only name Malfoy ever even mentioned was Theodore Nott. But he did say that all the old crowd still attended his mother's New Year's Ball. Again, if Draco said all the right things, he'd be the star of his old social circle, attending pure-blood soirees and galas every weekend.

Instead, Draco chose to show up every morning before the job he did not need to keep, to a Muggle café he did not need to patron, to spend time with Hermione.

A tangle connection existed between her and Malfoy. She'd felt it this morning when she grabbed his hand to thank him. Friendship, lust, it didn't really matter to Hermione what the connection was named, it mattered enough to her that it existed at all.

And so, Hermione hugged her knees to her chest and considered her options. It was three in the

"Very," she whispered, still staring at him.

Draco brought his thumb and finger, which had just moments ago been in her mouth, up to his lips and licked them lasciviously, his gaze never wavering from hers.

"Yes, I'd have to agree," he murmured.

He watched her eyes track the movements of his fingers, then her throat bob as she swallowed nervously. She broke the eye contact first again, and shuffled the papers and notebooks in front of her distractedly. Showing everything haphazardly in her bag she stood. "I umm, just remembered... early meeting... Ministry. So I'm going to go... now. But I'll see you later tonight?"

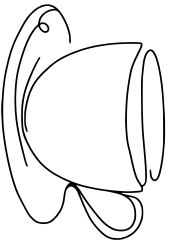
Draco nodded, deciding it might be best if he let her leave first so he wouldn't have to try and stand while his body's physical reaction to this morning's events was still on full display. *What I wouldn't give to be wearing robes right now...*

"I'm looking forward to it."

She threw her bag over her shoulder and almost knocked her chair over in the process. "OK, great... yes, umm me too... and don't forget to wear a suit to dinner. I mean, obviously you wouldn't forget to wear clothes, I only meant don't wear robes to dinner because it's a Muggle restaurant and actually what you've got on now would be fine, if that's what you've planned on wearing. I didn't mean to imply you can't pick out your own clothing because you're quite good at that... I mean, you've got an eye for that sort of thing, so... right. Well I'll be going now." She finished her babbling sentence and rushed out of the café before Draco could even respond.

I am in control of this. I am doomed.

No. I am in control of this.



Chapter Sixteen

Draco sighed as his apparition landed him in a deserted alley a short block from his designated meeting point with Hermione. He had come to a decision: this was going to be the last of their little forays outside of the coffee shop. His feelings for her had grown so far beyond friendship it was painful. If his little wanton display in the cafe earlier this morning were any indication, he couldn't be trusted in her presence. He had to protect himself, and ultimately her, from their relationship getting out of hand.

Just tonight, just get through tonight. You can put the walls back up Monday, just don't be an ass to her tonight and no touching outside of anything strictly platonic.

Draco steered himself to be distantly friendly, but then he rounded the corner before the restaurant and he spotted Hermione. He stopped walking.

Her beauty completely overthrew him once again. He allowed himself to stand totally still, half hidden behind the corner of a brick building and simply take her in, unseen.

Hermione had clearly put a lot of effort into making her usually riotous curls behave themselves for the evening. They were pulled back into a sleek bun at the base of her neck, with a few strands artfully left to frame her face. Her short dress was an elegant, rich purple and Draco grew warmer under his suit as he realized he'd never seen so much of her bare skin. The high neckline of the sleeveless dress fastened like a collar around her throat, leaving the skin of her shoulders and arms exposed to the night air. The dress flared out slightly at her waist, falling to just above her knees, which meant Draco could see plenty of leg and *Merlin*, she was wearing heels.

Weasley has got to be the biggest idiot alive. There were countless instances throughout his life that Draco had thought of Ron Weasley as an absolute moron (on the quidditch pitch, during classes, any time he opened his mouth, etc.) But seeing Hermione tonight, he felt the strongest surge of that thought yet. How did that tosser ever let her go?

The sobering thought of having to let her go made his gut clench painfully. A smart woman like her, she had to know, right? She *must* know Draco was no good for her. He was so terrified of losing

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words that might tumble out of his mouth. *I don't know how I ever managed without you. I don't know how I ever will.*

The moment dragged on a beat too long and Draco knew he had to say something to break this connection or he'd stand here all day, relishing in the feeling of her smaller hand in his larger one.

Finally, he gave a squeeze of her hand and let it go with a quiet "Of course, Granger, what are friends for?"

He turned and walked away, not daring to look back and make sure she actually left in the direction of her home. *I am in control of this. I am in control of this.*



True to her word, once Hermione left Malloy this morning she'd gone straight home and into bed. She was pleasantly surprised to find that it was close to dinner time when she later awoke.

Thankfully, she'd managed to squeeze in a quick visit to the Burrow on Sunday after her stay at her parents, and Molly had sent her home with almost an entire cauldron full of beef stew. After gulping down the delicious leftovers, Hermione made it through the back half of the Muggle televised news, then a chapter of her latest runes text, before deciding to call it an early night and head back to the comfort of bed and snuggling with Crookshanks.

But sleeping through the night did not go to plan.

Hermione woke up with a shout, her eyes wet and breathing ragged as she clutched at her chest. Her wand was in her hand suddenly, pointing at a torturer who was not there and who was long dead. She choked out a sob and placed her wand back on her nightstand. Hugging her knees into her chest, Hermione let herself shake and cry and tried not to look at the other side of her bed, which was empty and had been for years.

It was on nights like these that Hermione missed her relationship with Ron the most.

Not for romantic reasons; no, she and Ron had parted on relatively amicable terms and there was nothing beyond friendship as far as affection between them these days.

But Ron had always known how to wake her from a nightmare. He knew the soothing words and actions she needed when she awoke in a cold sweat, screaming at nothing and aiming her wand at the phantom of Bellatrix LeStrange.

She missed the feeling of a strong, masculine presence in her bed, arms wrapped around her tightly. Again, not necessarily Ron, just a dependable person who could act as an emotional and physical anchor when she felt like unraveling.

When they split up, Ron would constantly remind Hermione that if she ever needed him, day or night, he'd be there. Ron alone of her friends knew the intricacies of Hermione's night terrors, and there had been times she took him up on this offer. But after he'd started seeing Padma, Hermione knew she could no longer Fluo to Ron's in the middle of the night, sobbing while he rubbed her back

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She looked up sharply at Draco. "Excuse me? I can't take a sick day!"

"You can and you will," he calmly replied. Hermione scoffed and swung her work bag over her shoulder before turning and practically stomping out of the café. Draco rolled his eyes behind her back and followed her down the street.

"Granger, do not make me stun you. You need to go home and rest."

"I do not! I have far too much to do today!"

With a few long strides Draco was able to overtake her and physically block her from walking further down the sidewalk. She stopped just short of running into him and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Move, please," she demanded firmly.

"No," Draco replied, just as firm and smirked down at her. She huffed and flapped her arms and Draco bit back a laugh because she resembled an overly-irritated bird when she acted this way.

"This is not funny, Malfoy! I have to be at work!"

Draco sobered up then, realizing teasing wasn't going to get him anywhere. "Granger," he began softly. "Please. Go home. Your work will still be there tomorrow. You've just suffered a panic attack and you told me yourself you didn't sleep or eat well yesterday. If you don't take care of yourself, how do you expect to recover? Stop putting on a brave face for once and take a pause, yeah?"

Her eyes lost their intensity and ire and he could see her resolve crumbling. She let out a long breath and slung her bag higher up her shoulder. The fight seemed to be going out of her and Draco was relieved she finally seemed to see reason.

"You're right."

"Do mine ears deceive me or did you just admit I was right?" He couldn't resist the playful taunting but this time Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You're right," she said again, sounding slightly defeated. "I'm no good to my department in this state. I feel like I could sleep for a month."

"Sod your department, Granger, you need to take care of yourself for *you*," Draco didn't know where these declarations were coming from, and Hermione stared up at him with a curious expression. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Do you umm... need me to walk with you?"

She shook her head, sparing him from continuing to make a fool of himself. "No, I'm only a few blocks the other direction and I think the fresh air might help a bit before I lock myself in the rest of today."

Draco shrugged and took a step back. "All right, perhaps I'll see you tomorrow if you're well." He made to turn away, but a soft hand stopped him in his tracks.

Hermione had a hold of his hand and it was impossibly warm. "Thank you. I don't know how I would have managed without you today," she murmured.

Draco couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He couldn't move. The only part of his body he had any awareness of was his left hand currently enticed in Granger's grasp. He stared at their joined hands and didn't dare allow his gaze to wander up to her face. If it did, Draco was terrified of the

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something he didn't even have with her. A coward to the last, Draco knew that losing Granger was something his heart could not afford. In all his wildest daydreams and fantasies about a relationship with her, there was no version that didn't end with her eventually leaving. It would be inevitable, he couldn't offer her anything beyond a pathetic excuse for a wizard still desperately trying to figure out how to live his life. His surname came with so much public baggage, not to mention all his private emotional and mental baggage but at least he saw a Healer for that, it would cause any prudent witch to run screaming for the hills. If they ever were to embark on something romantically meaningful, she'd eventually come to her senses, or Draco would massively fuck up again, and she'd leave and be his ultimate undoing. This had gone far enough already.

And so Draco would do what he'd successfully done his entire life. He would lie. He would lie to himself and the rest of the world. A brief tour of Draco's life of lying follows:

Age 12: I'm better than Hermione Granger because I'm pureblooded and she is Muggleborn. *Lie*

Age 13: I'm definitely not afraid of Dementors. *Lie*

Age 15: I'm absolutely not jealous of Harry Potter's moronic army of children learning advanced defensive magic and I think Dolores Umbridge is a sane person. *Lie*

Age 16: I'm honored to receive the Dark Mark in service to the Dark Lord and have zero qualms about having to murder Albus Dumbledore. *Lie*

Age 16-17: Everything is fine. My family will survive our service to the Dark Lord. Everything is fine. The Dark Lord will succeed and our family will be rewarded. This is what I want. A world ruled by the Dark Lord will be a better one. *Lie*

Age 18-21: I'm coping. I can stop using Dreamless Sleep Potion any time I want. I don't need help. *Lie*

Age 22-Right Now: I don't need anyone. I can handle the sleepless nights. I can handle the night terrors. I don't need anyone. *Lie*

Right Now: Pursuing a relationship with Hermione would be a mistake. I will absolutely be able to handle life without her. I like being alone. *Lie. Lie. Lie*

Perhaps a person who was not Draco could judge him for all the lies over the course of his life, but then hadn't those lies allowed him to survive? *There is a vast difference between surviving and lying. Draco*, said Healer Brownings's voice in his head.

Draco pushed his Healer's advice away. He would continue to lie and pretend that he was perfectly fine going home alone every single night to his too-large-for-one-person estate. He would continue to lie that he preferred the deafening quiet and that his loneliness wasn't slowly crushing the life out of him.

Hermione fidgeted with her watch at her wrist and Draco thought she looked a little nervous. But Draco could do this. He could hurt her now and save her in the long-run. He'd do what he'd failed to do the night his aunt had tortured her on the drawing room floor: save her from pain. He knew she was attracted to him (the feeling being very much mutual there) but eventually that would fade for her. Hermione Granger was destined for continued greatness, and he wouldn't stand in the way, wouldn't

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drag her down with him. Tonight would simply be a goodbye to a future that could never occur. One day she would understand that this was for the best.

We have to let this go. Let me let you go, Granger.

Draco took a breath and pushed himself off the building and fully around the corner into view. Her head turned in his direction and her face lit up. She beamed so hard she practically glowed. And all because she'd seen him.

Too much has happened already, I'm feeling too much for you. I'll only hurt you.

He swallowed the hesitation lodged in his throat as he willed his body to approach, feeling like he was floating toward her, pulled in by some energy out of his control. *You're just friends, just friends, just friends.*

"Hello!"

"You look lovely!"

The words tumbled out before he could stop them and he knew the breathless reverence in his voice betrayed him. Draco was furious with himself because "lovely" was both too much and not nearly enough at the same time. *You look beautiful, breathtaking, fucking transcendent, and I will never forget how you look in this dress.*

He watched her take a small breath before she replied. "Thank you."

The restaurant was an upscale Italian eatery housed in a white brick, two-story building, with strings of lights draped invitingly along the outside of the façade and extending over the head of an outdoor patio. Hermione had opted to reserve a table indoors even though it was unseasonably warm, what with British weather in April being about as easy to predict as teaching an owl to swim.

As they were led to their table inside, Draco was startled to find most of the restaurant watching him and Hermione together. Two women seated at the bar openly stared at him, and he narrowed his eyes at their brazenness. Another woman actually nudged her dining companion and all but pointed her finger in his direction.

In the 30 seconds it took to be seated (more stares as Draco pulled out Hermione's chair for her), his mood had soured considerably. Draco glared down at his menu, fuming.

"What's wrong?" Of course, Hermione had noticed.

Draco fidgeted in his seat and huffed irritably. "I thought you said this was a Muggle restaurant?"

"It is."

"Then why is everyone in here gawping at us?"

He expected her to dismiss his suspicion. He expected her to roll her eyes and tell him he was being a paranoid egotist. What Draco did not expect was for Hermione to let out a sort of laughter.

"Oh Malfoy. They're not staring at you because you're Draco Malfoy, notorious heir to the Malfoy fortune."

"Then what the hell is going on here?"

She gave him that look of maddening superiority tinged with pity, like she always did when she felt the information at hand was ridiculously obvious.

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She paused here and closed her eyes for a moment taking a few steadying deep breaths. Draco could feel she was so close to pushing through her attack. He gave her legs another light squeeze.

"That's it Granger, stay with me. *Please*, come back to me," he murmured encouragingly.

When she opened her eyes again, Draco was ready with another question. "Where would I look if I wanted to find a bezoar?"

"A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and will save you from most poisons," she recited at top Hermione-Granger-swallowed-the-textbook-again speed and Draco grimaced.

"Welcome back, Granger," he said and realizing his hands were still on her legs, quickly let them drop.

"Here," he handed her the cup of water and muffin. "Drink this, all of it. And if you don't make quick work of that chocolate chip muffin, then it's fair game for me." That earned him a weak chuckle from her as he settled himself back across the table.

Hermione did as he instructed, sipping the water slowly and taking small bites of the muffin. When she'd finished the water, she placed the empty cup down and gave Draco a small smile.

"Thank you. I'm sorry you had to see that," she said quietly, but her statement completely floored him.

"Granger what on earth are you sorry for?" How could she have anything to be embarrassed about? She'd fought and won a war, for Merlin's sake, suffered unspeakable pain. If anyone had the right to fall apart sometimes it was Hermione Granger.

She merely gave a small shrug. "I haven't had a public attack like that in quite some time. I'm sure it's down to my lack of sleep."

"Do you... do you have them often?" His voice was careful, unsure if she'd be comfortable sharing something like this with him.

"Not as often as... right after the war. I usually only get them if I'm too tired or stressed or haven't been eating well. Lately I only have them at home, after certain nightmares."

"I guess that's another thing we have in common," he confessed before he could stop himself. Hermione met his gaze and Draco felt it again, that connection, that pull that originated from some place deep within him and towards the incredible woman in front of him.

They didn't speak for a few moments, just stared at one another as Draco's words hovered in the space between them.

He cleared his throat to break the tension. "Do you have a mantra? It was a tactic I was recommended once and it... helps me pull through. Helps anchor me a bit."

Hermione shook her head. "No. What's yours?"

"Ah, ah, that's cheating Granger. You wouldn't want to copy my work now, would you? How would you ever learn?" Draco smirked and was rewarded with another weak chuckle from Hermione.

She checked her watch and slowly gathered up her things and sowed them in her work bag. "We should get going," she commented softly.

"Yes, absolutely. I'm going to work and you're taking a sick day, so let's get you home already."

sharp and labored.

Draco moved swiftly around the table and crouched directly in her line of sight. “Granger. Look at me. You have to look at me.” She again gave no sign she could even see him, but her body started to sway in slight convulsions. He had to think fast or she was going to continue to spiral, maybe even start screaming. Draco recalled how she helped him during his flirtation with breaking his sleep potion sobriety and formed a plan.

“I’ll be right back, fight this, I know you can,” he murmured, not confident it even registered with her. He strode as quickly as he could without running to the counter. “A glass of water for my companion, please, I think she’s unwell,” he spoke urgently but quietly to the elderly owner. The woman glanced quickly at Hermione, pursed her lips and fetched Draco a cup of water so fast he thought she might have summoned it.

“Wait,” she called softly as he made to go back to Hermione. She grabbed the first muffin she could get her hands on out of the case and pushed it toward him.

“Have her eat this too, it can get real bad if her blood sugar stays too low. My husband served in Vietnam, I’ve seen my share of the shakes.” Draco didn’t quite comprehend everything she said but thanked her all the same.

He put the water and muffin on the table and crouched in front of her again. Hermione’s eyes were now closed so tight, he wondered if they’d be bloodshot whenever she managed to get them open again.

“Granger?”

Nothing. She just silently cried with her eyes shut tight, shaking her head slightly back and forth as if trying to will away whatever horrible thoughts plagued her.

Draco was absolutely lost and more than a little scared. How could he help her out of this? From his crouched position in front of her, he gingerly placed his hands on the tops of Hermione’s knees. Giving her legs a light squeeze, he thought of how best to reach her.

“Granger, what are the properties of a mandrake?” he asked softly. To his utter amazement, she stopped shaking and slowly blinked her eyes open.

“Wh-what? What did you say?” Draco was so relieved that she spoke to him even if her breathing was far too rapid and her voice panicked. His thumbs traced light circles on her knees.

“Mandrake properties, list them off for me.”

Her brows furrowed but she didn’t look away from him.

“Man-mandrake or... or man-mandradora is a... is a powerful restorative. It is... used to... to turn people who have been trans-figured or c-cursed to their original state... The c-cry of the... the cry is fatal to-to anyone who hears it.”

“Good girl. Recite Golpatot’s Third Law.” Hermione gulped a deep breath and continued to stare into his eyes.

“Golpatot’s Third Law states... that the... the antidote for a blended P-poison... will b-be equal to more than the sum... of the antidotes for each... of the separate components.”

“They’re staring because you’re probably the most attractive man to walk in here tonight. Probably the most attractive man they’ve ever seen, really.”

She said all this in an objective, offhand voice, as if his attractiveness were an established fact of the universe she’d memorized for a History of Magic lesson. *Did she really just admit that? Did she think that was about him?*

“Everyone was staring at you too,” he sputtered out, trying to wrap his mind around her bold declaration of his attractiveness. And indeed, half the stares from the restaurant patrons had been directed at Hermione, though she had failed to notice.

But Hermione rolled her eyes. “Well of course, they were all wondering how someone who looks like me could possibly be out to dinner with someone who looks like you.”

Did this woman not own a single fucking mirror?

“No Granger, they were staring because of how bloody gorgeous you look in that dress,” he snapped. He immediately flicked his eyes back down to the menu and pretended to read so he wouldn’t have to witness her reaction.

Now that was not very platonic, was it?

Draco didn’t dare look up until a waiter approached to take their drink order. Hermione cleared her throat and ordered a bottle of red wine in a voice higher than normal. He noticed a faint blush on her cheeks that extended part way down her neck.

They didn’t speak or look at one another until wine had been poured into a glass for each of them. Hermione seemed to be gathering up her courage as she sat up straighter in her chair and held her glass toward him.

“To a night of firsts,” she toasted, boldly meeting his eyes.

He should have bit out a scathing reply. He should have spurned her toast. He should have put a stop to all this nonsense months ago.

But Draco was a weak, weak man. Especially when it concerned the enchanting woman in front of him.

“To a night of firsts,” he repeated and clinked his glass against hers.

Draco steered the conversation toward Hermione’s upcoming conference and felt some of the tension seep out of the air between them. At several moments throughout dinner, Draco completely forgot they were sitting in a Muggle restaurant. The wine was excellent and the food as good as any other fine dining establishment Draco had visited over the years. The only real differences between this Muggle place and a wizarding one was that none of the dishes or bottles floated toward them and no one around them wore robes. None of the patrons brandished wands or cursed Draco because of his family name, angrily demanding an explanation for him daring to share a meal with war heroine Hermione Granger. It all felt so refreshingly normal, to be an anonymous man out to dinner with a beautiful woman; one who was kind and intelligent, and just as anonymous as he was here in the Muggle world.

Draco listened attentively as Hermione explained one of the more complicated rune translations

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she'd discovered in an ancient text, when she suddenly trailed off and stared at him.

"Ern, Granger? Everything all right?"

She frowned and seemed to come to a serious realization. "I talk about my career a lot, don't I?"

"Yes? But I don't—"

"You never talk about your job with me."

This turn in the conversation baffled him. "Of course I do. I always answer your questions."

She shook her head and continued to frown. "Yes, you always give me the facts and sometimes you talk about your colleagues. But you never tell me how you feel about your job. I don't even know what you like about your work, or what you find interesting about the sport."

Draco chuckled warmly at how adorably put-out she looked at not knowing an answer. "You hate quidditch," he replied simply.

"I do not!" she huffed indignantly, causing him to chuckle again.

"You absolutely do. Why would I bore you to death about a topic that is of no interest to you?"

She looked slightly hurt at his response and fidgeted with her wine glass. "But it's not as if you're interested in the welfare of magical creatures. Am I boring you incessantly in the mornings?"

Where the hell was this lack of confidence coming from? "Well of course not, I'm not some sort of bleeding heart do-gooder," he declared. "Do you think I honestly care about how deforestation affects bowtruckles? It's nothing to do with the topic of conversation, it's everything to do with the way you practically ignite with excitement and passion about your causes. There's no half-measures with you," he paused to take a fortifying sip of wine. "You're many things Granger, but never boring."

Those brown doe eyes pierced him, tempting Draco to raise his occlumency shields, but he knew she'd never take advantage of him in that way. Besides, all of his emotions were probably scrawled across his face in a glaringly obvious fashion.

The spell thankfully broke when the waiter approached with the bill. Before Draco could pull out the thick wad of Muggle money he'd brought with him tonight, Hermione slid a small plastic card into the billfold and handed it back to the waiter.

"Is that a new type of currency?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, that's called a credit card. Instead of having to carry around the paper or coins, I hand them the card and sign an agreement to pay the amount from my bank funds. Everything occurs electronically. It's terribly convenient, don't even get me started on how the magical world could benefit from a similar system. Giant gold coins are ridiculously cumbersome."

"You should have let me pay," he frowned, annoyed that she wasn't letting him display any sort of chivalry. She waved his statement away. "No, you got the tickets tonight and you paid for the ballet. Besides, I need to keep building my credit in the Muggle world. You rob Gringotts *one time* and they constantly treat you like a criminal every time you need to visit your vault..."

Draco laughed at the image of Hermione being harassed by a group of security goblins. "Come on then thief, we don't want you accused of purloining the silverware tonight."

They exited the restaurant and made their way back to the deserted alley where Draco had origi-

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Hermione snorted. "More like trust-fund brat."

"Careful, peasant, or I shan't ever lend you my coveted kerchief ever again."

Hermione laughed and held it back out to him. "Here, unless you want me to wash it first?"

Draco waved a hand imperiously. "Trust-fund brat, remember? I could have several sals made from my stockpile. Keep it as a reminder of my chivalry."

It was Hermione's turn to jokingly roll her eyes and Draco was pleased he'd been able to lift her spirits this morning. Usually when she was in these moods it resulted in sulky silence all the way to work.

"Want to tell me why you showed up today acting like an underfed blast-ended skrewt?"

That earned him a withering glare, but then she sighed and leaned back in her chair.

"I spent the weekend with my parents," she said softly.

Draco knew Hermione's relationship with her parents sometimes made her confusingly sad, but it seemed to be affecting her more than usual.

"Are they all right?"

"They're fine, it's just... with each passing visit, I feel this gulf widening between us."

"Did they say something to upset you?"

"No, it's not that," she replied thoughtfully and rested her chin in her hands, leaning back over the table. She stared off in the mid-distance and Draco knew her well enough by now to know she was simply taking a minute to marshal her thoughts before speaking.

"I can see it in their faces, Malfoy. It's the tiniest of things that will set them off. If I exclaim 'Merlin' or 'Godric' instead of 'God' or 'Christ' that shadow passes over their faces. Sometimes I'm a stranger to them because I've lost some of my Muggle turns-of-phrases or speech patterns. Sometimes I feel like I belong to two different worlds. I mean, my parents knew how to use mobile phones before me! Can you imagine? They had to teach *me* how to use one!"

"Yes, imagine that," Draco interjected dryly, "someone having to teach you how to perform a task."

Normally that would have earned him a playful slap on the arm, but Hermione seemed deaf to his interruption and she continued in a higher, more anxious voice.

"I've done all these amazing, fantastic things! I broke into and out of a highly secure bank! On the back of a Ukrainian Iron Belly dragon! And I could never, *can never*, tell them! So many facts of my life and they'll... never... know... and... I don't... I can't... ever..."

He watched as her face crumpled, then her features widened as she tried to find relief through air. Her body couldn't decide whether to cry or scream and all the while it had forgotten how to draw breath. Is this how he looked during his episodes? This was fucking terrifying to watch.

"Granger? Granger, are you all right?" She wasn't of course, but maybe if he asked, she would hear his voice and calm down. Hermione made no sign she heard him or that she even remembered he was sitting there.

Tears sprang suddenly from her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. Her hands began twisting into the fabric of the front of her blouse as her wide, crying eyes stared off at nothing, her breathing

Though the kisses were languid now, Hermione seemed to still want release with him. None too gently, she shoved him off of her and pushed him backwards until his legs hit her bed and he sat down on the edge of her mattress. The look she gave him could only be described as predatory as she leaned down to kiss him deeply.

"Scoot up," she whispered, motioning for Draco to move up the bed. He complied and his mouth went dry as Hermione bent down to remove her knickers and kicked them away. Draco shimmied his boxers off in turn, discarding them to the floor. Hermione crawled up the bed toward him, her brown hair falling like a curtain around their faces as she leaned over his body to claim his lips. As she made to straddle his hips, Draco grabbed her wrist to stop her.

"Wait"

She looked up at him in surprise, and he tried not to appear frightened or nervous as he met her gaze. They could stop this right now, and Hermione could still have her dignity intact, if she wanted. But before they went any further Draco had to know, had to be absolutely sure, that she wouldn't regret being intimate.

"Is this all right? I mean, is this what you want? With me?"

What was it about this woman that made him feel so vulnerable, so open? He cursed himself for the rare self-conscious tone of his voice, but Draco couldn't screw this moment up. If Hermione rejected him after the fact, Draco wasn't sure how he'd recover. Better to cut this off now before shame set in and she hated him in the morning.

Hermione's gaze softened and before she answered him, she wrapped her hand around his erection and stroked up and down several times, causing Draco to throw his head back and bite his lip. "Yes. I'm sure." He heard her murmur and as he opened his eyes, was greeted with the most perfect vision of Hermione lowering herself onto his cock. They both groaned as they joined together, Hermione letting her head fall back. Draco brought his hands to her hips as she tentatively moved up and down, exploring how their bodies fit together. Draco savored the way her tits bounced lightly as she slid up and down astride him, her mouth falling open in a silent, round shape as he filled her tight passage. Once she seemed more comfortable with him inside her, Draco moved his own hips up to meet her thrusts. He gripped one side tightly and as she found a steady rhythm, and reached his other hand up to palm and tease her breast. Hermione's hands came forward to rest on his shoulders, and she used her newfound leverage to move faster up and down his length.

Draco remembered dimly that Hermione mentioned her neighbors were traveling, and thanked the stars for that because the sounds coming out of both their mouths were uninhibited and extremely loud. Hermione worked herself on top of him at a furious pace and Draco removed his hand from her breast to hold tighter to both her hips. She slammed down on him more erratically now and Draco dug his fingers into her sides to help control her movements. The thought of her coming on top of him was almost enough to send him over the edge, but he wanted to get her off first.

Seeing as she was much more comfortable riding him frantically, he bucked his hips harder, sending his member deeper inside her, and she moaned wantonly in encouragement. Hermione leaned down

for a deep kiss, pushing his mouth open with a forceful prod of her tongue, before breaking the kiss and sitting up straight. Draco increased the pace again to match hers, both of them with a sheen of sweat forming across their foreheads as they panted with the effort of their lovemaking. Hermione's limbs trembled, and Draco knew he had her then. She threw her head back, her sheet of hair flying behind her, and Draco marveled at the way her bare skin glowed in the moonlight. Gods, he'd fantasized about her like this for months and none of his imaginings had even come close to the reality of her fucking him into her own mattress.

She was screaming his name again. "Draco! Draco! Yes! Draco!"

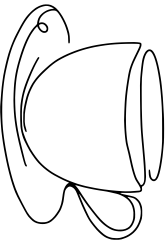
He was a goner after that. Finishing off her orgasm with incoherent mumbling, Hermione slumped forward onto his chest, tangling her hands in his hair while still moving her hips for him. A few hard and punishing thrusts was all it took and Draco saw stars behind his eyes as he came inside her. He may have mumbled "Hermione?" into her hair as she lay on top of him, but he wasn't confident the noise that exited his mouth was any recognizable human language.

Breathing hard and thoroughly sated, Draco brought his arms around Hermione's frame and held her to his chest, not wanting their physical contact to end yet. They stayed like that for a few minutes before Hermione reached her hands up to push her hair off both their faces. She pressed a chaste kiss to the top of his shoulder and then the side of his neck before gingerly rolling off him and laying down next to him.

Summoning the little courage he possessed, and still chasing the high from post-coital bliss, he turned on his side to face Hermione. She met his gaze with a shy smile of her own, and he grinned in return.

She hesitated a moment, then leaned forward to meet his lips in another brief kiss. Pulling away she whispered "Be back in a minute," then rolled out of bed and walked to the adjoining bathroom. Draco gave her made form an appreciative stare as she padded across the room, admiring the shape of her backside.

He flung himself back into her pillows with a contented sigh and shivered a bit without her warm body next to his. Taking it as a positive sign that she hadn't immediately kicked him out of her home, Draco decided to make himself a little more comfortable while he waited for her to return. Knowing Hermione, she'd probably want to discuss what had just happened between them. Draco pulled the covers up around his naked body and tried to fight the tiredness creeping into his bones. But it was a losing battle, and in a matter of seconds, he was out cold.



Chapter Seventeen

Closing the door behind her in the bathroom, Hermione leaned against it and let out a sigh. That had been, frankly, mind-blowing sex.

Turning to her reflection in the mirror, she had to bite down on a giggle as she saw her appearance. There was no other way to describe her just then: Hermione looked thoroughly and utterly shagged. Her curls were simply everywhere, a rosy flush to her cheeks, her makeup mostly worn off, light red marks covering her neck and chest, and if she looked close enough, fingerprint impressions in the skin of her hips.

She used the bathroom and freshened up, finally extracting the rest of her hair from some of the pins that remained snafled in her curls. Wrangling her hair into an acceptable bun atop her head, Hermione smiled at her reflection. As of yet, no self-consciousness or regret had sunk in, no worry about repercussions from her actions with Malfoy. Her grin widened as she ran through the events of the evening in her mind. While Hermione had been hopeful that perhaps tonight they'd take a step past friendship, she hadn't dared hope that they'd go quite this far. But they had indeed. Hermione had just shagged Draco and it had been more fulfilling than she'd ever imagined, and she'd certainly done her fair share of imagining recently.

A giddy laugh almost passed her lips, but she managed to stifle it in time. Throwing on a clean cotton slip hanging on the back of the bathroom door, she wondered how Malfoy felt about everything. Would he still be in her bed, staring blankly at the ceiling and worrying over her reaction? Or perhaps fretting that he'd made a mistake, and that she regretted sleeping with him? Maybe he was getting dressed right now, preparing to make a polite excuse and leave? What if he'd already dressed and left? No, he wouldn't... unless he was afraid? Hermione had witnessed his flight or fight response on several occasions, and knew that if a situation became too emotional for him, he found the quickest exit.

Hermione slowly opened the door leading to the bedroom and was greeted with the sight of Draco sound asleep in her bed, covers tucked over his body as if he'd always slept there. Relief coursed

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between them now. Draco planted kiss after kiss down her neck as her fingers grasped at his back, and he began working his mouth down to her bare tits. He circled one nipple teasingly with his tongue and felt her hips buck against him. He took the other breast in his hand and worked that nipple between his fingers, and heard her breaths quicken as she whimpered under his ministrations. He kissed his way back up the middle of her chest to capture her mouth while still kneading at her breast. Draco circled her taut nipple for a few more minutes, working her into a lustful frenzy before slowly tracing his hand down across her stomach and stopping just above the top of her knickers.

His hand remained there for but a moment before dipping just inside and stopping once more.

Draco pulled back from kissing her to lock eyes.

"Is this all right?" he asked seriously, making sure he had permission to touch her in her most intimate place.

"Yes, please," she whispered breathily and he kissed her fiercely as his hand moved lower. When his fingers finally reached their destination at the apex of her thighs and he could feel the wetness already accumulated there, they both moaned simultaneously. Draco dragged a finger along her slit, relishing in the moisture there, and Hermione had to break their kissing to gulp in oxygen desperately. He could tell he was already making her come undone with just the briefest brushes of his fingertips. Draco wondered if it had been as long for her as it had for him since she'd felt another person touch her in this way.

When he slipped one long finger inside her, she gasped and threw her head back so hard against the wall Draco wanted to ask if she'd hurt herself, but she silenced him with another kiss.

Gods, she felt perfectly tight and ready for him, and he reveled in the way her walls clenched and pulsed around his finger. He slid it in and out of her, going slow at first before speeding up the pace, all the while worshipping her neck with his tongue and stroking her breast with his free hand. As her moans became more frantic, he inserted another finger and quickened his movements within her, trying to match his speed with the thrusts of her hips. When his thumb flicked at her clit, she cried out and attached her mouth to his shoulder, sucking and biting at the pale skin there. Her nails dug so hard into his back that Draco was certain there would be ten little red marks there tomorrow, not that he minded at all. It thrilled him to be giving her this level of pleasure.

His thumb barely brushed against her clit again and he earned another whimper. She was so close, he could feel it, and the thought that he was about to make Hermione come by his hand alone made his cock impossibly stiff. He pumped his fingers faster, enjoying how her hips moved in time before her movements began to jerk uncontrollably as she fucked his hand. He stopped teasing her clit and circled it vigorously now with his thumb and a few moments later she rode out her orgasm with a cry of "Draco! Yes! Oh gods Draco, yes!"

Draco preened internally at the exclamation of his name falling from her lips in ecstasy and swallowed her cries with his own lips, his fingers slowing their ministrations as she came down from her orgasm. Breathing heavily, she leaned her forehead against his and smiled, then gave him slow, sensual kisses while he delicately pulled his hand from her knickers.

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and she'd make sure to deal the killing blow swiftly and kindly. He braced himself for her gentle but firm rejection.

Hermione got up on her tip toes and pressed her lips against his cheek. A goodbye kiss. One for the road. She placed another lingering kiss to his other cheek. Then her lips moved to the exposed column of his throat, beginning at just beneath one ear and moving slowly under his jaw to the other side. This felt less like a farewell...

He felt her tug his shirt back up over his shoulders and button it up again. "It's all right. You can keep it on if you'd like," she murmured soothingly as she buttoned all the way up his chest, only leaving the top two undone. Hermione then pressed her palms flat against his chest and looked into his eyes again. Her hands slid down his front, stopped momentarily at his abdomen, and came to rest at the top of his belt buckle.

What the fuck was going on? What alternate universe was he in right now?

Keeping her hands at the belt at his waist, Hermione rose up onto her toes again and put her mouth against his ear. "Your shirt is not the article of clothing I need you to remove right now," she whispered and all of his blood rushed south.

She pulled back with a smirk to rival his own on his starkest day, and Draco gulped as her hands worked at his belt. He froze as she tugged it out of the loops, and dropped it unceremoniously to the floor. His heart raced as she flicked open the button of his trousers, then unzipped them and swiftly tugged them down. Wordlessly, he stepped out of them, and Hermione launched herself at him, resuming their frantic kissing as if there hadn't just been an emotional interruption to the evening's steamy proceedings. All thoughts of his glasthy Dark Mark gone, Draco threw himself back into kissing the witch in his arms. She suddenly reached down a hand in between them to palm his erection and Draco had to break their kiss to let out a sharp hiss of breath. She rubbed the length of him through his boxers before reaching beneath his waist band to pump his member. Draco's head lolled forward to rest atop her shoulder as he let himself get lost in the sensation of Hermione's hand wrapped around his cock.

He needed to take control now if he had any hope of lasting much longer. Draco took her wrist and pried her hand from him, groaning as she gave one last tug before allowing him to remove her hand. Mouths and bodies melded together once more, and Hermione pulled him backwards. He let her lead him along, their feverish kissing never ceasing as they made clumsy progress further into her home.

She led him through a doorway and Draco pressed her up against the wall of what he realized was her bedroom. Hermione clawed at the skin of his chest underneath his buttoned shirt while she rolled her hips rhythmically against his and he drove his tongue further into her mouth. He pulled away briefly and whipped his shirt over his head, no longer giving a damn about his forearm, since Hermione was sufficiently distracted by the rest of his body anyway.

She answered in kind by unclasping her bra and letting it fall away. Draco gave her a hungry look up and down, then pinned her to the wall again, alternating between attacking her mouth and neck. She moaned loudly in his ear as they rubbed against each other, with nothing but their underwear

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through her and suppressing another laugh, she tiptoed over silently to scoot in beside him. He didn't stir, and Hermione took a moment to study his relaxed features as he slept. Draco's handsome, angular face appeared softer in slumber, his brow not furrowed, eyes not narrowed, no tightness around his mouth and jaw. His head of blond hair mesmerized her in the way it reflected the bright moonlight, and she resisted the urge to sweep some of the white locks from his forehead.

Instead of continuing gawking at him, she settled back into her pillows and was asleep within minutes. Any serious discussions about friendships, relationships, and the future of each, could wait until the morning.



The bright morning sunlight streaming through her bedroom window forced Hermione's eyes slowly open. Thanks to a clever charm on all her windows, Hermione could keep the curtains open constantly, while no outsiders could see into her home. While not necessarily a morning person, she liked being awakened naturally by the sun on weekend mornings.

She languorously stretched her limbs out, delighting in that specific dull soreness between her legs that only came after sex. Merlin, it had been so long since she'd felt that delicious aching. Casting her glance sideways, Hermione observed the sleeping male form beside her: Draco had stayed the night.

His back was to her, and by the sound of his deep, even breathing she could tell he was still asleep. Last night in the dark, and based on their positions, Hermione hadn't gotten the chance to appreciate the lean muscles of Draco's back.

Well, she certainly was not going to waste this opportunity. The covers had slid to his lower back, giving her plenty of skin to view; impossibly pale porcelain in hue, but not in an unhealthy way. Last night, Draco's hair had taken on the color of the moon, but in the shining sun, it shone no less bright, a white-gold halo atop his head. Longing to stroke the bare skin of his back and once again feel the taut muscles there, Hermione shook her head. She had no idea exactly how he felt about her yet, and it would be unwise to presume he would welcome her touch.

Worried he would turn around and catch her ogling him creepily, Hermione risked getting out of bed to make tea. He didn't stir as she left the room, throwing on a short robe over her cotton nightgown. Her kitchen clock read just past 7 AM, and the weekend edition of *The Prophet* already awaited her. An owl was perched at her window's ledge and she took the paper from its beak before it took off again on another delivery. She unfurled the paper and set it on her kitchen table, when she noticed a blinking light on her phone.

Hermione had no need for it last night, obviously, and had forgotten it was even left on. Picking it up, she noticed several text messages that had come in from Ginny roughly half an hour ago.

G: Good morning! I know you're an early riser so let's have it!

G: Usually you respond quickly.

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G: Seriously, Hermione put down whatever book you have and message me back.

G: I'm going to burst through your Floo if you don't respond soon.

Rolling her eyes at Ginny's theatrics, Hermione tapped out a reply. She hadn't expected Ginny to want to hear from her this early; she was notorious for sleeping in on the weekend if she didn't have early training.

H: And a good morning to you too.

G: FINALLY. Well?

H: Well what?

G: Very funny. Don't play dumb with me you'd never pull it off. You couldn't stop being clever if you tried. How was your evening of romance?

Hermione paused before answering. She had absolutely no idea how to explain this over text and she didn't think she wanted to tell Ginny this way.

H: Unexpected.

G: I'm coming over. Open the Floo.

H: No! Let's meet for lunch later and I'll tell you everything.

G: HOLY GODRIC IS HE STILL THERE???

Shit. Hermione couldn't even manage to be subtle over text message. She dithered over how to reply, unsure of the best way to divulge that why yes, a naked Draco Malfoy was still in her bed and had in fact stayed the entire night after a delightful bout of shagging.

She had taken too long to reply; and Ginny was not known for her patience.

G: HERMIONE GRANGER PUT DOWN THE BLASTED PHONE AND GET YOUR CUTE BUM BACK INTO BED WITH HIM!

G: Also yes let's do lunch later.

Hermione sighed and turned off the device. She bustled about the kitchen as quietly as possible, preparing a pot of tea. Once she set the kettle on the stove to heat up without magic (Hermione swore up and down that preparing tea the Muggle way simply tasted better) she picked up the paper for some morning reading.

Now what? Hermione often took the paper to bed with her and would prop herself against the headboard to catch up on the news while she waited for the kettle to boil. Would Malfoy find it weird to wake up and find her reading next to him in bed? Or would he be more hurt to wake up alone, thinking she regretted what they'd done?

Unbidden, Hermione's words to Ginny the previous Sunday floated across her mind.

"Is it wrong, Ginny? Is it wrong to want him?"

Last night certainly had not felt wrong. Not in the slightest. Sodd it all, Hermione was sick and tired of trying to cater to other people's definitions of right and wrong.

On her path back to the bedroom, Hermione noticed the comical trail of clothing left behind by her and Draco last night in their haste to undress each other. Her gown and cloak and most of his outerwear were strewn about her front hall, while his belt, trousers, and her bra had all fallen to the floor

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in disgust, as was her night. He was tainted, evil, and completely unworthy of a pure soul like her. It would break his whole being in half to witness this woman, who had come to mean so much to him, recoil from him in distaste and horror. For a brief time in his life, for this past year, Hermione had made him feel whole again. She'd treated him kindly, she'd appreciated his thoughts and feelings, made him laugh, made him feel as if he did in fact have something to offer the rest of the world.

Draco looked up to drink in the sight of her one last time. She was still against the wall, breathing hard. Her previously neatly coiffed hair, wild and free once again, tumbled down in bunches of curls and ghosted past the tops of her shoulders. Her plump lips full and swollen, lipstick long gone, and some of her mascara smudged under one eye. He trailed his gaze down the rest of her body; her bra askew from their passionate handling of one another, one cup pulled down so that one of her nipples peeked out over the top, and her lacy black knickers bunched at the front where they'd been grinding their bodies together. He'd never seen a more beautiful woman in his entire life.

She could never be his.

He looked away as his chest ached with every sharp breath he took. She was a virtuous, wonderful beam of light in this terrifying world and he had no business existing in her presence. He heard Hermione clear her throat and softly pad barefoot toward him, but he refused to look up. Draco knew exactly what was coming, could predict just how she would let him down: *"Malfoy, I think we got slightly carried away just now, and I think it might be best if you leave. I'll see you Monday for coffee."* And Draco would nod and agree because she was right, of course, because Hermione Granger was always right. He'd silently gather up his dignity and clothes and go home to his empty manor, drink himself stupid, and spend the rest of the weekend wallowing. Come Monday, she'd be distantly polite, determined to ignore what had passed between them. She'd pull further and further away from him, until eventually they'd be strangers to each other once more, and then one day she would stop showing up. She'd exit his life forever and it would be best for him to accept that now.

She came to a stop just in front of him, but he still kept his gaze averted. He could smell that intoxicating floral scent coming off her in waves and with each deep, ragged inhale of breath he vowed to commit that smell to memory.

"Malfoy," she called softly and Draco squeezed his eyes shut. He was unable, unworthy, to look upon her, a coward to the last. He almost flinched at the way she'd already reverted back to calling him by his surname.

She took another step toward him and was right up in his personal space. Draco continued to lean numbly against the couch, his right arm keeping a tight grasp on his covered left arm. Gentle hands cupped his face and he fought the urge to cry, her soft hands so comforting and tender against his skin. Another kindness he did not deserve.

"Malfoy, please. Look at me."

He obeyed her instantly and how could he not? She'd had control of his every action and decision for a while now, a power over him he didn't care to fight. Her eyes offered warmth and understanding, not imbued with the harsh judgment he'd expected to find. Still, she was nothing if not empathetic,

one-shaped dent when they eventually moved on.

Speaking of moving on, her small but insistent hands pushed at the shoulders of his suit jacket urging it down his arms and he briefly removed his hands from cupping her backside to shrug it off his body and fling it away from him. His waistcoat was next on her list, as her determined fingers made quick work of the buttons and he shrugged that piece off too. She pulled his face back to hers, and pressed a line of kisses from the light stubble of his jaw up to the shell of his ear, ending her path in a provocative whisper of "turnabout's fair play."

His eyes widened as she removed her hands from around his neck to reach up behind her hair. In one swift motion of her fingers, she'd unclasped her dress and pulled the high collar away from her neck. The fabric of her gown kept sliding down and down and down her body, until she nimbly stepped out of it and kicked it aside, now standing in front of Draco in nothing but a strapless bra and her knickers.

His throat released a sort of feral growl as he pushed her roughly back up to the wall, crushing his mouth and hips to hers. Both of their hands grabbed and fondled each other with wanton abandon, Draco luxuriating in the feel of both her breasts in his hands as she undulated against him and suckled at his bottom lip.

Hermione quickly dispatched him of his cuff links, he heard them drop against the hardwood floor and roll away. Her palms slid up his chest to the top buttons of his dress shirt, and she hastily worked her way down, untucking his shirt from his pants and coming dangerously close to touching his achingly hard cock. His shirt was wide open now, and Hermione leant back slightly to admire the pale skin of his chest and abdomen. Licking her lips, she leant forward again and pressed open-mouthed kisses from just above his navel all the way to the column of his throat as Draco groaned and gripped her shoulders.

Now her determined hands tried to push his shirt from his back and arms, and Draco made to oblige her, but as the fabric fell from his shoulders, down his biceps, and her touch reached the bare skin of his elbows, he gasped and wrenched himself out of her grasp and stumbled away from her with a cry of "No!"

Fuck, what was wrong with him? How could he have forgotten?

Panting like a frightened animal he backed away blindly, before his lower back collided with the top of her sofa. "I don't want you to... to see ... to see it," he stammered, out of breath as he came to a stop, leaning against the back of the couch. He clutched desperately at the fabric of his shirt still covering his left forearm, cognizant of the horrible image beneath the sleeve.

Draco's Dark Mark no longer glowed black or red as it had during Voldemort's reign. Once the wizard who'd branded him had died, the Mark immediately began to fade, all magic gone from the ugliness on his arm, but that skull and snake shape remained. It kept fading with time, and was now a faint outline in an unhealthy, gray hue, and though no longer so stark against his pale skin, it was noticeable nonetheless.

Draco knew he wouldn't be able to handle the sight of Hermione seeing it, of her looking at him

behind the sofa. With a quick swish of her wand, the clothes arranged themselves into neat piles on the armchairs in front of her fireplace, the cufflinks even coming to rest on his stack. His shirt, his boxers, and her knickers were scattered in different directions on her bedroom floor, Hermione stopping only to toss her underwear into the laundry hamper on her way back to bed.

Draco had turned in his sleep and now lay on his side facing her. As gingerly as possible, Hermione slid onto the bed, sitting with her knees propped up and back against a collection of pillows between her and the headboard.

Avoiding the urge to stare at him again, she buried her nose in the newspaper and was soon lost in a lengthy article on the acromantula venom trade.



Draco felt very comfortable and very warm. The bed beneath him was far too soft to be his own, and the light hitting his eyes far too bright to be his darkened bedchamber.

Hardly daring to believe that last night had actually been real, he slowly let his eyes open. He was not in fact, in his bed at Franklin House, but stark naked, tangled in Granger's non-silk sheets. The woman herself was a mere foot from him, and the first part of her that came into his waking view was her bare calf. Trailing his gaze upward, his eyes widened as he noted how little she was actually wearing. Her gray cotton slip just brushed mid-thigh, hiking up her leg since she sat with her knees bent. She also had a short robe on, but it did little to obscure the fact that she was not wearing a bra either. She'd let him stay the night. That had to be a good sign, right? Not only that, but she was clearly comfortable enough in his presence to return to her bed with him still occupying it.

Draco braved looking up at her face and saw her concentrating solely on her paper, unaware he was even awake. He simply watched her read for a few minutes, noticing how her eyes sped back and forth along the page and the way her brows and lips either quirked in agreement, confusion, or tre based on the information she read.

This was truly surreal. He had awoken in Hermione's bed, and without her wand at his throat, and the first sight to greet him was her reading next to him. As if this were normal, as if this were just any other morning. Before he could tamp it down, a dangerous thought crossed his mind: this was a wonderful way to wake up and wouldn't it be fantastic for this to be his everyday life? If this was what a life with Granger looked like, then Draco could certainly see himself a content man. She'd read the Prophet, scoffing occasionally at articles she disagreed with, Draco would make a wry comment to rile her up, she'd swat him with the paper, he'd sit up in bed to read the morning quidditch reports, one of them would summon their tea and they'd sip it happily side by side and then...

Too much, you're playing a dangerous game. Rein it in. I am in control of this.

Hermione's mouth caught his attention as she suddenly bit down on her bottom lip and it took significant effort on his part to not audibly groan. Memories of nibbling on that pouty lip last night

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washed over him, followed by memories of all the other parts of Hermione he'd nibbled on.

Shit, he was growing hard already. But it was impossible not to when he recalled the way she'd moaned, whispered, then eventually screamed his name in the throes of passion. He should probably let her know he was awake before she could accuse him of creepily staring at her read.



Hermione flinched when she heard Draco clear his throat.

"Good morning," he murmured and Hermione immediately felt herself flush at the hypnotic quality of his voice.

"Good morning," she replied, meeting his eyes bravely. Surprisingly, she felt no awkwardness at all, and a wide, giddy grin stole over her face, mirroring his own. Hermione realized she'd never seen him smile so openly before, and it warmed her heart to know he was comfortable enough in her presence to let his guard down in this way.

Hermione laid the paper on her side table and turned back to him once more. He appeared quite at ease in her bed, head propped up on his elbow, as he lay on his side with nothing but a thin, cotton sheet covering him from the waist down.

"Anything interesting in there this morning?" He gestured at her abandoned Prophet.

Hermione shook her head in answer to his question, and had to bite back the reply that threatened to escape. *Certainly nothing as interesting as you, right now.*

She realized she was staring openly at his bare chest, and at the sight of his raised eyebrow, she grew emboldened. The same tension that had descended upon them last night when he'd removed her cloak from her shoulders made a reappearance, coupled with the similar flutter of anticipation from when just before Draco's lips had met hers for the very first time.

Draco was no longer smiling, and she wondered if he could also feel the serious turn in the atmosphere. Unable to stand just staring at him in the prolonged silence, Hermione followed her body's instincts. She reached out a tentative hand towards him, noticing the way his entire body tensed and his gaze tracked the movement of her approaching fingers. Her touch came to rest in the silky, platinum hair at the side of his head, and she shivered when he closed his eyes, seeming to relish in her hand on him. She stroked his hair lightly, observing the way his throat bobbed as he swallowed.

Hermione let her fingers ghost down the side of his face, then rest for a moment on the top of his shoulder. Draco's eyes snapped open as her exploring hand came to rest on the front of his chest. She moved further down, stopping her hand just above his heart, and she could feel the pulsing and beating of the organ just underneath her fingertips. His chest rose and fell rapidly now, his breaths quickening and under the spell of her touches. He watched her with a desperate sort of longing on his face, but he remained completely still, letting her continue at her own pace. And this openness, this willingness to be so vulnerable with her, spurred Hermione to further acts of boldness.

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to rest his forehead against hers while he caught his breath. She didn't let him take too long of break, whimpering as she captured his lips again.

She wasn't telling him to stop, and soon, he would need her to tell him. Because there was nothing to blame for their behavior right now: no alcohol in their systems, no potions, no charms, spells, or enchantments of any kind. They were a man and a woman, alone finally after months and months of dancing around this attraction, and they were at risk of being consumed.

But Hermione didn't tell him to stop. Of course, she didn't tell him anything because her tongue was so deep down his throat that speech on either of their parts was quite impossible at the moment. Draco let his hands wander up her sides, ghosting the sides of her breasts and was rewarded with an erotic little gasp from Hermione as she twitched her hips forward to grind against him, tightening her own grip around his neck. Draco repeated this grazing motion from her hips up to the side of her chest several times, and in but a few minutes had Hermione panting for breath as she tore her mouth away from him. Draco decided to take advantage of her need for air, and placed heated, open-mouthed kisses along her jaw and up to her ear. Every new part of her skin he tasted only served to ramp up his desire further.

When his lips moved down to her slender neck, he removed one hand from her side and braced it on the wall just beside her head. With Draco laying at her neck, Hermione panted harder and mumbled the most sinful-sounding noises between breaths. "Ohh... mmmm... yes... ohhh... mmm..."

He nipped lightly at her ear, eliciting more of those reactions from her, and his hand on her hip crept upwards again. This time, he didn't stop at her side, but finally traced over the front of her chest before giving a firm squeeze. As his hand caressed and kneaded her breast, his mouth kept working at her neck until:

"Ohhh *Draco!*"

Draco was eternally grateful that one of his hands had been braced against the wall because his knees buckled. Hermione's moaning of his name literally made him weak in the knees, and he tore his mouth away from her neck, gasping for air.

Fuck.

Come Monday, Draco was going to file a petition to some office at the Ministry, or perhaps take out an ad in every single newspaper, asserting that no one else in this galaxy was ever allowed to use his given name, ever again. The way Hermione drew out the vowels as she moaned ("*Dracooohhh!*") was the only pronunciation he would accept from now on and only from her perfect mouth. Everyone else could address him as "Malfoy" or "That Blond Idiot" or honestly whatever they wanted, because nothing else mattered anymore but Hermione crying out his name in pleasure.

The woman writhing against him took advantage of his inability to draw in air, yanking his head toward her mouth and latching her lips to his neck in turn. Once he'd semi-recovered and could feel his legs again, Draco turned his head to claim her lips once more, their kisses taking on a new feverish urgency, and the roaming of their hands became unrestrained. She touched and groped every part of him, and Draco pressed her back so snugly against the wall he wondered if there'd be a Hermi-

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“Hermione,” he breathed.

Her name was both question and answer. His salvation and his ruin. It left his mouth on an exhale and though he barely achieved a whisper, it was as if he’d shouted, shattering the silence of her moonlit hall.

The levee broke.

Hermione’s hands went around his shoulders as she crushed her lips back to his. There was nothing delicate or tentative about these kisses, her mouth opened his immediately and Draco growled as her tongue reached out to seek his own. Mouths adhered to one another, hurriedly sucking, tasting, and licking, and Draco could have kicked himself. How long could they have been doing this before tonight?

Kissing Hermione was clarity. His mind rendered blissfully blank, devoid of all second guessing and broody decision-making, as Draco lost himself in nothing but the feel of her heavenly lips bruising his. When had he pushed her up against the wall of the hallway? Or had she pulled them into this position?

While Draco kept his hands on her shoulder and the side of her face, Hermione’s hands now moved everywhere. She began with his hair, tangling them in the fine strands that tickled the nape of his neck before moving upward and running them through his white-blond locks with abandon. Taking a cue from her, Draco mirrored her movements as she explored his body, letting her set the pace for their passionate journey, all the while snoggling furiously.

He shoved his hands in her hair, thoroughly ruining her intricate bun, but the happy sigh he swallowed from her mouth indicated that she did not care one bit as his nails raked her scalp. He was not quite pressed up against her body, not wanting to scare her away with his already raging erection. He kept his hands tangled in her tresses, while she swept her hands down to his shoulders, seeming eager to discover more of him. She gripped his shoulders for a moment, then trailed her hands down to squeeze the muscles of his upper arms, then traced back up to his shoulders.

Draco reveled in the softness of her hair, the warm taste of her on his tongue, the little rapid breaths that escaped her mouth and traveled right down to the tips of his toes. As her hands caressed his chest, Draco finally gathered the courage to move his touch down her body as well. He began with feather-light touches to the sides of her face and neck, then gradually ran his hands down the length of her shoulders and skin of her arms, earning himself a shiver as he traced the skin up and down and back and forth several times.

Their kissing increased in urgency as Hermione frantically bunched the fabric of his dress shirt and yanked his body toward her. With nowhere to go but her, Draco found himself pressed flush against her and moaned at the contact. Their bodies molded together and Draco could feel her every curve against his taut physique, and the delicious way she squirmed against him indicated she was just as eager to feel his body.

Draco slid his hands boldly down her sides, where they came to rest at her hips, his large hands gripping them tightly. Hermione nipped at his lower lip and Draco had to break their kissing briefly

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She traced one finger along some of the whitened scar tissue that covered his entire chest; remnants, she knew, of Harry’s ill-advised *Scutumempus* curse in their Sixth Year. The scars were faded now after all these years, and in the dark last night she hadn’t even noticed them. Her hand’s path led all the way down to his navel, then she traced a line up to his top hip, stopping where the sheet covered the rest of his nude body. Biting her lip and filled with a hazy mixture of lust, curiosity and recklessness, Hermione gripped the sheet and pulled it off of Draco, leaving him completely bare to her.

Draco didn’t react at all, didn’t move to cover himself, didn’t protest verbally, simply watched as her hand moved down over the curve of his hip, past the top of his backside, lingered at his knee, and came to rest on his calf. Hermione dared a glance up at his face, and saw nothing but trust there. As her eyes landed on his erect cock, she involuntarily licked her lips and saw a flash of his trademark smirk when she met his eyes again.

Removing her hand from his leg, she sat back to fully take in the sight of the naked man lying in her bed. Scanning him from head to toe and back up again, she could find nothing displeasing to the eye, not one physical imperfection. Draco was a beautiful example of the male specimen: glowing alabaster skin and long, lean limbs. His musculature insinuated favorable genetics and his shape would be described as trim rather than brawny. Hermione knew his slim build wasn’t due to exercising incessantly like his male Muggle counterparts. Almost all the wizarding men of Hermione’s generation could be described as thin, Draco included. But living through a war would do that to a population.

During their school years, Hermione thought Draco’s facial features too sharp and pointy to turn her head. But the adult version of that pompous boy had grown into his looks. Draco’s angular, high cheekbones, jawline, and patrician nose seemed carved from marble, his countenance built for administration. He had full, even lips, and teeth so straight and white they’d make her dentist swoon.

As she retracted her hand back to her side of the bed, Hermione let out a shaky breath. Catching his gaze again, Draco’s lips quirked upwards and Hermione could almost hear his thoughts in that seductive drawl of his: *Turnabout’s fair play.*

His hand began at the skin of her ankle. His expression turned serious again, and Hermione longed to know what he was thinking. His gray eyes were intense in their study of her, his long fingers drawing little circles around her ankle bone then beginning a slow journey up to her calf. Goosebumps appeared on the skin of her arms, a direct response to the arousing sensation of his light touch igniting a scaring path upward. He had reached her knee, then his hand formed a firm grip around her leg just as he approached her thigh. Draco’s brow furrowed in concentration and Hermione couldn’t have spoken about even if she wanted to. Why was he looking at her as if she were some fascinating creature he’d only just discovered?

I’m real, she wanted to blurt out. I’m real and imperfect and nothing special, for Merlin’s sake, stop looking at me like that! It’s just me, just Ganger!

When his hand reached the hem of her cotton slip, he ghosted up the fabric until he came to the tie of her robe. He met her eyes and gave a light tug. Hermione obeyed his unspoken request immediately, pulling the tie loose and shrugging the robe off to fling it Merlin-knows-where across the room.

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Like an impatient child, his hand pulled at the nightg, and before Hermione could feel self-conscious or embarrassed, she whipped the offending garment over her head and also cast it aside.

She was now completely naked and sitting up sideways in bed, in front of her former childhood bully, and Hermione couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this exhilarated. Because Draco was no longer that ignorant little schoolboy, but a painfully gorgeous man giving her made form deep appreciation with his lust-darkened eyes.

Draco had taken his hand away, the hand that happened to be connected to the forearm branded with the Dark Mark, but Hermione was pleased he seemed to have gotten past that insecurity. She had known it was there all along, and his sudden emotional outburst last night caught her off guard at first, and only made her heart ache for him more. She was of the opinion that he had about as much choice in receiving that Mark as Harry had in receiving a lightning bolt scar across his forehead as an infant. But now was not the time for such a heavy conversation because Draco's eyes were roving hungrily up and down her body and Hermione was already wet with desire for him.

His eyes traced the same path his fingers had not a minute ago. Beginning all the way from her legs up the curve of her hips, further up her midsection, lingering on her bare breasts, then up her arms, neck and shoulders, then finally stared her full in the face, trapping her in this moment with the intensity of his stare.

"You're beautiful," his voice was low and hoarse, full of a reverence that made Hermione's breath catch and her heart stutter.

Neither moved, the only sounds in the bedroom were their sharp intakes of air, as both seemed out of breath though no physical activity had occurred, yet. All Hermione could do was simply return the burning gaze coming from Draco. The tension emanating between their bodies in rolling waves made her slightly delirious.

The kettle whistled from the kitchen, signaling the boiling water was ready, but the sound seemed muffled and far away, the piercing cry unable to burst an invisible barrier in the air between them.

"I can fix us tea, if you like," Hermione whispered.

"I still don't need any tea," Draco's low, menacing murmur ignited a spark in every nerve in her body and before she could throw herself across the bed, he closed the space first.

Draco's strong, lithe frame suddenly rolled over, caging her in and Hermione found herself flat on her back and his mouth reunited with hers. She stuck her hands back in his hair like they belonged there, her lips eagerly parting to immediately allow his tongue entrance.

There was no hesitation, no need for tentative discovery, since they'd properly introduced their bodies to one another last night. Hermione was lost in the way his skin felt flush against her own, as they bucked and writhed against each other.

His kisses were hot and insistent, Hermione reveling in the pliable softness of his lips. Draco nipped lightly at her bottom lip, and she grinned against his mouth. He traced the area he'd just bitten with only the tip of his tongue before taking the lip between his teeth and sucking hard. Hermione gripped his hair harder and pushed her chest up into him. Draco took the hint, delving his tongue back into

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Draco slid the thumb of his hand on her shoulder slowly back and forth across her skin in a light dance, lost in the sensation of touching her. He flicked his eyes from her deep brown ones to the few wild curls that had managed to escape their owner's careful hair styling over the course of the evening. He reached his other hand up and gently pulled one of the pieces framing her face between his fingers, relishing in its impossible softness. He heard Hermione's breathing hitch in her throat, but Draco couldn't tear his gaze away from the look he caressed, lightly pulling and threading it around his fingers.

"I can still... go... make tea?" She whispered breathlessly and Draco recognized it as the last warning, the last attempt to pull the brakes on this train, the final caution sign before careening off a cliff. "No," he whispered back in reply, still focused on the curl between his fingers. "I don't think I need tea just now."

His eyes slid back to her face as the realization sunk into his soul. He wasn't heading uncontrollably toward a cliff at all. Draco had taken a running start some time ago, leapt straight off the cliff's edge, and he'd been falling and tumbling down through the air, completely unsupported for a long time now, with no plan to land on solid ground.

Her eyes no longer held a question, but rather, a challenge. Hermione had been the brave one all her life. Ever since Draco had known her from age 11, she'd run headlong into things if she believed hard enough in her cause. Sure, of her friends, she'd seemed to be the more cautious one because she took the time to think before acting, but once Hermione Granger set her sights on what she wanted, Draco knew nothing could stop her.

But this time? Draco saw that she was going to make him decide. Knowing her as he did now, all the conversations they'd had about the pressure she felt to be brave, be strong, be the one to make the choice... just once she was asking for someone else to step up and assume the role.

He could be that someone, right now.

Reluctantly, he let the lock of hair slip through his fingers. His hand came to rest at the edge of her jaw, while the other resumed its light pattern of circling on her shoulder. Draco's nerves felt aflame and he had no idea if the trembling throughout his body originated with him or with her. The last thing he saw before he closed his eyes and angled his head down were Hermione's eyelids fluttering shut in anticipation of his mouth finding hers.

Finally, Draco's lips connected softly with hers, increasing that swooping sensation in his stomach of diving unencumbered through the air by ten-fold. The feel of her lips pressing firmly back against his own soothed an ache deep within him; an ache for her touch and taste that he'd coveted for longer than he'd care to admit.

Their lips danced tentatively against one another, moving to an unknown rhythm as each participant sought to discover the shape of the other's mouth and how they fit together as one. Draco felt her supple lips parting underneath his, and he hesitantly pulled back for a brief pause to catch his breath.

Her eyes opened slowly to meet his searching gaze. Her stare became a pool of desire threatening to drown him and Draco's veins thrummed with the overwhelming feeling of her beneath his hands.

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Hermione walked a few paces ahead, setting her beaded bag and wand down on a small hallway table and moving to unfasten her cloak.

"You can hang your cloak and robes on the hooks by the door if you like, and I'll go put the kettle on," she called over her shoulder.

Draco obeyed her like an Imperius Curse. He shrugged out of his cloak and outer robes, hanging them carefully just to the left of the door. Still not knowing what to do with himself, he hung awkwardly back, keeping his body leaning against the door as if a Sticking Charm kept him in place.

Not twenty paces in front of him, Hermione still stood, engaged in an epic struggle with the silver closure of her shining cloak. The cloak was putting up quite the fight. She tugged and pulled and yanked at the neck, and Draco simply watched from behind, trying desperately to ignore his impulse to approach her.

Could she feel it too, now? An eerie silence descended and covered everything with a thick blanket of tension in the hall lit only by bright moonlight. There was nothing and no one to interrupt their evening now: no Blaise, no public, no superfluous entertainment, no painful reminders of their dark history rearing an ugly head at inopportune moments.

The resounding quiet was only broken by Hermione's frustrated mutterings as she continued to wage war with her cloak with her back to Draco. "Stupid, bloody thing... how did I ever manage this... should be a simpler way to just..." Hermione ranted to herself, fingers appearing to work furiously.

Draco pushed himself off the door and began a slow approach. At the sound of his dragon-hide shoes clicking against the hardwood flooring, Hermione completely stilled. He came to a cautious stop just behind her, standing so close that should she take but one step back, she'd be flush against his chest. Now the only sounds filling the deadened air around them were Hermione's short breaths; Draco could tell by the quickened rise and fall of her upper body that his proximity affected her, and it wasn't out of fear. It was anticipation.

Draco leaned down and put his lips just next to her ear. "Allow me," he murmured and felt her entire body quiver. He braced one hand delicately on her shoulder and reached his other long-fingered hand around her neck to take the clasp from between her fingertips. Her hands fell limply to her sides, as Draco deftly unhooked the fastening with but a simple maneuver of his thumb and forefinger.

The cloak fell away from her shoulders to pool between their feet but neither stooped to retrieve the garment. As the material slipped through his fingers, Draco's hand remained on Hermione's bare shoulder. She revolved slowly on the spot until they were face to face, her flesh warm and almost vibrating underneath his hand.

Hermione was so naturally beautiful when she confidently knew an answer, but when she was still in the discovery and questioning phase of learning, as she appeared now? She took Draco's breath away. He stared down into her wide eyes, mere inches from his own, and he saw all the uncertainty and disbelief she tried to sort through. It was as if she were searching for the logic behind some grand, mythic puzzle and the solution hid somewhere in Draco's eyes.

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her mouth and moving one hand down to caress her breast. When he circled her raised nipple with the pad of his thumb, a gasp escaped her throat and Draco removed his mouth from hers to let the sound reverberate loudly.

He kissed along her jaw, and Hermione raked her nails down his scalp, then further down to clutch his back. While she'd very much appreciated being on top of Draco last night, every one of her sexual fantasies involving him seemed to always be in this very position: pinned beneath him. And Merlin, the way this man kissed her neck, she could melt into her mattress and never be found again.

"Say my name," he suddenly whispered a plea in her ear. "Like you did last night, say my name." His voice coupled with his warm breath sent a shock straight down to her core, and all she wanted to do in that moment was obey him: *Draco Draco Draco Draco Draco*.

She could drown here in the overwhelming feeling of his touch, his skin, his scent, and his taste. The weight of his body covering her own set her alight, the sensation of his throbbing erection grinding against her while she squirmed to increase the friction between them left hardly any space in her brain for anything but his given name. How easily it had fallen from her lips last night, a glorious cry torn from her throat several times, just two seductive syllables that surrounded her every sense and demanded to be released from her mouth.

But Hermione gathered what was left of her wits to challenge him. Pulling herself up to his ear, she whispered back tauntingly, "Sorry, *Malfoy*, but you'll have to earn it."

She could tell she'd surprised him by the way his entire body stilled, but it lasted for a fraction of a second before he changed his tactics. Draco moved his mouth slowly away from her ear and pulled back far enough to look her full in the face. The look he gave her was positively feral. Steel-gray eyes smoldered in a gaze that she felt all the way to the tips of her toes. And when his mouth pulled into dangerous smirk, a thrilling shiver of anticipation wracked through her.

Oh dear, I am in trouble now.

Leaning his smirking mouth back down to her neck, Draco changed the snogging tempo abruptly. No longer seemingly in a hurry to taste and lick her skin, his tongue languidly licked up and down her neck, tracing all the way up to the shell of her ear. He took a tortuously slow path with his mouth, lavishing each inch of the skin of her neck for a sinful amount of time before moving further along the column of her throat to the other ear.

He finally captured her mouth again in a long kiss, deepening it gradually. One of his hands snaked into her hair and pulled her face even closer to his, until Hermione felt delicious from both the skill of his kiss and the lack of oxygen. Draco pulled away slowly, and though Hermione needed to breathe, she almost whined at the missing contact. He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth, then began a trail southward. When his face reached her chest, he gently kissed her sternum, then moved his lips to hover just over one breast. Hermione wilted her body not to arch into him, but it was fruitless. Draco untangled his hand from her hair to caress her other breast as he finally lowered his mouth around her pert nipple. Hermione let out a sigh of contentment as he lazily worked her tit, driving her brain into further states of haziness.

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Her exquisite state of pleasure didn't last long, as he removed all contact from her chest and kissed his way down her abdomen, past her navel, and ghosted his lips over the side of her hip. She suddenly felt strong hands grip her thighs and part them, and through the heady fog of lust clouding her senses, only realized what Draco was about to do roughly one second before his tongue swiped at her most sensitive area.

"Oh! Oh my..." Hermione was rendered utterly incoherent at the sight and feel of Draco's head buried between her legs. All the late-night fantasies of him performing this exact act on her absolutely paled in comparison to the reality of his tongue licking up, down, all around her wet slit.

Abandoning all dignity, she wound her fingers into his fair hair and arched her hips into his face. Her wanton display was rewarded with Draco's tongue plunging inside her and she gasped loudly again. Shockwaves of pleasure shot through her body, causing her toes to curl underneath her.

Panting heavily now, she felt the beginning wave of an orgasm gathering steam within her, and tried to focus on not bucking her hips too hard lest she scare off the man currently kneeling between her legs.

He pulled back and Hermione glanced down, confused. Perhaps he needed a break to breathe? But no, he now simply ghosted her inner thighs with kisses, then hovered his mouth just above her sex, so his lips barely touched her skin. Then she remembered the challenge she'd issued to him several minutes ago. *Steady little bastard.*

He wasn't going to let her climax without hearing his name first. Almost as if Draco could hear her thoughts, he grinned wolfishly up at her before lowering his tongue to her again.

No man had ever been so... *thorough* in this task before. Voldemort himself could have burst through her bedroom door announcing his latest return from the grave and Hermione would have told him to *bugger off and wait the hell outside* because Draco's tongue was about to bring her to a quivering orgasm and she'd deal with him after, *thank you very much.*

His warm tongue delved into her relentlessly, tasting her over and over and Hermione had to release the hold on his hair or she might accidentally rip it out by the roots. Her hands grappled at the bed beside her instead, desperately trying to cling to anything as her limbs began to shake. She was so, so close, and bit down on her lip, but knew it was a losing battle. Draco had pulled his mouth away again, repeating the exquisite torture from earlier in bringing her to the edge only to retreat to feathery kisses.

The pressure building within her approached unbearable heights and she could tell Draco was more than aware of her state. When he clamped his whole mouth around her clit, Hermione gave in as her pleasure finally cressed and she surrendered spectacularly to him. "*Draco! Mmmm yes Draco!*"

The subject of her cries kept circling her clit with his talented tongue, leaving Hermione breathless at the way he'd earned his given name from her throat. He'd well and truly earned it indeed.

Unaware she'd squeezed her eyes shut, Hermione blinked them slowly open when she felt him lean off her thighs to sit back on his heels. Draco made for an achingly beautiful sight in the morning sun: naked and kneeling over her with his flushed cheeks and mussed hair. He regarded her with a very

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Hermione led him in the opposite direction, and Draco recalled that she'd walked back this way when he'd convinced her to take a sick day at home. Draco almost stopped walking. She was taking him to her home.

Almost as if she could hear his thoughts, she commented, "I live just a few blocks up here. This is the closest apparition point that isn't inside my home, but I don't think my wards would have let you through even with side-along apparition. Better safe than splinched."

Draco nodded and despite the light chill to the late evening, felt his cheeks heat up. He roughly yanked his bow tie off and stuffed it into his pocket and undid the top two buttons of his collared shirt beneath his cloak. Throat free of most restrictions, he still felt a sensation of a tightening grip: from his own inadequacy, his foolishness at rising to Blaise's bait, his inability to keep his temper in check in front of Hermione, and his weakness to her any request. He should absolutely not be following her home right now, but she could ask him to follow her into the depths of hell and he'd be powerless to resist.

Draco choked on a thousand apologies, each one sounding more feeble and ridiculous than the last in his head. *I'm sorry I threw a public tantrum. I'm sorry you were associated with me at all. I'm sorry I don't know how to be a good man. I'm sorry that I can't stay away from you even when I know that you deserve so much more.*

They moved in silence; the streets around them deserted and storefronts dark due to the late hour.

Draco checked his watch and noted it was closing in on half-past 11. *This is not an appropriate hour for you to be accompanying Ganger into her home.*

She came to a halt outside a handsome brick townhome at the end of a row of similar-looking abodes. "This is me," she said simply and pushed open a short iron gate at the end of a brick walk. Draco heard her muttering incantations under her breath to release the wards briefly to allow him through. She performed a series of taps with her wand to the front door and then it swung open.

He could turn around now. He could make a weak excuse and go home now. But Draco's feet kept taking steps after Hermione and before he knew it, his feet had led him right inside. The door clicked shut behind him and Hermione moved toward a winding staircase just to center-left.

"The downstairs level is mainly storage; I hardly ever come through here," she explained as Draco craned his neck to see a darkened room filled with neatly stacked bins and boxes in the distance past the stairs.

"I spend most of my time on the top two levels and the rooftop. The woman I bought the house from is a squib who works as a realtor. She sells to wizards and Muggles alike, and actually my next door neighbors are an elderly witch and wizard. They're on holiday at the moment, visiting their daughter in America."

Her voice sounded even and calm as she led him up the stairs to a landing and another door, but Draco knew she was slightly nervous by the way she babbled. It wasn't so much the tone of voice as the amount of spurious information she felt the need to expel.

She removed a key for this door and Draco followed his traitorous feet into the main level of her home. As the door closed behind him, he leant back against it, unsure of what to do with his body.

It was hearing his name that stopped him cold. She'd never personally addressed him by his given name, not once since they first met as children. He turned to look down at her, and noticed her brows furrowed in concern, her eyes wide and pleading. "Draco," she repeated, her voice soothing now that she'd grabbed his attention. "Come on, let's go. It's all right, let's just leave."

He nodded mutely and removed his hand from the inner pocket of his robes, resisting the urge to curse Zabini off the planet. Draco allowed Hermione to tug him quickly by the hand through a side exit, away from the prying eyes of the rest of the crowd.

Once they were outside, Draco began a furious pace away from the opera house and the rest of the public. How dare Zabini accuse him of such unoward motives in regards to Hermione?! How dare he stand there in front of a war heroine and insult her like she couldn't hear him, as if she were too stupid to understand just how little a pureblood wizard like Zabini thought of her?!

Draco kept up his frantic stalking for a few blocks, towing Hermione along by the hand, muttering angrily under his breath the whole way. When she gently squeezed his hand, he slowed down a bit, and gulped in a slow, deep breath. In his stupor of fury he'd almost forgotten she was holding on to him.

He slowed down even more to a meandering stroll, as his anger gave way to shame. He'd completely acted the fool in front of Hermione, in front of an entire crowd of people, and she didn't deserve to have such a lousy end to her evening. He released a deep sigh, knowing he had to salvage this in some way.

"I'm so sorry, Granger. What Zabini said to you was completely out of line."

Hermione shrugged her shoulders and gave him a tight-lipped smile. "It was no more than I'd expect from him. I'm glad you didn't curse him."

"He would have deserved it," Draco replied gruffly. He stopped walking suddenly and pulled Hermione around to face him.

"Granger, what he implied about why I was with you tonight... I would never do that. I wouldn't use you like that. You know that, don't you?" He asked her desperately, begging her to understand the unsaid feelings in his voice.

She met his unwavering gaze with a steady one of her own. "If I thought that's all this was... I wouldn't be here with you tonight." Her voice was calm and controlled and Draco swallowed the question that rose to his throat. *And what exactly is this? What are we, Granger?*

"I'm sorry I ruined our evening," he offered quietly.

"You didn't," came her soft reply. He still felt the bitter sting of anger welling up inside, but the feeling of her thumb circling the skin of his hand began to stir up other emotions. Their joined hands meant they stood awfully close.

"I think we could both do with a cup of tea. I can make us some, if you'd like?"

He nodded at her suggestion and she gripped his hand tighter and apparated them away. When they reappeared, she dropped his hand and he immediately missed the contact. Looking about when she started walking, he realized she'd apparated them into the same alley he appeared in each morning across from the coffee shop.

serious expression, all smirking gone from his face.

Hermione took the lead this time, shifting her hips forward and off the bed toward his waiting erection. He met her stare and gently braced a large hand on the side of her hip. "Is this all right?" he asked softly and when Hermione nodded firmly he shifted his weight over her. He still seemed tentative and restrained in his movements, so Hermione added a verbal consent of, "yes, please."

She had filed this same observation from last night away, curious about his hesitation to enter her before receiving a vocal confirmation that she wanted him inside her. She found it unexpectedly tender for a man like Draco and wondered why he felt the need to explicitly ask when she was giving him all the signs that she'd very much like him to shag her immediately.

Questioning his odd, yet sweet, behavior would need to wait until later though, because Draco was kissing his way back up her body and as their mouths reconnected he pushed inside her, eliciting gasps from both of them.

She closed her eyes briefly at the sensation of him filling her so fully, and when she opened them again, saw Draco studying her face. Hermione reached up and grazed her fingertips along his cheek then rested her palm behind his neck. He leaned down to kiss her again and began thrusting slowly in and out. Hermione let him find a good rhythm before moving her lower body in turn, seeking to give him as much pleasure as he'd bestowed earlier.

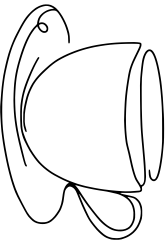
Draco alternated between kissing her mouth and burying his face in the side of her neck as their movements picked up in pace. Hermione shifted her hips up slightly to give him a deeper angle inside her and he growled appreciatively in her ear and pumped harder.

And it all felt so easy yet so foreign to be with him in this way, that Hermione lamented the amount of time wasted in not being together. Every powerful stroke, every brush of his hips, every little whisper of his breath across her skin made her feel feverishly alive. Her pleasure mounted to dizzying heights again, and as his hips strapped into hers more jaggedly than before, she fell victim once more to that all-consuming wave.

Draco kissed her passionately as she regained some of her sense of self, and then with several harsh thrusts later, let out a deep moan into the side of her neck, and she felt another small thrill of satisfaction as he spilled himself into her completely.

They lay locked together for a few moments before Draco moved first. Pulling up slightly, he leant over her face, some of his blonde fringe tickling her forehead. His mouth split into a mischievous grin. "Think I'll take that tea now, Granger."

Hermione giggled then swatted him so he rolled off of her.



Chapter Eighteen

After a quick shower, Hermione emerged from her bedroom dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt to find Draco taking stock of the framed pictures on her living room mantel. He had re-dressed in his suit trousers and dress shirt from last night, but damn if he didn't still look perfectly put together. Not a wrinkle in sight.

She watched him as his hand reached up and plucked a frame down to inspect it closer. Frowning, he stared at it for a few moments before shaking it and then inspecting it again to look for any movement.

"It's a Muggle photo," Hermione explained as she approached him. He looked up, startled, and flushed slightly at having been caught handling her things.

"Your parents, I presume?"

Hermione looked down at the photo he held and nodded. It was from her parents' wedding day, both of them smiling widely at the camera, her mother clutching both her bouquet and her new husband's arm tightly. The Grangers looked so young and carefree, and Hermione had trouble remembering a recent time when they'd looked that happy, that unburdened.

"You favor your mother," remarked Draco, lifting the photo up next to Hermione's face. "Though I can see now where you get the hair," he teased and Hermione chuckled. Before her father started losing his hair, his head was covered in the bushy curls that Hermione eventually inherited.

She wondered what Draco was thinking as he carefully replaced the frame on her mantel and his gray eyes swept along the rest of the pictures accumulated there. There were two more of her with her parents: one from her fifth birthday and another from their holiday in France when she was 13. All the rest of her framed memories were of the wizarding variety: several from Hogwarts, all the Weasleys in various images, Harry and Ginny's wedding day, Harry holding an infant Teddy, and the prized photo at the front and center of her with Ron and Harry. Hermione couldn't remember for the life of her what Ron had been saying in the photo, but she and Harry were throwing their heads back in giddy

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offered her his arm to guide her down the stairs and back to the gallery. "Not at all, Granger." When she placed her hand on his arm, he tried not to luxuriate in the warmth of her touch, knowing this moment would be over all too soon.

They retrieved their cloaks from the floating gloved hands and made their way toward the exit, Hermione struggling with the fastening at her neck. "You'd think this thing would be simpler to fasten," she muttered, trying and failing to close it. Just as Draco was about to offer his assistance, a voice rang out.

"Malfoy!"

Draco's head whipped in the direction of Blaise Zabini once again. Screaming every hex, jinx, and curse inside his own mind, Draco remained stock still as Blaise confidently strutted up to where Draco stood with Hermione. Blaise's date seemed quite forgotten as she trailed about 15 feet behind.

He stopped short of the pair, Draco pleased to note that he was still several inches taller than his old schoolmate. "Yes?" Draco asked shortly.

Blaise took a small step back and held his palms up in mock surrender. "No need to be so formal with an old friend, Malfoy. I simply wanted to invite you to the gala tonight."

"What gala?"

Blaise smirked. "My mother is ah, *good friends* with the composer from tonight's show. She's hosting a gala in his honor at our home this evening. You know what a stalwart patron she is of the fine arts."

More like she's trying to woo her tenth husband, Draco thought snidely.

"Perhaps another time, Zabini. I think we'll just be—"

"Look, Malfoy," Blaise took a conspiratorial step towards Draco but didn't trouble to lower his voice. "Finish up with whatever business you have going on here," his dark eyes slid over to Hermione, then back to Draco, "and then join the rest of us for a more exclusive experience tonight. I can introduce you to Cecilia's sister if you require a proper date for the evening."

Draco felt his blood boil. How dare this arrogant arse insult Hermione so callously, as if she weren't standing right next to Draco, hearing every word? Who did he think he was?

"And just what the hell is that supposed to mean, eh?" He hadn't meant to shout, and now the entire hall was looking at them, but Draco was deaf with rage.

Blaise stepped back and fixed him with a composed stare. "Whatever you like it to mean. I have to admit, even I didn't think you'd stoop this low to get your family's name back in society's good graces."

With a final smirk, he walked away but Draco moved to follow him.

"Malfoy don't!" Hermione's warning sounded like it came from far away, and he didn't slow in his pursuit of Blaise, who now had his back to Draco, swiftly putting distance between them.

"Malfoy! He's not worth it!" Her voice came again and this time he felt a light pressure in his left hand as she gripped it in her own.

He dipped his other hand into his robes and groped for his wand, when Hermione's hand tugged hard.

"Draco!"

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ness she managed to inject into just three syllables; it could have frozen firendfyre.

Blaise's date meanwhile, openly gaped at Hermione now, her painted mouth hung open in a comical "O" shape.

Draco fixed Blaise with a chilling smile, daring the other man to spit out the insults that were most likely dancing on the tip of his tongue. Blaise merely cocked one eyebrow and answered with a smug and appraising look of his own.

"Well as... interesting as this has been, we'll head back to our box. Good seeing you as always Malfoy, join us for a drink after the show, won't you?" Without waiting for a reply from Draco, he swept his date, who was still gawking at Hermione, back through the velvet curtains.

Draco forced himself to count to ten before he turned back to Hermione. That rude little git had done his best to make Hermione feel as unwelcome as possible. It certainly hadn't gone unnoticed by Draco the way he'd barely acknowledged her existence upon learning her identity and the way he'd pointedly left her out of the invitation to drink later. And if Draco had noticed the slight, then someone with the intelligence of Hermione certainly had as well.

It was the douse of the cold water of reality that Draco needed to rein in his emotions from earlier. Just when Draco thought he had any right to be worthy of Hermione, his past had burst into the evening to remind him that no, actually, he had no business being anywhere near this woman.

He could play the fraud no longer. Blaise had gotten right under his skin with but a few words and glances, and it was all Draco could do to stop himself from chasing after him and hexing him six ways from Sunday. He counted to ten again as he silently seethed in his seat, unsure of how to redirect the fury coursing through him.

Hermione may think him a changed person, a good person, but people like Blaise Zabini would always be around to remind him of every awful thing he'd done in his pitiful life.

He faced Hermione suddenly, an apology about to tumble from his mouth, when she spoke first.

"As pompous as ever, isn't he? Do you see much of him?"

"No, thankfully. Any longer than that in his presence and I wouldn't be responsible for which curses leave my wand," he spat and she seemed to recoil from him.

The lights of the opera house went dark once more to signal the end of intermission and the beginning of the second half of the show. A different kind of tension settled between them now: Hermione fidgeting absently with her opera glasses in her lap and Draco staring at the stage with glazed, unseeing eyes. He kept his hands to himself the rest of the show, not daring to have his tainted self anywhere near her.

As the final hour crept by, Draco calmed down and was able to think rationally. He didn't need to be such an angry prat and ruin Hermione's first time at the opera. He'd go back to being friendly and cordial after the show, maybe suggest a night cap somewhere nearby.

When the final notes rang out and the performers all filed onto the stage for standing ovations, they both stood and silently exited their box.

"That really was wonderful, thank you for suggesting this," Hermione finally said quietly. Draco

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laughter, Harry removing his glasses every few moments to wipe tears away. Luna's husband Rolf had taken the picture at the Burrow several years ago and Hermione loved it for the hope it inspired. After everything the three of them had been through, school stress, arguments, running for their lives, keeping secrets, romantic relationships, loss of family and friends, more life-threatening scenarios than they could count, they could still laugh this freely with each other. They could still love one another, unreservedly.

She had a sneaking and sad suspicion that Draco did not have any personal keepsakes like these displayed in his home.

"I think I'll take my tea now, did you want another cup?"

Draco shook his head and flushed again. "I, uh, haven't had any either." When Hermione gave him a quizzical look he explained, "I didn't know where you kept the milk and sugar and didn't think you'd appreciate me rummaging around your kitchen."

Hermione almost snacked her forehead in exasperation at her own thoughtlessness. When she'd told Draco to "make himself at home" while she showered, she should have realized this might be slightly uncomfortable for him. Hermione's townhome was a mixture of the magical and Muggle, but her kitchen in particular was almost entirely Muggle. Having learned to cook without magic, she relied on the comforts and ease of Muggle technology like her electric stove, refrigerator, and microwave. In her opinion, all the stasis charms in the world couldn't compete with the convenience of a refrigerator.

Hoping he hadn't felt too foolish around the unfamiliar devices, she led him back to the kitchen. He took a seat on one of the stools at her marble island and Hermione busied herself with fetching tea so as to occupy her mind and hands. Though she wasn't looking, Hermione could feel his eyes on her as she opened her fridge to get milk and then pulled some sugar from an overhead cupboard.

This is positively surreal, she thought, wondering how on earth they'd ended up here. Here, with Draco sitting in her kitchen, adding far too much sugar to his tea, and glancing around curiously.

While he cast his eyes around her home, Hermione fidgeted with her teacup. When did the charged atmosphere turn so awkward? Not an hour ago, the man had been inside her, but now she couldn't think of anything remotely interesting or appropriate to say. Should they discuss their feelings or implications of last night's and this morning's actions? Where did they stand with each other now? Where were they supposed to go from here? Draco hadn't run out of here screaming yet, and certainly seemed in no hurry to be away from her, so what did it all mean?

But instead of voicing any of these concerns, Hermione blurted out, "Would you like a tour?"

She expected him to snirk or cut her down with a quip. Instead, he took a moment to sip his tea before quietly replying, "Sure, Granger."

Hermione fell into the role of brisk hostess then, taking comfort in performing the social ritual of showing a welcome guest around her home. They began in the kitchen of course, and though Draco didn't verbally ask her questions, any time she saw his brow furrow at the sight of an unfamiliar Muggle device, she gave him a brief explainer of its function.

They moved back out to her living room, Hermione deciding to save the lesson on television for a

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future date. *Oh, thinking about having him over again already, Hermione?*

Pushing away her snide subconscious, she showed him the guest bedroom and bathroom just past the fireplace and then around the other side to her office, or as she likes to refer to it, Library One. Draco smirked as his eyes scanned the wall-to-wall shelves filled with books, but made no comment.

She led him up a flight of stairs to the third level. Technically, this is the master bedroom, but Hermione preferred sleeping on the second floor, closer to the fireplace. She didn't explain aloud that the reason is so she can hear someone coming through her Floo in an emergency. Some of her survival instincts will never fully disappear.

The large room off the master bedroom was probably supposed to function as a nursery or child's room, but Hermione converted this into Library Two. Hermione offered a swift apology to Draco for the state of this bedroom and walk-in-closet; her suitcase was open on the bed, clothes piled all around as well as stacks of parchment and books. She meant to be all packed for her Venice trip by now, but Draco had thoroughly put her off that task last night.

There was also the matter of a giant ginger creature currently occupying her suitcase.

"Oh for goodness' sake, Crookshanks!" She hustled over to the bed and forcibly evicted the cat from her luggage. He protested with a loud meow as she deposited him to the floor. "You're staying with Harry and Ginny! I can't very well bring you on an international trip!"

He narrowed his yellow eyes at her, then flicked his gaze to regard Draco for a long moment, before swishing his tail imperiously and scampering out of the room. Hermione rolled her eyes and Draco chuckled.

"Is that your familiar from Hogwarts?"

"Yes, the very same."

"I can't believe he's still alive," he said bluntly.

Hermione shrugged. "Me either, honestly, but he is part kneazle so that may contribute to his extended lifespan." She pointed to a short flight of stairs past Library Two. "That leads up to the rooftop terrace."

The tour of her home complete, she led Draco back down to the living room. They hovered near the fireplace before Draco cleared his throat.

"What are your plans for the rest of today?"

"I've promised to have Ginny over for lunch so she can collect Crookshanks. I'm sure you also noticed that I haven't quite finished packing for my trip."

He nodded solemnly. "Right, I'll get out of your hair then," and he coupled this quip with a suggestive smirk that turned Hermione's legs into jelly.

As Draco gathered the rest of his clothes and belongings from last night, Hermione warred with herself over what to say to him. Should she thank him for staying over? Thank him for the multiple orgasms? Ask him if he enjoyed himself? Drag him back to the bedroom for another round? Interrogate him about this new milestone in their friendship?

"About last night and um, earlier... I'm on the potion, so..." Oh sweet Merlin, that's what she

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to finish with "grab a drink out in the lobby?"

However, that remaining 1 percent contained an abundant amount of other fantastic, more enticing, possibilities. For example:

"Would you like to ditch the second half of the show and go down the street to a quiet little cocktail lounge where we can sit in a dark corner and my hand can work its way up your thigh?"

Or:

"Would you like to have me press you up against one of these marble pillars and sing you sensless?"

Or:

"Would you like to have me bend you right over the edge of this box, and in front of the entire crowd gathered here tonight, just go ahead and—"

But he never got to the second half of his question.

"Malfoy?" A familiar and unwelcome voice called his name and Draco froze. He saw Granger's eyes dart behind him, and his heart sank. He closed his eyes briefly, schooled his features, and slowly stood, turning to greet the incredulous face of Blaise Zabini.

"Zabini," he responded coolly. He felt a muscle just behind him and realized Hermione must have stood as well.

"I thought that was you, what with the hair and all," Blaise explained dryly. Draco hadn't seen his former schoolmate since his mother's New Year's ball, and he'd only exchanged about two words with the man then.

A statuesque woman in amber dress robes clutched Blaise's arm and gave Draco the once-over. "May I present Cecelia Montescqueu," Blaise said carelessly. Draco's old dorm mate could have brought a broom as his date for all the emotion he displayed in regards to the woman affixed to his arm. If Blaise had wanted to bring someone he could comfortably ignore, Draco wasn't sure why he had picked such an impossibly distracting person: her hair was charmed to flash several different colors simultaneously, and the diamond pendant glittering on her neck was the size of a plum.

"Pleasure, I'm Draco Malfoy," greeted Draco stiffly. He merely shook her proffered hand quickly, not wasting his time or effort to observe the pureblood etiquette of kissing her knuckles. The woman let out a vaprid, high-pitched giggle. "Oh, but of course I know who you are!" It took more muscle control than necessary for him not to roll his eyes out of his skull.

He turned his attention back to Blaise, who peered around Draco with interest and he realized: he didn't recognize Hermione. Gritting his teeth, Draco steeked himself for the Knut to drop.

"Zabini, I'm sure you remember Hermione Granger from school?"

Draco took pleasure in the way Blaise's eyes widened a fraction and his mouth dropped slightly open before he instantly reverted his features back into his effortlessly haughty and impassive mask. On a normal person, that reaction would be akin to gasping loudly in shock, but Blaise Zabini was not a person with normal human emotions.

"Granger? Really?" he drawled, neither greeting her nor offering a hand to shake.

"Zabini," Draco heard Hermione respond icily. Draco felt a surge of pride in the degree of cold-

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perhaps Astoria? No, it was Daphne. Maybe.

Either way, the opera was duller than an early morning History of Magic lesson taught by Professor Binns. He cast a furtive glance at his lovely companion and noticed the opera glasses remained in her lap. As if she'd felt his gaze upon her, her eyes darted to her periphery, and she inclined her head slightly towards him. She gave him a shy smile, perhaps embarrassed by her flirty behavior earlier and redirected her attention to the performance below. Draco's stare never wavered from her. He could not care less about the classical show, as something far, far more enthralling had captured his every sense.

The rest of the opera house, the entire crowd, the singers below, ceased to exist in his eyes. There was only her, sitting less than a foot from him in a gorgeous fitted gown, the light golden skin of her arm begging to be touched and stroked.

Her head tilted slightly toward him again, but she didn't smile this time. Her facial features seemed to tighten, and she shifted in her seat, inadvertently bringing her body a few inches closer. Both of their arms resided on the wide armrests that separated their seats, and Draco let his gaze wander from her face, down her arms and finally to her delicate-looking hand.

It would take but a few centimeters of movement from his right hand, and he could gently brush against hers. His eyes flicked back up to her face and he noted the way her jaw had unclenched. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye again and her lips parted as she drew in shallow breaths.

Which of them would give first? Draco was certain that his longing for her was palpable at this point. Every fiber of his being screamed for him to touch her, just once, just tenderly graze the bare skin of her hand with his own. He trailed his eyes up the length of her body to the soft curls falling gently from her low, secure bun. How would it feel to comb his fingers through the escaped pieces of hair?

Draco's pulse quickened, his heartbeat in time with the rise and fall of her chest. Hermione was almost facing him now, not even bothering to keep up the pretense of watching the performance. Their arms remained apart, and her eyes flickered down to his hand every few moments.

Just a hair's breadth stood between their skin touching and Draco knew she could probably hear his breathing or at least the traitorous thumping of his heart against his chest. What would happen if they gave into this sensation? Every blink of her eyes, every slight intake of air in between her pink lips kept twisting and winding a coil all the way down to his toes, and something had to give soon.

Hermione angled her body just a few inches more and now she fully faced him. This wasn't a game anymore, and after months of blistering stares and stolen glances, perhaps they were both finally ready to acknowledge the charged atmosphere between them. Sod the opera, and sod the need to have an excuse to spend time together. Draco wanted her and if he was reading the heat in her countenance correctly, he knew she wanted him too.

A full-blown duel could have broken out on the stage below and neither one of them would have noticed nor cared. The lights of the opera house came on to signal intermission. Neither of them dropped their gaze. Draco felt his heart in his throat.

"Would you like to—" he began. Now, Draco was 99 percent certain that his question was going

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comes out with? *Don't worry Malfoy, I'm a progressive witch who takes a monthly contraceptive potion, so no little illegitimate heirs or diseases from our two omphs.*

Draco's face colored and she watched his throat bob nervously. "Oh, right, I uh, figured that... though I probably should have asked, or uh..."

He trailed off awkwardly and Hermione felt like sinking into the floor in embarrassment. He moved toward the front door to gather his cloak and robes from the hanging hooks and Hermione already felt bereft even though he hadn't left yet. Have they completely obliterated the friendship they've cultivated over the last 14 months?

Draco turned to face her and Hermione was struck by how much taller he was, almost looming over her.

"When are you back?"

"Next Sunday evening."

He nodded and chewed his bottom lip in thought and Hermione wondered what made him so nervous. Though she only just showered not a half hour ago, she felt herself beginning to sweat.

"You'll do great, you know that right?"

Hermione nodded and offered him a weak smile, only slightly buoyed by his encouragement. "I'm sure it will go fine. I've got my whole presentation transcribed onto color-coded notecards, and I have an audio recording of myself reading it through, so I can remember where to take the proper pauses for breaths. Last week I actually went to Scrimshaw's and finally got my hands on that timing parchment that contains a built-in countdown charm, so if I spend too long on the dual meaning of the *du* sequence, then—"

"Granger," his hypnotic drawl effectively cut her rambling short. His striking eyes danced with mirth at her anxious babbling but it switched quickly to an intense heat. "I—" he started but then faltered, at a loss for words.

Hermione could only stare up at him, on the edge of a precipice and in danger of losing her balance. She knew she should say something and although she couldn't shut up a moment ago, speech has eluded her.

Finally, Draco seemed to have had enough of the lingering question hanging between them.

"Sod it all," he muttered darkly then pulled her forward by the shoulders and crashed his lips down to hers. She eagerly reciprocated, forgetting about the awkwardness, as his taste and touch erased any doubts that the desire between them was mutual.

After several minutes of exploring her mouth with his own in what felt like a promise of future explorations, he pulled away slowly and smiled softly.

"Owl me when you get back?"

Hermione nodded absently, knowing he could have asked her for anything after that kiss and she would have gladly acquiesced. When he swooped down for another lingering kiss, Hermione didn't know if she'd make it to Venice anymore. *Sorry, something's come up and I'll have to cancel my presentation and attendance at this prestigious learning summit because I simply must spend the rest of my week being smugged senseless*

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by *Draco Malfoy*.

He finally released her and gave her a rare, boyish grin before taking his leave to walk to the nearest apparition point.



Hermione lost track of the time as she dazedly stared at the door through which Malfoy had just exited. With a shake of her head, she came to, and let out a long string of giggles. The past 24 hours had been so utterly bizarre that she still couldn't quite wrap her head around everything that happened.

She resigned herself to finish her packing before Ginny came over, because Merlin knew that her friend's interrogation would probably last the entire afternoon. Stopping briefly in her bedroom to make up the bed, Hermione paused after rustling the sheets. They still smelled like Draco's cologne.

Resisting the urge to climb back in bed and luxuriate in the memories of last night with his tempting scent still clinging to her sheets, Hermione made the bed in a hurry. She could only imagine the size of Ginny's smirk if she came over to find a disheveled bed.

She had just latched the clasp of her suitcase when she heard the Floo activate in the living room below. Ginny tumbled out and screamed Hermione's name.

"I'm here, all right, just a minute!" Hermione shouted back. Checking again that her luggage was properly closed and Crookshanks no longer trying to paw the latches open, she made her way back down to the living room.

As predicted, Ginny's face was smiling as wide as it could go without splitting itself in half.

"Well, well, well." Ginny crossed her arms and leant back slightly to survey Hermione. She scowled in response and put her hands on her hips.

"Well what?" She really didn't appreciate the knowing look Ginny sported.

"Now I know what you look like after a proper shag." Ginny crowed and Hermione buried her face in her hands in exasperation.

"For the love of Godric, Ginny!"

She felt Ginny tug her arms and with a resigned sigh sat down on the couch next to her friend. She summoned some tea and sandwiches from the kitchen as the women made themselves comfortable. After a few steady sips in which Ginny watched her expectantly, Hermione sighed again and knew it was time to face the music.

"All right. I will answer some of your questions, but the second you get too crude, this conversation is over," Hermione warned flatly.

Ginny comported her face into the perfect picture of innocence. "Understood, but if I may rebut?"

"You may."

"You are the only woman in my life that is not married to or dating one of my brothers. Luna doesn't count because all her descriptions of sex with Rolf are far too clinical. You'd think someone

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Her gaze followed his pointing finger and found the form of Ariadne, an ancient Greek story, and Draco already knew Hermione was familiar with this one. As they completed their long walk to the end of the gallery, Draco used the opportunity of her distracted upturned gaze to observe Hermione. Is this what his life could be like? If he hadn't been such a colossal fuck-up, could his life have turned out differently? If he'd gotten his shit together sooner, maybe nights like this would have been a fantastic, regular occurrence instead of an aberration from his usual seclusion?

They followed the filing line of other patrons as they approached the end of the gallery. Both stopped in front of pairs of floating white gloves. The gloves sprang to life and relieved Hermione and Draco of their cloaks for the evening. Hermione took his arm once more as they climbed the lush, carpeted stairs to their box.

An usher pulled aside heavy maroon curtains as they reached a point about halfway up the theater. Hermione's jaw dropped as she rushed forward to take in the view from the balcony of their box. "Oh wow, this is amazing! I've never had seats like these before in any theater!"

A private box? Damn Merlin! I really do owe you.

They each settled into their plush seats, Draco thankful that the opera house invested more gold into comfortable seating than the ballet theater. Draco tried to remember if he enjoyed opera at all. His previous excursions to this type of entertainment still remained foggy (maybe it was Daphne Greengrass that had the lighter hair? She'd been really into opera. Or at least paid it more attention than she did to him) but he hoped it was less mind-numbing than ballet. Especially because he was going to need something, anything, to distract him while sitting so close to Hermione.

She fiddled with a beaded bag and Draco chuckled when she eventually removed a small pair of gold spectacles.

"You brought your own opera glasses?"

She shrugged, a mischievous smile played about her mouth. "You know I like to be prepared. A fancy evening out to the opera has always been a fantasy of mine."

Draco grinned wickedly. "Is that so? Tell me then, how does this fantasy of yours usually end?"

For the second time that day, she called his bluff.

Hermione didn't answer him. Not verbally, anyway. Instead, her eyes bored into his, then slowly scanned up to his hair, made their way back down to his eyes for a moment, then continued their exploration south. They lingered on his lips, trailed a searing path down his neck, loitered on his chest, and then traveled down, down and still further down, until she was openly ogling his trousers just below his belt. Just as her darkened brown eyes found his again, the lights in the theater went down to signal the start of the show and Draco remembered that his lungs required oxygen to work.

A coy smile tugged at her lips as she turned from him and faced the rising curtain. Dear Merlin, if she flirted that outrageously with him one more time Draco didn't know what he would do with himself.

The show had started and some slip of a soprano was warbling in Italian but Draco found he could not force himself to care, not one tiny bit. He'd seen this show before, possibly with his mother, or

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the feeling of apparition and nothing more.

When they landed outside the grand opera house and joined the throng of other well-dressed wizards and witches, she wound her arm through the crook of his own. The feeling it inspired within him was warmer than butterbeer, better than blueberry scones, more satisfying than Dreamless Sleep potion.

Hermione Granger was out for a night on the town, on his arm, in public, by choice. It shouldn't have made him this disturbingly content, this obscenely proud. Because this was a fleeting feeling and he'd do better to squash it now.

The precise night of this show appeared to be wonderfully fortuitous as far as Draco was concerned. It was neither the opening night of the show, nor the closing for the season, meaning cultural press coverage would be scarce. Glancing around the entrance, he was greatly relieved to discern a complete absence of gossip or fashion reporters. He recalled that luck was on his side once more: there was a Weird Sisters reunion show across town tonight, and that would surely be the more exciting venue for celebrity- and gossip-hungry press. Hermione was on his arm tonight and he would be damned if anything was going to ruin this brief detour into happiness.

Hyper vigilant of his surroundings since the war, Draco's eyes darted left and right as they entered the grand lobby. Though they caught a few stares (damn his recognizable head of hair) no one seemed to be pointing, sneering, or reaching for their wands. Hermione had once confided in him that the public often didn't spare her a second glance when she took the time to tame her hair: apparently her public image was only instantly recognizable if her hair was peak frizz as she carried stacks of books and trailed after Harry and Ron. Draco had almost laughed to the point of tears when she confessed she'd once received a painting of this very scene in the mail from a deranged fan.

The witch on his arm looked up at the ceiling of the opera house in starry-eyed wonder. The entrance hall was a long gallery, requiring patrons to walk quite a length before reaching the actual theater. Draco knew in the past, this long and richly carpeted entrance served as an excuse for the old wealthy and purpleblooded patrons to show off their extravagant dress robes, strutting like peacocks on parade. He had a few hazy memories of performing this walk before with other witches, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. He'd accompanied one (or was it both?) of the Greengrass sisters (Astoria had the lighter hair, right?) to the opera on several occasions, but conversation was minimal and Draco would have been at least one bottle of whisky deep by this point in the evening.

The hall itself was the height of opulence: gold-framed mirrors, floating crystal chandeliers in every size, but the ceiling was the piece de resistance. Painted in vibrant, bold colors, the scenes from famous operas danced above them; looking both impossibly lifelike and ethereal at the same time. Draco had never really noticed the magic in the artwork before, but seeing it through Hermione's eyes he could begin to appreciate the combination of astounding artistry and spellwork that had to coexist to create such wondrous murals.

Draco used his free arm to point to the rendering of a mournful young woman in red pacing in front of the entrance to a labyrinth. "See her, just there? That's the depiction of the show tonight."

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with her imagination would be far more exciting, but no. So I simply ask that I be allowed some leeway in the questions because I need to live vicariously through *someone*."

"But you're married!"

"Yes, and you never let me talk about my sex life!"

"Because it would be disgusting! Harry is basically my brother and I still haven't recovered from you getting drunk and confessing how many times you've had sex in the Harpies locker room."

Ginny snorted. "Point taken, but please Hermione? Take pity on an old, married woman?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the redhead but felt a little pang of guilt. "Fine. But I reserve the right to refuse to answer questions that make me uncomfortable."

"Of course. So how big is he?"

"Ginny, are you kidding me!?"

Ginny met Hermione's furious glare with raised palms. "I'm sorry, but I had to. Merlin, your face," Ginny chorled at her embarrassment and took a swig of tea. "How about instead, you take me through all the events of last night and this morning, and I will ask follow-up questions during your scandalous retelling?"

Hermione supposed that was fair, and began recounting her evening with Malfoy starting from their dinner in Muggle London. True to her inquisitive nature, Ginny interjected often with questions.

"How did he dress?"

"A tailored, expensive suit, of course."

"And for the opera?"

"Tailored, expensive dress robes, of course."

"How did he react to your dress?"

"He said I looked bloody gorgeous." Hermione blushed and Ginny let out a triumphant laugh.

"How was the show?"

Hermione faltered a bit here. She tried to put into words the palpable tension that had prevented either of them from truly paying attention during the first act, and when Hermione reached the point where Blaise Zabini interrupted their evening, Ginny gasped loudly.

"How did Malfoy react?"

"He seemed really angry. I got the impression they're no longer on friendly terms."

When Hermione described how Blaise had then accosted Malfoy after the show to throw thinly veiled insults at both him and Hermione, Ginny let out an angry snarl.

"That absolute arse! I would have hexed his pretty boy face into another dimension."

"Malfoy was close, I had to just about physically restrain him from attacking Zabini in public. He almost had his wand in his hand before I could convince him we should just leave."

Ginny's face became pensive. "Interesting."

"What is?"

"Nothing, do go on," Ginny urged but Hermione knew her friend was flitting away an observation about Malfoy's character. Hermione tried to describe the moment when she'd finally realized they

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were quite alone in her home last night, but didn't know how much she wanted to divulge. Seeming to sense her friend's hesitation and wanting to respect her privacy, Ginny inquired, "And if one were to rate Malloy's abilities in the snogging department, one would say...?"

Hermione covered her face again and let out a few deep breaths as she tried to collect herself. "Positively outrageous," she mumbled into her hands and Ginny giggled excitedly. Hermione was grateful to Ginny for showing some restraint when her line of questioning became more abstract, allowing Hermione to comfortably share some details.

"Am I to assume that you were left feeling... satisfied?"

Hermione let out a slight cough of embarrassment. "Yes, several times over."

At that response, Ginny regarded her with something akin to pride in her eyes. She could tell the redhead was holding back, and while she appreciated that, decided to throw her a bone.

"All right, I can see the question written on your forehead, go ahead."

Ginny smirked. "And may I ask by what means he... satisfied you?"

Hermione laughed openly, decided that having a close female friend, practically a sister, and one that wanted to gush over her love life didn't have to necessarily be a bad thing. "First with his hand, then I was on top of him, then this morning he used his tongue and then the final time he was on top of me."

Ginny's jaw dropped, a rare occurrence in Hermione's experience. "You're telling me that *Draco Malloy* went down on you after one night together? Do you know how long it took for me to get Harry to do that?"

Hermione scrunched her nose in disgust. "Please, Gin, please. I do not ever want to know the answer to that question. Ever."

Ginny sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine, and thank you for telling me. I'm certainly starting to see that ferret in a whole new light!" It was Hermione's turn to roll her eyes, but she supposed if Ginny were teasing her about Malloy then that had to mean she approved in some way.

"Would you say the two of you are dating now?"

It shouldn't have, but Ginny's practical question caught Hermione completely off guard. Were they dating? They hadn't discussed a single thing besides Hermione's indegent statement about contraceptive use and her impending Venice trip. Oh Merlin, now what?

The panic on her face must have shown, because Ginny called to her in concern. "What's wrong?"

"We didn't... didn't discuss what any of this means! And now I'm leaving for a week and I have absolutely no clue where I stand with him." She sunk her head in her hands in defeat.

"Hermione," Ginny said gently. "How did you part this morning?"

"Well we snogged a bit more and then he told me to owl him when I'm home again." She met Ginny's gaze and noticed her friend was giving her an encouraging smile.

"Don't you think that means he's interested in you? In more than a one-off?"

Hermione sighed and reluctantly nodded. She felt like she'd come at this backwards, every other bout of intimacy with men had come after an exclusive romantic relationship was already well-es-

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inally apparated earlier in the evening. Hermione glanced surreptitiously around them, then determining they were quite alone and hidden, nodded once. Draco produced his wand from inside his suit jacket pocket and performed a series of taps to his collar. Instantly, his black dress robes and cloak with ornate silver fastenings flowed over his suit, his waistcoat appeared, emerald cuff links materialized at his wrists, and a bow tie wound its way around his throat.

"Damn," he muttered fidgeting with the askew bow tie to pull it straight. "I can never get that spell to get it quite right..."

He looked up at Hermione and the speech center of his brain decided to go on holiday. Hermione's purple dress had lengthened down from her knees and flowed into a delicate short train with a silvery pattern of ivy sewn along the back and edges of the gown. The top half of her dress remained the same, which meant Draco would have the rest of the night with the sight of her bare arms and shoulders. Unaware of his heated stare, she threw an extravagant midnight blue cloak around her back; the rich velvet material covered in a sparkling design of stars that seemed preternaturally bright. She looked up then and noticed his stare. "Isn't it beautiful? It was a gift for my birthday last year from George and Angelina. I've warned them never to tell me what type of silk the stars are, because I'm fairly certain I'd have a moral objection."

Draco wanted to snort derisively at her, but all he could think was how the brilliance of her cloak absolutely paled in comparison to her. He grunted some sort of feeble response and continued fumbling with the crooked bow tie at his neck.

"Oh here, let me! I've gotten quite good at bow ties over the years." Before he could even open his mouth to protest, she stepped up to him and took the strip of material from between his clumsy fingers.

He let his hands fall limply to his side as she invaded his space. Her hands just below his chin, it would take but a quick jolt of his head down to press his lips to her fingertips. She was so far in his personal space that every small intake of air was accompanied by that sweet, wonderful, mysterious floral scent that haunted every corner of his mind when they weren't physically together.

"There," she whispered, as she gave the tie a final tug into place. "It's perfect now."

You're perfect.

Could she feel it too? Draco stared into the warm depth of her eyes, so close to his own that he could pick out that glowing golden hue, and wondered if Hermione also felt the thrumming of desire through her veins. Her fingers slowly let go of the bow tie, but she hadn't moved away. Would she object if he pressed her back into the wall of this brick building and latched his mouth to hers like he wanted to, so very badly? Would she protest if he told her to forget all about the sodding opera, he'd much rather run his hands all over her curves the rest of the evening?

Remember who you are? Remember what you are? You can never be what she needs. Let her go.

Draco closed his eyes and cleared his throat. "We should go," he whispered, his voice unable to produce anything stronger. He took a step back and offered her his arm for apparition. He tried to ignore the swooping sensation in his stomach as she squeezed his arm, and told himself that it was just

me?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously, but Draco refused to retract his baseless accusation.

"Excuse me? Do you honestly think I'd...? You know what?" She cut herself off and stood abruptly.

"I don't have time for dramas today Malfoy, so think what you like about me and my inappropriate behavior." And with that, she collected her bag and swept out of the café, leaving Draco to stare into his coffee cup and regret the day he was ever born.

Prize. Fucking idiot.

I missed you.

I am okay with this.



The next morning, Draco was first to the café. As he sipped his beverage, he wondered if Granger would even show after his immature outburst yesterday, but she didn't disappoint. No, Draco currently cornered the market on disappointing behavior.

She approached him with a cool glare and settled down across from him.

"Morning, Granger." He spoke first to break the silence when it was clear she wouldn't be greeting him amicably this morning. Though he'd been taught by his father that speaking first during a tense discussion or negotiation was a sign of weakness, Draco thought it best to practice some form of humility after yesterday.

"He's at least forty years my senior, married with five grown children, one of the most respected Mermish scholars in Europe, and my professional relationships are always strictly that, professional."

"What the hell are you...? Oh. Right."

"Right indeed. How could you even think I'd be so shallow a person as to use a professional educational conference as some sort of opportunity to indulge in a romantic rendezvous? Do you really think so low of me? Am I the type of empty-headed, flighty person that is so easily distracted by good looks? Even if Paulo had been much younger and rather handsome, what would it even matter? Why would you assume the worst of me?"

She never raised her voice, but the disappointment came across loud and clear and Draco felt like he'd been hexed in the gut. None of the responses that flitted across his mind seemed worthy of her earnest questions.

You did nothing wrong Granger, not one thing wrong, not now, not ever. My jealousy knows no bounds.

I'm so insecure and emotionally unstable that I barely survived a week of your absence and upon your return made you feel as if you'd committed some betrayal because I'm king of getting in my own way.

Everyone leaves me: my parents, Crabbe, Snake, Theo, and then you, and I couldn't take another person walking away from me.

I don't know what we are to each other anymore and it fucking terrifies me. But I know what I want. I want you, I want to court you properly, I want you in every single way it's possible to want another person. I'm on new ground here,

Granger and I need help because I'm so lost when it comes to you.

He cleared his throat and tried to sift through the tumultuous emotions and thoughts. Granger deserved a straight answer, he owed her that much.

"I'm sorry." There, a promising start. Her gaze had softened to a more patient look, but retained a stern quality. He had hurt her and she wasn't going to let him off so lightly with just a vague apology.

"I didn't mean to imply anything unkind, I just—" *I missed you.* But he couldn't say the words. Couldn't admit the weakness. *Coward.*

"I obviously shouldn't have insinuated something sortid, you didn't deserve that. I'm sorry I was such a git to you yesterday and the day before. That was hardly the reaction you were hoping for upon your return, was it?"

"No. It wasn't," she replied softly, still pinning him to the chair with her brown eyes. *What were you hoping for Granger?*

"Well, now that we've established what an absolute rubbish listener I am, would you be so kind as to regale me with the rest of your trip?"

She recovered quickly and launched back into her description of the other conference sessions she'd been fortunate enough to attend and Draco tried to ignore the hint of sadness that still lurked in her eyes.

The rest of the work week was both wonderful familiarity and exquisite torture for Draco. The pair of them seemed to have fallen right back into the comfort and ease of their morning routine friendship, as if they hadn't spent a glorious night in her bed discovering the feeling of their bodies together. It was two steps forward, and now five steps back.

Of course, that didn't stop Draco from fantasizing about her constantly. Almost every time she opened her mouth, he envisioned his name falling silyly from her lips. Every time she turned her head and he caught a glimpse of her neck, he imagined peppering her skin with kisses from her throat to her ear. Every time she swept her hair off her shoulders, he remembered how it looked flying behind her while she rode him.

He felt helpless and out of his depth. How was he supposed to make his intentions known to her? Should he wait for Granger to broach the topic of a relationship? Were they just going to forever ignore the sexual tension that had culminated in two rounds of unbridled passion?

When Friday rolled around, Draco felt adrift despite having Hermione back in his life regularly. They'd resumed their friendly discussions so easily, would he be mucking it all up by mentioning he wanted more?

Further, why was this incumbent upon him to pursue? If she wanted him at all, well he was right in front of her wasn't he? His mood was souring quickly once more and he knew it would only be a matter of time before he snapped irritably at her.

"Any weekend plans?" Her question broke into his sulking fit but only fed his bitterness.

"None," he clipped. "And yourself?"

She pushed some hair off her face and thought for a moment. "Ginny wants to catch up, so we

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have brunch plans tomorrow. On Sunday I have dinner at the Weasleys.”

And what about me, huh? Aren't I entitled to just a sliver of your time? He thought petulantly.

“Ah yes, Merlin forbid you miss one week of the intellectual stimulation from that clan. Tell me, do you positively thrive on the illuminating academic discussions from that brood? Or does everyone sit around and count how many turkey legs your ex-boyfriend can stuff down his gob?”

“Must you be so rude? Why are you in such a foul mood today?”

“Maybe this is just who I am Granger, did your oversized brain ever consider that? Why pretend anything different? But perhaps my personality is too unsavory for you, so I won't bother you a moment longer,” he gave her a well-practiced sneer and stormed out of the café.

The second the door shut behind him, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He knew his misplaced anger and frustration had been directed at the wrong person, and yet he just couldn't help himself from lashing out at Hermione. He'd wanted to spend time outside of the coffee shop with her again, but was wary of being rejected and thus, a tantrum.

If you never ask anything of other people, you aren't giving them the opportunity to say yes, echoed Healer Brown's voice in his mind.

Merlin's fucking bollocks, if he could just swallow his pride for two damn seconds, he might be able to salvage the situation with Granger. Gritting his teeth, he turned around and strode purposefully back into the café.

“Granger,” he barked, coming to stop in front of her. “Have dinner with me tonight. My place.”

She merely arched a brow and regarded him coolly for a moment, giving Draco time to add a reluctant and softer “Please,” to his abrupt demand.

Hermione folded her arms across her chest and considered his statement. “All right,” she finally agreed, but with a small frown.

“All right?”

“Yes,” she affirmed, and now looked slightly smug.

Draco rocked back a little on his heels awkwardly, realizing what absolute rubbish he was at inviting a woman he fancied into his home.

“Er, okay, great. How's 7?”

“7 is perfect.”

“I'll have the Floo open if that works best. Call out Franklin House, Berkshire.”

“Got it, can I bring anything?”

No, all I need is you.

“Just yourself.”

“All right, then I'll be seeing you later I suppose.”

Draco gave a jerk of his head that he hoped functioned as a parting nod and instead of waiting for her to walk to work, thought it might be best if he had some time alone to both castigate himself for being an utter wanker and then congratulate himself for turning it around before it was too late. Because tonight he'd have Granger all to himself, and he'd be damned if he fucked it up this time.

couldn't stay out of his own way, could he?

The guilt he'd felt at the way her whole demeanor had crumbled because of his stiffness ate away at him the second he'd reached his office. I mean really, was he actively trying to drive her away?

Well not today. Today Draco was going to be so fucking pleasant she'd remember that he wasn't a complete prick and that perhaps he did have some redeeming qualities after all.

He received a surprise when he entered the café: Hermione was already seated at their table wringing her hands nervously.

Prize. Fucking idiot.

“Good morning,” she said cautiously, as if speaking to a frightened animal.

“Granger, look I —” He sat down and noticed she'd already gotten his coffee for him. Not only had he made her feel terrible for having the gall to oversleep after returning from a career-defining trip, she clearly felt like she owed him. *Will there ever be a time when I'm not an awful human being?*

“I'm sorry about yesterday Malfoy, I didn't mean —”

“Don't, Granger. You don't have to say anything. I hadn't slept well the night before and I wasn't my best self.” *I'm sorry I'm a giant man-child who doesn't know how to process complex emotions.*

She offered him a tentative smile. “How was your week? Were you able to get loads of work done without me talking your ear off about runes?”

“It was fine, I suppose.” *Lie. It was akin to fucking torture. It took a mental breakdown and an emergency healing session to discover that I bloody missed you. Gods, I missed you.*

“But come now, don't leave me in suspense. Did you receive the proper accolades and praise for your brilliant presentation? How much over the time limit did you go?”

His tight teasing worked, and the smile on her face turned more genuine. As she launched into a retelling of her presentation, Draco lost himself in the sound of her voice. The emptiness that had festered within him all last week was slowly being snuffed out the longer she talked. She chatted rapidly, without pause, and Draco wondered if she'd stored all this up just for him. Her presentation had been flawless, of course, not that she worked it that way, but so vivid was her description, Draco could imagine sitting in the audience, rapt with attention at the level of detail Granger included in her talk. She was blinding in her magnificence and it had taken him too long to see.

“...and then of course by the time Paulo gave me the tour of the section on ancient —”

“Who?”

“Oh, Paulo Pescara? I was fortunate enough to make his personal acquaintance, I couldn't believe it, I mean I cited eight of his works in my discussion and —”

“Gave you a personal library tour, did he?”

So is that what had Granger so distracted that she was late returning from Italy? She met some dashing, Italian intellectual and spent all her time cuddling in cozy library corners, all thoughts of Draco quite forgotten?

“Yes, considering one of the sections is actually named after him, it was quite the honor to —”

“A little inappropriate, wouldn't you say? Fraternizing after hours alone with some wizard you just

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He was steps away from the entrance to The Leaky Cauldron when he heard his name.

“Malfoy!”

He ignored the call, believing it to be his mind playing tricks on him.

“Malfoy, wait up!”

He stopped his forward progress and closed his eyes, hardly daring to believe it was her voice calling out to him. Draco opened his eyes as he turned around slowly, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides.

There, half-walking, half-running towards him in the springtime sun, hair flying wildly behind her, jacket buttoned incorrectly and work bag unclasped as it hung precariously from her shoulder, was Hermione. She looked disheveled, exhausted, and beyond beautiful.

Fuck, I missed you. I missed you so much.

She smiled brightly as she approached, her eyes sparkling and cheeks pink from her furious pace toward him.

“Hello,” she said, slightly breathless, looking up hopefully at him.

And despite the unmitigated joy that sprang to life within him at the sight of her, despite the urge to hold her to his chest and never let go, something more sinister fought its way to the surface of his mind. How dare she make him feel so miserable for days on end? How dare she leave him waiting for her to show this morning? So what if the mere sight of her made him happier than he’d been in days, didn’t she know how he’d suffered in her absence? Did she even care?

His pride was going to be the death of him.

“Returned from your big trip, have you?” he questioned coldly, and tried not to regret his tone when her face fell in a mixture of hurt and surprise.

“Yes. There was a mix-up with the timing of my portkey at the Italian Ministry, and I didn’t arrive home until well after midnight, and then I completely overslept this morning,” she rushed out.

It was a logical and truthful-sounding explanation and it should have mollified Draco. Not that he had any cause to be angry with her at all, but he seemed to have only one setting this morning: emotionally self-destructive.

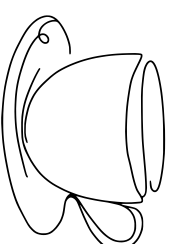
“Yes, well not all of us have the luxury of being late to work after a glamorous jaunt to the continent, so I best be going,” he drawled. Her stricken and confused face chipped away at the iciness in his heart, but his outward expression remained unmoved.

“Malfoy, I’m sorry, really it wasn’t—”

“See you tomorrow, Granger, that is, if you have the time in your busy schedule for me,” he clipped and turned abruptly on his heel and stalked off to work.



I am a prize idiot. That was the first thought Draco had when he woke the next morning. He just



Chapter Twenty

He was going to fuck this up. Inviting Granger over had been a horrible, rash, and stupendously morose idea. Draco wasn’t remotely emotionally prepared for the reality of inviting this woman into his home. Although, he did at least have the foresight to order the elves to remain either in their quarters or somewhere out of sight for the evening, as he wasn’t quite sure how to broach that topic just yet with Hermione. Poor Crick most likely thought his master was going round the bend, but he merely fixed Draco with an indifferent stare before blinking once and agreeing to inform Watson there would be no need to cook.

This obviously meant he needed to figure out how to provide a meal without the aid of elves. As soon as his work day ended he placed a Floo call to a French restaurant in London that had catered some of his mother’s galas in the past, and after throwing his surname and a whole lot of gold around, was able to arrange for delivery of a veritable feast at precisely 6:30 that evening.

Having no clue which kind of dishes she preferred, he’d opted for the sensible choice of one of every dish listed on the menu. Pragmatism at its finest. The long table in the dining room groaned under the weight of dozens of French delicacies, as Draco cast a strong stasis charm across everything. He’d changed out of his robes for the evening and that had been a whole episode of angst as he dithered over how to dress. He felt completely out of sorts, and realized this was the first time he’d entertained a date entirely on his own at home. Former dates with pureblood women took place in social settings or planned outings or parties that were sure to be photographed for the society pages, which meant dress robes. Same thing goes for dinner with his mother.

Maybe just the suit, like he’d worn for their dinner in Muggle London? But even that felt too stuffy for a dinner in with a friend. A more than friend? Fuck.

In the end, he decided on a white dress shirt sans tie and smart black trousers. It was definitely an outfit that would have wrinkled his mother’s nose at being far too casual for dinner, but he had a suspicion Hermione would not care.

And now he had 30 minutes of panicking before Hermione arrived. He paced the length of the downstairs traveling parlor in front of the large fireplace. Should he be seated casually in one of the armchairs when she arrived? Perhaps doing his best Lucius impression with a glass of brandy in one hand, and a novel in the other? He'd be the perfect picture of refined wealth and lord of the manor. Draco mentally snorted, thinking that reminding Hermione of his father was probably the last thing he wanted to do given the (pun intended) bad blood there.

With two minutes to go, he finally settled on leaning against the door frame to the parlor, arms casually crossed in front of his chest, exuding nonchalance. He held that pose for two full minutes. When the flames lit green right at the stroke of 7, Draco tried not to jump, though his heart had leapt into his throat.

Hermione stepped gracefully out from the fireplace, ducking slightly to avoid hitting her head on the mantel, and cast a quick *Tergeo* on herself. Instantly, the stray soot was banished from her dress and hair. She was a vision in a flowing, bright marigold dress that fell to mid-calf. The wide straps left plenty of shoulder on display and a darker hue of silk ribbon under the bodice accentuated her small waist. A golden spring flower personified.

She cast her eyes anxiously around the parlor before she finally spotted Draco in the doorway. "Welcome," he greeted her, unfurling himself from the doorway to approach her.

"Hello," she smiled and tucked a strand of hair that had already escaped her low ponytail behind her ear.

He stopped several feet in front of her, a safe distance. "That's a lovely dress," he murmured sincerely and earned another nervous smile.

"Thank you, I bought it in Venice." She smoothed down the sides of the fabric. "I know you said not to bring anything, but my parents always said to never arrive anywhere without a host gift, so umm, here." She flushed and held out a bottle of wine toward him. Draco accepted it and read the label.

"I know you probably have an actual wine cellar and I don't even know if this will pair well with what you're serving tonight, but I saw it in the shop and couldn't help myself. If you notice, it's the same bottle we—"

"—we shared at the Muggle restaurant, before the opera," Draco finished for her and she met his eyes in surprise. And there it was: that glowing in her eyes when he said or did something that pleased her. A look that shot a shock of warmth through his entire being.

"Surprised I remembered?" he teased.

"Maybe a little," she confessed with a light shrug. "Honestly, I'm more surprised a bevy of house-elves weren't here to greet me upon arrival."

"Sorry to disappoint you Granger, but it's just you and me tonight."

A pregnant pause followed his statement. The atmosphere suddenly seemed to twist from slightly awkward to one thick with anticipation. Perhaps it'd be best to take a slower approach this evening until they clarified exactly where they stood. Taking a fortifying breath he offered, "Why don't I let this

display plants indoors. Would you prefer me to place the bloomed plants throughout the home?"

"Yes, I'd like them displayed here in the dining room, the library, and several in my bedrooms."

"Very good sir," and Draco watched as the little elf immediately banished half the pots outside and began levitating the others to different areas of the room.

Leaving Crick to it, Draco retired to the desk in the library to review some documents sent over from his solicitors. Not ten minutes later, two potted hyacinths appeared in ornate pottery along one of the tall window ledges. Crick had obviously disposed of the inferior, plastic Muggle containers in favor of something more befitting of a wealthy estate.

Chuckling, Draco wondered what Hermione would make of him setting his elf with the task of decorating his home with spring flowers. Only one more day without her...



Granger was late. Draco impatiently checked his watch again for the sixth time in the last two minutes and let out an irritated huff. His coffee was growing colder and his temper growing shorter.

Maybe something had gone wrong with her portkey? He'd asked her to owl him when she returned, but if she'd gotten in late last night perhaps she didn't think that to be necessary? She didn't owe him a thing.

He sat for a few more minutes debating with himself on whether he should confront her outside her own home, now that he knew where she lived. It was only a quick few blocks from the café after all. He ultimately decided that would only come across as monumentally creepy, and what if she didn't want to see him? Had he even considered that this inflation was one sided?

Still, she had taken the time to write him a postcard. Draco took the paper memento out from his inner breast pocket and read through it again, her written words calming him momentarily. Come on Granger, where are you?

She doesn't want to see you, don't you get it? His subconscious hissed at him.

Pathetic, really, how you need her, yet she can't be bothered to let you know she's returned.

You missed her, and worse, you're in lo—

Draco put up his occlumency shields and took deep, calming breaths. Once he regained control of his runaway thoughts, he realized he'd be late to work if he didn't get a move on. He sighed as he trudged morosely down the street, hands stuffed in his pockets. He'd woken up this morning feeling a thrill of anticipation at being reunited with Hermione and hearing her excited voice as she waxed lyrical about everything she learned at the conference.

But no, apparently Draco was not an important enough feature in her life for her to care that she'd stood him up at their usual morning meeting. Of course he should have expected something like this, but it still caused a pang of hurt within his chest. She'd had all that time to herself to rethink their dynamic, and Draco had a feeling he knew which conclusion she'd drawn.

Remain Nameless

Stalking back up through the rows of flower stalls, he came to a stop again as a light breeze came through and swept the intoxicating smell into his nostrils.

Hermione

There it was again. Despite knowing for a fact that her porky wasn't due to return her to England until late tomorrow night, he craned his neck around to see if she was hiding just out of sight. Instead of the person he wanted to see more than anything in the world at that moment, his eyes fell on a collection of flowers he didn't recognize.

They were potted plants of varying colors: white, pink, and a blue/purple, all with shiny bright green leaves. The more mature ones with more flowers than tightly closed buds rose to roughly a foot high out of their dirt. He dragged a finger along an open plant and admired the soft yet strong petals that grew in an almost conical shape. Picking up a pot containing a plant that was just about fully bloomed, Draco brought his nose to the purple petals and took a deep inhale. *Hermione*. He'd finally solved the mystery of that floral scent that accompanied her everywhere.

"These flowers, what are they called?" he demanded of the stooped Muggle gentleman who ran the stall.

"Hyacinths," he croaked. "Not great for bouquets, but yeh can plant the bulbs and they'll grow all right with a decent bit o' sun. They show up in spring."

Draco nodded and scooped up as many as he could carry. He bought fully bloomed hyacinths that were already leaking their addicting fragrance and several that had tightly closed buds so green it was impossible to tell which color they'd display.

Forgetting all about coffee, Draco returned to the Ministry-approved apparition point to take his floral purchases home. He deposited his new garden bounty on the dining room table and summoned Crick.

The usually impassive house-elf cast a wary eye over the amount of flowers residing on the pristine antique dining table.

"How may I be of service, sir?"

"Do you know anything about planting flowers?"

"I do sir, the landscaping upkeep falls to me here at Franklin House."

Draco bit his lip and nodded. His elves were still a bit of a mystery to him and seemed content to fulfill their various roles and responsibilities without much direction. Draco knew there was some sort of division of labor between Crick and Watson but could never remember which task fell to which elf (besides cooking, which was solely Watson).

"Right, well I'd like these planted along the verandah in the back of the estate."

Crick approached the table and lifted one of the hyacinths off to inspect it closer.

"I can certainly re-pot these outside, however this type of bulb will need to be planted in the autumn in order for it to succeed. If you don't mind my recommendation sir, I can plant these closed buds which will sprout for you in a few weeks. I suppose they will need to be revisited in autumn to set their proper tending schedule. The ones that have prematurely bloomed will better serve you as

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breathe for a bit and show you around? Dinner's ready whenever you like."

Hermione beamed and stowed her wand in her little beaded bag. "All right. But given the size of this parlor alone, I imagine this might take a rather long time," she teased.

Draco smirked; she loved taking shots at his obvious wealth. "I'll give you the condensed version then. Wait here peasant, I'll set this on the table."

Leaving the unopened bottle out amongst the varied dishes, he took a moment to wipe his damp palms on his trousers. Fuck, but he was nervous. Trying desperately not to focus on the meaning behind all of her words or actions thus far, he schooled his features before returning to Hermione.

"Is there a brochure or map to help me on our journey?"

"Why, so you can bury your nose in reading material and miss out on my talents as a tour guide? I assure you, my oral skills are unmatched."

As soon as he finished his unfortunate sentence he clamped his mouth shut and turned away from her. A tense silence fell again and Draco desperately wished for some kind of charm that would prevent him from spewing any and all sorts of accidental sexual innuendos for the foreseeable future. Fucking Salazar, not five minutes in and he was already blowing this.

He coughed to clear his throat. "Right, well that was the traveling parlor, obviously. I mostly sick to this side of the first floor and my wing on the second floor." Most of his home was tragically undensured, but when you live alone and never host visitors except your own mother, that is to be expected. He would be leaving this fact out of the tour.

He led her up the main grand staircase, and noticed how she admired the ornate tile work of the ground floor. The stone walls along the staircase were dotted with portraits of pastoral landscapes of the surrounding county of Berkshire and the neighboring one of Draco's former home in Wiltshire, though to Draco it all looked the same anyway. A few sheep grazed along one that Hermione stopped to watch with interest, and a collic bounded into frame to herd some of the stragglers. Draco explained that his mother was responsible for most of the décor, as Draco couldn't really be bothered.

"How long have you lived here?"

Draco scratched the back of his head in thought as they reached the top of the stairs. "I'd say 7 or 8 years? I lived on my mother's estate for a bit, but when I saw this place up for sale, I couldn't pass on the deal."

"Did you know the family that lived here before?"

They walked slowly side by side now, as Draco opened doors at random for Hermione to poke her head into the rooms if she desired.

"No, but it wasn't a family estate anyway, it was some elderly wizard with the surname Franklin. Apparently he had this built for himself back in the late 1800s. He never had any heirs and with no family claiming the deed for succession it fell to public sale. I was most fortunate to come across it when I did."

"What about the house attracted you?"

"It wasn't the Manor," he said bluntly and saw her wince in his periphery. "Truly, it's in excellent

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condition and came with several dozen acres, so I can fly comfortably behind the estate. There's a village about ten miles north, but no other homes close by. I've come to value my privacy."

They'd come to a point roughly halfway down the hall. Draco directed a hand ahead of them. "That's the start of Mother's wing for when she visits. I've actually no idea what's in most of the rooms. But this is what I really wanted to show you."

He threw her a knowing smirk as he heaved open one of the large oak doors to his library. Hermione did not disappoint. She stepped past him, her mouth falling open in awe, the light from the sun setting outside the tall glass windows reflecting in her eyes and some of the golden undertones of her hair. Granger in his library glowed both literally and metaphorically, and Draco felt a swell of pride at being the one to inspire this reaction.

"Oh Malfoy, this is wonderful! How do you ever leave? This might be more square footage than my entire home!"

The library was impressively vast for a private residence, though probably half the size of the Malfoy Manor library, and the bookshelves lined floor to ceiling with tomes or scrolls on every subject imaginable. The entirety of the western wall being the exception, with the ceiling-high windows overlooking the back of the estate. Draco waved his wand to ignite the candles all along the wall, as the sun was dipping lower in the sky. In one far corner of the library was Draco's desk, set in front of the fireplace. He conducted all of his financial obligations here, his handsome dark cherry desk littered with neat stacks of parchments, a collection of quills in a silver holder, and a smattering of ballpoint pens in a crystal dish.

Hermione walked slowly into the middle of the room and revolved on the spot, as if to breathe the entirety of the collection in all at once. Draco was once again struck with the sensation of viewing the world through her eyes. All these sights and experiences that he took for granted (the ballet, the artistry of the opera house, the grandiosity of his home and library), sparked a wonder in her that made his heart swell. She was so uninhibited in expressing joy or awe at the magic around her, and at times he could feel that delight too, in just being a witness to her new discoveries. Merlin, but she was amazing, this witch. This witch who had seen death, war, and loss, and could still feel something other than absolute disdain for the world, it both puzzled and enchanted him.

"May I?" she asked politely, though Draco could tell she'd been physically restraining herself from running to the nearest shelf and grabbing the first thing she touched. He gave her a slight incline of the head, and she was off.

Grimming like a child in a toy shop, she ran her fingers lightly across the spines of the books as she walked carefully past the shelves.

"Are these all from the Manor?" She called, as she came to a stop in front of the Potions section.

"Not all of them, but perhaps about two-thirds. The Ministry confiscated a ton, as you can imagine, and I've collected my fair share over the years."

With a shy grin, Hermione reached out and finally pulled a book from its place. "It seems the Ministry wasn't as thorough as they should have been." She held up the book and Draco approached to

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me as 'important' and she wouldn't have fun if it heard her in the face. I've decided to record the magical properties of this phenomenon. There must be an explanation for this occurrence, I'm sure. There's no denying that quality to the magic, but if I'm positive after writing you should light up whether a brand of illumination is also needed. Just that I'm convinced of that word goes, I feel about that particular subject. All this to say the city is very beautiful and I'm glad you shared this brand of with me, even if the experience was no my own. Try not to let all the city's beauty seem as if it's every place.

See you soon,

Hermione

Draco read through her message once, twice, three times, then a couple more for good measure. Several minutes later and he had the damn thing memorized.

"*Unimportant nerd who wouldn't have fun if it heard her in the face,*" did sound exactly like the sort of playful insult he'd lob her way. He chuckled at the image of her eyes narrowing while he smirked at her, before she'd eventually crack and let a smile loose.

Merlin he missed her smile. And her glares. And how easy it was to irritate her.

There it was again: that pesky sprouting of hope inside his chest. She'd thought to send him a letter during her trip. And since this had arrived Thursday, it meant she'd most likely sent this owl on her very first evening. Trying not to dwell on what that might mean, he tucked the missive into his inner breast pocket and left for work.

I am okay with this

Roughly once an hour, he'd take it out again and read it, despite already knowing the entire contents backwards and forwards. Did she really end up at the library later in the week? How had her presentation gone? When she wrote she was glad he shared something with her but lamented she was experiencing it solo, did that mean she wished he was there too?

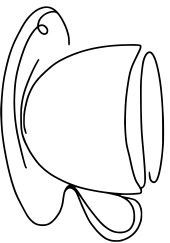
Gods, the level of sweetness dripping from her writing was uncharted. Who goes to look through dusty old scrolls while on an Italian trip? He indulged himself in a sudden fantasy of interrupting her studying of ancient magic by sweeping aside her hair and kissing up her neck. Eventually things would escalate to such a degree that he'd pin her against the bookshelves and have his wicked way with her. This would go down as the most unproductive work week of Draco's entire career.



On Saturday morning, Draco felt as if the walls of his home were closing in on him. Deciding to go out into the world and not fall victim to his own stir craziness, he apparated to the alley near the Muggle coffee shop. The little city square in front of the café was filled with weekend vendors, playing host to a small farmer's market. Striding through the stalls to get to the café, Draco came to a dead stop after passing by a row of flowers.

Hermione.

He whipped his head around frantically, searching for her. She had to be near, he had caught such a powerful surge of her flowery scent just seconds ago.



Chapter Nineteen

On Friday morning, Draco sighed as his eyes snapped open. He'd gone to bed so early last night after mulling over his appointment that he'd awoken just before dawn. Taking care of the more shameful part of his new morning routine (*why yes he did in fact begin each morning with a raging hard-on for Granger, thank you for asking*) he dragged himself down to the dining room.

He felt completely spent, emotionally and physically, after his breakdown yesterday and subsequent angst-inducing discussion with Healer Browning. Fine, he could admit he missed Granger. He could admit he cared about her. But now what the hell was he supposed to do with this information? Browning may have dismissed the last obstacle as simply "fear" but to Draco it wasn't so trite. Honestly, what if she truly did not feel the same way? What if she was more comfortable being friends with him? What if he was so hopelessly forgettable that one week away was enough for her to remember how much better her life was without him in the picture?

Out of sight, out of mind, right?

"Good morning sir," Critch suddenly piped up from beside him.

"Er, good morning."

"Apologies, sir, but as you retired so early last night I held the evening post for you. Here you are." The tiny elf handed him two pieces of mail then disappeared before Draco could even thank him.

In his hands he found a letter from his mother which he summarily tossed aside in favor of a far more interesting item. It was a postcard. A postcard from Venice.

Letting out a breath he was unconsciously holding, he slowly turned the card over. Neat script he knew to be Granger's covered the entire back.

Something from Venice!

If I'm writing this while camped within the shadows of San Marco, and honestly, I'm not sure how to describe the magic I witnessed as the sun set on the water and simultaneously rose on the opposite side. Truly, I cannot thank you enough for the recommendation, it put my mind at ease just as I was beginning to feel over my upcoming presentation. I've already booked time in the ancient world's version of the magical library here and before you roll your eyes and call

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see *Morte Potente Poisons* in her grasp.

Draco raised a disbelieving brow. "Didn't realize you had a taste for the more insidious texts, Granger."

Her grin grew even more mischievous. "Yes, well, when you brew Polyjuice Potion as a Second-Year, sometimes you have to bend the rules just a bit."

"You brewed Polyjuice in our Second Year? How? Why?"

"To answer your first question, yes, to answer your second question, quite successfully, and to answer your third, well you'll have to ask me again after a few glasses of wine I think," she playfully responded and returned the book to the shelf.

He was caught between biting out a scathing retort at her refusal to answer him and intrigue at the way this woman constantly captivated him. She turned away and resumed her path around the perimeter of the shelves, pausing here and there to inspect a title further.

Draco's mind began to wander into a fantasy realm. One where he envisioned himself slowly approaching Granger from behind, pushing her right up against the shelves, lifting the skirt of her dress up, yanking down her knickers and shagging her until they both couldn't feel their legs.

"Merlin, are these *all* first editions?" Her excited query broke through his lascivious thoughts about how it would feel to take her right here, right now, in his library.

He shoved his hands in his pockets as he strode over, willing his body to calm down and behave in her presence. "I'm not sure about every single volume, but the ones from the Manor at least are quite old, so I would assume so, yes."

She gapped at him. "You would assume so?" she repeated faintly and shook her head in amazement. A few wisps of hair escaped her ponytail and Draco kept his hands fixed to his trousers so as not to brush them off her neck. The urge to reach out and touch her was causing a dull ache to bloom within his chest.

"Anything you'd like to borrow? You're welcome to, any time." He offered and her eyes lit up. *You're welcome to borrow me too, any time. I'd even let you keep me.*

"Perhaps, but not tonight. I don't think I'll ever leave if you let me start reading," she laughed warmly and Draco failed to suppress the surge of hope that her statement implied a future time she'd be present in his home.

"Well I don't know about you, but I could do with some dinner. Shall we?"

She smiled at him as they took their leave of the library, and Draco held the heavy oak door back with one arm and gestured for her to pass through first. As she brushed past him, a strong wave of her trademark hyacinth-resembling scent invaded his nostrils and mixed with the lingering scent from the old, dusty tomes and ancient parchment and all of a sudden it hit him like a tsunami. *Amortentia*. Draco had just identified that third and final scent that had wafted out of Slughorn's cauldron back in his Sixth Year of schooling. Hermione Granger in his library. Mystery fucking solved.

For Draco's own exclusive suffering, that particular brew conjured the three scents most enticing to him in the entire universe. He now knew his personal temptation hell comprised the once glorious rose

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garden of Malfoy Manor in summer, freshly brewed hot coffee, and Hermione Granger in his library. *I am okay with this. I am okay with this. HOW THE F*CK DO I BECOME OKAY WITH THIS?*

He had frozen with his arm outstretched, still holding the door open.

“Malfoy? Everything all right?”

No, I’m fairly certain everything is absolutely fucked.

“No, I mean, yes, I mean, could you give me a minute? Sorry, I hadn’t realized I’d left my desk in such a state and some of those documents should probably be put away, I’ll meet you back in the foyer.”

She glanced at him questioningly, but thankfully obeyed. Draco let the library door swing shut as he backed into the room. Shakily, he leaned against the top of his desk and covered his face in his hands.

No, not this, never this. He couldn’t fall for her in such a spectacularly soul-crushing, permanent-feeling, anxiety-inducing fashion. But now that he knew the truth, there was no going back. It was the fact he’d been denying to himself for a while now, the words he couldn’t admit aloud in front of his healer. He was in love with Hermione.

I am okay with this.

Could he reconcile this? Time to review some facts again. Fact: Hermione Granger was currently in his home, waiting for him to complete his mental meltdown so they could dine together. Fact: He had requested her presence here this evening and she had willingly agreed. Fact: He was in love with Hermione Granger. Damn it all.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt the truth of this realization manifesting deep within his soul and then branching out to course through every vein along with his magic. And though he now knew his feelings to be deep and true, he felt completely incapacitated with uncertainty. How to proceed from here?

A choice.

That one word weighed heavily upon him. Choice.

Choose, Draco. For once in your life, make a real choice. He could remain up here and sulk, continue to repress his emotions and wither away in misery, or...

Or...

March downstairs and woo the ever-loving-fuck out of Hermione.

He pushed himself away from the desk and stood tall. He shook out his sleeves and assured his shirt and trousers were unwrinkled. He ran a hand gently through his hair to make sure it fell to the side just right. Then he strode purposefully from the library, shoulders back, and head held high.

There was a beautiful woman awaiting his presence in the foyer and he was going to court her within an inch of her life.



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He took a deep gulp of air. “But she... she makes me hope for something more. She is one of the few people that would actually have the right to kick me when I’m down, but she’d never do that. It’s as if she actually fucking believes I’m worth a damn and I can’t remember the last time someone made me feel that way, if ever. There’s not a false bone in her body and I can’t even be honest with her about how much I... admire her.”

Apparently you can’t even be honest with yourself. Admire? Hmm. Appropriate, sure, but is that the whole truth?

“From everything you have described, it seems to me that this young woman has a positive impact on your life. I believe we have talked through all your excuses for not pursuing a relationship, except one.”

Draco raised his head but knew the answer already.

“Your own fear,” supplied Browning. “What has you so afraid of telling her you’d like to attempt dating?”

“You mean besides a humiliating rejection and crushing of my spirit if she doesn’t feel the same?” Draco drawled but Browning didn’t budge. One day. One day he’d get the stoic healer to respond to his sarcasm.

“Fine, besides the devastating blow to my pride... I’m worried that I might... well it’s only a matter of time before I cock it up somehow and hurt her.” *Again. You mean hurt her again. Do remember, Draco, just how much pain you caused her from ages 11-17 when you were busy being a ruthless bully.*

“In any relationship, be it friendship or otherwise, there is of course never a guarantee of success. But Draco, don’t you think you owe it to yourself to explore these feelings in a healthy way instead of continuing to repress them? I think we’ve quite established your recent stress was borne from you missing her company.”

That’s the problem, isn’t it? I don’t just miss her, I’m fucking bereft without her.

“I think we need to discuss changing your mantra at this time. As you know, I did initially counsel against your current one, so I’d like to revisit that discussion.”

Draco nodded to show he was listening.

“Do you recall my previous objections to ‘I am in control of this?’”

“You told me control is often an illusion and that one of the only things we truly can control is how we react to situations.”

“Correct, so bearing that in mind, how do you feel about ‘I can accept the current situation?’”

Draco snorted decisively. Was he fucking serious? No way was he chanting such a mouthful while trying to come out of a panic attack.

“Too formal?” Guessed Browning. “How about something more colloquial? ‘I am okay with this.’”

I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

Wasn’t that what Browning had been trying to teach Draco for years? Acceptance of the world around him, acceptance of his past, acceptance of Potter’s forgiveness, acceptance of Hermione’s friendship, and now acceptance that he truly cared for her.

I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

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He was still dizzy, breath coming in gasps as he tried to organize his thoughts. No longer caring about appearances, he backed against the wall of the washroom and slowly sunk to a seated position on the floor, his gaze landing at Browning's slippers in the doorway.

"Because I shouldn't... I really shouldn't... she's only a friend... and she's... she's a... Muggle-born."

"Do you think her inferior because of her parentage?"

"No, it's not that." How could he possibly begin to explain? Two warring ideologies existed within him, and had for a while. It was... inappropriate for a pureblood of his storied family for him to want her in any capacity. But in this new world order, with no Dark Lord issuing edicts about blood statuses... well the script had flipped, hadn't it? It was nothing short of criminal for a pariah like him to deign to hope a righteous heroine like her felt anything other than pity for him. That he still even felt the twinge of his twisted upbringing showed that clear as day. He was weak, pathetic. A disappointment to both sides.

"I know that I don't deserve to be with her. No matter what I do in this life I can never deserve her, even if she... reciprocates my feelings."

"Are you afraid of feeling happy?"

"Yes," he breathed out. He didn't have the strength to keep up an inner monologue simultaneously any longer. He pushed out a question that had been bothering him for some time.

"What if I'm addicted to her? What if I only substituted sleep potion for her?"

"You've been clean for years, Draco."

Draco shook his head in disagreement. It was true he hadn't touched certain potions in years but he would always be an addict. "But you know it's still there, that urge to use never really leaves, especially when shit gets bad."

"I see. I think you're falling prey to your own false equivalency argument here. How did using potions make you feel?"

"Numb. Like I could disappear for a while. I didn't have to think or feel or remember."

"And how does being with her make you feel?"

"Overwhelmed."

"Let's explore that feeling, you've described her this way before."

Draco closed his eyes and lost himself momentarily to recent memories of Hermione. Keeping his eyes closed in concentration, he focused in on what those interactions meant to him.

"She overwhelms me in every way and I'm unsure of how to process what I feel around her."

It was an incessant onslaught to his senses: the sight of her, the scent of her, the sound of her, and now he was acquainted with her taste and touch...

"There are some days where I don't even know who I am anymore, but she makes me feel like I could be *something*. Something other than a complete failure. Before we... reconnected I was content doing the bare minimum. I had a job, I kept out of trouble, I quietly cleaned up my family's name, I kicked the poison habit, and I thought maybe not being a complete prick was enough for this world."

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When he returned to the main staircase, he found Hermione fidgeting nervously in the front hall. She shot him a relieved smile when he reached the foot of the stairs.

"Sorry for making you wait. Ready to eat?"

Draco led her back past the traveling parlor and several small sitting rooms, but stopped when he no longer felt her presence beside him. He turned around, confused, only to find Hermione rooted to the spot at one of the thresholds. It was his mother's music room, though he'd never seen Narcissa set foot in there, it's just what his mother dubbed it when Draco had allowed her to furnish it to her own taste.

Hermione shot him a wide-eyed look and gestured into the room.

"Oh my, is that a—?"

"A piano, yes."

"No, no, not just a piano. That's a *Blüthner*!"

She didn't even wait for his permission to enter, just approached the instrument carefully while Draco trailed in confusion. The expression on her face was one of disbelief and deep reverence, almost as wonderstruck as she'd looked in the library.

"Oh and it's antique! I've never even seen one in person, how did you ever get your hands on one? Actually, never mind," she chuckled. "I forgot who I was talking to for a minute. Don't tell me how much this cost or I'll lose my appetite," she teased.

"Do you play?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not anymore, but I had lessons all through childhood up until I received my Hogwarts letter. I had a wonderful teacher and she used to say that if she ever came into a significant amount of money, the first thing she'd buy would be a Blüthner piano." She smiled fondly at a memory and slowly circled the instrument.

"I'm afraid I don't know as much about pianos as yourself. What's so special about the maker?"

She came around to the front and eyed the keys as she answered. "Supposedly the sound is warmer and richer than other pianos and if you notice the strings," she pointed to the propped-open back and Draco's eyes followed. "Those strings are single-hitched on a pin, which leads directly to individual tuning pins by the keys, as opposed to other piano strings, which are often looped. It's also got an extra string in the treble."

She stepped back, still in awe. "This is the instrumental equivalent of seeing a unicorn. I mean, do you realize how many famous composers used this maker? Brahms, Debussy, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff...". She ticked off names completely foreign to Draco. "Queen Victoria was rumored to have one as well and—"

She cut herself off abruptly, and met his eyes, looking apprehensive for some reason.

"And you must have no idea what I'm babbling about. How did you come by this piano?"

"My mother furnished this room, it's hers, actually. I had lessons as well as a child on this very instrument. They also ceased when I went to Hogwarts and I remember Father had it moved to one of the vaults, but I can't remember the reason. Mother brought it back out, obviously, when I moved

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here.”

Hermione’s eyes darted nervously between the piano and him. “I don’t understand, it’s just that...”

She took a breath as she looked up at Draco. “All those famous, classical composers I named, they were unfamiliar to you, yes?” He nodded and she continued. “That’s because they are all Muggles. And this,” she gestured back to the piano, “is entirely Muggle-made.”

Draco’s brow furrowed and he could hear the unspoken questions running through Hermione’s mind. *Why would pureblood nobility, Narcissa Malfoy, allow something built by Muggles into her home? Why would she keep such a thing? Why would she dedicate an entire room to its display?*

Oh, Mother, do I have some questions for you, he silently fumed. How many times during his formative years did he hear both his parents rail against anything related to Muggles? Muggles were barbaric, lazy, stupid, unworthy to share this planet with wizards, according to them. But apparently those descriptors didn’t apply when it came to antique, luxury goods. Draco was torn between laughing and wanting to set fire to the instrument out of spite.

“It would seem I’ll be having an interesting conversation with my mother in the near future,” Draco clipped.

“I’m sorry, it was none of my business and—”

Draco waved her apology away, hoping she understood that it was Narcissa’s uncovered hypocrisy that was the cause for his irritation as they made their way, finally, to the dining room.

“Granger, please, think nothing of it. Let’s just have some dinner.”

Her mock and abashed expression slid off her face when she took in the amount of food awaiting them at the table. She snorted in a rather unladylike way, but nowadays Draco would describe the sound as adorable rather than grating because he was positively besotted.

I am okay with this.

“Seriously Malfoy? Are you sure there won’t be another fifteen or so people joining us this evening?”

Draco busied himself with pulling out a chair for her because he was a gentleman, and also because he wouldn’t have to look at her when he admitted, “I wasn’t sure of your preferences so I thought it safest to order a variety.”

He took his seat at the head of his table, having placed Hermione to his immediate right. She cast an amused eye over the impressive spread. “Well, I do very much enjoy French food, so you really couldn’t have gone wrong. For future reference, I’m no longer fond of mushrooms or trout.” When Draco raised a questioning brow she elaborated. “When you have to survive on wild mushrooms and fish for months on end in a tent, you’d swear it off too.”

Draco gave her a pained smile and redirected the conversation away from the war and back to France. Hermione talked excitedly about her love for the country and of her childhood holidays there with her parents.

“Let me see if I have this right, you’ve never been to Paris?”

“No, I’ve been to Paris, not *wizarding* Paris. Our family trips remained firmly in the Muggle world

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routine by leaving me here... and... and...”

He drew a ragged breath and continued to glare at the bookshelf. “And well... you’re the healer, what the hell do I do with all this?”

All Draco heard for the next minute was the frantic scratch of the quill and he tried to block out the noise, lest he whip out his wand and attempt to set it on fire again. He’d tried that petulant move in their third-ever appointment together, but the healer was quicker than he looked. Draco wondered just how many times the older man had needed to stop an enraged client from setting his note-taking misadventure ablaze.

“Have you considered that the reason why you are upset is simply that you miss her?”

Draco whipped his head back toward Browning. “Miss her? I don’t *miss* her!” He sneered at the mere implication that he should fall prey to that type of useless sentimentality. Men like Draco did not *miss* people.

The healer met his childish outburst with a patient stare over his spectacles. “In matters of the heart, I personally always find honesty to be the best path forward.”

Draco scoffed and folded his arms over his chest. *Matters of the heart, what absolute bullshits.* Of course he didn’t *miss* her, because missing her meant he cared far more than he should, which was simply ludicrous.

Matters of the heart.

Heart.

And the worst game of word association took place inside his mind. *Heart. Love.*

Matters of the heart meant... it generally meant love, yes? How preposterous. Insane. Ridiculous. Fanciful.

Love.

Draco mentally snorted. He wasn’t in love with her or anything. He wasn’t... he was not... he could not... love her. His heartbeat stilled within his chest, seemed to sputter to a stop, then roared back to life and synced with his brain, the blood rapidly pounding in his ears almost deafening. He couldn’t possibly be this fucking stupid. *No. No. No. No. No. No. No.*

He really was going to vomit this time. He shot up off his leather seat and bolted to the adjoining washroom just in time. Draco gripped the edge of the sink tightly and braced himself as he retched into the porcelain. Most of what came up was bile, having nothing in his stomach so far today, and it burned his throat something awful. He dry heaved several more times before the worst was over.

Clammy and shaking, he couldn’t bear to look at the pallid face with purple bruises under exhausted eyes in the mirror. With his head bowed over the sink, a floating glass of water appeared and gently tapped him on the hand. Thinking there was no way his body could expel anything else, he took a few small sips.

“Why does admitting you miss or care about this person upset you?”

Browning’s calm voice came from just behind him, as if they were simply continuing the session, as if Draco wasn’t violently ill over the sink not a moment ago.

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in circles about “duty to his forefathers” and “repressing urges to defy his responsibility to the family name” when Lucius had abruptly taken out his wand and taught Draco how to perform a contraceptive charm. The charm, his father warned, was merely a precaution should Draco be weak enough to give in to any “hormonal temptations of the flesh” and he was to use the charm to safeguard against any illegitimate offspring before marriage. Lucius then tersely thrust a parchment containing the instructions for a contraceptive potion at Draco then dismissed him.

And that was the closest instance to sexual education that Draco ever received. Luckily for him, and Theo and his other male friends, the Manor library teemed with books on every subject under the sun, including subjects of the more carnal nature (complete with graphic illustrations) and pagan sex rites that detailed quite precisely just how men’s and women’s bodies could be used for pleasure.

So hearing the question “Did you engage in physical intimacy?” in a casual, conversational tone from a man old enough to be Draco’s father was a truly surreal experience for him.

“Yes,” Draco finally replied, not removing his eyes from the book case. “Twice.”

“How do you feel about taking that significant step with another person?”

Draco chewed his bottom lip as he tried to sort through his swirl of emotions about sleeping with Hermione.

Continuing his stare across the room, he began slowly, “I feel... honored that she would trust me enough to invite me into her home. And into her bed. But beyond that I’m not sure... I mean... how can I...how can we...?”

He trailed off and felt utterly lost. Healer Browning didn’t break the silence and Draco knew he was waiting for him to talk through his emotions.

Letting out a huff of frustration at his own lack of eloquence, Draco’s spiraling thoughts tumbled out of his mouth in an unstoppable stream. “I mean, how the fuck am I supposed to feel after that? We shagged and it was beyond satisfying and I have absolutely no idea what the fuck I’m doing! I sure as hell enjoyed it and she gave me every indication she did too but... what if she’s regretting it now? What if she hates me or thinks I pressured her? I don’t think I did anything untoward... I confirmed consent at every turn, just like the classes taught, but fuck, I don’t know what the hell she thinks about all this! And where does that leave me, eh? I go to bed, alone, wake up, alone, attempt to drink coffee, *alone*, and all I can fucking think about is her! About how she’s not here because she’s bloody brilliant and is off being a supreme swot at that international conference while I’m stuck here just... just existing! We spent this fucking fantastic night together and then she swans off to Italy and I’m sure she’s drowning in resentment at shagging a former Death Eater and I’m the idiot that didn’t even bother to have a discussion with her about what we’re doing or if we’re together or if she even wants me in any capacity... are we even still friends anymore? Why can’t I recover from her absence from my life of only a few days? Why do I feel so sodding worthless and like nothing I do even has a point? I exist in a damn void and she’s the only one I want to talk to about it but I can’t very well do that with her so far away... and I don’t even know why that’s upsetting me because she’s returning in a few days and I’m sure she’s not having an entire mental collapse just because she’s gone and messed with our established

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since I couldn’t perform magic over the summer hols anyway.”

“I’ll have to take you some time,” Draco offered before he could stop himself. He hastily occupied himself with a spoonful of bouillabaisse.

“That would be lovely,” came her soft reply and when he met her eyes, her face was almost as red as her tomato bisque. Instantly, visions of whisking Hermione off to any country her heart desired danced in front of his eyes, and he added “international holidays” to his mental list of courting ideas.

“You enjoy shellfish, I’ve noticed,” she spoke up, gesturing to his choice of first course.

“Starting a file on me?”

“Of course. You make it easy when you order the same type of dish each time we’ve dined together.”

She kept notes on his likes and dislikes then. His confidence was going to reach dangerous levels before the night was over.

“If you must know, it’s a recent development for me. I was never allowed to have this as a child because shellfish is too much of a risk—”

—a risk for infection and food poisoning,” Hermione finished for him and Draco merely blinked back at her and she laughed.

“It figures your pureblood customs would be the same as Muggle royalty. Shellfish is also rumored to be banned for the royal family of the UK.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“I read it in a book.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Of course you did, Granger, it’s you after all. I’m curious as to which book provided that information for you.”

“The Sacred Twenty-Eight.”

Draco almost dropped his spoon in shock. “You. You’ve read that book?”

She nodded fervently. “Yes, there’s a copy in the Hogwarts library. I read it in Second Year after I learned there was such a ridiculous hierarchical system based on blood in the wizarding world. It was written by an ancestor of your friend Theodore Nott, did you know?”

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his chair and took a sip of the wine Hermione had brought. Oh if his father could see him now, attempting to woo the most famous Muggleborn since Minister for Magic Nobby Leach while drinking Muggle wine and discussing the most revered of pureblood texts.

“Yes, Theo and I shared a memorable evening a few years back where I helped him dispose of several dozen copies in his family home.”

That evening had been memorable indeed. Draco and Theo had gotten absolutely plastered on some disgustingly expensive scotch and defiled every copy of that blasted book, which amounted to 52 tomes. They performed all manner of defacements to the books, including setting them on fire, changing the titles to things like *The Sizzling Twenty-Eight: A Beginner’s Guide for Raining Generations of Promising Young Wizards and Witches Due to Blind Allegiance to Blood Trickery and Willingness to Commit Incest*, and charming the pages to sing quidditch chants. But he wasn’t about to inform Granger of all this.

"That's nice that you have a friend like him. I mean, that umm, shares your outlook..." she trailed off nervously and sipped her wine. Draco hoped she meant that in a positive way, as in, his outlook that blood purity dogma was utter bullshit and he'd very much like to embark on a serious relationship with someone descended from non-magical parents.

"You'd like Theo," Draco offered, steering the course of conversation. "He was a giant swot at school, just like you."

She playfully rolled her eyes and Draco talked some more about his quieter friend and gave her a few anecdotes from his childhood before Hogwarts.

Hermione asked him about work as she cut into a piece of filet mignon. "I hear you recently helped scout Mary, no that's not right... Maureen! A Maureen Tyler? A, umm, Beater?"

Draco cocked his head, bemused. "I recall merely introducing Maureen Tyler to Ginny Weasley—" "Potter."

"Whatever. I introduced the two of them and may have made mention of her unmatched beating skills and that Weasley was welcome to do as she liked with that information."

Hermione appeared to be thinking hard, trying to recall something. "It's Potter and if I'm right... she had... ummm... an average of 6 unseats per game? Is that the right term for when they knock someone off their broom?"

Oh this was truly adorable. Granger was attempting to talk quidditch stats with him as if she knew anything about the game.

"Yes, her career at Hogwarts was quite legendary but she had yet to make it off the reserve roster for the Tornados, so I thought perhaps the Harpies might be a better fit for her talents."

Hermione frowned and concentrated hard again. This woman could memorize the name of every stupid sorcerer who'd so much as sneezed notably throughout the history of time, but her quidditch knowledge was a gaping black hole.

"And she also was quite skilled at... oh, what's the term... hoop moving? No, Keeper switching?"

"Hoop-swapping, or forcing a hoop-swap. That's when a well-timed bludger forces the opposing Keeper to change the main hoop they're guarding as a Chaser prepares to score, opening up a greater scoring area for the Chaser," Draco explained, putting her out of her misery. Merlin, he was already half-hard at being in the rare and enviable position of instructing Granger in a subject.

"Oh, right," she muttered sheepishly and placed a piece of the steak in her mouth. Her expression changed to one of pure pleasure.

"Mmm, this filet is... perfect. All of this came from the same restaurant?"

"Yes, we'll have to try it together some time. I know I ordered far too much, but like I said, I wasn't exactly sure of your tastes and it would have confused my house-elves to—"

Draco stopped talking as Hermione stopped eating, fork halfway to her mouth. *Oh, fuck.* She carefully placed her fork back on her plate and dabbed her lips with her napkin as Draco waited for the axe to fall.

"How many?"

"One of your recurring nightmares?"

"Yes... my aunt... she's... she's torturing... someone... right in front of me. And I just stand there."

Scratch, scratch.

"Have you been suffering from nightmares often as of late?"

Draco shook his head. "No, but the last few days I've had difficulty sleeping... and eating. I can't... I can't focus on anything and I feel fucking miserable," he bit out.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

"Has something occurred to spur these feelings? Anything new in your personal life or routine that you find upsetting?"

Draco hesitated, but wondered if divulging the Granger situation might be helpful. "Well, I took my... friend out to the opera on Friday evening. We had dinner before as well."

Scratch, scratch.

"And how would you describe the evening out with her?"

"It was fine, I think," Draco began tentatively. "She seemed to enjoy it, to enjoy being out with me."

"How did you feel about the evening?"

"Good. I mean, I enjoyed it too... being with her. But we had an unfortunate run-in with an old classmate and I think I embarrassed myself in front of her."

"What happened?"

"He insulted her, and me and my family. We got into a verbal altercation but I didn't hex him, much as I would have liked to. He would have deserved it too."

"How did he insult your friend?"

"He was quite nasty about her blood status." *Just like I used to be.*

"I see." *Scratch, scratch.* "Does anything else stand out from your evening?"

Oh, does it ever.

Salazar, there was nothing for it, he was going to have to come clean about the recent romantic development with Granger.

"Well, she invited me to her home after the show and I ended up... uh, staying the night..."

He could no longer look his healer in the eye and instead cast his glance over to the book case on the far wall of the office.

"Did you engage in physical intimacy?"

If he wasn't feeling so thoroughly miserable at the moment, Draco would have laughed at the absurdity of that question and at the calm, clinical tone it was asked. Sex was not discussed openly in proper, pureblood families, because there really was only one purpose for sex and that was to produce heirs during marital relations.

When Draco was 12, his father had summoned him to his study for a private discussion about Draco's duty as the sole heir to the Malfoy estate. He'd been confused at first as to why his father talked

Remain Nameless

You've changed, is that it? So because you no longer wish death and destruction upon Muggleborns that makes you worthy of her?

You'll never be enough for her, Neve.

Draco stood and gripped the edges of his desk, squeezing his eyes shut. Warring images raced through his brain: Granger spasming while being tortured, Granger running her hands down his abdomen to reach for his belt buckle, Granger's eyes flashing in hurt as he called her a "Mudblood," Granger's face lighting up in a smile as he walked towards her before dinner...

He loosened his tie, feeling as if the air around him was leaking out of the room. It was getting harder to breathe. *I am in control of this. I am in control of this.*

Fuck it all, he was in control of nothing.

Swallowing his pride, he groped desperately for the jar of Floo powder on his office mantel and managed to grasp out the line name for Healer Browning.

After several chimes, the healer's face appeared in the fire.

"Draco, is everything all right?"

Draco shook his head and tried to keep his voice steady. "Yes, I mean... no. I need... I need to see you today, if possible."

"Do you need me to contact St. Mungo's?"

"No, I haven't used, I just... I need to talk to someone."

The healer nodded thoughtfully and looked down, most likely consulting his schedule on his side of the Floo.

"I have an opening at 11 this morning, would you like to meet me then?"

"Yes... please." Draco responded hoarsely and ended the call. Abandoning all pretense of working, he slumped to the floor in front of the fire and stared at the empty grate.

He remained on the floor of his office for the next hour and a half, then sent a quick memo to his boss to explain his absence for the remainder of the day. Draco rarely took sick days, and couldn't remember the last time he'd begged off work, but knew he wouldn't be able to return after his appointment.

He walked down the streets of Diagon Alley in a daze. The sun felt too bright and too hot, even though the weather was pleasantly mild. Upon being shown into the healer's office, Draco all but collapsed onto the leather couch and raised his desperate eyes to the man who could hopefully keep him from drowning in despair.

"Draco, I thank you for reaching out to me in your time of need. Would you like to tell me what brought you in here today?"

Draco took a deep breath and eyed the floating parchment and quill poised just next to Healer Browning warily. No turning back now. But where to even begin?

"I'm not sure I... I had a nightmare and I've had trouble this morning recovering. I can't concentrate at work... I can't even eat."

Scratch, scratch.

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"Only two," he replied and she scoffed.

"Oh, only two slaves, you're practically middle class," came her withering reply and if he wasn't so busy getting offended he'd tip his glass to her in respect.

"They aren't slaves, Granger."

"Oh really? And just how did they happen to find themselves in your home?"

"When I purchased Franklin House, they came with the deed—"

She held up a hand to cut him off.

"Do you even hear yourself? *They came with the deed!* You're talking about advanced magical beings as if they were property!"

"Because they are! You of all people should know that, considering your office classifies them as such!"

She spluttered in a dangerous mixture of rage and indignation. "I'm well aware of the classification laws, thank you very much, considering I had to fight tooth and nail to have their welfare protected by law!"

"Well then, if you are so well acquainted with the welfare laws, you must know that since I still have elves in my home that I'm compliant with them! How can you even be upset about this? Do you want to inspect their furnished living quarters? I treat them well, I've never punished them or abused them! They live a perfectly comfortable life here!"

Why couldn't she let this ridiculous crusade go? Why was he being judged for the way he was raised? Elves were an expected part of a wealthy pureblood upbringing and hadn't he already proven to her that he wasn't cruel, like his father? Seriously, what more did he have to do?

"A benevolent slave owner is still a slave owner!" she fired back, cheeks pink. "These creatures don't have any autonomy despite possessing powerful magic and intellect. Simply because you don't treat them with open hostility and violence doesn't matter, because they never had a choice but to serve their intended master without any form of payment for services. Ugh, you sound just like Ron!"

Draco saw red, his blood boiling in his veins at the mention of her odious ex-boyfriend.

"Don't ever compare me to Weasley," he growled. A tense silence fell and they both glared at one another. Draco could see her fists clenched at her sides as she shook with anger, chest heaving, with her prissy little chin high in the air.

Maybe it was all the pent-up angst from being unable to articulate his romantic feelings for her, or maybe it was the unfortunate mention of Weasley, or maybe it was the confusion surrounding their current relationship, or maybe even sexual frustration... or maybe it was a mix of all of these things that caused Draco to spectacularly implode the formerly pleasant evening with his next words.

"Is that what you've been doing for the past two weeks? Comparing me with him? Go on then Granger, tell me, how do I measure up?" He spat harshly and slid his chair back from the table, tossing the napkin from his lap onto his unfinished dinner.

"Come on, don't be shy on me now. I mean, now that you've experienced *all of me*," he sneered and gestured his hand up and down his entire body. "I'd love to hear what your notes say and how

thorough you've been. I bet they're ridiculously detailed," he jested, then flicked his eyes and hand in the direction of his crutch. "Down to the last inch."

Her eyes were pure fire and he knew he'd pushed her too far, but so wounded was his pride that he was past caring.

Hermione slowly slid her chair back and placed her napkin on the table. "How dare you," she spoke with a trembling voice before rising gracefully and stalking out of the dining room.

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath, and counted to five. He stood up and only made it halfway across the dining room as she was already marching back to give him a piece of her mind.

"You know, I was really looking forward to this evening with you! I'm sure it was painfully obvious while I was stumbling over those blasted quidditch stats, but I even asked Ginny to help me think of topics of conversation that would interest you!"

A slight pang in his chest at the pleasing notion that she cared enough to prepare that way, but it wasn't enough to quash the blinding anger.

"Ah, how lovely that you so openly discuss me with that entire dim-witted family! Do tell, how do they feel about their precious Hermione Granger spending alone time with a Death Eater?"

"I'm not *openly discussing* you with anyone but Ginny!"

Draco immediately changed his tack. "Ashamed of our friendship, are you? I'm just your dirty little Death Eater secret?"

"For Merlin's sake, of course not! And stop calling yourself that!"

"What? A Death Eater?" He challenged as he looked down his nose at her. "And why not, Granger? Isn't that what your precious Potter and Weasley think about me?"

"I don't bloody care what they think, or what anyone thinks! All I want is—" she cut herself off abruptly and backed away, swallowing a lump in her throat. "It doesn't matter, I don't even know why I bothered."

She turned suddenly on her heel and stomped down the hall toward the traveling parlor. Draco followed her this time, intent on getting in the last word and hell-bent on self-destruction, blood pounding in his ears.

"We're not finished here Granger!" He strode into the parlor and towered over her again. She was so much shorter and smaller than him, but no less imposing, especially with how angrily she glared up at him in that moment.

"And what is there left to say, Malfoy?" she barked right back at him. "You've made it abundantly clear how little respect you hold for me and my friends, so what more could you possibly want to say?"

I want to say that I need you. I want to ask you to stop. I want to tell you I'm sorry. But nothing came out of his mouth.

His silence only seemed to irritate her further, as she took a sharp inhale and puffed out her chest. "You've been hot and cold with me all week to the point where I have no idea where I even stand with you! So just tell me, please, what is wrong with you?"

from his mind.

No nightmares, no, no, Draco, those were memories, tainted his snide subconscious.

Memories of his insane aunt torturing Granger on the drawing room floor of the Manor. Memories of her dirty, tear-streaked face as she screamed, cried, writhed, and shook in extreme pain under Bellatrix's unyielding wand. Memories of how he'd turned away, unable to bear the sight of a girl he'd known since the age of 11 curling in on herself as she bore the shrieking demands of his aunt and her relentless casting of the Cruciatous Curse.

Memories of how through all that disgusting and horrendous inflicting of pain, Granger had lied, had defied her tormentor with incredible strength. She never wavered from protecting her friends, from protecting their mission. That girl would have died to save her friends, so stalwart was her belief in their cause.

And the worst memory of all: of how Draco, standing there, equipped with a wand no less, did nothing.

He was a fucking monster.

That's the conclusion Granger would eventually reach while on her trip and away from him. It wouldn't be some silly little thing about ruining their friendship, or unsure if they'd moved too fast, no it would be a far worse reason. But it would be the right reason.

How dare he think he had the right to even befriend Hermione Granger? After what his twisted family put her through? How could she even stand to look at him, let alone talk to him? Yes, obviously he'd apologized sincerely for his treatment of her over the years, but had she truly forgiven him? Draco didn't think he could, if he were in her shoes.

Had she been afraid to refuse his advances? Alone in her home with a former Death Eater, her former personal bully, had she been uncomfortable and unsure of how to get him to leave?

A severe wave of nausea wracked through his body and he found himself curled up on the floor in the fetal position. After several minutes of mild convulsions, he unfurled his sweaty body and shakily stood. After a shower of chilly, near freezing, water to numb his sore limbs, he slowly pulled on his office robes and somehow made it downstairs to the Floo. He wouldn't be able to handle the coffee shop today, knowing he'd be alone, knowing she wouldn't be across the table from him. He wished he could talk to her, just a few minutes, to explain his behavior, to apologize for how he'd come on far too strong. Arriving in his office, he all but collapsed into the chair behind his desk, beyond grateful for the direct connection from his home to here. He pulled some reports toward him and tried to read, but his vision blurred. After trying and failing to move beyond the same paragraph several times, he gave it up as a bad job and rifled through his post. That task took all of three minutes and he was back to dwelling on thoughts of Granger.

He wondered if hashing out some of his ideas for Muggle Studies would help, but quickly nixed the idea. The mocking voice inside his head began taunting him for even thinking of this pursuit.

Oh, the usually keen thinks his gold can buy forgiveness does he?

You could empty all your vaults at her feet and it wouldn't be enough to make up for what you did.

Remain Nameless

Shakily he sat in his office chair and buried his head in his arms on the desk. How would he react if Granger returned triumphantly from her trip and wanted nothing more to do with him? She had a whole week away from him, and knowing Granger, she would be doing a whole lot of thinking. What conclusions might she come to, alone in another country? Perhaps her memory of their night together wasn't quite as positive as his?

Oh gods, he could picture it now. She'd be pacing her hotel suite, twisting her hands anxiously, wondering how on earth she ever thought sleeping with *Molly* was a good idea.

Regret. She would feel regret for sure. She would remember who and what he was and regret giving her body to him, to surrendering so beautifully and fully to the passionate spark between them. Surely, that part had been real? Draco closed his eyes and recalled the charged atmosphere before they kissed for the first time. The way she seemed so alive under his touch, how she'd arched into his body, how she'd cried out in bliss...

But Hermione Granger was nothing if not the most logical person he'd ever met. In the seductive darkness of her bedroom, of course sleeping together seemed like a grand idea. And in the morning? Well, Draco was already there anyway, and naked, no less, so perhaps that had been enough for her to want a repeat performance. But Draco was not with her now. She could be alone with her rational thoughts and he had a depressing idea about what she'd inevitably decide. That he was good for a shag, and nothing beyond.

I am in control of this

Draco felt like screaming, or throwing his office furniture against the wall, or simply lighting everything on fire with a quick *Incendio* and running home to his well-stocked liquor cabinet. He did have another option, however. A mandatory office-wide meeting at Whisp & Wright this morning on the recent league ruling to allow for two more players on final rosters had forced Draco to postpone his monthly healing appointment with Browning to next week, because the universe loved gifting Draco with impeccable timing. But now, next week seemed a lifetime away.

It had been years since he'd used the emergency Floo line for Healer Browning. He'd needed it to help stave off the urges to chase his firewhisky with a dangerous combination of Dreamless Sleep, a Pain Potion and a Draught of Peace years ago. Eventually he'd just bothered Theo when he was too drunk to do anything else and had kicked the potion abuse. But Theo didn't seem to be an option anymore. They hadn't even spoken since their weird interaction at his mother's New Year's Ball over the pen, and Draco had no idea what his friend was up to these days.

His hand was halfway to the jar of Floo powder on his office mantel when he stopped himself. No, a silly little matter like Granger resenting letting him touch her didn't warrant such hysterics. He could ride this out on his own.

I am in control of this

On Thursday morning, Draco woke with a sharp gasp of a yell. He threw off his sweat-drenched sheets and sat over the side of his bed with his head between his knees, willing himself not to vomit. He pulled in harsh breaths, gripping at his hair, trying in vain to dispel the images of his nightmare

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"Isn't it obvious?" He bellowed. "I'm in love with you!"

He should have realized it when a ringing silence descended upon the cavernous room. He should have realized it when Hermione's mouth dropped open and all the fire left her countenance. He should have realized it when her eyes went wide in pure shock.

But Draco did not realize that he had not silently bellowed those words inside the privacy of his own mind, but had, in fact, shouted them into Hermione's face. He did not realize this fact until Hermione let out a shaky whisper of, "What did you just say?"

And then it hit him.

"Fuck." He said this aloud too, and then turned and half-ran from the room and the woman who'd just endured his screamed confession.

He staggered to the liquor cabinet in the dining room and grabbed the first bottle he could get his shaking hands around. Luckily for him, it was Ogden's and he poured a hefty measure into his empty wine glass, spilling plenty on the table in the process.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck," he repeated and downed the glass in one go. He immediately poured another.

Draco threw himself back into his chair, swallowed the alcohol, poured another measure, but left the liquid in the glass this time. He was going to be sick or possibly combust on the spot. Could one die of mortification? Draco was certain he was about to discover the answer.

He covered his face in one large hand, the other gripping the glass as if it still tethered him to the earth, and wondered at how phenomenally foolish he'd acted this evening. He'd completely and utterly ruined any chance he would ever have with Hermione.

At what point, Draco pondered, would he finally stop blowing up his own life?

After finally, *finally*, getting Granger all to himself after months of pining after her, he decided to antagonize her with a debate on elf rights, insult her closest friends, and imply that she would be so callous as to cruelly compare/contrast lovers. Oh, and to cap it all off, he literally played his entire hand not two minutes ago when he'd yelled his innermost feelings right in her pretty and incensed face. No one to blame here, this mess was all on him.

I am okay with this

I am not okay with anything

Draco didn't know whether he wanted to hurt up his dinner, laugh at his own ineptness, or cry as the misery took hold. Unable to make any sort of rational decision, he simply sat there, clutching his face and his whisky, while his body forced him to take in oxygen.

A soft slapping of shoes on the hardwood flooring attuned Draco to Hermione's approach. He couldn't even summon the will to look up and confirm this to be true. He heard her pull out her same chair from dinner and sit down. From the bit of his vision that wasn't obscured by his fingers, he saw her fold her hands delicately in front of her on the table. He heard her take a deep breath. Draco dropped his hand from his face, prepared to deal with the fallout of his rash words.

"Did you mean what you said?" she asked quietly.

"No," he replied instantly and as Hermione's face fell, he scrambled to explain. "I mean, yes! I mean... fuck!"

He downed the whisky and refilled the glass again, sloshing even more over the sides as his fine motor control gave way to nerves.

No more hiding, he decided then. If Granger hadn't left yet, that must mean she wanted to hear him out. Here was his last chance.

I am okay with this.

Deep breath. Look her in the eye.

"I meant what I said back there, but I didn't mean to shout it at you," he began and noticed her eyes shined especially bright.

"It was the honest answer to your question. It's why I've been such an absolute wretch of a person this week. Do you know what happened while you were away, Granger?" He asked desperately and she shook her head.

"I went fucking spare without you. I barely lasted two days before I felt miserable... I wasn't sleeping or eating... You'd have thought a sodding Dementor was following me around, it was pathetic," he spat and paused to down his glass and refill it. What was this, his fourth or fifth drink? The alcohol didn't even burn his throat anymore.

"I thought there was no way you were thinking about me. There was no way you didn't completely regret what we did together. You were off in Venice having second thoughts about ever setting eyes on me again and all I could think about... all I could feel was..."

Draco pulled his stare away from her and instead cast his eyes down at the table. "I missed you," he admitted hoarsely and swallowed the lump in his throat.

"I missed you and it bloody hurt," he met her gaze again and felt a slice of guilt cut into him when he noticed a tear escape her full eyes.

"The night after the opera, in your bed," he continued in a hushed tone. "Gods, do you have any idea how long I'd wanted to do that with you? And of course it was fucking fantastic, and I'll remember that night until I finally die, but then you were gone. Just gone. I was left to kick myself for not telling you how much I wanted you, how I didn't want to go back to being friends or polite acquaintances or whatever farce of a label we had before." He took a steady inhale, still unsure if he was helping or hurting his cause.

"But then you sent me this," and Draco took out his wand and summoned the postcard he knew to be residing on his bedside table. Hermione looked on with wide eyes as the little scrap of paper zoomed through the dining room towards Draco's waiting hand. He held it out to her, and she took it with trembling hands.

"You sent me that postcard and I dared myself to hope... to hope that I meant something to you. But do you know what the worst part was? All the ways I envisioned you rejecting me when you returned. When you were late to coffee that first morning I assumed you wanted nothing more to do with me. When you mentioned that wizard research, I assumed you were throwing me over for

lingering sense that something was terribly amiss.

Frowning into his coffee, he couldn't place the origin for this melancholy. Glancing across the table at the empty chair opposite him, his frown deepened. What was Granger doing right now? Italy was an hour ahead, perhaps she was in a conference session now? She'd be listening attentively, taking more notes than necessary and most likely arming herself with a thousand and one questions to barrage the poor speaker with at the end. Merlin help those presenters, they probably had no idea the rapid rate at which that woman's brain fired.

Was she thinking of Draco at all? Doubtful, she had a very busy week ahead of her. Why should she spare a thought about him? What did he even mean to her anyway? Sure, they were friends and they'd obviously come to know each other intimately in the physical sense, but why should that mean a thing to Granger?

He barely paid attention to the parchment on his desk at the office. What he needed was some outdoor time today, but there weren't any practices or scrimmages to observe on his schedule. This left Draco staring glumly at his paperwork, willing it to be more interesting. Or at least, interesting enough to take his mind off a certain witch.

Gods, what was his problem? He'd existed before she'd swept into his life, right? He'd managed to be a functioning adult human for years before Granger blew in and... and showed him what a pathetic existence he'd really inhabited.

He was a fucking shell of a person and the light of her presence only illuminated that sad fact. And now that she was gone, he felt that creeping sense of being adrift at sea. He had no one, was no one.

I am in control of this.

I am in control of this.

On Wednesday morning, Draco blinked awake slowly and didn't want to leave his bed. He felt fucking miserable, even with his body's new routine of waking him up with graphic thoughts of Granger. He didn't even bother with the dining room charade today and just apparated straight to the alley to get to the coffee shop.

The elderly owner was working the till and gave Draco a sort of prying look when she handed him his coffee, and Draco responded with his most withering glare. He must really look a sight if he was receiving sympathy from a stranger. Perhaps it was the fact that he'd only enjoyed roughly three hours of sleep?

His office felt no less suffocating that day either. Pacing the length of it, he went over every detail of Friday and Saturday in his mind. There had to have been something he missed. Something to explain this moroseness that seemed to consume him from the inside out.

Finally, a thought struck. Had those two instances with Granger been temporary? Her feelings for him fleeting? What if their time together had been a quick exercise in indulging some lustful feelings on her end, and nothing more?

Was it more for him? Shit, how would he even know?

I am in control of this.

Remain Nameless

Yes, this table belonged to him and Granger now, but he'd have it to himself all week. Finding it easier to concentrate here than in the lonely silence of his own home, Draco set to work rebutting some of the concerns laid out about the fund he was so close to establishing in Hermione's name at Hogwarts.

One of the governors had made a very astute point about ensuring extra poisons supplies for demonstrations as well as the availability of different magical creatures. Draco thought these excellent additions to helping familiarize the young ones to the world of magic. It seemed the cankerous pureblood contingent was finally giving up dragging their sorry feet on this, as Draco, and McGonagall, had managed a most elegant argument against their objections about what to tell pureblood children about this endeavor, lest they feel left out. Well, McGonagall at least had been elegant in her word choice, turning Draco's reply of "Tell them to get stuffed, Headmistress," into lengthy prose about how these Muggleborn children would surely benefit from learning about magic firsthand from qualified witches and wizards at such an esteemed institution as Hogwarts, instead of second-hand through books or their Muggle parents.

The latest issue Draco needed to tackle involved re-tooling and renaming Muggle Studies. Having given a great deal of thought to what Hermione always said about the piss-poor curriculum, he also remembered her other complaint: the name of the class itself.

"*Muggle Studies*. It makes it sound like just one step up from Care of Magical Creatures."

Taking this to heart, Draco had proposed to have the course renamed to Understanding Non-Magical People. He was still waiting on this tenet to gain approval, as well as the tenet to make it an included course of the mandatory Hogwarts curriculum as opposed to the additional and optional classes taken by older students.

He just hoped Granger wouldn't be too angry with him when she found out he'd been planning this without her. But still, that was most likely several months out, after the Ministry would have its say. Now that Granger was his, he could... wait. She's your *wife* exactly? He frowned at the thought. They'd never discussed the repercussions of the weekend's step in their relationship. What had all that meant to Granger? What did it even mean to him?

Fuck, this was becoming confusing. Maybe it would help to go over the facts? Fact: he and Granger had slept together. Twice. Fact: the sex had been spectacular. Fact: the thought of her naked body being caressed by his hands and lips was going to occupy the rest of his evenings and mornings from now until such time as she let him touch her again. Fact: She was in Venice the rest of the week. Fact: He had absolutely no idea how she felt about any of this. About him. Fuck.

Putting the conflicting thoughts and feelings out of his mind, Draco's work day passed quickly. That night, he sent off his latest update to McGonagall and went to bed after reminiscing thoroughly about how good Granger tasted and the delicious way he'd made her mean his name.

On Tuesday morning, Draco woke with a scowl and desperately hard again. Something felt distinctly off today. He picked at a piece of toast sourly before giving up on having an appetite and moving on to the coffee shop. He'd hoped the caffeine would work as a pick-me-up but no, he still felt a

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someone else. And I'm sorry," he swallowed another lump in his throat.

"I'm sorry I didn't know how to tell you all this. To tell you that I'm a warped, twisted, imbecilic excuse of a man who wants nothing more than to be... to be someone important in your life."

To be worthy of loving you.

His breathing felt ragged, labored. Hermione stared down at the postcard as if it held all the answers to life's questions and Draco waited for her to respond to his rambling, semi-coherent monologue.

Finally, she looked up at him.

"I sent you this postcard not two hours after I arrived in Italy," she said in a small voice.

"Why?" he choked out before he could command his tongue. He needed to hear her say it out loud.

"Because I missed you." She quickly wiped at her wet eyes and continued. "I missed you to distraction." Draco was sure his heart was going to tip itself out of his chest, inch its way onto one of the silver platters on the table, and then present itself to Hermione.

"I honestly did," she laughed shakily. "Do you know how bad it got? For only the second time in my entire life I mistranslated a rune. An attendee asked a straightforward question during the Q&A portion and I positively flubbed the meaning of the rune and then had to backtrack to correct myself all because my mind drifted right to where it always drifts these days..."

She gave him a watery smile. "To you."

Draco couldn't breathe because his breath, his heart, his entire essence had been stolen by the woman across the table.

"I didn't regret being intimate with you. Not for one second," she said firmly, her voice growing stronger. "I'd rather like to do it again."

Wait, did that mean she wanted to...? What the hell did any of this mean? Help.

The confusion must have been written across his face because she took pity on his befuddled, and now lost-addled, brain and clarified, "I want to be with you, properly. Not just in the... in the bedroom. I want to give this, give *us*, a real chance."

A new emotion now took over: panic. The bedroom part he could handle just fine, but the rest of it? He had an abysmal track record when it came to the fundamentals of adult relationships (see: Pansy, Astoria, and/or Daphne).

"You do? But I've no idea what to do... I don't know... I don't know how to..." Draco trailed off helplessly and groped for the firewhisky, but a small hand quickly wrapped itself around his wrist, halting his progress. Hermione kept a firm grip as she stood from her chair.

"Yes you do. You do know." With that declaration she slid her hand up his arm and shoulder as she moved away from her chair and took the one step around the table corner. Planting herself in front of him, Hermione dragged her hand up to the side of his face, her eyes still swimming with emotion. "You do know," she repeated then tilted his chin up to capture his lips in a fierce kiss.

To Draco, it felt like they'd never stopped kissing from two weeks ago. All the useless suffering and strife that had occurred in between the last time his lips were connected to hers and right now, melted

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away as he lost himself to her taste.

She threaded her fingers through his hair and deepened the kiss. He then remembered that he also had hands and that his hands should always be touching her, and gripped her hips to pull her even closer.

His kisses became apologies and unspoken declarations. All the words he couldn't say, all the promises he wanted to make, all the feelings he couldn't quite articulate yet, all the vulnerabilities exposed from losing his composure earlier, Draco poured all of it into worshipping her lips with his own. Could she tell?

Though the strength of his feelings should utterly terrify him, Hermione seemed to harbor no such uncertainty, and answered him kiss for kiss in a way that gave Draco hope that she understood without him having to speak the truth aloud.

She moved her hands down to clutch his shoulders then swiftly lowered herself to drape her legs over either side of his hips in the chair. The skirt of her dress cascaded over their lower halves and Draco found himself with Hermione straddling his lap at the head of his dining room table.

He should invest in a Pensieve.

Draco wrapped his arms around the small of her back, pressing her even closer, and they both simultaneously panted at the wanton way their bodies began to instinctually grind against each other. He pulled his lips away from her mouth to acquaint himself with other areas of her skin.

"Missed you," he rasped as he kissed up the exposed column of her throat.

"Prove it," she challenged breathily. Draco audibly groaned when she rocked her hips into him. Gathering what little was left of his wits, he prised one of her hands from the side of his shoulder. Taking it firmly in his own, he pressed her small hand on top of the erection straining painfully against his trousers.

"Proof enough for you? You've had me in this state for two weeks," he admitted with a smirk.

And then she one-upped him. Rivaling his smirk with one of her own, Hermione flipped his hand into hers and dragged it under the skirt of her dress.

"Ditto," she gasped before shoving his hand inside her knickers. She was already drenched for him.

One hundred billion points to Gryffindor.

Draco curled one of his fingers against her and she let out a pleased little whine. He moved his mouth to her ear. "Is it all right if I—?"

"Gods, yes, it's more than all right," she interrupted and writhed against his hand. He slipped two fingers inside her and swallowed her low moans. With one hand languidly pumping in and out of her, he used the other to slide the straps of her dress off her shoulders and lowered his head to nip at her collarbone. Hermione's legs tightened around him as she slid her arms free of her dress straps, then reached behind her back to undo her bra and discard it.

Yes, he would be looking into that Pensieve purchase tomorrow. Draco had no idea what occurred in this dining room for the previous owner, but it surely could not beat fingering Hermione on his lap with her bare breasts mere inches from his face.

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tablished, save for her dalliances with Cameron, but her time with him had only ever been for one purpose, a mutual understanding. But with Malfoy? She had no idea how they were going to navigate this new situation and now she'd be apart from him for more than a week.

With some more encouragement from Ginny, she tried to put it out of her mind for the time being. But once Ginny had left with Crookshanks and she was alone with her thoughts once more, she found it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

When she texted Ginny this morning that last night's events had been "unexpected" it wasn't a lie. Of course she didn't expect to have sex (fantastic sex, at that) with him. She certainly hadn't expected a most welcome repeat performance this morning. But perhaps the most unexpected feature of the last several hours was Malfoy himself.

While yes, the snogging and shagging had been frantic and passionate at times, she kept coming back to the surprising moments of tenderness he'd displayed. The uncharacteristic softness in his voice when he'd requested permission to touch her or enter her, the hesitation to let his hands roam her body until she'd been practically pawing at him for minutes on end, the enduring gentleness he'd exercised in their first kiss...

It was these memories that gave Hermione hope that perhaps something more awaited her upon her return from Venice.



Draco woke Sunday morning with an absurd expression on his face. It was a smile. He quickly scowled to rid his countenance of such an insipid expression, because *Sadazar* what type of fool woke up smiling?

This fool. The same fool that had stalked a dam in Granger. Finally.

He lost the battle and grinning, flung a pillow over his face, reliving Friday night and Saturday morning for just a touch longer with his own hand.

When he arrived fully dressed in his dining room and actually ate a passable breakfast, he thought he might have startled his own house-elf to death. The poor thing looked uncharacteristically flabbergasted at the way his master loaded his plate with eggs, bacon, kippers, and roasted potatoes.

When Draco did the same thing Monday morning, Crick was better prepared this time, and schooled his features to that of an impassive servant as he poured Draco's tea. Granger didn't know he had two eyes, perhaps he should tell her? Yes, he'd file that little revelation away for when she returned and see what kind of debate ensued. What would she be like in bed after a fight? Merlin, he'd love to find out soon. Images of her keening in pleasure underneath him swam before his eyes, and distracted him to the point where he was running later than normal when he reached the Muggle café.

"Good morning," he actually greeted the young barista who answered him with a wide-eyed look at his sudden turn to friendliness after years of barely an acknowledgement. Draco didn't notice how-ever, and contented himself with returning with his coffee to *their* table.

Remain Nameless

Order of the Phoenix members and Dumbledore's Army recruits were scattered about the rest of the yard behind the Burrow. All together to celebrate and mourn. Another year alive. Another year without some of our best.

And while the beautiful sight of so many beloved family and friends around her usually made Hermione's heart swell with emotion, a hollow sort of pain also arose.

How was Draco feeling about today? He would be all alone after work, holed up in his dark mansion, left to his own thoughts. Suddenly Hermione felt sick with shame. She hadn't even thought to offer to spend today with him, hadn't even considered his complicated feelings about the end of the second wizarding war. Yes, Draco had made some pretty terrible life choices, but he'd still lost people that day too. He'd lost Vincent Crabbe, one of his oldest friends, who he'd witnessed perish in fiery-fyre. He'd lost Goyle, who'd chosen to try to duel Aurors instead of come quietly and had paid with this life. He'd lost Snape, someone he'd once regarded as a mentor. He'd lost his parents that day too, in a way.

Arthur finished his toast and Hermione drained her champagne glass. Here she sat, amongst a literal crowd of people who loved her, but suddenly, it all felt wrong.

"Ginny," she suddenly whispered, throat tight.

Ginny jerked her head towards Hermione, looking concerned.

"I know it might sound strange to you, but I think there's somewhere I need to be right now. He doesn't deserve to be alone today."

Ginny's eyes softened and she gave Hermione an encouraging nod.

"Go on," Ginny nudged her. "I'll make your excuses." Hermione squeezed her friend's hand in gratitude, before disentangling herself from Ron. She waved off people's questions and hugged as many as she could before apparating straight home. Once there, and before she lost her nerve, Hermione threw Floo powder in her fireplace and called out Draco's address.

Whining out of the fireplace and into the traveling parlor, Hermione dusted off her clothes and stepped uncertainly into the room. Before she could call out his name a distinct popping sound signaled the arrival of a house-elf in front of her.

"Oh!" Hermione cried and jumped in surprise.

The tiny elf in front of her stood stiffly, clad in a pristine navy pillowcase cinched with a roped belt.

"How may I help you Miss Granger?"

"Oh umm, you know who I am?"

"Of course Miss, I was responsible for establishing the Floo connection between Franklin House and your home last week."

Hermione felt at a loss in front of the stiffly formal little thing addressing her. "Right well, umm thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you—?"

"Crick, Miss."

"Crick, lovely to meet you," Hermione held out her hand on instinct and to her slight shock he shook it firmly. He kept staring at her with wary eyes and Hermione realized she had yet to give a

reason for her impromptu visit.

"Apologies for dropping by unannounced, but is Malfoy, I mean Draco, I mean—" She paused her stammering to collect herself, unsure of how to proceed. "Is Mr. Malfoy home?"

Crick didn't immediately respond and Hermione worried she may have somehow offended the creature. "Mr. Malfoy is in the library, if you'll follow me, Miss, I can—"

But Crick couldn't finish his sentence before several loud, belligerent voices exploded from the upper level.

"—DESERVE TO ROT IN AZKABAN LIKE YOUR FATHER—"

"—DIRTY DEATH EATER SCUM WITH NO RIGHT TO—"

"—ENJOY YOUR FREEDOM YOU DISGUSTING PIECE OF—"

Hermione forgot all sense of propriety as she dashed past Crick and ran up the grand staircase, her veins thrumming with adrenaline.

"—HOW DARE YOU SHOW YOUR FACE IN PUBLIC—"

"—DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR KIND DID TO MY WIFE—"

"—HELL ISN'T EVEN A PROPER PLACE FOR THE EVIL LIKES OF YOUR FATHER—"

She came to a skidding stop at the doors of the library, her heart thumping madly as she gripped her wand and burst across the threshold, but halted abruptly at the sight before her.

Draco sat behind his desk, his hand whizzing back and forth along a piece of parchment as he furiously scribbled with a pen. Flying all about the room and forming a menacing ring above his head were a dozen or so Howlers, all screaming obscenities and threats down upon him. The moment one finished, Draco lazily cast his wand in its direction to banish it, but its place is quickly taken by another red envelope, eager to spill forth the vitriol within.

"Malfoy!" Hermione cried, but her shout is lost amongst the torrent of ill-will being shouted overhead.

"—DO YOU KNOW WHAT THEY DO TO PRETTY BOYS LIKE YOU IN AZKABAN—"

"—AREN'T FIT TO WIPE THE DIRT OFF HARRY POTTER'S SHOE—"

"—YOU AND YOUR MOTHER DESERVE TO HANG—"

"Malfoy!" she tried again but he was completely focused on the parchment in front of him and only moved to banish the finished Howlers. When she was right in front of him, Draco finally looked up as he noticed the movement. Hermione clocked the dullness to his gray eyes, but he blinked once and appeared confused by her presence.

"Granger?"

He had his Occlumency shields up, Hermione realized, which explained the blank expression on his face.

"What are you doing here?"

He looked up at her nervously, then cast a panicked look at the parchment below him before hastily rolling it up.

"I came to see if—"

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Remain Nameless

“—SHOULD SNAP YOUR WAND IN HALF AND—”

“Oh for heaven’s sake!” Hermione whipped out her wand and sent the strongest *Incendio* she could muster at the remaining Howlers, feeding a grin satisfaction when they burst into flames and scattered ash everywhere, leaving behind a ringing silence.

Draco’s eyes were back to their normal silver hue, and Hermione detected a mixture of shame and sadness in their depths.

“What are you doing here?” He repeated softly. “I thought you were meant to be... elsewhere.”

Hermione reached out a tentative hand and ran her fingers lightly through his hair. He closed his eyes at her touch and she felt her heart break for him.

“I think I’m exactly where I’m meant to be,” she murmured and his eyes snapped open. He seemed to remember the scene Hermione had walked in on and he shrank from her touch, eyes becoming cold and distant again.

“I’m fine. You can go back to whatever party you came from. I don’t need—”

“No!”

She cut him off with a yell. Hermione was absolutely not going to stand for him wallowing in misery. Not today.

“No?” He asked warily.

“No!” She threw back at him. “This is absolutely ridiculous! Get up, right now!”

Startled into submission, Draco stood and waved his wand once over his desk, his parchments rolling into neat scrolls and sealing themselves. Hermione lunged forward and grabbed his hand, yanking him into step behind her.

“Granger, where are you—?”

“Have you eaten dinner?” She interrupted brusquely and kept tugging him along behind her.

“Uh, no, I’m not really hungry, but where are we—?”

He stumbled slightly as she pulled him down the stairs and back through the traveling parlor. She threw in some powder and shoved Draco forward towards the green flames as she called out her home address.

“Get in, I’ll follow right after.”

“But why—?”

Hermione let out a snarl of frustration that succeeded in shutting Draco up. “Just do as I bloody say, Malfoy! I’m in no mood to listen to your self-loathing excuses today so get in the Floo so I can take you home and make sure you eat a sodding meal!”

She swore she saw the corner of his mouth lift in a half-smirk before he finally obeyed her. “Stubborn idiot,” Hermione muttered under her breath before following him through.



Hey Jude!9

Friday, May 2, 2008

Ten years. How?

How had an entire decade gone by since that awful, horrible, frightening, but ultimately victorious day? Each year, on the anniversary of the final battle of Hogwarts, Hermione felt that internal conflict as her feelings warred. She was happy. Happy so many of them made it out alive, happy their world was mostly at peace, happy she still had her parents. But the cost?

Some years, the cost seemed almost too high. They’d lost Fred, Lupin, Tonks, Lavender, Colin, Moody, Dobby, Snape, Sirius, and many, many more. She still suffered from nightmares. Her parents sometimes regarded her as a stranger. She even still felt like an outsider as a Muggleborn even though she’d sacrificed more than most to keep the wizarding world intact. She was happy but she was still... bereft.

Nine years ago, on the first anniversary, Hermione had worn black. It had felt proper at the time, to still be in mourning. Molly had spent most of the day in fits of tears, the others holding on to each other, trying to find comfort or solace in tight hugs or hand-holds.

With each passing year, the pain began to morph and eventually, lessen. Now people wore bright colors. They spoke fondly of the fallen, and shared stories, memories, and jokes.

She’d told Draco in advance that she wouldn’t be at the coffee shop today, and he’d given her a stoic nod before kissing her cheek yesterday. Last year, Hermione had barely spared a thought as to how Draco spent this day, but today he hardly left her mind.

She bounced the giggling little Roxanne Weasley a few more times on her knees before relinquishing the nearly 1-year-old back into the arms of her mother, Angelina.

“Cheers, Hermione, you’re a natural,” Angelina stated and shifted the baby to her hip. Hermione gave her a tight smile as she accepted the compliment. No less than five people had shared similar remarks and she was in no mood to hear any more comments on her future ability as a fiancé/ wife/ mother/insert traditional feminine role here.

Helping herself to the champagne brought by Bill and Fleur (Merlin bless their tendency to share the imported goods brought over from France by the Delacour family), she settled in to the long wooden table between Ginny and Ron as Arthur began his yearly speech. Ron linked an arm through hers and Ginny found her hand.

While Arthur thanked everyone for coming and spoke about what this day meant for him and his family, Hermione let her gaze drift over the coterie of people gathered. Bill stroking Fleur’s arm and his daughter’s hair. George holding baby Roxanne close to his chest, Angelina holding him around the waist. Molly looking up at Arthur, eyes shining with love and pride. Percy accepting the gentle touch of Audrey’s hand on his forearm, solemnly listening to his father. Charlie had his arms secure around George and Angelina’s other toddler, little Freddie. On Ginny’s other side, Harry’s hand was clasped tightly in hers, while Harry fondly rested his other hand on Teddy’s back. Glancing behind Ron, she could see the top of Padma’s head where it laid on Ron’s other shoulder.

Remain Nameless

“Granger,” he drawled, straightening up to his full, considerable height. “Ready for coffee?”

I’m ready for you to take me back inside and not leave the bed for the foreseeable future.

“Absolutely.”

They chatted amicably as they strolled the few blocks to the café together. When they reached the establishment, he held the door for her. Hermione caught the eye of the elderly owner behind the counter, who most certainly noticed Draco and Hermione arriving together, and the woman threw her a shy smile and a wink.

When she placed her bag at their—*their*—table and moved to go order her tea, Draco stopped her.

“Masala chai? What size do you want today?”

She’s so taken aback that she can’t even find the words to protest about him buying her tea. Settling in and accepting the fact that she is not still asleep and dreaming, Hermione watched Draco return with two steaming cups in his hands. As he approached the table, Hermione’s mind flashed back to that moment a year and some months ago, when he’d stalked angrily up to her table, demanding to know what her game was.

“Seriously Granger? Do you think this is a jump?”

Those had been the first words he’d spat at her. She recalled experiencing the shock of a lifetime when she’d looked up from her reading to find an impeccably dressed Draco Malfoy, tense and seething with barely suppressed rage at her in a Muggle café.

Draco’s current demeanor could not have been more different. He moved with a relaxed elegance, his posture perfect yet devoid of tension, sitting down across from her and looking content.

“I’m in love with you.”

They hadn’t discussed that particular declaration from Draco, and Hermione didn’t see the need to bring it up just yet, but she would be lying if she said those words hadn’t reverberated around her mind all weekend. Had he truly meant them? Or was it just emotions spilling over in the heat of an argument? If he said them again under calmer circumstances, could she honestly say she returned those feelings? Hermione pushed these heavy thoughts away for the moment and chose instead to focus on the new and pleasant reality of exclusively dating Draco.

When they parted ways for work a little later, he added another new facet to their morning routine. Just as she’d opened her mouth to say farewell for the day, Draco stepped closer and leaned his face next to her ear.

“Have a good day at work,” he murmured and pressed his lips to her cheek. The kiss lasted only a few seconds longer than a standard peck, but something about the way his lips lingered on her skin felt positively indecent and caused Hermione’s eyelids to flutter shut.

“Y-you too,” she mangled, and opened her eyes to see a self-satisfied smirk gracing his features. As he turned and left her practically panting with desire in the middle of the sidewalk, Hermione wondered how he possibly could have thought he’d be bad at a relationship.



Hey Jude!9

Well, now he knew what it felt like to be kidnapped by Granger.

Draco remained silent when they’d entered her home, letting Hermione stomp around before locating her pile of menus and snappily ordering delivery with her weird Muggle device and barking at him to sit in the kitchen.

Hermione’s sour mood didn’t abate until the two of them were sat at her kitchen table with plates of Chinese takeaway in front of them. She’d been quite cross with Draco up until she saw the way he comported himself to eat. He’d made sure to delicately drape a paper napkin across his lap before eating, and Hermione almost made it another few minutes without giggling, but she lost the battle after he lightly dabbed at his lips with said napkin after taking a bite of food.

“It’s all right to loosen up a little, you know. I don’t think we’re expecting the Minister for Magic this evening,” she teased.

“Are you mocking me for having excellent table manners?” he drawled with an arched brow. The tension finally broke and she let out a stream of giggles and earned a reluctant grin from Draco.

“Never in my life have I seen a man sit so stiff and proper while using a plastic fork to eat fried rice off a paper plate,” she said with a chortle.

After dinner they settled on the couch together, Hermione tucking her knees underneath her and leaving a little bit of space between her and Draco. He knew it would only be a matter of time before she would want to discuss the disturbing scene from the library, and he was a little surprised they even made it through dinner before she asked questions.

“Does that happen every year? The Howlers?” she asked tentatively. Draco didn’t respond for a beat, and kept his eyes straight ahead as he sunk against the couch and slung one arm across the back.

“Yes, but this year was more than most. I expect with it being the ten-year anniversary and all, people were feeling more nostalgic than usual,” he answered bitterly.

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, eyes still staring at the wall in front. “People are looking to place their blame somewhere and I’m sure in their minds, the Malfoy family deserves to hear exactly how far we’ve fallen in the public esteem.”

“That’s not why I’m sorry.”

He turned to face her now, to face those too-large brown eyes that made him want to cut himself open and divulge all his deepest, darkest fears.

“It’s not right, what those people say to you, especially when they don’t know you, or how you suffered—”

“I don’t want your pity Granger—”

“Shut up Draco!”

His eyes hardened but she at least had temporarily shocked him into cutting off his icy tirade of self-hatred. Hermione took a steady breath and placed a gentle hand on his arm resting across the couch, her touch soothed and warmed his skin even through the fabric of his shirt.

I am okay with this

Remain Nameless

"I'm sorry that I didn't come sooner. I should never have left you alone today of all days. I'm here if you want to talk, or not talk, it's up to you."

It's up to you.

Gods, how glorious to hear a phrase like that one. But as he looked across the couch, across the mere few feet of space that separated him from Hermione, Draco was unsure of how to properly articulate what he wanted in that moment.

"I—" he began, but faltered, looking to her helplessly. Words failing him, he rotated the arm resting behind them to capture her forearm and gently tugged her toward him. She understood immediately, and closed the space between them, settling herself against him. Hermione's palm rested against his chest and he gingerly placed his arm around her, tucking her further against his side.

They remained this way for several quiet minutes, Draco breathing in her familiar scent as he gathered his scattered thoughts. Did he want to unpack all his complicated emotions and risk a breakdown in front of Hermione? These were confessions he'd only ever shared with his healer over the years, never a significant other nor his own mother. This would be a different type of sharing, less clinical and far more vulnerable.

He dropped his head atop hers, then pressed his lips to her hair. *I am okay with this.*

"Some days I feel that no matter what I do, no matter how hard I work to turn my life around, I'll never escape him."

"Who?"

"My father."

Hermione nodded against his chest, signaling him to continue.

"You only caught the tail end of the public's tirade against me and my surname tonight, but I'm sure that was enough for you to get the gist. Every single one of those Howlers mentioned my father. They always do, year after year after year."

Hermione's fingers traced a feather-light pattern along his chest and he found himself drawing strength from her touch.

"I'll never outrun his shadow. Never. And days like today make me so... furious that he's dead. He's dead and he doesn't have to witness the aftermath of his actions on his wife and son."

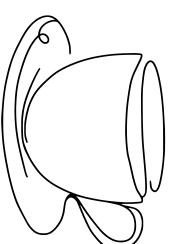
Draco closed his eyes briefly and squeezed her tighter. "And on some level, I understand why he gave up. I'd say it would be the one time my father ever exhibited some form of bravery."

Hermione's hand stilled on his chest, and she looked up at him with saddened eyes. "What do you mean 'gave up'?"

"You never heard how my father died in Azkaban?"

"I only read that he'd passed a few years ago."

"Yes well, despite the removal of Dementors, that place isn't any less of a hell hole," Draco replied grimly and she laid her head back on his chest. Draco suppressed a shiver as he recalled visiting the isolated, freezing rock of a prison with his mother. Even without the soul-sucking creatures to guard the prisoners, there was the type of chill in the air that seeped into the bones and never left.



Chapter Twenty Two

Even though it was now Monday morning, Hermione was still a little miffed that Ginny had found the audacity to cackle—cackle—at the sight of her rushing into the café 15 minutes late Saturday mid-morning.

Ginny had taken great delight at the state of Hermione's hair, the pink weils adorning her neck and collarbone, and the shrewd observation that Hermione still wore the marigold dress she'd told Ginny she'd planned to wear to dinner with Draco. Hermione needed new, less astute, friends.

Even so, Hermione mused as she bustled about her home gathering her work necessities, it was with a certain sort of giddiness that she confided about the romantic development between herself and Draco. And perhaps sensing how happy her friend felt, Ginny hadn't referred to Malfoy as a ferret even once, and agreed to Hermione's proposition of a double date if things were still going well in the next few weeks.

Hermione put that bold suggestion at the back of her mind for now, lest she break out in stress hives. Harry may be one of the kindest people she knew, but her dating Malfoy would be a bitter pill to swallow.

She had quite the day ahead of her at the office, and she began mentally running through her arguments for re-drafting the adoption laws for domestic niftlers as she locked the front door of her townhome behind her. If she could strengthen the household inspection language without making it look like government overreach, then the Wizengamot might eventually—*Oh*.

She froze in her tracks, halfway down her front steps.

Leaning against her front gate, casual as you please, all long limbs and effortless grace, was Draco. It was a Monday morning, which meant his suit schedule dictated he be wearing one of his custom black ensembles, with his crisp white shirt and black tie. Hermione wondered absently if he would share the name of his tailor, so she could send them a personal "thank you" note.

"Good morning," she said, slightly breathless with surprise as she approached him.

Remain Nameless

offered to please her orally until her brain melted.

As she reluctantly Flooded straight from Draco's home to Diagon Alley, Hermione thought of all the extravagant gifts that Ginny owed her for at least the next ten Christmases. Hermione would also be sticking the red head with their impending brunch bill.

Hey Jude!9

"It was pneumonia, in the end. Not vengeance at the end of a wand, not the Dark Lord's wrath, not the Dementor's kiss, not any other of the dozens of ways I'm sure people thought he deserved to go. He caught pneumonia, it festered in his lungs, and he refused treatment."

He felt Hermione let out a soft gasp against his shirt. "He refused treatment? Why?"

Draco considered the theory he'd scuttled on long ago, but had never shared with anyone. "I think he knew he was dying and in his mind, thought this might be best for our family's image, or at least for my mother. She never let on, but I think... I think it broke her a little more each time to see him in that position."

Draco left unsaid that it broke him too, to see his mother that way. The unwaveringly stoic and proud Narcissa Malfoy reduced to quiet tears every time they left that ill-forsaken prison. To her credit, Draco never saw her break down in front of his father, but the effort to suppress her feelings of despair would prove too much almost the moment they ended each visit.

The last few visits had been particularly dreadful, witnessing Lucius wither away as his body would more often than not become overwrought with a wracking cough. Though it may have hurt his mother, Draco was now immune to seeing his father in a weakened state. Groveling on his knees in front of a deranged half-blood, begging for mercy for screwing up a mission, being stripped of his family home and even his own wand, this was the version of Lucius Malfoy that remained etched in Draco's recent memory, totally at odds with his childhood perspective.

Draco had so obviously idolized his father growing up. He relished in any praise given, strove only to please the stern and proud man. Lucius was everything Draco wanted to become: a powerful, pure-blood patriarch who commanded respect and even fear from the rest of wizarding society. And oh how his father had built up the glorious vision of Draco's future. Draco could picture the Lucius from his youth so clearly: a glass of his favorite brandy in a crystal glass, seated in his designated armchair of the drawing room, swirling the amber liquid around as he waxed lyrical about the "good old days" of Voldemort's initial rise to power. The Malfoys had retained their impeccable standing in pureblood society after the first triumph of Harry Potter, and as Lucius assured Draco countless times over the years, Draco would have his pick of any pureblood witch in the world when he came of marrying age. His life path laid out before him; a path of unending wealth and power with a doting witch by his side to produce his heirs.

Younger Draco drank it down greedily. But then the other bludger dropped. The Dark Lord rose again, and Draco witnessed first-hand that being the right-hand man to the most evil wizard ever to exist was not all it was cracked up to be. He watched his father emasculated, time and again at the hands of either his "master" or his sister-in-law, Bellatrix. Where was the imposing Lucius from his boyhood days? His father would never suffer such indignities at the hands of others, but here he was, sniveling to a mad, inhuman megalomaniac who couldn't even best Harry Potter in a duel.

You're just like your father. Oh how that phrase warped from a compliment to an outright insult over the course of Draco's life. A statement that had once inspired pride only conjured shame now.

"I want to say he felt remorse in the end, but I honestly don't know. I think he may have been trying

Remain Nameless

to finally put an end to my mother's suffering by removing himself from her life, permanently. When he died, I felt... I felt free," Draco admitted in a whisper against Hermione's hair. "That's awful of me, I know, it's twisted to think in such a way. But even though he did some truly awful things I still... I can't help but..." He trailed off uncertainly but Hermione correctly deduced what had gone unsaid. "It's all right to miss him."

Draco nodded, jaw clenched, not confident enough in his voice to respond.

"Thank you for trusting me enough to share," she whispered and pressed a soft kiss to the underside of his chin. *No, thank you. Thank you thank you thank you thank you...*

"I'm not used to needing people," he stated gruffly. Everybody let's him down: his parents, his former friends, Snape, Dumbledore... but not her, never her.

Hermione shifted her position and met his haunted gaze.

"What do you need right now?"

"You. I don't want to feel anything but you. I just... need you." His voice wavered but didn't break as he tilted her chin up to capture her lips. Hermione responded instantly to the gentle push and pull rhythm of their mouths. Their kisses were slow and deep, different from the lust-filled urgency of their previous encounters. Draco felt as if she healed a broken part of him with her caresses, as opposed to simply scratching an itch for desire.

Hermione angled her body further towards him before throwing a leg over his lap to straddle him.

"In case there was ever any doubt... I need you too," she breathed and planted sensual kisses and nips to the exposed skin of his neck. Draco's head fell back, letting her heartfelt words wash over him and thoroughly enjoying her tongue's attention to his throat. He lost track of time as they snogged in this languid manner, but eventually both gave in to the grinding rhythm that naturally developed between their bodies. Clothes were divested in a slow unwrapping, and no other words uttered between them until Hermione was poised over his hardened cock.

"Are you sure you want to continue?" he asked. She nodded and smiled beatifically.

She murmured his name over and over, chanting it like an incantation as he thrust slowly in and out of her. They took their time with one another, savoring the sensation of being joined in the most intimate of ways. Each touch from her erased another doubt, each kiss soothed a pain, each whispered exaltation of his name dulled an ache.

She came on top of him with a tight squeeze of his shoulders and a final whimper of "Draco..." and he followed several deep strokes after.

"Stay with me tonight, I don't want to be alone," Hermione whispered and he could only nod. He clutched her tightly to his taller frame and carried her to the bed with her legs still around his waist.

Settled comfortably in her bed, Hermione curled into his side, it didn't take long before Draco felt the pull to succumb to sleep.

"Good night Malfoy."

"Night Granger."

I am okay with this. I fucking love you and I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

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kept up that self-assured, indifferent front, but when he lowered the walls, even a little bit, it made her heart swell.

Hermione looped her arms around his neck to reassure him. "No. I very much enjoyed last night with you, once you stopped acting so foolish. I really do have to get going though."

She made to pull away but Draco tightened his hold and smirked up at her. His hands came around to grip her hips and he ran his fingers up and down her sides. He pulled her in closer and pressed a kiss to the skin of her chest at the top of her pajama top. The same pajamas she'd borrowed from him that she was seriously considering absconding with because they were obnoxiously soft and also smelled faintly of him. Craning his head up, Draco trailed a line of kisses up her neck, each touch of his lips increasing the fog levels in her brain. Merlin, this man's lips were sinful.

"It's only brunch with Weasley; you can be a little late," he murmured against her throat and continued his open-mouthed assault on her flesh.

"It's Potter," she managed to gasp out. "And what excuse shall I give her?" Hermione barely got the full sentence out and repressed a moan.

"Hmm," he hummed against her skin and she felt the vibration all the way down to her toes. "Tell her your new boyfriend doesn't feel like sharing you today."

Hermione couldn't help it, her entire body shivered at his words and the deep tone in which they were uttered.

"First of all," she said, and cursed her voice for shaking, but Draco had just taken her earlobe between his teeth. "Boyfriend sounds so juvenile, and secondly," she gasped as his hand came up to palm her breast and she lost her train of thought.

"You were saying?" his low whisper was in her ear and Hermione was suddenly very aware that her knickers were positively ruined.

"Secondly, I'm—not—I'm not a possession to share." *Score one for feminism.* If he thought he could pull that toxic masculinity *you belong to me* trope, he had another thing coming.

"Of course not Granger," he purred in her other ear. "I would never dare presume something so bold as to *possess* you, however," he kissed down from the ear to the corner of her mouth. "I'm not used to sharing; you understand," he murmured against her lips. "Spoiled only child and all that. So if I give into certain territorial urges," Draco expertly plundered her mouth with his tongue. "You'll have to find it in your heart to forgive me. I'll beg if I have to."

Oh my Godric, her knickers were now the Atlantic Ocean.

Sighing, she gently pushed him off and took a step back in his hold. "As much as I'm going to regret this, I really do need to leave. I can't be standing up my friends this early in a relationship."

"I suppose you're right," he drawled, giving her space but letting his thumbs run up and down her hips. "But you know Granger; turnabout's fair play, and I had planned on repaying you for that little performance on your knees last night."

I should be sent to Azkaban for a minimum of five years. Every single heterosexual woman with eyes would agree to this punishment for Hermione leaving behind an almost naked Draco Malfoy who had just

Remain Nameless

Hermione was so warm. Her entire body felt perfectly heated and content, nestled in a cocoon of luxurious silk sheets and a pair of strong arms encircling her and the feel of his hand—

RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

Oh, bollocks. The shrill piercing tone of her mobile's alarm had Hermione jumping out of bed and sprinting toward her beaded bag. She tore furiously through her bag for the blasted thing, hoping it wasn't too late.

RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

"Granger! Are you all right? What is that? It's not the wards, I don't think."

Too late.

Draco was on his feet, wand in hand, and looking for the source of the shrill disturbance. Gods, can she be any more embarrassing? He'll never invite her to stay again after this.

She tried to wave him off with her free hand. "It's—" RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG "fine it's just my—" RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG "stupid alarm—" RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG "—just let me find—" RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG "—oh for Merlin's sake—" RINGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG "*Arcoo mobile!*"

The cursed device found its way into her waiting hand and she shut it off. Draco rushed to her side, wand still aloft, looking panicked.

"Granger, what's going on? What was that?"

Hermione looked up into his startled face and bit her lip to hide her smile. As adorable as he looked right now with his sleep mussed hair and wearing nothing but his boxers, she didn't think he'd appreciate the humor of this situation.

"Sorry, it was only my alarm," Hermione held up her mobile and the tension finally left Draco's shoulders as he lowered his wand.

"I'd forgotten I set it on my phone so I wouldn't miss brunch with Ginny."

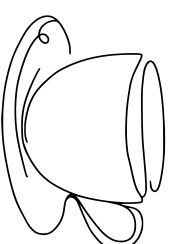
"Err, right," Draco walked backwards and sank back onto the bed and heaved a few deep breaths. "Maybe use your wand next time. Bloody hell."

Hermione shuffled her feet awkwardly, unsure of how to leave things with him. Where was the confident woman from last night who'd boldly sunk to her knees and pleased Draco so well she'd rendered him a quivering mess in the armchair?

"I should get dressed, I'm already running behind. I hadn't planned on staying over," she mumbled and made her way to the bathroom. As she passed the bed, a pair of arms grabbed her around the waist and spun her around. She found herself standing in between Draco's legs at the edge of the bed.

"You don't regret staying?"

It was soft-spoken questions like this that always caught Hermione off-guard. Draco constantly



Chapter Twenty Three

A sharp pain in his shin roused Draco at an indecent hour. Survival instincts kicked in immediately, and Draco shot out of bed with his wand in hand. "No... no... please no... no no," a muffled and agonized murmuring came from Hermione. Realizing that it was she who had kicked him, he relaxed momentarily, but Hermione kept up her pained pleading. "No it can't be... no... no..."

A movement behind her head startled Draco until he saw it was the ginger moistness of Hermione's cat planted firmly on her side table, flicking his yellow eyes between his owner and Draco as if to say, "*Well don't just stand there, do something you moron.*"

Draco touched a tentative hand to her shoulder and gave it a slight shake. "Granger... Granger wake up!"

She continued to moan and twist her legs around the covers, her face scrunched in despair. Draco climbed back into bed beside her and held her tightly to his chest. "Granger, you're fine, you're fine... you're okay... you're okay..." he whispered soothingly until he felt her tremors stop and she jerked awake.

"M-Malfoy?" Her eyes opened wide, still fearful, as if whatever had been plaguing her dreams was still in her line of vision. Her expression quickly morphed into one of embarrassment.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to... Oh my God!" She burst into noisy tears and Draco looked on helplessly, unsure of what was expected of him in this situation. She shook in his arms, desperately trying to stem her tears and catch her breath.

"Do you want me to Floo someone?"

This was apparently the wrong thing to say, because she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head furiously.

"No! Please... please just... could you... could you just rub my back?" The request came in such a small, broken voice that made Draco think she expected him to refuse her.

He coaxed her back on her side again so he could settle behind her, still unsure of his role. He

Remain Nameless

carefully raised a large hand and moved it in slow circles on the skin of her back.

"Is this what you meant?"

Hermione's head bobbed in a nod, and he kept up his ministrations, both hearing and feeling as her breathing slowed to a more relaxed rhythm. After a few minutes, she let out a contented sigh and smuggled closer against his chest.

"Better?"

"Much, thank you."

"Do you... want to talk about it?"

Draco felt her shift, presumably as she decided whether or not to share.

"Not right now. I think sleep would be best."

"All right." He tried for a neutral tone, but Hermione was too clever not to spot the insecurity.

"You really helped," she whispered, and pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "I meant what I said earlier. I need you too."

When she was asleep a few minutes later, Draco luxuriated in the swelling feeling of pride that he had successfully comforted Hermione in her time of need. *Perhaps*, he thought, as sleep finally claimed him, *he wasn't so bad at this whole relationship thing I am okay with this*.



Draco woke to the most heavenly smell of coffee, tea, and what he would guess to be pancakes. He was alone in the bed, but a soft humming from the direction of the kitchen clued him in to Hermione's whereabouts. Throwing on his discarded boxers, he padded down the hall and stopped at the kitchen threshold.

Hermione's back was to him, a mug clutched in one hand while she sprinkled blueberries into a bowl of batter. Trading the mixing spoon for her wand, she directed perfectly even portions of batter to float from the bowl and plop gently onto a heated griddle, where they came to rest with a satisfying sizzle.

Draco leaned against the wall and observed her masterfully charm a spatula to flip the pancakes at precise intervals, while she moved gracefully along her counter to add other ingredients to her bowl. All the while, she hummed along to a haunting, low tune coming out of her Muggle wireless device. The device looked similar to the magical radios that picked up the Wizarding Wireless Network, but Draco had never heard music like this before. The tune was simple, but the song seemed maddlin, and Draco wasn't sure he liked it or not. Plus the singer kept repeating a word Draco couldn't understand. "Is that some obscure Latin word? I don't know it." Hermione whipped around and almost dropped her mug of tea in surprise.

"Holy Merlin Malfoy! You frightened me half to death!"

Draco sninked and with a shrug, set himself down on a stool behind her kitchen island.

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ize how awkward I've made things and I'm hoping to not kick you in the middle of the night or snore, and I usually sleep in the middle of the bed, but—"

"Well come here then," Draco interrupted gruffly and reached out a long arm and yanked her towards him.

He positioned her with her back to his chest, nestling her smaller frame into his, and draped his arm over her waist. "Ow?" she protested as he rammed one of his feet in between hers, effectively tangling their legs together.

"There. Now you won't be kicking me," he grinned into her neck and felt her relax in his arms. He couldn't remember the last time he had held a woman this way, in his bed.

"Your bed is unfairly comfortable and of course you have silk sheets."

"Only you would complain about sleeping in luxury, jealous? I would be too if I went home every night to your cotton and straw monstrosity."

She snorted. "Oh please, my mattress is not made of straw."

"Whatever you say, peasant."

"Prat. You wait, when I introduce you to my bougie parents, you'll be eating those words."

He heard Hermione suck in a startled breath and knew she'd clamped her mouth shut in mortification. Draco was both terrified and elated that she was thinking that far ahead. She had to be serious about him if she'd even consider introducing someone like him to her Muggle family.

I am okay with this

"You don't have any hangings up," she quietly observed, breaking the tense silence.

Draco flicked his gaze up to his bed posts. "I removed them after my first night here. I didn't like sleeping with them closed," he confessed to the back of her neck. What he didn't say was that he awoke with the velvet hangings drawn around his bed, panicked, and ripped them off with his hands. The darkness around his bed had suffocated him when he opened his eyes, and elevated his heart rate to dangerous levels. With the curtains obstructing his view, he'd never be able to spot the exit to the room, or see if any intruders had burst in before it was too late.

Hermione turned suddenly in his arms and faced him. Their heads were mere inches apart, and even in the dark he could pick out the warming glow of her eyes.

"I should probably warn you that I've suffered from... nightmares, in the past. I wake up disoriented with my wand in my hand. But I've stowed it across the room in my bag so... well it's rare these days anyway, but I wanted to warn you in case..."

He silenced her with a stroke to her cheek. "I'm no stranger to bad dreams, myself," he whispered back.

Hermione nudged her nose to his and kissed him lightly before turning back around.

"Goodnight, Malfoy."

"Goodnight Granger," he rumbled into her hair.



Remain Nameless

Hermione and cupped her cheek. “I’m happy to reciprocate, if you’d like.” He leaned down and met her lips with a soft kiss.

“I’ll definitely take you up on that another night. It’s rather late now, so I should probably be going.”

Draco nodded and stepped away so she could gather her beaded bag. A sudden melancholy seized him, watching her straighten her dress and turn to leave his bedroom.

“You could stay,” he murmured quietly, freezing her progress. Hermione turned back around, bewildered.

“Only if you want to,” Draco added quickly. “I only meant that, you’d be welcome to sleep here, with me.”

Draco couldn’t explain why he felt so hollow at the thought of her leaving him tonight. He only knew that he’d be kicking himself later if he’d wasted the opportunity to not be alone for once. But was he pushing for too much, too fast? They still seemed in this odd limbo and Draco considered just how out of practice he was at navigating relationships.

“I’ll stay.”

His relief must have been palpable, because she shot him a reassuring smile and pecked his cheek. As he lay in bed waiting for her to return from the bathroom, he wondered if Hermione knew what that moment of vulnerability had cost him. Draco was raised with the belief that women were good for very specific purposes: breeding heirs, directing the house-elves, and maintaining good social standing to ensure the family name stayed on the correct side of public opinion.

A Malfoy man would cherish his wife to be sure, but he did not need a woman to fill a void in his chest, or to provide any sort of frivolous notion like, *Melvin, fobid*, happiness. Draco knew the longing he felt for Hermione’s presence would have been a foreign concept to his father.

Hermione emerged from the ensuite bathroom clad in silk pajamas she borrowed from Draco and transfigured the proportions to fit her tinier frame. It amused him that she felt the need to change her clothes in the privacy of the bathroom after letting him shag her rotten on the dining room table and then blowing him not ten minutes ago.

She gave him a shy smile when she noticed his usual sleeping attire: nothing but his trunks. Draco resisted the urge to smirk and waved his wand once to extinguish the flames around the room.

“Goodnight,” she whispered awkwardly and settled flat on her back next to him. Draco usually slept smack in the middle of his large bed and the last and only time he’d shared a bed with Hermione they’d been too exhausted from their lovemaking to become self-conscious about sleeping boundaries. At least Hermione was acting as uncomfortable as he felt. She huffed out little breaths every few seconds and made small movements, trying to be comfortably.

“All right, spit it out,” he grumbled and felt the mattress move beneath them as she jolted.

“What?”

“Whatever silly thoughts are blasting through that brain of yours.”

She sighed resignedly. “I’m trying not to have this be so awkward, and now having said that, I real-

“Good morning to you too.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Blueberry or chocolate chip?” She gestured vaguely at the floating spatula that was now flipping finished pancakes onto plates.

“Both.”

“Syrup or butter?”

“I enjoy my syrup with a side of pancakes,” he grinned wolfishly.

She plopped a heaping stack of pancakes in front of him along with a bottle of syrup and a mug of coffee. Fuck, he could get used to this. Draco immediately set to drowning his stack in an obscene amount of maple syrup as Hermione wrinkled her nose.

“You’re a heathen. It’s a miracle your teeth haven’t rotted out of your head.”

Draco merely smiled at her through a mouthful of fluffy, chocolate, syrup-soaked goodness. Hermione took the stool next to him after fixing her own plate and adding a pat of butter on top.

“Did you ask me a question about Latin?”

“Oh, right,” he swallowed an impressive mouthful of pancake and continued. “That song... I couldn’t make out the word but I hadn’t heard it before. Was that Muggle radio?”

“Yes, but I’m trying to remember... oh! The song I was humming. The word is ‘hallelujah’ but in Latin it’s ‘aleluia.’ It’s a Hebrew phrase meaning ‘praise the lord.’”

Draco almost dropped his fork. “Wait, that surely doesn’t mean—”

“No, not Voldemort!” She cut in quickly and Draco winced at the name. “It’s just a popular song, but the title refers to lord as in God, you know, Muggle-Judeo-Christianity.”

“Ah, ok.” There were so many weird intricacies to the Muggle world and if he were being honest with himself, it sometimes seemed far more complicated to be a Muggle than a wizard.

“Sorry if I woke you, I had the itch to cook this morning. My parents and I used to do this most weekend mornings, listen to music and make a mess in the kitchen.”

“Granger, feel free to wake me any time if you’ve got coffee and pancakes waiting for me.” Hermione beamed at him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“I should introduce you to more Muggle music,” she said and hopped off her stool. She levitated their dishes to the sink and set a charm for them to self-wash.

As she came around the island, Draco reached out to grab her wrist and pull her to him.

“Are you feeling all right? After last night?”

Hermione shrugged. “I’m fine, it wasn’t anything to worry over,” she stated simply, but Draco arched a brow at her, calling her bluff.

“Sorry, I know brushing it off is unhealthy.”

“Then don’t. You don’t have to put up the brave front all the time. Especially not with me,” he said quietly and she relaxed in his arms.

He felt Hermione take a few deep breaths against the skin of his bare chest, steeling herself. “It was one of my most awful nightmares,” she admitted against him. Draco closed his eyes and pressed his lips to her hair.

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"Was it about... her? Bellatrix?" he asked softly, reflexively holding her tighter as guilt coursed through him.

"No," she replied, shaking her head, her hair tickling his chin. "No, it was about Harry."

Draco felt her curl in further to his body, so he mimicked the soothing ministrations against her back with his hands as he had the night before. It seemed to give her comfort, and she continued. "I dreamt about the battle at Hogwarts. When Voldemort emerged from the forest and Hagrid... Hagrid was carrying Harry's body and he... Voldemort... when he crowed about Harry being... about Harry being dead, and I remember—" she pulled away slightly to wipe at a few escaped tears. "I remember all the hope going out of me in that moment. I... I couldn't process it. How could Harry... after everything... how could he... could he have been *dead*? I've never felt so terrible in my entire life. It felt like we'd failed him. Like I'd failed him."

She finally shuddered against him and Draco let her cry silently against his chest. She sniffed loudly and pressed on. "I was so angry with him, with Harry. When he made his grand reveal that he'd only been feigning death. I was so, so angry. I understand why he did it, obviously, but a selfish part of me felt for a moment that he had no right, no right whatsoever to make me, Ron, and Ginny, and everyone believe for even a moment that he was gone from this world, that we were on our own."

Draco brought a hand up to stroke her hair, relieved when he felt some of the tension leave her small frame. "Have you ever told Potter this?"

That got a snort out of Hermione. "Of course not, it sounds absolutely ridiculous when I admit out loud that I was mad at my friend for pulling off a spectacular ruse and saving the entire world. But Ron... I've told Ron," she admitted in a small voice and Draco tried, and ultimately failed, at quelling a surge of jealousy. "Ron understood because he felt exactly the same. The two of us had spent practically our entire adolescence keeping Harry alive and for him to just... be dead? Gods, I don't think we'd ever felt more inadequate than in that moment."

"You and Weasley have quite the bond."

Hermione tilted her head up sharply and narrowed her eyes at Draco. "Don't do that. Ron and I are best friends, nothing more. We've been through too many strange, life-altering and ridiculously dangerous situations to not have a strong, life-long bond, and I don't expect you to understand that but—" She brought her palm up to cradle the side of Draco's face soothingly. "I'm with you now. Again, I don't expect you to understand the relationship between me, Ron, and Harry, but you can ask me anything, and I'll do my best to explain. I won't keep anything from you."

Draco nodded, leaning further into her touch. He had a million questions, some appropriate (why on earth did Weasley ever let you go?), some less so (how many times, on average, did Weasley make you come during sex?). But today was not the day for the exes' conversation.

"Would you believe me if I told you I felt actual despair when the Dark Lord proclaimed Potter was dead?" He confessed quietly. Hermione looked at him earnestly, the warmth in her brown eyes comforting and encouraging him. "All my life, I'd honestly hated him. Potter. But even I knew, towards the end, witnessing everything that You-Know-Who was capable of... even I could feel that Potter was

"You can call me whatever the fuck you want when you're doing that," he gasped.

"Langauge, Malloy," she chided him softly and then enveloped as much of him as she could physically take with her mouth.

Draco now believed in reincarnation. He must have been a literal saint in his previous life to have earned this moment because he'd certainly done nothing in his current stint on the earth to deserve this gift. It was the only explanation for the sight before his eyes of Hermione on her knees, sucking him off.

Call this what you want. You can call me anything you want.

Draco clutched the armrests in a death grip so as not to impulsively reach out and grab her hair while she lowered her gorgeous warm, wet mouth to him continuously. Hermione slowed her pace before releasing him with a soft pop.

She looked up at him with those big, brown eyes, lips moist from pleasuring him orally not a moment ago, and resumed her business-like tone. "Boyfriend and girlfriend just sounds so immature to me. Again, I don't think we should lie to people. So if anyone directly asks, we can tell them that we're dating one another. Exclusively."

Holding his gaze, Hermione lowered her mouth around him again and sucked the length of him a few times, working him into a fevered, panting state. She released his cock after several blissful minutes during which Draco tried not to black out in ecstasy, and tilted her head to the side with a question. "Is that agreeable to you?"

Hermione ended this question by licking the entire length of his shaft from base to head before swinging her tongue around his sensitive tip.

"Yes," he managed to choke out, knowing she'd made a well-reasoned proposal, but also knowing he would have agreed to literally anything she asked in that moment. *Set myself on fire? Sure. Keys to all my vaults? Here you go. Publicly declare the Chudley Cannons to be a decent quidditch team? Done.*

"Wonderful." She beamed up at him and then engulfed him in her mouth again. Draco's knuckles were turning white on the armrests, and he knew his control was quickly slipping away.

"Granger... you don't have to... I'm close... I'm... *fuck*... you're going to... make me come..."

But she met his eyes and only bobbed her head faster, and Draco was soon helpless to stop his climax.

"Fuck... so fucking good... *Hermione*..." His release shot out of him and down her throat and his eyes widened as he watched her swallow every drop.

Draco couldn't move a muscle, he was rendered boneless where he sat. He watched Hermione stand back up, smooth out the skirt of her dress, then drain the remainder of her wine. He had no real words to express his gratitude for the intimate act she'd just performed.

"Any other relationship matters we need to discuss? Because I'm a huge fan of your negotiation tactics, Granger," he quipped, still somewhat out of breath.

She laughed and shook her head. "No, I think we're on the same page."

Draco tucked himself back into his pants and righted his clothes. Stranding, he slowly approached

"Now, I think I need to make things just a bit clearer." She slowly approached Draco and gently trailed one hand up his arm as she came to stand behind his chair.

Both her hands came to rest on his shoulders and she began to lightly knead the muscles there. "For instance, I would be most upset if another woman were to have her hands on you in this way."

"Hmm?" Draco managed as his body surrendered to the blissful relaxation of Hermione massaging his shoulders.

Her lips were now right next to his ear. "Oh yes, I don't think I'd be very amused to find another woman with her hands on your shoulders. Especially if they started to wander."

She moved her fingers to the top buttons of his shirt and began undoing them one by one. Well this little chat was certainly taking an interesting turn...

Hermione raked her hands up and down his bare chest and planted soft kisses against the skin of his neck. Draco sucked in a harsh breath as a surge of pleasure shot straight to his groin. "And I, of course, would absolutely not be touching or kissing any other man in this manner," she murmured.

Draco turned his head slightly to capture her plump lips, teasing out her tongue with his own. Breaking the kiss, he felt her grin against his mouth. "And I definitely will be reserving that sort of snogging for you," she whispered.

"You better," he growled possessively.

Hermione straightened up then, out of his reach, and Draco was tempted to pull her around the chair and right into his lap, but she seemed to have other plans.

She moved around the front of the chair and stood between his outstretched legs. Leaning down to kiss him again, Draco appreciated a delightful view of her tss down the front of her dress as she bent at the waist.

"I would hope you have enough respect for me not to ogle other women in the way you just did me," she said cheekily.

"Trust me, Granger, there's more than enough here for me to ogle," he muttered before reaching up to cup and caress both of her breasts.

She leant down again and planted kisses at the base of his neck and then worked her way down his chest all the way to his abdomen. Smiling mischievously, she stepped back out of his reach, then parted his long legs further so she could kneel between them. "And allow me to assure you that I would never touch another man in this way while we're together."

No way. No way was this happening to him.

Oh but it was. Hermione undid his belt buckle and teasingly ran her hand up the length of his erection before unzipping his trousers. When her hand disappeared into his trunks and grasped his cock firmly, Draco threw his head back and bit his lip to keep from crying out.

"Now for as long as we are... Hmm I'm not sure exactly what to call you and me," she mused as she stroked him deliberately, applying the perfect amount of pressure, and Draco lifted his hips briefly so she could tug his trousers down. He settled back in the chair and tried not to thrust erratically into her pumping hand.

the best chance." Draco paused to swallow a lump in his throat.

"My family, we survive, by any means possible. That's what we've always done. And I knew if Potter were actually dead, then there was truly no hope. My family were not going to make it in the Dark Lord's regime, we'd displeased him too much in those final days, finally become disposable. So when I saw his body, heard he was dead... I started making every contingency plan I could think of to get my mother out of there alive. Not that it mattered," Draco heaved a sigh. "Because once again, Myopic Boy Wonder miraculously survived. Merlin knows how, and I certainly don't believe half of what was written in the official account by the Daily Prophet."

"It's a thrilling tale. I'll tell you some time." She smiled coyly at him and his heart fluttered. He'd just confessed his cowardly thoughts about wanting only to protect his mother during the battle and she still eyed him with affection. Was this what a healthy relationship was? Unburdening of long buried secrets, revealing of weaknesses to another person, and only to have that person cling closer to you, rather than recoil in horror?

"I was glad your side won you know," Draco said hoarsely. "Perhaps not at first, because I don't think 'gladness' was in my emotional wheelhouse at the time, but eventually, I was glad. Because it was over and I was just so bloody exhausted that I didn't give a shite what happened to me because I knew nothing could be worse than what had been done to me, to my family, in my own home. Things so awful that I... I never wanted to go back."

Hermione frowned in understanding and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "What happened to your manor? Did you sell it?"

Draco shook his head. "The Ministry seized it as it was technically a crime scene. They confiscated everything they could then relinquished the rest of our books, paintings, furniture, anything not deemed 'dark.' I don't know what they use it for now, but good riddance."

Hermione sighed then dabbed her eyes dry. "Right. I think that's enough macabre talk for today."

She stepped out of his embrace to finish cleaning up breakfast.

"I think we're due for something fun today. Did you have any plans?"

"Oh, was I allowed a say in this? I didn't realize you gave your hostages a choice in the matter."

"What on earth are you on about?"

Draco smirked at her befuddled expression.

"You kidnapped me, just last night."

"I did no such thing!"

"Why Granger, don't you recall last evening when you barged into my home, unannounced, and proceeded to kidnap me by means of showing me through the fireplace? Honestly, I'm the victim here."

She changed to playfully shove him, but Draco grabbed her hands and secured them around the back of his neck before sweeping her into a kiss.

"Did I happen to mention I'll play hostage with you any time? I quite liked being at your mercy," he teased, once they emerged for air, several snog-filled minutes later.

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Hermione rolled her eyes and disentangled from his embrace. “Yes, yes, you’re a helpless little lamb, aren’t you? Run home and find some casual clothes, I’m parading you about the Muggle world today.”

When he’d obeyed her and returned via Floo after about 30 minutes, Hermione let out a chuckle at the sight of him.

“What’s so funny? Wasn’t this all right when we dined at the Muggle restaurant?” Draco tried not to pout, but was sure his expression had soured at her laughter. He was wearing a casual black suit, white collared shirt, but sans tie. He looked positively plebeian.

“I’m not making fun, really, but do you always have to look so... so...”

Draco arched a brow as she stumbled over her words.

“Ugh, so put together! I mean, do you even own any t-shirts?”

“Of course, for flying or under a quidditch kit.”

“How about jeans?”

“And what possible reason could I have for owning a pair of jeans?”

Hermione snorted and muttered what sounded like “snob” under her breath but he let it go. “What I’m doing a poor job of saying is that you look entirely too nice for a day of larking about London. Lose the suit jacket and cuff links and you’ll do.”

“As you wish, peasant.”



Being out in the Muggle world came with a strange sense of freedom. Of course Draco was somewhat used to being an unknown entity at the coffee shop, but going out in the world for such an extended period of time with Hermione by his side was an entirely new sensation.

They walked along the Thames talking of everything and nothing, enjoying the gorgeously mild spring weather. No one glared at him. No one spewed insults. No one whipped out a wand threateningly. No one popped out of the bushes to snap photos of Draco and Hermione together. Draco had been too wrapped up in his own brooding the night they’d had dinner before the opera to truly appreciate just how unknown he was in this version of London.

It hit Draco suddenly, as they came across an outdoor farmer’s market, the gift she was giving him. Only yesterday he’d felt scared, tense, stressed by both his past actions and the uncertainty of his future. But none of those dark thoughts seemed bothersome today. It felt easier to breathe, his whole body felt more relaxed than it had in ages, and Draco wondered if Hermione even knew how much he appreciated this opportunity. Today he was just an ordinary man, out and about with his girlfriend. Normalcy had never felt so thrilling.

When he wanted to sling his arm around her shoulders as they walked, she let him.

When she became excited by a vendor stall and dragged him over by the hand and interlacing their

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“Among other things,” he murmured and her flush deepened.

With smug satisfaction, he saw her body shiver, but she shook it off with dignity. “Speaking of... other things,” Hermione paused here and flipped some of her escaped hair over her shoulder. “How many other partners have you slept with?”

He held back an amused snort. Typical Granger, no finesse whatsoever, just barreling in with her questions. Perhaps this little witch had a possessive streak, which if he were being honest, was somehow arousing in Hermione where it had been a turnoff in Pansy.

“You would be the sixth.” Feeling that he’d earned the right to reciprocity, he threw her question back. “And yourself?”

“You would be my fifth partner.”

Hmm, Draco’s mind couldn’t help but wonder at the identity of her previous four lovers, though felt it was too soon in the fledgling relationship to ask. Obviously, and tragically, the Weasel was definitely one of them. He also vaguely recalled her mentioning taking back up with Viktor Krum straight after that breakup, so that accounted for two. This left Draco with two more names to track down...

“I expect complete fidelity while we’re together, that’s non-negotiable,” she stated, chin set, head proudly high.

Draco couldn’t resist an eye roll this time. “Merlin, Granger, seriously? I’m not the type to screw around. I hardly have the opportunity and I certainly don’t have the inclination.”

You’re it for me, if you hadn’t already realized. I am okay with this.

His answer, biting though it may have been, seemed to placate her.

“Good, because in that same vein, I’d like to discuss appropriate boundaries with the opposite sex.”

“Sorry?”

“Appropriate boundaries,” Hermione repeated and came to a stop, facing Draco head-on. “For example,” she began, and reached behind her head to undo her ponytail.

“I have many close friends who happen to be male. These relationships are strictly platonic.” She shook out her mass of curls, then gathered them in her hands.

“Even though there is no romantic element to my relationship with Ron, Harry, or the men in the Weasley family, physical displays of familial affection are not uncommon,” she explained as she quickly tied her hair back into a much tighter and higher ponytail.

“Hugs and pecks on the cheek are standard forms of greeting, so I won’t accept any sort of jealous pushback on that.” Hermione went on and Draco shrugged. Did he enjoy the fact that Weasley and his innumerable brothers felt entitled to put their hands and mouths anywhere near Hermione? Not in the slightest, but he wasn’t about to start an argument over this.

“I’m aware in your circles that it’s customary to lightly kiss the knuckles or cheeks of women, so I understand that act is nothing but a formality at certain social functions for you.”

Draco wanted to contradict her and tell her he avoided these social functions like the plague, baring his mother’s New Year’s ball, but wanted to see what else made Hermione’s list of appropriate physical contact with men who were not him.

Remain Nameless

"I suppose we should start with the more difficult aspect, given what you accused me of earlier," she began and Draco winced. "I don't want to hide what I feel for you. I'm not ashamed of you."

All he could do was stare back at her. He opened and closed his mouth several times, unsure of how to respond.

Thank you

You should be

I can't ever deserve you.

"I'm not ashamed of you," Hermione repeated sternly, though her eyes were soft in understanding as if she'd heard his thoughts. Draco merely nodded to show he listened and wished for her to move on, lest he succumb to an irrational or emotional response. Again.

"Ginny knows how I feel about you, and I suppose Luna does as well. However, given the history between you and the rest of my friends, I'd like to propose a gradual reveal, if that sounds all right to you."

That sounded logical to Draco, though he desperately wanted to be there in person when she informed the Weasels of their relationship. That prat was going to blow his stack.

"It's fine with me, we can take this at your pace," he replied honestly.

"Malfoy, I really hope you understand, I don't want to keep you a secret. That would imply what I thought is happening between us is wrong. It's not. The past circumstances being what they were between you, Ron, and Harry, specifically... well, I'd just like for no one to draw wands and start throwing curses. Not to mention," she paused and gave him a small smile. "I'd like the chance to see where this goes first, without any outside meddling."

Now that part, Draco could appreciate. Having Granger all to himself without the interference of Scamhead and his hapless sidekick? Perfect.

"I'd like to confide in Theo, if that's acceptable," Draco said.

"Of course," she agreed. "And... do you ever plan on telling your—your mother?" she asked hesitantly.

Draco thought of how he might break the news via letter.

Dearest Mother, I'm currently dating Hermione Granger. I trust you remember her and her non-pureblood heritage. I've gone and completely fallen in love with her, so please refrain from sending me letters containing your recommendations on the qualities of various gold-digging widows you socialize with at galas and the like, as I'm quite content in my choice. Your loving son, Draco

No, he'd spare Hermione that particular form of torture, for now.

Hermione was looking at him apprehensively, and it dawned on Draco what her question really meant.

"I'm not ashamed of you either, Granger," he stated cautiously, and her face relaxed. "But I'd like the same courtesy for telling my mother that you're extending to your more... difficult friends. The chance to court you, without outside meddling."

Her cheeks flushed an attractive pink. "You're courting me, are you?"

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fingers, he let her.

When he leaned in to kiss away the drop of strawberry ice cream that lingered on her lips, she let him.

When she shoved a bunch of novels at his chest in the middle of the bookstore and insisted he take them home to read, he let her.

After a long day of leisurely strolling, chatting, ice cream indulging, and shopping, Hermione squirmed into the setting sun and turned to Draco with a question.

"Dinner?"

"Has anyone ever told you how delightful an abductor you are? I'd love some dinner."

"For the last time, I did not kidnap you."

"Yes, yes, keep practicing that statement for the Aurors."

They settled on an outdoor café and over plates of fish and chips, Hermione excitedly reviewed all her gift purchases from the day. Her mother's birthday was approaching, as was Padma's, and she was inordinately pleased at having knocked both those tasks off her list today. They chatted long after their plates had been cleared, but neither was keen on letting the night end.

"Drinks?"

"Clever. Get me all liquored up so my memories of being taken by force are compromised. I'm a less reliable witness now."

"You're incorrigible."

And I'm yours. I'm all yours.

Hermione remembered a lounge with live music she used to frequent several years ago and towed Draco along, intent on introducing him to non-magical cocktails. He proclaimed her vodka with cranberry juice "utrechtly vile" but when she ordered him a "rum and Coke" he almost chugged the entire glass in one go as she giggled.

"Slow down there, you lush. I'll introduce you to Muggle soda another day, since your sweet tooth knows no bounds, apparently. But this has quite a bit of rum in it, so take it a little easier."

They sat closely in the dimly lit club at a little table, nursing their drinks and listening to tonight's live entertainment in the form of a guitarist. Draco's hand rested on the table, and during a discussion on the best way to reserve juices from the sophisticated bean, Hermione reached over and interlaced his fingers in hers. Still not quite used to such intimate displays in public, he stopped talking and met her shy, yet bold, gaze. It was but a simple gesture, but it made Draco's breath catch in his throat. He coughed lightly and resumed their discussion, but noticed Hermione had a permanent smile affixed to her face ever since he'd accepted her touch.

The musician performing wasn't half bad in Draco's opinion, but his exposure to Muggle music was extremely limited and he'd much rather pay attention to Granger. Draco and Hermione spent most of the night talking amongst themselves anyway, but Draco's ears pricked up when he heard a familiar set of chords and the word that had niggled in his mind from earlier this morning in Hermione's kitchen.

Remain Nameless

"Hey, I know this one! Err... Hallelujah? Did I pronounce that correctly?"

Hermione smiled at him indulgently and laughed. "Very good, 10 points to Slytherin."

After a few more songs and a few more drinks, Hermione seemed to have other things on her mind besides music and theoretical potions. She removed her hand from Draco's and it disappeared into her lap. Thinking she may have just experienced a hand cramp and needed a break, he almost jumped out of his chair when he felt a pressure on his thigh. Draco sucked in a breath as her hand crept higher and higher, until it was dangerously close to his inseam. Emboldened by her snirk and extremely turned on, Draco leaned over and planted an openmouthed kiss underneath her ear.

"Careful, Granger. I'm not above breaking a few public indecency laws by having you right here on top of this rickety little table," he whispered threateningly, and a small moan escaped her lips.

"Take me home now, please," she breathed and they left immediately, Draco throwing enough money at the bartender on the way out to settle their drink tab.

Both a little buzzed, their lips found each other's as soon as they entered her home. Draco pushed her up against the front door, reveling in the sweet taste of the fruitjuice and alcohol still on her breath. Hermione tried to kick off her shoes simultaneously, resulting in her stumbling a bit and knocking her head into Draco's chin. They both giggled at her clumsiness before resuming their snogging.

"Mmm... fancy continuing this in the shower?" she suggested, as Draco kissed down her neck to her chest. He hummed in approval and she led the way, discarding clothes as they went.

They made an unfortunate discovery when Draco had her back pressed up against the wet tile: the disparity in their heights made shagging against the wall quite impossible, unless they wanted to risk Hermione slipping out of his grasp and tumbling to the hard floor of the tub, which would probably take the romance out of the act.

That didn't mean Draco wasn't going to take advantage of having a soaking wet and very naked Hermione in his presence. He'd never seen her this way; curly hair slicked to the sides of her head and neck under the warm spray of the shower. Since sex would need to wait, they took turns washing each other, and Draco realized the intimate act of cleaning and being cleaned by another was a first for him. Quickly though, the chore of lathering soap onto hair and skin became less about getting clean and more about working themselves into a lust-filled frenzy. Draco was rather unnecessarily rubbing soap all over Hermione's breasts with a wicked grin, relishing in the softness of her flesh in contrast with the hardened peaks of her nipples under his thumbs. The flowery smelling suds running in rivulets down her chest mesmerized him as Hermione reached between them to pump his cock. Gasps and moans filled the chamber of the shower before Hermione broke first.

"Draco *please*. I need you now," she whimpered.

Not even bothering to towel off, they stepped out of the shower and Hermione backed into the bathroom counter. Draco following immediately to cage her in with his arms and a kiss. She hopped up onto the wide counter so Draco could step between her legs and gather her closer. With a whispered query of "Is this what you want?" and a desperate reply of "Please, Draco," he was inside her. Hermione locked her legs around his torso, heels digging into his back while Draco found a steady

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laughed and released his hand to freely walk about his private quarters.

Of course, Granger heads immediately to the bookshelves. As she did in the library hours ago, she slowly ran her fingers along the spines before selecting a title. "I see you have mostly fiction here. Is that intentional?"

"Yes," he said, coming to stand beside her. "It's my preferred genre for when I'm free of quidditch reports or financial documents."

She held up the book in her hand. "What did you make of this one?"

It was a classical novel set just after the death of Merlin, about a young wizard named Aloysius who embarks on a journey of self-discovery as he spreads the knowledge of magic throughout the European wizarding community. There was a thrilling chapter that contained a battle with a dragon that had captured Draco's imagination when he was much younger.

"It's a classic for a reason, I've gone back to it a fair few times."

"I have a few Muggle books in mind that I think you'd enjoy that are similar. If you don't object," She tentatively suggested.

"As I wouldn't have the faintest idea where to begin, I'll trust your judgment."

Her smile was radiant as she looked up at him before continuing her inspection. Draco settled into an armchair in front of the roaring fire (Crick must have come up here at some point, the sneaky little thing) and waited for her to stumble across things with which to tease him.

Finally, she settled on the chaise lounge he levitated over from its usual spot beneath the window. Being the consummate loner he was these days, he had no need for two armchairs in his bedroom. Hermione's seating options would have been the edge of his bed or his lap, although now that he thinks about it, perhaps he'd been too hasty in bringing over the lounge...

"All right, I concede," she piped up. "I fully expected everything in your bedroom to be covered in green and silver."

"I ask, Granger, haven't you learned by now not to assume things about me?"

She playfully rolled her eyes as she sipped her wine. Placing it firmly on the side table, she suddenly stood up and faced him.

"Speaking of assuming things, I think we ought to have a discussion."

Draco tensed, expecting the worst. Had he done something untoward in the last few hours? Fuck, maybe she felt taken advantage of, all alone in this big, empty house with him and—

"I think it would be prudent to lay down some ground rules, or rather, set some expectations," Hermione elaborated.

"Regarding?"

"Our relationship."

She stated it so matter of fact that Draco had to fight the ridiculous grin that threatened to emerge. *Our relationship.*

Hermione was now pacing in front of the fireplace, hands clasped in front of her, as if she were about to launch into a dissertation on the regulations governing hippogriff ownership.

Remain Nameless

in the mural.

"It's a tradition, on my mother's side, to name children after constellations or stars."

"I gathered," she replied. "Sirius, Regulus, Andromeda..." she ticked off. "Do you like your name?" she asked suddenly.

Draco shrugged, having never really considered it before. He recalled once that Ron Weasley had mocked his name, but really, that ginger git had no legs to stand on with a surname like *Weasley*.

"I like hearing it from you," he murmured and her brown eyes snapped to his. Hermione blushed and broke the gaze.

"Can you take me around the grounds? Since I Flooded here I didn't have a chance to appreciate any of the landscape or gardens."

Draco scratched the back of his head and considered her request. "Unfortunately it's late so you won't be able to see anything in the darkness. We can sit on the verandah for a while if you'd like."

She grinned and nodded and he led the way out of the ceiling high French doors from the ballroom. It was a pleasantly cool evening, and in the darkness of the countryside, the real stars shone just as brightly as their faux counterparts in the ballroom mural.

Draco waved his wand in a brisk pattern and the many torches and lamps lining the stone railings and footpaths came to life. He heard Hermione suck in a surprised breath at the vastness of the space before her, and though it was mostly hidden by the night, he was sure she could just make out the edges of the sprawling back lawns and gardens that abutted a dense forest.

They sat side by side on one of the many stone benches and Draco finally delivered on his promise of hearing about Hermione's Venice trip without being a petulant little toad. She chatted happily and sipped her wine, and Draco marveled at how easy this all felt. Not two hours ago he was stewing in self-doubt and melancholy and now he found himself talking animatedly with Hermione about the merits of Italian cuisine.

When their conversation came to a natural lull, Hermione tipped her head back and looked skyward. Draco couldn't tear his eyes away from her face, but felt a sudden movement against his hand. She'd silently reached over and taken his hand in hers, as if that were a routine act between them. Draco's chest swelled as he glanced down at the sight of their joined hands, and he guided a large thumb along the inside of one of her fingers.

When he looked back up, she was smiling at him. "I meant what I said earlier. Don't think you're getting out of showing me the bedroom. I need to see for myself if you have wallpaper of little green snakes."

"Granger, no self-respecting modern aristocrat still uses wallpaper," he quipped and tugged her up by the hand.

Draco led her back through the house and up the grand staircase, hands intertwined the whole way. He threw her a smirk when they finally reached the threshold of his bedroom and she answered with one of her own.

With a simple arching of his eyebrow, he gave her the go-ahead to explore at her leisure. She

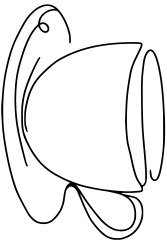
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rhythm. The large, waist-high mirror behind the sink meant Draco could watch himself fuck Hermione on her counter and he was a little surprised at how erotic he found this.

He envisioned spinning her around so he could see her face reflected too, forcing her to watch herself getting railed from behind, but they had yet to try that position and he was unsure how to ask. Still, that thought of taking her that way made his cock stiffen even further and seconds later Hermione came with a cry as he gave her a small love bite just above her collarbone. She grabbed his face in her hands to kiss him deeply, and Draco moaned in her mouth as she angled her hips upwards to meet his now frantic thrusts. He wound one hand into her wet hair and gripped her backside with the other to give him the leverage he needed to snap his hips forcefully against hers. There was only the feeling of her surrounding and enveloping all of his senses, and Draco's release was upon him as he squeezed her arse and came with a strangled gasp of "Hermione," into her ear.

Hermione, Hermione, Hermione. These four syllables had taken root in his mind until he couldn't think anything else, didn't want to know any other word or name ever again.

I am okay with this



Chapter Twenty Four

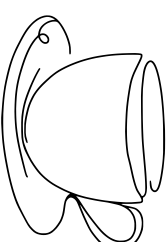
Draco received a pleasant surprise mid-week when an owl from Theo arrived asking if he wanted to meet for drinks on Friday. Hermione seemed pleased and promptly scheduled a girls' night in with Ginny, going on about how even though they were a couple now, it wouldn't do to ignore the separate friendships in their lives. Draco rolled his eyes, but bit his tongue. He knew he wasn't entitled to all of Hermione's time, especially when they already saw each other every week day morning and usually spent Friday and Saturday evenings together, but Draco failed to see an issue with wanting to spend every second in her company.

Sweet Salazar, he was well and truly besotted. Just induct him into Hufflepuff already.

I am doing with this.

The new routine of Draco's life had him feeling a way he hadn't dare feel since his early teenage years: content. Draco met Hermione outside her home each morning before work, rain or shine, and accompanied her to their café. They would settle in with their beverages of choice (him with a black coffee, her a masala chai) and discuss everything from their previous work day, upcoming projects, something that had caught Hermione's ire in the Daily Prophet, the most recent endearing/exasperating thing Potter or Weasley had said to her, etc. Then they'd stroll to work together and Draco would place a lingering kiss on her cheek that never failed to make Hermione blush.

Weekend evenings swapped back and forth between their respective homes, depending on the quidditch schedule for Draco. Hermione introduced him to all sorts of marvelous Muggle cuisine, Draco becoming addicted to the anonymity afforded to him in non-magical London. Draco also spent many an evening watching Hermione aglow with happiness in his library as she discovered tome after tome. He'd yet to realize his fantasy of sex against the shelves, but could hardly complain given how willing Hermione was to either lead or be led to the bedroom. Sundays meant a lie-in, breakfast (either preceding or following a climactic romp between the sheets) and then Hermione would head over to the Burrow for her weekly Weasley nonsense while Draco either returned home to shore up financial



Chapter Twenty One

Once they'd both redressed, Draco refilled her wine glass before they set off throughout the house. They ambled through the many rooms of the first floor, most of them richly decorated studies or tea rooms for entertaining. She seemed pleased by everything he showed her and though she constantly asked questions, a sudden thought occurred: this didn't impress her in the way it would other women. Not in the way his library had, but that had less to do with the monetary value contained within those shelves and everything to do with the amount of knowledge at his disposal in that room alone.

Hermione wasn't wandering from room to room calculating the amount of gold each piece of art, decoration, tapestry, or furniture must have cost. Instead, she asked thoughtful questions about the design choices, inquired as to the history of certain paintings, offered her opinion and admiration of the style of architecture. She was trying to get to know Draco via the place he called home, not envision all the fabulous ways she could spend his money.

Unfortunately, Draco had honestly handed over much of the decorating control to his mother and a team of interior designers, so most of the rooms were quite impersonal, in his opinion.

"Have you ever hosted a ball in here?"

They had reached the grand ballroom, and Hermione left his side to walk to the middle of the gleaming, parquet floors. She revolved slowly on the spot with her head craned toward the ceiling to take in the twinkling mural of the celestial sphere that covered the overhead entirely.

"No, I'm not one for entertaining large parties, if you couldn't tell," he responded, wryly. "I leave that task to my mother. Besides, her ballroom is easily triple the size of this one."

A small smile graced her features as she continued to peruse the constellation groups up above. Draco had a sudden vision of gathering her in his arms and twirling her about the dance floor in front of hundreds of guests, proudly showing off the witch he could now call his own.

"Draco," she called softly, breaking his reverie. He looked over, but her eyes were still trained on the ceiling. Hermione pointed upwards and he found that she was indicating his namesake constellation

Remain Nameless

about no one else in society being allowed to speak his given name ever again. Those two syllables belonged to Hermione now.

Draco captured her mouth in a burning kiss as she angled her hips slightly upwards so he could easily sink into her wet core. He groaned at the reunion of their bodies and stilled momentarily enjoying the euphoric feeling of her walls completely enveloping his cock. He began moving slowly in and out, mindful that the hard wooden surface was probably not the most comfortable for her backside, but the noises leaving her mouth made it seem as if she could not care less.

Hermione leaned back on her elbows, allowing Draco to drive himself even deeper inside her. A few frantic thrusts later, and she gave up the battle with her upper body strength and laid herself flat on her back. Did she have any idea how beautiful she looked? Sprawled across his furniture, breasts bouncing as he dove into her, over and over and over until—

“Ohh... my... yes Draco... Draco!”

Draco dug his fingers into the soft flesh of her hips as he chased his own release. He came with a guttural cry before slumping forward to rest his forehead against her chest. Instantly, he felt her hands stroking his hair as their breathing slowed, and Draco could be here forever, still inside her.

I am okay with this. I am absolutely, one hundred percent okay with this.

“Malfoy?” she called softly.

“Mmm?”

“Care to finish the house tour? I believe you made mention of a bedroom?”

He grinned against her bare skin and both felt and heard her giggle. Reluctantly, he pulled out from between her thighs and held out a hand to help her up.

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matters or do a spot of flying.

Damn it all, Draco was content and tonight he was going to indulge all of this to Theo.

When Draco entered the crowded Hogs in the Hearth on Friday evening, it didn't take long for him to spot the tall and gangly form of his friend seated at the bar.

“I see you've started without me,” Draco drawled as he pulled up to the stool next to his friend. Theo shrugged and took a long pull from his drink.

“What'll it be tonight? On me, of course, I could probably buy everyone in here rounds for the rest of their lives and not scratch the surface of my inheritance.”

Draco eyed his friend warily. The last time he'd seen Theo had been at his mother's New Year's gala, but his friend could not look more different. Gone was the easygoing demeanor and healthy glow to his face; the glow of a person who had something going right in life. The Theo next to him looked defeated and morose, a bleak pain reflected in his gaze.

“Same as you, I guess.”

Theo signaled to the bartender for another lager. When Draco had a drink in front of him, Theo raised his glass in a mock toast.

“Let us raise a glass to the house of No!t, a most sacred and pure lineage. Thanks for the gold, you fucking tossers, and for damning me to a miserable fate.”

Draco lowered his drink in alarm at the scathing bitterness imbued into the words, but Theo emptied his glass in one go and ordered another. Draco quickly cast a Sound-Interfering Charm around them.

“Theo, mate, seriously, you're scaring me. Tell me what's happened.”

Draco watched his friend take a deep breath, shake his head, then take another long swig of his new and full lager.

“Is it your mother? Is she unwell?” Theo shook his head.

“Work? Someone bothering you at the Ministry?” Theo shook his head again, eyes front.

“Are you ill or something? In some kind of trouble?” At this Theo hung his head and Draco's stomach dropped.

“I love her,” Theo finally choked out and Draco's brows knit in confusion.

“Who are you—?”

“I love her,” Theo repeated as if Draco hadn't spoken. “I don't want to live another fucking day without her. She wants to move in together and I want that too, but this is never going to work... fuck, I want to marry her and spend the rest of my sorry life with her if she'll have me...”

Draco's jaw dropped as his friend kept ranting. He signaled to the bartender for two firewhiskys, post haste.

“She is the best thing that ever happened to me and Merlin knows what I did to deserve this,” Theo continued and Draco's brain screamed *Oh, me too, mate, you're no idiot*, but now that the flood gates had opened, he figured it best to let Theo get everything out.

Theo suddenly looked panicked and shook his head. “I love her but she doesn't know, she has no

Remain Nameless

idea and how the hell do I fix this?”

“Wait, I’m confused. I thought you said this woman wants to move in with you? She doesn’t know you love her?”

Theo still wouldn’t look him in the eye, just stared down into his lager dejectedly. “You wouldn’t understand. You’ll never understand.”

“How about you fucking try me instead of assuming, yeah?” Draco burst out angrily. After all the shitty family drama they’d had to endure in their young lives, did Theo really think Draco couldn’t handle whatever romantic nonsense he was all broken up over?

Theo shook his head and released a pained sigh. “I love her—”

“Yeah, I got that bit.”

“I love her and she doesn’t know that I’m... that I’m a...” Theo drained his glass again. “She doesn’t know I’m a wizard.”

Draco’s mind tried to work furiously through what Theo had just said because it did not make any sense.

“How?” Was all Draco managed.

“Because I haven’t told her what I am. Because I don’t even know how to approach this. Because... she’s a Muggle.”

The bartender arrived then with a bottle of Ogden’s and two glasses. “Leave the bottle,” Draco ordered and the man shrugged and walked off. Draco filled the two glasses to the brim and pushed one towards Theo.

“How did this happen?” He asked in a hushed voice.

Theo tossed back the whisky. “About a year and a half ago I found myself in a Muggle pub...”



The double life of Theodore Nott

Muggle London was bustling at this hour, but this version of London seemed bustling at every hour. It was frantic, chaotic, and there were throngs of people everywhere, constantly. Theo sat on his usual bench across the way from a strip of popular pubs, cafes, and shops, summoning the courage he possessed. He’d been coming to this exact spot every day for the last week, observing his surroundings. This field trip was the culmination of several weeks of studying and meticulous planning of noting normal Muggle habits and behaviors.

He could do this. His healer assured him he could do this. Theo *needed* to do this. All the burning curiosity he’d been made to keep inside his entire life had finally eked out. The books he’d found in the Ministry library from the Muggle Liaison Department had prepared him to dress and act the part, because Theo was nothing if not careful. He’d prepped on current technologies in use, and while the first sight of motor traffic alarmed him, he’d read enough to know what to expect. They weren’t so

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He leaned forward to capture one in his mouth and she let out an encouraging moan. Both of Hermione’s hands clutched at the sides of his head as he closed his mouth around her tau ripple, and Draco felt her inner walls clenching his fingers, her release approaching. Maneuvering his fingers just so and rubbing his thumb along her clit was all it took, and then she was coming undone with a high-pitched cry.

Draco kissed back up her neck while she caught her breath. When he reached her lips again, she smiled against his mouth and Draco removed his hand from within her to pull her to him again. She kept up the tortuous undulating of her hips against his stiff member, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain control. Hermione’s hands worked furiously at the buttons of his dress shirt.

“My—bedroom—upstairs—we—can—if—you—still—want—” he mumbled in between her breath-stealing kisses.

“No,” she replied firmly, then kissed a path up to his ear, “here. I want you here. *Now.*”

If he put in a rush owl order tonight that Pensieve could probably be here first thing tomorrow.

His position in the hard-backed dining room chair was not going to give him the leverage he wanted or needed to fuck her properly. Grabbing her firmly around the waist, Draco set her up to standing. She helped him shuck his shirt all the way off and looked to him to take the lead as she trailed her fingers up and down his bare chest. Plucking his discarded wand off the table, he wordlessly banished everything left from dinner.

Hermione reattached her lips to his and the wand clattered to the floor as her hands made quick work of his belt buckle. Draco pulled her flush against him, before scooping her up and setting her down on the edge of the two-century old, antique mahogany dinner table. As he’d suspected when he stepped in between her legs it was the perfect height.

Clever witch that she was, Hermione understood his intentions exactly and gathered the skirt of her dress up about her waist. Draco tugged her knickers down, before returning upright to hover over her to claim her mouth, relishing in the way her tongue moved out to seek his own. Merlin, this girl could snog. Hermione gave an insistent tug at his waist band, urging him to step out of his trousers. Draco resisted the temptation to quip about her eagerness because his nervousness mounted again.

Standing completely nude before her, Draco took a moment to commit the sight before him to memory. Hermione’s curls were barely held back in their ponytail, cheeks flushed, her bare chest heaving, and the light material of her mangold dress bunched around her middle, as she perched at the edge of his needlessly opulent table, scorching him with her heated gaze and waiting to be ravished by him. This perfect vision of a woman wanted him.

Theo probably owned a Pensieve, he could Floo over after and “borrow” it.

I want to be with you, properly, she’d said earlier. She had no idea how those words had ignited his soul. Draco brought a hand up to gently cradle the side of her face, and she closed her eyes at the soft touch. “Are you sure you still want to—?”

“Draco,” Hermione interrupted swiftly, her eyes snapping open. “I want you inside me now.” Was the Witzengamot in session on Monday? He really needed to get that petition on their docket

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searing lips trailed a path to her other ear and his honeyed voice once again lulled her mind. “Am I correct in assuming you’ve charmed your windows so that no one can see inside?”

“Yes...”

“Perfect,” he purred, slowly worshipping the skin of her neck with his lips. Hermione arched back to give him better access and closed her eyes, letting the pleasurable sensation wash over her. His hands stroked up and down her sides tenderly and she longed for him to touch her in other places.

“Such a clever girl,” he murmured and his hands finally approached her breasts. He took both in his hands, caressing them over the thin material of her shirt. “Open your eyes Hermione,” he ordered and she obeyed instantly, confronted with the sight of Draco’s hands cupping her breasts while he stared into her eyes.

“You’re going to keep your eyes open for me. I want you to watch yourself when I make you come with just my fingers,” he promised huskily and Hermione bit back a longing moan as desire raged through her. Gods, this man could turn her into a plant, shuddering mess with his voice alone. He’d never been this vocal in the bedroom, and certainly never this explicit, but it seemed the alcohol lowered his inhibitions enough to loosen his silver tongue. Hermione discovered that she liked it very much indeed.

“It’s my favorite sight in the whole world, watching you come.” His hands left her chest and moved to the hem of her t-shirt. Hermione watched in the window as his long, pale fingers inched up the material of her shirt and then disappeared beneath. His hands on her bare skin made her breath hitch and though she wanted to shut her eyes, she didn’t dare.

“You’re so gorgeous, you’ve no idea... so bloody perfect,” he whispered and Hermione bit hard on her lip as his hands reached the destination of underneath the cups of her bra. Hermione watched her own mouth fall open as he teased and rubbed both her nipples simultaneously. Her core clenched with need, her thighs longing to wrap themselves around Draco and ride him into oblivion. She was panting now and certain that her knickers were already soaked. Draco merely smirked back at her and then let his hands fall away. He immediately gripped her hip with one hand while the other came to rest inside the waistband of her leggings.

“I want you to see what I see.” His fingers dipped lower and lower down her front until they were stroking up and down her slit. Hermione abandoned all pretense of washing the mug and gripped the edge of the sink as she squirmed against his hand.

He let out a low groan in her ear. “Gods, Hermione, you’re so wet.” All she could do was nod in response, struck dumb by his ministrations. “Is all this for me?”

“Yes,” she whimpered as his fingers teased her clit. “For you, only you,” she added breathily and she saw him bite his lip in the reflection.

“And how is it that I’ve managed to positively detrench your knickers?” he inquired teasingly. *Smug bastard!* she thought, but couldn’t manage to feel anything close to irritation while his finger circled her swollen bud.

“You v-voice... oh gods, your voice... don’t stop talking,” she begged and saw her seductive spec-

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tre grin with glee.

“My voice, hmm?” he confirmed before finally inserting a finger inside her. She cried out at the sensation and involuntarily bucked her hips into his hand, earning a low chuckle from Draco.

“While I would love to describe all the wicked things I’d love to do with that pretty little cunt of yours...” he paused to nip her carbide and Hermione was sure the noise that exited her mouth was loud and needy, but she had no desire to be either analytical or embarrassed at the moment. No man had ever spoken to her like this, and it turned her on to heretofore unseen levels. Who knew she had a thing for dirty talk?

“I find myself needing to confess something to you.” Draco’s hand squeezed her hip as he pushed up against her and she could feel his erection flush against her backside. “Do you feel what you do to me Hermione?” he pled in her ear and Hermione saw her reflection nod.

“I confess that you’ve had me in quite the state for a very long time now.” He pressed his hardened length further against her and even though they were both fully dressed, Hermione moaned at the contact.

“Before you allowed me the honor of touching you like this,” Draco added another finger inside her, but slowed the pace in and out. “I used to fantasize about it... *constantly*.” Hermione watched him say these things to her, heard him say these things to her, and can still hardly dare believe that she is currently experiencing something so obscenely sensual.

“While you and I danced around each other... when we told ourselves we were only friends... I confess I had to stroke myself twice a day to the thought of you... to how it would feel to be inside you... to how you would look bouncing up and down on my cock...” He ground shamelessly against her backside now and Hermione felt her orgasm rapidly approaching. Draco pressed feverish kisses to the skin of her neck and ear.

“Tell me Hermione, *Oh gods, yes, anything, I’ll tell you anything, what do you want to hear?*”

“Did you do the same? Did you touch yourself thinking about me?”

The sin dripping from his voice was too much for her, and Hermione’s orgasm ripped through her, making her hips snap back and forth in time with his fingers while pushing back into his groin.

“Yes, Draco! Yes, yes...”

She watched herself fall apart in the window, eyes half-lidded in ecstasy, mouth open while her truthful answer to his scandalous question tore itself from her throat over and over.

“Good girl,” he growled before yanking his hand from her knickers, spinning her around to face him, and crushing his mouth to hers. He parted her lips immediately with his tongue and he tasted deliciously of firewhisky and something so innately *Draco* that Hermione’s head spun.

All too soon for Hermione’s liking, he ended the kiss and took a step back, leaving her breathless against the counter. His stormy gray eyes swept her from head to toe. “Take off your clothes,” he commanded hoarsely.

Hermione couldn’t strip fast enough. He had never been this way with her before and her body reeled from the surprising enjoyment of him ordering her around. All their previous sexual encounters

involved some light teasing, sure, but once they got down to the act of intimacy, Draco's demeanor always became respectful to near reverence. This darker side to seduction was new to Hermione, and for a moment she wondered if she was taking advantage of his intoxicated state. Draco erased that thought from her mind as he picked her up, walked her a few feet to the right, and set her atop the kitchen table.

Draco's gaze burned as he stepped in between her legs and tilted her head up. "You are stunning," he mumbled and captured her lips in a deep kiss. His tongue glided easily against hers and his hands found purchase on the skin of her hips as he pulled her flush against him. It was a testament to Draco's snogging skills that Hermione soon forgot that she was stark naked on top of her kitchen table while Draco had yet to remove a stitch of clothing besides his outer robes and tie.

Draco pulled away from her mouth suddenly as his eyes conveyed some wicked deed he planned just for her, and Hermione felt her core slick with anticipation again. He leaned down to murmur darkly in her ear. "You may recall how spoiled I was as a child," he tugged on her lobe with his teeth and she moaned again.

"When I misbehaved, my parents would forbid me from flying or take some of my toys away..," He kissed down her neck and over to the other ear.

"But no matter how cross they were with me... do you know the one thing I was never, ever denied?"

Hermione only shook her head, incapable of speech.

"Dessert." Draco sank to his knees in front of her and parted her legs wide.

"Hermione... are you still too cross with me to let me eat dessert?"

Hermione looked down into his glistening gray eyes that held the promise of unspeakable pleasure and shook her head again. *No, I've quite forgotten the meaning of the word "cross" so please use that agile tongue of yours on me now.*

"Excellent," he purred and leaned forward to press his mouth to her entrance, devouring her just like the dessert course he would never be refused. His skilled tongue dipped in and out of her, and Hermione came quicker than ever before, grasping desperately at his silky head of hair.

Having expertly consumed her, Draco sat back on his haunches and smirked up at her. Hermione fell back on her elbows, panting and willing her legs to stop shaking as Draco licked his lips.

"I'm not done with you yet," he vowed solemnly. Hermione didn't know which aroused her more, the sight of Draco still in his suit between her thighs or the sound of his rich baritone saying such wonderfully wicked words.

In a blink, his clothes were discarded and he was stretched inside her. Hermione could barely keep hold of his shoulders as Draco was relentless in both word and deed. There was no hesitation this time, no tentative questions or shy looks as he boldly plunged into her over and over.

Draco was claiming her right here on her kitchen table and though she'll need to *scourge* every inch of its surface later, the exquisite pleasure wrought from his cock slamming into her repeatedly pushed all thoughts of cleaning out of her mind. She'd also have some interesting bruises and red marks on

Hermione really needed to get a grip on herself. She was supposed to still be cross with Draco for showing up and barging his way into her night with Ginny, but damn it if he didn't look positively delectable in that suit and robes. The genuine affection with which he'd discussed Theo hadn't hurt his cause either. Hermione couldn't recall him ever speaking so warmly of another person.

Hub, Theodore Not has a secret Muggle girlfriend. Who could have predicted? She had to admit to herself, she was curious to meet one of Draco's friends, if only to see another side of him. Speaking of seeing another side of him, she'd just about lost her train of thought when he removed his tie and began unbuttoning his shirt. Really, the man had barely done anything remotely sexual and she'd immediately wanted to climb into his lap.

Hermione felt her cheeks burn as she scrubbed out the two mugs of tea from earlier in the evening. Yes, occupying her hands was a good idea at the moment, so they wouldn't be tempted to start pawing at Draco who, again, she was supposed to be cross with for drunken, poor decision-making.

Spoken of the devil and the devil appears.

She looked up and saw a flash of white reflected in the glass of the kitchen window. She hadn't heard him approach but suddenly Draco stood right behind her, leaning casually against the island.

"Merlin! I didn't even hear you sneak up on me!" She gasped. She saw the reflection of Draco smirk and heard him chuckle.

"Apologies, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right," Hermione said, and returned to her task in the sink, avoiding his eyes. Now that she knew he was so close, she was having a harder time concentrating on the simple chore in front of her. Had she cleaned this mug already? Was it always so hot in here? How could he smell this good from such a distance?

Hermione felt a looming presence behind her, and looked up into the dark window serving as a mirror to see Draco had moved closer.

"You know," he drawled. "I find it so curious that you choose to perform some household tasks the Muggle way." He was a hair's breadth from her now, his hands resting on the counter on either side of her, caging her in. She was trapped, and she'd be lying if she denied how much it thrilled her.

Hermione made no response to his comment, and lowered her gaze to the thoroughly clean mug in her hands. "It's calming at times, to use my hands instead of my wand," she responded lightly, trying to ignore the way her body almost quivered at his closeness.

"I see," he intoned from just behind her ear, his warm breath tickling the hairs on the back of her neck. "I can't say I understand the rationale, particularly from a witch like you. You're ever so talented with handling a wand, *Hermione*."

She had no idea if it was the double entendre, the use of her given name, the low, seductive timbre of his voice, or a combination of all three, but it caused her eyes to go wide as they met his in the window. He kept her gaze and moved his slender hands to her hips. The look on his face displayed pure want, her own alabaster demon of lust, who existed solely to tempt her and render her mindless. He lowered his head and his lips moved along her neck and her only thought was *finally*. Draco's

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“Relax, Granger. I’ve told you, you’ll get on with Theo once you get to know him. Do me this small favor for my friend, yeah?”

Hermione grinned back at him. “All right, I’ll do it. Which means you’ll owe me a little something in return and since Ginny already agreed, the night before we’re having dinner out with her and Harry.”

“Potter?”

“No, the other Harry that I’m best friends with,” she said wistfully. “Yes, the Potters.”

Draco set his mouth in a grim line. “I suppose this meeting had to happen eventually,” he drawled. This was a positive step right? She wanted to make their relationship known to their friends, he should be glad she’s not so ashamed of being with him. But at the same time, Draco couldn’t help but feel a sense of foreboding at letting the outside world into their content, hidden bubble. Ginny was one thing, but Potter and the Weasel were going to be a whole different game given the years of bad blood. “It’ll be at a Muggle restaurant to prevent either of you oafs from setting the other one off and whipping your wands out in public.”

“I see. Is that what you two witches discussed this evening? Us whipping out our wands?” He gave her a lecherous grin and Hermione giggled.

“Maybe,” she teased airily. “But Ginny had some news to share... she’s pregnant!” Hermione gushed with a wide, joyful smile.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Delightful, more Potters and Weasleys roaming the earth.” Hermione smacked him on the knee.

“Oh, hush, let me be ecstatic for my friends. Harry always wanted a family, and Ginny was saying he wanted to tell me and Ron together personally but then he got called away for—”

As Hermione continued to babble happily about her friend’s news, Draco became mesmerized by her face. She was stunningly alight, glowing with the thought that her friends were experiencing this wonderful milestone of life, and it was this, thought Draco, this innate ability of hers to feel such unmitigated love for those around her that made him want to hold her to him and never, ever let go.

I am okay with this.

Draco removed his outer robes as she chatted, nodding along to show he was listening. Leaning against the back of the sofa, he undid his tie and crossed his left ankle over his right knee, then unbuttoned the top button of his white Oxford. He saw it then, the flicker of her gaze. It tracked the movement of his fingers as he performed the innocent task of getting more comfortable, and though it was but a subtle gesture, he saw her throat bob, just for a second, and then she was back to conversing. *Caught you, Granger.* She’d shown her hand, and as she excused herself to finish some cleaning up in the kitchen, Draco’s whisky-fueled confidence returned in full force.



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her backside tomorrow, but Draco had unlocked her most basic, primal need to be utterly, thoroughly shagged.

He didn’t stop the constant torrent of his seductive words in her ear, even if they came out more raggedly than before.

“So tight—so perfect—every damn time—feel fucking perfect—gods, Hermione your cunt is gorgeous—bloody fantastic—*gods, yes...*”

A teeny tiny part of her wanted to chastise Draco for dropping the “c” word again, but that part of her was swiftly silenced because *sweet Merlin* if it didn’t make her walls clench even tighter around his cock. And so instead of the usual “Language, Malfoy” that should have left her lips, Hermione gasped out, “Draco, oh my God, *Draco!*”

She knew he loved hearing his given name, and she certainly loved screaming it, and it usually spurred an orgasm for one or both of them, but what he murmured in response floored her.

“Good girl... I want you to scream the name of the man fucking your brains out on your table... the only man who gets to see you this way... the only one... want to be the only man who ever does this to you...”

It was raw and animalistic and Hermione wondered if Draco even knew what he was saying anymore, or if come morning he’ll even remember the intense, possessive words spilling uninhibited from his lips. But Draco was far from done telling her all the ways he wanted her as he strapped his slim hips into her mercilessly.

“I want you against the shelves of my library... I want you spread out on my desk... I want you... *fuck...* I want you every day for the rest of my life.”

What did he just say?

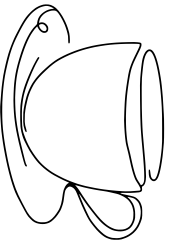
Hermione’s mouth fell open at both the meaning of his words and the intensity at which they made her climax.

I want you every day.

For the rest of my life.

Those earth-shattering words clasped themselves round and round inside Hermione’s head. Draco muttered incoherently into the side of her neck as he followed her right over the edge. After finishing inside her, he pulled back to pepper her face with kisses and gave her a boyish grin and Hermione knew then that he was clueless to his own revelation.

I want you every day for the rest of my life.



Chapter Twenty Six

Hermione absently stirred milk into her tea and stared off into space. Did Draco have any idea what he'd admitted to her last night?

His words wouldn't leave her alone. Though her (admittedly, sort of adorable) drunken lover had all but fallen into her bed and was asleep within seconds, Hermione had been awake much of the night. Had Draco unwittingly revealed the true depth of his feelings for her under the influence of whisky?

In vino veritas. Or perhaps in Draco's case, In whisky veritas.

Was Hermione ready to return such serious sentiments? A pleasant shiver ran through her body at the memory of last night. Perhaps she already had her answer: Draco hadn't said anything quite so dramatic since that night at his home when he'd loudly confessed to being in love with her. The "I" word hadn't entered any conversations since, but last night was an extremely strong declaration of intent on Draco's behalf.

Hermione sipped her tea and honed in on her emotions. She should be afraid, right? She should be concerned that this was too soon and that there was too much bad history between them, or that one or both of them would only end up hurt. But when she searched her feelings, Hermione felt no trepidation. That Draco could feel something so monumental and exhilarating for her felt... thrilling. Her face stretched into a stupid smile so wide she'd roll her eyes if she could see her own reflection.

Merlin help her, she'd well and truly fallen for Draco.

Giggling quietly to herself, Hermione switched on the radio and decided to fix some food for both herself and her, most likely, hung-over guest.

Hermione cracked a few eggs into the hot pan and hummed the chorus to one of her favorite songs when she heard a familiar drawing voice from behind.

"Are all your Muggle songs just blokes whinging about girls?"

Hermione shook her head and chuckled. "He's not *whinging*."

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the hydrangeas on the coffee table. "But I think we should talk."

Draco swallowed the nervousness in his throat as his palms started to sweat. He was a complete and utter idiot and this is how Granger was going to end things: with him still experiencing the vestiges of drunkenness on her couch after making a fool of himself in front of the She-Weasel. No need for a potion, water, or weird little Muggle tablets, that though in and of itself was doing a bang-up job of sobering him quickly.

"I'm sorry!" he blurted before he could stop himself. "Look Granger," he scooted forward to the edge of the couch and spoke earnestly. "I didn't mean to interrupt your evening. Things with Theo got out of hand tonight, and really, we were just riding the excitement of the evening—told him all about you, he's quite supportive, actually—and you know, we hadn't seen each other in so long and wait until I tell you why—and we had this idea—well it was Theo's idea, really—to buy you and Sasha flowers and obviously I drank an awful lot and it slipped my mind about you having plans—and obviously it seemed a good idea at the time to show up unannounced with arms full of flowers—and then—"

"Malfoy!" Hermione held up a hand to stop his rambling and Draco snapped his jaw shut. "All I wanted to say was that in the future, whisky or no whisky, I'd like for you to respect my time with my friends, and I do hope this level of alcohol is not a regularly occurring event, that's all." She finally gave him a small smile, and Draco felt like a man reprieved of execution. He sank back against the couch and ran a hand through his hair.

"Good... that's good. I'm sorry, really, but Theo shared some good news and we got carried away at the end there."

"Am I to assume that was about the Sasha you mentioned in your little rant?"

"Er, yeah. He's happy, truly happy. I've never seen him like this, ever." Draco grimed, thinking about how deserving the reserved and tightly-wound Theo was of finding a worthy woman.

"He sends his regards, by the way, I never realized, but he's quite an admirer of yours."

"Oh? Well I look forward to properly meeting him."

"You'll get your chance next Saturday, he wants us to have dinner with him and his girlfriend," Draco said and took another sip of his water. Hermione furrowed her brow in thought. "I think that works for me. But tell me about his girlfriend! Did she attend Hogwarts? That name isn't familiar."

Draco smiled widely. "Not surprising because no, she didn't attend because she *couldn't* attend Hogwarts." He leaned forward conspiratorially and set his glass back on the coffee table. "She's a *Muggle*."

Hermione gasped. "What? But... how?"

Draco shrugged, amused at her shock. "He met her in a pub a year and a half ago. They're quite serious, apparently."

"She doesn't know, does she? That's he's a wizard?"

Gods, his witch was so perceptive. "Ten points to Gryffindor. He'd like us to keep up that pretense next week when he introduces us as his normal, non-magical friends from boarding school."

Hermione chewed her bottom lip in contemplation. "I suppose it's all right, for now. Let's see how dinner goes. If I think anything untoward is going on, I won't hesitate to intervene," she warned.

Ginny struggled. “Well of course she is, but you know her, this will blow over soon. Just be your usual, uh, charming self.”

Draco scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “That’s what the flowers were for.”

“Trust me, the way she talks about you, the flowers were most unnecessary. I, however, will have you know my favorite are tulips,” she plucked a bouquet of them from the floor.

“Take those with you then, make Potter jealous,” he replied with a smirk.

Ginny shot him a wicked grin. “Oh, you are a crafty one, aren’t you? If I tell Harry some other bloke gifted me this beautiful arrangement I may be in for the shag of my life when he gets home.”

Draco winced in disgust but before he could bite out a scathing retort, Hermione returned, levitating several water-filled vases in front of her.

“Did you say you were leaving? You don’t have to go, Gin.” Hermione’s eyes slid to Draco and narrowed a bit. Shit, he was in trouble.

“No, I probably should be on my way anyway. Your boyfriend has sufficiently wooed me with flowers so I’ll pass him off to you for the remainder of the evening.”

Hermione didn’t even crack a smile. Damn it. “Are you all right to Floo?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Yes, mum. I’ve got quite a ways to go before that becomes an issue.”

“All right, then, give my love to Harry and I’ll see you Sunday.”

Ginny made a show of sniffing her bouquet and clutching it to her chest. “Thanks ever so much for the lovely flowers, Malfoy!” He glared at her and she cackled as she stepped through the fireplace.

The silence left in the wake of Ginny’s mirth was deafening. Hermione directed a few vases to various shelves and plopped several bouquets in them. Draco stood silently, feeling more foolish with every passing second, while Hermione then busied herself with cleaning up the empty mugs and bowls from her table left over from Ginny’s visit.

Draco sighed and sat heavily on the couch as she retreated to the kitchen momentarily. When she stalked back out, she leveled her eyes at him. “I’m all out of Sobbering Potion, so we’ll have to sober you up the Muggle way. Here,” she set a glass of water in front of him and two tablets. “Muggle medicine. You can have some tomorrow too. It’s not instantaneous and won’t do much tonight, but will probably save you an aching head in the morning. Drink all that water.”

Draco nodded dumbly, and did as she bade, only hesitating for a moment before swallowing his first dose ever of Muggle pills. He gulped down the water while she moved about the living room, trying to find suitable places for all the flowers. Eventually, he heard her give up and she vanished the rest of them.

As she made to stalk past him again, Draco called out to her. “Granger?” Stuffing down his pride when she turned to face him, he said softly, “I can go if you like.” He stood and slowly approached her. “Here, Weasley said these were your favorite.” He handed over the bunch of hydrangeas. Hermione pursed her lips but accepted the offending nonetheless.

“It’s Potter. Thank you,” she replied stiffly. “You don’t have to go,” she sighed and motioned for him to sit back down, then sank into the armchair facing him. She reached forward and carefully set

“That guitar sounds like it is.”

“No, no, his guitar is *gently weeping*.”

She looked back over her shoulder briefly and was rewarded with a predictably puzzled expression at his missing the Muggle pop culture reference.

“He’s just shouting some witch’s name.”

Needling her about Muggle music was a favorite pastime of Draco’s. Hermione gave the frying eggs a flip and responded, “It’s about an unattainable love.”

From his silence, Hermione could tell he wanted her to elaborate. “Layla is the wife of his best friend, but he’s hopelessly in love with her. He doesn’t think she’s being treated the way she deserves, but well, she’s married to his best mate, so obviously that results in some angst on his part.”

Hermione left the eggs to finish cooking and grabbed a mug from the cupboard. “It’s a true story, you know. He wrote about a real woman.”

“What happened? Did she leave her husband?”

“She did.” Hermione added some bacon to another pan. “She left her husband and, get this, they all remained friends.”

“Bollocks.”

“Nope! It’s quite fascinating actually. I’ve read all three of their autobiographies.”

Hermione filled up the mug with freshly brewed coffee and turned to hand it to Draco. She stopped short of handing him the mug, taking a second to appreciate the view before her. Draco leaned up against the kitchen island with one hip, arms folded across his chest, perfectly at ease. Hermione noticed lately that with each stay in her home, Draco became increasingly comfortable in her presence. He was clad only in his trunks and a t-shirt, and though the circles under his eyes betrayed a hint of a hangover, his platinum hair looked as pristine as ever.

Prat, she thought, but with affection.

He accepted the mug of coffee with a small smile and Hermione’s heart fluttered. Not a smirk, not a sneer, but a real smile.

Good Godric, she was a goner.

I want you every day for the rest of my life.

Hermione turned back to the stove swiftly, lest her face give her away. If Draco noticed her strange behavior he made no comment, and she heard him take a seat on one of the stools.

“How’re you feeling this morning? Do you want any more pills?”

“Nah, you gave me coffee, I’m cured of all mortal ailments.”

Hermione laughed and prepared two plates piled high with bacon and eggs. A light piano melody filled the silence.

“This song is much better,” asserted Draco.

“It’s the same song.”

“One must not tell lies, Granger.”

Hermione snorted into her tea. “Believe me or don’t, but this is the second part of the song. Fig-

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ured you'd take to it, you favor piano."

"Was that a thinly veiled way of calling me a snob?" He drawled.

Hermione whined around and stuck her tongue out. "Snob," she enunciated and earned a playful glare.

She joined him at the counter and they ate in companionable silence for a few minutes, listening to the radio. Draco broke it when he delicately placed his fork on his plate and cleared his throat.

"Granger, um... look about last night..."

Hermione froze. Oh sweet Merlin they were going to talk about it and she could already tell Draco felt uncomfortable. *Wonderful. Yes, go on, let's talk about how you perplexed and astounded me with the weight of your feelings only for you to now backtrack and make me feel like a lovesick idiot.*

"Look I... I owe you an apology?"

Hermione turned to face him fully. He fidgeted on the stool and rubbed a hand down his face with a long-suffering sigh.

"Whatever for?" Was he going to take back his words? Say he didn't mean them? Tell her this is moving too fast and he needed time away from her?

If possible, he looked even more nervous. Pink patches appeared on his pale cheekbones and he kept his eyes still firmly on his half-finished breakfast.

"I shouldn't have treated you in such a manner when we were... when we were uh..." Draco gave another awkward cough.

Slugging? Screwing? Fucking like mad?

"...when we were together. I fear I may have said things that were highly inappropriate..."

Oh did you ever and oh Merlin was it sexy?

"...and I handled you far too roughly..."

I liked it. I loved it. I want you to do it again and again and again...

"...being drunk is no excuse, so I hope you can accept my apology for being so um... improper and forward with you... I hope I haven't ruined things between us."

The only things you've managed to ruin, Draco Malfoy, are my knickers.

"Oh gods, Granger... I didn't even ask permission to be with you and I'm so sorry!"

She could only stare as he hung his head in shame. This was not the conversation Hermione had expected this morning. He felt guilty for talking dirty? He was ashamed for acting something less than deferential to her during sex?

This odd dichotomy of Draco amused Hermione: the well-mannered, unfailingly proper man before her now, and the impatient, demanding, and dangerously seductive man from the night before. But his last statement caught her ear and needed to be addressed first.

"Malfoy," she began softly and didn't continue until he met her eyes. "You have nothing to apologize for."

His throat bobbed as he swallowed and Hermione clocked the complicated swirl of inner turmoil clouding his gray eyes.

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take off your clothes?" But as he leaned down to capture her lips, she placed a firm hand on his chest and exclaimed hurriedly, "Malfoy, Ginny is here!"

A sudden burst of loud laughter came from behind him and Draco whipped his head around to see Ginny clutching her side, bowled over in mirth.

"Oh my... I mean... wow... I... cannot... this is just... Merlin..." the redhead gasped between fits of hysterical laughter. Draco's mouth dropped open as Ginny wiped tears from the corners of her eyes. This was not supposed to be happening, not to him. And then his fuzzy brain remembered: he'd just crashed their girls' night. The girls' night Hermione had repeatedly told him about when he'd made plans with Theo.

Fuck.

"I'll grab some vases for all this," Hermione mumbled, sounding embarrassed and swept past Draco into her kitchen. This left Ginny grinning smugly at Draco while he tried to recover some of his dignity.

"Wesley," he greeted her coldly.

"It's Potter."

"Huh?"

"My last name, it's Potter."

"Whatever."

His rudeness did nothing to deter her amusement at his expense.

"This was quite the gesture, Malfoy, I didn't take you for the sappy type."

Draco went for a nonchalant shrug. "Granger deserves to be showered with the finer things in life. I'm happy to provide that for her."

"Come now, Malfoy," she intoned in a begrudgingly accurate impersonation of his voice. "Surely you must know our Hermione isn't to be swayed by material objects."

For some reason, her innocent teasing raised his hackles. "Yes, well what else have I got to offer her?" he spat, and surprised even himself with the harsh honesty of his words.

Ginny raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. She regarded Malfoy coolly for a moment before slowly approaching him. Draco drew himself up to his full height, prepared for an onslaught.

"For the record," she said softly and laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Her favorite is Hydrangea."

"Hydrangea?"

"Yes, those ones there," Ginny gathered up a bouquet of white, purple, and blue flowers that Draco recognized as being particularly plentiful in the spring and summer months. She handed them to him and offered a tentative smile. "There, that should get you laid tonight," she stated and Draco rolled his eyes.

As Ginny strolled along the hallway of flowers, stopping to smell a few, Draco cast a worried look towards the kitchen where he could hear Hermione muttering under her breath and running sink water for vases.

"I think she's quite cross with me at the moment," he admitted.

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time.

But when the door swung open, the Hermione Granger on the other side did not swoon at the sight of him. She stared at Draco, mouth agog, as she eyed him from head to toe.

“Malfoy? What on earth are you—?”

“Evening, Granger,” he drawled in his most alluring tone, leaning against the doorframe. He felt himself slide a little down the jamb but quickly caught himself. A few flower petals shook to the floor.

“Why are you holding all of those flowers?”

“And they said you were brilliant. Come now Granger, surely you must know these are for you,” he teased and swept past her into her home.

He turned to face her with a charming smirk on his face, and expected to find her smiling in return, but she still had that confused look that bordered on irritation.

This wasn’t going the way he envisioned, not at all.

“Are you drunk?” she accused and Draco scoffed.

“I’ll concede that it’s possible as I may have indulged in a few beverages with Theo, but I managed to apparate here just fine, thank you.”

He thought he heard a snort of muffled laughter from somewhere behind him, but his alcohol addled brain must have imagined the noise.

“And you decided to bring me flowers tonight?”

What was with the interrogation? Couldn’t a bloke just bring his girlfriend flowers?

“I did?” He tried for a winning smile and set all the bouquets in his arms haphazardly on her hall table, taking no notice when several tumbled to the floor. He began emptying his pockets then, Hermione’s eyes growing wider and wider with each batch of flowers he produced and brought back to their normal size.

“Since I didn’t know your preferred flower, Theo convinced me I should buy one of each.”

“One of each?”

“Yes, I’ve brought you one of each bouquet they sell in the shop.” The florist hadn’t been too pleased when Theo and Draco stumbled in five minutes before closing time to demand they be served, but changed his tune right quick when the two men bought everything he had in stock.

When he’d completed his task of producing every single flower from his robes and setting them on her hallway floor, he looked up at her with an excited grin only to be met with an exasperated expression. Hermione’s entire front hall now resembled an overflowing greenhouse and for some reason, she did not seem overly pleased by this. Shouldn’t she be throwing herself in his arms by now?

“Malfoy,” she said slowly, as if speaking to a child. “What am I supposed to do with an entire floral shop’s worth of arrangements?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” he stated confidently and sauntered up to her. His vision was a little blurry, but he was certain his steps were mostly steady towards her. When he was right in front of her, he reached out a hand and caressed her cheek, his brain ignoring the warning signs of her brows furrowed together and lips pulled in a frown. “For starters though, how about you kiss me and

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“I should have asked for your explicit consent before we engaged in anything,” he stated and Hermione, at last, felt like she’d solved just one of the mysteries of Draco.

All the times he’d abruptly stopped steamy proceedings to tentatively ask if she was all right, all the hesitant moments before fully penetrating her, double-checking that she really wanted him... she knew there was a reason behind that behavior:

“I enjoyed everything we did last night. Everything.” She voiced quickly. Draco didn’t seem entirely reassured, a small frown playing about his mouth. Hermione reached for his hand and though he stiffened slightly, he didn’t pull away.

“I really enjoyed it. Every time we’ve been together you’ve never given me a reason not to trust you with my body. You don’t need to beat yourself up over this. We’re two consenting adults with a mutual attraction and it’s normal to act on that feeling. If I’m ever uncomfortable with how you’re touching me I’ll tell you to stop, all right?”

Draco let out a held breath and nodded slowly. She squeezed his hand and gave him a small smile, knowing she was about to make the situation a thousand times more awkward. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to but... is there a reason you always pause before we uh...”

Holy hell, she’s a grown woman and a war survivor and she can’t even look her boyfriend in the eye and say the words “have sex.”

Draco didn’t need her to finish the sentence, and his cheeks flushed again. “As part of my sentencing after the war... or I guess the Ministry would term it ‘rehabilitation’... I was required to take certain classes.”

Hermione squeezed his hand again and waited for him to continue, aware that displaying any sort of vulnerability did not come naturally for him.

“One of these classes was on consent during sexual activity... given the rumors about certain followers of the Dark Lord and what happened to some of Greyback’s victims...” Draco trailed off, but Hermione didn’t need him to elaborate. Rape and sexual assault had been a notorious specialty of Greyback’s, while most Death Eaters preferred the less plebeian and more sophisticated form of torture only a wand willing to bend to Dark magic could bring to victims.

Suddenly, Draco gripped her hand tightly and spoke passionately. “I need you to know that I never... I would *never* do that to a woman. I did a lot of awful things to protect myself and my parents but never... that. Nothing of the sort happened at the Manor.”

Hermione didn’t have any good words to comfort him, and so instead, closed the distance and wrapped her arms around his middle. She stroked up and down his back a few times and felt his breathing calm.

“I still would like to apologize for last night... I said some very... *aggressive* things to you and—”

“I liked it,” she mumbled into his chest, then lifted her head to meet his eyes.

Draco stared down at her, dumbfounded. “You... what?”

“I liked it,” she repeated firmly and bravely held his gaze, even though she knew her cheeks were aflame.

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“Oh.”

He looked confused and a little lost and Hermione wanted to crawl into a hole and die of embarrassment.

“I’ve made you uncomfortable haven’t I? Please, forget I mentioned anything and—”

But Draco now grinned down at her in a delightfully wicked way.

“You misunderstand me, Granger. I was just surprised is all.” He held her tighter and pressed his lips to her ear.

“Who knew a good girl like you would want me to whisper dirty things to her?”

Hermione smirked and brought her lips to his. “Do you know what else is dirty?” she murmured against his mouth and he shook his head.

“These dishes.”

She twisted out of his grasp and skipped out of the kitchen.

“You’re in charge of the washing up as penance for crashing my girl’s night and if I hear a Banishing Charm consider yourself banished from the bed!”

And Hermione pretended not to hear the *Evanesco* as she darted into the bedroom, laughing.



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“You’re joking.”

Harry was not having a good day. Work had been absolute hell at the DMLE between a distraught, senile witch convinced her son-in-law was Grindelwald back from the dead and a young, morose married couple who had dabbled in some questionable transfiguration spells in order to “spice things up in the bedroom.”

The details in the paperwork on that last case made Harry want to burn his own eyes out.

Needless to say, he was most definitely not in the mood for one of his wife’s jokes today. And really, did she think he’d fall for, “Before Hermione and her boyfriend arrive I should probably tell you... she’s dating Draco Malfoy?”

Because honestly, it’s like Gin wasn’t even trying with that one. Who on earth would believe that? But when Harry said, “You’re joking,” and his wife responded with a dry, “Nope. Not joking,” Harry felt the world tilt on its axis.

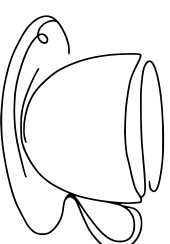
“Hermione is dating Malfoy?”

“Yep.”

“Draco Malfoy?”

“That is the name I gave you and also the name of Hermione’s boyfriend, yes.”

When Ginny had informed Harry earlier in the week that they would be joining Hermione and her mysterious new boyfriend on a double date this Friday evening, Harry had been excited, elated even.



Chapter Twenty Five

In Draco’s estimation he was the most cunning and caring of boyfriends. Granger was going to have no idea what hit her. He patted down his robe pockets once more to check that all his shrunken purchases remained inside, then apparated away.

Whoops.

He’d meant to apparate down the block from her home, but his fuzzy brain had instead dropped him in the bottom level of her house. At least he now knew her wards wouldn’t mutilate him. Chuckling to himself as if being dismembered by Granger’s protective magic was positively charming, he checked again on the status of his many pocketed items. Now to execute his grand entrance.

Draco Malfoy did not do elaborate romantic gestures. They were degrading, unbecoming of a man of his social standing. Which meant this plan for Granger right now was a singular, momentous event, and he couldn’t wait to see the look on her adorable face. No doubt she’d be swept right off her dainty little feet and directly into a lengthy bout of vigorous lovemaking in her bed. Yes, she would be simply thrilled, enchanted even, at the sight of him and the never ending floral arrangements on his person. “Oh Draco!” she’d cry. “This is just too much, Draco! Thank you ever so much, Draco!”

Yes, that is exactly how this was going to play out. She currently only called him by his given name during the throes of passion, but by Merlin he was sure he’d wangle it out of her with this display.

Drunken logic is a funny thing, and this was the lesson Draco stood to learn firsthand.

As he came to the top of her first floor stairs, he made sure to run a hand through his platinum locks to arrange them just right. He was certain he looked quite debonair in his black robes and lightly mussed hair. She was going to bloody swoon. A further brilliant thought occurred to him, and Draco removed a few of the miniaturized bouquets from his robes. He restored about six or so large ones to normal size and gathered them up in his arms before knocking confidently on her door.

He heard muffled voices on the other side of her door and wondered with whom she was speaking. Probably herself, he reasoned fondly, his little swot often mumbled to herself under her breath all the

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“Where did ya...did you come from?”

“The loo!” he announced proudly. “I think I’m—I’ve had enough to drink. *Hi*—let’s—*hi*—get on our brooms, yeah? I miss Sasha.”

“No, no, no,” Draco wagged a finger imperiously in Theo’s face. “You can’t fly tonight, you’re drunk. I’m drunk. No, you’re drunk... let’s go.”

“Not what I meant, it’s a figure of speech you dol...” Theo mumbled as he plopped down more than enough gold to settle their bill.

As the pair burst out into the cool and fresh night air, Draco felt like he actually was flying. They stumbled and tottered down the street with as much dignity as they could muster, which, given their level of inebriation, did not amount to much.

“Flowers!” Theo shouted suddenly and like an excited toddler in a toy store, dragged Draco by the elbow to his destination.

“Flowers,” Draco echoed with a silly grin on his face as they came to a stop in front of a shop window.

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It had been years since Hermione had brought a bloke around. Though their relationship had only ever existed on the plane of siblings, Harry knew Hermione was most definitely a catch, and it thrilled Harry that this relationship was serious enough to introduce him and Ginny. Hermione was always a good sport about it, but Harry knew it could be tiring to be a fifth wheel when they went out with Ron and Padma. Hermione deserved more than anyone to be happy.

All that being said... *Malfoy?*

“Gin,” Harry pleaded to his wife. “You can’t be serious. How long has this been going on for?”

Ginny shrugged in an infuriatingly casual manner and inspected her nails. “You can ask them yourself, they’re coming now.”

Harry whipped his head toward the entrance to the restaurant and immediately clocked the familiar, signature white-blond Malfoy hair. Merlin, if there was one bloke Hermione could have chosen to date with hair as recognizable as hers, it was *Draco solving Malfoy*.

“No, I can’t accept this... I mean, it’s Malfoy!” Harry fumed under his breath. His sharp green eyes tracked the lean form of his former childhood nemesis. The cruel little bully who used to do anything in his power to make his and Ron’s lives miserable was now the man escorting Hermione out to dinner. That same snotty boy who had hunted disgusting slurs at his best friend was now holding the door of the restaurant for her like a proper gentleman. The scared, gaunt teen who couldn’t bring himself to murder Dumbledore was now helping Hermione out of her cardigan with a familiarity to his movements, as if he’d done this a few times with her before.

Draco Malfoy may have apologized to Harry, he may have even grown up to be halfway decent after surviving a fucked up childhood, but that did not mean Harry wanted to be confronted with the sight of Hermione giving Malfoy an affectionate and comforting smile before she looked out over the tables for Harry and Ginny.

Ginny hissed one final warning in his ear. “Harry James Potter, you listen to me right now. You will not ruin this for Hermione do you understand?”

“But Ginny, I—”

“Behave or the baby’s middle name, no matter the sex, is going to be Muriel.”

“Fine,” Harry breathed out with a scowl. “But don’t think we’re not discussing how you kept this from me.”

Though Harry was a bit cross with his wife, he begrudgingly respected her strategy of delaying the big Malfoy reveal until 30 seconds before Harry would have to face him with Hermione. She had robbed Harry of the opportunity to throw an epic fit and refuse to attend the dinner. Not for the first time, he cursed the influence that Fred and George had on their sister growing up. So now, due to Ginny’s plotting and Hermione’s penchant for privacy, Harry would be stuck spending his Friday evening in the company of Malfoy. *Fan-fucking-tastic*.

Harry tried to look less miserable, but really what kind of prat wore a custom-made suit to a casual dinner with friends? The man sported an anachronistic tie pin and matching cuff links, for Merlin’s sake. Harry could see the shining stones from all the way across the restaurant and with a sinking feeling

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in his stomach, noticed the shade of purple was the exact same color as Hermione's wrap dress. It was such a "couple" thing to do that Harry almost grabbed a passing waiter to order a double of the strongest alcohol available.

Harry couldn't do this, he just couldn't. Ginny could name the baby *Splendifero Muriel Cornwallis* Potter for all he cared, because one smirk from Malfoy and he'd implode, he could feel it.

Their walk to the table happened both in slow motion and faster than Harry would have liked. Ginny got to her feet with a swift elbow to his ribs, and Harry decided it would be best to follow his pregnant wife's example of cordiality rather than risk further bodily harm at her hands.

Ginny wrapped Hermione in an exuberant hug. "Hermione, you look gorgeous, I love your dress!"

"Thanks Gin!"

As Ginny stepped lightly to the side so Harry could embrace his friend, he immediately softened at the look on Hermione's face. Her cheeks were lightly flushed as she smiled nervously at Harry. It was a smile that said "please don't be angry with me, Harry." It broke his heart. When had Hermione ever asked anything of him?

This was the woman who steadfastly remained at his side while they hunted for Horcruxes. This woman who had given up most of her youth and even a healthy relationship with her parents, and all for him. How many times had she put her life on the line for Harry? He would give Malfoy a chance, if only for Hermione's sake.

"Hi Hermione," he embraced her tightly and when he pulled back, saw a look of relief flash across her features.

Malfoy hovered awkwardly just behind Hermione. With a half glance back at him, Hermione ploughed on bravely:

"You both remember Malfoy, of course."

Harry bit back a snort and let his wife take the lead. "Evening Malfoy!" she said brightly, and cheekily offered her hand for him to kiss.

Malfoy looked as if it physically pained him not to roll his eyes. "Weasley," he greeted and brushed his lips briefly to her knuckles, like the pampered little pureblood he was.

"It's Potter," she corrected cheerfully, and Harry noticed a muscle twitch in Malfoy's jaw.

"Right," he dipped and then his cold, gray eyes shifted to Harry. "Potter," he offered with a stiff nod and Harry mimicked him with a terse "Malfoy." Neither held out their hands to shake. Hermione seemed to be holding her breath.

"Now that introductions are out of the way, why don't we commence with the dinner part of this evening, seeing as I'm famished!" stated Ginny with determined cheer. Merlin bless his wife, she really was going to force friendliness, or at least civility, between all parties tonight.

Harry and Ginny resumed their seats and Malfoy provided his second shock of the evening when he didn't sit down right away, but held out Hermione's chair for her.

Pone.

With Malfoy settled stiffly in his own seat, a tense silence descended upon the foursome. Since he

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expect Granger to be happy about it."

Theo looked so genuinely glad at Draco's agreement that he couldn't help but also feel something akin to joy. He had his friend back and had finally been able to tell another soul about his relationship that wasn't paid to listen to him.

Theo raised a freshly poured glass of whisky in his direction. "To Granger. Not sure what she sees in you, but honestly well done." Draco rolled his eyes and accepted his friend's toast.

Things got progressively blurrier after that. With the melancholic brooding portion of the evening completed, the two old friends began teasing everything ("honest to Salazar, McGonagall was the best professor at that blasted school, to McGonagall!") and anything ("television is nuddy brilliant, to telly?") as they shared a second and then a third bottle of Ogden's. Theo interrogated Draco about the budding romance between him and his former nemesis (Theo's words, Draco would never deign to be so dramatic), Draco's tongue getting looser with the increased consumption of alcohol.

"I should send her flowers!" Theo exclaimed suddenly.

"Who?"

"Granger, obviously!"

"What—why—why're you—sending my Granger—my girlfriend—flowers?" Draco slurred and finished with a hiccup.

"Because! She's so helpful! Y'know with all the Muggle stuff. I have to show her my grāt—grātitude. She's smart, your girl." The normally quiet and reserved Theo was what one would call a hyperactive and overly excitable drunk. Draco on the other hand, generally landed more on the morose drunk side of the spectrum, but his friend's enthusiasm was contagious tonight.

"Yes! Yes. Women love—flowers—yes. Flowers! Oh Merlin," Draco set his drink down and looked panicked. "Oh Merlin's arse, do you know I've never given her flowers?"

"Not once? What's her fav—favorite fl-flower?"

Draco put his head in his hands in defeat. "I've no bloody idea! Fuck, what is wrong with me!; Y'know she smells like hya—hyacinths... Granger does." Oh gods, he was the worst, just the absolute worst romantic partner in the history of relationships, he thought bleakly.

"Ah mate, you're failing the most basic of pureblood etiquette rules. You've not sent the woman you're courting flowers! Mine loves daisies. Loves 'em."

"I think we're failing a lot of pureblood rules, don't you?" chorled Draco, suddenly chipper again.

"Feels good, yeah?"

Theo joined in with a snigger. "Feels fucking fantastic. Look at us! Two—two pureblood scions, last of our lines, flouting all their bullshit decrees!"

He then jumped down from the barstool suddenly and gave an ungainly wobble. "Whoa there, this floor is uneven, should be looked at, that. I gotta piss." Theo announced and stumbled towards the bathroom. Draco remained slumped at the bar, alternately sipping another drink and muttering "should buy Granger flowers, I should," to himself repeatedly for several minutes.

"Mate!" Theo yelled in Draco's ear as he clapped him on the shoulders.

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Sound-Interfering Charm with an irritated flick of his wand.

"Oh... oh Merlin... oh that was a good one." Theo chuckled and wiped his eyes.

"I fail to see the humor in the fact that I'm seeing Granger," Draco said stonily, putting on his iciest glare of intimidation but Theo would not lose his stupid grin of disbelief.

"Yeah, yeah, no one in their right mind would actually believe that."

Draco leveled him with an unblinking stare. "Some days I don't even believe it," he replied softly and Theo's eyes widened as the smile slid off his face.

"You're serious, aren't you? But... but she *hated* you. And you well... you weren't quite nice to her?"

Draco snorted. "That's putting it lightly."

"And she... forgave you?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Obviously," he drawled.

"How long have you been seeing her?"

"That part is relatively new I suppose... a month, month and a half?" Did one start counting a relationship from the first shag? This was a question probably best left to Granger.

"And how did you convince her to give you the time of day?"

"We've been friends for a while now, even before I apologized for everything and then things sort of... progressed naturally from there."

Theo regarded Draco with a mixture of surprise and pride. "Merlin Malfoy this is... this is fantastic! This is fucking brilliant!"

"I'm not following"

Theo set his glass down, eyes now alight with the beginnings of a plan. "This is how you can help me! Think about it, Granger is quite possibly the most intelligent witch since Rowena Ravenclaw, right?"

"She's been known to have a few good ideas," Draco responded wryly.

"And she's Muggleborn!"

"You've lost me."

Theo began gesturing wildly with his hands, willing Draco to see the brilliance of his idea. "Don't you see? I can introduce you two to Sasha so she thinks I have friends!"

"I *am* your friend, you git."

Theo waved away this statement as a mere trifle of a fact. "Whatever. Look, we can go on a double date! Granger will be brilliant like she always is, and obviously being raised by Muggles she'll know how to act in front of Sasha and I'm sure she can keep you in line for an evening"

"Your confidence in me is truly touching. I'll have you know I've been out and about in the Muggle world and have yet to violate the Statute of Secrecy." Draco neglected to mention the incident just last weekend when he rainished a spilled glass of wine in a restaurant and Hermione gave him a complete dressing down about how lucky he was that no one had seen.

"So you'll do it then? You'll ask Granger for me?"

Draco huffed out a breath. "Fine, I'll help you keep lying to your little Muggle girlfriend. Don't

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was directly across the table from him, Harry would have no trouble keeping the shifty little ferret in his sight all evening. One of Malfoy's pale hands resided on the table top, where he drummed his long fingers out of either boredom or restlessness, but the other remained underneath. Interesting. Suspicious.

"Wine?" Ginny exclaimed suddenly. "Let's order wine!"

As a waiter appeared, Ginny took the lead. "Hermione, what was that bottle we had last time?"

"It was the petite Syrah."

"Ok, two bottles please! But just three glasses, I'm afraid I have to abstain tonight."

As the waiter bustled off, Harry turned to his wife with a frown. "Two bottles Gin, really? For only three people?"

She merely shrugged. "Alcohol is a social lubricant."

Harry rolled his eyes and noticed Hermione try to suppress a smile.

"Not drinking tonight Weasley? Your team is on a bye this week, surely you can indulge a little," drawled Malfoy.

"Malfoy," Hermione hissed. "She's pregnant."

"Oh, right." Malfoy had the grace to look momentarily abashed. "Er... congratulations," he said tonelessly and inclined his head at Harry.

Harry merely raised an eyebrow, but Ginny responded with, "It's Potter and thank you! We're very excited!"

"Have you told the team yet Gin?" asked Hermione.

Ginny shook her head. "I'll have to next month. It's early enough that I can get by with some extra protective enchantments during practice and matches, but I'll have to bench myself soon. Speaking of," she turned to Malfoy. "Not a word of this to anyone else in the league, Mr. Smooth-Talking Quidditch Scout."

"Of course not," he responded drily. "Not that the Harpies are even considered threatening this season. Though once you've removed yourself from the lineup, they'll be even less so."

"I'm going to focus on the part of that statement where you paid me a compliment," chirped Ginny.

"How's Tyler fitting in?" asked Malfoy.

"Oh Maureen? She's spectacular! Surely you must have noticed the jump in our goal statistics, and frankly, it's down to her beating skills..."

Quidditch talk between Malfoy and Ginny with a few distant replies from Harry carried the conversation all the way through the pouring of the wine.

When all but Ginny had a full glass in front of them, the redhead offered a gleeful toast to "friendships, old and new?" Harry downed half his glass in one go and noted that Hermione and Malfoy did the same. At least the three of them seemed to be on the same page for how this evening fared thus far. "Hermione, how's work going?"

Seeing as she'd had precious little to contribute to the conversation on quidditch, Harry was grate-

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ful that Ginny had the social tact to let Hermione open up. Since Harry often saw Hermione at the Ministry and grabbed lunch with her most days, it also gave him the chance to tune out and observe Malfoy's behavior.

His former foe was sharply dressed, cutting a much healthier figure than the rain-soaked and bedraggled version that had shown up on the steps of Grimmauld Place years ago. He still had the same trademark hair, and but for the lines around his eyes and a tightening around his mouth, hadn't aged much since their school days. But Harry's keen eyes, honed from his days as a Seeker and only made sharper over the years as an Auror, could note the subtle differences of the man across the table now from the mean-spirited boy back at Hogwarts.

Malfoy was definitely on edge tonight. He held his lithe frame upright and stiff in his chair; his pallid fingers still drumming a steady rhythm on the table. Though he carried himself as the picture of easy money and unflappable arrogance, the obnoxious boasting from their younger years was absent. Harry could well remember the way Malfoy loudly held court over at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall.

Now, Malfoy gazed at Hermione with rapt attention as she discussed her latest legislative efforts on behalf of centaurs. The impassive mask stayed in place, but there was a brightness in his normally cold eyes and a slight softening of his features that only seemed to occur when Hermione spoke.

"—and Janina let slip to a few of us that she's planning on retiring in a few weeks, which means the Deputy Director position will be open finally."

"Will you put your name in?" inquired Ginny.

"I think so," said Hermione sheepishly. "I would hope they'd promote me internally, but if they open up the scratch to fill the vacancy from outside the department, I suppose I'll just submit my CV and hope I earn it on my merits."

Before Harry could offer his support, Malfoy scoffed. "Granger, quit being so modest. Only a fool wouldn't hand you that position on the spot. Not only do you work harder than every idiot at the Ministry put together, but you've ushered through a record number of laws in the few years you've been there. If your name doesn't get you the job, your track record certainly will."

It hit Harry like a bludge to the face. Malfoy looked positively besotted with his best friend and Harry was in dire need of more alcohol to accept this new fact of the universe. Harry reached for the wine and poured himself a generous refill. Maybe Ginny had a point in ordering more than one bottle.

This is bloody bizarre.

Hermione blushed prettily at Malfoy's statement while Ginny chimed in with "Hear, hear!"

Good Godric, Malfoy had just praised Hermione and made her blush like a school girl. More wine flowed for Harry.

The awkward group made it all the way through the salad course before another lull occurred in the conversation. Harry seized the opening.

"So, how did this happen then?" he asked abruptly and gestured vaguely between Hermione and Malfoy. Hermione's eyes widened at the brusque question while Malfoy's narrowed.

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"But what I really don't need from you, Draco, is a tirade about how I'm sullying myself with Sasha. I truly hoped you'd evolved enough by now to not think that way anymore, but perhaps I was mistaken. One word about how filthy you think Muggles are and I won't hesitate to curse that nose off your poncy face."

Draco clenched his jaw and tried to get a word in while also trying to hide how his friend's lack of confidence hurt.

"Theo," he ground out dangerously. "You need to listen to me."

"No I really don't. We've shared enough over the years about our despicable families, enough for me to know how messed up all that pureblood ideology made you, but I can see now I was wrong and your father's reach is too strong for you not to have turned out just like him."

"Enough!" Draco spat in such a startlingly accurate imitation of Lucius that he finally succeeded in shutting Theo up.

"If you don't let me speak I'm leaving and I'm not coming back, understood Not?" Theo nodded but frowned warily.

"For the record, your lack of faith in our friendship is fucking astounding and it's going to take several more bottles of whisky for us to get past that," Draco began and ran a shaky hand through his hair.

"But I'll try to help you," Draco murmured, trying and failing to keep the hurt out of his voice. "I'll try. I owe you, you know, after everything you did for me. All those times I floored over, blackout drunk and raving, trying to ignore that burning call in my blood for just one more potion? You've seen me at my absolute worst, did you not think I'd ever repay that favor?"

Theo had the decency to look abashed. "I'm sorry, I know... I'm sorry. It's only that... I want to protect her, from everything, from my old life and I don't know who I can trust. I don't know how she'll react if she ever finds out about my family, about our role in the war. She'd hate me... I'd hate me." His voice trailed off in a resigned whisper.

Draco sighed and sipped his whisky. Theo had shown a willingness to be vulnerable, and Draco owed his friend some truth in return.

"I understand better than you might think. I'm seeing someone," Draco stated bluntly, staring down into his glass.

"Oh! Erm, good for you mate! Who?" Piquing Theo's curiosity seemed to pull him out of his melancholy.

"Granger. Hermione Granger."

Draco looked up to meet his friend's eyes and was puzzled to find him grinning. "Hermione Granger?"

"Yes."

Theo's grin only widened, his thin lips stretched as far as they could go. Then without warning, he threw his head back in a violent peal of laughter. There were actual tears coming out of his eyes as he continued to guffaw, drawing more than a few stares from other bar patrons. Draco recast the

ter?

Because the questions weren't stopping and they weren't getting any easier to deflect. He really didn't have any friends from school? Just exactly where in Scotland was this Hogwarts located? Funny name for a school, don't you think? Why hadn't he attended a university? Why had she never been introduced to any of Theo's work colleagues?

Theo was at a breaking point and since he'd neglected to tell his healer that the love of his life, the woman he wanted to marry, was actually a Muggle for fear of the course of action the healer would advise, Theo had impulsively owed Draco. Once the alcohol started flowing, he couldn't stop himself from revealing secret after secret, hoping that one of his oldest friends might understand what Theo sought with Sasha: a chance to finally live on his own terms. A chance that both he and Draco might have had if they hadn't been born into their cursed pureblood families. With their fathers gone, they finally could plan the lives they wanted without needing a formal contract to marry or seek a career or breathe without permission.

Theo met Draco's questioning gray eyes with desperate brown ones, needing the help of his friend, but not knowing how to ask.



When Theo finished his tale, Draco stared back helplessly. His friend had fallen head over heels for a Muggle and Draco's brain scrambled to come to terms with this fact.

"So that's it, that's my sorry story," Theo said glumly. "It's why I've been a ghost and a shitty friend to you. Merlin, this is some situation I've landed myself in."

Draco pitted his friend but remained lost as to how to make this better. He also couldn't help but feel as if all of this could have been avoided if they'd just asked one simple question growing up: why?

Muggles are inferior, Draco. *Why?*

We must serve the Dark Lord. *Why?*

You must marry a witch with the proper heritage upon graduation and produce an heir as soon as possible. *Why?*

Why? Why? Why?

"Theo, mate I... I truly don't know what to say."

Theo let out a derisive snort. "I guess I should have figured that. The great sole heir to the spoils of the house of Malfoy is not exactly the person I'd expect to approve of my predicament."

"Excuse me? Listen here—"

"You're excused. Look, I didn't unload all this onto you to hear a lecture."

"Lecture?"

"About how foolish I'm being to get myself involved with a Muggle woman."

"Of course it's foolish but that's not what I—"

"What my normally polite and well-mannered husband *meant* to ask—" Ginny broke in and glowered at Harry. "—was how did you two meet, or um, reconnect?"

Hermione spoke up, eyes darting from Malfoy to Harry. "We ran into each other at the coffee shop. You know, the one down the street from me? Turns out we'd both been going there every morning before work for years and had never crossed paths."

It did not escape Harry's notice that Ginny seemed unsurprised by Hermione's explanation and that his normally inquisitive wife was not petting the two of them with follow-up questions. *Talious little witch*.

"And what, you just... *crossed paths* one day?" Harry tried his best to not slip into his Auror interrogation tone, but failed miserably.

"Ern, something like that," said Hermione in a small voice and Harry immediately regretted his harshness.

He shifted his attention to Malfoy. "But isn't that café Muggle?"

Malfoy met Harry's stare with a challenging look of his own. "Yes," he clipped. "As is our current setting."

There was a ghost of his usual sneer, but Harry didn't care if he'd offended Malfoy. He'd sincerely accepted Malfoy's apology years ago, but if the git thought that made him worthy of dating Hermione he had another thing coming.

"And anyway," continued Malfoy in his signature drawl. "Granger is guilty of lying by omission. Little thief stole my table to provoke me deliberately."

Hermione immediately jumped to her own defense. "For the last time, Malfoy, it is a public space, meaning you cannot claim ownership of a café table and further, I didn't even see you!"

"I don't know if I buy that, Hermione, it's pretty hard to miss that hair," chimed in Ginny, giggling. Oh good God, Malfoy and Hermione had an inside joke. He was teasing her, and in a... *a boyfriend* sort of way as opposed to a slimy, bigoted, asshole way. They had a "how we met" story.

More wine. I need much more wine. I need enough wine to forget that filthy snink Malfoy just threw Hermione.

It was simply... unnatural to see Malfoy displaying any sort of emotion close to affection.

"Yes, well, after he'd gotten over his little public tantrum, we started having coffee together last February and then a few months ago we uh—" Hermione's face went scarlet and Harry wanted to sink through the floor when her pause made him fill in all manner of disturbing images. "—we decided to give dating a go."

Almost a year and a half. That's how long Malfoy had been in Hermione's life. A year and a half that she felt she had to keep this to herself. Harry felt a burning shame that his best friend didn't trust him enough to overcome any lingering ill will towards Malfoy to give her a chance to explain this new friendship turned relationship for so long. She shouldn't have felt the need to hide.

Be that as it may, Harry's irrational side piped up, *it's Malfoy*. Could Hermione really trust him? Could anyone? And why in Merlin's name was his right hand perpetually out of sight under the table? Overcome with a suspicious dread, Harry realized Malfoy probably had his wand aimed right at him

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underneath the tablecloth.

Rather than throw out an open accusation about Malfoy's dubious nature, Harry "accidentally" dropped his salad fork onto the floor. As the other three began discussing coffee preferences, Harry leaned down under the table with the pretense of retrieving his fork, knowing he'd be able to see with his own eyes the evidence of Malfoy's wand trained on him.

But upon lifting the cloth and grabbing his fallen cutlery, Harry was proven to be very, very wrong. *Oh boggling hell.*

Instead, Harry was confronted with the sight of Malfoy's hand clasped tightly in Hermione's in a firm grip. Their fingers were intimately intertwined, Malfoy's knuckles taut and white even for his pale skin, and every few seconds Hermione's thumb gently smoothed over the top in a soothing fashion.

Harry's brain went into Auror deduction mode: Malfoy felt nervous about meeting Hermione's closest friends and tried to hide this; Malfoy trusted Hermione enough to display vulnerability to her; he sought solace in her touch and Hermione comforted him.

Sighing deeply, Harry pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose as he sat upright. Malfoy shot him a quizzical look but the women had seemingly noticed nothing and were now discussing Ginny's pregnancy cravings.

Harry warred with himself as he picked at his spaghetti Bolognese, appetite dulled for the time being. He pushed his pasta around his plate and wondered idly if he was too blinded by his childhood loathing of Malfoy. Hadn't that been the lesson learned too late by Sirius? By Snape? Upon learning the truth about the surly poisons master during the Battle of Hogwarts, hadn't Harry lamented that if Snape (and by extension, Sirius and Lupin) had been more forthright about a few things, then so much pain and heartache might have been avoided?

Besides, Dumbledore himself had seen some good in Malfoy. Perhaps Malfoy, who came from a similar upbringing to both Andromeda and Sirius, (and was blood-related to both), had arrived at the same epiphany as his aunt and older cousin: That blood purity doctrine was utter bullshit.

Obviously, simply striking up a friendship with Hermione showed he thumbed his nose at his parents' way of life. But merely tolerating the existence of Muggleborns was not going to be enough, especially not with Hermione. That meant he must have done or said something to have earned Hermione's forgiveness and trust; two things that she did not dole out lightly. If Malfoy had shown himself to be worthy of affection from a woman as discerning as Hermione, then Harry was resigned to at least extend the courtesy of giving him the chance to either prove he'd truly changed or confirm Harry's worst fears.

Thinking back to how tightly Malfoy clutched Hermione's hand, Harry grimaced. Ron was going to absolutely lose it.

"Excuse me friends, the pregnant lady needs the loo," Ginny announced, pulling Harry out of his musings.

"I'll go with you," Hermione piped up. Harry did not miss the meaningful glance shared between the two women. He knew full well what that look meant: *we need to discuss this evening's progress away from*

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about each type of flower he'd selected, she crushed her lips against his and pressed him up against the door. She swiftly explained that her roommate was out for the night and pulled him along to her bedroom, the beautifully arranged flowers forgotten on the floor.

A month later and he was spending every weekend at her flat. Two months later and he told her he loved her (she responded in kind). Three months in, and she invited him to meet her parents (they thought he was a bit odd and too proper at first, but his quiet demeanor, impeccable manners, and erudite observations in conversation won them over within a mere few hours of introductions). More months flew by, and as their relationship blossomed and their love grew, Theo became so immersed in Muggle society and culture that he could comfortably discuss cricket with Sasha's father, lament global politics with her many uncles, dissect classic literature with her mother, chat about music with her pianist brother, and compare notes with her other brother on television shows and new films. It seemed the entire family was enamored with Sasha's gangly white boyfriend with the peculiar mannerisms and quiet enthusiasm for the world around him.

And every time Sasha had a question about Theo's mysterious past, he divulged just enough of the truth without disclosing anything about his magical life. His parents were dead (oh boy did that win him sympathy points with all of her aunts) and he'd survived an abusive childhood. He'd been sent to boarding school at a young age and had trouble fitting in, thus he didn't have many friends to speak of. He had a steady job in finance and could afford ridiculously fine dining and a posh home as the sole heir to his deceased father's fortune. Theo's hand had been forced into buying a furnished townhome in the Muggle neighborhood of Belgravia when Sasha once remarked that they never spent time at his place.

And so for the past year and a half, Theodore Nott convinced the woman he loved that he was nothing more than a Muggle accountant for the government. A lonely little rich orphan with no friends.

His mother lamented that he never spent time with her anymore. His elves were restless at Nott Estate with hardly any housework to be done or orders given by their absent master. His one friend, Draco, anxious to know why their Friday outings to the pub had diminished.

The double life started to eat at Theo. He loved Sasha with every fiber of his being, but how could he give himself to her fully when she didn't know the most fundamental thing about his existence? She had no idea how difficult it was at times to suppress the magic in his veins. She had no idea the horrors he'd survived as a child. She had no idea the horrors he'd survived at his boarding school at the hands of his father's master and cronies. She had no idea that had the Dark side won, he would have been expected to fall in line with his deranged father. He would have been expected to torture and kill people like Sasha and her family simply because they were non-magical.

And so when their talks drifted into the territory of houses, or futures, or forever, Theo's heart simultaneously soared in joy and clenched in panic. Sasha was everything he'd ever wanted: beautiful, smart, driven, friendly, kind, funny, and for some reason, as in love with Theo as he was with her.

But now he'd arrived at a crossroads. To tell, or not to tell. Keep up the charade or close this chap-

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but it was nothing for Theo, and he insisted on treating her.

The next week, she offered to cook for him at her flat, and Theo got his first look at a Muggle residence. He was fascinated by all the unfamiliar gadgets and appliances, but even more taken with the perfect salted caramel bread pudding she pulled out of the oven for dessert. He licked every last morsel from his spoon, and declared it the best thing he'd ever eaten. This caused the normally unerring confident Sasha to blush with pride at the compliment and ask tentatively, "Really? You think it's that good?" And instead of reassuring her that the dish was indeed one of the best things he'd ever tasted and that she was obscenely talented, her quiet question spurred a different reaction.

"You're so beautiful," he intoned softly and the moment he stopped speaking her lips were on his. The next thing he knew, she was straddling his lap in the kitchen chair as he stroked her braided hair while they kissed away the remnants of caramel from each other's lips and tongues. Just as Sasha went to put her hands under Theo's shirt, the door swung open and signaled the arrival of her roommate. Theo leapt up, embarrassed at almost being seen in such a position and then at almost sending Sasha tumbling to the floor.

He muttered a hurried apology and practically ran from her flat. What was he thinking? This had gone far enough. How could he have let himself get so caught up in this woman, a Muggle, when they could absolutely not have a future together? What a stupendously selfish and short-sighted bastard he'd been.

These feelings of self-loathing lasted a whole week before he could no longer deny the urge to talk with her one last time. It was meant to bring closure, but the words stuck in his throat the second she picked up the phone. Instead, out tumbled an apology as he begged, *begged*, her to let him make it up. She was rightfully angry with him but eventually accepted his offer to take her to dinner.

The restaurant was only two Michelin stars this time (so it probably wasn't very good, reasoned Theo) but Sasha seemed impressed. However, instead of a farewell dinner, Theo laid his heart on the line. He was sorry he'd reacted poorly. He didn't regret kissing her. He was frightened by what he felt for her. He'd never met a woman, or even a person, like her. He'd had a really rough childhood, his father had been a brute, and only now, after his death, did Theo finally feel free of him. He'd never had a serious relationship before, had no clue how to act on his feelings for her.

Sasha bore all of these truths stoically as he unburdened some of his darkest fears and Theo felt the knots in his chest easing with each truthful sentence he uttered. Barring Draco and his own healer, these were thoughts he'd never shared with anyone, and with each layer he peeled back he could see her eyes softening.

She didn't let him all the way off the hook that night. She thanked him for dinner and said goodbye with a chaste kiss to his cheek after he'd escorted her back to her flat. "You're a little bit broken. Not Theo, but I find I don't mind much," Sasha said softly before leaving him for the night.

The next week, they met for dinner again at her flat and Theo was nervous the entire walk over. He handed her an insanely extravagant bouquet of flowers when she opened the door that made her jaw go slack. She yanked him inside by his shirt and before he could launch into a detailed explanation

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the men, so let's take an orchestrated trip to the bathroom.

As Hermione stood to leave the table, Harry's observant eyes caught the fleeing expression on Malfoy's face. It was momentary, but the emotion that had flitted across his face at Hermione leaving was panic. The poor sod looked frantic at the thought of her leaving his side for even an instant.

Harry refilled his wine glass again.

Now, having two best friends meant Harry remained loyal to both Ron and Hermione in equal measure. If he could give Malfoy a chance out of duty to Hermione, then he could also grill Malfoy a bit out of duty to Ron.

"All right Malfoy, what's your game?"

Malfoy slowly finished chewing the bit of scallop in his mouth, delicately placed his silverware down, dabbed at his lips with his napkin, and only then met Harry's glare.

"My game?" He repeated back, devoid of emotion.

"Yes. I want to know what type of game you think you're playing here with Hermione."

"You think this is a game to me?"

Harry made no verbal reply, but stared back stoically.

"Do you even hear yourself Potter? Are you implying that I have managed to pull one over on one of the most intelligent witches to ever exist? Me, the person that Granger has been calling on his asshole behavior since she was 12 years old, somehow hoodwinked her into tolerating my presence for what—my own personal amusement?" Malfoy's gray eyes had taken on that steely glint Harry well remembered from school. He was hacked off. *Good.*

Harry remained undeterred. "Well, why else would you be here tonight?"

Malfoy sat back in his chair and swiped his wine. "I see." He downed the rest of his drink. "You want my statement of intent. While I could waste my breath and spout off all her best qualities, you've been friends with her far longer and are surely more than aware of what makes Granger so admirable."

Harry folded his arms across his chest. He certainly didn't expect Malfoy to start gushing about his feelings for Hermione, but he'd have to do better than such a detached response if he wanted to convince Harry of his affections for her.

It was Malfoy's turn to reach for a refill of wine. He waited him out, knowing Malfoy wouldn't appreciate the tense suspicion of Harry's silence.

And just as he predicted, Malfoy finally caved. "Do you know what I'd actually planned for this evening before your interfering wife made plans with Granger?"

"Enlighten me."

"The magical circus is in London, one night only, and completely sold out. However, a colleague of mine owed me a favor and I managed to procure two tickets off him. Granger has never been before. So, my evening was supposed to be taking Granger to her first ever magical circus performance and no doubt she'd be wearing some delightfully short Muggle-style dress, and I'd get the pleasure of her company and of watching her face light up in enjoyment instead of the pained little smiles she's been

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sporting tonight. Then, after dazzling her with my impressive choice of entertainment for the evening, I planned on taking her to a very exclusive cocktail lounge that has perfectly low lighting, which means I can sit as close to her as I like without glares from the general public. And finally, if I'm very, very lucky, she'd invite me back to her home for the night." He paused here and took a formidable swig of wine. "But I am not enjoying that wonderful evening that I'd secretly planned for Granger. No, I'm out to dinner with you and your moderately tolerable spouse."

Harry could only sputter out, "Er... why?"

"Because she asked me to be here tonight, so here I am." Malfoy replied, eyes fixed on a point over Harry's shoulder. There it was again: that slight softening around his mouth, the lightening of his eyes. Harry took a peek over his shoulder and saw what had captured Malfoy's attention. Hermione was walking back towards them, Ginny in tow.

"You do actually care about her then?" Harry asked quickly, before the women could hear their conversation.

Malfoy's intense eyes met Harry's, but his response was merely a quiet, "Yes, Potter, I should say I do."

Damn it all, this was really happening. *Ron is going to need to be well-fed, slightly inebriated, and wandless when Hermione breaks this news.*

Hermione sat back down with an apprehensive look on her face, glancing between Harry and Malfoy, but both men shot her tight smiles. *No hexes thrown, Hermione. See? We can behave in public.*

Dinner progressed less awkwardly, but still rather stilted from there. Harry managed a few questions to Malfoy about his work and even politely inquired about Narcissa's well-being.

There was even a moment of levity when the waiter dropped off the bill. Harry's hands were too quick for Hermione and he stuck his tongue out while she chastised him. "Harry James Potter you will let me pay for our meals!"

"Not a chance, Hermione."

"You got dinner last time!"

"And you brought me tea the other day."

"You brought me some of Molly's leftover treacle tart!"

Ginny finally interjected, "And Harry saved all of wizardkind but only because Hermione put up with his sorry asse for so long, blah, blah, blah. Just split it down the middle you two, Malfoy's probably bitten through his tongue by now to hold back some barb about self-righteous Gryffindors." She threw a hearty wink Malfoy's way and though he rolled his eyes, Harry swore he saw his lips twitch.

They said their goodbyes at the table, and Hermione hugged Harry extra hard after he offered his hand to Malfoy. Ginny waved them goodbye with a "Let's do this again soon!" and Harry thought it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, especially with how happy that suggestion made Hermione.

While Harry could admit that dinner with Hermione and Malfoy as a couple (*via Malin, that was going to take some getting used to*) wasn't completely intolerable, a seed of doubt still niggled in his mind. Letting Hermione and Malfoy leave first, Harry tugged on Ginny's arm.

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alive and well. Theo would describe their relationship as strained, at best). She patted his arm in sympathy, her lively eyes full of sadness for him, and Theo felt a warmth spread through his body that had nothing to do with alcohol.

He deftly turned the conversation back to her life, wanting to learn everything he could about her in this one night. Because when it was over, he'd go back to his lonely existence, but at least for tonight, he could be free of the burden of his heritage. Tonight he was just a bloke in a bar, chatting up a pretty girl.

Her friends eventually took their leave, but Sasha waved them off with a careless hand as they passed by, seemingly too interested in spending time with Theo. He couldn't stop the questions that tumbled forth: what was culinary school like? What was her favorite pastry to make? What was it like growing up in London? Why hadn't she followed in her parents' footsteps? Did she like having brothers? And on and on and on until they both jumped when the bartender announced last call.

Theo felt the despair sinking in as they settled their tabs and made to leave. He'd never felt more loose, more alive than when he'd been talking with Sasha, and now it was over and he'd never see her again. Sasha, however, had other plans.

"Here," she scribbled a series of numbers on a piece of paper and handed it to Theo. He looked down at it, confused. Was this some sort of code? And for what?

"My number," she said with a coy smile at his perplexed look. "I'd love to hang out again. Maybe you could buy me the drink next time? Have a good night, Not Theo." And with a cheery wave, she was off, leaving Theo standing in the middle of the sidewalk of Muggle London, clutching a scrap of paper and feeling like his entire world had shifted in but a few hours.

He succumbed into a frantic madness over the next few days, the likes of which he hadn't felt since he'd been studying for NEWTs. He needed to buy a mobile and figure out how to use it so he could communicate with Sasha. This was not like Theo, not at all. He was careful, quiet, methodical, rational. He kept his head down at the Ministry, and for the most part, no one really bothered him despite his last name. Connecting with Sasha could only lead to complications, something he studiously avoided in his current life, especially after the war. But an unexplainable urge coursed through him, an urge to seek out her company just one more time to see if those feelings from the other night had been real.

So he went back to the Ministry library. He read everything he could get his hands on about Muggle communication and technology. He basically interrogated a colleague in the Muggle Liaison Department on where to buy a portable phone. He ignored the puzzled looks from a Muggleborn witch he shared an office with as he asked her to show him how to use the mobile he'd purchased.

And so one week after meeting Sasha, he finally called her.

Two weeks later, they went on their first date: dinner at the pub and a movie. The movie terrified Theo, (how did Muggles still have their vision and hearing? That was nothing but two hours of an assault on the senses!) but he found he enjoyed sitting so close to Sasha.

A week later he took her to dinner at a restaurant that had something called "3 Michelin stars" and Sasha seemed gobsmacked when Theo told her where they'd be dining. Her eyes bugged at the bill,

As the barkeep approached, Theo opened his mouth to speak, but an exuberant voice cut him off.

"Can we get two more Cosmos, two lagers, an amber ale, a Guinness, and another pint of whatever this one's drinking?" She joked her head at Theo. His mouth fell open and he tried to sputter a refusal, but she had already carried some of the drinks back to her group. She returned twice more to carry everything and still Theo could not find his voice.

Finally, she returned clutching her glass of ale as the bartender slid another Guinness in front of Theo.

"Hello," she said, and perched herself next to him with that wide, confident smile.

"Ern, hi. Thanks for the drink."

"Well, I got tired of waiting for you to buy me one, so I reckoned I might save you the trouble of making the first move."

Theo almost spat out his drink at her forwardness.

"You have been staring at me right? Don't think I didn't notice."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb your evening," he said sincerely, and she threw her head back in a loud laugh.

"I did just buy you a drink, don't you think if I'd been offended I would have told you to bugger off?" she teased and Theo felt his entire face reddened all the way to the tips of his ears. The striking woman was regarding him with mirth in her bright, amber eyes, and Theo felt a fluttering inside his chest.

"I'm Sasha," she offered, and held out her hand primly.

"Not, Theo... I mean..." But Sasha had burst into laughter again and Theo found himself joining her this time at his blunder.

"Well are you Theo or not?" she teased.

"Let me try that again, I'm Theo Not."

"Nice to meet you Not Theo," she grinned as they shook hands.

Theo had never met a more easygoing person in his life. Sasha, he learned, was enrolled in the culinary school up the road, which explained the matching white jackets she and the rest of her group had slung over the backs of their chairs. He asked her question after question, eager to learn everything he could about her life. She loved culinary school, but wanted to specialize in pastry and work as a head pastry chef in a restaurant eventually. Her parents were both from Ghana and met and fell in love at university here in London. They'd bonded over their love of learning and were both still professors, her mother of English literature and her father of mathematics. She had two older brothers, one was a classical pianist and the other following their father's footsteps in maths.

Theo drunk in every word she said, fascinated, his pint of alcohol long forgotten. She eventually posed personal questions back to him, and Theo did his best to navigate around the truth. He told her his job was in finance for the government (technically true, he did work in finance but for the wizarding government). He had to wangle his backstory when it came to family, and instead told Sasha his parents were no longer around (half true, his father was dead but even though his mother remained

"Come on, I want to check something"

Ginny sighed. "You want to follow them in the cloak don't you?"

"Humor me, please Gin. You owe me for springing this dinner on me."

Ginny rolled her eyes and muttered, "Fine, you paranoid git."

Harry had timed their exit perfectly. Ducking into the coat-check closet, Harry threw the invisibility cloak over him and Ginny. Malloy and Hermione were right outside the restaurant, having just retrieved Hermione's cardigan.

The sidewalk was crowded with Muggles, being a Saturday night, so Harry and Ginny followed Malloy and Hermione as they ducked into an alley next to the restaurant, presumably to apparate.

Harry was unsure of what he thought he was going to find by following the couple, but he couldn't seem to squash his wary feelings when it came to Malloy. They came to a stop a few feet away, close enough to hear any conversation between the unsuspecting pair.

The subject of his suspicion currently stood behind Hermione and helped her into her cardigan. As Hermione lifted her sheet of curly hair to shrug her sweater on, Malloy leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to the exposed back of her neck. Hermione turned around and smiled sweetly up at him.

"Thank you for coming with me tonight."

Malloy shrugged. "Of course, Granger."

Hermione looped her arms around Malloy's neck and pulled him closer. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. That was less painful than expected. Potter didn't even throw out an accusation about having you under the Imperius Curse."

Malloy mostly achieved inouciance with his joke, but Harry detected the underlying vulnerability and immediately felt guilty. Malloy had done nothing tonight to deserve his suspicions of underhanded behavior. It was high time for Harry to let go of schoolyard grudges.

Hermione wasn't fooled by Draco's attempt at breeziness either. "I know I already said it, but thank you. It means so much to me that you and Harry can at least try to get along."

"Anything for you, Granger," Malloy said softly.

This was too much for Harry, Ginny, and Hermione.

Harry's jaw dropped in shock.

Ginny stuffed a fist in her mouth to hide her jubilant whoop of laughter.

Hermione tightened her hold on Malloy, backed him up against the building, and snugged him in earnest.

Harry would rather hunt down another ten Horcruxes than stand rooted to the spot while Hermione sucked face with Malloy, but Ginny had him by the elbow under the cloak.

When they finally broke apart after some of the most painful minutes of Harry's life (*did Malloy really need to grab Hermione by the hips and ease like that?*), Hermione came up for air to whisper huskily, "My place or yours?"

"Surprise me," Malloy replied with a smirk and the amorous couple apparated away.

Ginny threw off the cloak and doubled over in laughter while Harry glared at the space previously

Remain Nameless

occupied by a very handy duo.

“Serves you right,” chortled Ginny. Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know, I know. Hermione’s a grown woman but... I’m going to possibly need you to obviate me.”

Ginny looped her arms around Harry’s waist and drew him in for a heated kiss. “Well if I weren’t already up the duff I’d say you’d have a very good chance of getting me pregnant after that sexy show.”

“Nice, Gin.”

Ginny giggled and rested her forehead against his. “I love you. Now.” She wagged her eyebrows up at him. “My place or yours?”

Harry begrudgingly laughed.

“Surprise me.”

Hey Jude!9

different from the Ministry cars after all, but everything was so much louder and brighter out here. It had taken Theo this entire week for his senses to become accustomed to the busy atmosphere around him. Merlin, there were so many people, hustling to and fro, unbothered and unaware that a world of magic was concealed all around them.

He finally unfitted his lanky frame from the bench and walked through the doors of the pub he’d selected as his target for this mission. He, pureblood wizard Theodore Nott, son of a prominent Death Eater, was going to have a drink in a Muggle pub and it was all going to be fine.

On one of his reconnaissance visits earlier in the week, Theo had picked this particular pub based on the age of the patrons coming and going. The early evening crowd comprised young people around his age, usually in groups or couples, and it didn’t seem as rowdy as a few of the other establishments. One he wanted to avoid forever had an entire wall of glaring, overly bright boxes of light, which Theo later discovered were called televisions. Much too erratic for Theo, he wouldn’t know where to look.

He took a seat on a stool at the bar of his chosen pub, and ordered a pint of Guinness. The brochure of travel tips he found in the Ministry Library titled “How to Holiday in the Muggle World While Not Violating the Statute of Secrecy,” said this particular beverage tasted similar to a stout Theo often ordered at the Hag in the Hearth.

Theo took a tentative sip and discovered the brochure description to have been accurate. Seeing as step one of this operation had gone smoothly, he relaxed a little and looked around the moderately crowded pub.

This group of people were the greatest threat to the wizarding world? This unassuming bunch of humans going about their lives were somehow going to be eventually responsible for the collapse of magical society? How stupid was his father to have bought that preposterous lie?

Theo quietly snorted to himself and sipped his pint as the taste steadily grew on him. Boisterous laughter suddenly burst through the air, and Theo whipped his head to the right to locate the source.

And Theodore Nott was never the same again.

She caught his eye immediately. Her head thrown back in glee, the unrestrained joyfulness of her laugh carrying above those of her companions. Her smile was wide, genuine, and her teeth glowingly white against her complexion. She swept her long black braids into a ponytail behind her head, and then caught Theo’s gaze. He looked away quickly, focusing on not spilling his pint, embarrassed at being found staring.

After a few minutes, he couldn’t help himself. He looked across the room again. She was chatting animatedly with her group of friends, nodding emphatically at one of them, when she again looked up and straight at Theo. He averted his eyes.

This little dance went on for several more rounds, and though Theo cursed himself every single time, he couldn’t stop his stare from wandering back to her, this vivacious woman seemed to light up the entire room. She gave him a playfully challenging grin, and Theo knew he was in trouble.

Polishing off the last of his drink, he thought it was about time to settle his tab for the evening. He’d completed what he’d set out to do, and it was time to end the charade and go back to his world.

Remain Nameless

from one of your old friends because apparently I'm shy at reading social cues and what I had assumed was a friendly drink was, in actuality, a prelude to a shag?

Draco heaved a sigh as the bartender handed him a water and another beer for Susan. Maybe Draco could just close the tab and do a runner?

No, that would be awkward too, and more than a little cruel. Steeling himself, he made his way back to the table, trying not to visibly cringe as he approached. Susan gave him a rather thorough eye-fuck, her hungry expression zeroing in on him as she leaned further across the table.

He set her drink down and she raised an eyebrow at the sight of his water.

"Bones—"

"Susan."

"Whatever. Look, I'm really not good at this sort of thing and—"

"It's all right Malfoy, I'm perfectly aware you don't date much. That's why I asked you out."

Draco grii his teeth and tried not to scream in frustration. *I don't date much because I'm already with someone, thank you very much.*

"Which is very flattering, but I have to tell you—"

"I don't care that you haven't been with anyone for a while, and I certainly don't care about your past or teenage transgressions—"

"Wonderful, but—"

"I've been wanting to ask you out for months now because we get on so well when we work together, but I didn't feel like waiting for you to ask me, so here we are. It's not complicated, Malfoy, I'm attracted to you, we're both single, and my flat is just up the street."

On one level, Draco had to admire her boldness. She had looked him straight in the eye as she'd essentially propositioned him.

"I'm not single," Draco admitted flatly.

He had to avert his eyes as the color drained from Susan's face. "You're not?" she sputtered.

Draco shook his head. "Not for a few months now. We're uh... well, not many people know... not that we're hiding or anything just... not parading it about."

He looked back up and saw his inner mortification mirrored on her face. She cleared her throat.

"Does that mean you had no idea that I was asking you on a date?"

"None."

"Morgana's tits this is embarrassing," she groaned and covered her now flaming face in her hands. "Do I know the lucky lady?"

Draco froze, unsure of his next move. He and Hermione had agreed not to lie if directly asked, but Draco wasn't clear on whether this counted. When he remained silent for too long, Susan made the choice for him. "That means yes," she sighed. "Which witch do I need to avoid for the rest of my life?" Draco's eyes darted around the pub. Sod it all, they were adults in a relationship, why the fuck should this be a weird sort-of secret?

"Hermione Granger," he murmured, eyes continuing to glance around the moderately crowded

bar.

"Huh." Susan sat back in her seat, all embarrassment forgotten as she gazed thoughtfully at Draco.

"That's... unexpected, I'd say, but... good for you. And well, good for her, too, I suppose."

"Er... thanks?"

"Oh gods... she's going to kill me!" Susan suddenly whispered dramatically. Draco rolled his eyes.

"She's hardly the type. Aren't you two friends?"

"We're friendly enough but I don't think she'd much appreciate me trying to pull her boyfriend.

Any chance you could not tell her?"

Draco merely raised one pale eyebrow and Susan laughed in defeat, finally cutting some of the awkward tension.

"Right. Well, since I've thoroughly made a fool of myself for the evening, I think I'll head out."

Draco stood with her, unsure of how to leave this situation. "Look, you didn't know I was seeing her, not many people do. I honestly wasn't aware of your ah... *intentions*."

"I'm sure I'll recover after some more alcohol at home or I could just obliviate myself. Honestly, I'm still trying to wrap my mind around you and Hermione." She peered up at him with a small smile.

"You're revilingly happy with her, aren't you?"

"Happiness is for Hufflepuffs," he deadpanned and she laughed.

"Thanks for not being a complete arse about this. Let's do this again some time, but bring Hermione."

After Susan left, Draco immediately apparated to Hermione's home. When she answered the door, she looked a little worried and confused.

"Is everything okay?"

Draco opened and closed his mouth several times. What the hell did he rush over here for? He could have easily waited until coffee tomorrow and given himself some time to think of an eloquent explanation.

"It was an accident!"

Kill. Me. Now.

"What was? Are you all right, did something happen? Do you need—?"

Of course, she went right into emergency mode. Gods, he was beyond help at this point. "I'm fine,

I... look this whole thing is rather odd, can I come in and explain?"

When they'd settled on the couch, Draco steadied himself and took the time to form a coherent sentence before babbling on.

"I may have accidentally gone on a date."

Hermione blinked owlishly at him.

"I see." She said, even though Draco could tell she didn't, really. "How does one accidentally go on a date?" Her low and careful tone gave Draco the sense that an awful lot of trouble awaited him if he couldn't explain properly.

"A colleague stopped me after my Ministry meeting today and invited me out for a drink. I swear

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Remain Nameless

Granger, that's all I thought it was."

"Mmmhmm. Still not clear on this whole 'accidental date' thing."

Oh fuck, the narrowed eyes. Shit, shit, shit...

"Well, fuck, what was I supposed to think? It's not like witches are approaching me left and right, I had no clue she meant tonight to be a date. She pitched it as a chance to talk more about work!"

"And what finally clues you in?"

Draco's face reddened at the memory and Hermione's eyes somehow narrowed further.

"She may have mentioned that she lived close by and that I would be welcome to uh... accompany her home."

Thick, ominous silence met this statement. It belatedly dawned on Draco that Hermione's silence signified her need for him to elaborate.

"I obviously let her know that I'm not... available," he said hastily. "And I told her I was seeing you, specifically."

Those words softened Hermione's features slightly, but she remained undeterred. "Are you going to tell me who or do I need to guess?"

"Bones, Susan Bones."

"Oh! I like Susan! She does excellent work for her department," said Hermione brightly. But then she turned off to the side, and Draco didn't miss the way her face suddenly fell, her gaze landing on the floor. "She's quite pretty," she said softly.

"Sorry?"

"Susan is quite pretty," repeated Hermione faintly.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

Hermione shrugged, but still wouldn't look at Draco. "Nothing, it just makes sense I suppose, for a woman like her to pursue you."

Draco frowned. "Don't be nonsensical Granger. I didn't ask for this. The second I realized her true intentions I made it known I'm not interested. Why does it matter if she's quite pretty?"

"You agree with me then, that she's quite pretty?"

"Don't put words in my mouth, that's not what I said," growled Draco in exasperation.

Hermione gave another half-hearted shrug, looking a little defeated. The silence stretched on between them and Draco began to question whether honesty had been the right call in this situation. He seemed to have only caused more trouble by blundering over here and spilling his guts like a nervous Third Year.

Why the hell was Granger fishing for compliments? Draco was here, wasn't he? Not off mindlessly shagging some random bint just because she threw him a smile. Did she really think so low of him? No, it finally dawned on Draco, *she thinks that low of herself*.

He really wasn't adept at this sort of thing, but for Granger, he could try. Draco reached over and took one of her hands in his, getting her to finally look at him.

"I don't tell you enough, do I?" he asked softly.

Hey Jude!9

"All right."

A half hour later, Draco could admit that this had not been a total mistake. Susan possessed more than a bit of quidditch knowledge, despite her poor choice in team.

"They're almost as bad as the Cammois now," beremoaned Susan.

"No one's forcing you to still support them," Draco pointed out, polishing off his lager.

"Hey! I'm no fair weather fan! And next season, when the Appleby Arrows are crowned league champion, you'll be eating those words," she said smugly. "Oh who am I kidding," she snorted. "We're doomed for at least the next five seasons. Couldn't throw some of those star players on your roster our way could you?"

"Not a chance."

"Prat," Susan teased. "I'm starved, want to order some food?"

Draco again pulled the wristwatch move. He had no plans tonight to see Hermione since it was a Thursday, so he really had no place to be. No one in this particular pub seemed to care about him showing his face in public (after all, he and Theo drank regularly here) and Bones had yet to become intolerable company.

"Sure. The venison stew's decent."

They ordered another round of drinks and for the first time in his life, Draco willingly ate a meal with a Hufflepuff. They stayed to the safe topics of quidditch and Susan's work in the Department of International Cooperation, Draco actually finding himself interested in her travel tales and surprised at the extent of her work.

"My current tally is 5 continents and 26 countries."

"Not bad," Draco drawled. "And in all your time globe-trotting, you've yet to pick up another language besides Spanish? That's honestly a little pathetic."

"Oh I'm sorry, not all of us were raised with a private French tutor at our beck and call."

"My grandparents taught me the language, I'll have you know. You're thinking of the Latin tutor."

Susan chuckled and Draco indulged in a grin at his joke. Seeing that they were both nursing their last sips, Draco stood and held a hand out for her glass.

"Fancy another? I'll grab this round."

Susan nodded slowly and drained her glass and put it in Draco's outstretched hand, but as he began to pull away, she brushed her fingers against his.

"Careful, Malfoy. I think one more of these and I'll need you to help me home," she said in a low voice and smiled coyly at him. *Oh. Well, fuck*

Draco immediately turned towards the bar and tried not to have a panic attack. Fucking Salazar, had this been a date the whole time? Merlin's arse, how the fuck did this happen? He had completely misread the entire situation and had no idea how to walk this back without looking like a prize idiot. Which he was, by the way, per usual. Fuck.

Shit, Hermione was going to kill him. Draco ran his hands through his hair nervously as he waited for the bartender. How did he even begin to explain this? *Sorry Granger, but I accidentally accepted a date*

Remain Nameless

used to it by now but...” he trailed off with a shudder.

“More for me then!” She topped off her own glass. “Since you’re here Harry, you might as well stay for dinner. I haven’t got much in, so where would you two like to order from?”

“The curry place.”

The only sounds that could be heard for the next several minutes were Hermione’s peals of laughter at Draco and Harry’s unintended joint response.



“Hey Malfoy!”

Draco turned at the sound of his name and saw Susan Bones hustling to catch up with him as everyone else filed around him and out of the conference room. The Ministry meeting with Draco’s office had just concluded budget talks for the upcoming charity match next month. This year, Switzerland would host England, which meant significantly less work for the Ministry, but Whisp & Wright employees would be just as busy with preparations for the English team.

“Miss Bones.”

“Susan is fine,” she waved away his propriety. “Anyway, I have the close-out report from last year’s charity match. Our French counterpart ‘forgot’ to send us an English copy,” she rolled her eyes in disbelief. “Could you do a quick translation for my department? The spells are absolute rubbish and it would be much faster a job if I had someone I trusted to do it right the first time.”

“Err, all right.” Someone trusted him? Well that was news to Draco. “When do you need this by?”

“Next Friday?”

“That’s fine,” his gray eyes scanned the parchments in his hand. “Oh this won’t take long... do you want me to include all his snide comments about the quality of British stadium food?”

Susan huffed. “Oh for Merlin’s sake... yes, please include it as exactly as possible. It’s an official Ministry report so it needs to be word for word.”

“No problem, see you around Miss... Susan.”

He turned away but she called him back again. “I was just heading out to the Hag in the Hearth. Are you free for a drink? We can chat more about those broom recs for next month.”

Draco frowned and made a show of glancing at his wristwatch to buy himself thinking time. He could not remember the last time a person who was not Theo or Hermione had invited him anywhere. But he didn’t really know Susan Bones at all outside of the Ministry meetings. She seemed competent enough, and despite her aunt’s death at the hands of Death Eaters, seemed to harbor no ill-will towards Draco. This would be harmless right? Just a drink with an acquaintance. Normal people did this all the time, according to his healer. Besides, Bones supposedly maintained friendly relationships with not only Hermione, but Potter and Potter’s wife, and various Weasleys. This could be to Draco’s benefit in the eventual future where the rest of the world became privy to his relationship with Granger.

Hey Jude!9

She stared back blankly, so Draco clarified. “That you’re beautiful.”

I love you

Hermione’s face flushed. “That’s not what I... I mean, you don’t have to... I mean, thank you,” she stammered and looked away again. Draco, having none of this, cupped a hand under her chin and forced her face up.

“You’re beautiful.”

This time she rolled her eyes, but Draco recognized the practiced deflection, a stab at feigned annoyance to veil her true emotions. This incredible woman always heard about her cleverness, her nobility, her bravery... Draco had an inkling there was another trait she longed to hear associated with her name on occasion. The memory of their conversation after the ballet all those months ago popped into his mind. “*I’d love to have someone who thought of me as more than a bratty bookworm, who would bring me flowers or take me out on dates.*”

“Enough of this, stand up.” Draco said suddenly.

“Why?” she asked warily.

“Humor me.”

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms, but stood off the couch all the same. She raised an expectant brow as she stared down at him. Draco stood too, towering over her small frame. He took her by the hand and led her to the bedroom, where he tugged her in front of her full-length mirror and stepped behind her.

“It appears I’ve been quite the neglectful boyfriend,” he drawled. He swept her hair over one shoulder and pressed a kiss to her neck. He wanted to devour her skin, addicted to her taste, but knew that patience would be essential here.

“If the woman I’m seeing isn’t convinced of her own beauty, then I’ve failed spectacularly,” he whispered, then gently nipped her ear lobe. He felt her shiver and moved his hands from her arms down to rest on her hips.

“You’re beautiful,” he repeated, then gently tugged her shirt up, helping her get it over her head. He undraped her bra next, sliding the straps down one at a time and kissing the tops of her shoulders.

“Let me show you,” Draco whispered, then walked around to stand in front of Hermione. He trailed his fingers lightly down the side of her face, and then hovered them over her lips, which parted instantly at his touch. She surprised him when she opened her mouth further and sucked on the length of his pointer finger. His trousers became painfully tight at the sight of her pretty mouth wrapped around his digit.

“Good girl,” he growled and she smiled. *Finally*, he thought, *no more of this meek nonsense from his witch*. His beautiful witch.

Draco pulled his finger from her mouth so both hands could lightly caress and massage her breasts. Hermione hissed in a breath at the contact, eyes fluttering closed.

“Gods, I could do this all day, Granger, your tits are glorious.”

He crouched and ducked his head down and took a nipple into his mouth. “Beautiful,” he mur-

mured against her chest, delighting in the way he'd caused her to pant. Draco knelt in front of her to unbutton and remove the rest of her clothing. With Hermione bare before him, he wasted no time and immediately licked and kissed at the apex of her thighs. Merin, he loved eating her out, she always came astoundingly quickly. Giving into the sensations caused by his tongue, Hermione soon grabbed onto his hair and cried out in pleasure. He hoped she watched all this in the mirror behind him.

Draco craned his neck up to look at her. "How could I ever notice another woman when I have you?"

Still breathing hard and coming down from her orgasm, she only managed a shake of her head. Draco stood and held her to his chest.

Finally she could form words. "Because you're so... so bloody fit! I mean... Merin... have you seen yourself? I'm... well I'm decent-looking enough, I suppose, but next to you..."

While this did quite the number on Draco's ego, it made him thoroughly uncomfortable that she felt some large delta existed between their levels of attractiveness.

"How many times? How many bloody times do I have to say it?" he growled in frustration, and she looked up at him, wide-eyed.

Draco stepped back from her and began removing his own clothing.

"It seems you still haven't gotten the lesson. Lucky for you, I'm a very patient teacher."

Once he was also naked before her, he glared down at her. "Get on the bed... please," he intoned.

When Hermione had positioned herself with her back to the headboard and knees drawn up against her chest, Draco shook his head.

"Lags down Granger, don't you dare hide," he murmured, still standing at the foot of the bed.

She huffed out an indignant breath and raised her chin, but complied all the same. Draco licked his lips at the sight before him. He would make her feel incomparably stunning if it was the last thing he did.

Mine

His eyes raked up and down her nude body, taking their time to commit every square inch of her skin to memory. Laid out before him like the most delectable feast, his cock screamed at him to just fuck her into the mattress already.

But this time needed to be about Hermione.

Draco ran his tongue over his lips again, but slower this time, making sure to keep his eyes locked on hers. His gaze was drawn to her chest though, as it rose and fell rapidly.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice tinged with apprehension, her stare quizzical.

Draco shrugged, feigning indifference. "A simple practical demonstration." He wrapped one hand around his aching hard member and stroked it slowly. "There's no need for you to talk, I have everything I need right in front of me."

He noticed her throat bob and she released a shaky exhale as her brown eyes zeroed in on the way his hand pumped himself up and down. Draco focused on different areas of her body to appreciate while he pleased himself, desperate to relieve some of the tension built from tasting her. Her eyes,

seemed to have a hatred of quietly minding his own business in addition to proper hair care products. "So, you and Hermione... that's still going well?"

"Obviously," sneered Draco. "It would be going even better if you'd not popped by with your cheap swill."

Potter shrugged and grinned boyishly. "This is a tradition, wait until she sees."

Merin help him, but he'd take "easily riled Potter" over "chummy Potter" any day.

"So where is your better half this evening? She seems more the type to burst through a friend's Floo at inopportune moments."

"Yes, where's Gin?" called Hermione as she re-entered, now covering significantly more skin in jeans and a long-sleeve shirt.

"She sends her regrets, but she's absolutely knackered. She's tired all the time now, I guess it's a first trimester thing. Oh and Malfoy?"

Potter turned and smirked at Draco. "I will absolutely be telling her you referred to her as my better half. Good luck living that down."

Draco scowled but made no comment, lamenting the loss of the natural hatred that had once flourished between himself and Potter.

Hermione spotted the bottle on the coffee table and laughed affectionately. "Oh Harry, you didn't!

It's a work night!"

"Do you really think that's going to stop me? Come on Hermione, it'd be bad luck not to!"

Hermione filled in the gaps for Draco. "Harry and Ron think it's ever so hilarious that the first time I ever got drunk was on extremely cheap strawberry-flavored champagne. Every time we have something to celebrate, they buy me a bottle and force me to drink it."

"Malfoy's aristocratic sensibilities might not be able to handle this," joked Potter. "I picked it up at your nearest petrol station."

Draco rolled his eyes, but accepted a glass nonetheless. Gods, Potter's "annoying kid brother" schtick needed to die, what with this hanging around when he's not wanted, making sure Draco's balls remained blue for the rest of the evening.

"How did you find out about my promotion?"

"Aunt," said Harry, referring to Hermione's boss. "He caught up with me in the canteen and told me, I'm so proud of you, Hermione."

To Draco's horror, Hermione's eyes watered. *Oh for fuck's sake...*

"Thanks Harry," she said shakily, and reached over to squeeze Potter's hand. Potter's eyes looked a little starry too, but his voice firm when he raised his glass in a toast.

"To Hermione! Next stop, Minister for Magic!"

Hermione snorted in humble disbelief and they all tipped their glasses back. Potter wasn't kidding, this shit tasted absolutely awful. "Granger, you can't be serious," Draco coughed. "That's bloody disgusting."

Potter wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "I have to agree, Hermione. You'd think I'd be

the side table.

Running his hands up her sides, a delighted Draco discovered she'd foregone a bra underneath his shirt. He groaned against her lips and trailed his fingers under the fabric to assess the knickers situation. A soft satin met his fingertips while her tongue began to slide against his. Hermione dropped her empty champagne glass and Draco heard it thunk and roll away, while her now freed hands took up the mission of undoing his shirt buttons.

His chest bared to her now, Hermione ducked her head down to pepper open-mouthed kisses to his skin, while Draco kept a firm grip on her backside to keep her center pressed against his stiffened cock, their bodies rocking fervently into one another. If she wanted to celebrate her promotion by shagging him through the sofa, then fair be it from him to deny the beautiful witch making him lose all sanity with her lips and the sensuous movement of her hips. This was certainly Draco's best Tuesday evening in recent memory.

Mine

Lost in the pleasurable feelings, neither realized the Floo had activated and another person had entered the living room.

"Hey Hermione I just heard—OH JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!"

Hermione shrieked in surprise and mortification and rolled quickly off Draco's lap. "Hi Harry!" she said in a voice several pitches too high.

One of the most awkward silences of Draco's life stretched on while Hermione pulled the shirt as far down her body as it could go and a red-faced Harry Potter looked at the floor.

Draco sighed and fixed his disheveled hair and buttoned up his own shirt. "Evening Potter," he drawled, getting the worst of it over.

Harry cleared his throat. "Sorry for ah... interrupting, I uh—"

"It's fine Harry," assured Hermione, a statement with which Draco disagreed wholeheartedly. "I forgot to close the Floo after Malfoy came through. We were just umm... celebrating some good news I received today..."

"Yes, that's why I dropped by!" Potter recovered and pushed his glasses up his nose, a tic of his that Draco despised. "I may or may not be privy to information regarding the very recent promotion of one Hermione Granger." The prat's morose smile faded from his face. "But I see I'm intruding so..."

Yes Potter, you are intruding. Boy-Who-Lived-to-Cook-Black

"No, not at all, let me umm, put some clothes on."

Potter at least had the decency to avert his eyes from Hermione as she crossed the room in naught but a dress-shirt belonging to Draco.

Left alone together, Potter had the audacity to offer a sheepish grin to Draco and inquire mischievously, "All right there Malfoy?"

"I've been better," Draco replied dryly.

Potter dropped a bottle he'd brought on the coffee table and took a seat in an armchair, making himself right at home. Draco resigned himself to sitting in silence until Hermione returned, but Potter

her full lips, the curve of her shoulders, her tits, the dip of her hips, her thighs, her calves... "So bloody beautiful," he said in an awed voice, increasing his speed a little as he bit his lip.

Her lips parted and she squirmed under his intense gaze. "You don't have to do this just to make me feel better," she said weakly.

"Shut up and spread your legs for me."

The abruptness of his forceful command made her mouth snap shut as her legs fell open. Draco fought the urge to come instantly into his own hand.

Mine

He let out a sort of strangled groan at the sight of her glistening, wet center and worked his cock even faster. She was panting too, even though he was the one touching himself, and he saw her hands clench into fists at her sides.

"I can't take this anymore, please come touch me!"

He instantly removed his hand. "Oh thank Merlin..." Draco moaned and finally crawled up her body. "Do... you... believe... me... yet?" he mumbled into her mouth between kisses.

"Yes, yes, you're very convincing, now please get inside me," she said impatiently. *I love you*

"As the lady wishes."

Afterwards, when she'd all but collapsed in his arms, Draco drew her close and buried his face in her hair.

"Malfoy?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you."

I love you

Draco didn't reply, just held her closer still. He knew he shouldn't ask. He knew it would sound silly, whiny, and pathetic. But he needed to know.

"How often did Weasley compliment you?"

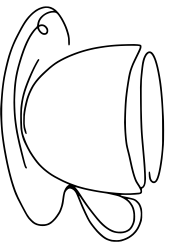
He both felt and heard the sigh that left her mouth.

"I suppose now is as good a time as any for this."

"For what?"

Hermione tipped her head up to look at him.

"To exorcise the ghosts of relationships past."



Chapter Twenty Nine

Hermione took a deep breath and steeled herself. Despite the intensity of her feelings for Draco, they still had many long-buried issues to overcome, and this was a logical place to begin. He deserved to know why things hadn't worked with Ron. He deserved the reassurance that she wasn't going anywhere, that right here, right now, in his arms she felt more content than she had in years.

Hermione spoke until her voice went hoarse.

Harry and Ginny's wedding marked the beginning of the end.

Hermione had been a model maid of honor the entirety of the engagement, and the morning of the wedding was no different. She helped Molly get ready, made sure Ginny ate some breakfast, repaired a stray thread on the veil, tugged a squirming Victoire into her flower girl dress, ensured her own hair and makeup weren't a total disaster, poked her head into the groom's room to check he wasn't a nervous wreck (he was, but Ron handled it), refilled Arthur's whisky glass, straightened Ron's bow tie, and when she returned to the bride to find her standing nervously in front of the mirror looking radiant yet anxious, she assuaged Ginny's fears that Harry would of course melt at the sight of her coming down the aisle.

"You really think so, Hermione?" The normally boisterously confident redhead trembled as she asked the question. Oh, Ginny. Here stood the girl who could outfly all of her brothers who charged into the Battle of Hogwarts even though she'd been underage, who helped Neville organize a revolution under the Carrows' disgusting noses. Nothing and no one scared Cateora Weasley, except the great Harry Potter.

Hermione wanted to roll her eyes, but instead, squeezed the bride's shoulders and said she'd bet 5 Gallions that Harry would be reduced to tears.

Easiest money she'd ever made.

They were married on September 1st in the backyard of the Burrow because Harry is nothing if not sentimental. His favorite day of the year at his favorite place. When Hermione reached the end of the aisle in her lovely dusty pink gown, she almost let a few tears slip. She wanted to run into Harry's arms and burst into tears and sob over and over how he truly deserved a perfect day like today. Instead, she shot him a tremulous smile and mouthed "love you." He nodded shyly and returned the sentiment and of course cried when Ginny reached the end of the aisle. Across the way, Ron caught

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I accepted, of course, but the paperwork won't be signed until tomorrow. Juanita is the only other person who knows, she stopped in to congratulate me on her way out today. Oh Merlin, I'm going to have quite the time filling her shoes. I should schedule an interview with her to go over the transition of duties and—"

"Whoa, whoa, Granger slow down! Take a minute to bask in your achievement. Off with those work robes, we're celebrating tonight. Actually, hold that thought, I'll be right back."

Fifteen minutes later, Draco stepped out of Hermione's fireplace once more, this time clutching a bottle of vintage champagne from his wine cellar.

"Just so you know, I only have two of these bottles, so consider yourself—"

What Hermione should consider herself, she would never find out. The rest of Draco's sentence died on his lips as he took in the sight before him on the couch. *Oh, fuck, I love you.*

"Is that my shirt?" he croaked, throat dry.

Hermione's lips curved into a playful smile. "I do believe it is, yes."

"Just something else you've stolen, eh?"

Hermione unfurled her bare legs from the couch and walked slowly towards him. The white, colored dress shirt brushed the tops of her thighs, and she'd shaken her soft curls loose from the confines of their bun.

He knew she'd object to the thought if he were stupid enough to voice it aloud, so he kept silent.

But the word that had crossed his mind when he laid eyes on her in his shirt was: *Mine.*

He wanted to growl the word in her ear while he made love to her. He wanted to hiss the word at every male idiot that had the stones to even glance at her. He wanted to shout the word at the entire world while she stood at his side.

Mine. Mine. Mine. All mine.

She stopped just short of him and inspected the bottle in his hand. "I may or may not have accidentally left with this article of clothing after the last time I stayed over at yours."

"I see," he said and licked his lips. "This is certainly curious attire, Ms. Deputy Director, hardly appropriate for a high-ranking Ministry official such as yourself. But what I'd like to know ..." Draco closed the minuscule distance between them and fingered the top button of the shirt. "... is what have you got on underneath this?"

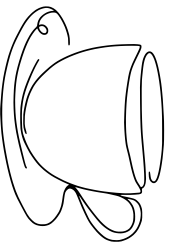
Hermione raised her wand and summoned two glass flutes from the kitchen.

"Pour me some of this absurdly expensive champagne and I just might show you."

Draco deftly popped the cork with his wand and filled their glasses. Drinks in hand, Hermione led him back to the couch and lightly pushed him down to sitting. She sipped her champagne as she lowered herself to straddle his lap.

"Not that I'm complaining, but you are aware that my birthday was last month, yes?"

Hermione cocked an eyebrow and drained her glass in the next go. Before Draco could quip that champagne of this quality was meant to be sipped and savored, not chugged like some common tavern ale, she captured his mouth in a bruising kiss. He had enough wherewithal to deposit his drink on



Chapter Twenty Eight

July 2008

The inner front pocket of his robes felt warm. Opening the two-way journal, Draco saw a pleasantly surprising request from Hermione awaited him.

Could you come muna my place tonight?

Of course, he hastily scribbled back. Everything all right?

Fine, I just want to see you.

If Draco could see himself grinning like a fool at his desk, he'd hex his own face off. They typically didn't spend weekday evenings together, so this was a delightful detour from his usual Tuesday routine. As the clock ticked closer to the end of the work day, however, a more insidious thought crept into his mind.

Her message had been rather short, no? Quite brusque? No emotional punctuation, no term of endearment... never mind that they weren't the sort of couple (yet) for that type of behavior.

But still, something about the detached, brief note left worry growing in his gut. By the time Draco stepped out of her Floo, he had managed to convince himself that Hermione had summoned him over to break things off with him.

To his enormous relief, the second Hermione spotted him she beamed and flung her arms around him. "I got it! I got it!"

Draco pulled back and grinned down at her. "Am I to assume I'm now in the presence of the new Deputy Director of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?"

"Yes!" she squeaked, eyes shining with pride. She pressed a fierce kiss to his lips. *I love you.*

"Didn't I tell you they'd give it to you? Don't know why you were so nervous."

"I know, I know, but I'd never want to presume something like this."

"Is it official then? Did they announce?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not yet. Aunt came to my office just before lunch to offer me the post.

Hermione's eye and he playfully grimaced. Hermione hid a giggle in her bouquet.

Then the toasts began and swept her joyful emotions aside to make way for something altogether strange.

Hermione watched two people she loved pledge themselves to each other for all eternity in this life and the next and all the lives beyond. But people get married every day. They listen to the officiant and mindlessly repeat back the words and perhaps most of them understand what they're signing up for (richness and health, richer or poorer, blah, blah, let's get to the reception) but honestly they're just traditional words to echo to give some weight to the occasion.

Not for Harry and Ginny.

Never in her life did Hermione see and hear two people pledge themselves so fervently, so earnestly to one another. She wanted to look away. It felt too intimate, too pure for all these people to witness as Harry and Ginny recited oaths to be bound to one another for life. Every syllable the couple uttered imbued with a burning love so fierce and bright that Hermione felt unworthy to stand in the presence of such honest and raw passion.

The joy that she felt for her dearest friends gave way to a stab of misery so sharp that she almost staggered. The flowers in her hand suddenly felt as if they weighed two tons. The tears streaming down her face no longer the happy variety but of a painful, twisted grief. Pulling her eyes from the blissful couple, her gaze landed beyond Harry and on to Ron. He too no longer paid the marrying couple any mind. His mouth, usually pulled into a lopsided grin at family events, fixed in a confused frown. When his blue eyes met hers, Hermione froze in her aching heart that they had both arrived at the same devastating conclusion.

The awful pronouncement was posed some time later as a question by Ron. As they swayed lightly on the dance floor together, their gaze drifted over to the happy newlyweds. Harry and Ginny only had blissful eyes for one another, faces shining with unreserved adoration.

"Do you think that will ever be us?" Ron asked quietly.

No.

"Ron I—"

But she might as well have screamed her initial thought.

"Shh, Hermione. It's all right."

He gathered her closer to his chest so she could hide her face as her tears fell. She loved Ron so much and felt loved by him in return. She felt beautiful in his eyes, and in the early days of their relationship, the compliment felt off his tongue at least once a day.

But the thought of standing at an altar and consenting to a life-bond and really, truly meaning it with all her being? She couldn't picture it. They weren't Harry and Ginny and they never would be. They could not be the all-consuming, driven to the brink of madness with passion, type of love that each deserved to find.

Ron and Hermione's romantic relationship bloomed in war time, borne in fire and blood. When the dust from the Battle of Hogwarts had settled, there'd been no question of them going their separate ways. They were a unit now. Hermione witnessed with pride as Ron became the paragon of steadfast strength that his family so desperately needed in the trying months of grieving, following the war.

When Arthur threw himself into helping rebuild the Ministry, Ron spent time with Molly to make sure she didn't collapse in on herself from losing Fred. When Ginny needed to exorcise her rage and pain, he went flying with her and organized pick-up quidditch with Harry and their siblings. When Percy still felt awkward and guilty around the family's

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Ron invited him into every conversation, made his new girlfriend feel welcome, and hugged him every chance he got. When George relied too much on familiarity and Dreamless Sleep Potion, Ron took over the joke shop and solicited the help of Lee Jordan and Angelina to keep both the business and his brother afloat. When Charlie returned to Romania and Bill and Fleur returned their focus to their growing family at Shell Cottage, Ron stepped up his help around the Burrow so his parents never felt alone. When Hermione needed to travel to Australia to restore her parents' memories and bring them home, he supported her the entire trip and didn't complain once. He held her hand when her parents became angry and distraught when they finally remembered what their only daughter had done to them.

For someone whom Hermione once accused of having the emotional range of a teaspoon, Ron Weasley had certainly proved her wrong and then some.

But when you've given so much of yourself to everyone around you, what's left for you? When Harry announced he would be entering the Animagus program, she saw the brief glint of regret in Ron's eyes. It had always been him, Harry, and Hermione, side by side, defying darkness. But Ron just couldn't do it anymore. George needed him. His family needed him. Ron threw himself into Weasley's Wizard Wheezes and never looked back.

Before Hermione and Ron knew it, a few years had gone by. If anyone asked, they were happy together. Young and in love. Would they be getting married soon? What was the hold up? Harry and Ginny were engaged, so shouldn't you two not be far behind?

We have time, Ron and Hermione told each other. We have all the time in the world. For now, let's take care of each other, yeah?

But soon, that's all it became. Grief and recovery. Holding one another just to get through another sleepless night. Fights that used to end in passionate makeup sex now ended with sighs and long silences. The question of an engagement and marriage always pointed to some other time in the future. Perhaps that blasé attitude about commitment should have clued at least one of them in, but it became easier to stay in the comfort of the familiar and expected. It was slowly killing them both.

Ron had spent so much time and energy healing everyone around him that he neglected to let himself heal. He couldn't find the words to articulate his own pain. Hermione realized one day that she learned so much on Ron that even she remained blind to his anguish. They eventually had long, tear-filled discussions about the war and guilt, about what they lost, about how far they'd come, and the love between them morphed into a different sort of love. They became affectionate flat mates. There was still laughter and joy, but the days where Hermione came home from work and felt a gapping maw in her chest increased in frequency. So too did the days where Ron came home with a narrowing emptiness in his blue eyes that Hermione tried desperately to chase away.

With all their time and effort built into propping each other up just to make it through another day, things like romance, sex, and dating fell by the wayside. What were they to each other anymore? Who were they to themselves?

And so when confronted with the blinding strength of the love bond between Harry and Ginny, the veil was lifted. When they returned home to their flat that evening after the wedding, they made love for the last time. Hermione cried when it was over and Ron held her close until morning. When the daylight began creeping through the blinds, Ron kissed her on the forehead and said, "I'll go to George's, you can keep the flat."

But Hermione insisted he stay here, since it sat down the street from the joke shop. Eventually they agreed that Ron would move in with George for the week, giving Hermione time to move to her own flat with her things, and then Ron

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Gathering up the collection of letters, he dropped them in the library fireplace, igniting the pieces of parchment in a quick flick of his wand on his way out the door.

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let out a choked sob. Why had his mother kept the piano? Why had she never said where it came from? What else had she hidden from him all these years? Was she so proud that she would coldly spurn her sister's overtures at reconciliation? Or perhaps she felt she had to hide this from Father?

But she kept it. She bloody kept the letter and the piano. Why not reach out now, with the war over and Father gone?

None of this made sense to Draco, and he clutched his head in his hands as tears continued to fall, the emotional weight of this discovery like a wallop to his gut. Drying his eyes, the sorrow soon gave way to the fires of anger. Part of him wanted to smash the instrument in front of him to bits and then set the pieces ablaze. He was so fucking sick and tired of paying for his parents' choices.

In a rage, Draco tore up the stairs to his library. Locating the pile of letters from his mother, Draco threw himself behind his desk and scanned every single one from the past year.

...I met the most captivating young witch, Draco, and wouldn't you know, she's planning to visit London next week...

...Madame Avery sends her regards as well, and I'm sure you know her niece is a highly accomplished...

...say they have no use for house elves here, and really, they could not be more wrong on that front...

...why just yesterday I had the most delightful meal with her and her husband, who incidentally, spoke to me of several political posts that could be in need of an English-speaking liaison...

...wouldn't mind just popping into Twilfitt and Tatlings for me? Their spring collection just debuted in Paris and I need...

...she graduated Beauxbatons two years before you, darling, so perhaps you've already made her acquaintance from the Triwizard Tournament?

Trivial nonsense, all of it. All her silly letters contained were useless gossip, sly hints about Draco switching to a career more befitting his family's shady political past, and endless recommendations of wealthy pureblood witches handpicked by Narcissa to entice Draco into finally settling down.

Not one line of substance.

If he were being honest, he hardly poured his heart out to his mother when he replied. Truthfully, his responses became more and more cursory as he spent less time at home and more time with Hermione.

Narcissa's most recent letter included an apology for not being able to return to England for his birthday as some high-society family needed her assistance with planning their annual summer gala (a true honor to be asked to help, she assured him). She would be back in July and they could celebrate properly then.

Draco barely retained the information as he pushed the letters away and sat back heavily in his desk chair.

Was it worth the cost, Mother? How can you go on pretending that our family isn't a fucking force?

A sudden glimpse of his watch pulled Draco out of his melancholy. He had to head out soon to the Wasps' match tonight against the Falmouth Falcons, and thank Merlin for quidditch or he'd be staring down a lonesome evening trying to stave off a mental collapse.

could move back. Alone.

They agreed not to tell anyone except George until Harry and Ginny returned from their honeymoon. When the news broke, the Weasleys were devastated, to say the least. Hermione heard from Ginny that, in an astounding surprise turn from expected behavior, Molly sent Ron a very lengthy Howler about daring to end his relationship with Hermione.

She stayed away from the Burrow for all of one week before Molly and Arthur showed up on her doorstep. "You're our daughter too, whether you date Ron or not," they insisted and all three of them cried into their tea.

Things were awkward at first, but Ron and Hermione had so many years of friendship built into their faces that soon enough, they were able to hug again without blushing furiously.

Ron, bless him, even asked her permission to date another witch about three months after their breakup. Hermione laughed and said of course, but also went home that evening and drank an entire bottle of wine by herself. Certainly not because she still loved Ron, no, Hermione felt as if everyone around her had moved on when she had yet to pick up the pieces of her shattered life. Would another man ever appreciate or love her the way Ron once had? What was she even doing anymore? She had no boyfriend, an entry-level job in the government, and a stilted relationship with her parents.

Two weeks later, she ran into Viktor Krum at Neville and Hannah's wedding. Two months after that, she took an international portkey to Bulgaria to attend one of his matches, which led to her first sexual experience with someone not named "Ron Weasley."

During Viktor felt exciting at first. The Daily Prophet and the international press absolutely adored them as a couple. Viktor was attentive and completely besotted with her, and gave a huge boost to Hermione's confidence with his rather voracious appetite in bed. Hermione tried to attend as many matches as she could, but with her career at the Ministry finally ramping up, international travel became more tiresome. She tried, really she did, to enjoy quidditch matches. She respected Viktor's passion and his chosen career, but being a quidditch girlfriend could be beyond exhausting if one had no love for the sport. Given his level of fame and her level of notoriety, there were far too many eyes on her when she could attend matches, meaning Hermione had to act the part of supportive fan for far too many hours. She would have liked to bring a book or even some work to do during the long, drawn out games, but knew that would be disrespectful to Viktor and probably set off a flurry of negative articles in the press.

Hermione gripped her teeth and tried to pay attention, and it helped for a while to become acquainted with the other players' spouses and families. But this presented her with a new realization: the life of a quidditch player's spouse was not for her. It involved far too much travel, long matches, endless press inquiries, and Hermione knew it would exhaust her to keep up the charade of delightful quidditch wife. Her career had taken off too, and she had less time to devote to games, after-parties, and charity galas. She received her own fair share of these types of requests by being a war heroine in her home country.

A lack of common interests: the final nail in the coffin of her relationship with Viktor Krum. Hermione had once described Viktor to Harry as "more of a physical being." They certainly connected in the bedroom, but trying to have a meaningful conversation posed more of a challenge than it should. Viktor, bless him, tried his best to keep up with Hermione when she would monologue passionately about new laws and regulations, but ultimately had little to contribute to their discussions. And Hermione, for her part, just couldn't muster the sort of unbridled enthusiasm Viktor deserved for his career achievements.

They parted ways officially after 9 months, and Hermione once again found herself alone after a rather amicable

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breakup.

Dating after Hermione had been tough for Ron, at first. No shortage of women wanted to date him, of course, but when he quickly discovered their superficial reasons for doing so (his war hero status, his fame, his proximity to Harry, etc.) it left him rather depressed.

Then Luna reintroduced him to Padma Patil. They broke the ice on their first date by reliving their disastrous Yule Ball experience and had each other in stitches over their past immature behavior at school.

The first time Ron brought Padma to Sunday dinner at the Burrows was more than a little tense. Molly barely acknowledged the poor girl and made quite a show of fawning over Hermione. It took the Weasley matriarch much longer than anyone else to let go of the idea of Ron and Hermione as a couple. But Padma, made of stronger stuff, had politely brought homemade samosas to share with everyone. All declared them fantastic, even if Molly refused to try them.

Hermione went out of her way to make Padma feel welcome. She had always liked the girl at school (far better than her gossip) and less serious twin, Parvati, anyway) and could immediately see why she worked so well for Ron. She tempered his personality in a way Hermione never could.

Padma appreciated Ron without idolizing him. She was intelligent like Hermione, but without Hermione's complex of needing every person in her life to know just how intelligent. Padma was patient with Ron when Hermione would have gotten snippy. She kept Ron in line without resorting to nagging or mothering. Padma laughed easily at Ron's jokes and didn't make him feel inadequate by her mere presence. She became the balance Ron needed.

George of all people finally convinced Molly that Padma made a good match for her youngest son. Still flourishing after the loss of Fred, the normally boisterous reformed more often than not existed in a fog of depression. With Ron helping out at the shop, things had improved somewhat, but Lee and Angelina were still having a devil of a time getting through to him.

During her third-year visit to the Burrows, Padma plopped down next to George where he sat silently in the corner of the living room, keeping himself to the edge of his family and friends. Hermione watched curiously as the dark-haired girl spoke quietly for a few minutes to George, and it seemed he reluctantly began replying. An hour later, they still carried on their private discussion, but more people in the room had begun to notice. Finally, just as everyone in the room got tired of casting surreptitious glances at the odd pair, George shocked everyone by grabbing Padma in a fierce hug. Wiping his eyes, he stood and loudly addressed Ron. "Ron, if you don't keep this one, you're fired from the shop."

The shocked silence left in his wake only broke when Molly asked if Padma wouldn't mind sharing her mum's recipe for the delicious samosas.

Hermione asked Ron once what Padma had said to George to shake him out of his rut. "She just told me it's a twin thing. You wouldn't understand. I just had to level with him, twin to twin."

With Ron safely in love and off the market, this unfortunately left Hermione's surrogate family with a renewed desire to match her with any available wizard. The next year of Hermione's love life sped by in a string of awful one-time-only dates. Seamus Finnigan (seriously, what the hell Ginny?), Terry Boot (homosexual and just as confused as Hermione as to why they'd been set up), Ernie Macmillan (Hermione almost heaved the pompous git before drinks were poured), Justin Finch-Fletchley (no spark, plus they worked together and that would be too weird for Hermione), and others so boring they didn't even deserve a mention. By the time Angelina suggested Oliver Wood (dear Merlin, did these people seriously think she could stand to be with another famous quidditch player?) she felt thoroughly out of options and almost resigned herself

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lid to the bench. Perhaps his mother kept some sheet music in here.

He found a few of the standard classical fare, but nothing to really capture his attention. As he made to close the bench, a piece of parchment caught his eye, lodged in one of the hinges and partially stuck to the top of the lid. Giving a gentle tug, he managed to extricate it without tearing the parchment, frail and yellowed with age.

Unfolding the delicate letter, Draco saw it was addressed to Narcissa, and dated almost 28 years prior.

My dearest Cissy,

I do hope that this letter finds its way into your hands. I am writing to congratulate you and your husband on the birth of your son. The announcement in the Prophet said you bestowed him the name of Draco. A fine name indeed, and quite fitting in the family tradition.

Though we have not spoken in a number of years, I felt compelled to send my fondest wishes on the birth of your healthy baby boy. Your husband is surely exceedingly proud that you have produced a male heir.

I have a daughter of my own now, Nymphadora. It is my dearest wish that one day our children could meet and know one another as family.

Perhaps it is rather presumptuous of me, but I'd like to think that had our relationship not suffered so in light of my marriage to Ted, that you would have named me godmother to Draco. Learning further into that fantasy, I do hope that you will also accept my gift for him, as it is a godparent's right to shower their godchild with a bit of extravagance.

I well remember your skill at the piano, Cissy, and it is one of my greatest regrets that I no longer have the privilege of hearing you play. You were ever so musically gifted, and I pray your child inherits your talent. Even if you never acknowledge my letter, please allow your son the opportunity to learn on this very instrument. An experienced player such as yourself will surely recognize that the quality and craftsmanship is second to none.

Please tell Draco that his Aunt Andromeda loves him already. I hope to meet him one day, and when he's old enough to play, I'd love nothing more than to witness him using this gift.

And darling, if you're ever in need of anything, don't hesitate to come to me. I will always consider you family.

Your loving sister,

Andromeda

Draco's hands were shaking by the time he finished reading the letter. This piano, this very piano, had been his birth gift from Aunt Andromeda. Andromeda Tonks, née Black, whose name Draco never heard leave his mother's lips, and only once from his father's, though on that occasion it was preceded by "that filthy Muggle-lover."

Andromeda Tonks, his blood relative, was but a stranger to him, while the likes of *Harry bloody Potter* got to call her family. Were circumstances different, perhaps Draco would have been bestowed the honor of godfather to Teddy Lupin, not Potter.

But no, once again his family's foolish pride had sabotaged what could have been a true familial relationship. What else had his parents' ignorance cost Draco?

Please tell Draco that his Aunt Andromeda loves him already.

The words blurred in front of his eyes and when the burning in his throat became too much, Draco

Draco meandered down his hallway, notebook open in his hand—his birthday present from Hermione—and his mind still reeled from receiving it a few days prior. They'd both been too busy with their work schedules and then dinner with friends to celebrate his birthday until midway through June. But when Hermione presented him with her gift, Draco thought it well worth the wait.

He'd been rendered speechless when the wrappings fell away to reveal one of the companion journals he had originally gifted Hermione for Christmas. Hermione nervously chattered in front of him, quickly explaining that she wasn't trying to re-gift something per se, and if he found it horribly tacky then she of course had something else for him, but Draco remained deaf to her prattling.

When he'd given those to her, he thought she'd pass off the spare one to her mother, or the She-Weasel, or even Potter himself; the intention to make it easy for her to communicate with someone important in her life.

And she'd chosen him.

“—and I do have something else planned for you, I just thought—”

“Grainger?”

She took a deep breath and finally ceased wringing her hands. “Yes?”

“Are you sure you want me to have this?”

Her face contracted in a frown. “Of course I want you to have it.”

“Why?”

She started fidgeting with her hands again and blushed furiously. “Because for as long as I've had them, I kept trying to think of who I wanted to talk to during my day about something interesting I read or saw at work... who I would want to confide in at the end of the day... who I'd want one last chat with as I scuttled in with tea before bed. And well... oh are you really going to make me say?”

Draco gave her his best smirk. “Go on, it's my birthday after all.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “It was you okay? It was always you, you self-centered, egotistical—”

He cut her off with his lips and soon after found his other birthday present to be Hermione in a very fetching lace brassiere and knickers set.

Now that he knew of her little penchant for dirty talk (sweet Merlin, but he was semi-hard right now, just thinking about that) maybe he could give her a taste in writing. Smiling to himself, Draco shut the journal, vowing to think up some lecherous taunts for her later. Hermione had tea scheduled with her parents today. Draco didn't ask to accompany her, and she hadn't offered. It was enough for now that the Poters and Theo knew about their relationship.

Alas for the day, Draco stopped as he passed by his music room. The piano melody from “Lay-la” hadn't left him alone for the past few weeks, so perhaps playing it out would help. A simple enough piece, he reasoned, and sat down on the bench of the Bluthner piano and absently plucked at the keys. The instrument sounded perfectly in tune. Draco wondered if Chick kept it primed for use.

After a few minutes of refreshing his muscle memory with some scales, Draco tried to recall the song. Nothing he played sounded quite right, and he soon became frustrated. He stood and lifted the

to spinsterhood. Besides, she didn't need a man to lead a fulfilling life! But, well... regular sex was nice. And not being the third, fifth, seventh, or 15th wheel since every single one of her friends had all paired off would also be nice on occasion.

In a rare moment of honesty, Hermione confided in her mother about the absolute dearth of romantic prospects in the wizarding world. When her mother positively ignited in excitement and suggested introducing her to a longtime patient's son, Hermione decided to just go with it.

Daniel turned out to be very handsome, very educated, and very Muggle. At first, dating a Muggle man felt like a rebellious capitulation of wizarding society's expectations on her, thrilling in a way, to date a completely ordinary man. One who came without the baggage of surviving a war, or an unfortunate perception of her from their Hogsmeade days, or would put her on a pedestal based on her status as a heroine. Plus, the Daily Prophet couldn't follow her in the Muggle world, and magical press laws prohibited them from publishing pictures of Daniel in non-magical settings.

Daniel, a solicitor at his father's firm, grew up in a similarly upper class environment as Hermione. Indeed, if Hermione had never been a witch, they probably would have attended the same posh schools, competed for the same school prizes, belonged to the same clubs, and perhaps even attended Cambridge or Oxford together. Alas, Hermione was quite thoroughly a witch, a core part of her life that became much too hard to suppress.

Magic to Hermione felt as natural as breathing, but lying required far too much effort on her part. She'd had to uphold the pretense that she'd attended a remote school in Scotland for gifted children and that she now worked as a consultant to the government on animal rights. The amount of tying up she had to do before hosting him at her flat was more stressful than it needed to be. Introducing him to Harry and Ginny went fine (thank Merlin for Harry being raised by Muggles in this one instance) but meeting Ron and Padma made her palms sweat something awful.

Several long months in and Hermione reached the end of her rope, fed up with hiding her true nature. Daniel, no slouch in the intelligence department, definitely sensed something hesitant about Hermione, something amiss when she discussed her personal life, or her work life, or even her friends. Their relationship eventually reached the point where Hermione realized she'd be wasting both her time and his by carrying on. She didn't love Daniel and didn't think she ever could. She certainly didn't love him enough to want to divulge the secret of her double life and go through the cumbersome process of introducing him to the magical world. Hermione looked up the laws once out of curiosity and was promptly horrified at all the red tape. At any rate, it gave her a brand new appreciation for married couples consisting of a magical and non-magical spouse.

Daniel didn't even seem surprised when Hermione broke off what had become a rather stagnant relationship anyway. Her parents on the other hand, seemed extremely disappointed and Hermione had an inkling as to why. Perhaps if this relationship pointed out they would finally succeed in dragging a bit of their daughter back into the Muggle world.

Hermione swore off Muggle men after that. Almost.

Cameron, her next romantic entanglement, was an exception. A silly fling, a flirtation at a Muggle club Ginny dragged her to that turned into Hermione's first and only no-strings-attached let's-just-shag partnership. They slept together (at his place, always his place) a handful of times over a few months, met up for drinks occasionally, but the second Cameron met someone he wanted to seriously date she once again found herself with a friendly ex.

Her relationship, or lack thereof, with Cameron fizzled out several months before she'd laid eyes on Draco at the coffee shop.

“Which means I've not done this, meaning a serious relationship, for quite some time. It appears

Remain Nameless

I'm still in possession of some old insecurities," she confessed and laughed weakly.

She felt Draco sigh against her hair and she indulged in her urge to cling tighter to his body, burying her nose in the side of his neck. Merlin, but the man smelled so good.

"Well," Draco drawled. "Turnabout is fair play."



He wasn't proud of it, but Draco lost his virginity to Pansy Parkinson in his Fifth Year. Oh what a splendid year that had been in the life of young Draco Malfoy. Yes, the Dark Lord had returned, but as a distant and alluring concept to Draco. His father resided in the thick of it once more, holding closed door meetings in his study and popping in and out of the Ministry. This time, he assured Draco, this time their side would be victorious and the Malfoy family honored above all.

The Dark Lord's work was already being done for him by the morose Minister for Magic. Installing Dolores Umbridge at Hogsmeade to keep old Dumbledore in check was a true masterstroke of idiosyncrasy on the part of the Ministry. He hardly had a kind thought to spare on that odious and batty woman, but that didn't keep Draco from joining her Inquisitorial Squad. Finally, a position of power that allowed him to lord over Potter and his stupid friends.

Riding the high of being promoted to such a prestigious group, he accepted Pansy's coy offer to "celebrate together" in her dorm room. She'd made sure to kick all her bunk mates out (no doubt after smugly informing them exactly why she needed privacy) and dragged Draco to her bed.

The whole ordeal probably lasted no longer than a few minutes and Pansy whispered to Draco that she loved him. He did not return the sentiment. The pair continued their pathetic attempts at shagging the rest of the year, and Draco felt like the king of the castle. Pansy was available whenever he wanted, always eager to please, and even if he had to endure her declaration of love every single time, she never complained about his (again, likely pitiful) performance.

But then Potter and his merry band of rag-tag children just had to go and thwart the Dark Lord's mission in the Department of Mysteries. A mission his father had been chosen to lead. When Lucius not only failed spectacularly to secure the prophecy, but got himself and others captured and imprisoned, and on top of that cock-up, alerted the entire Ministry to the Dark Lord's return... Draco knew the time for childish games had ended.

Thus began Draco's period of celibacy, lasting until after the war. Indeed, it's a little difficult to maintain an erection after you've had a Dark Mark branded onto you, then informed that not only are you required to take your father's place amongst the ranks, but you will be given the wonderful opportunity to prove your worth. This opportunity involves you somehow murdering one of the greatest wizards to ever exist, lest you'd like to witness the torture and slow, painful death of your mother. Oh, and you'd probably be killed too, but only after. Not exactly the sort of stable emotional state that would allow for one to want to shag or even work.

As their Sixth Year progressed, it took some time for Pansy to get the message. He rebuffed her advances over and over while she tried to coo in his ear that she could make him feel better, she knew just what he needed, what he liked. Draco snatched one day and snarled that she was nothing more than a convenient hole for his cock and he had far more important things to do than her. She took the hint to bugger off, but primly replied that he would not be allowed to speak to her in such a way once they were married.

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Leaning back in his chair, Theo mouthed "10 Galleons to me" at Draco.

Hermione redirected the conversation back to Sasha. "Are you almost through with your culinary schooling?"

As Sasha prattled on about her education, Draco took the opportunity to observe Theo. His eyes had a glazed quality to them, enraptured by the woman beside him. When Sasha revealed that her greatest ambition was to progress from a pastry chef to owning her own bakery, Theo even gushed, "She'd be brilliant. Everything she makes is fantastic." He pressed a soft kiss to her temple and she responded by gazing up at him in adoration.

Gods, is that what he looked like with Granger? No wonder Ginny looked so obnoxiously smug all through last evening while Potter looked on the verge of retching.

When they parted ways later in the evening, the women exchanged a warm embrace. "Hermione, let's swap numbers! I'd love to meet up when these two need their boys only down the pub's ighns."

Theo offered his hand to Draco with a quiet, "Thanks mate... for everything."

Nothing he could say in response to his friend's desperate relief felt adequate. Hermione was much better at that sort of thing, at accepting gratitude. Sure enough, when Theo shook her hand in farewell and murmured, "Thank you for... being you," Hermione warmly replied, "No thanks needed, Theo. I'm glad to get to know you."

Hermione tucked her arm through Draco's elbow as they walked to a safe apparition point, displaying yet another area in which she excelled: affectionate gestures came so naturally for her. Draco practically suffered an existential crisis before deciding whether or not to hold her hand in public.

"I liked Theo," she admitted quietly. "I can tell he means a lot to you."

"He liked you too," Draco asserted. "Perhaps a little too much," he couldn't help but add.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You can't seriously be jealous! Besides, he's clearly head over heels for Sasha. I thought they were very sweet together."

For some reason, this innocuous statement caused anxiety to bloom in his chest. What sort of picture did Draco and Hermione make as a couple? Ginny seemed amused by them. Potter seemed bewildered, but reluctantly accepting. Theo seemed to think the idea of them together as the funniest cosmic joke of all time.

"How do you think other people view us?"

She peered up at him, clearly surprised at the open vulnerability of his question.

She stopped walking and brought herself around to his front, arms going around his waist. "I think our friends see that we're happy, even if they need some time to wrap their heads around the concept of us. As for the rest of the world?" Hermione stood on her toes and kissed Draco softly. "The rest of the world can bugger off!"

I love you. I love you. I love you.

I am okay with this



Remain Nameless

Draco rolled his eyes and flipped Theo off.

The three magical beings took advantage of being out of earshot of Sasha to speak freely. Or rather, as Draco predicted, Theo and Hermione took turns trying to out-swot one another. It started with Theo praising her recent centaur reservation land legislation, Hermione acting modest and surprised of Theo's awareness of her career, then Theo sheepishly admitting he had read through the entire law she'd written, Hermione then talking about her Ancient Runes discoveries in Venice, Theo asking nerdy follow-up questions about the Venetian library... and Draco would have seethed with jealousy if it didn't warm his shriveled black heart to see them getting along.

When Sasha returned, the rest of the meal passed rather amicably. With Hermione and Theo having warmed to one another, conversation flowed more naturally, Sasha still dominated most of the discussion, seemingly fit to bursting with curiosity about Theo's life before her.

Draco was mature enough to admit that Theo had chosen well. This woman was far too chatty for his taste, but she was undeniably attractive, cultured, intelligent, and confident. If she weren't so unfortunate to have been born a Muggle, she would have been entirely out of Theo's league. Draco internally winced at allowing himself to think her inferior still, but found it difficult to wrap his mind around a person with a complete absence of magic in their veins as being his equal. He'd been around enough Muggles to not be bothered by them due to their existence, they were just people after all, and all people (magical or not) annoyed the ever-loving-fuck out of him in equal measure. Perhaps this was a discussion best left for his next session with Healer Browning.

Sasha's line of questioning with Hermione caught his attention.

"Hermione, you mentioned your parents live outside London?"

"Yes, they're both dentists, they own and run their own dental practice."

Sasha's eyebrows flew up towards her hairline. "No need to ask how you afforded boarding school. What's your story, Draco? Are you a charity case like my Theo here or an heiress to a dental dynasty like your girl?"

Was Hermione really that wealthy? The way Sasha looked so impressed by her parents' careers made it seem like she was rolling in Galleons, but then surely this is something he would have known about her? And he'd also need to properly rib Theo for the "poor little orphan who clawed his way to wealth" act. Not Estate ranked second only to Malfoy Manor in grandiosity and the contents of the Gringotts vaults just as overflowing. Charity case indeed.

Theo saved Draco from answering by snorting incredulously. "Malfoy's family has more money than God."

A comment like that would have made younger Draco puff out his chest and crow about the perks of being a Malfoy, but these days it didn't seem to matter quite so much. All the gold in his vaults couldn't give him what he sorely lacked: a respectable name.

"Don't embarrass your friend, Theo. Although now I know why this meeting took so long to happen, what with your friends being both insanely attractive and well-off. Perhaps I settled for you far too soon," she rounded off her statement with a flirty wink at Draco.

Hey Jude!9

Poor, stupid, naïve Pansy. She really thought Draco would marry her after the war.

Thinking back on his behavior immediately following his trial made Draco cringe. Lost and messed up didn't even begin to cover it. But Pansy, almost as much of a pariah as him in those days, had stuck by him. Perhaps the pull of nostalgia for better days at Hogwarts when he'd been a carefree, bigoted, asshole made him put up with her tiresome presence for as long as he did.

She didn't complain about his potion addiction. She ignored it. A potion-addicted boyfriend didn't play well in the fantasy life she'd crafted in her own mind, so Pansy pretended that "Draco's little problem" did not exist. Instead she complained about the changing world around them. About Muggleborns and blood traitors. About how unfairy purebloods like Draco and Pansy were being treated.

Draco was tired. So fucking tired. The mind healer quaked the Wizengamot obligated him to see put difficult ideas in his head. Dangerous ideas his father would say. Ideas that made him question every single decision he'd based his entire existence on. But the potions helped, for a bit anyway.

Pansy became fucking relentless after a while. Did he even care about her reputation? He did not. Didn't he want to get engaged? Get married? She knew? He did not. Not with her, especially. Even Millicent Bagnshole had found a husband, didn't Draco care how that made Pansy feel? He did not.

When it all came to a head one day, Draco used every cruel word in his arsenal to reduce Pansy to sniveling tears as she flooded away and threatened to never return. Good fucking riddance.

Except she did return, only once, not three months later. She slipped through his Floo in a silk robe that she promptly dropped to the floor. Draco took one look at her nude form, snarled, and all but shoved her back into the fireplace with a quip about how a bride needed her beauty rest the night before her wedding. Pansy married her middle-aged Bulgarian husband the next day and Draco drank an entire bottle of single malt scotch to celebrate escaping her clutches once and for all.

His next two forays into the dating pool came as a favor to his mother. The Greengrass sisters, you remember them, don't you Draco?

He's fairly sure he dated Daphne first. She had dark hair and didn't speak much. Their courtship, for lack of a better term, consisted almost solely in the public eye. They attended galas, operas, charity functions and the like on each other's arms; Draco drank or close to it for every single event. He'd kicked the poison habit by now and found alcohol to be a decent replacement to chase demons away. They'd fumbled around his bedroom a time or two (he did get consent, but probably struck out on making her come) but she never slept over because that would be indecent for an unmarried couple. When he started standing her up to indulge in becoming too wasted to leave his home, she broke off their courtship via owl.

As time, he's almost certain, was next to be courted. She had light hair and also spoke softly. She would have made the perfect pureblood bride. Draco once again went through the paces of parading about high society with a beautiful witch on his arm while adequately sloshed. Kisses and repeat the exact same mistakes he'd made with her sister. She also dumped him via owl. He deserved it. He didn't care.

Narcissa card. She cared a whole lot that her only child threw away most chances at marrying a respectable (read: pureblood) woman to secure the continuation of the Malfoy line.

Draco's next romantic encounter occurred abroad, in France. For the life of him, he could not remember whose wedding he had been mandated to attend with his mother, probably because he was pissed for the entire thing.

He spent the reception partaking in the best champagne that Galleons could buy before catching the eye of a leggy brunette. Draco took her back to his suite and the conversation between them consisted of an affirmation that she would like to fuck him and then a contraceptive charm. She'd gone before he woke the next morning.

A year or so later, Draco found himself back in France at another stuffy and elaborate pureblood matrimonial affair, around the time he decided to cut back on alcohol as a coping mechanism, which meant the ceremony and reception felt three times as long. It also meant that he had to endure, while sober, his mother's waspish comments about all the eligible young witches he could be wooing if he just applied himself. Figuring he'd behaved enough to at least have one drink, he stalked over to the bar to indulge in some witchy. Before he could reach his destination, a stunning French witch boldly asked him to dance.

The woman, Camille, was self-assured, a capable dance partner (purebloods did love a good waltz), and to Draco's surprise a good conversationalist. When Draco asked why she'd approached him, she replied that she knew a thing or two about familial obligations and he looked like he needed rescuing. She herself was engaged to a man she'd met just twice, with the nuptials planned to occur in a matter of weeks.

She invited Draco to her suite. "But you're engaged," he'd sputtered and Camille shrugged. "Engaged, oui. Dead, non."

One of the most humbling moments of his life followed. Camille did not appreciate Draco's attempt to bed her sons forplay and was most vocal about this.

"Miss non, but you are too beautiful to be a bad lover!"

Stunned into mortified silence, Draco listened as the witch ticked off all the ways he failed at pleasing his sexual partner. "Eet see, not fair to your future wife, I will show you," she asserted, bossily. And show him she did. With an almost clinical efficiency, she took him through all the ways women liked to be caressed, what signals to read from his partner's reactions, how to prime both her body and his during forplay for more satisfying (and multiple) orgasms, what positions allowed for deeper thrusting angles, and most crucially, how to give and receive oral sex. She did not shy away from correcting his technique ("Non, not like zat. Gently swirl ze tongue... Yes, yes! Mon Dieu, zat is better...") and giving pointers for improvement, both a humiliating blow to Draco's ego and a thoroughly needed educational experience. Hardly the demure, pampered debutante like all the other women he'd previously known, and Merlin help her intended spouse.

They did not leave Camille's suite for the entire weekend, pausing between sexual encounters only to order room service and table. At the end of his time with her, almost every part of Draco's body ached. She sent him on his way with a kiss to each cheek and a cheery, "Bonne chance, mon cher! You will invite me to your wedding someday, oui?"

An embarrassing amount of time elapsed before Hermione re-entered his life and he finally got to put Camille's lessons to any use.

"Well," Hermione said after Draco finished. "You wouldn't happen to know Camille's surname would you?"

"No. Do I even want to know why you're asking?" he asked warily.

"Shame. I think I need to send that woman the world's most extravagant gift basket."



could possibly end up together."

"Thank you so very much, Theodore, what a lovely thing to say," Draco grit out irritably.

"Quit laughing Theo, Jesus." Sasha swatted his shoulder. "Oh, but this is even more romantic! Forbidden love!"

Theo only laughed harder at that and to Draco's dismay Hermione joined in. "Oh, lighten up Malfoy," teased Hermione and put a placating hand on his arm. "We've only been dating for two months." "So you were enemies at school, what changed?" inquired Sasha.

War. Torture. Death. Destruction. Addiction. Redemption. Friendship. Love. I am okay with this.

Draco met Theo's eyes anxiously and turned to Hermione in a panic, but she only smiled up at him, the cold dread that had threatened to seep into his soul burned away by the warmth in her eyes. She was a living, breathing Patronus, chasing away the darkness that wanted to consume him.

"We did," she said simply, and then surprised Draco by kissing his cheek softly.

I love you.

Hermione steered the conversation by asking Sasha about how she first met Theo. As the women chatted, Draco caught Theo's eye, expecting to see his friend mocking him after Hermione's public display of affection. Theo, however, regarded Draco with an understanding, yet slightly sad smile, an anguished edge to his gaze.

I'm happy for you, it conveyed. But why did we waste so much time? We were so blind and it almost cost us everything.

Halfway through dinner, Sasha excused herself to the restroom. Theo waited until she was far enough away before letting out a long exhale.

"Pardon my language, but Merlin's fucking bollocks this is nerve wracking" he stated and drained his wine glass. Setting it down, he addressed Hermione.

"Granger, can I just say you are a gift from the heavens." Hermione blushed and tried to demur.

"And what am I, a bloody flopperworm?" Draco grouched but Theo waved him off impatiently.

"Shut it, you're just the eye candy. I'll bet you 10 Galleons Sasha makes a comment on how fit she thinks you are before the night's out."

Theo refilled his glass, eyes downcast and suddenly serious. "Granger, I need you to know how much I appreciate you being here tonight. You probably think I'm being underhanded by not telling her the whole truth, but I want to slowly introduce her to our world. I know we don't have the best history and I'm so sorry if I ever—"

"Theo," she cut him off. "Please, no apologies tonight. We didn't know each other well at school and I'm willing to start over tonight if you are."

Gods, this witch's capacity to forgive was astounding. *I love you.*

"That's unbelievably magnanimous of you, and more than I deserve. Thank you, Granger."

"You can call me Hermione, you know, I won't tell any of your Slytherin friends," she said coyly. Theo barked out a laugh and turned to Draco. "You're keeping her, I've decided."

Yes. Yes I am. I am okay with this.

Remain Nameless

“Merci beaucoup,” she trilled as the sommelier poured everyone a glass. “Thanks for humoring me tonight, I went to school with the sous chef here, so I was able to get us a table. Theo’s always taking me to these posh places and I thought I’d return the favor and try and impress you lot.”

Draco arched an eyebrow as Hermione let loose another nervous laugh. “I’ll admit, I was a bit intimidated. My parents have been on the waitlist for a reservation for a few months I think.”

After placing their meal orders, Saslia jumped right into her interrogation. Draco braced himself. Merlin, were all Muggle women this bubbly? This inquisitive? It seemed her and Theo weren’t just polar opposites in the physical sense, but also personality wise.

“I’m saying sorry in advance, but I have so many questions for you two!”

“About?” asked Draco warily.

“Theo of course! You’re the first people from his life I’m meeting! What was he like at school?”

Oh, right. Theo. Not, usually, lonely orphan. Draco made a mental note to not mention the currently very alive Lady Cordelia Not.

Draco sipped his wine thoughtfully. “Well, I’ve known him since birth, really. Our families were old friends.” He noticed Theo shoot him a pleading look, but Draco wasn’t about to disappoint his friend. Theo had saved his arse too many times in recent years.

“Theo was a very serious student and I was a little more, shall we say, careless about my study habits. I fell in with a... less responsible crowd, but Theo was kind enough to rekindle our friendship after graduation.” Graduation being a solo act for Draco, as he’d earned his degree from home. He bitterly wondered how Theo achieved his NEWTs and mentally filed away the question for a later date. What else had Draco never bothered to learn about his friend?

Theo seemed to unwind slightly at Draco’s sincerity. “Ugh, I knew he was a total bookworm,” teased Saslia and Draco held back a gag at the sight of his normally stoic friend exchanging a loving smile with his girlfriend. If they started snogging at the table, he had no qualms about making a hasty exit.

Theo slung an arm around Saslia’s shoulders. “Me? Please. I had absolutely nothing on Granger here. She was top of our year, every year, you know, absolutely no one could come close.”

Hermione flushed prettily in surprise at Theo’s compliment. “Oh! Umm, thank you Theo.”

“Were you two boarding school sweethearts?” Saslia asked suddenly, gesturing between Draco and Hermione.

Before either Draco or Hermione could so much as open their mouths, Theo burst out in uproarious laughter. It took him several minutes to calm down, while Draco glared and Hermione bit back a grin.

“What’s so funny?” asked Saslia.

“Yes, Theo, I fail to find the humor here, perhaps you’ve had quite enough wine this evening,” drawled Draco.

Theo wiped the corner of his eye. “You—you don’t understand. These—these two... absolutely *laughed* one another at school,” he gasped out. “I mean, no one would ever—*ever*—think that these two

Hey Jude!9

Draco didn’t usually stay over during the work week, in accordance with one of Hermione’s little rules for dating, that they keep separated most week day evenings so as not to lose focus on their respective careers.

Personally, Hermione stuck to this rule because she’d become a tad worried she spent too much time with Draco already. True, things were going so well between them, but a tiny voice inside her kept warning her that this had become too serious, too soon.

It took one fateful kiss from Draco to effectively kill off that tiny voice of doubt.

He had stayed the night, despite it being a Thursday, since by the time they’d finished regaling one another with their romantic pasts, the clock read well past one in the morning. Already naked and in bed, they’d succumbed to sleep easily.

Rushing about before work the next morning, Hermione had just banished their breakfast plates to the sink when Draco yelled out from the bathroom. “Oi, Granger! I’m using your toothbrush!”

“Fine,” she called back and walked through to her closet to get dressed.

“How is it—that you only have—the Muggle toothpaste? Honestly Granger—I thought I—had finally convinced you—to switch to—the wizarding stuff,” he loudly whined in between shoving her toothbrush around in his mouth.

“My parents are dentists and that is their recommendation! That brand of spearmint toothpaste is backed by research studies showing its efficacy in removing plaque and preventing tooth decay. If you don’t like it, feel free to Floo home and use your own!” She fired back and finished buttoning her blouse.

Draco appeared in the doorway of her walk-in closet with a smirk. “I’m only teasing, you daft little thing, don’t have kittens.” He cupped her face and pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

The tiny voice of doubt met its death in that moment.

Hermione gasped and wrangled herself away from Draco.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing it’s just—” she reached up and grabbed his face to pull him in for a deeper kiss. No mistaking it this time. “You taste really good,” she finished lamely and turned away.

Amortentia.

For years, Hermione assumed she had her personal Amortentia components on lock. When she’d correctly identified the potion for Slughorn in her very first Potions class of their Sixth Year, the smells wafting over from the cauldron were easily recognizable. Well, at least two of the three.

New parchment jumped out first. But of course, that smell to Hermione meant the start of a new school year, or an essay she excitedly wanted to tackle for class. The next scent, freshly mowed grass, transported her to childhood summers where she’d run about the garden while her parents did yard work. Those simple summer days with her family felt like they would stretch on forever as a child.

At the time, the third scent of spearmint toothpaste had slightly confused her. Perhaps because her parents were dentists and she’d grown up with the scent it meant more to her? But no, it smelled more

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specific than that. A few times she thought she smelled it on Ron, but it didn't register strongly enough. Perhaps her memory of the poison had dulled over time, she reasoned.

After breaking things off with Ron, she hadn't given Amortentia a second thought until this moment. The scent memory washed over her in such a powerful wave, overwhelming not only her nostrils but almost every sensory nerve in her body to the point of slight dizziness. Her third and final component of Amortentia did not simply smell of a Muggle spearmint toothpaste.

No, specifically the way Draco Malfoy tasted while kissing her after using Muggle spearmint toothpaste rounded out her Amortentia cauldron.

The surreal nature of this revelation slammed into her: for someone like Draco, indoctrinated to hate her, to want to eradicate someone like her, to use a Muggleborn's toothbrush covered in Muggle toothpaste without a second thought. The enormous significance of such an insignificant act would probably be lost on him, but to Hermione it felt like the earth moved.

As they walked together to the coffee shop, Hermione twined their fingers together. "All right?" Draco asked, a bit puzzled. They didn't hold hands in public often.

"Quite," she responded with a shy smile.

She loved Draco. Merlin help her, she'd been hiding from the fact for a while now, but she loved Draco.

Perhaps one day he'd feel ready to calmly commit to the confession he'd once yelled in her face, and when that day came, she felt more than ready to return the sentiments.

Hey Jude!

Theo's teasing voice from the table.

"Right, sorry," Sasha threw them an apologetic smile. "Theo told me to tone it down for the evening, but I'm ever so pleased to finally meet friends of his for a change. I don't know why he's been hiding you all for so long!"

Theo stood as they approached the table and shook Draco's hand with an amused smirk. Draco had an inkling what his friend found so funny, and if he were being honest, the situation was objectively absurd. Draco Malfoy with Hermione Granger on his arm and Theodore Nott courting a Muggle. Lucius and Theodore Nott, Sr. would have spontaneously combusted on the spot.

"Granger, it's been awhile," Theo stated nervously and inclined his head politely at Hermione, his smirk giving way to a tight, guilty smile.

"Hello, good to see you again," responded Hermione, answering with her own nervous smile.

Theo stood to pull out Sasha's chair as Draco did the same for Hermione. Some pureblood habits die hard.

"And I haven't been hiding them, I told you, love, these two travel quite often for work. I can barely get this one out to the pub anymore," Theo insisted, jerking his head towards Draco.

"So Draco—am I saying that right?" Draco nodded and she pressed on excitedly. "Sorry, you've no idea how fun it is to be on the other side of this. My family are from Ghana, you see, and though I got off lightly in the name department—Sasha is fairly common, I'd say—I've got loads of family with traditional Ghanaian names and I can't tell you how often they hear 'what a unique name, how do you pronounce that again?' So at least my parents spared me that." She said all of this very fast and then turned her attention to Hermione.

"And *Hermione*, now that is definitely a first! Did your parents name you after A Winter's Tale?"

Draco turned to the witch by his side curiously. Hermione was an odd (and lovely, in his opinion) name, but he'd no idea of its origin.

"Yes! My mum read it at university and the name always stuck with her. You're the first person I've met who knew the reference. Is that your favorite work by Shakespeare?"

"Goodness no, I can't stand any of it, sorry. My mum's a professor of English literature so I was forced into reading a lot of classics from a young age. Despite her best efforts, I was never much of a book lover."

Theo groaned, "Good lord, Sasha, if there was one thing you could have said to make Granger not like you, it was to say you don't enjoy reading."

Draco let out an amused chuckle, but felt Hermione tense beside him, unused as she was, to Theo's good-natured humor.

Sasha shrugged, unapologetic. "This is why my mum loves him. I leave the two of them alone for five minutes and they're all 'Thackeray was terribly overrated, don't you agree' and my dad and I try to keep our eyes from rolling out of our heads."

The sommelier approached then and after Sasha confirmed with the rest that wine was acceptable, she conducted a conversation in perfect French while Theo looked on, admiration in his eyes.

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for football, cricket, or rugby (he made a mental note to ask Hermione about these later, because they actually did sound intriguing).

Hermione also spent most of the day listing off words and phrases Draco would have to avoid: Merlin, Muggles, Salazar, Slytherin, Gryffindor, etc. It felt rather like preparing for an exam, but with much higher stakes.

A lot of factors were in play tonight, and one false move could mean blowing his friend's cover. Draco did not wish to be the party responsible for mucking up Theo's happiness. If all else failed, he would remain mostly silent and let Granger do the talking.

As they approached the restaurant, Draco felt Hermione tense, her shoulders up around her ears. He trailed his hand up her arm to get her attention.

"All right there?"

She gave Draco a tight smile and admitted, "I just hope things aren't too weird... I don't really know Theo and I know it's silly of me to want to impress him, but if he still thinks of me the way he knew me from Hogwarts, then I'm worried—"

"Granger, stop. Trust me, Theo's going to love you."

I love you.

That pesky thought had been cropping up at an alarming rate the more time Draco spent in Hermione's presence. Successfully preventing it from once again leaving his mouth, Draco nodded his head toward the restaurant. Hermione nodded as well, and let out a last nervous exhale before continuing inside the busy establishment.

Sasha came as something of a surprise. Sitting beside Theo, the pair cut a very striking picture, almost a study in opposites. Theo was thin to the point of appearing stretched, his skin as pale as Draco's, with small, dark eyes and wavy brown hair; a man coiled with tense energy. The woman beside him had dark skin, half of her kinky black curls held back with barrettes, and her large amber eyes glowed preternaturally in the low lighting of the restaurant, her posture exuding barely suppressed delight. When Theo spotted them, his face twitched slightly in apprehension followed by a wry grin. As he gave her a light nudge and gestured toward Draco and Hermione, Sasha's face split into a gigantic smile that showcased her bright teeth.

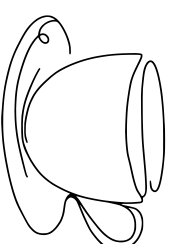
"Is that them!?" Sasha's voice carried across the restaurant. When Theo nodded, Sasha bolted up from her chair and met them halfway to the table, seemingly unable to contain her excitement. Draco barely had time to steady himself before she wrapped her arms around his middle in an exuberant hug.

"Oh my gosh, it's so wonderful to *finally* meet you both!"

She released a startled Draco from her clutches and promptly embraced Hermione.

"Oh, you too," Hermione managed weakly, clearly also surprised by this woman's enthusiastic greeting. For a moment Draco worried that Muggle behavioral standards included this type of touch-freely display regularly, but it seemed Theo's girlfriend may be an outlier based on Hermione's reaction.

"Love, I don't know about Granger, but I know for a fact that Draco is not the hugging type," came



Chapter Thirty

Draco could hardly dare believe it, but his efforts had not been for naught. He held in his hands the reward for many months' back and forth with McGonagall, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and finally, the Ministry.

The final steps left for the *Hermione J. Granger Fund for Students of Non-Magical Parents* to become a reality were two measly signatures and then the official Ministry sign-off. The first signature line released the apportioned funds from the designated vaults at Gringotts and would be signed by Draco. It would be the first ever use of his gold fountain pen. However, some nifty spell work on McGonagall's part would make the signature read as "anonymous benefactor" to anyone but Draco or any person he chose to tell. Draco admired the brilliant play on the Fidelius Charm applied solely to a signed document—an impressive bit of creativity from his former transfiguration professor.

The final signature line awaited the ink of the executor of the funds and Executive Director of the entire charity. This person held complete control over the use of every single Knut pertaining to the initiative, since all donations came from private accounts, not the Ministry. Hermione would sign here.

With July about to come to an end, once Hermione gave her blessing the program could go into effect for next year's incoming First Years. Given the timeline, McGonagall suggested holding the first fundraising gala in either September or October to kick things off properly, capitalizing on the beginning of the new school year.

Draco could finally tell her everything tonight. Except he had more on his mind than her fund. No, tonight Draco wanted to finally say out loud what he'd been feeling since April, or perhaps even before then. Hermione deserved to know before he blurred it out at an inelegant time. Again.

He felt nothing but a cringing mortification any time he thought back to that fateful night when he'd angrily shouted a rather important declaration into her face. The next time Draco put his voice behind those words it would be deliberate and sincere, not on the heels of the complete unraveling of his emotional stability.

Remain Nameless

While yes, he'd said "I'm in love with you," to Hermione, to Draco a clear separation divided "I'm in love with you" from "I love you." Perhaps his inexperienced treatise on love may seem peculiar to others, not that he'd ever deign to explain this to anyone else, but it helped him to categorize his feelings for her as fact, not belief.

To be in love meant to be a slave to an ideal, surrendering one's rational mind to an alluring concept that could potentially border on obsession. Draco had long given up sycophantic devotion to ideals of any kind.

To love meant a choice. One he'd not made before Hermione. She ought to know that for Draco, loving her was a conscious decision, deliberately made.

Not in love. He loved. He loved her.

And gods, he'd failed her in so many ways at the outset of their relationship, the least Draco could do was make this special for her. Three words. Just three words.

Those three little words threatened to attach themselves to every stupid sentence he uttered. They hung in the back of his throat and on the tip of his tongue, waiting to strike out the second he let his guard down. No matter how trite, how innocuous the statement, those stubborn words put up quite a fight to be heard.

"Pass the sugar." *I love you.*

"Good morning." *I love you.*

"No, I wasn't lying when I said there were no more blueberry scones. There were no more blueberry scones because I purchased the last one for myself." *I love you.*

"Granger you can't seriously be considering presenting this to the Wizengamot." *I love you.*

"Fine, I'm mature enough to concede that Potter was less of a twat the other night, happy?" *I love you.*

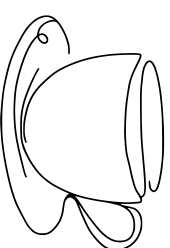
He was most vulnerable during sex. Every little breathless moan of "Draco" and he almost said it. Every time their eyes locked while she writhed beneath him he almost said it. Every time he came inside her he bit back the phrase he longed to throw out and instead gasped "Hermione." He spoke her name as a safeguard to prevent himself from saying the words that he'd never said to anyone.

Not tonight. No more running, no more hiding, no more pretending he didn't feel so much for her that not being in her presence resulted in a physical ache inside his chest.

Draco raked an anxious hand through his hair as his gray eyes swept along the dining room table. A nagging sense of doubt suddenly reared its head based on a conversation they'd had last week. Hermione seethed in frustration that some of the lands reserved for centaur herds and funded by private charities, instead of protected by Ministry law, were now being encroached upon by wizardkind. She'd ranted to Draco that government protection would have been more beneficial in the long run, since some of those charities' coffers had run dry.

"You can't simply throw money at a problem and expect it to be solved!"

Draco had shrugged and countered with, "Sounds like not enough money was thrown to solve the problem."



Chapter Twenty Seven

Unlike the previous evening, Draco eagerly anticipated this dinner with another couple. Well, somewhat. Apprehensively anticipated was probably more accurate.

True, he looked forward to finally introducing someone in his life to Hermione. He had an inkling that Theo and Hermione would hit it off. The two of them hadn't really interacted much at Hogwarts, and if Hermione could give Draco enough of a chance to date him after all their murky history, then surely she'd be willing to be friendly to Theo. It certainly couldn't be as awkward as the dinner they'd had with Potter and his wife last night. Draco cringed as he recalled how much he'd foolishly revealed to his former foe. How dare that bespectacled git make Draco justify his intentions toward Granger?

Still, Draco had to admit, it could have gone much, much worse. Potter seemed to begrudgingly accept Draco's presence in Hermione's life by the end of the meal, so he must have done something right.

Draco would try to extend the same understanding that Hermione had shown last night. If things became a bit tense between her and Theo, he'd exercise patience. He also hoped he didn't bungle things for his friend. Draco visited a Muggle coffee shop every day, and he and Hermione often spent time in the Muggle world together, but none of those instances required Draco to interact personally with a Muggle person for an extended period of time, or force him to talk about himself without breaking the Statute of Secrecy.

Merlin, how did Theo do this all the time? How did he completely avoid talking about the magical world? Hermione, clever Muggleborn witch she was, had already briefed Draco on the backstories she'd invented for the evening. Hermione tweaked her job description to that of policy advisor to the government, advocating on behalf of animal and environmental rights. Draco's career became an asset and estate manager, a function he performed anyway as sole heir to his family's fortune. Hermione reasoned that finding a sporting equivalent to quidditch in the Muggle world would be too complicated, and the learning curve too steep for Draco to convincingly lie about being a talent scout

chest.

"He was upset that I kept our relationship from him, and yes, he lashed out with some unkind words, but he's only trying to protect me!"

Hermione hadn't meant to excuse Ron's cruel actions, surprising even herself at the way she quickly tried to justify his intentions. She had no idea why she defended Ron's poor behavior to Draco, but all her insidious doubts and fears about falling for the man in front of her couldn't seem to disappear. *Was I wrong about you? Was I looking for someone who wasn't really there?*

"Oh yes, I'm sure the Weasel delighted in reminding you about all my past transgressions. Let me guess, he's adamant that I'm incapable of change? Still believes I exist to prey on those that aren't pureblood?"

"Is that so wrong of him? Have you ever given him a reason not to think that?"

She immediately wished the callous retort never left her mouth. Draco looked stung for a moment but quickly tried to mask the hurt. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and running his hands through his hair. In the awful silence that followed her unkindness, Hermione debated closing the distance to comfort him, but couldn't get her limbs to move, paralyzed with shame and awaiting the inevitable fallout.

Draco moved first, slowly rising to his feet, looking down at her with a pained expression. After a few more beats of silence he drew his wand.

"*Accio* parchment," he said quietly and Hermione didn't miss the way his hands lightly shook. The neat stack of papers that had been curiously sitting on her kitchen table zoomed into his shaky grip.

Draco's pale face looked nervous but determined as he held it out for her to take.

"What's this?"

"A reason."

Hermione unfolded the bundle and read the top line with a furrowed brow. She read the words written in bold, black ink at the top of the first page once, twice, then a third time, her normally quick mind unable to comprehend what she'd read. Her eyes scanned the rest of the first page of what appeared to be a funding agreement for the genesis of something extraordinary titled *The Hermione J. Granger Fund for Students of Non-Magical Parents*.

Hermione looked back up at Draco, confused. "I don't understand... what is all this? Why does this fund have my name associated with it? I've never even heard of it!"

When he didn't answer, she flipped through more of the pages, stunned to discover it mirrored her greatest wishes for how a program like this could work for future students of Hogwarts. In fact, most of the language and ideas were ripped word for word from her private notebook. Beyond that, she noticed, reading further and further on, some additional tenets had been added (*providing actual magical creatures to introduce to the children? Brilliant!*) to expand the scope of her initial dream even further.

She had a contract, she finally realized, reading the bottom of the last page with blank lines for two signatures.

"What does this all mean?" she breathed, not daring to voice her fantastical suspicion.

"You don't, please, don't apologize, you don't owe me—"

"I do!" Hermione cut him off sternly. "I apologize for leaving. It was unfair to you. Should I become upset or angry with you in the future, I promise not to leave. I'm sorry."

Discomfort ran rampant across his features, despite his best efforts to maintain an unaffected air. "It's fine Granger, had I known my mother was a trigger for you, I would have—"

"No, Draco, if this relationship is going to work, you need to learn to accept apologies from me when I have wronged you. And to be clear," she pressed up on her toes and kissed him softly, "I want this to work."

His eyes roved over her face, drinking her in with almost an intent to memorize. Draco regarded her smiling face with a contradictory combination of both hunger and satiation, the look of a man who truly thought he might have lost her, and even now as she stood before him after declaring her commitment, he still could not fully come to terms with a deserved offering of stable, consistent happiness.

"I accept your apology," he gruffly replied.

He obviously required more reassurance, but Hermione sensed he would neither voice the insecurity, nor articulate his own needs at this time.

"I don't tell you enough, do I?" she asked, mirroring his question from the other night.

"Tell me what?"

"That you're a good man, Draco."



A scream tore through the otherwise silent bedroom. Hermione bolted upright, her wand already in hand, ready to either defend or attack. Blinking away the last vestiges of sleep, she looked quickly around the room before glancing beside her to check on Draco. The terrifying shout had originated from him, and he let out another anguished yell, his long limbs jerking and twisting in the sheets. His face was paler than normal and contorted in pain, while his hands clenched into fists so tight Hermione worried he might bleed from digging his own nails into his palms.

"NO! NO! PLEASE!"

Hermione leapt into action, tossing her wand aside and placing her hands firmly on the sides of his sweat-soaked face. "Draco! Wake up! It's just a dream, wake up!"

His body trembled fitfully for a moment more before his eyes snapped open. His gaze fixed on her, but panicked and scared. "Gr-Granger?" He slurred, as if he couldn't understand that she really was in front of him and not a lasting image from his nightmare.

"I'm here, it's all right, you're safe, it was only a dream," she murmured soothingly and ran her fingers through his hair. But Draco's eyes still darted around the room, his chest heaving as he breathed in too hard and too fast. Body still shaking, he sat up so rapidly he almost collided with Hermione's

Remain Nameless

"But then that means you've... you've been here for hours?" She exclaimed, catching a glimpse of the wall clock. Draco didn't respond, just fixed her with that penetrating gray stare. The naked emotion in his eyes overwhelmed her, and she turned away.

"Would you like tea? I could use some myself." She bustled by him to fiddle with the kettle on the stove, doing everything she could to distract herself and avoid looking at him.

"No, thank you. Perhaps we could sit and talk?"

His too polite, too calm demeanor disrupted both Hermione's preconceived behavioral expectations as well as her conviction to lose herself in the mundane social ritual of preparing a pot of tea. Why wasn't he upset with her? Why wasn't he shouting and demanding to know where she'd been? She looked a right mess and yet he had the audacity to appear perfectly put together?

Hermione flicked her wand to heat the kettle. "Fine," she said tersely, and walked by him to the couch and sat down primly. She knew it wasn't fair, but the lack of emotional response from Draco started to irritate her. He should be the one itching to fly off the handle, not her.

An annoyingly and unusually placid Draco settled into the armchair facing her. No escaping his heated looks now, to turn her head away would be admitting defeat.

"Did you really follow right after me?" she asked, disbelievingly.

"I did."

"And what did your mother have to say about my presence in your home?"

"Nothing of importance." Draco leant forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "My priority was you tonight."

Hermione felt tears prick at her eyes and redirected her fury inwards, finding herself so unprepared to deal with his quiet sincerity that she completely lost control of her tear ducts again. He'd put her first tonight and what did she do? She'd run away like a child, hiding from her problems. The first sign of trouble and she'd bolted, while Draco stayed behind, waiting for her to recover from her fit of immaturity. How had this happened? When did she let herself become so weak?

"I take it you went to the Pottery?" he asked softly.

"Yes, I needed... I just needed to speak to Harry and Ginny but then... but then Ron showed up."

Draco's eyes immediately hardened. "I see," he dipped. "Did you have a lovely evening with all your old friends?" Finally, he'd allowed some semblance of emotion to seep through. She didn't miss the bitter resentment in his question at the thought of Hermione running to Ron with a problem. Especially a problem involving relationship matters.

"It was awful, actually," Hermione snapped. "And I'm sure you'll be thrilled to know that Ron completely lost it when I told him we were together!"

Why was she so hell bent on trying to rile him up? The comment about Ron hit its mark and she saw a muscle twitch in Draco's clenched jaw. "On the contrary," he hissed, "I find myself rather more concerned about the state you arrived in just now. Did he hurt you? What did he say to you?"

Part of Hermione warmed at the possessive nature of his questioning but she'd had about enough of the men in her life reigniting old feuds tonight. She stood suddenly and crossed her arms over her

head. She pulled away just in time as he swung his long legs over the side of the bed and promptly vomited on the floor.

Hermione immediately vanished the sick and conjured a bucket. She'd unfortunately logged so many nights of experience with this exact situation (both as victim and caretaker) during her relationship with Ron that these steps were second-nature.

Draco's shoulders shook as he retched into the bucket again and Hermione summoned a wash cloth and dampened it with water from her wand. The moonlight filtering in through the window reflected off the glistening skin of his back, and Hermione fought down her own heartache at the sight of Draco succumbing to his nightmares. She touched the cloth to the back of his neck, and though he tried to shrug her off at first, another bout of sickness required his attention and he surrendered to her gesture of comfort.

She rubbed his back soothingly and pushed his hair off his sweat-covered brow, while his body hunched and continued to empty his stomach's contents into the receptacle. His knuckles turned white against the rim, and Hermione wondered if it would crack under the pressure of his grip. She alternated between vanishing his sick and gently pressing the wash cloth to his neck and face.

Eventually, his body spent, Hermione tugged the bucket from his grip, vanishing it all together. She showed a glass of water into his hands and continued to murmur words of comfort in his ear. Too tired to be embarrassed now, he abandoned his earlier feeble attempts to fend her off, and sank into her arms. Hermione scooted up to the edge of the bed beside him as Draco's weight sagged against her side. He only managed a few gulps of the water before he dropped the glass, his frame still suffering mild convulsions and aftershocks. Hermione held him all the tighter, repeating over and over, "I'm here Draco, you're safe."

When she felt something hot and wet drip onto her shoulder, she moved to grab the cloth to dab away more sweat, but a quick glimpse of his face revealed tears instead. From what she could see of Draco's face, his eyes were squeezed shut and his jaw clenched tight, but he could no longer hold the tears at bay.

"Tell me, please. Please Draco, what was it?"

He took a shuddering breath that threatened to turn hysterical. Hermione placed a hand on his chest and counted a few breaths for him.

"It was Bellatrix," he finally rasped. "She had you... she had you under her wand and you were... you were..." He broke off with a gasp and wrenched himself away from her to bury his head in his hands.

He rocked his body back and forth as he cried out, "I d-didn't s-save you... I didn't save you... I *never* save you!"

Draco broke down completely and Hermione gathered him against her before he could move away. She met no resistance from him now, as he clung to her instead, his trembling hands scrabbling for purchase, seeking to find a tether anywhere he could reach. She guided his head to her shoulder while his body wracked with sobs and Hermione tried not to come undone herself. All she could do

Hey Jude 19

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for Draco now was allow him to draw comfort and safety from her touch. His arms gripped her tightly as he lost all control of his emotions, weeping as he choked out apologies against her skin. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m so fucking sorry...”

Not for the first time, Hermione cursed their generation’s lot in life. A sobering thought occurred to Hermione then: How many of her fellow witches and wizards suffered this way? How many of them had the help they needed?

Hermione could only help the wizard in her arms, and hope that she could be enough to combat the darkness that threatened to overwhelm them both. She didn’t interrogate Draco any further about his nightmare, a familiar one to her after all, but let him cry until his eyes ran dry. She kept her fingers running delicately through his hair all the while, never ceasing the rhythm as he practically howled in misery.

Some time later, Draco relaxed under her ministrations and regulated his breathing. Shuffling a bit, he pulled away and dried his face with the heels of his hands.

“I can’t do this Granger,” he said hoarsely. Hermione felt a sudden icy sting of dread, fearing the worst. What did that mean? Was he talking about them? About their relationship?

Draco shook his head as he held it in his hands. “I can’t do this... I can’t be here. I need to—I need...”

He looked up at Hermione then, eyes blazing. “I need to get out of here for a little while. Can we do that?”

She met his intense gaze with a puzzled look. “What do you mean? Go where?”

He clasped both her hands in his suddenly. “Please, Granger,” he begged. “Let’s go away for a bit, a week tops. Just the two of us... out of England so I can fucking breathe again.”

“You want to go on holiday together?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Right now.”

Hermione pulled her hands from his. “What? We can’t just leave! What about our jobs? Or—?”

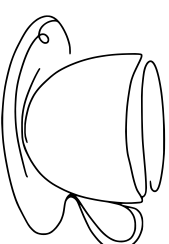
“Fine, next weekend then!”

She sat back and regarded him for a beat. “You’re serious? How do you expect to just pick up and go to Merlin-knows-where and—?”

“I’ll take you to Paris. Fuck, Granger, I’ll take you to the bloody moon, just... *please*. If I don’t get off this tiny, damned island where everyone from my mother to fucking Weasley thinks they have the right to comment on my personal affairs then I am going to go fucking spare.”

He looked at her so desperately then, his eyes still glassy and red-rimmed, that it left Hermione powerless to refuse him. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d requested time off from work and truthfully, a holiday sounded rather lovely. No angry Ron to deal with, no judgemental pureblood mothers, just her and Draco.

“All right, we can take a trip,” she acquiesced. “We’ll talk more in the morning. Let’s get you back



Chapter Thirty One

She should still have some strawberry ice cream in her freezer and more than a few bottles of wine to choose from at home. But when Hermione stepped out of her Floo, all thoughts of drowning her sorrows in dessert and alcohol were summarily dashed.

Had she not been experiencing a complete emotional breakdown the entire evening, the sight that greeted her in her kitchen would have made her laugh until her sides split. Draco and Crookshanks each occupied a chair at her kitchen table, a stack of parchment in between, looking to all the world like two men having a *very serious and sophisticated discussion* about the state of global economics.

“But what your argument fails to consider, my good man, is the impact this legislation would have on the export relationship with China.”

“No, no, see, you must understand the boost this would give the home market. It’s quite simple, really.”

Both pairs of eyes flicked to Hermione as she appeared in the entryway, pulling her from her ludicrous reverie.

Draco got uncertainly to his feet. “Hello,” he said softly.

“Hi,” she replied weakly, immediately self-conscious of her bedraggled appearance. Her hair was likely a rat’s nest, her clothes still rumpled from the Floo, and she didn’t even want to know the state of her barely dry eyes. Yet there Draco stood, with his perfectly crisp navy suit and not a lock of his platinum hair out of place, frustrating Hermione on several levels. Not something she’d normally complain about, but the man’s enduring attractiveness was a most unfair advantage when she looked like a half-drowned knazle.

“How was dinner with your mother?” It came out more bitterly than she intended, but Draco merely shrugged at her question.

“I wouldn’t know, I left shortly after you did.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “Have you been here all this time?”

Draco shrugged again. “I think I missed you by about two minutes.”

source of support... I'm sure he's probably feeling rather lonely right about now."

Hermione sighed and wiped her face dry. Timidly, she voiced the fear that had been plaguing her since the run-in with Narcissa.

"Do you think we have a chance? Draco and me?"

Harry shrugged, but then reached over and held one of Hermione's hands between his own. "That's not really up to me, is it? I'll support you no matter what you decide."

Hermione let out a watery chuckle. "Harry Potter you are getting sappy in your old age."

He responded with a boyish grin. "Well I am going to be a father, so I guess I need to practice this whole talking-about-feelings thing"

Feeling as if her legs would be able to support her weight again, Hermione stood and pulled her hand from Harry's.

"Look," Harry said, a bit awkward. "I cannot believe I'm about to say this but, you might want to hear Malfoy out. Despite everything that happened... I think he really is trying to change, or uh, has changed."

Hermione regarded him in shock. What happened to the suspicious boy who was so convinced of Draco's wrongdoings he ordered two house elves to tail him during their Sixth Year?

As if Harry could hear her thoughts, he pressed on. "Hermione if I learned anything at all from the mess that was my youth, it was that people can surprise you. Even those you thought might not be capable of love or of change... it's best not to jump to conclusions, yeah?"

"I understand. I think I should be getting on now."

Harry walked her through to the living room. "See you at The Burrow tomorrow?"

"Of course. Tell Gin thanks and I'm sorry I ruined the evening"

"You didn't. You okay going home? You're welcome to stay here you know."

Hermione hugged him tightly. "I know, Harry. But I think it's Crookshanks' turn to deal with my emotions. I'll see you tomorrow."

to bed."

Draco's expression cleared at her agreement and he allowed her to maneuver him back down into bed. His whole body sagged with both relief and exhaustion as Hermione propped an extra pillow under his head.

"Do you want a Calming Draught?" He shook his head at her offer. "No, I don't think my stomach could handle any potions right now," he responded weakly and Hermione could see sleep was already succeeding in claiming him.

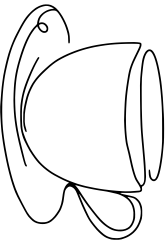
She gently dabbed at his forehead a few more times with the cool cloth as his eyes fluttered shut. She pushed away the dark thoughts about how Draco would have coped with these night terrors in the past, thankful that he could be vulnerable in front of her now.

She laid a hand on his scalp and indulged in combing through his hair with her fingers, surprised but gratified when he leaned into her touch.

"Mmm, thank you love," he murmured sleepily and Hermione stilled. Never, not once, had Draco ever addressed her by a term of endearment.

Smiling to herself, Hermione settled down beside him.

I love you, too



Chapter Thirty Two

Hermione took a deep breath and inhaled the usually comforting scent of a hot summer day outside of The Burrow. Now, however, her insides twisted in knots at the aroma, and not just because she'd apparated on an empty stomach.

She'd left Draco that morning with some ginger ale and toast, promising to be back later in the day so they could discuss this trip he was so desperate to take. He'd grumpily waved her off and said he'd already decided on France and that he'd take care of everything, all she needed to do was tell her office she was taking all next week off. Hermione huffed and left, but had to admit, it would be quite nice to have someone else planning a trip instead of her. Any holiday she'd taken with Ron had resulted in him complaining about her meticulous itineraries that she'd spend weeks putting together.

Speaking of Ron... Hermione wondered if he'd even be here today. Well, no use delaying the inevitable, she thought, and strode toward the home. Before she could walk five feet, Ginny dashed out of the house and over to her:

"Should you be running in your state?"

Ginny frowned at her. "You're almost as bad as Harry. I'm pregnant, not an invalid! I'm not even that far along!"

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest as she eyed the home behind Ginny. "How bad is it in there?"

Ginny's face immediately softened. "Would you like it from best to worst?"

"Well, what?" Hermione sputtered. Wouldn't Ron be the only one in a foul mood?

"Well after Ron left ours last night, he went to George's. He called a 'Wesley family emergency'—without me, mind you, the prat—and told the entire family about you and Malfoy."

"So everyone... the whole family... the whole family knows?" Hermione asked, stunned.

Ginny nodded, giving her a sympathetic grimace. "I'm sorry, Hermione, you know how he gets. Shoots his mouth off, asks questions later."

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given it freely.

"Are you all right?" asked Ginny.

"No."

"Ron had no right to say those things to you."

Hermione sniffled and gave a half-shring of her shoulders. "He's hurting. I understand why he's so upset. Ron was always sensitive about me and Harry keeping anything from him after... after..."

"After he left you both on the run?" Ginny finished for her.

Hermione nodded. "He's never really forgiven himself for that. Add in his complex about Malfoy... well this was the perfect storm, really, to set Ron off."

Harry reappeared suddenly in the kitchen. "Padma told me I'd just missed him. She's pretty sure he went round to George's. She reckons that might be the best place for him right now."

Hermione worried her bottom lip between her teeth, feeling guilty that she'd ruined a perfectly good dinner as well as Ron and Padma's excitement over the next step in their relationship. Harry noticed Hermione's anxious habit and frowned.

"Gin, can I speak to Hermione alone for a second?"

Ginny gave Hermione's shoulders a soft squeeze, poked Harry on the cheek and disappeared into the living room, closing the kitchen door behind her. Harry sighed and took Ginny's vacated seat next to Hermione. He rubbed his temple then folded his hands on the table in front of him.

"I need you to know that I don't agree with Ron. Gin and I both support you completely, no matter who you choose to date, and even if... even if Malfoy and I don't exactly... like one another... I would never stand in the way of you being with someone you... love." Harry looked as if the last word pained him to say, but he got it out nonetheless.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said weakly in gratitude, unable to say anything else. Harry shook his head, dismissing her unspoken apology and thanks.

"Enough about Ron's feelings. How can I help you with... whatever happened with Malfoy? You said he didn't say anything, but you seemed awfully upset."

"He didn't, he tried to convince me to stay but I was too shocked and upset and—" Hermione closed her eyes as the horrific realization dawned on her. "Oh God, Harry, I just turned tail and ran! I didn't even give him the benefit of the doubt, I assumed the worst of him when I saw his mother standing there."

The shock of Draco and his mother together in the room with her had plunged her backwards in time to the horrific memory of her torture at the Manor. She'd flown into a terrified panic before she could truly process that Draco didn't feel that way anymore.

She groaned and opened her eyes to meet Harry's patient stare. "I really buggered this up, didn't I?"

Harry adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. "Well, I'm not sure about that, but I think you should at least explain to Malfoy why you left the way you did. I know he doesn't... I mean I don't think he has a lot of people he can depend on in his life, besides you. And with you being a fairly recent

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I would have *died* rather than see you tortured like that!"

A ringing silence punctuated his shouted words and Padma laid a placating hand on Ron's arm. He shook her off and ran a hand through his hair.

"Do you—" he swallowed thickly but plowed on. "Do you love him?"

"Yes."

Four pairs of eyes snapped to her face at the quickness of her answer.

Ron shook his head, disappointed and disgusted. "Never took you for a fool, Hermione."

Ginny began to loudly protest, but Ron ignored her again. With a deadened look in his eyes, he placed Padma's container and the bottle of champagne on the kitchen table.

"Here," he said flatly. "We were going to announce the good news tonight. Padma and I are moving in together... but I can't be here right now."

Ron turned on his heel and stalked out of the kitchen. Padma whispered an embarrassed apology and hurried after him.

Harry looked to Ginny for help. "Go," his wife urged him at once. "Go after him, make sure he's all right."

As Harry rushed to the Floo, Ginny directed Hermione's head onto her shoulder. The affectionate, sidely gesture brought on a fresh wave of tears for Hermione, and the red head let her cry silently, making soothing noises.

Did Ron have a point?

Could she really have been so naïve? She closed her eyes and pressed the heels of her palms to her eyelids, trying to calm her swirling mind and racing heart. She knew why Ron felt so hurt and betrayed by her and Harry right now. Ron only recalled Malfoy as the petulant bully who did everything in his power to make Ron feel worthless. He had no concept of the more mature man Malfoy had worked so hard to become, had no idea the demons he wrestled with, how horrified he would be now to be compared to Lucius.

And could she really blame Ron for his overreaction? Harry and Ginny had each had time and first-hand experiences to reconcile the two versions of Draco, but this had been sprung out of nowhere on an unsuspecting Ron. No, to Ron, Draco was the smirking prat who had no problem sneering at the less fortunate and firing off morally questionable hexes at schoolmates' backs.

Over a year and a half ago, would Hermione not have thought the same? Back then, the name "Draco Malfoy" would have conjured memories of a snarling pale face hurling the word "Mudblood" in her direction.

Now, however, the name "Draco Malfoy" conjured memories of his lips trailing soft kisses down her body, of his face between her thighs, of spirited debates over morning coffee, of good-natured teasing about Muggle music, of the way he passionately breathed her given name, of his gray eyes burning with need and unspoken declarations, of his fingers playing with hers, of him holding her when he let his guard down, of him admitting weaknesses and faults, of him asking her to forgive him...

Because she had forgiven him. All the way back in November he'd asked her forgiveness and she'd

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Hermione sighed and ran a hand down her tired face. "Right then. Best to worst it is."

Ginny smiled grimly. "Well, you obviously have mine and Harry's whole-hearted support. Charlie was quite outspoken in your favor, Bill told me he was very passionate in your defense." Hermione smiled, wondering if Charlie would heed his own advice from their heart-to-heart in the pantry from a few months ago.

"Next, we have Bill, Percy, and Audrey with tentative support. Bill said he has no quarrel with Draco, Audrey doesn't know him personally, and Percy believes anyone is worthy of a second chance if they can prove themselves."

Hermione nodded, that sentiment made sense coming from Percy, she thought fondly.

"Now we move on to the level of neutrality. Angelina is torn I think, both because of George and she remembers Malfoy as a little cockroach on the quidditch pitch... but apparently her cousin is Malfoy's boss and she's heard nothing but good things since he started working there. She has no real animosity towards him, and she thinks the world of you but..." Ginny trailed off with a resigned sigh and Hermione understood. Easy enough to figure out where George stood then. "Padma's in the same boat too," Ginny continued. "She respects your opinion and choices, and was never a personal target of Draco's at school... but she's obviously seen first-hand how this is affecting Ron."

Hermione sighed, and fought down the feeling of guilt that threatened to creep up.

"Which leaves Fleur, George, and as you know, Ron."

"Wait, Fleur? Has she even met Draco?" Hermione asked, bewildered as to how the French witch could possibly be upset by this.

Ginny shot her an apologetic look. "Fleur umm... well she blames Draco for Bill's injuries. Because he let Greyback into Hogwarts the night that Dumbledore died."

"Oh."

She was torn between both amusement and indignation that the entire Weasley clan had seen fit to discuss her romantic relationship behind her back, going so far as to hold an emergency conclave.

"George and Ron still furious?"

Ginny shrugged. "George will get over it, I think it was the shock of it all that got to him. You know him and Ron can be quick to hold grudges, but George is soft-hearted, he'll come round. He can't shake how Malfoy treated you at school, it's an older brother thing."

"While that's all very sweet, I'm hardly some naïve little schoolgirl! I've fought in a bloody war!" Hermione finally exploded, sending a few nearby crows into startled flight. Ginny leveled her with a patient look and laid a comforting hand on her arm. "Hey, Ron made a right mess of things, and I'm not excusing his behavior, but try to remember that we all love you. There's not a person in this house that wouldn't do anything for you."

"Except let me make my own decisions about whom I date," she muttered bitterly. Hermione pushed her hair back and shook off Ginny's hand. "Is everyone waiting inside, ready to either berate me or dole out unwanted advice?"

"No, everyone is in the backyard, waiting to see which hex you use on Ron first. Bill's betting on

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Jelly-Legs Jinx, but I've got a few Gallions riding on those lovely canaries you favor."

Hermione's anger deflated and her mouth twitched upwards. "Thanks, Gin. For everything."

She straightened her shoulders and took another deep breath, then a thought struck. "Hang on... your parents... what did they have to say?"

"Ah, see that's really why I came to intercept you. Mum wants to speak with you privately in the kitchen."

"Her and your dad... how do they feel about me and Malfoy?"

Ginny shook her head. "No idea. Charlie said they didn't say a word last night, just said they'd like to speak with you alone, if you'd let them."

Hermione tensed, wondering what fate awaited her in the kitchen. "You can come with me if you like. It might be nice to have an ally if your mother gets worked up."

"Actually, I was wondering... is Malfoy at yours? I thought I'd pop by for a chat with him."

"Ern, yes, he is. May I ask what—?"

"You may not. But fret not, this is a friendly chat, I swear. He and I are long overdue for this discussion."

Hermione dismissed the dozens of questions that rose in her mind, having more pressing issues to deal with herself. "All right, but... he had a rough night. I'm going to visit my parents after here, so you can take your time with whatever... whatever you've got to discuss with him."

Ginny hugged her then went back inside to the Floo, leaving Hermione to walk into unknown territory alone.

As the younger woman had said, Molly waited in the kitchen and turned to her with a smile as she approached. "Hello Hermione dear," she immediately engulfed her in a hug and Hermione relished in the maternal embrace. After the day and night she'd endured, the comfort of a mother's arms almost made her cry all over again.

Molly pulled back and held Hermione's face tenderly in her hands. "I'm not here to judge you or chastise you. I just want to talk. Tea?"

Hermione nodded weakly and sank heavily into a chair. Out the kitchen window she could see all the assembled Weasleys in the backyard, but didn't focus her gaze on any one in particular. Her attention was pulled back to the matriarch as she placed a steaming cup in front of her. Molly took a seat as well and regarded Hermione with kind eyes.

"Family ties are a tricky thing, are they not?" Molly began, stirring some milk into her cup. "The Malfoys and the Weasleys have always had bad blood between them, going back a few generations now. Even my own family, the Prewetts, didn't care for them. When I was a girl, my father used to rage about Abraxas Malfoy and his interference at the Ministry." She paused and sipped her tea delicately. "And as for Arthur and Lucius... well you've seen firsthand the animosity between the pair of them."

Hermione snorted as she recalled the brawl between the two grown men at Flourish & Blotts before the start of her Second Year.

"I know what Lucius used to say about Arthur. I know how he used to degrade my husband, be-

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Hermione's eyes filled with tears again. "Ron, no, it wasn't like that, I swear! I just wanted to introduce everyone to the idea of... me with Draco slowly and on my own terms. This isn't how I wanted you to find out that... that..."

She stuttered to a halt and Ron jumped in before she could collect herself. "That you were what?"

Coz'ing up with a Death Eater?"

Padma gasped as Harry and Ginny made noises in protest while Hermione shot back, "Don't call him that!"

"Well why not? That's what he is, Hermione! He's the same as his father!"

"He's not!" Hermione shouted, more tears tracking their way down her cheeks. "He's not," she repeated in a quiet voice.

"I think a certain mark on his forearm might beg to differ," Ron responded coldly.

"He didn't have a choice Ron! Voldemort threatened to kill his parents!" Hermione replied desperately, trying to appeal to Ron's forgiving nature.

But Ron merely snorted decisively. "Don't try to convince me he didn't want that life, he only regrets ending up on the losing side. You honestly believe he feels bad about that decision?"

"I know he does," Hermione said firmly.

"You're blind, Hermione, absolutely blind," Ron said sadly. "If Harry and I hadn't broken out of their Manor cellar that night I bet you anything he would have traded off with his dear Auntie Bella when she got tired of torturing you herself."

Hermione inhaled sharply and felt as if she'd been slapped.

Distantly she heard Ginny snarl while Harry shouted, "Ron, that's enough! Don't speak to Hermione like that, what is wrong with you?"

Ron paid him no mind, and focused his gaze on Hermione.

"No, this is between me and her. She knows... she knows what that night... how that night affected me."

Seeing his haunted blue eyes, hearing his voice break, she felt it then, the burn of shame. Ron thought it his greatest failing, being unable to shield Hermione from Belatrix. They'd suffered through many a night together where Ron woke up screaming Hermione's name in pure terror, dreaming of being dragged away from her into the cellar of Malfoy Manor on the worst night of his life and hers. Hermione couldn't look away from Ron, even as she felt her heart shattering. Ron, who had held her during the night terrors, who stemmed her tears and fetched Calming Draughts, who cleaned her vomit and dabbed at her sweaty forehead when she succumbed to the worst of her memories... he now looked at her in true agony. *How could you keep this from me, Hermione? After everything we were to each other? How could you? His faintly almost tore you apart, what are you thinking?*

"He had a wand," Ron said shakily. "He had his wand Hermione, and he did nothing. You could have bled out right at his feet and he wouldn't have lifted a finger."

Hermione still refused to back down. "He would have been killed, Ron."

"SO WHAT?" Ron roared. "I would have gladly been killed for you! Remember that, Hermione."

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“Ron, shut up and—” Ginny tried to cut him off but he yelled over his sister.

“How long?” He asked Hermione. “How long have you been keeping this from us?”

Hermione wilted herself not to waver under his accusatory shouting. “We’ve been dating since April.”

“APRIL?” Ron exploded. “You’ve been keeping this from everyone for FOUR BLOODY MONTHS?”

Hermione shook her head “It’s not like that Ron, we were friends first... for quite a while...”

“Friends? Are you kidding? Hermione do you remember what he used to call you?”

“Vividly,” she said coldly. “And as I’m the only person in this room who’s ever been addressed by that term, I’ll thank you to trust me when I say that Draco no longer uses that sort of language, nor does he harbor those beliefs anymore.”

Ron scoffed and turned imploringly to Harry. “You tell her Harry, go on. Tell her what *darling* Draco said to us in the Slytherin common room in our Second Year. Remember, when he thought we were Crabbe and Goyle? Remember what he said about Hermione?”

Harry shook his head. “We were kids, Ron, all of us. He was a dumb, misguided kid.”

“He wished for your death?” Ron whined back to Hermione. “He said he hoped that Slytherin’s monster killed you! You, Hermione, specifically?” Ron bellowed.

“Ron, that’s enough. Who Hermione dates is her business,” said Harry warningly.

“You can’t seriously be okay with her dating Malfoy?” Ron asked incredulously.

Harry pushed his glasses up his nose and sighed, casting an apologetic half glance at Hermione. “It’s not up to me, Ron. He seems to be making an effort to be, umm... different. And anyway,” Harry scratched the back of his neck as a blush crept up his face. “They seem umm... happy together, I reckon.”

Ron screwed his face up in disgust but then came to a devastating conclusion.

“Hang on... you knew?!” You knew she was dating that evil little git? The hurt at the perceived betrayal in his voice stabbed at Hermione’s conscience and she took pity on Harry.

“Don’t be angry with Harry, Ron, I asked them not to tell,” said Hermione softly.

“Them?!” He rounded on Ginny next, who glared back, daring him to challenge her. He sunk back against the counter, looking defeated.

“So,” began Ron sulkily. “Am I the only one in this room you didn’t trust enough to tell?”

Harry and Ginny averted their eyes at the misery in Ron’s voice. When he turned to Padma, his eyes widened at her guilty expression. “You too?”

Padma gave a half shrug and looked apologetically at Hermione. “I heard a rumor from Susan Bones that Draco was serious about some witch, and then I remembered what you’d said at Christmas...” she trailed off and looked back at Ron. “I had a hunch, but I didn’t want to pass on gossip about Hermione, I’m sorry.”

Ron shook his head in disbelief. “So what, the three of you,” he gestured to Harry, Ginny, and Hermione, “have been getting together for cozy little double dates behind my back?”

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snitch his name to make sure he never advanced in his career. Lucius Malfoy was a spiteful, pitiful man, and I would be lying if I said I didn’t take some comfort in knowing he’s gone from this world.”

Hermione nodded in understanding, silently telling the older woman she didn’t begrudge her this opinion.

“As for Narcissa... I can’t claim to know the woman very well. On the rare occasion our paths did cross I found she more than lived up to her reputation of being haughty and cold. And how a mother could simply stand by and allow her only child to be forced to serve that... that monster... well I’ll never understand that. I have no sympathy for the woman, however...” Molly took a shaky inhale as her eyes filled with tears. Hermione placed a hand over hers and received a watery smile in return.

“She saved Harry’s life. And for that, should our paths ever cross again, I will gladly clasp her hands and thank her.”

Hermione stared back in surprise. Molly sniffed and continued. “I would, dear, no matter her flaws, she did save that boy’s life, and for that, I owe her a debt of gratitude. Then there’s the fact that I... that I... I murdered her sister,” she finished in almost a whisper and Hermione was dismayed to see a tear leak out.

“Molly, no! You were defending your family, you were defending your child! Bellatrix was aiming to kill Ginny, to kill me! Do you have any idea how many lives you saved that day?”

Molly shook her head sadly. “I still took a life and that is a decision I have to live with. I’d do it again, but that doesn’t mean the choice doesn’t haunt me every now and then.”

Hermione could only marvel at the strength and compassion of the older woman before her. Molly took out a worn handkerchief and blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes. “My point is... what I originally said... is that family ties are quite tricky. Now I don’t personally know Draco, nor do I truly know what the boy has lived through... pardon me, the young man...” She broke off and regarded Hermione with a faraway look. “You’ll have to forgive me, dear, but it’s ever so hard not to still think of you all as children.”

Hermione’s resolve completely broke then, and she shot out of her chair to hug the older witch tightly.

“Does he make you happy?” she asked Hermione softly once they parted.

“Very.”

“Treats you with respect?”

“He does.”

“Takes you on outlandish dates?”

“He’s whisking me away to France all next week.”

“Good,” said Molly and wiped her eyes dry. “Merlin knows you deserve it, my dear. The others will come ‘round eventually. You’d think after two wars people would learn to forgive petty schoolyard squabbles but alas...” she sighed and trailed off.

“No one knows more than Draco that he has an awful lot to make up for. But he’s trying Mrs. Weasley, he’s really trying,” said Hermione and she stood, prepared to take her leave.

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Molly smiled kindly. "You know to call me Molly. And if you wouldn't mind indulging another one of your elders today, Arthur's waiting in the garden for you. If you pop out the side door, you'll find him."

Gesturing with an encouraging smile, Molly pointed her to the exit. When Hermione reached the garden, she found Arthur seated on the lone, ivy-covered bench, looking on as two gnomes fought over a mushroom.

"Funny little things, aren't they?" he said in greeting when he'd spotted Hermione.

"Quite. Hello, Mr. Weasley," Hermione pecked his cheek and took the empty spot beside him.

"Arthur, dear," he corrected.

They sat in silence for a bit and watched as one gnome emerged victorious, sprinting away with the mushroom cap clamped beneath its sharp teeth, his rival hot on his heels.

"Molly said you wanted to speak with me."

The Weasley patriarch turned to look at her. "Yes." He removed his glasses and polished them on his robes, a move he often pulled when he wanted to gather his thoughts before speaking.

"From what I gathered of what Ronald—erm—shouted at us all last night..." Arthur began and Hermione rolled her eyes. "I understand that you are dating the Malfoy boy?"

"Draco," Hermione corrected automatically.

"Draco," he echoed back and inclined his head in a slight apology.

"Hermione, you're an intelligent young woman and unlike a few of my sons, I'm not going to ask you to defend your choices or make a case for Draco. I am going to ask you to simply listen to what I have to say."

Arthur sighed then, and Hermione felt in that moment he looked older than she'd ever seen him; a man who'd raised seven children and lived through two wars. Hermione had nothing but the utmost respect for him and his wife. The least she could do was hear him out.

"A family like the Malfoys," he began slowly, "hold a certain exalted place in our world, the wizarding world. Their lineage is legendary, their ancestors notable, and they always seem to find themselves in the thick of tumultuous times."

He paused here to marshal his thoughts. "My personal feelings for Lucius aside, I feel it is my duty to caution you about what getting involved with a family like that could mean."

"Draco is not his father," Hermione asserted sternly.

Arthur held up a placating hand. "I'm not accusing Draco of anything. I simply want to stress that there is a certain burden that comes with the Malfoy name, warranted or not, and I would hate for you to have to suffer unduly. Pureblood family traditions being what they are, should you and Draco declare anything publicly, certain expectations could be thrust upon you, not to mention the media frenzy this would incite."

Hermione pursed her lips, heart clenching in her chest. She knew what Arthur meant to caution her against, and while she appreciated he cared enough to warn her, part of her boiled in indignation at the public's perception of her, of Draco, and of the moronic blood-based hierarchy that seemed to

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Both Harry and Ginny opened their mouths to reply, but were interrupted by the Floo. "Oh bugger, that'll be Ron," muttered Ginny. "Sorry Hermione, we knew you had plans with Malfoy tonight so we invited them over for dinner."

"Oi Harry, Gin! Padma's coming through with the samosas, so turn the oven on and we can—!"

Ron walked into the kitchen, Padma a step behind him carrying a container and a bottle of champagne. The newly arrived couple stopped short at the scene in front of them.

"Blimey, Hermione, what the hell happened? What's going on?"

Silence greeted Ron's question as Harry and Ginny exchanged uneasy glances and Hermione struggled to form words.

Finally, she managed to squeak out, "It's nothing Ron, I simply—"

"No Hermione," Ron cut her off firmly. "It's very clearly not nothing. Why do you look so upset?"

When still no one answered, Ron grew frustrated. "Look, someone better tell me what's happened right now. I'm sick of all this secrecy! I'm not a complete idiot, you know!"

Hermione looked up at Ron in surprise. "What do you mean? Secrecy?"

"Well, yeah, about you," Ron said plainly. "You spend all your weekends with some bloke and no one even knows who he is and... hang on a minute," he stopped as if he'd pieced everything together. "Is that what this is all about? What did he do to you? Did he hurt you?"

"Stop Ron, it's nothing like that!" Hermione interjected quickly. "A silly misunderstanding is all. I overreacted and came here to vent a bit. I'll be fine."

Ron crossed his arms. "You don't seem fine." He said bluntly. Ginny scowled at her brother. "Seriously, Ron? Don't be a prat." Ron shrugged, his eyes only for Hermione.

"I'm your best friend too," he said stubbornly. "I deserve to know why you're hurting. Hermione, please." It marked the second time tonight that someone had begged her that way.

Hermione took a deep breath, knowing Ron had a point. "I had an unexpected run-in with Narcissa Malfoy tonight. It left me feeling somewhat... shaken."

"What? Where? What did she say to you?" His questions flew out thick and fast and Hermione knew she'd been a fool to think she could keep this quiet.

"She didn't say much of anything, not that she had to..." Hermione responded bitterly and wiped her eyes. "She was an unexpected guest at dinner and—"

"Dinner? She accosted you publicly?"

Sweet Merlin, this was going to be painful.

"No, she was visiting with her son. In his home."

Gods, she really was a coward several times over tonight.

Ron's brows furrowed and it seemed as if everyone in the room held their breath. "But then... how...? But that means... No!" Ron backed away from the kitchen table in horror. "Hermione tell me you don't mean what I think you mean!"

Hermione met his shocked gaze beseechingly, but that only seemed to wind Ron up more. "NO! You're dating Malfoy!? That slimy fucking ferret!? ARE YOU INSANE!?"

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stared at it numbly, watching the steam rise up in swirls. Collecting herself, she looked up into the concerned faces of Harry and Ginny. Where to even begin?

"Did something happen with Malfoy?" Harry asked delicately, ignoring the sharp look Ginny sent him.

Hermione inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly through her nose. *We all live in a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine...*

"Yes, I mean, no... I mean..." It wasn't working, her mantra wasn't working. "Oh my God, Harry, how could I have been so stupid? How did I ever convince myself that this could work?"

Ginny's arms were around her again and Hermione finally succumbed to her tears. "I'm so stupid, so bloody stupid..." she cried into Ginny's shoulder.

"Stop that!" said Harry sternly. "You've never been stupid for a second of your life, Hermione. Can you please try and tell us what has you in such a state? We want to help."

Harry's bright green eyes were full of such sincerity it made Hermione want to cry harder.

"It wasn't... him... Malfoy didn't do anything really, he just... Oh Harry, it was his m-mother!"

Hermione choked out. Those icy, unfeeling eyes had made Hermione feel about two feet tall.

"Narcissa?" Harry said blankly. "What's she done?"

Hermione tried to draw strength from Ginny's soothing hands rubbing her shoulders and stroking her hair, but it was a losing battle. She hadn't felt so weak, this low, in the longest time, as if every inferiority complex she'd ever had about being Muggleborn had rushed straight to the forefront of her mind and refused to relinquish the hold over her.

"She showed up tonight and looked at me... just looked at me like I was *nothing*. How dare someone like me... a filthy..." Hermione trailed off and Harry and Ginny exchanged raised eyebrows. "How dare someone like *me* have her arms around her precious son?"

"What did she say, exactly?" asked Ginny.

"Nothing, but gods Ginny, it was all there, all the judgment, all the contempt for people like me, right across her face."

"And Draco? Did he do anything?" prodded Ginny. Harry crossed his arms and frowned.

Hermione shook her head slowly, trying to remember. "No, he... he asked me to stay but I... I couldn't be there. Not in the room, with the two of them... the picture of pureblood poise and privilege and..." she turned her eyes to Harry. "It was like I was right back there on the floor of Malfoy Manor," she admitted. She left the rest unsaid and watched as Harry grimaced in pain and guilt. She knew memories of that night haunted him too.

"Hermione I'm so sorry and I'm so glad you came to us." He pushed off the counter and stood in front of her and Ginny. "Do you want me to go speak to Draco? I can tell him you're here or..."

Harry trailed off awkwardly, clearly unsure of what Hermione wanted him to do. Hermione let out a shuddering sigh. "No that's all right, I don't even know what to say to him right now. I just—I just—" The panic mounted again and her breaths came in harsh gasps. "I don't know what I... was I crazy for thinking a relationship would work between us?"

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be the root of all the problems in the wizarding world. *Why couldn't everyone just bloody move on already?*

When she met Arthur's eyes again, he smiled wryly as if he knew exactly what she had been thinking. This man raised Fred and George after all.

"I'm not trying to patronize you, Hermione. Truly, I'm not. But you must know by now that we... that is, Molly and I... we consider you one of our own."

Hermione felt a tear leak out and cursed under her breath. Arthur smiled gently and Hermione willed herself not to completely break down when she saw his blue eyes mist. "Even though things didn't work out between you and Ronald, you're still a Weasley. You can come to Molly or me any time if you're ever in any sort of trouble."

She could only nod in response as her throat tightened.

"You've been through so much, and you're still so young, that I suppose what I am trying to ask, what I think you should ask yourself... is if Draco is worth the trouble."

Hermione already had her answer. Clearing her throat, she stood suddenly, making Arthur lean back in surprise at her swift movement. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand then took out a small square of parchment and tapped it once with her wand, restoring it to full size. She handed it to a puzzled Arthur.

"Here's something I think you should read. It's a comprehensive educational curriculum and cultural initiative that will benefit Muggleborn children for years to come. Three guesses as to the identity of the anonymous benefactor," she said primly.

Arthur's eyes scanned over the first page, brow furrowed.

"You can keep that copy, I've got the original at home. Maybe pass it on to Ron when you've had a chance to read it properly. There will be an inaugural gala in October and it would mean the world to me if you and the others would attend. As my family."

She squeezed his shoulder as she passed by, hopefully indicating that she harbored no ill will towards him.

"I won't see you next week as I'll be traveling to France with Draco. Please give the others my regards."

Hermione choked back a fresh wave of tears as she turned back and noted the slight tremble in Arthur's shoulders. Then, steeling herself for the discussion she now needed to have with her biological parents, she disappeared.



He felt like he'd been run over by the Hogwarts Express.

If Draco had the energy to feel anything besides bone-deep exhaustion and melancholy, he would have been mortified. Sure, he'd had a few minor night terrors in Hermione's presence before, but nothing on this scale. Merlin, he'd thrown up in front of her. Disgusting

She, of course, had handled it all in stride. The consummate survivor.

He scowled, furious with himself for being so weak. Even after all that, after asking so much of her (*clean my sick, dab my forehead, dry my tears, comfort me for reaching to your torture...*) he'd made her agree to go away together.

Sod it, they deserved this trip. If he was to be denied what should have been the celebratory evening he'd originally planned for making her find official, then he'd whisk her away for a week and spoil her property. He indulged in a smirk and an unkind thought about how the Weasel surely had never treated Hermione to such extravagance when they'd dated.

And maybe, just maybe, an opportunity would arise that would finally allow him to tell Hermione how he really felt about her. Somehow between his mother's untimely arrival, Hermione's breakdown at the Pottery, and Draco reaching all over her floorboards he'd been unable to summon those three little words. It hadn't been quite the romantic evening he'd envisioned.

But oh, he'd been so very close. When she pinned him to the spot with those overlarge eyes of hers and asked why he'd done all this work on her behalf, it almost tumbled out. When she'd chased away his nightmares and made him feel safe under her healing touch, it almost lurched from his throat. Fuck, but he was pathetic.

Would it have been rather audacious of him to tell her though? Honestly, the nerve of him, thinking he had a right to say those words after what he dreamed about his family doing to her. *No, just a damn*, he thought bitterly, *a real memory*. Back in November when Draco had begged her forgiveness for his non-interference as she suffered under his aunt's knife and wand, Hermione had said she wanted to discuss that night, eventually, when they were both ready. Perhaps it was best he'd held his tongue until they'd well and truly come to terms with that awful night at Malfoy Manor.

I am okay with this.

Draco rubbed his tired eyes and set aside the parchment for the fresh ink to dry. He'd finished drafting the request to Bellamy for the time off the following week, pleased that he would only be missing practices and a single match. He'd also already sent off correspondence to his solicitors letting them know he'd be out of the country as of Friday evening and used Hermione's Floo to make the proper reservations at his preferred hotel in Paris. Gallions were no object for this holiday (or any holiday, for that matter) and apparently throwing enough of them around combined with his surname was enough to secure the exact suite he desired.

He desperately needed a shower. Dragging his exhausted body to Hermione's bathroom, he let the shower heat up until the water could almost be classified as scalding before getting in under the spray. He closed his eyes and some of the tension had finally left his muscles when he heard it—the voice he hadn't heard in years.

Oh Draco, what has become of you?

Draco jolted, and his eyes popped open at the sneering drawl that seemed to echo all around him. *You love her, do you? Honestly Draco, the Mudblood?*

"Shut up," Draco snarled aloud. "Shut up, shut up, shut up." He tried to throw himself into his

The second Hermione Flooed away from Draco, she felt the panic rising in her chest. Stumbling blindly out of her fireplace, she gasped lungfuls of air and tried to calm her shaking body. She couldn't shut her mind off and couldn't stem the horrible memories from pouring forth.

"What?" said Narcissa sharply. "Yes—yes, she was in Madam Malkin's with Potter! I saw her picture in the Prophet! Look Draco, isn't it the Granger girl?"

"I... maybe... yeah."

The moment she'd lain eyes on Narcissa Malfoy, it instantly transported Hermione back to the drawing room floor of Malfoy Manor. The last time those cold blue eyes had swept over Hermione, they assessed her value as a bargaining tool for Harry's capture to win back Voldemort's favor.

She needed to breathe, she needed air, she needed...

"But surely," she said quietly, "this is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?"

"Yes, yes it's Granger!" cried Lucius.

She couldn't shake their hold, she couldn't think straight. She needed to get somewhere safe and fast.

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, tell the truth!"

Harry and Ron are alive. Harry and Ron are safe. Ginny is alive and safe. She is alive and safe. *We all live in a yellow submarine*. Harry is alive, they're all alive. *We all live in a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine*. She's fine, Ron and Harry are fine.

Harry, Ginny,

She had to get to Harry and Ginny.

"And I think," said Bellatrix's voice, "we can dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her"

Hermione's shaking hand managed to toss some Floo powder into her grate and she stuck her head in the flames. "H-Harry?" she choked out, her head now in the fireplace of the Potters' cottage.

Ginny swept into view wearing an apron. "Hermione! What's wrong?"

"Ginny, I'm so sorry... can I come through?"

"Course you can but... well never mind, just come through, it's fine."

Hermione darted out of the fire and straight into Ginny's arms, overcome with violent trembling. She didn't know whether she'd be sick or faint.

"Harry! Get in here quick!"

Hermione felt a strong pair of arms pull her gently from Ginny and Hermione buried her face in Harry's chest and shook.

"Are you hurt? What's happened?" Harry's low and calming voice held a touch of urgency all the same. Hermione could do nothing but gulp in air and shake her head back and forth.

"Bring her through here Harry, I'll fetch some tea."

Seeing her gently, Harry walked her to the kitchen and pulled out a chair at the scrubbed wooden table next to the stove. "Here love," Ginny said and placed a steaming mug in front of her. Hermione

Maybe he could just apparate to a pub and get pissed. *Right*, he snorted to himself, *because that's the sort of decision that's worked out well for you in the past.*

Besides, he needed to see Hermione tonight and he needed to convince her that he was still worth all the trouble. Best not to be drunk off his arse when that happened. But *fucking Salazar*, did he want a drink right now. He didn't want to have to think about Hermione's panicked reaction to his mother, didn't want to hear his mother's harsh words chase themselves around his mind, didn't want to imagine what Hermione would say when she finally returned...

He wanted some Dreamless Sleep Potion.

No, I am okay with this.

Draco sat heavily in a chair and rested his chin in his hands. Crookshanks jumped up onto the opposite chair and regarded Draco across the table with an unblinking stare. *"Sorry, old chap, I haven't the foggiest when she'll return. Best make yourself comfortable."*

What in Merlin's name had her running away from his mother like that? What could have possibly spurred such an alarming reaction? Hermione didn't even know his mother, not personally anyway. Why, the two women had never even been in the same room together!

Except for... *oh fuck.*

Oh, fucking fuck fuck.

What about the lovely encounter in Madam Malkin's shop before the start of his Sixth Year? The one where Draco had complimented Hermione's black eye and Narcissa had referred to her as scum? Yes, lovely.

But the last time his mother and Hermione had been in the same room, Hermione had been on the floor writhing, bleeding, and screaming under the wand and knife of his aunt while Draco and his parents simply stood there and let it happen.

And just like that he felt as overwhelmingly helpless as he had that day. Maybe he should call up

Healer Browning.

No, he wanted Hermione.

He wanted to scream and rage until his face turned blue that he'd never let anyone hurt her again, that he'd been a pathetic excuse of a boy but he'd grown up since then. He would never let any person or any potion make him feel weak again.

Draco swallowed the anxious lump in his throat. No, he'd have to give her space for now. Potter and co. would expect him to lose his cool and make threats and demands regarding Hermione's whereabouts. He must stay calm, stay rational, and not let himself be ruled by emotions. He had to prove to her that he wasn't his father, no matter the physical resemblance. He had to prove to her and the rest of the world that they were wrong about Draco Malfoy.

I am okay with this.



occumency, but his deceased father's voice would not be silenced.

It's pathetic, pinning over such filth. Do you really think she could ever return your affections? How could you let yourself be so weak?

Draco slapped his palms against the shower wall. "Enough!" He was arguing with a ghost, with a figment of his deranged imagination.

Her hand is decisive! Don't you see how she has fooled the world around her into believing she is some sort of powerful witch, to be revered and adored? She's nothing but a common, dirty Muggle, same as her parents.

Draco growled and shut off the water. He pressed his fingers against his temples and tried to massage his growing headache away, determined to ignore the insidious voice of his subconscious.

Foiled you too, hasn't she? But you remember, son, don't you? How she begged and screamed for mercy under your aunt's wand like a pathetic animal?

Draco stumbled out of the shower, held himself up against the sink, and glared into the mirror still fogged with steam from the hot water. In the misted reflection, he thought for a moment he could see another presence in the bathroom; a visage of white-blond hair and gray eyes too startlingly similar to his own for comfort.

You're a fool, Draco. Pretend all you like that you're a better man than me. But we both know the truth.

Draco let out a scream of fury and slammed his closed fist into the mirror, cracking the glass.

"You're wrong," he whispered brokenly. "And you're dead."

A ringing silence greeted his statement as he staggered back from the counter and cradled his bloody knuckles. A movement in the corner of his eye startled him, and he turned to see Crookshanks watching him beadily from the doorway.

"Made a bit of a mess, haven't we? If you're quite through with your tantrum, you'd best clean this up before she gets back."

Draco frowned at the animal but retrieved his wand and in two flicks had repaired both the bathroom mirror and his bloodied knuckles, though some bruises remained.

Crookshanks let out a sniff of approval and then sauntered off, leaving Draco alone to berate himself for falling prey to the haunting apparition his mind had created. Salazar, this holiday with Hermione could not come soon enough if hearing the lilting taunts of Lucius in his head rendered him mad enough to punch a mirror with his bare hand.

As he emerged dressed from the bedroom, determined to finally master Hermione's Muggle coffee machine, the Floo lit up and a familiar red-head stepped through.

"Afternoon, Malfoy."

"Weasley."

"It's Potter."

"Whatever."

Ginny regarded him thoughtfully for a moment and Draco rolled his eyes. He didn't need or want any gestures of sympathy from her.

"Well? What do you want? Granger isn't here. In fact, she's supposedly at the Nest or Pigeon or

Remain Nameless

whatever your oversized brood calls your home.”

“It’s the Burrows,” Ginny replied calmly, not taking his bait. “And she is there, but I asked her if I could come speak with you while she finishes up and heads to her parents. Couldn’t make us a cuppa?”

“Do I look like a bloody house-elf?” he sneered.

“No, you look like you’ve been trampled by a herd of hippogriffs.”

Draco turned on his heel and strode into the kitchen. “I’m fixing myself a pot of coffee. You can either accept that or make your own damn tea.”

Ginny followed and plopped down into a chair at the kitchen table, making herself quite at home. “Thanks ever so, my most gracious host!”

Draco scowled and made no response as he fiddled with the Muggle coffee maker. Surely this wasn’t that difficult if it required no magic? As if she could sense his dilemma, Ginny appeared at his side.

“Oh you are a pathetic one, aren’t you? I’ll do it this once, you prat, Harry and I have one of these at home.”

Draco folded his arms and stalked over to the table, throwing himself down in her vacated seat. Neither of them spoke while Ginny prepared the coffee, the red-head only breaking the silence to ask if he needed cream or sugar. He shook his head and accepted the steaming mug with a grunt of acknowledgement. She then prepared a kettle for her own tea, leaving Draco to frown into his acceptably made brew. When she’d finally settled herself across from him, Draco stared at her impatiently, waiting for her to say her piece.

“I’m here to officially welcome you to a very special club.”

“No offense, but the last time I heard those words I ended up with a dark image burned on my skin and loads of memories no amount of potions or alcohol has allowed me to repress, so I’ll pass.”

Ginny idly stirred her tea, ignoring his sarcasm. “You and I have a lot in common, you know.”

Draco didn’t respond but to raise one disbelieving brow.

“It’s true!” she asserted. “Both pureblood, both war survivors, both quidditch fanatics, and,” she wagged her eyebrows up and down. “Both hopelessly in love with saviors of the wizarding world.”

Draco leveled her with an icy glare. “Is there a point to all this?”

“The other thing we have in common, is that we both know what it’s like to live with Voldemort.”

His grip tightened on his mug as he hissed out a shocked breath. “What the fuck Weasley?”

“It’s Potter and I told you,” said the witch patiently. “We have more in common than you think.”

He glared at her mutiniously, itching to throw a hex her way, pregnant with Potter’s spawn or not.

“You know nothing of my life, *milking*. Do not presume that because of my relationship with Granger that you can claim to understand me,” he fumed.

“I’m claiming nothing of the sort. But I do know what it’s like to live with that monster.”

“Is that so?” His tone low, dangerous. “Tell me, at what point in your coddled childhood did you go to bed with the knowledge he was sleeping but a few doors away? Did you ever have to take meals with him, hoping beyond hope that your occlumency was strong enough to not show the revulsion you

Hey Jude!9

could all just carry on with our lives after the war. No, I rather think you and Father cornered the market on insanity.”

“Don’t you dare!” hissed Narcissa. “Don’t you dare speak ill of your father!”

“I’ll speak of him how I like!” roared Draco. “Have you the faintest idea what my life has been like for the past several years?” Narcissa pressed her lips into a thin line and didn’t answer Draco’s rhetorical question. She looked rather like an exasperated parent dealing with a child’s tantrum and it only enraged Draco further.

“Father is dead,” he spat, his vitriol rewarded with a brief flicker of emotion in her eyes. “He’s dead and all he’s left his only son and heir is a shameful legacy and the burden of our surname. We’re a joke Mother! And you would know that if you spent half as much time here as you do escaping to the Continent, safe in the loving embrace of other misguided relatives!”

He walked deliberately towards her. “Do you know what I’ve been doing? When I finished trying to kill myself slowly with potions, I tried to drink myself to death. Since I’ve pulled my sorry arse out of that hell, I’ve kept my head down and quietly rebuilt. Even with my hard work I *still* have to avoid plenty of businesses in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade because they won’t accept ‘Death Eater gold.’” Chest heaving, he came to a stop in front of Narcissa. “And then finally, *finally* I found someone who would look past every shameful, regrettable thing I’ve ever done and you have the gall to say she’s not worth my time or effort? That Mother, is insane.”

If he’d taken Narcissa aback by his emotional outburst, she didn’t give any sign. “This won’t end well, dear.”

Draco scoffed, irritated that his words had seemingly no effect, and turning on his heel, marched towards the fireplace.

“It’d be best for you to place your affections onto a more suitable candidate,” she said primly.

His throat tightened, as he tried to quell the depressing thought that his affections might not be enough to salvage what he currently had with Granger. “Hermione is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he said hoarsely. This time, he didn’t wait for his mother’s response, but stepped into the flames.

Stepping out into Granger’s home a moment later, he hurried through the living room, looking for any sign of her whereabouts. But the stillness in the air told Draco he’d missed her. Sighing, he walked into the kitchen and tossed the parchment onto the table. Altered by the noise most likely, Crookshanks darted into the kitchen, stopping when he saw Draco.

“*Oh, it’s you. She’s gone, you idiot.*”

Draco looked around, weighing his options. No way in hell would he return home to face his mother right now. The level of smugness would be uncharted. He had a feeling Hermione had most likely fled to Potter and She-Weasel. Though his relationship with the couple bordered on amicable these days, surely an upset Hermione bursting through their Floo would have soured whatever progress he’d made in the last few weeks. It would be in poor form to chase her to the Poters’ residence and in all likelihood make things worse.

With a slight shake of her head she whispered again, "I'll see you soon," and called out her address as she disappeared in the flames. Draco stared into the empty grate, wondering if he stared hard enough that Hermione would suddenly decide to return. His world crumbled around him and Draco stood in the middle of falling rubble, frighteningly powerless to stop it.

"Fuck!" He yelled and slammed his palms against the mantel.

"Language," his mother admonished from the doorway and Draco whined around at the sound of her voice. He'd forgotten she even still stood there.

Groaning in frustration, he ignored her and ran a hand over his face. He needed a plan, he needed to act fast, and he needed to—

"Am I to presume that lovely dinner spread was not for my benefit but for Miss Granger?" Narcissa interrupted his frantic train of thought.

"You presume correctly," Draco clipped impatiently.

"Am I to further presume that this... *distraction* is also the reason your letters have been rather sparse as of late? When you even bother to reply to me at all..."

"Don't," he growled in warning. "Don't refer to her as a distraction."

Narcissa narrowed her eyes at his tone. "Do you love her?"

"Yes."

His answer flew out of his mouth the exact second she'd finished the question. The very first time he's willingly admitted his love aloud and to his mother of all people. *Fuck this.*

"I see," came her icy reply.

Draco ignored her and summoned the thick fold of parchment he knew to be at Hermione's place at the dining room table. Providing she hadn't blocked the Floo already or reset some wards, he'd go over there right now to straighten this whole mess out. He didn't have time to deal with Narcissa's cold disapproval or insane questions. The proper time to deal with that was the Tuesday after never.

"And where are you running off to?" She had the nerve to call as he stalked toward the fireplace.

Draco looked back at her, dumbfounded that she even needed to ask. "I'm going after Granger."

Narcissa scoffed and waved an impatient hand. "Oh don't be ridiculous, Draco. That girl is hardly worth your time or effort."

Draco saw red but forced himself to stay calm. He tucked the parchment into his inner breast pocket and smoothed over it with a hand, securing it for Floo travel.

"Draco, come now, be reasonable," Narcissa huffed. "You cannot seriously expect something lasting with that girl. Honestly, anything beyond a rebellious dalliance would be absolutely insane for a promising young man such as yourself."

Merlin's sagging bollocks he really, truly did not have time for this but *fine*, if she wanted to harp on about it.

"Insane?" Draco queried in a low voice. "You think me insane?" He turned slowly on the spot to face his mother. "I'd be careful throwing that word around, because you may not like my definition. Insane is selling your soul, home, and your family to a raving, mad half-blood. Insane is thinking we

felt? Did you watch him take your father's place at the head of your dining room table and wonder if tonight would finally be the night he'd snap and kill your entire family with a wish of his wand?"

This stupid, insipid witch knew nothing of that sinking pit of despair he'd existed in for two straight years. The constant fear, the feeling of being on the edge of a knife, never knowing when you'd be tortured or asked to torture another...

"Oh, Tom and I were much closer than roommates. Didn't you know Malloy? My entire first year of Hogwarts we shared my mind," she said flatly.

"What?"

Ginny took a deep breath and a fortifying sip of tea. "Like I said earlier, I'm welcoming you to the club. Your initiation is long overdue, but then we weren't exactly on speaking terms until recently. Anyway, you, myself, and Harry are part of an elite group of humans. Welcome to the 'I Shared Living Quarters with Voldemort Club!'"

Draco stared back at her in horror as her lips split into a grin. "Is this... funny to you?"

"I mean, a little," she said and shrugged at Draco's disgusted expression. "Oh come on Malloy, if I can't laugh about it I'll dissolve into a useless heap of tragic anguish and frankly, I've never been one for angst, and Harry's got enough for the both of us, so yes, I like to laugh despite the objectively horrifying situation I was in at 11 years old."

Draco didn't know whether to admire her or forcibly admit her to St. Mungo's.

"I had a diary, like most girls that age, and I poured my little heart into it. Only my diary wrote back. Tom Riddle was my personal correspondent all year, giving me advice and encouragement... until one day he was giving me more than that. He invaded my mind and made me do things. Awful things. Soon I had no control over my own thoughts and actions until I woke up on the stone floor of the Chamber of Secrets, barely alive."

He couldn't look away from her blazing eyes. That loss of control at the hands of a maniac... Draco knew that feeling all too well. *I am okay with this.*

"I know that suffocating feeling of his... tainting presence. He stole my mind from me and I had to live with that. He inhabited part of Harry's soul and he inhabited your Manor, so there you have it. The little trifecta of mental, spiritual, and physical that comprises our morbid and esteemed club."

She dabbed at a stray tear then, looking surprised that her eyes were even wet. "Harry wanted to be here for your initiation, of course, but he's busy making my asshole brother see reason."

Draco swallowed, unsure of how to process everything Ginny had confided. "Why did you tell me all this?"

Eyes dry, Ginny met his stare resolutely. "To help you understand that you're not some woeful, misunderstood loner. I know exactly what it's like to have that bastard in complete control. After what happened to me I felt... dirty. I felt sick... *used*. And I thought that when Harry finally killed him, that the feeling would go away. But I still feel it sometimes... that stain of darkness. A permanent mark if you will," she finished softly and glanced at Draco's sleeve-covered forearm.

He pulled his arm off the table and into his lap, out of sight. He flushed angrily, but Ginny was

unperturbed.

"You're more than your Dark Mark, just as I'm more than the girl who opened up the Chamber of Secrets. Tom Riddle had a gift for telling people exactly what they want to hear, seducing them with just the right words until it's too late."

She sighed and took another sip of her tea. "My point is... it's not too late for you. Voldemort is long gone and it's high time we all moved on from his reign of terror. If I can do it, if Hermione can do it, Merlin, if Harry the Boy-Who-Lived-to-Wallow-in-Guilt can do it, then so can you."

She nodded at his other arm still on the table, noting the bruises along his knuckles.

"I had a feeling after last night you might be prone to a bit of brooding and I thought from one former Voldemort roommate to another, you might need an arse-kicking from a kindred spirit."

Draco couldn't stop the snort that left him. "Was this supposed to be some sort of pep talk? Because I have to say Weasley, this went a bit dark."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Would it kill you to call me Potter?"

"Possibly, and I'd hate to gamble my life. Besides, 'Potter' is reserved for your four-eyed nuisance of a life companion."

"You really do have quite the fascination with my husband."

"Feeling threatened, Ginevra?"

Ginny burst out laughing. "Ooh, that's grand, only my mother calls me Ginevra! Touché, Malfoy!" She stood abruptly. "Well, I think this concludes your first official club meeting. Future meetings are wherever any one of us is on the verge of mental collapse."

Draco stood too, following her back to the fireplace with his mind reeling. He had a thousand or so more questions for Ginny, but his brain felt too full to take in any more information.

One question couldn't be suppressed. He shuffled his feet and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"How did you... how did you come back from...?"

"From living with a psychopath inside my own mind and not being able to trust my own thoughts?"

"Err yeah, that."

Ginny shrugged, taking a handful of Floo powder.

"Hermione helped me loads. Everyone else around me, my whole family, they tried to handle me with kid gloves after that and it only made me feel worse. But not her, no, she saw me moping one too many times and she really let me have it, pulled me right out of my self-loathing. Don't spurn what she has to offer you," she advised.

Draco didn't respond, thinking bitterly that he had nothing to offer Hermione in turn. *I am okay with this.*

A sudden, sickening thought occurred to Draco as Ginny turned to leave.

"Your diary... the one filled with dark magic. It came from my father, didn't it?"

She gave him a sad smile, and the sinking in his gut threatened to overwhelm him. *An 11-year-old girl. His father had callously handed an 11-year-old girl a cursed object, not caring if it hurt her or worse.*

Draco could see the wheels turning behind his mother's eyes as she finally pieced together the odd surprise of her arrival: why the table had been set, but Narcissa's chambers not readied, why Draco had asked so many questions about her visit but had clearly expected someone else in the fireplace.

Draco cleared his throat, shattering the awkward silence of the room. "Mother you remember Hermione Granger," he said with more confidence than he felt, falling back on his impeccable manners.

Narcissa, being of the same aristocratic mold, immediately recovered from her shock and replied crisply, "Of course, lovely to see you again Miss Granger."

Draco turned to see how Hermione would respond, but found the space next to him unoccupied. Feeling a body shift at his back, he turned fully and realized she'd moved to shield herself behind him. He raised a perplexed eyebrow that she failed to see, as she stared fixedly at the floor. What the devil was she doing? Her face looked almost white, hands clenched at her sides, and she seemed to be shaking a bit, trying to fold in on herself.

"Hello Mrs. Malfoy," she finally responded in a trembling voice most unlike her.

"Granger," he began in a low voice. "What—?"

"So sorry to intrude!" she suddenly chirped over him in a falsely bright voice. "I'll just be going now!" she added in that same tone, several pitches higher than her normal speaking voice. It bordered on hysterical.

Draco's heart plummeted at the sound. Her nervous voice. Her panic voice. Her "I'm on the verge of an imminent breakdown" voice.

As she took measured steps back toward the fireplace, Draco realized exactly what she was doing: she was running away. Hermione Granger, the witch so fearless she impersonated his insane aunt and broke out of Gringotts on the back of a blind dragon was *running away*. With each step he felt her slipping further from him.

"Granger wait! Where are you going?"

She wouldn't look at him and he felt his chest constrict. *You're losing her*

Her hand reached for the Floo powder. "Enjoy your evening with your mother. I'll see you soon."

No, *no*, this would not stand. Hermione Granger did not run from anything, she held her head and her wand high and charged ahead. She did not cower, she did not break, she did not give up.

"Granger, don't—"

"It's fine Malfoy. I'll see you soon." She repeated flatly, still refusing to meet his eyes. She threw the powder into the fireplace.

"Hermione," he pleaded softly. His last ditch effort, a desperate entreaty for her to stay, to talk to him, to not leave him. *Please don't leave me, everyone, fucking leave me.*

Her eyes jerked to his at the sound of her given name, giving him a sliver of hope that was summarily snuffed out as he took in her expression. She almost looked through him, as if she didn't even recognize him, her haunted eyes devoid of any warmth or affection. Closed off, protecting herself. "Hermione, please." He tried again, not caring how pathetic it sounded.

the east wing and the work is going to be terribly disruptive. I'm sure. Don't you recall agreeing to me staying until the work is finished?"

Had he agreed to this visit? Draco's mind worked quickly, trying to recall what his mother had written. Then he remembered the pile of correspondence he'd recently lit on fire in a fit of petulant rage. *Wrong! Fuck.*

"Oh something does smell delicious!" Narcissa approached the dining room in all its splendor: covered dishes waiting to be feasted upon, candles lit, and two place settings laid out.

"Oh Draco, this looks wonderful! Let me just pop upstairs and change into something more appropriate. You might want to change too, dear, what on earth are you even wearing?" She roved a critical eye over his Muggle-looking suit sans tie and snifted in disapproval.

Shaking her head, Narcissa glided out of the room and Draco stuffed his fist in his mouth to muffle a scream. As he heard the click of his mother's heels disappear upstairs, he sprinted to the traveling parlor. *Fuck, fuck, fuck and fuck. I am okay with this.*

Did he have time to get a message of warning off to Hermione? His two-way notebook sat on his desk in the library and she might not even have hers near. He'd never conjured a corporeal Patronus before, so that eliminated that method of communication. Just as he'd decided to Floo quickly to hers and explain the situation, his fire lit up green and Hermione stepped through with a smile.

I love you.

Draco moved across the room in a few long strides and pulled Hermione to him. Before she could say a word, he cupped her face and captured her lips in a fierce kiss. He kissed her desperately, clutching at her cheeks, her hair, her neck, her shoulders... any part of her he could grab. When they parted for air he rested his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, willing for time to stop, to freeze him right here with Hermione. This meeting between the two most important women in his life should never happen by accident. Draco would have picked out a neutral territory, preferably with a Calming Draught or five in his system. He would have prepped both of them adequately beforehand, would have warned his mother to be civil, and would have assured Hermione of the importance of their relationship and how much it meant to him no matter how Narcissa felt on the subject.

I don't want to lose this, I don't want to lose us. I love you.

"Well hello to you too," she teased. Draco opened his eyes and stared down at her, keeping a tight grip on her upper arms. A worried frown replaced her grin.

"Hcy," Hermione said soothingly, looping her arms around his waist. "What's wrong?"

"My mother's here," Draco said quickly.

"Your mother?" she echoed, confused.

"Yes, she just showed up. I'd no idea she was coming. Listen Granger, this changes nothing, whatever happens I—"

"Draco where have those elves got to? My quarters aren't prepared and I—oh!"

At the sight of Draco and Hermione embracing, Narcissa froze in the doorway.

At the sight of Draco's mother, Hermione leapt out of his arms as if she'd been scalded.

"But you never said... why didn't you say?"

"What would be the point?"

"Merlin, my father almost killed you and you were just... fuck, I'm sorry I—"

"No," she said firmly, cutting him off. "Stop. Do not apologize for your father's crimes."

Draco opened his mouth to argue but she cut him off again. "No. You're not him."

He clenched his jaw and blinked at her. Ginny seemed to take this as a positive sign and tossed the powder into the fire.

"Be kind to yourself, Malfoy. And if you ever want to chat, you know where to find me."

I am okay with this

Draco stared at the fireplace long after she'd disappeared through it. He knew he needed to return home, if only briefly, but his muscles didn't seem to want to move forward.

The past 24 hours had been too much, his emotions surging from nervousness, to despair, to impatience, to hope, to misery, to gratefulness, to despondency, to confusion, to whatever he felt now after the bizarre, soul-baring conversation with Ginny.

But he could no longer delay this confrontation with his mother. Upon arriving back in his traveling parlor, he immediately summoned Crick.

"Sir?"

"Is my mother still here?"

"Yes, sir. Watson has just prepared tea service for her in the garden."

"Fantastic," Draco grumbled, annoyed that she'd made herself right at home.

The skies were gray with the threat of impending rain and the air rather uncomfortably humid, but Narcissa looked perfectly at her leisure sitting on Draco's verandah.

She said nothing as she watched Draco approach and take the seat across from her at the table laid out with a sumptuous tea service.

"I see you've settled in," he clipped.

Narcissa's eyes narrowed over the rim of her tea cup.

"I noticed you neglected to return home last night," she replied neutrally and Draco rolled his eyes.

"Yes well, being that I am an adult in a relationship, I find myself not returning home most week-end nights," he drawled. His mother's eyes, somehow, found a way to narrow further.

"That's rather improper, don't you think?" she sniffed and Draco chuckled.

"It's realistic. I'm 28 years old, Mother."

"Yes, old enough to know what is expected of a young man of your upbringing. Tell me Draco, do you enjoy defying hundreds of years of our family's customs and sacred traditions? What do you possibly hope will come of your association with that... that girl?"

I am okay with this. I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

Draco allowed himself to count to thirty before responding. His mother, ever the unruffled lady, waited him out, seemingly filled to the brim with indifferent patience.

"Her name is Hermione Granger," he said in a low voice. "You may remember her from the night

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she was tortured on our drawing room floor.”

Narcissa made no reply but to purse her lips unpleasantly, as if Draco had made mention of an unseemly event not appropriate for conversation over tea in the garden.

“As for our family’s oh-so-sacred traditions,” he continued quietly, “Would you like to see what obeying those beloved customs got me?”

He stood and yanked up the sleeve of his left forearm, exposing the dull gray Dark Mark in all its faded glory. Narcissa merely set her chin and turned her head sharply, casting an icy gaze over the grounds behind Draco’s estate. Her refusal to acknowledge his revealed Mark incensed him.

“LOOK AT IT!” he roared, slightly gratified when she deigned to cast her steely blue stare at his pale skin, forever tainted with a snake protruding from the mouth of a skull.

“We reap what we sow, Mother. Were you proud to have your only son branded? Is this everything you and Father envisioned for your child? What about all the attempted murder and torture? Is that part of the grand Malloy legacy too?”

Her eyes snapped to his, cold in their fury. “You’re being ungrateful and dramatic. Everything your father and I did was for you. Every choice we made was for you.”

Draco let out a mirthless laugh. “I hope that thought lets you sleep at night.”

“Quit talking nonsense,” she snapped irritably. “You claim to be an adult yet you act like a petulant child. You haven’t the faintest idea what I’ve had to do for you to survive.”

Fuck this. If she wanted to sit there and apportion blame onto his shoulders instead of giving him an explanation or Merlin forbid, some sort of apology, then he was through with the circular conversation.

Wordlessly, he raised his wand and summoned a copy of Hermione’s fund information as well as an old slip of parchment, yellowed with age.

“I find myself growing tired of this disagreement. You’re welcome to stay in my home, but it might be for the best if you keep to your own wing for the next week. I’ll be leaving for 10 days this coming Friday. I’ve decided to take Granger to France. I’ll let Crick and Watson know they’re to care for you while I’m gone.”

He clocked the downward turn of her lips when he mentioned his trip with Hermione, but otherwise, she didn’t react to his pronouncement.

“Some reading material for you,” he threw down the paperwork for the student fund. “There’s to be a gala in the next two months or so. I’d hoped to recruit your assistance in planning such a large-scale event, but given your current feelings towards Granger, perhaps it would be best if you keep your distance. After all, we wouldn’t want to sully our good public image any further, now would we?” He finished with a sneer.

“Still,” he drawled, “I think it’s important for you to see what I’ve been working on. As for this,” he gently laid the folded letter from Andromeda beside her tea cup. “I found this inside the piano bench. You know the beautiful instrument you’re so fond of? Muggle-made, as it were. Fascinating, that.”

Narcissa’s eyes zeroed in suspiciously on the folded letter, but she made no move to open it. Draco

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The glare she’d thrown him had been more than a little withering.

Oh fuck, is that what she would think about this fund for Muggleborn children?

I am okay with this

No, he needed to have confidence in the judgment of Minerva McGonagall and the Board of Governors and his own ideas. If he could convince the likes of them as to the merit of this fund, then Hermione could be convinced too.

The dining room passed his inspection. He gave Crick and Watson the night off again, ordering food from the French restaurant he knew Hermione liked. He had just placed the bulk of parchment about the fund on Hermione’s dinner plate when he heard the Floo roar to life.

Draco frowned and checked his watch. Damn, 15 minutes early. No matter, he would plunge full steam ahead and hopefully show her that he was more than a potions addict. More than an ex-Death Eater. More than his money, his name, his blood.

He loved her, and maybe he’d never ever be worthy of doing so, but she deserved to know how he felt.

He pulled nervously at the cuffs of his navy suit as he strode down the hall. Draco hadn’t forgotten the time Hermione blurted that he looked good in the color blue. Tonight, he’d do anything in his power to tip the scales in his favor, including taking meticulous care to don a navy suit with a crisp, blue button-down.

“Hey, you’re a bit early but we can—*Mother!*”

“Hello darling!”

The woman striding out of the fireplace in his traveling parlor was not Hermione, but a thoroughly unanticipated Narcissa Malloy.

Draco froze in the doorway and gaped openmouthed as his mother flicked her wand and several trunks appeared beside the door of the room.

“What are you doing here?” *Not tonight, oh fuck, not tonight, I do not need any of this shit tonight.*

Narcissa raised an eyebrow as if the answer were obvious and Draco’s question impertinent. “You’re being silly, dear, I know you received my letter.” She crossed the room and pecked Draco delicately on the cheek in greeting.

“They must be keeping you busy at that office. Well, now that I’m here, have those elves of yours take my things to my chambers. I think I’ll change my robes before dinner and have a bath drawn after.”

Draco could only blink at her in disbelief. “But... but I thought... you weren’t coming back until later this month?”

Narcissa let out a light, musical laugh. “It is the end of the month, darling.”

She swept by him into the hall, Draco trailing helplessly behind her. “But what are you doing *here*?”

You’re staying in your wing? *Here?*!”

She shot him an irritated look over her shoulder. “Honestly, I was starting to suspect you weren’t reading my letters carefully enough. As I wrote you several weeks ago, I’m having renovations done to

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clutched at his back as his thrusts slowed to a stop. When he picked his head up, he sported the lazy grin that she'd grown to love.

"I think your sneaky little shopping excursion was a rousing success," he quipped. He rolled out of and off her, pulling her into his side as he came to rest on his back.

Her hand traced lazy patterns on his bare chest, a contented smile on her face as she felt the beginning of sleep take over. She almost jumped when his hand came up to still her tracing movements, not to beat her away in irritation, but to intertwine their fingers together, coming to a rest over his heart.

Hermione bit down on the inside of her cheek. Oh she was going to make Draco say those three little words before this trip was over if it killed her.



The trip sped by far too quickly for Hermione's liking. Their days were so full, packed to the brim with sightseeing in both the magical and Muggle world. Their nights were full of each other; tangled limbs in their silk sheets, furious snuggling in the gigantic bathtub, groping and snogging heatedly out on the open air balcony, waking one another each morning with heads between thighs...

Needless to say, Hermione felt rather put out that it would all be over in but a few days. She'd never seen Draco so carefree before, almost as if he'd been transported back to his old, confident schoolboy self, just without the superiority complex and bigoted beliefs.

Little public displays of affection that she'd never dared hope for from him seemed so natural now. Just the other night he'd reached across the dinner table to hold her hand in full view of the restaurant. Hermione had almost dropped her forkful of coq au vin.

The forays into Muggle Paris amused her to no end. When Draco proclaimed Versailles to be a "decent-sized palace" she couldn't hold back her snort. Once a snob, always a snob.

The palace gardens as well as the jardin des Tuileries suitably impressed him at least. But the Eiffel Tower left him nonplussed, even when Hermione kept stressing that it was constructed completely without the aid of magic.

The Louvre almost resulted in Draco breaking the Statue of Secrecy. She could tell he'd been itching the entire time to prod the paintings with his wand to see if the subjects would move, and he frowned at the statues of Winged Victory and Venus de Milo. "But why don't they just fix them?" he'd asked her, perplexed. "Come on, Granger, you've got to admit these Muggles are daft for putting out broken statues and calling it art... I mean, really, the hint is without arms!"

The portrait of Mona Lisa was the last straw. "Granger, I'm telling you, that woman winked at me! I swear on my magic, she bloody winked! That's no Muggle painting of that I am certain!" She'd physically dragged him away from several bewildered tourists and out of the museum altogether.

She giggled into her morning tea at the memory. But just as quickly as her mood had lifted, she felt a sting of melancholy. What would happen when they returned to England, to their families, friends,

and work lives? Would Ron still be furious and refusing to speak with her? Would Draco's mother keep trying to dissuade her only child from dating a Muggleborn?

Then there was the matter of all the work to be done for her new charity. With the inaugural gala in two months' time, Hermione would certainly have a lot on her plate. She'd already decided that one of her first acts as Executive Director would be to put together a Board of Directors. A charitable endeavor of this size and scope would need a significant amount of time and attention, and with her recent promotion at the Ministry, those things were in short supply for her.

When Draco emerged from the bedroom, looking positively mouthwatering with his tousled blond hair and shirtless torso, he frowned at Hermione scribbling madly on a piece of parchment.

"Tell me you aren't working right now," he said by way of greeting and poured himself a cup of tea. She shook her head and smiled. "Not technically! I've got a preliminary list of candidates I'd like to approach to serve as my Board of Directors for the fund. I've also outlined how the board should function and written a few bylaws for the fund's charter."

Draco chuckled into his tea and mumbled something that sounded like "little swot," which Hermione chose to ignore. He held his hand out expectantly and she handed over her list of names.

"Hm," he surveyed it with a critical eye. "Deneza Robins... Kevin Emwistle... Justin Finch-Fletchley... makes sense, to have notable Muggleborn Hogwarts alumni... Arthur Weasley?"

"Yes, I know this is a topic near and dear to his heart, plus he's planning to retire in a few years from the Ministry. He'll be dedicated and more importantly, out of Molly's hair," she explained with a grin.

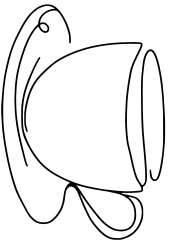
"I suppose having a pureblood or two involved would give it a more well-rounded feel," Draco mused and read down the rest of her list.

"These names here," he frowned and jabbed a finger towards the bottom. "I don't know them. Peter and Amette Brown? Mitchell Creevey?"

"Oh, well they're Muggles. That's Lavender's parents and Colin and Dennis Creevey's dad. I thought it might be nice to extend an invitation to a few Muggle parents of magical students, especially parents that have already been through this experience. They would obviously have keen insight from the parental perspective for what others can expect," she reasoned. "Besides," she twisted her hands anxiously in her lap. "They lost their children in the... in the war and I thought... it might be nice to let them know that we haven't... that our world hasn't forgotten. That we appreciate the sacrifices of Lavender and Colin..." she trailed off and looked away.

Draco remained silent but for the sipping of his tea and Hermione fretted that she'd ruined the mood. They could run off to France all they like, but the past would always be this ugly, twisted shadow looming over them, reminding them of darker days and gruesome memories. Hermione kept her eyes on the skyline, wishing she'd kept her mouth shut. As it was wont to do, the war had snuck in and burst their idyllic relationship bubble. Draco cleared his throat quietly, and Hermione braced herself for the repercussions of shattering the beautiful peace.

"I think that's brilliant, Granger," he said softly. She whipped her head around and stared at him. *Take your time. Whenever you're ready, I love you, too.*



Chapter Thirty Five

A scenic stroll through an enchanted forest to access a remote fairy colony sounds fantastic on parchment, but really, Draco mused sourly, did it have to be a forest of perpetual winter? He sighed for what felt like the thousandth time and shoved his hands deeper into his coat pockets.

It was August and yet they'd been forced to bundle up in several layers and cast Warning Charms as they trudged through the snow as if it were mid-December. Draco could grumpily huff to himself all he liked, but this situation was entirely his fault. He had been the one to mention the fairy colony and Granger's eyes had lit up like a child's on Christmas morning, so of course he would indulge her request to go on this hike.

He really was hopeless.

He'd had a scowl on his face ever since their apparition had landed them at the edge of the woods, somewhere near Loiret to visit the ancient colony fiercely protected by the French Ministry. A century or so ago, officials set up anti-apparition wards around most of the wood to prevent wizards from popping in and out and ruining the natural habitat. While the fairies were no longer in danger of being kidnapped for nefarious black market purposes, respect for the cold-weather favoring colony's privacy meant the wards remained.

While that was all well and good for the fairies (and of course, made a bleeding heart like Granger practically ignite with happiness at the thought of these wintry creatures being so well-protected) it meant a two-mile hike on foot through snow to see this so-called magical wonder.

Draco spent most of the freezing trek thinking of all the things he'd rather be doing, like burying himself in Granger's gorgeous cunt. Not that he hadn't been doing that practically morning, noon, and night, or whenever they weren't being all touristy and gallivanting about Paris. Not having to worry about pesky things like work or societal or familial obligations left an abundance of time and energy for far more pleasurable activities. Gods, but Granger had been insatiable this week. She'd initiated all sorts of new positions and they'd fucked on so many different pieces of furniture in the suite

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"Thought I'd be spoiling you this trip..." Draco groaned. "Gods... look at you... all this... for me..."

Yes, all for you, only you. Let me spoil you and you can ruin me.

Incapable of actual words, and preferring to hear him speak anyway, Hermione focused on the euphoria wrought from sliding herself up and down, ignoring the burning in her leg muscles in favor of another type of incendiary sensation.

"Close, aren't you? Come for me love, that's a good girl..." he encouraged then pressed kisses to the exposed skin of her back. His voice and praise sent more shivers straight to her core, and her movements became frenetic as she rode out her orgasm, and she probably would have toppled over ungracefully but for the strong hold of his hands. Her body slackened as she came down from her high, and Draco gathered her close, his hands skinning every part of her he could reach.

Hermione stood shakily, then moved to the bed, tugging Draco with her as she laid on her back. He settled between the cradle of her thighs before removing her knickers and pushing his length into her to the hilt. He emitted a stuttered breath and Hermione threw her head back against the pillows as her eyes rolled back. She felt Draco hitch one of her legs up and when she summoned the will to open her eyes again, found him staring right back as he thrust at a languorous pace. Gone was the teasing, the quick and hurried movements of two people with a desperate need to satisfy their lust. A more delicate atmosphere of physical tenderness prevailed; a need to savor and appreciate what each had to offer. His touches along her body made her feel cherished, worshipped.

He looked down at her as they leisurely moved together as one, but his typical carefully guarded gaze seemed now an open book to her. She reached up to cup his face and pulled him in for a slow, deep kiss. *I know*, her kiss imbued with the words she wouldn't say aloud. *I know everything you're feeling and it scares me too. I love you, too.*

Draco pulled his lips away gently and his awed gaze moved down her to her breasts. His hips kept their steady and deliberate rhythm, and she knew he wanted her to climax at least once more before he lost control. When he closed his mouth around one of her satin-covered nipples, she cried out, arching her back and canting her own hips up, forcing him even deeper inside.

"Draco! I'm... Draco I'm coming!"

He kissed back up her neck and pulled up to look eyes with her again, as the intensity of his reverent gaze sent her hurtling into the blissful abyss.

"Fuck... Hermione..." he grunted out and buried his face into the side of her neck. His movements picked up, the pumping becoming faster, harder, more erratic. His words mimicked his movements, tumbling out of him in a stream of confidence-inflating appreciation.

"So good... feels so good... I... Hermione... I..."

Come on, come on, come on, say it, say it, say it.

"...fucking gorgeous... don't deserve you... Hermione I... I'm coming, love..."

How easily his new term of endearment seemed to fall from his lips now. But of course she hadn't missed the way he'd stuttered over her name, the way he'd still held back from revealing all. She

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All trace of his former tiredness gone, his deft fingers tugged the sash undone and Hermione shrugged her shoulders loose from the robe, letting it drop to the floor. His gray eyes darkened as they roved her frame, taking in the little silk bows adorning her shoulders all the way down to her stockings and dairy shoes.

“Turn around,” he said huskily. Hermione revolved carefully on the spot, stopping when she faced the window.

“Bend over,” he ordered and a shock of desire flooded her system. She immediately complied, spreading her legs apart as she did so, her willingness to be on display for him reaped the reward of a strangled groan. Suddenly, Draco’s firm hands were on her hips as he sprang to his feet and pulled her upright.

“Fucking exquisite,” he growled and turned her in his arms to claim her lips in a hungry kiss. Hermione felt as if she could fly, his approval of her fancy garment hard and evident against her abdomen.

“Green looks good on you Granger, who knew?” Draco teased and moved his lips to her neck, one of his fingers sliding underneath a strap to ease it off her shoulder. Hermione busied herself with removing his shirt and trailing her mouth along his revealed porcelain skin. She worked her way back up to his mouth, their tongues tangling in a frenzy of unadulterated want.

“Need you now, love,” Draco panted into her mouth and she preened at the endearment. Showing him lightly backwards so he sat on the edge of the bed, she motioned for him to remove the rest of his clothes. Gods, this preternaturally beautiful specimen of a man, all taut physique and pale hair glowing in the moonlight, might very well have her sending an urgent owl to Madame Bonvier inquiring about some sort of subscription service. The playful way he smiled as she straddled him warmed her all over, as if she’d personally gifted him something singular and he couldn’t believe his luck.

Draco clearly wanted to hustle things along, if the way his hips jerked upwards served as any indication. “Would you like to remove the rest of my outfit? It can only be undone by hand,” she murmured then darted her tongue out to trace the shell of his ear. His hands twitched on her waist. He wouldn’t be able to rip the fabric off her, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t welcome the attempt. “Mmm... I think I’d like to see how you look riding me in it,” he replied and snaked a hand down to shove her knickers to the side. Thinking quickly, Hermione jumped off him, turned around, then sat back on his waiting cock, holding her underwear to the side just as he had a moment ago.

Draco let out a hiss through his teeth as she began testing out a rhythm. Planting her heeled feet on the floor, she tilted forward slightly to shove her backside closer to him, sinking down deeper onto him. This new angle... this movement of up, down, then forward, backward... a clenching, a tensing inside her... this felt good. *Really good.*

Hermione gripped the tops of his legs, using them as leverage to move up and down on him at a rapid pace. The total, incredible control would most assuredly result in her spiraling into incoherence, and as his hands digging into her hips became a pleasurable type of pain, it tore loud moans from her throat.

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that Draco would never be able to look at a chaise longue again without getting half-hard. Just a mere whisper of something as trite as “*si t’ous pleit*” had her dripping and opening her legs for him. He’d tried a few times to keep crooning French while inside her, but his prick barely allowed him intelligible English when it allowed him to speak at all.

And sweet Merlin, that sexy little green number she’d worn for him? Undoubtedly the best surprise of his life.

All that to say, Draco strove desperately to keep his grumbling to a minimum this afternoon, lest he piss Hermione off and miss the opportunity to sully another hand-crafted antique chair later tonight.

The witch in question bubbled in giddy anticipation at his side. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, curls escaping from her wool beanie, eyes bright against the winter chill as she studiously consulted the trail map. She looked quite adorable with the tip of her nose reddened. *I love you.*

See? Hopeless.

The towering, snow-covered fir trees of the densely packed forest cast a premature darkness over everything and blocked the late afternoon sunlight. But that darkness served its purpose as they came around a bend in the trail into an open clearing.

“Oh my...” Hermione trailed off breathlessly.

While they’d previously been surrounded by dark trees, they now found themselves encircled in yellowish, twinkling lights. Even Draco could admit, albeit begrudgingly, that the sight was quite spectacular. The bright little fairies sparkled and danced all around, some flitting from tree to tree while others remained dormant, pulsing in place. A low humming sound pierced the quiet stillness of the forest, otherwise silent but for Draco and Hermione’s cold puffs of breath.

“This is... this is magnificent,” she whispered in awe and carefully stepped forward. Draco hung back, unsure of how receptive the fairies would be to a human presence. Hermione inched closer to the vast, seemingly endless web of beings that began at the forest floor and stretched up and all around, creating a canopy of brilliant light.

A few of the more curious fairies flew forward to meet her, and Hermione chuckled and remained still as the brochure had instructed. They flitted around her head for a few quick moments, then headed back to the safety of their nest.

Every few seconds, small groups of the creatures performed this same little dance around Hermione’s head, creating a brief halo. She tried to stay motionless, but was soon overcome with laughter at the funny little things intent on inspecting her and flying off.

“Malfoy, here!” Hermione suddenly tossed her beaded purse at him and he caught it easily. “Take a picture for me.”

He rummaged around her magically extended bag, shoving aside what felt like several books, glass vials, an apple, and a spare pair of mittens before he snagged her camera.

He quickly snapped a few for her and lowered the camera. Still laughing, she half-turned from him to observe her new friends. But Draco couldn’t tear his eyes from her. He hoped she’d develop these photos magically, but even so, he didn’t think it would be possible to capture her beauty in this moment

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in something as banal as a photograph. The magic around them paled in comparison to her.

Ethereal in the fairy light, the skin of her face glowed with a smile of such genuine happiness that even he felt its warmth beneath the coldness of the air. Hermione embodied pure joy.

Now. He should tell her now. Alone in a forest straight out of a storybook, blanketed in enchanted snow and fairy light, Draco could not have asked for a more perfect setting.

But neither his feet nor his mouth would move.

Coward.

"Come here!" she called, breaking his reverie. "Let's take one together!"

She took the camera as he approached and cast a Hover Charm, sending it floating a few feet from them.

"I hope you're capable of an expression other than a sneer or a scowl," she teased as he slung an arm around her shoulder.

Draco scoffed. "So mouthy. Good thing I know how to shut you up." He smirked and stole a kiss, deepening it quickly with an agile maneuver of his tongue along and then past her lips. She broke away laughing and swatted his shoulder.

"Prat! That's the first picture we've ever taken together!"

Draco waggled his eyebrows. "It better be front and center on your mantel so everyone can bear witness to me snogging the daylight's out of you."

She rolled her eyes and blushed. *Now.* He should tell her now, while she stood encircled in his arms, smiling so prettily up at him. Draco looked down into her warm eyes and tried to summon the words. But still they would not come.

An awful feeling of despair gripped him. He was a pitiful failure, wasn't he? A miserable coward. Nothing but a failed Death Eater unfit to live in this world. Hermione would do well to leave him. What kind of future could they even hope for together? They made no sense as a couple. He'd been so terrible to her during their school years, truly terrible. He couldn't shake the memory of her young face crumbling in hurt as he threw a casual and cruel "Mudblood" in her direction.

His chest filled with painfully cold air and ice ran through his veins. And when had the lights gone out?

Draco shook his head as if to clear it and realized Hermione had stepped out of his arms. She furiously stuffed her camera away and had her wand out. He looked around, bewildered as the forest plunged into sudden darkness, as if a giant with a wand had cast a far-reaching *Nox* across the entire colony. Where had the faeries gone?

"Draco," said Hermione shakily. "Draco, take out your wand."

He immediately complied, alarmed at the fear in her voice.

Then the feeling of despair increased, became sharper and more real. He was so beyond pathetic, wasn't he? His mind hurtled back to the scared and contorted face of Mr. Olfander as he twitched and yelled under Draco's wand, while the Dark Lord grinned maniacally and threatened Draco with much worse if he did not comply. So much pain... so much fear... he was so afraid... the Dark Lord

warred with himself a moment longer, then stepped out of her reach, leaving her cold. "Let's have another drink," he said flatly and led the way back to their table.

I love you, too.



Hey Jude!9

Hermione decided a different sort of tactic might aid in achieving her end goal.

When they returned to their suite that night, Hermione at least still a tad buzzed from the gin, she left Draco in the bedroom where he sat heavily on the bed and began removing his shoes. He looked a little tense and tired, which made Hermione all the more determined.

She'd kept the bag containing her new lingerie tucked away inside a linen drawer, out of sight in the enormous bathroom. Stealing herself, she donned the outfit, mimicking the wand movements Dominique had demonstrated for getting the garter straps to cooperate and fasten on their own, securing her stockings. Merlin, but she loved magic.

She slipped on the kitten heels and took a few deep breaths as she regarded her reflection. She could do this. She'd faced darkness more terrifying than her lack of self-confidence: she'd faced wicked witches and monstrous men and come away scarred but whole. She practiced a brave smile and shrugged on the black silk robe she'd thrown onto her purchase pile last minute, because if she meant to perform this complicated routine of seduction then she certainly shouldn't half-arse it.

Hermione rattled off her list of accomplishments in her head as she exited the bathroom. *You are a remarkable witch. You have an Order of Merlin, First Class. You are on track to be one of the youngest heads of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. You look bloody fantastic in this expensive green lingerie.* Draco still sat on the far edge of the bed, back to her, his head cradled in his hands. He'd only gotten as far as removing his jacket it seemed. *Perfect.*

She cleared her throat and took a stab at a lofty tone. "You never asked me, you know, where I disappeared to for over an hour the other day."

His response was an elegant lift of his shoulders, as he sat up straight and ran his hands down his face. He turned his head to the side, and she could see the half-smirk pasted there. "As much as I'm sure I would have *loved* being dragged around another dusty library or some sort of bespoke patchment shop, I have to say I—"

He broke off as her heels clicked closer and she came into view.

"That's new," he said blankly, scanning her from head to toe.

"Mmm, so it is," she said with more bravado than she felt. She approached him slowly and Draco leaned back to spread his legs so she could stand in between them. "Would you like to see what's underneath?"

"Very much so," he replied hoarsely, his eyes zeroing in on the sash tied at her waist. Hermione took one of his hands and placed it at the loose knot, encouraging him to do the honors.

Remain Nameless

"Did you want to..." his gray eyes flicked across the room and then back to her, "dance?"

"Yes!" she said quickly. A little too quickly, judging by his smirk.

Paul

They'd never danced together before, Hermione realized as they approached the dance floor. But before she could panic, he simply drew her close as they mimicked the other couples surrounding them and swayed lightly back and forth to the slow melody. His hand fell to her lower back as she braced an arm around his neck, their free hands clasped together and held aloft. Draco maintained a rigid yet still fluid posture, and Hermione knew in her bones that he would be an excellent waltzing partner. He'd probably received professional instruction from some renowned dance tutor during his childhood.

She made a mental note to ask him later, not wanting to ruin this moment with any quips about his post upbringing. Leaning her head against his chest, she closed her eyes and let the song and the rhythm of his even breathing overwhelm her senses.

A rumbling against her ear emanated from his chest and lulled her from a blissful reverie, and she realized the vibration signified softly-spoken words. She pulled her head back to gaze up at Draco in wonder, but he stared at the far wall over her head, his brow slightly furrowed in concentration as he translated the lyrics for her.

"When he takes me in his arms... he speaks to me softly... I see life in pink."

Hermione could only look up at him mutely, not daring to speak or even breathe too loud lest she interrupt.

"He tells me words of love... these are every day words... and they do something to me."

His words certainly affected her. No matter the manner in which Draco spoke to her, it never failed to ignite a strong surge of *something* within her, be it lust, exasperation, awe, irritation, love.

"He has entered into my heart... a piece of happiness... of which I know the cause."

Her cause of happiness existed here, now, pressed tight to her body and setting all her nerve endings alight. She would float skyward but for Draco's tender embrace.

"It's only him for me... me for him, for life... He told this to me, swore to me, for life."

Hermione gulped nervously as these murmured lyrics reached her ears, sped through her veins, and exploded somewhere behind her ribs. His silver gaze switched to her now, unblinking.

"And there is the one I regard... and I fed in me... my heart which beats."

Her own heart hammered in her chest, threatening to burst straight through her ribcage, and possibly escape from her body entirely. They stopped swaying as the song ended, but their grip on one another did not loosen, nor their shared gaze drop. They didn't move even as polite applause erupted around them and a new song started up.

"Hermione... I..." Draco began but faltered, and though Hermione wished dearly for him to finish his sentence, she could see the panic rising behind the emotion in his eyes. He still didn't think he was ready.

She stayed silent, giving him time, willing him to believe in himself and in his feelings. Draco

was going to kill him, kill his mother...

"Draco?" Hermione's voice rang out. "Draco, listen to me! Can you cast a Patronus?"

Dementors. Dementors were near.

Draco fought the creeping misery and tried to focus on the witch in front of him. If the situation weren't so dire he'd have barked out a harsh laugh, as more memories played behind his eyelids. Memories of sweating in one of the lesser-used parlors of the Manor, while his wand produced large vapor clouds yet no distinct shape. Time wasted on him by a man that surely had more important tasks than to teach an ignorant schoolboy how to protect himself.

"*You will need to produce one eventually, Draco, for your own protection.*"

"*The Dementors obey the Dark Lord now, this is pointless.*"

"*You are mistaken if you think those creatures know anything of loyalty. Try again.*"

But despite the patience of Severus Snape over the course of one summer before his Sixth Year, Draco never saw his casting of the charm form any definite shape. Instead, he'd watched as Snape's effortlessly trotted around him, a strange animal choice that he would conjure and dissipate quickly.

Draco shook his head side to side to physically shake himself back into the present. "Yes, I mean... it's not corporeal, but I know the spell."

Hermione grabbed his hand as they ran back down the path. They did not make it very far when Draco noticed gliding black shapes in his peripheral vision, moving along the trees at their sides.

"Expecto Patronum!" Hermione shouted and a transparent otter burst forth, charging at the group at their sides. The ones to their right scattered, chased away by the creature of light.

But there were more. Many more. Hermione gasped and they came to a jarring halt as Dementors appeared directly ahead, blocking their path. The shock broke her concentration, and Draco's hopes dashed as the otter disappeared. Their protector gone as they were surrounded.

And he was so cold. So numb. Best to just lie down here and succumb to death. Like Crabbe. Crabbe was dead and it was Draco's fault. He should be dead too. Lifeless, like Crabbe's eyes as he fell into the Fireflyre...

"Expecto... expecto patronum!" called a voice and Hermione's hand twitched, pulling him back to the equally terrifying present. A misty white vapor emerged from her wand this time, and her hand in his began to tremble.

No, he needed his good, brave witch to stay strong. But Hermione's face had turned pale and her wand arm drooped. The Dementors floated closer, briefly held at bay by the misty shield, but it soon flickered and dissipated, leaving the path clear to Draco and Hermione.

Hermione's limp hand fell from his as she sank down to her knees. She began to whimper. "No, please... please... we found it... it's a fake... it's a fake..."

Draco's heart broke as he realized what memory plagued her most to cause her this magnitude of distress. And he did that... he did that to her. He'd been there that night, in his family's drawing room, for Merlin's sake, and his own aunt... and he'd watched and done nothing.

He could do something now.

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Draco threw himself bodily in front of Hermione and pointed his wand at the advancing Dementors. “Expecto Patronum!”

Nothing He then remembered the second part to the spell: he had to think of his happiest memory. Fuck.

There had to be something from his childhood that qualified, but lately those memories seemed tarnished for him, as if they belonged to someone else’s life.

His existence had been mostly unending doom and gloom from age 16 onward, until last year. His eyes looked to his left, to the woman cowering on the ground. His happiness, his everything. Yet he could not protect her... he had failed her again. How had he ever thought he could deserve her? He never saved her, he was physically incapable of the act.

“Granger... Granger please...” he said weakly. He’d dropped to the ground beside her, and gathered her limp form in his arms. She’d fainted and the foul creatures were above them now. Circling, closing in, ready to strike and feast upon them.

He screwed his eyes shut and thought of their first kiss, all those months ago in the dark hallway of her home. “Expecto Patronum!”

A misty shield much like Hermione’s recent effort shot out, but left Draco weakened and panting. The Dementors halted for a few moments then one swiped it aside.

“Hermione... please... I need you... Hermione... wake up, you have to wake up!”

But he got no response and he felt something grip his upper arm and yank him away from her. He was alone, always alone. She was going to die. They were going to die. People would mourn her and blame him and rightly so. It was all his fault, everything was his fault... and he’s still not told her. She would die and never know that Draco loved her. He loved her so much and the thought of never seeing her again, of never hearing her brilliant laugh, of never feeling her touch on his skin, ripped a tidal wave of sorrow through his body.

Let the Dementor take him, then. If she no longer belonged to this world, he didn’t want to either.

Such a shame, wasn’t it? All the things they never got to experience with each other? Not moments ago, they’d taken their very first photograph together, the other night shared their very first dance. How many other memories and firsts would they miss out on making?

A sudden image burst so clearly into his mind, for a second Draco thought perhaps he’d left the forest all together. An image of such striking tangibility that he might have already lived it, or perhaps experienced time in such a way that he lived it now.

She strode toward him, beaming with unbridled joy, draped in a white gown and clutching a bouquet. Her radiant smile widened even further as she approached to stand facing him. She reached out a hand to clasp his own. Her sweet voice rang out clear and strong as she looked to him with a fierce pride and reined words he’d never thought he’d hear from anyone, let alone her. “Hermione, take you, Draco...”

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

The Dementor dropped Draco and thrank away, his companions following suit as a giant shape sped from the end of Draco’s wand. He watched in awe as the large creature unfurled itself and

fashion.

“Bienvenue,” she chirped and pulled aside the curtains once they reached the end.

They ducked inside and Hermione felt as if she’d used her Time Turner again. They’d entered an underground drinking joint straight out of World War 2 occupied France. Low café tables littered the dark club, the air hazy with the smoke of cigarettes from both years’ past and tonight’s guests. Costumed servers wound their way deftly between the little tables to deliver drinks to patrons; the waiters outfitted in soldiers’ garb and the waitresses in nurses’ uniforms. Although, the men’s uniforms were much tighter and the women’s skirts much shorter than was probably historically accurate, mused Hermione.

In the far corner, Hermione could hear a vocalist accompanying a live jazz band playing a soft tune. Between swaying couples on the crowded dance floor, she could make out the dark-haired singer crooning, her silver sequined cocktail dress glittering in the dim lighting, a mink stole around her shoulders.

Hermione’s parents had spoken fondly of their own time in this little hidden Parisian gem. Apparently during their visit, the password had been “Marie Curie” and the servers sporting lab coats, drinks served in breakers and test tubes.

Tonight’s cocktail menu listed mostly gin-based drinks, Hermione bravely ordering for her and Draco. He’d been silent so far, leaning back in the wooden chair and casting surreptitious glances around the room. She could tell by the slight furrow of his brow and tightness of his jaw that the unfamiliar surroundings made him a touch nervous.

Taking pity on him, and buoyed by the warmth of her gin, Hermione launched into a detailed re-telling of the state of Muggle global affairs during the 1930s and 40s, doing her best to explain all the little historical flourishes in the lounge.

Reminiscent of their mornings in the café, Draco listened with keen interest, interjecting with a hesitant question every so often (“Sorry, what’s a submarine?”) and seemed to have a liking for pricey Muggle gin. Just as she was in full flow about the Allied and Axis powers, her ears pricked up as a familiar tune permeated the air. “Oh it’s *La Vie en Rose*! This is one of my favorites!” she gushed.

“Er... life in pink?” he asked, translating it literally.

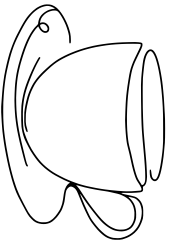
“Yes, but it’s more of a colloquial way of saying ‘seeing life through rose-colored glasses,’” Hermione clarified. “She’s singing about a love that fills her with such happiness that she cannot help but view the world around her as full of bright colors...” she trailed off as a blush crept up her face. “Anyway, it was a very popular song after the end of the Second World War.”

Draco raised a challenging eyebrow. “I thought you said your French was merely passable?”

“I can only understand a line or two, really,” she shrugged. “But it’s a beautifully composed piece and there’s such emotion to the words... even if I can’t quite understand them all.”

Draco stared at her pensively for a minute; one of those penetrating looks of his that made Hermione feel as if she’d exposed her every thought and feeling, and only to him. An examination that both terrified and thrilled her.

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Chapter Thirty Four

“Granger, how much further is this bloody place? I thought you said you knew where to go!” Draco grouched, trudging along in Hermione’s wake. Hermione didn’t answer, instead re-reading the small slip of paper in her hand.

“It should be just up here. My mum said to look for the little alley between the hat shop and... ah! Found it!” she crowed triumphantly. Despite the Cushioning Charm on her heels, Hermione had been close to winning right along with Draco at the amount of walking involved to find the speakasy. Cobblestoned streets and women’s shoes were not the best of bedfellows.

She also experienced an ever present soreness in her leg muscles, but from the far more pleasurable act of having been bent over several different types and heights of furniture in their suite.

Reaching the end of the alley, Hermione spotted a figure dressed in black leaning against the building, cigarette smoke billowing out of his mouth and dissipating into the summer night air. Draco took her hand at the sight of the man, and Hermione gave him a reassuring squeeze.

The man looked up at them in disinterest, waiting for either her or Draco to speak as they approached.

Hermione cleared her throat. “Charles de Galle?”

The man nodded and with a wink, stepped aside to pull open a door that had seemed to blend seamlessly into the walls around it. Pleased that she’d given the correct password for entry, Hermione excitedly tugged Draco behind her into the dark hallway.

Hermione’s mother had recommended this elusive drinking club, having found it on the Grangers’ honeymoon, and made sure to warn her that the password changed each month, usually to honor a different famous historical figure or time period. A quick request from Hermione to their concierge and he’d gotten the correct theme and password for her within the hour.

The dark hallway turned and they walked along another corridor lined with bespoke gas lamps. At the end of the hall, a velvet curtain awaited along with a young woman dressed in impeccable 1940s

charged, no *fleur*, at the soul-sucking creatures. Because dragons did not charge when they had wings at their disposal.

Draco harnessed all of his magical energy and focused solely on the feeling of all-encompassing bliss from the scene his mind had somehow conjured. The dragon soared and circled the mass of Demons, trapping them and snatching and snapping its wide jaws. Sweat ran down his face and his body trembled with the effort, but he couldn’t and wouldn’t let up. Not when he’d been shown something so wonderful, something he knew he had to live for.

Draco directed his translucent savior around the entire wooded path, neither letting up nor resting until every last dark creature finally retreated, banished from their presence. Sweaty and shaking, he fell to the ground beside Hermione. The dragon’s task done, it flew once more around Draco and Hermione before disappearing. In its wake, a peaceful silence fell again, and distantly Draco could see fairy lights.

But he was weak. So, so weak. His magical reserves had all but run dry and he collapsed next to Hermione. They couldn’t apparate, not for another mile and a half, at least. As unconsciousness threatened to overtake him, Draco summoned the last of his power and cast a Warming Charm over Hermione. Hoping it would be enough, he passed out.



Draco woke suddenly and shivering, his muscles aching. He laid on his side in the snow, one arm flung across Hermione’s still body.

“Hermione?”

Panic sent a shock of adrenaline through his tired limbs as he dragged himself up to sitting. He had no idea how much time had elapsed since they’d both blacked out, but night had definitely fallen in the forest.

Draco never felt so cold in his life, and hoped his desperate casting of a Warming Charm had at least helped Hermione. She remained passed out with her face paler than he’d ever seen. Her normally pink lips had an unhealthy, bluish tinge. He blew warm air into his cupped hands and placed them around Hermione’s face, desperate to do something for her. She still breathed at least, though when he felt her wrist, the pulse registered as faint. He needed to act fast.

Draco’s mind raced as he tried to fight his body’s tiredness and mild convulsions. They’d been out in the cold for too long, but he couldn’t say for certain just how long. He had no experience treating any sort of hypothermia, but knew he had to get him and Hermione out of these woods if they were to survive.

Think, think, think.

His fingers curled around Hermione’s beaded bag. There must be something in here that could help in the short term. With no healing skills to fight prolonged exposure to the elements, he rooted

Remain Nameless

around instead for something to ease the inner cold left by the Dementors. What had that werewolf Lupin taught them? Chocolate!

His hand closed around a box of truffles Draco had tossed in when Hermione asked if he wanted any snacks for their hike. He stuffed one in his mouth greedily and though he felt some warmth return internally, it did little to ease the pain of his cold-blistered extremities. With a slightly clearer head, he tried to revive Hermione.

"Hermione... Hermione please," he shook her lightly but she would not wake. Draco rolled his wand in his shivering hands, deciding it would be unwise to try a *Remediate* in his weak state. He couldn't even push the chocolate past her blue lips, afraid she would choke.

Fuck. Help, please, anyone.

Draco cast his eyes around the empty woods desperately. She needed medical attention, they both did, and soon. He looked down the path in front of them, and knew there was nothing else for it. He'd have to carry her out of here to apparate.

He rose to his feet gingerly and ate another chocolate. He seemed fit enough to walk, but knew it would be a challenge with Hermione's weight combined with his. He squatted down and undid his jacket and pulled Hermione into a seated position to wrap her in it. Hoisting her up, her body sagged against him, limp as a rag doll, and he staggered but did not fall.

"Steady on, Granger," he whispered to no one. "Let's get you to safety."

He ducked to sling one of her arms over his shoulder, then began the awkward motion of hauling her like a sack of potatoes.

One step. Another. And another. Draco willed his feet to keep moving as he dragged Hermione along. He chattered constantly to the unconscious witch at his side, obliquely wondering if delirium was a symptom of hypothermia.

"Granger, Granger, Granger... only you could turn a stroll to a fairy colony into a life or death situation... Potter would be so proud, though I think you're encroaching on his territory of winding up in a deadly disaster for foolish reasons... Never say I don't make your life exciting, love... I mean, Dementors... doesn't get much more exciting than that now does it? Merlin, but you look so small yet I'm honestly struggling here, Granger... and no, I wasn't calling you fat or anything of the sort... just a bit tired is all, love... that Patronus sure takes a wizard's energy eh?... And isn't that so typical? I successfully conjure my first corporeal Patronus and you're not even there to see it... so... typical... so... fuck... Granger... Hermione... fuck but I'm tired... it's far you know..."

More steps. More harsh intakes of freezing air. He had to keep moving. He had to make it another mile. For her, all for her. She was Hermione Granger, for Salazar's sake, and this would not be how her story ends. Hermione Granger survived above all else: a fact of the universe. She survived a basilisk, she survived groups of Death Eaters chasing her through the Ministry, she survived his evil aunt's torture, she survived breaking out of Gringotts, she survived a room burning with Fireflyre, she survived a snake-faced megalomaniac hell-bent on destroying the free world... she did not die out here in the snow from something as trifling as cold weather.

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Dominique tapped her wand to her back and immediately the color changed to a bright white and Hermione's face paled.

"Too bright!?" guessed Dominique and Hermione could only nod again.

The woman furrowed her brow then tapped the fabric again. Bubblegum pink. She frowned and tapped again, intent on finding the most agreeable color for Hermione's skin tone.

Midnight blue. Royal purple. Daisy yellow. Burnt orange. Scarlet red. Plain taupe. Chocolate brown. Shiny gold. Muted silver. Dusty pink. Light lilac. Deep mehmet. Pastel mint.

Hermione closed her eyes, the whirling colors making her a bit dizzy after a time. Several taps of the wand later and she heard Dominique exclaim "Voilà! Oh, Mademoiselle Granger, *zis* is your color!"

Hermione opened her eyes and burst out laughing. Her little outfit now radiated in a gorgeous and vibrant emerald green, the color highlighting the golden undertones of her hair and skin. It was the exact same shade of green as Slytherin's house banner.

"I'll take it. This and the black version."

After a friendly farewell complete with light kisses to both cheeks, Hermione left Dominique to send her new purchases straight to her hotel suite.

When she spotted Draco further up the street with a few shrunken parcels in his hand, she couldn't help but tease, "Tell me you didn't spend the entire hour in the sweet shop."

He fixed his face into a picture of innocence. "You've no proof of anything."

Chuckling, she stepped up to him and pressed her lips to the corner of his mouth, darting out her tongue to collect the bit of chocolate that had lingered there.

"Hmm, tastes on par with Honeydukes I'd say."

Draco looked down at her in genuine amusement, and it occurred to her that they'd never kissed in public in the magical world before. Barely 24 hours into their French holiday and she'd never felt so free of her public persona, nor had she ever seen Draco look so unburdened.

She'd planned on saving her recent purchases for special occasions, but seeing Draco so carefree that he looked years younger, she wanted to drag him back to their room right now and put on a show for him.

Perhaps a little green outfit might inspire a certain phrase from his mouth.

I love you, too.

Did she prefer to wear her hair up or down?

Did she enjoy kissing? Where was her favorite place to be kissed?

Did she anticipate being photographed in the lingerie or was this for private use only?

Did she want the option to wear heels or another type of shoe? Or did she prefer to be barefoot?

How much makeup did she typically wear, if any?

What was her favorite sexual position?

Did she enjoy role-playing during sex?

Hermione tied her best to banish any lingering shyness and answer each question honestly.

At the end of the (surprisingly pleasant) interrogation, Dominique pointed her wand at Hermione's feet and instantly a pair of black kitten heels appeared. She then tapped a series of movements against Hermione's shoulders, and she felt fabric covering parts of her body as thigh-high stockings suddenly clad her legs.

Dominique gave her a moment's warning then vanished the silk robe. In its place, a stunning ensemble fitted and flattered her shape and Hermione found herself staring back at her reflection in stupefied awe. The woman in the mirrors looked confident, coaxing Hermione into a smile at the realization that she didn't look like some unrecognizable doll playing dress-up, as she initially feared.

On her top half, a surprisingly comfortable black satin busier cupped her chest and stopped just above her navel. Some crystal detailing dotted along the curve of her breasts and led down the path of her sternum, sparkling in the light. Two silk straps were tied into bows at her shoulders, but with the garment fitted securely enough to her bust without them, it rendered them only for show. The knickers were also a soft black satin in a cut that flattered the curve of her backside and allowed the bottom of her cheeks to peek out. The black stockings were held up by thin garter straps; something Hermione had always wanted to try wearing, but never had the patience for. Indeed, the one time she had tried to don a complicated set of lingerie for Ron, she took so long that he burst into the bathroom and discovered her bent over and cursing, sweaty with the exertion of trying to clip the stupid stockings to her outfit. They'd both doubled over in laughter and gave it up as a bad job.

But Hermione did not want a repeat of that night with Draco. No, she wanted to stun him speechless and then get railed into that luxurious French mattress until she could no longer walk.

Dominique stood behind her and explained the design.

"The patented Bouvier Busier," Hermione stifled a snort at the alliteration, "cannot be ripped nor vanished by magic. It can only be undone by hand." Dominique turned her gently so Hermione could see the back of the busier in the mirrors. "See ze buttons? Zhey must be undone by your hand or your partner's... Let's see... on ze questionnaire you said you liked for him to undress you? Ah yes, you answered that if you were wearing something like zis that it would be nice for him to take his time. D'accord?" Hermione hummed in approval. She owed Ginny big time for this recommendation.

"Now, zis is a classic black, obviously. But would you like to see other colors?"

Hermione nodded. Sod it, why not? Sure this was a rather expensive indulgence, but she rarely treated herself to such goods and she could certainly afford to splurge on an outfit or two.

One foot in front of the other. He raised his wand to see if any sort of magical warmth might be possible, but his magic still felt dulled. He would need every ounce of it if he had any hope of apparating them out of here alive. The trail entrance sign still wasn't within sight and his vision started to blacken around the edges. He shook his head to keep himself awake and alert. Forward, forward, onward and out. For Hermione, for their future.

His eyes felt heavy. His legs felt heavy. Everything felt heavier and heavier and unflinchably cold... but no, no stopping. He shook his head for what felt like the hundredth time. *Keep her alive, keep her alive, save her, save her, save her... I need you, don't go, not yet please, I need you, I need you, I love you I love you, I love you*. "Wasted... wasted so much... time without you... so many years... could have had years... with you Granger... imagine... imagine what we could have been... happy... so happy with you... Hermione... I'm tired... can't do this... without you... I'll be alone... I can't go back... hate being alone... hate being without you... talk to me, please... Granger, please... nag me, anything... need to hear you again... if we get out of here... I'll do anything... be anything for you... don't go... not like this... please, love..."

Draco didn't know whether it hurt more to talk or stay silent and only drag in ragged, freezing breaths past his chapped lips. Just when the air began feeling like knives in his lungs, his foot and knee connected with something hard. He pitched forward, but kept upright. The trail sign! They'd reached the edge of the wood!

Draco halted Hermione a few more feet along then pulled her into his chest. He held her tightly to him, using the familiar feel of her body to calm his panicked thoughts and gather the strength he would need. The relief at having reached an apparition point fed some life back into his magic and he squeezed his eyes shut to concentrate. Draco focused every fiber of his being on the destination and then strengthened his grip to twist into nothingness.

Reappearing a moment later in the too-bright lobby of their hotel, Draco dropped to his knees, Hermione sagging down with him. Dimly, he heard a cacophony of concerned voices crying out in alarm. A hand shook his shoulder, and the concierge's face swam into view above him. Was he lying on his back now?

"Monsieur Malfoy! Monsieur Malfoy! What 'appened? Can you hear me?"

"Dementors... save... her... please... save her."

Hermione, I love you

Draco's body slumped to the ground as darkness overtook him again.



The lights were still too bright. Draco slowly blinked his eyes open and tried to place his surroundings. He lay in a bed beneath sheets with the lowest thread count possible and clad in a hospital gown. St. Mungo's, then, must be.

Remain Nameless

“Welcome back,” said a wry voice to his right and Draco whipped his head around so fast his neck cracked.

“When you’ve had a moment to collect yourself, I think we should discuss why you have selected me as your emergency contact instead of your own mother or perhaps your friend Theodore Nott,” said the calm voice of Healer Browning.

Draco ignored him and sat up. He did not have time for this. His head swam at the swift movement, but he didn’t care, he had to find Hermione.

“Easy, Draco,” cautioned Browning. “You’re in St. Mungo’s.” *Well, fucking spotted, old man.* “And your sedative potions are just wearing off now.”

Draco threw back the covers and made to stand, causing Browning to shoot to his feet. “Draco, stop! Where on earth are you going?”

Fuck off!

“I’m fine, I need to find her, do you know if—?”

The door to the ward opened then and two healers in lime-green robes walked in briskly. It appeared Draco convalesced in a private ward, which meant his regular monetary donations to St. Mungo’s were not in vain.

“Ah, Mr. Malfoy, hello. The diagnostic spells notified me that you were awake. I’m Healer Benson and this is—”

“Where is she?” Draco cut off whatever introductory tripe would fall next out of the healer’s mouth. The healer pursed his lips into a frown.

“I’m afraid I cannot—”

Draco leapt out of bed and drew himself up to his fullest height. “Where is she?” he thundered in the man’s face. Out of the corner of his eye, Draco clocked the other healer removing her wand from a holster at her side.

“I am not at liberty to give you details of other patients. Now as for you—”

“WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE? TELL ME RIGHT NOW OR I SWEAR I WILL—!”

“Mr. Malfoy if you do not calm down I will have no choice but to have you physically restrained!”

Healer Benson fired back, completely unfazed by Draco’s yelling and proximity. The wand twitched in the other healer’s hand.

Draco backed away and sank down on the edge of his bed, glaring mutinously at the two healers in front of him. He felt Healer Browning’s presence at his back. If the old man even thought about placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, Draco would nip it off.

“You’ve survived an intense Dementor attack,” continued Healer Benson in a bored, clinical voice, as if Draco had not screamed in his face moments ago. “Your magical reserves were heavily depleted by your casting of a Patronus and subsequent Warning Charms and then Apparition. The French healers transferred you here almost immediately and you have been magically sedated for 24 hours. We also treated you for hypothermia, dehydration, and mild frostbite to your tips and ears. Your magic has made a full recovery, as have your extremities. It is my professional advice that you stay at least

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mirrors. As she stood on the raised platform in naught but a tiny robe, Hermione made small talk with Dominique to quell her own insecurities.

“Is this your shop?”

“Non,” Dominique replied briskly and conjured a clipboard and a quill. “Il eez a family business. Madame Bouvier est ma tante. My sisters and I help out part time during *ze* summers.”

Dominique circled Hermione slowly, eyeing her from head to toe as a floating tape measure took her body’s measurements all on its own, like a more intimate version of her first visit to buy a wand at Olivander’s.

Hermione waited with bated breath for the stunning French woman to voice some critique, to point out a flaw in her physique, but the woman merely observed her neutrally.

“Nice of you to help your aunt,” Hermione said, unable to tolerate the silence during the inspection of her body. “What do you do when you’re not working here?”

“I am a healer, training to specialize in poisons and antidotes,” the witch replied proudly, and took a break from her study of Hermione to flash her a grin in the mirror. “I am in my final year of additional research.”

“Congratulations,” Hermione said warmly. Dominique’s chosen career explained the clinical nature of her gaze as she regarded Hermione’s figure, and it made her finally feel comfortable in her presence.

“D’accord. Now I must ask you some questions so we may choose *ze* best pieces for you.”

What followed was a refreshingly body- and sex-positive line of questioning:

What was the purpose of her appointment here today?

Was this purchase for a special occasion, every day wear, or just to try something new?

What sort of lingerie did she normally buy/wear, if any?

Was the lingerie for her eyes only, or something to please her partner?

Was she trying to impress her partner or feel more confident in her own skin?

Was the lingerie meant to be worn all day under clothing? Or would she be changing into it solely for sexual activities?

for sexual activities?

Did she need a fabric that was immune to tearing or did she not care if it were ripped off her?

Did the fabric need to be stain or water resistant?

Did she prefer to remove her own clothing or have it removed by her partner?

Any fabrics that made her uncomfortable? Any aversion to or preference for lace, satin, cotton, silk, leather, fur, etc.?

What was her favorite part of her body?

Which parts of her body did she want accentuated?

What did she like most about her personality?

What attracted her most to her partner?

When did she feel most confident: At work? Relaxing at home? At social gatherings? In the bedroom?

A little metal holder extended out from the door handle, and Hermione placed the embossed business card from Ginny onto it. The holder slid back inside and she heard the click of the door unlocking.

“Entrez, mademoiselle.”

Hermione quickly entered and shut the door behind her. As it clicked in the lock, her eyes took in the magnificent sight before her. From the street, the shop had appeared the size of a small boutique, but Hermione had just stepped into a small warehouse of an establishment. Racks and racks of all manner of fabrics surrounded her, but her eyes were drawn to the many mannequins on display; animated, faceless models posing and sashaying to show off their wares. It pleased her to see they came in every single body type, giving a realistic depiction of how certain pieces would look on someone with wider hips, or perhaps a flatter chest, or a more robust backside. There were even a few male mannequins. She blushed when she realized some displays involved two or more mannequins actively engaged in pantomimes of different sexual positions. Although, on second thought, it did show the customers just exactly how the lingerie would look and function if they were copulating vigorously in, for example, reverse cowgirl.

A young dark-haired woman in a plain black shift dress approached Hermione with a smile and a glass of champagne.

“You are Mademoiselle Granger, oui?”

“Yes, umm that’s me,” Hermione replied nervously, tearing her eyes away from the moving mannequins.

“Excellent! I am Dominique and I will be assisting you today.”

Hermione readily accepted the champagne and downed it in one go. The glass immediately refilled itself and Hermione resolved to slow down on the alcohol consumption so as to keep her wits about her. Dominique gave her a knowing smile.

“It’s your first time here, I understand. Do not worry, your appointment *est* completely private. We only assist one client at a time in-person. May I ask you something before we begin?”

“Oh! Of course!”

“Your ‘usband, I saw him outside with you earlier... is he perhaps a Delacour?”

Hermione flushed at the woman’s assumption. “Oh! Umm, well he’s not my husband he’s umm... well anyway, he’s also not related to the Delacours.”

“Ah, I thought... because of his ‘air and he is very beautiful... no matter, shall we get going?”

She led the way back to a dressing room.

“I do know a Fleur Delacour, but it’s Fleur Weasley now... she’s practically family,” said Hermione and Dominique gave her a radiant smile.

“Oh mon Dieu, but I have not seen her in ages! I was two years above her at Beauxbatons. She was a lovely girl, yes. You will tell her I say hello when you see her, yes?”

Hermione nodded enthusiastically and accepted a short silk robe from her. Dominique instructed her to strip completely and don the robe, and to step up onto a short pedestal in front of a trio of

another 6 hours to fully heal physically and—”

“Discharge me now,” Draco interrupted.

“Draco, I don’t think—” began Healer Browning, but Draco cut him off. “Now. Discharge me.”

The female healer who hadn’t bothered introducing herself conjured a form and a quill. She thrust it at him with a terse, “You can sign this saying you’re requesting a discharge against your Healer’s advice.”

Draco signed it without reading and threw it back at her.

“Fantastic,” he clipped. “Where might I find Hermione Granger?”

Both healers stared back impassively, but Draco heard a quick intake of breath from Browning behind him.

“As I said before, I cannot give you private details regarding other patients.”

“Is she alive? Is she all right? Just take me to her, please, I—”

“Mr. Malfoy as you are neither immediate family nor listed as next of kin, you are not entitled to any information regarding Ms. Granger.”

So she was alive then, or at least, still alive. And she was here, somewhere in the hospital. Draco’s blood boiled at the two adversaries in front of him, who dared reduce his relationship with Hermione to nothing. He could perhaps throw his weight around using his donor status and threats of lawsuits, but a better plan suddenly surfaced in his mind. He had a card up his sleeve that these two idiots had no idea he possessed, and Draco planned to lay it down the second they left the room.

“Fine,” Draco said coolly. “Thanks ever so much for your help. Such a pleasure to see my many Gallions at work in this institution,” he sneered. The healers left without another word, though Draco knew it almost killed the witch to not roll her eyes at him.

The second the door shut, Draco snatched his wand up. He had to focus if he wanted to do this correctly.

“They told me you arrived with a young woman. That you had both experienced a Dementor attack and suffered from exposure, but that you were able to apparate both of you to safety,” Browning said numbly. “Draco the woman you were with... why didn’t you tell me you were dating Hermione Granger?”

Draco paused his concentration to glare at his healer. “What difference does it make? You know all about her from my sessions, I wasn’t aware I had to disclose her full name. Do you need her address and date of birth as well?” he said coldly.

“Normally, no, I would not need personal details of a romantic partner, but Draco this is quite the special circumstance given your history and past healing sessions! Don’t you think I would have been able to tailor our sessions differently if you’d only been honest? This isn’t some trivial detail about your love life, this is a major revelation that is necessary for me to treat you properly!”

Draco had never seen Browning angry with him before. It would have had more of an impact if Draco had the time or inclination to care about anything other than Hermione.

Ignoring his healer’s outrage at his perceived duplicity, Draco closed his eyes to focus on his happy-

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est memory. Or fantasy, he supposed. He needed to research Patronuses and how they were specifically conjured.

A while dress a while smile. "I Hermione, take you, Draco..."

"Expecto Patronum!"

The silvery dragon emerged and floated in front of him, awaiting orders. "Take this message to Harry Potter." Potter, it's Malfoy, I'm at St. Mungo's and they have Granger here somewhere but the fucking sods won't tell me where, so I need you to get your arse down here immediately and pull that Savior of All that is Good and Just in the World thing you do and make sure she's all right and take me to her."

There. Let the idiotic staff here refuse a request from Harry Potter.

The dragon flew from the room, and Draco met Browning's stupefied look. "I'm going to find her, you can save your admonitions for our next session," he said flatly then snuck the standard issue patient gown and pulled on his own clothes.

"I'm scheduling an additional 30 minutes for our next session," said Browning. "We'll be discussing why you've listed me as next of kin in addition to your reasons for not discussing your relationship with Ms. Granger."

"Whatever," Draco muttered and looked up quickly as the ward door opened.

"That was fast," Draco said as a harried Potter strode over to him.

"What was?" came the blank reply.

"Didn't you get my Patronus? How are you already here?"

Suddenly, the misty dragon appeared and delivered Draco's message. Harry smirked as the Patronus faded away.

"Impressive. Although I am disappointed it's not a ferret."

Draco bristled at the insult, but shoved his pride down. "Potter, you have to help me find her. The healers wouldn't tell me a thing and I don't even know if she's all right and I've no way of getting to her and I need to know if she—!"

Harry held up a hand to stop Draco's anxious babbling. "Malfoy, she's fine. If you can calm down I'll take you to her now."

A cough behind him reminded Draco they weren't alone. "Draco we still should discuss—"

"Not today, Browning," Draco snapped. "Browning this is the Boy Who Doesn't Know How to Die nor Comb His Hair. Potter, this is my personal healer, Browning."

Draco rolled his eyes as the two politely shook hands. "Harry Potter, pleasure to meet you." "Atticus Browning, likewise."

As he hurried after Potter out of the ward, Draco swore he heard Browning mutter under his breath. "*Should have just bloody retined like Mariama asked, I'm far too old for this...*"

The two men stalked down the hall together, Draco peppering Harry with questions about Hermione's wellbeing. The questions went ignored until they reached a deserted corridor.

"...and her lips were sort of blue, and I've no idea what state I arrived in, but I think she was worse

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magic. Every jewel bright shop window contained magical displays trying to constantly outdo the business next door.

"You know it's not actually called *Place de Magie*," Draco remarked dryly. "That's just what the Parisians tell the English tourists."

"Oh hush you little snob, are you really going to go all snooty historical know-it-all on me? That's generally my job on a holiday."

In the front window of a cobbler, Hermione watched a pair of sparkling high heels perform a complicated tap dance routine before transfiguring into another pair of shoes (baller slippers) to perform steps en pointe, then into a third pair (low red heels) for a flamenco before Draco had to physically drag her away. She dawdled again in front of a toy shop that featured life-size, painted fancy hippogriffs bowing regally at one another.

At the start of the trip, Hermione made a deal with Draco (or rather, Hermione insisted and Draco decided he liked shagging Hermione regularly so he agreed) to alternate days between the magical and Muggle world.

Today would be in the magical world and Hermione needed to figure out how to lose Draco for an hour so she could make her appointment slot. She eventually told him straight up that she needed to go to a private appointment and apologized profusely while insisting she just needed an hour. He raised an eyebrow and shrugged before strolling off in the direction of the massive sweet shop.

Hermione collected her nerves, checked over her shoulder to ensure Draco had moved far enough away, and tentatively approached the shop she needed. Ginny had absolutely insisted that Hermione visit Madame Bouvier's ("Pleur sent me there for my wedding night lingerie and let me tell you Hermione, the way Harry's eyes bugged out of his head, it was worth every last Knut.") and taken the liberty of setting up a private fitting on her behalf.

Hermione wasn't one for spending absurd amounts of money on what amounted to very little clothing, and taking into account Draco's usual sexual proclivities involving her undergarments, it would be hastily removed anyway.

Ginny argued that with Draco hell-bent on whisking her off to the Continent for a romantic week filled with champagne, silk sheets, pastries, and artisanal chocolates, at the very least Hermione could invest in one or two scraps of fabric designed to make him shag her until she forgot her own name.

Hermione needed to confiscate Ginny's stash of trashy romance novels.

Upon approaching the boutique, Hermione worried for a moment that it wasn't open. The closer she got, she noticed every window had a set of robin's egg blue velvet curtains behind them, obscuring the view from the street. Hermione found a button next to the blacked out door and fought down her nervousness as she pressed it.

"Hullo?" called a breezy, feminine voice.

"Ern, bonjour... Je m'appelle Hermione Granger... erm, I'm terribly sorry, my French isn't that great, but I have an appointment?"

"Oui, mademoiselle. Pleez place your card in ze slot."

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Hermione scooted back from him. She stood, tugged her knickers off and made to remove her dress when she heard Draco rasp, "Leave it on."

With a coy smile, she turned around, dropped to her hands and knees on the end of the lounge chair, and gathered her dress up around her hips.

"Ready when you are," she called over her shoulder, bending at the waist so her face met the fabric while her bottom angled upwards towards him.

She was sure he never shrugged the rest of his clothes faster. On his knees behind her, his grabbed handfuls of her bare backside and murmured, "The wards are also soundproof. Scream all you like, love."

They simultaneously groaned when he eased into this new position for them, Hermione reveling in how deep he felt within her. Draco muttered indiscriminate curses under his breath as he moved in and out, clutching her hips like a lifeline while they both adjusted to the foreign angle. The unfamiliar position soon gave way to a familiar ache inside and she knew what she needed, what she wanted, but couldn't quite articulate anything beyond loud moans.

Finally, it broke past her lips in a harsh gasp, "*Harder*."

Draco's rhythm stuttered momentarily and a fresh string of curse words filled the night air. "Fuck...

Hermione... gods... fuck..."

He recovered quickly to acquiesce to her desperate demand and soon Hermione didn't care if all of Paris heard her.

"Harder... Draco, please..."

He made a sort of strangled noise but obliged her request, pounding away relentlessly until she wanted to sob from lingering on the edge of ecstasy. When one of his fingers came around her front to gently stroke at her clit, the contrasting softness of his touch from the rough and fast movement of his cock within her made Hermione see stars behind her eyes. She cried his name so loudly when she came, she wondered blithely just how strong those soundproof wards truly were. Draco finished as her cries died away, and slumped over her to press kisses down her back before tugging her dress back down.

Hermione tucked her sated body into his hold as they leaned back on the chair together, panting and boneless.

"Hungry?" he inquired after a few minutes.

"*Oui*."



Hermione didn't know where to look first. She had a very particular mission to complete this afternoon, but the marvelousness of *Place de Magie* threatened to derail her schedule. While Diagon Alley often felt cramped and dirty to her, the *Place de Magie* of Paris seemed to teem with life and wondrous

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off than me, but if they administered the right potion straight away, then there shouldn't be any lasting..."

Harry cut him off mid-rant. "Merlin, will you shut up? I can't give you any answers until I know we're alone!"

Draco clamped his mouth shut, but glared. "She's fine. Hermione's fine." Harry repeated and finally the words sank in. Draco fell heavily against the wall and covered his face in his hands. All the anger and adrenaline at needing information bled away as the crush of relief and worry washed over him.

"Malfoy," said Potter quietly. "She's alive thanks to you. You... you saved her life." Potter's tight voice only made Draco feel worse. How close had he been to losing her? Gods, what would have happened if they'd been out there just a minute more? Or if he never succeeded in casting the Patronus? Potter's reaction made it seem as if he'd been close to grief. How long had Hermione hovered between this world and the next? Had she suffered, again, because of him?

Harry leaned on his side against the wall, facing Draco and crossing his arms. "Are you all right?" Under normal circumstances, he would have bit out a scathing reply and told Potter to sod off, but the fight had left him. Draco dropped his hands and drew in a shaky breath. "I can see her," he asked softly.

Harry nodded and pushed his glasses up his nose. "She's sleeping now, but yes, this is her room." Harry gestured to the door in front of them. "She asked for you first thing," he added. "Ron and Ginny are with her now."

Draco squeezed his eyes shut, willing the terrible images of her frozen in the woods to disappear.

"Her parents? Do they know?"

"Ah, no." Harry hedged. "Me and Ron... we're listed as her next of kin here. Her parents don't... well, I'm sure you know, it's a bit difficult between all of them. Hermione doesn't like them to worry. You were still supposed to be in France for another two days anyhow."

Draco huffed out a bitter laugh. "And if she'd died?"

Harry's mouth set in a grim line. "She didn't die. Come on."

Draco pushed off the wall and followed Harry into another private ward. Yet instead of the reassurance he hoped for, Draco saw his worst fear laid out before him. He saw Hermione in a bed too big for her small frame, her hair flowing wildly all around her delicate face, eyes closed and with skin so pale. She was too still, too quiet. Was she even breathing? She looked like a shell of herself... like a corpse. Like a limp little doll being tortured on his drawing room floor...

Draco's vision blurred and he swayed on his feet. Distantly he heard someone calling his name but all sound was muffled to his ears. At the edge of his swimming eyes he could see two moving shapes with red hair, but he couldn't look away from the pale, lifeless imitation of the woman he loved lying prone, never to wake. *He was too late, always too late. He couldn't save her, he never saved her...*

A concerned face came into view, and Draco realized he only remained standing because Potter held him steady. He said something in an urgent tone, but Draco couldn't make out the words.

"I... can't... no. I can't do this... I—" Draco gasped and wrenched himself away and bolted out of the ward.

He couldn't breathe. He needed to be able to just fucking breathe. She was so deathly pale. As pale as when the Snatchers paraded her into the Manor.

Draco staggered down the hall and into the nearest washroom and all but collapsed over the sink. He gripped the back of his head tightly and choked on a sob. Eventually his misery took its physical toll and he retched into the basin. He dry heaved a few more times before his body gave up trying to expel whatever healing potions he'd been dosed with earlier.

I am okay with this I am okay with this I am okay with this

Draco wiped his face clean and gulped down some water, then took a good look at the ghastly visage in the mirror. Potter had claimed she'd recovered but how could he say that when she looked so fragile, so broken?

A sudden movement behind him caught Draco's attention and then he saw another face reflected over his shoulder. He couldn't help the sense of déjà vu.

"We must stop meeting like this, Potter," Draco's weak voice attempted a drawl.

Harry's lips quirked briefly. "I promise not to try out experimental dark curses that make you bleed out on the floor this time."

Draco shrugged but couldn't suppress the trembling in his weakened limbs. The memory of that incident hit him in full force: the helplessness, the desperation, the abject misery he had felt...

"I wanted to die that day, you know. Don't get me wrong, I sought to hurt you, but when you hit me with that curse and I started bleeding... I thought I'd finally found my way out of my fucked up situation. It had finally gotten through my thick head that I was doomed to fail the Dark Lord's mission from the start. And what do you know?" Draco laughed darkly. "I even failed at dying."

Draco closed his eyes so he didn't have to see the concern etched on Potter's face; the same that day in their Sixth Year, too, when they'd locked eyes in the cracked mirror. Potter's pity had infuriated him then, but now he could only muster a muted disgust.

"You had another way, you always did," Potter said quietly. "I realize it's easy for me to say that. I only wish that... that Dumbledore... or anyone could have shown you much sooner that you did have a choice."

Draco barked out a harsh laugh. "A choice? That's rich," he sneered and turned to lean back on the wall. Why were they even having this pointless discussion? But Draco found that now they'd gone down this road, he might as well see it to the end.

"You're the Boy Who Lived, yes? Consider me the Boy With No Choice." Draco sank down the wall so he could sit with his knees propped up. "Thanks to my father's blunders, I was made to fulfill certain terrifying expectations just as I'd turned 16. Perhaps younger me would assert he welcomed it at first, but we both know my choice was between taking the Mark and certain death. Would you call that a choice at all? And as for my mission to kill Dumbledore... kill the old man or watch your parents die. Which path would you choose?"

a French accent?

Only capable of responding non-verbally, Hermione tipped her head back to give him better access to her exposed skin.

"Qu'est-ce que tu veux? Porte que, je sais ce que je veux faire..." he goaded her and moved his hands to the hem of her knee-length summer dress.

His cool touch wandered under the fabric and as his fingers smoothed over the curve of her backside and around to the front of her thighs and inched closer to exactly where she needed him to touch her, her eyes flew open.

"Draco," she breathed, "Anyone could see us we're—"

"You really should have thought of that before you wore this dress," he growled, and Hermione's hips jerked into his hand of their own volition.

"But... but..." she protested feebly, becoming less and less concerned that people in any of the nearby buildings could look out the window and see her pressed up against a railing with her boyfriend's fingers in her knickers. Her unbelievably soaked knickers.

"Do you honestly think a room in this price range doesn't come with the strongest privacy wards that gold can buy?" he chuckled in her ear.

"I... I..."

He drew his wand and sent a burst of light to their left. Hermione watched as the tell-tale shimmer of the wards kept the light from escaping the boundary of the terrace. She felt Draco stow his wand in his jacket pocket then he twined her around in his arms to capture her lips. Unburdened of the shame of becoming an accidental sex show for the general public, Hermione returned his kisses with equal fervor.

She needed to regain the upper hand after his little stunt of speaking French with a caressing lilt, as if it were a language he'd specially crafted with the sole intent of seducing her. Hermione pushed him backwards towards one of the loungers and shoved him lightly into a sitting position. Draco's long legs straddled the chair and he leaned back as Hermione crawled to his lap.

As she reached him, she dragged her palm up the front of his trousers and was rewarded with a groan and a twitch of his hips into her hand. She met his mouth with languid kisses and helped to divest him of the top half of his clothing.

Hermione caught a glimpse of his wrist and gasped at the time on his watch. "Malfoy! Our dinner reservation is in 10 minutes!" She made to stand, but Draco yanked her back down.

"Relax Granger. While you were lost in lustful fantasies about me downstairs I spoke with the concierge about dinner tonight."

"Oh?"

Draco smirked and clicked his fingers. Instantly a bottle of wine, candles, and several covered plates of food appeared on one of the tables further along the terrace.

Oh, he's good.

She endeavored to snog the self-satisfied smirk off his face and when he went for his belt buckle,

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flanking each side of the massive washroom, and to top it all off, champagne chilling in a stand-up tub beside the enormous bath.

"Merlin, this is unreal," she sighed under her breath.

Upon her return to the main living area, she found Draco eyeing her apprehensively with his hands stuffed in his trouser pockets. It dawned on Hermione that he'd nervously awaited her inspection for an opinion on the accommodations he'd selected for her. For *them*. His silent bid for her approval tugged at her heart.

"Malfoy, this place is truly amazing... it really is too much!"

Her genuine enthusiasm lit his mark and his lips quirked into their familiar pleased smirk.

"But you haven't even seen the balcony yet."

Most of the far wall was covered in ceiling-high glass doors outfitted with more fine drapery, and as Draco led her through the one off the dining area, Hermione did not even attempt to stifle her gasp. She hadn't realized how high up they were, nor that the balcony ran the entire length of their suite. It stretched on, dotted with low café tables and chairs as well as a few loungers scattered here and there, should one wish to stretch out. The golden skies of early evening reigned above, but brackets of gas lamps hung at the ready to cast a hazy glow along their personal terrace the instant the sun fully set. It would be their own private Parisian café, stories above the city.

Speaking of the city, their room offered a spectacular view of the City of Lights, complete with the requisite Eiffel Tower backdrop in the near distance. How did one become used to a lifestyle such as this? Hermione sucked in a breath of pleasant summer air at the sight, awed at the splendor before her.

"It's charmed to look like a block of *piet-à-terres* from the street," Draco remarked quietly.

Piet-à-terres? Oh, for the love of Merlin...

Now she sucked in a breath for a very different reason. Draco stepped behind where she stood at the terrace edge, leaning out against the railing. His hands came to rest on either side of hers, and he dropped a kiss to her shoulder.

"Where—?" She cleared her throat and tried again to speak normally, "where did you learn to speak French?"

"My grandparents, both sets, were fluent. Of course, French was also part of my tutoring schedule as a child."

"I see," she replied, throat dry. "Well, it's umm... pretty much perfect."

Hermione's own French left something to be desired. Though she'd visited the country plenty of times, her grasp of the language stayed within the limited confines of stock conversational phrases, asking for directions, and ordering at restaurants.

She felt Draco press closer and his hands came up to skim her bare arms.

"*Qu'est-ce que tu veux, Hermione?*" he murmured and her entire body quaked.

He kissed up the side of her neck and Hermione's brain quite forgot how to formulate a response in either English or French. Had her name ever sounded so delicious than when it fell from his lips in

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Draco looked up at Harry thoughtfully. "I heard a rumor once that the Sorting Hat considered you for Slytherin, had a whole conversation with you over it. Did you know it said *nothing* to me? Remember our Sorting Ceremony? It barely grazed my hair and declared me Slytherin. Didn't offer me any glimpses of alternate paths, no words of wisdom over how my life might turn out differently, no, it simply swept me along my predetermined path of darkness."

Harry leveled him with a patient stare. "I told you this once before, but I think it bears repeating. The world is not split into good people and Death Eaters."

Draco tipped his head back and trained his eyes on the ceiling. "Yes, yes, very pretty words, those." Though he didn't look up to verify, Draco would have bet a lot of gold that Potter rolled his eyes.

"Look, I'm not here to rehash the past. You apologized before, I forgave you, we're beyond that now. Hell, you're dating my best friend and rescuing her from Dementors! I came here to thank you and make sure you weren't punishing yourself. It wasn't your fault and the healers and Hermione told us what you did for her."

Draco cringed and hung his head. What he'd done for her... it was laughable. What he'd done was get her into yet another dangerous situation that almost got her killed.

"She almost died. She..." To his utter mortification, Draco felt his throat close up.

"Malfoy," Potter sighed exasperatedly, "what part of 'Hermione's fine' did you not understand?"

"Oh? You call that fine?" Draco exploded. "You call lying in bed looking like the fucking Grey Lady, fine? Maybe you're numb to seeing her in near death situations but I'm not!"

"So what, you run out of the room and hide? How does that help?"

"I'm glad you can be so blasé about it, Potter, but forgive me if I'm a bit out of sorts at seeing her that way. How would you react then, eh? If it were Ginny in that bed?"

When Harry's eyebrows shot up, Draco realized what he'd just admitted.

"Fuck," Draco groaned and rested his head against the wall. He closed his eyes so as to block out the sight of the too-relaxed form of his former rival, standing casual as-you-please against a bathroom door while Draco divulged his deepest secret.

"And I never told her... she almost died and I never told her," Draco whispered hoarsely.

"Why not?"

Draco's eyes snapped open to glare up at the bane of his adolescence.

"In case you haven't noticed, *Alum Potter*, things don't quite work out when I have something to lose," he snarled.

Potter let out another long-suffering sigh and if Draco had more energy he would have boxed him between the eyes. "Look, you really need to quit being so dramatic, and that's saying a lot coming from me." He shot Draco a roguish grin that made bile rise in his throat again. "War's over, mate. Been over a long time now. The only way you stand to lose Hermione now is if you continue to act like a twat—"

"I almost lost her to Dementors, so don't you dare tell me—"

"Yes, a group of rogue Dementors, I got the full story from the French Aurors. Apparently it's been a problem in parts of Europe since we banished them from Azkaban. But you fought them off, Mal-

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foy.” Green eyes bore into gray. “You fought for her. And I’m telling you right now that if she wakes up again and you’re not there this time? Dementors will seem like Pygmy Puffs compared to her.”

Draco indulged in a wry half-grin, knowing full well what a furious Hermione could inflict upon those who upset her. And while she would have every right to be angry with him, it would never take away from the fact that he didn’t deserve her. He, the idiot having a meltdown on a filthy hospital bathroom floor, who was too much of a coward to sit at her bedside and wait for her to wake, could never deserve her. Which meant he desperately needed to quash his silly little fantasy. His thrilling, ridiculous, impossible, and absolutely terrifying fantasy.

Yes, terrifying. Terrifying that his brain had even thought to travel anywhere near that sort of future. He couldn’t even summon the words to tell Hermione he loved her and yet his mind in a panicked state saw fit to conjure a vision of her agreeing to be bound to him, heart, soul, and magical core, forever. Had Draco really been that blind to the depth of his own feelings?

Madness. Sheer madness. As if she’d ever agree to tie herself to someone like him. Marriage. Forever. Why and how was that the source of enough happiness for Draco to finally cast a corporeal Patronus? Where the fuck had that come from?

With a stab of misery, he realized it didn’t matter anyway. Draco couldn’t be the man in his own fantasy; a man worthy of the glowing smile of that remarkable woman agreeing to be his wife. He’d never be that man.

“I can’t do this... I can’t be what she needs. I can’t—”

“Bollocks to the ‘I can’t’! What you *can* do is bloody try! You can grow the fuck up and at least try for her! Pull your head out of your poncey arse and be the man who was strong enough to ward off Dementors and carry her two miles in the snow! What’s the alternative, eh? Make yourself miserable and make her miserable because you’re too pig-headed to see she loves you too? Hermione doesn’t do anything by halves, so my advice is to count yourself as one lucky sod and thank Merlin every day you get to be in her presence.” Potter’s chest heaved by the end of his little tirade, and this more than anything succeeded in buoying Draco.

Now this was familiar ground! An irate Harry Potter, raining self-righteousness down upon him. Draco stood up slowly and ran a hand through his hair, settling it back in place. He rubbed at his nearly dry eyes and straightened his clothes.

I am okay with this.

“If that is your version of a supportive lecture Potter, I pity your future child. You probably shouldn’t curse so much, it’s unbecoming of a father, you know.”

Harry snorted and muttered something derogatory under his breath. The two men regarded each other and shared understanding grimaces; not exactly a handshake, but a mutual acknowledgment of a commonality all the same. Harry jerked his head toward the washroom door. “Come on, then. Gin and I have to be off and Ron promised to inform the rest of his family about her condition. You can stay with her now, no one will bother you over it.”

Draco said nothing, even if he was begrudgingly grateful several times over to Potter today. Just

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They’d been in France all of five minutes and he’d already ruined her knickers.

She did not possess the necessary wherewithal to pay attention to the astonishing spellwork of the concierge tapping her palm to activate the charm that would allow her and Draco access to their suite via personal lift through a mere touch of their fingertips. Instead she channeled all her mental energy into keeping her jaw from unhinging as she listened to Draco inquire (flawlessly, lyrically about their dinner reservations for the evening. She barely registered the impressive magic of the concierge clicking his fingers and their luggage disappearing, surely now awaiting them in their room.

By the time Draco led her towards the lift, she suppressed the urge to rub her thighs together at the way he’d tossed a perfectly accented “*merci beaucoup!*” to the staff. The lift had no buttons, and once inside, Draco pressed a hand next to the closed doors for it to move. The entire car of wall-to-wall mirrors offered Hermione no escape from her flushed face and the puzzled look Draco shot her.

“All right Granger?”

She could only bite her lip and stare down at her feet. “Mmm, a bit flustered from portkey travel,” she lied.

Weren’t magical lifts supposed to be quicker than this? Gods, thirty more seconds in this box with Draco and she would jump him and his expensive suit.

He stared at her the rest of the ride.

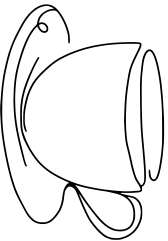
Finally, mercifully, the lift doors opened and Draco gallantly allowed her to pass into their suite first.

Now her jaw really did drop.

The marble foyer led to a vast open floor plan that Hermione quickly calculated as possibly triple the square footage of her entire townhome. A full kitchen complete with an island and breakfast nook sat on one end of the suite, while a full wine bar sat at the opposite end. In between these two outrageous bookends was a long glass dining table that seated twelve, and perhaps a dozen or so lush couches, loveseats, settees, and chaise lounges plus two fireplaces. She vowed to sit on every exquisite piece of expensive furniture at least once before the holiday ended. A few doors led off the main room, and Hermione left Draco behind to discover what treasures they held. She found two bedrooms, both with queen-size canopy beds and private bathrooms the size of her bedroom at home. There was also a guest half-bath as well as a powder room.

Just as Hermione wondered why on earth they would need a powder room while on holiday, she stumbled upon the master bedroom, bedecked in lush-looking cream-colored furniture, with two enormous armoires, and gauzy curtains framing the ceiling-high windows. The large bed looked impossibly soft and Hermione repressed the urge to jump onto it and leap about like an over-excited child. She could already hear the snide remark of “peasant” in her head should she surrender to that urge.

The walk-in closet already held their clothes and she shook her head at the ludicrousness of it all. Hermione opened the door to the ensuite bathroom, closed it, and then opened it again. The bath reminded her of the Prefects’ bath at Hogwarts, also made of pristine white marble, and Hermione let out a moan of longing. Her roving eyes took in a shower stall behind frosted glass, two dual vanities



Chapter Thirty Three

August 2008

Hermione needed to get a grip on herself. Honestly, it wasn't as if she were some poor little pauper who'd never experienced anything of luxury before. She'd stayed in several upscale accommodations on holidays with her parents, not to mention, being a war heroine often led to certain upgrades when she used her real name to make reservations. But this? This level of opulence was heretofore unseen by her eyes.

When their international portkey (an ugly, chipped mug) had landed Hermione and Draco into a side chamber just off the main lobby of their Paris hotel, Hermione had no idea what to expect. Draco had been in charge of this part of their trip after all, and perhaps she should have known he would have gone completely overboard. Not that someone of his tax bracket would think this overboard. No, Malloy didn't crane his neck to study the cathedral-high ceilings of the lobby, nor admire every surface covered in pristine white marble, nor did his gaze track the shine of every framed gilded mirror and assorted richly upholstered accent furniture. A design union of old world extravagance and modern gaudiness. Rows upon rows of crystal chandeliers hung from above, reflecting an almost blinding light across the polished walls and floors, the intricate stain-glass windows, and the dozens of fountains outfitted with gleaming ice sculptures ranging in size from 2 to 15 feet in height. Was that a champagne tower in the corner? In every corner?

Leave it to the French to exceed her expectations.

Hermione managed to keep her composure by running through her mental checklist of her life's accomplishments (a personal tactic whenever she let feelings of inferiority creep in) and she would have been perfectly fine if Malloy hadn't opened his stupid mouth.

His stupid, perfect, sinful mouth.

His stupid, perfect, sinful mouth that had just opened to conduct a polite conversation with the hotel's concierge in rapid, flawless French.

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before they reached the head of the ward, Draco asked the question that still plagued him.

"Potter... when you cast a Patronus... you have to use a memory right? Something that's already happened?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, yes, that's the technique I was taught and it always works for me. Hermione would know better if there are any alternate theories out there. Obviously it has to be something that inspires happiness. Not just typical happy in a way that's fleeting. More like... more like... a memory that makes you so happy that if it were the last thing you experienced it would be worth it."

A subtle dress, a subtle smile. "I Hermione, take you, Draco..."

Harry gave him a searching look. "Why? What did you think about when you cast it?"

Draco didn't answer, just determinedly entered Hermione's room and focused on putting one foot in front of the other as he approached her bed. He didn't spare a glance at the two other figures in the room, either. He sank into the chair and tried not to retch again at the sight of her looking so frail. Her chest rose and fell gently and only by timing his own breathing with the movement did he feel himself begin to calm.

"When she wakes, tell Hermione I'll Floo her tomorrow," Potter's voice called softly from the doorway. He must have also gestured to the Weasleys in the room, because he could hear footsteps shuffling past.

Draco did not care to address them, he only had eyes for Hermione, and so it caught him by surprise when a small, warm hand squeezed his shoulder in what one might consider affection. He looked up into the fierce brown eyes of Ginny, who regarded him with a tremulous smile. *Thank you*, she mouthed, and he merely blinked back at her. She didn't seem to expect any other reaction from him and dropped her hand to follow the others out.

Before the door closed, another voice called out to him.

"Malloy."

Draco turned in the chair to see Ron Weasley hovering at the threshold. The red-head sported a pained sort of frown, but he looked Draco in the eye. "Thanks," his eyes flicked to Hermione then back to Draco. "For what you did... for her. Just... thanks."

Draco nodded once and turned away. He didn't have the emotional or physical energy to unpack his feelings toward the Weasel just now. When he heard the door swing shut for good, he gave into his urge and wrapped Hermione's hand in his own. Based on appearance, he expected it to be cold to the touch, but she felt as warm and comforting as always.

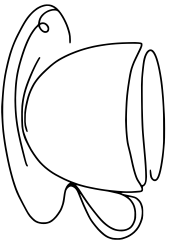
The familiar feel of her skin made him choke on an emotional exhale. He'd never let her out of his sight again. Relief weighed heavily on a tired Draco, forcing him to sink into the stiff chair. He kept his grip on Hermione, even as exhaustion staked its claim on him.

Never letting you go again, Granger

I love you

I am okay with this

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Chapter Thirty Six

Hushed voices nearby roused him gradually. When he recognized Hermione's voice, Draco wanted to leap out of his chair, but her clipped tone gave him pause. He deduced feigning sleep would be the best course for now.

"...supposed to mean?"

"No disrespect meant to you Miss Granger, not at all," whispered a frantic female voice. "It's just that he's a... he's a... well, you know, a... umm..."

"If you'd like to finish that sentence in this century?" Hermione interjected disdainfully, and Draco wondered if he'd had more influence on her than she'd care to admit.

When silence reigned, Hermione struck again. "If the end of your sentence isn't going to be 'wonderfully supportive boyfriend' or 'awfully brave man for saving your life' then I think you best not say anything at all," she said coldly and it took all of Draco's muscle control not to smirk.

"I meant no offense, Miss Granger, I'm sorry. I was only surprised to see him here with you."

"I assume they give you healers training in handling shocking situations? In how to react to the unexpected?"

She was so inpatient in her iciness even Narcissa would have inclined her head in respect.

"I'm so sorry, I—"

"What's your name?"

"Trainee Healer Kane."

"And where were you during the Battle of Hogwarts?"

Oh dear, Draco thought wryly. This poor little lamb was heading straight for lecture-town to be verbally slaughtered by Granger.

"I was only 10 then. I was home."

"And the rest of the war? Home as well?"

Draco could picture the arching of Hermione's eyebrow.

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decided it best to leave her then, seeing as he'd said his piece and anything further would only be in anger. He gave his mother one more beat to respond before turning on his heel and staking back inside the house.

He'd just turned the corner of the threshold when he heard the sound of delicate china smashing against the stone of the garden verandah.

Draco refilled their glasses and when he'd returned to the couch, noticed the way the older man's eyes lingered on all the Muggle technology Hermione owned, as if itching to run his fingers over it all and discover their secrets. His eyes kept flicking back to the television remote.

"Do you know how to use it?" Arthur asked Draco suddenly.

"Yes, sort of. I can at least turn on the device, if you like? I find it rather garish and overwhelming. All the discordant noise and the colors are far too bright."

Draco remembered Hermione telling him about Arthur's affinity for all things Muggle and thought he might finally have a way to win the man over.

"Here," said Draco, pushing the button to switch the screen on. Hermione didn't watch much television, especially if Draco stayed over, so he was unfamiliar with the various "programs" it offered. Arthur, however, seemed delighted.

"Oh this here! This is marvelous! Has she explained football to you yet?"

Draco shook his head, watching the little men in different colored uniforms jog and sprint up and down some sort of field chasing after a ball the size of a quaffle, but only touching it with their feet.

"It's the biggest Muggle sport there is, and it's rather ingenious actually, all the little rules..."



"I think it's about done, the juices are running clear," Hermione said confidently, setting the roast pan on the kitchen counter.

"Looks perfect dear," Molly replied with an affirming nod.

Hermione gathered some forks from the drawer and placed them next to her best dishware. "All right, I need the bigger serving spoon for the asparagus and then we can—"

"You never mentioned how handsome your young man is. Goodness, if I were a few decades younger, you'd have to beat me off him with a broomstick."

Hermione winced around. "Molly?" she gasped in astonishment, casting anxious eyes toward the living room.

The older woman chuckled. "Oh please child, whatever could you be embarrassed about? He's really rather gorgeous, isn't he?"

Her cheeks had lit on fire at the sheer absurdity of this conversation and the truth in the pronouncement. "Oh well, yes he is, I mean... it's not the only reason I'm with him, of course, but obviously it doesn't hurt..."

Molly giggled like a school-girl, and Hermione found it infectious. Apparently, Draco only had to lightly peck the older woman's hand and she fell completely in his thrall.

As if you were any different...

Hermione's ears pricked up at a familiar sound. "I can hear the telly. Do you think they're all right?"

When the women went through to the sitting room, they found two rather impassioned men gesturing wildly at the television.

"Come off it, you can't just plough a man like that!"

"Quite right, quite right! Most unsporting!"

"Do you think he faked it? I mean that was a rough fall, but at that angle..."

"No, no, that was much too hard to be a flop, they should send off that defender!"

Hermione leaned her face against Molly's shoulder to hide her silent laughter. Methin, if she had a video camera at this moment, she'd never let either of them live this down. Telly and football: the great unifiers of all men.

"If you two are quite finished, Hermione's made a rather wonderful meal, and it would be a shame for it to grow cold," said Molly sternly, causing the wizards to jump to attention. She threw a sly wink Hermione's way.

Roughly half an hour later and dinner continued on swimmingly, but Hermione had just about reached her limit.

Firstly, the clothing. The man wore a three-piece suit (gemstone cufflinks and all) to a supposed casual "getting to know Hermione's new boyfriend but in reality is also a way for her magical family to vet him and for said boyfriend to knock some apologies off his list" dinner.

He looked so shag-able. The artfully coiffed hair she couldn't wait to ruin with greedy fingers. The tightly composed facial expressions she couldn't wait to loosen with wanton lips. That stupidly, delightfully fitted suit she couldn't wait to have pressed against her.

And Hermione knew his choice of blue suit was in no way accidental, but rather a deliberate assault on her ability to function in his alluring presence. She'd only blurted that indegent thought about Draco and the color blue *one time*, and yet, the smug arise seemed to now own a plethora of suits in just about every shade.

Secondly, the table manners. Not that her previous boyfriends had bad table manners, per se (even Ron had improved over time), but Draco's sense of decorum during a meal entered the stratosphere of flawless.

The way he deferentially passed dishes to Molly, his seated posture somehow both stiff yet graceful, the way he'd delicately dab his lips with the napkin after each bite, the way he inclined his head toward Arthur when he addressed him, gods even the perfect way he sliced his serving of roast without making a sound with the cutlery against the plate made her hot and bothered.

And finally, his voice.

The way Draco spoke always sparked something within her, but tonight he'd dialed the formality up to uncharted levels. She wondered if a nervous tic manifested in the use of his aristocratic accent, so posh it bordered on snobby. Each consonant crisply punctuated, vowels not drawn out too long, not a dropped "g" in sight, every word he uttered seeming so carefully selected before making its way past his lips, it all made it very difficult for Hermione to focus on anything other than the fantasies running rampant through her mind.

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Fantasies where Draco proffered his arm to her and asked, “If Miss Granger would do him the honor of accompanying him for a turn about the gardens?” And then they’d talk about the proper way to decant brandy or breeding hunting hounds or something equally as snooty and then he’d inquire if he might steal a brief kiss and she’d drag him behind a hedge by his suit lapels and smug him rotten...

Merlin, what was wrong with her?

This had to be one of the longest evenings of her life, and not because of long-running familial feuds or grudges as she’d initially feared, but because she was beyond aroused and quite close to chucking the Weasleys out so she could indulge in a newly awakened feish for an upper-class cadence and mannerisms.

When dessert, coffee, and tea had finally been cleared away and the night reached its end, Hermione had enough of her wis left about her to shoo Draco into the kitchen after Molly had gone through to collect her dessert tin.

While her and Arthur couldn’t hear the soft-spoken conversation, they did eventually hear Molly exclaim, “Oh my dear boy, of course!” followed by the sounds of feminine blubbering. Arthur and Hermione shared amused smirks. When the two emerged from the kitchen, Molly dabbed at her eyes with a white handkerchief (monogrammed D.L.M.) and Draco sported a rather pink face.

The Weasleys said their goodbyes then, Molly still clutching Draco’s kerchief as she hugged him, and Hermione beamed when Arthur shook Draco’s hand in a much warmer fashion than their silted greeting. The door closed and Hermione heard Draco release a loud exhale.

“You would obviously know better, but in my estimation that went fairly wellmmmmphfff!” Hermione cut off Draco’s summary of the evening with an insistent press of her lips. Caught off guard by her aggression, Hermione succeeded in pushing him against the nearest wall, his hands clutching at her sides for balance.

She molded her body into him and ran her hands all over his form until Draco’s enthusiasm caught up with hers as he nuzzled forward into her hips. After keeping herself from groping him all evening, Hermione luxuriated in finally touching Draco anywhere and everywhere she could reach. Only two things kept her from tearing the clothes off his body: she knew they were custom-made and thus outrageously expensive, and he looked so mouthwatering all dressed up for her that it would be a shame to remove this finery in such an animalistic fashion.

Desperate to satiate her desire for him, her tongue delved into his mouth and discovered he still tasted of the sugared raspberries from dessert. She kissed down his neck as the groans in her ear spurred her to further heights of boldness.

“Granger whatever I did to inspire this, do let me know and I’ll make sure to repeat it,” Draco gasped, fingers rolling her nipples through the fabric of her dress.

She kissed back up to his mouth while her hands worked their way down his hard chest and stopped at the top of his belt.

“Your—accent—and—oh good—so bloody—proper—you’ve no idea—how—goods—you sound like—yes, *Draco*—such a gentleman—it’s so—mmm—I’ve wanted you—all night—” She managed to

we look after her as one of our own. And if anything should happen to him and his wife, then we would take her in, give her a home.”

Arthur fixed Draco with a hard stare. “I consider the oath I gave that man an Unbreakable Vow. Now, obviously her parents are alive and well, but make no mistake, Molly and I will never stop looking out for that girl... er, young woman.”

The end of his statement had a ring of a warning to it.

“Hermione is very fortunate. To be cared for by so many,” Draco offered uncertainly.

“She makes it easy,” Arthur replied with an affable smile. “But her parents... they are going to be wary of you, you understand. Our world intrigued them at first but now... after everything that happened to their daughter... I think they fear it, having seen the darker potential for magic. And a young wizard from a family like yours... I believe they will have some reservations about you dating their only child. I would advise you to be very careful about how you present yourself to them. Warranted or not, they approach magical people with a degree of suspicion these days, and after everything they’ve been through, you’d do well not to upset them by hurting Hermione.”

Draco fiddled with the glass in his hand before taking a large gulp of bourbon, almost draining the glass. Two immediate reactions warred within him: *you deserve this* battling against *how dare you?* He edged forward in his seat, fighting the urge to either jump up to pace or tap his fingers against his thighs. His anxious energy had no current outlet.

“I have no intention of ever hurting Hermione. I’ve spent time around Muggles, I’ve no issue with... look, the way I was raised, my father...” Draco took a steadying breath, “my father disrespected you on numerous occasions and I am sorry for the way my family has treated yours and—”

Arthur held up a hand. “Let me stop you there, Draco. I am personally of the opinion that the sins of the father should not be visited upon the son.”

Draco had no response for that pronouncement. Were the situation reversed, Draco knew his own father would never be so accommodating to Weasley’s son.

“Still, sir, if I may, the way I acted towards your sons and daughter at school—”

“Is a matter between you and them.”

Sweet Salazar, why did everyone in life need to make apologizing such a to-do? *I am okay with this*

“Fine,” Draco said through gritted teeth, struggling to still sound contrite. “Then let me at least apologize for any derogatory comments I made about you and your wife in the past.”

“Forgiven!” Arthur replied jovially and Draco almost suffered an aneurysm from not rolling his eyes.

Another awkward silence descended, Draco unsure of how to proceed now and wishing Hermione would announce dinner soon.

“Fancy another?” he asked Arthur, gesturing to the man’s empty glass.

Arthur looked over his shoulder toward the kitchen, checking to see if his wife lurked within view or eavesdropped.

“Oh, go on then.”

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lowed your recipe to the letter, and I think the roast only needs 15 more minutes in the oven, but I'd love if you'd double-check for me."

"Of course dear! I've brought raspberry tarts for dessert so we'll set these down for later..."

The two women bustled off leaving Draco alone with Arthur, per Hermione's plan. A tense silence descended upon the two men.

"Something to drink for you?" Draco inquired, gesturing at Hermione's makeshift bar cart in the corner of the sitting room.

"If she still has that bourbon, that'd be acceptable."

Draco helped himself to a glass as well, and once again tried to suppress the snide voice of his father in his head, borderline apoplectic at a Malfoy fetching a drink for a Weasley. Arthur accepted the glass without a word and the men settled as far as possible from one another on Hermione's couch.

"Hermione's father sends me a bottle of this stuff every Christmas," said Arthur after a few sips.

"It's quite smooth."

"It's Muggle-made, you know," Arthur said lightly, but Draco spotted the underlying accusation.

"I'm aware," he clipped.

The men silently sipped their drinks for a few moments before Arthur set his glass on the coffee table and turned to face Draco.

"Have you met her parents?"

Draco swirled his bourbon around the glass. "Not yet. We're meeting them next weekend for Granger's, I mean Hermione's, birthday."

The older man nodded. "Good, that's good. Fine people, Hermione's parents. She rather overwhelms them, I think." He paused and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Quite honestly, I don't think they knew what to do with a daughter like her. I still remember the first time we met them... blimey but you were all so young... and I thought as Muggles go, they'd adjusted about as well as anyone to learning about our world."

Draco met Arthur's eyes, noting that the older man's keen blue stare so resembled that of his youngest son. Absently, Draco wondered what Arthur Weasley saw when he looked at him. He'd been told all his life how extraordinarily alike he was in appearance to Lucius. Is that what Weasley Senior saw? A mere facsimile of his former foe?

"The Grangers did their best to understand, but it's hard, I'm sure, to have your worldview upended so spectacularly," Arthur continued. "Her father especially worried about her... which is why he approached me before we took Hermione in for the summer before the '94 Quidditch World Cup. Let's see, you're Ronald's age, so that was before you... Fourth Year, yes?"

Draco nodded. *Yes, that disastrous event where my father and his cronies had a bit too much to drink and decided some Muggle fortune was in order while I was told to hide behind a tree.*

"Hermione's father had a special request for me and Molly: Smart man, her father. He could tell there were things Hermione kept from him, could sense his daughter was in more danger than she'd ever let on. So he approached me and my wife and asked that while Hermione was in our world, that

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murmur against his lips between kisses and felt the smirk curl the edges of his mouth.

"How wet are you right now love?"

Hermione pulled back with a coquettish smile. "A lady would never speak of such things."

With a wicked gleam in her eyes, she made quick work of his belt buckle, reached into his trunks to grip his already stiff member, and stroked it the way she knew he liked. Her deft wrist movements rewarded Hermione with a fantastic sight: Draco closing his eyes, biting his lip, and his head lolling back against the wall. He looked so perfect in the throes of passion, beautiful in the way he came undone for her. And all by her hand... or mouth.

Drunk on the power she had over him, Hermione sank to her knees and removed his cock fully from his trousers. She heard a throaty moan followed by a sigh of pleasure when she sucked the length of him. Glancing up, she noticed his fingers scrambling for purchase along the wall next to his trembling body.

Always the gentleman.

Hermione snaggled one of his hands and directed it to the back of her head. His fingers twitched in her hair, clearly afraid of grabbing too tight, so Hermione hollowed her cheeks and bobbed her head faster, taking in as much of him as she physically could.

"Oh fuck Hermione... fuck, like that... just like that..."

He finally let go, bucking his hips and pulling on her hair as his breathing grew more erratic. Draco's knees almost gave out as he came down her throat, Hermione silently congratulating herself on rendering him almost legless and relishing in the thrill of making her refined, tightly wound boyfriend lose all sense of self.

Draco hauled her to her feet, a lazy grin on his face. "Take off your knickers and go wait on the bed."

Hermione obeyed instantly and when Draco brought her to a quivering orgasm minutes later with his talented tongue, the hazy afterglow allowed her to revel in the planned evening having gone absolutely perfect.



A brief interlude in which Ron Weasley learns his lesson

Harry said all sorts of things to warn Ron off from doing what he intended to do, but Ron needed this.

Malfoy may have saved Hermione's life, and if the look of genuine wretchedness he'd displayed at Hermione's hospital bedside meant anything, he seemed to sincerely care for her. His own father had given a hesitant, yet positive review of Malfoy's conduct from their dinner a week ago, to say nothing of Ron's mother who seemed a little too fond of the platinum-haired prat.

Still, Ron didn't feel ready to let go of decades of animosity and cruelty. In the end, Harry proved

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to be a true friend, and allowed Ron to borrow his Invisibility Cloak for the morning.

He'd been to the little Muggle café a fair few times before, but he wasn't much of a coffee drinker, and knew Hermione liked her quiet mornings before work. When he began dating Padma, he'd stopped going at all, but even after all these years Ron remembered the location, a few blocks down from Hermione's townhome.

Beneath Harry's Cloak, Ron removed one of the more ingenious products from the joke shop: Chameleon Extendable Ears. While the original version had been flesh-colored strings, he and George had since improved the product so that it now blended in with the surroundings, rendering it almost undetectable to ignorant eyes.

A couple sat in the front window, but at the table just beyond them, Ron spied a familiar shock of white-blond hair. He jammed one end of the Extendable Ears into his own, and watched as the shimmering other end snaked beneath the café door and slithered to a rest underneath the table. Hermione's recognizable voice burst into his ear, speaking in a low warning.

"—if you do this, I swear Malfoy, I'll—"

"You'll what Granger? Hex me in front of all these Muggles?"

"It's not fair! You can't keep doing this to me!"

"I can and I will."

Ron fumed under the Cloak and gripped his wand. He knew it, he knew it! Malfoy, that underhanded ponce, had Hermione trapped and Ron would have to curse that ferret's face off. Thinking through the best combination of jinxes to throw Malfoy's way, he raised his wand.

"But this is *my* scone, you sneaking prat!"

Ron lowered his wand. The Muggle couple got up from the table in front of him and Ron had a clear view of his best friend and childhood nemesis. Hermione scowled and Malfoy gleefully chewed on a breakfast pastry.

"Pretty sure I paid for these today... mmm, thanks for sharing love."

"You know it's rather unbecoming of a gentleman to lick his fingers."

"But I thought you liked it when I use my tongue? You certainly weren't complaining last night."

"Well of course not, my mouth was rather occupied at the time as you may recall..."

"*Merlin, Granger*, say something naughty like that again and we won't make it to work because I'm taking you straight home so I can—"

Ron yanked the end of his Extendable Ear so hard it was a miracle it didn't snap. Fighting the urge to vomit right there on the sidewalk, he caught one last glimpse of Malfoy's lovesick smile and Hermione's blushing face as she giggled behind her hand before he Disapparated beneath the Cloak. Storming into Harry's office later, he threw the Cloak on his other best friend's desk with a terse, "You were right, lesson learned, never again, *Merlin*."

Harry leaned back in his chair and grinned knowingly up at Ron. "You catch them snogging? They're rather fond of it."

Ron shuddered. "Ugh, thanks for that image Harry. And no, just... some... words... completely

Hey Jude!

September 2008

"Oh my gods, what time is it?"

Hermione had frantically shouted and muttered this question at least eight times in the past hour. She paced around her kitchen while Draco leaned against the doorway, having been told to "just stay out of the way, I've got a handle on this."

Molly and Arthur Weasley were coming to dinner at Hermione's home and Draco had no idea why that made her so nervous. If anything, she should be consoling him, the pariah about to officially meet his girlfriend's pseudo-parental guardians. When a brisk knocking sounded on the door, Hermione almost completely upended the cheese tray.

"I can get that if—?"

"No, we're sticking to the plan," she cut him off abruptly, because of course Granger had designed an entire script around this momentous meeting.

She straightened her wrap dress as she led the way toward the door, Draco wondering if these would be his final moments on this earth.

"I look all right?"

She looked to him for validation, her eyes swimming with uncertainty and anxiety. Draco tucked a wayward curl behind her ear.

"You'll do," he said with a smirk and she swatted his arm.

"And you look bloody perfect," she grumbled and he held back a chuckle at her bitter tone.

Hermione pasted a smile on her face and opened the door.

"Hello Hermione dear, thank you for having us!" came the cheerful greeting of the Weasley matriarch. She wrapped Hermione up in a fierce hug and her husband followed suit.

When the couple turned his way, Draco braced himself for a cold appraisal, and resolved to uphold everything he'd learned from those ingrained etiquette lessons of his childhood.

"Molly, Arthur, I don't think you've ever properly met Draco."

"How do you do Mrs. Weasley," Draco intoned politely, dropping a light kiss to the back of her hand in the traditional greeting.

"Lovely to meet you dear," said the older woman, seeming friendly and a bit flustered at his display of old-fashioned propriety.

Draco held in a smirk, sensing he just might be able to survive the evening on charm alone. That confident thought died a swift death when he met the cool eyes of Arthur Weasley.

"Pleasure to meet you as well, sir," Draco said and offered his hand.

"Likewise," Arthur replied stiffly, shaking and dropping Draco's hand rather quickly. Draco pushed thoughts away of what Lucius would have to say in this situation if he could see Draco attempting to win the approval of the head of a family of blood traitors.

"Whatever you have cooking smells fantastic, Hermione," Arthur said with much more enthusiasm.

"Oh thank you! Speaking of, Molly would you mind helping me in the kitchen for a minute? I fol-

Remain Nameless

he entered his bedchamber, the fire still lit in the grate surprised him. Before he could call Crick to put it out properly, a movement from his bed gave him pause.

Heart in his throat, Draco moved silently across the room, coming to a stop at the foot of the bed and leaning against one of the handsome wood posts. Hermione lay fast asleep, her hair sprawled everywhere, mouth ajar, and scattered across the coverlet were numerous pieces of parchment, covered with her neat notes. She must have Flooed over after dinner to see him after the match ended, but then of course, worked herself out with the obscene number of things she had on her plate.

Where do you see this relationship heading?

Right here, Draco thought. Right fucking here.

For a few minutes, Draco allowed himself to fantasize that coming home could look like this: Hermione attempting to wait up for him and busying herself with her own projects while she anticipated his return to *their bed in their home*.

Draco sighed on an exhale and cautiously approached her side of the bed. He traced a finger against her cheek and her eyelids fluttered open.

“Hello there. This is quite the surprise.”

“Mmm, hello darling.” Hermione murmured back sleepily and stretched to fully rouse herself.

Draco’s stomach, which had already experienced a swooping sensation at her groggy use of “darling” went through a further series of impressive acrobatics when the sheets slid down her body to reveal she wore one of his shirts.

“Well? Did your team win?”

Draco removed his robes and climbed in next to her. “We did. We’ll have a tough match-up in the semis though, we’ll be up against the Kenmare Kestrels and if I were a betting man, I’d say our chances aren’t great at advancing beyond next week.”

Hermione flicked her wand and her notes collected themselves and floated to a writing desk across the room.

“Well congratulations anyway,” she responded and settled down next to him, arm draped over his chest. “Gimmy says your team has won the league several times, so you’ll have to forgive me if I secretly root for Kenmare next week. I rather hate losing you to quidditch on the weekends.”

Her breathing was already deep and even once more, while Draco’s heart thudded wildly in his breast.

“Granger you couldn’t lose me to anything,” he murmured.

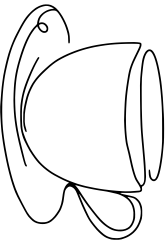
Whether she heard him or not, Draco didn’t really care. Tonight, more than any other night this week he had finally experienced the sensation of coming home.



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inappropriate... honestly gross... disturbing... ” He trailed off in horror, unable to articulate his disgust properly.

Harry’s chuckles followed him out of the office. Apparently Ron must now accept *Draco sodding Malfoy* into their friend group.



Chapter Thirty Eight

If Draco thought Hermione nervous about the dinner with the Weasleys, it paled in comparison to how out of sorts she seemed now. They would join her parents for Hermione's birthday dinner this evening and Hermione would be lucky if she had any nails left with the way she'd gnawed at them all day.

Contrary to her normally over-informative nature, Draco had been given a rather scant picture of what to expect from the Grangers.

"So what ah... exactly have you told them about me?"

Hermione's stare jerked up from the tea she'd been stirring idly for the last ten minutes.

"Oh! Well, my mum... she's known about you from the beginning, really. When we would chat about my week, I'd mention meeting with you in the morning. Apparently I mentioned you a lot," she broke off with a slight flush.

"Then when you sent the package of toothpaste for them at Christmas my mother launched a full-blown inquisition about you," she added with a laugh. "Which of course then Dad got involved. I told them we were seeing each other before we left for France."

Draco stared down at his hands. "Granger I think you know that's not what I was asking."

A few beats of silence and Draco found he still could not look up.

"They knew your name. When I told them... when I told them we were friends. My dad—he had a lot of questions about you because he remembered your name. You have a rather unique name, especially in the Muggle world, it's not one you forget. He recalled you from letters I used to write home from Hogwarts."

Draco's head snapped up at that revelation.

"You wrote home about me?"

Hermione averted her eyes and Draco felt shame bloom in his chest at the guilty look that stole over her features. She opened her mouth to speak, but Draco beat her to it.

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his healer might shower him with the barest modicum of praise for his willingness to open up more? Not this time.

"Have you given any thought to how your relationship will be perceived by the public given Miss Granger's notoriety?"

"Umm... not really, no."

"You haven't discussed revealing your relationship publicly?"

Draco frowned. Did they need to?

"Well, those closest to us are aware and we're going through all the proper introductions to family and friends just now. I don't see how our personal affairs are any business of the public."

"Where do you see this relationship heading?"

The end of an aisle in my best robes? Fuck.

"I haven't thought that far ahead. We're just enjoying our time together," he lied through his teeth. The healer dropped the subject then, but it left Draco with a slight feeling of unease long after he'd left the appointment. When he returned home to share a quietly awkward dinner with his mother, he found he could only pick at his food. Still unable to shake the dogged moroseness, Draco retired early, and only when he entered his bedroom did he pinpoint what felt so wrong.

After almost two uninterrupted weeks of sleeping in the same bed as Hermione, climbing into his four-poster alone felt strange and uncomfortable. The silk sheets slid too cold against his skin, the bed felt too spacious, and the air around him too quiet. Nothing and no one beside him to either hold or be held. Gods, was that all it took? Barely two weeks and he suddenly pined for the way her monstrous hair practically suffocated him in the morning?

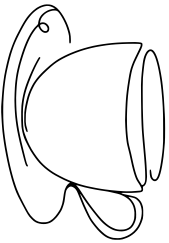
Draco rolled over and tried to thump his pillow a few times to beat it into a more comfortable shape. Hermione didn't lie awake having these types of existential crises. No, she was probably glad to be rid of him for a few hours. They already saw each other for morning coffee and spent the weekends together, too. So why did Draco now crave her every evening? She probably welcomed a break from him, no doubt he'd become one of those hovering and over-attentive boyfriends, especially as she healed from her hospital stay. Giving his pillow another frustrated thump, he drifted into a rather unsettled slumber.

When do you see this relationship heading?

He didn't sleep very well the remainder of the week either, putting on a brave face of well-rested relaxation when he met Hermione in the mornings. When Saturday rolled around, he existed in a tight foul mood even through his required attendance at the quarterfinal match for the league playoffs. If the Wasps won, Draco would be expected to attend the after-party, which meant missing out on spending time with Hermione all together.

The long, grueling game lasted close to four hours, the Wasps emerging victorious, and Draco sighed internally, even though it pleased him that his team now advanced to the semi-finals. By the time he could pull himself away from the celebrations, it neared two in the morning.

Bravely-eyed from the lack of quality sleep, he trudged up the stairs of his home in a daze. But when



Chapter Thirty Seven

Draco glared at the looming stack of parchment beside Healer Browning's chair. If the old healer wanted to make a point about the weight of Draco's omissions then consider it well-made. Apparently Draco had talked quite a bit about Hermione over the years, the evidence piled several feet high on the floor:

"Draco," Browning began in greeting, and though Draco desperately wanted to throw out a snide "Aticus," in response, he stuck with "Healer Browning."

The floating quill already performed its noisy duty just from the four syllables uttered by Draco.

Scratch, scratch, scratch...

"You've had quite the busy month it seems. Why don't we start with—?"

"I love her."

The quill stopped. Healer Browning stared at Draco.

"That's where this is all going to end," Draco gestured to the mountain of scrolls and papers that held all his past confessions and thoughts regarding Hermione Granger from years and years of sessions.

"I'm merely speeding the process up. I love her and the only people I've explicitly said that to are my mother and you. And technically Potter."

The quill jumped back to life as Browning collected himself.

"How did that conversation with your mother go?"

Draco relayed the tumultuous and accidental meeting between Hermione and his mother. He spoke at length about their holiday in France. He detailed what happened after he stormed out of his hospital bed in search of her. He divulged the soul-baring conversation he'd experienced with Hermione post hospital stay.

Browning bore all of this information as stoically as he always did, but Draco couldn't help but assume he'd somewhat surprised the man with the amount of information spilling out of him. Perhaps

Hey Jude!9

"Don't," he said harshly. "Don't apologize. I'm reaping what I've sown."

He stood abruptly and brought his empty tea cup to set in the sink. He leant on his forearms against the counter and stared out the little kitchen window, while he heard Hermione draw in a careful, measured breath behind him.

"They don't know about you from the war. My letters home after Fourth Year were... heavily edited to say the least. They just remember you as the boy who used to taunt me for my appearance and my—my heritage."

Draco bowed his head over the sink. *I am okay with this.*

"They don't know about your role in... they don't know anything about your parents either," she rushed out.

"Thank Merlin for small mercies," he said bitterly. Better her parents think him the former bigoted bully than the glibble moron who joined a murderous cult and watched their daughter tortured by his aunt in his own home.

Her small hand rubbed up his back then and he closed his eyes at the comforting touch he didn't deserve. "Please don't withdraw from me. Please Draco."

He turned to look at her and when she worried her bottom lip between her teeth he drew her into a tight embrace. Gods it was her birthday and she had to console his fragile feelings. *I am okay with this* "Any words of advice before I'm eviscerated by your parents?"

That earned him a weak chuckle. "Like I said earlier, I've apparently mentioned you quite a bit, so don't worry, I did talk up your good qualities. Just be yourself and they'll warm to you, I'm sure."

Draco did not share her optimistic view.

As they got ready for dinner at the Grangers', Hermione kept throwing out random bits of information about her parents, Draco's brain scrambling to keep it all straight.

"So they're dentists, which are the equivalent of specialized healers, but in the Muggle world you address them as Doctor..."

"Mum comes from old money, but you're better off sticking with a handshake as a greeting, I think she'd consider the whole kiss on the hand thing a bit sexist..."

"Dad will have done the cooking and Mum will have done dessert, or she'll claim to have anyway, but the cake will probably be from a bakery..."

"I know you'll feel underdressed, but I think it's best if you just wear a button-up and nice trousers. I don't think Dad wears suits except for weddings, funerals, and the occasional dental conference..."

As they apparated to a little wood of a park at the end of the Grangers' neighborhood, Draco noticed the tight lines around Hermione's eyes and mouth, indicating her apprehension. He resolved not to let her down.

He fucked up immediately.

When the door opened into a handsome foyer of the modern suburban home, Draco and Hermione were greeted by a smiling woman. Hermione's grin resembled something close to genuine as she embraced her mother (an older version of her daughter's features, but with straight hair that fell to just

above the shoulders) and then they were ushered inside.

"Hello darling! Happy birthday!" her mother enthused and Hermione repeated her greeting to the man just behind her. Hermione's father was shorter than Draco expected, the remnants of the curly hair from the wedding photo on Hermione's mantel reduced to wisps on a balding head. Familial affection concluded, Hermione stepped back and to Draco's surprise (and relief), slipped her hand in his.

"Mum, Dad, this is Draco. Draco, these are my parents, Jean and David."

Cue Draco's immediate faux-pas.

"Pleasure to meet you Mrs. Granger," he intoned politely, offering his hand to Jean first.

Jean instantly frowned and shook Draco's hand. "It's Doctor. Doctor Granger."

Fuck. Me.

"Right, sorry," said Draco, already flustered. "That word's still new to me," he made a brave stab at humor and Hermione, loyal witch, gave a forced laugh.

"Nice to meet you as well, sir," Draco offered his hand to David who looked like he'd rather eat nails than shake his hand, but completed the social nicety all the same.

"Welcome to our home," said Jean, seeming a bit friendlier since Draco explained his minor misstep.

"Thank you for having me."

A brief awkward pause, before Jean gestured for the couple to come in further. Draco followed as Hermione shot him an encouraging smile and tugged him along after her parents, feeling like a man walking towards his own execution.

Draco disentangled their hands to surreptitiously remove his wand and restore the wine bottle in his pocket to its original size. She'd made comments in the past that the sight of a wand was a surefire way to set her parents on edge, so Draco took no chances and stowed it back out of sight quickly.

If he weren't so anxious, he would have made a snappy quip to Hermione that she'd been holding out on him. The Grangers were very clearly well-to-do: an expansive house, tastefully decorated with several large art pieces, Muggle appliances that even Draco could recognize as state-of-the-art, and a glimpse out the large window of the sun-room showed a lawish, verdant lawn and garden.

As the Grangers showed them into the dining room, Draco presented the wine to Jean.

"Oh how thoughtful!" She took the bottle from him with a genuine smile. "I'll let this breathe during the salad course."

Before Draco could stop himself he corrected her. "Oh, no need, you can serve it immediately, it's elf-made."

"Elf-made," Jean repeated blankly and exchanged a look with her husband.

Fuck. Me.

The group settled around the handsome wood dining table, Hermione's parents sitting in the pair of chairs opposite Draco and Hermione instead of at the heads. Draco only just managed to stop himself from pulling out Hermione's chair for her. David poured everyone a glass and raised his in a toast.

She nodded. "I'll think about it," she clipped.

Draco swallowed nervously, unsure if he should even dare ask the question that burned his insides. "Would you ever consider introducing me to your parents?"

She gnawed her bottom lip for a minute. "I have considered it," she eventually replied. "And this might sound odd to you... but would you be willing to have dinner with the Weasleys first? Just Molly and Arthur, not the whole lot."

If anything, the request made Draco more curious than ever to observe Hermione's relationship with her parents, but he wouldn't pressure her on this. But perhaps she had a point to mending fences with the Weasleys first. They at least had more context for Draco's wartime conduct and choices.

"I'm... amenable to that proposal."

She beamed and his insides ceased their burning and melted. *Hopeless.*

Hermione reached up to brush some of his hair off his forehead and then leaned in for a brief kiss.

"How are you feeling? That was a lot," she said with a quiet chuckle.

"Like a wrung sponge," he said bluntly.

Hermione pressed another kiss to his lips with a ghost of an apology written on her face. "It's late, we should try and sleep."

Instead, Draco watched as she drifted off, content to merely hold her. *Never again*, he vowed to himself. Never again would he be the scared boy in the corner, wand held limply at his side. Checking to see she'd fallen asleep, Draco rolled up the left sleeve of his shirt to his elbow.

Just a skull and a snake now, and barely recognizable as such, especially if you weren't of magical origin. Nothing but faded ink and grotesque, to be sure, but at least devoid of dark magic. And even with the cursed magic that once resided in the shape long gone, the smudge remained, not removable by any means he'd attempted. He'd stopped trying long ago.

He glared at the blurry, grayish symbol, wishing for perhaps the hundredth time that he were anyone else, any other nameless man with a clean forearm and unburdened history.

Never again.

But wishes of that nature were futile, self-defeating, and he knew Hermione would tear him a new one should she ever develop the skill for Legilimency. He'd earned the trust of the witch stumbling in his arms and that thought served to collect the shattered fragments of his heart. Every shard, every sliver and scrap, gathered up by her faith in him to create something new. Something whole. Something that could conceivably be offered with pride, but only to her.

I am okay with this

Remain Nameless

a coward. I'm not the hero, I've never been, I think we both know that."

She stared at him for a beat more before she lifted her hands to cup his face.

"Thank you for answering honestly."

Draco closed his eyes and placed his hands over her smaller ones. "I hate myself," he whispered. "I hate that I'm not enough for you."

"No," she murmured. "No, Draco. I know you now and you are enough. I wanted to hear your answer for my own healing. You are a good person."

I am okay with this.

He let his hands fall away, but hers remained on his face, as she patiently waited for him to open his eyes. When he did, he felt like he could breathe again. Whatever icy grip of melancholy had taken hold of his soul thawed as Draco drank in the sight of her.

"Hermione," he spoke her name like a solemn prayer, "Hermione I am so sorry"

Please don't leave me. I love you.

"It's all right, Draco. I know I asked a lot of you just now." She replied quietly and Draco finally understood. She'd not meant to blame or berate him. Hermione needed to exorcise the last of the demons between them and on her own terms. Draco respected her enduring strength, even if he feared the next words out of her mouth would be a dismissal.

"You'll still stay with me tonight? I didn't scare you off?"

His mouth went dry, his eyes wide at her question. "Yes of course.. Granger obviously I—I mean—are you sure you want that?"

Are you sure you want me?

She smiled then, the one that crinkled the corners of her eyes and highlighted the apples of her cheeks, and if he weren't already aise over teakettle, that simple sign of affection would have done it.

"Yes, you knob," she chuckled and wrapped her arms around him and settled against his side. The relief in hearing her laugh calmed him better than any brewed draught.

For some reason, the word vomit wouldn't be kept at bay. He had the oddest urge to keep purging his sins, confessing faults, seeking absolution.

"I always protect my own," he said gruffly, one hand coming up to stroke her hair. "When you're a kid, you think you have to be brave for your parents... as if that would make a difference." Draco laughed hollowly. "In the end," he continued thickly, "My mother was the brave one. To this day I'm still astounded that she lied to the Dark Lord's face."

"It wouldn't be the first time Voldemort underestimated the love a mother has for her child," said Hermione softly. Draco sat with that statement for a moment. It had been more than a decade now, and he couldn't quite understand his mother's motivations then, nor could he fully comprehend them now.

"Speaking of... I saw my mother briefly before I came back here. She'd like to have you for dinner some time." At the frown on Hermione's face he quickly assuaged her fears. "I told her when you're ready. It's up to you."

Hey Jude!9

"To Hermione. Happy birthday darling and many happy returns."

The Grangers both took careful sips of their wine, David regarding the bottle thoughtfully. "This was made by elves you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"House-elves? Or are there more than one type?"

"It means house-elves, yes Dad," Hermione broke in.

"Aren't those the poor creatures you're always campaigning for freedom for?"

"Yes," Hermione clipped, perplexing Draco. Usually once someone, anyone, in a five-mile radius mentioned house-elves, she'd recite a well-rehearsed dissertation on how their servitude was akin to slavery. Further, why didn't she talk up her major success of passing Elish Welfare Laws? While admittedly not freedom, but what Hermione accomplished a few years ago effected such a significant change in wizarding society that Draco knew it rounded out her list of achievements on her Chocolate Frog card.

"Do you have elves?" David asked Draco.

Draco gripped his fork tighter than necessary and bit the inside of his cheek. "I do," he begrudgingly admitted.

Apparently Hermione's father felt that response a sufficient indictment on his character and returned to eating his salad with a frown rather than pester Draco to elaborate.

"How's work going dear?" Hermione's mother stepped in, quickly changing topics.

"Work is fine. Still getting settled into my new role and playing a bit of catch-up after our holiday in France," she shot Draco a small smile.

Draco expected either one or both of her parents to ask a follow-up question about Hermione's promotion or new responsibilities, but nothing came of it.

Dinner could not have been more different from the meal he'd shared with the Weasleys just one week prior. Draco felt he had precious little to contribute to the already stilted conversation with Hermione's parents, whereas last week, Molly and Arthur asked him questions about his career, his opinions on the latest Ministry decrees or recent quidditch matches, and even politely inquired after the wellbeing of his mother.

The other stark difference between the current dinner and last week's affair manifested in Hermione. She finally gave Draco a glimpse of the double life she led: the two versions of Hermione.

The Hermione from last week relaxed once the stress of preparing dinner dissipated, an ease and warmth to her demeanor as she'd chatted amicably with Molly about the antics of the other Weasleys or debated recent goings-on at the Ministry with Arthur. Both Weasleys congratulated her on her centaur legislation from earlier in the summer, and asked about her upcoming work after her recent promotion.

The Hermione next to him sat rigidly, offering rote responses to her parents' perfunctory questions about her career. She seemed almost afraid to mention anything remotely related to magic, as if one strange term or odd word would set her parents off. It dawned on Draco that Hermione must share

Remain Nameless

very little of her work life with them, and he wondered how much they truly understood of the importance of Hermione's role within the government.

Was this the difficult balancing act performed by all Muggleborns? Draco experienced a sickening rush of shame at the way his childhood self had so cruelly mocked Hermione and others like her. She juggled two different lives, straddled two different worlds, and it must take a toll on her, yet she bore it all so nobly. He could only hope that the fund he's started in her name could eventually lessen this burden for future generations of Muggleborn children.

"Oh, Hermione, you'll never guess who we had in for a cleaning the other day. Carol Bishop! She was asking after you and then she told me her son Rodney, you remember him from primary school? Well Rodney just earned his doctorate in psychology!"

"Oh... yes, how lovely," said Hermione flatly.

"Yes, yes, quite an achievement. And her other son is in his second year at Cambridge. On a rowing scholarship, you know."

Hermione made a noncommittal noise in her throat.

"And your dad's cousin Evelyn dropped by the other week. You remember her eldest, Caroline? She's engaged now and it sounds like the wedding will be next May..."

"...Kirsten's youngest is expecting another baby, can you believe it?"

"...Mrs. Eldrich told me Louisa is 7 months along and Moira is entering her final year at law school in America, somewhere in Boston if I recall. She's specializing in trust and estate law and planning her wedding on top of all that..."

"...graduated with honors..."

"...celebrating their first wedding anniversary already, bless them..."

"...her mother thinks she might be expecting, but didn't want to speculate..."

"...engaged..."

"...married..."

"...pregnant..."

Hermione's parents traded anecdotes and tidbits of information about their patients and some of their relatives, Hermione only contributing to the conversation with alternate responses of "How nice," and "How lovely," while stabbing her roasted potatoes with vigor.

When they'd finally exhausted the list of noteworthy accomplishments of tertiary acquaintances and distant relations, Draco was incensed on her behalf. Didn't they know their daughter was one of the most famous people in the wizarding world? That her list of achievements would be documented in history books? That little witches and wizards everywhere wanted to grow up to be like her? That society considered her an expert in magical creature advocacy and a policy-writing virtuoso? That she held the distinction of having the most laws passed in the shortest amount of time in her tenure to date at the Ministry? Oh and all this after she'd helped rid the world of an ego-maniacal dark wizard and dubbed Brightest Witch of Her Age at just 18.

"Hermione, have you told your parents about your newest legislative effort?"

Hey Jude!9

if she'd killed me. Would I have been a martyr for the cause? A symbol that blood prejudice couldn't ultimately win?" She paused for a shuddering breath. "But I had the best revenge of all."

Hermione's eyes had a fierce glow, almost smoldering in their knowledge that she'd won. She'd beaten Bellatrix. "Because I survived and continued to survive. I'm so grateful now for the time I have with my parents again, with my friends, and with you."

Pieces upon pieces upon pieces. *I am okay with this.*

"So no, Draco. I do not blame you for that night, and I never have. There were others in that room who should have known better, who had the power to stop Bellatrix from torturing me."

Draco stared down at his hands in miserable shame. The same hands that had done nothing the day she was dragged through his family home.

"I want to ask you one question... just once. You don't have to answer but I... need to ask it," she said in a small voice. "You were so hesitant to identify us, and especially vague when it came to Harry. I know there's no way you didn't know exactly who we were immediately. And I want you to know that I will not hold your answer against you, nor will I ever ask you again."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Why didn't you try to help me?"

His chest felt hollow. His heart obliterated.

He couldn't run, couldn't hide, not this time and certainly never again from her. He'd look the woman he loved in the eye and lay his litany of faults at her feet and tell her exactly what type of spectacularly awful human currently sat in her bed.

He'd already discussed and worked through all his ghastly recollections from the drawing room debacle with his mind healer. Draco already explained his actions to the Wizengamot. But that was nothing, absolutely nothing, compared with answering to the victim of the war crime he'd witnessed, to the woman who owned his fragmented soul. Draco would go to the ends of the earth for her now, but adolescent Draco couldn't lift his wand to help her past self.

"I didn't help you because I wanted to live. I wanted my mother and my father to live. You were another unfortunate victim that was brought in front of my eyes and by that point I'd become numb to the violence around me. I didn't know how to help you and I was so, so fucking scared. When you'd all escaped, I'd barely had time to pull shards of glass from my face before... before *he* returned. I'd never been tortured like that..." He trailed off into almost a whisper.

"If you caught a glimpse of my father during the Battle... he was given the worst of it, obviously as 'head of the family,' the one supposedly left in charge. His eye wouldn't heal quite right for months and he had a permanent limp. My mother and I... well my mother and I took your place on the drawing room floor, so to speak. When he'd mostly sated his rage, the three of us were confined to the Manor until it was time to attack Hogwarts."

Her eyes remained on his face and Draco wondered what she thought of him now.

Draco continued in that same almost-whisper, "I didn't think you deserved it, none of it. I didn't think you were less than me anymore. Perhaps this is a pitiful distinction, but I want to make it nonetheless. My lack of interference had nothing to do with bloody purity ideals. I didn't act because I'm

wandless failure. His mother, ignored, a socialite who could bring nothing of strategic value to the table. And then Draco, the gutless schoolboy. The Dark Lord enjoyed having Draco dole out torture sessions to fellow Death Eaters who botched missions, Muggle and Muggleborn victims, and anyone kept captive in the Manor's cellar. But Draco clearly didn't have the stomach for it and the Dark Lord soon grew bored of needing the Malfoy boy and busied himself with more important matters, leaving the control of the Manor to Bellatrix. Draco had to return to Hogwarts anyway, a slight reprieve for him. Snape and the Carrows left him alone, seeing as they were all part of the same little cult, so Draco existed in a sort of mindless daze, wondering when it would all end, and how.

And then, the Easter holidays. Stomach filled with lead, Draco turned on his side again to face Hermione. "Did you... did you want to speak first? I'd understand if you don't want me to talk about that night and... listen while you say your piece," he offered uncertainly.

Her eyes shimmered as she pushed herself up to sitting. She brought her knees up to her chest and leaned forward on them. Draco sat up too and though he wanted to reach out and touch her, comfort her in some way, he held himself back.

"When I think of that night," she began slowly, "I don't even think of you, really."

A stray tear escaped and Hermione brushed it away hastily. "I thought for certain that this time... this time I was going to die. I'd been through so many impossible situations with Harry and Ron... and though we were in danger most of the time... it never felt like we wouldn't pull through. But when... when Bellatrix," she paused to swallow a lump in her throat. "When she called me out by name and dragged me away from everyone else... I made my peace with dying and resolved to not break and betray our mission before I did."

A tiny fissure, just a little crack, but Draco felt it. His heart commenced the process of breaking.

"While the physical pain was... unimaginable, the despair of why I'd been singled out by her, and by your parents, made it worse."

Another crack in his heart, a little bigger this time.

"I had this wild thought when she dragged me by my hair into the middle of the room. Surely... surely some adult here will remember I'm practically still a child? That I'm the same age as their son? That I was a classmate of his? But then just as quickly it dawned on me," she swallowed and more tears leaked out. "It dawned on me that your parents... your aunt... they considered me less than human because of my blood."

His heart was almost in two.

"They were so quick, elated even, to have identified me. My life meant absolutely nothing to them and I thought in the deepest part of my soul that I would be tortured into either insanity or death in front of these people simply because my parents were Muggles."

It finally cleaved in twain. More pieces were chipping away now.

"Afterwards... after the entire war was all over and I finally had time to think about that night... I ran through so many emotions and besides the obvious one of fear... I found myself returning often to a burning anger. On some of my worst, lowest days, part of me wondered what would have happened

"Oh! Well, it's really not that major..."

"Of course it is!" Draco addressed the Grangers. "She's being far too modest. After her landmark legislation passed, her department head tasked her with adapting several of the measures to strengthen laws against poaching dragons and creating more preserves."

"Did you say dragons?" asked David, dumbstruck. His wife shushed him.

"What did you pass?" inquired Jean.

Hermione fidgeted a bit in her seat. "After a few years of re-writing and appealing, I finally succeeded in getting a law on the books that protects lands inhabited by centaurs from wizard encroachment."

Draco grinned at her in encouragement, but when he looked to her parents, they appeared nonplussed.

"And that was a... problem? For... centaurs?"

Surely now his little swot would take in an impressive breath and launch an impassioned tirade about the mistreatment of centaurs at the hands of magical humans going back centuries?

Instead, Hermione shrugged her shoulders, a pink tinge coloring her cheeks. "Yes, umm, it was a rather a sore point between our races," she said meekly.

A rather sore point between our races. He hadn't thought Hermione capable of uttering such a massive undersell. Oh how Draco wanted to push the issue on this. He longed to go on a furious diatribe about how the repercussions of their daughter's work, so instrumental in shaping modern wizarding law, would be felt for decades.

But Hermione would most likely not appreciate him jumping to her defense and talking her up to her own family the entire night. Plus, he'd need to mount his own self-defense, as Jean now commenced an interrogation of him, Hermione's new boyfriend.

Hermione's mother, every bit as sharp and inquisitive as her daughter, gave Draco the creeping sense his brusque answers to general questions were less than satisfactory.

"Hermione tells us you work in the sporting world. Quidditch, yes?"

"Yes, I'm a scout for the Wimbourn Wasps."

"And did you complete additional education for this career?"

"No, further schooling was not required."

I was also a potions addict and thrilled to simply be alive and not in Azkaban after I'd completed my NEWTS remotely, so no, I did not pursue further educational opportunities. Additionally, the Ministry of Magic would have laughed in my face had I dared apply for any position there. I also do not even need to work for a living because I am what commoners call "independently wealthy."

"Never understood Quidditch, if I'm honest," grumbled David. "Too busy of a game if you ask me. Not sure why you magic folk can't have something sensible like football."

Draco grabbed onto the end of his statement in a desperate bid to score points. "I caught my first football match on Hermione's television just last week. It must be nice to have your sport so readily available to view without having to go, physically, to a stadium."

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"Yes, well it is the most popular sport in the world," drawled David.

Salazar's trick, this man clearly loathed him. Jean hastily filled the awkward silence with more questions.

"Where did you grow up, Draco?"

"Wiltshire."

"That's a beautiful part of the country. Any siblings?"

"No, just me."

"And what do your parents do?"

"Mum!" Hermione hissed, shooting Draco an apologetic glance. He knew then that his compassionate little witch had absolutely forewarned them that the topic of Draco's parents was off limits. Her mother however, pursed her lips at her daughter's outburst. As Jean turned to Draco to apologize, he cleared his throat.

"No, it's all right Hermione," he assured quietly, even though his heart thudded against his ribs.

"My mother is a philanthropist." Draco didn't miss David's eye roll. "And my father passed away several years ago." *In prison*, left off the sentence. Somehow he didn't think that tragic detail would endear him to the Grangers.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jean offered sincerely and Draco gave her a brief nod. He felt Hermione's hand grab his beneath the table and squeeze.

"And was he also a philanthropist?" David asked and Hermione glared at her father. "Dad! That's enough."

"I'm just trying to get to know the young man," he answered defensively, not taking his eyes off Draco.

"Yes," Draco ground out. "In a sense."

Hermione tightened her grip on his hand. Jean changed topics again, probably cognizant of the unease in the air. She and Hermione chatted about the state of the Grangers' garden while the men ate in staid silence until everyone's plates were clear.

"Come on lad," Hermione's father said abruptly to Draco and stood. "You can help with the washing up."

Hermione opened her mouth as if to protest, but Draco cut her off with a swift shake of his head. Even though he desperately wanted to whip out his wand and levitate and clean the dishes by magic in some sort of power play, he doubted it would amuse Hermione.

Dutifully following David into the kitchen, he stopped a few feet away from the sink. Draco hesitated for a moment, then abandoned all caution and rolled up his sleeves. His oddly faded Mark might go unnoticed, or rather, Draco hoped, Hermione's father would be ignorant to its meaning.

David gave Draco a once over then snorted. "Don't bother, I can spot a man who hasn't done a day of manual labor a mile off."

Feeling exposed, Draco leaned back against the counter while the older man turned on the tap and rinsed the dishes.

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things and schoolyard grudges. He was to become a servant for the Dark.

It was all breathtaking adventures and exhilarating impossibilities for Hermione (saving the Sorcerer's Stone, rescuing Sirius and Buckbeak, helping Harry with the Triwizard Tournament) for the first four years. Then the time came for action, preparation, and danger unlike she'd ever known before. She was to become a warrior for the Light.

When Draco had reached the point in his story about his initiation before the Dark Lord, he faltered. Hermione, no doubt recognizing his hesitation and the emotion behind it, took his hand and interlaced their fingers.

"I wanted it," he murmured hoarsely. "I wanted that damned Mark on my skin. Father had screwed up and this was my chance to prove to everyone that I could be the one to bring glory to my family's name. *An honor*, I thought, foolishly."

He pushed out a harsh laugh. "Gods, I was naïve. I thought I was so important. I was *chosen*. Me, so young and given such a vital mission. What a fucking joke." Draco met her eyes, expecting to see disgust, anger, or some form of chastisement (*really, Malfoy what were you thinking?*). But he saw none of that.

"My life had been so easy and I thought this would be just the same. That others would do all the dirty work for me and I'd sit firmly at the top of the food chain, reaping the benefits of a pureblood society."

By the time he'd realized how in over his head he was, he confessed to Hermione, it was far too late. He told her about his wretched Sixth Year: he couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, couldn't concentrate in classes, obsessed with fixing that cursed Vanishing Cabinet and somehow sparing his parents' lives from the Dark Lord's wrath. Meaning Myrtle his only confidante: the ghost of a Muggleborn girl who could no more help him than come back to life.

Then came that horrible night on the Astronomy Tower. In the heat of his triumph, he envisioned quickly and callously dispatching the old fool and returning to the Dark Lord and his family, a celebrated assassin. But when face to face with his intended victim, he couldn't say the spell. Dumbledore acted calm and merciful to the last and Draco spent countless hours after that fateful night fantasizing about what might have happened had he accepted clemency.

In Draco's healing sessions, Browning advised against playing the hindsight game, but it was damn near impossible to avoid.

"I should tell you," Draco suddenly interrupted his own story. "I... I still see a mind healer. It was part of my probation at first, to go twice a week. But I still go... once a month."

Draco looked away, embarrassed, but Hermione would have none of that. She gently took his chin in her hand and forced him to look at her. "You didn't have to hide that from me. You don't have to hide anything from me. I think that's brilliant."

He nodded jerkily, then rolled onto his back to stare at the ceiling. Looking at her for this next part might be his undoing, so he kept his eyes up and continued his tale of woe.

The Dark Lord lived in his family home, if you could call it that anymore. The Malloys were a laughingstock amongst the Death Eater ranks by this time. His father, emasculated and discarded, a

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brought me, Harry, and Ron to Malfoy Manor. I think it's time."

Draco sucked in a harsh breath. Could he do this? Could he listen to her recount that awful night? He cleared his throat and accepted his fate. "All right."

"Do you want a Calming Draught?"

Sweet Salazar, did this witch's compassion know no bounds? *I love you.*

"No I... I can do this," he asserted.

"I think," Hermione took a deep breath, "I think we need to start further back. There's a lot we don't know about each other from before... before the war... and I want to get to know you, all of you. I don't want to avoid certain topics any longer because they might cause us discomfort."

They started at the beginning and talked almost through the night. No judgment, no scorn, just listening as they each unraveled the separate stories of their lives. They traded off memories, the good and the bad, and instead of feeling like an extra healing session with Browning, Draco found he didn't mind sharing these long-haired anecdotes with Hermione.

Draco told her about growing up at Malfoy Manor. It was a strict, yet charmed life. He told her about the many tutors, his every hour scheduled down to the minute with unending lessons on etiquette, history (wizards and familial), French, Latin, flying, swimming, waltzing, piano, geography, politics, runes, arithmancy, reading/writing, and eventually spellcasting and poisons. He wanted for nothing, obviously, his parents indulged his every whim, urge, and tantrum. Yes, heavy expectations were upon his head (sole heir and all) but there was never a doubt in Draco's mind that his parents loved him.

Hermione told him about growing up in a posh suburb. It was a cloistered, yet charmed life. She told him about her proud parents, so pleased their daughter showed such an affinity for reading and learning at a young age. Hermione was clearly a gifted child, and they treated her as such. She too had many extracurricular lessons outside of primary school, and a clear expectation that she would one day assume responsibility over her parents' dental practice. She wanted for nothing, and but for her Hogwarts letter would have had her pick of any number of upper-class secondary schools. There was never a doubt in her mind that her parents loved her.

Draco's Hogwarts letter arrived and it was everything for which he'd been prepared. His parents assured him he'd be a prince among boys, and then when Draco came of age, a king among men.

Hermione's Hogwarts letter arrived and it upended her family's entire life. Her parents assured her she'd go to this special school and be just as brilliant as if she'd gone to a Muggle school.

Draco arrived at Hogwarts and didn't have any friends. He had admirers, minions, and sycophants eager to exploit a connection with the young Malfoy heir.

Hermione arrived at Hogwarts and didn't have any friends. She didn't know a single soul, had no family legacy to uphold, and was so keen to prove herself worthy of her own magic that she didn't put herself out there unless it involved imparting facts.

It was all fun and games for Draco (taunting Potter, ruling over Slytherin, preparing for his future as an aristocratic kingmaker) for the first five years. Then the time came for him to put away childish

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"You remind me of a few members of my wife's family," he said. "I'm the son of a dock worker and a school teacher and I had to scrape my way through dental school. Jean comes from a rather well-to-do bunch. One of her great uncles was even an Earl or something else ridiculous. I taught her how to wash a dish, if you can believe it."

Draco remained silent, waiting for David to speak plainly and admit to this ruse of cleaning-up as a way to corner him away from Hermione.

"And I wasn't born yesterday. I'm well aware that isn't some silly amateur ink you've got on your arm. I know precisely what your smudged symbol means."

Draco clenched his jaw painfully tight, the stab of shame hitting him square in the chest. He'd never, even be rid of this Merlin-forsaken brand. *I am okay with this. I am okay with this.*

"I've read all about your world, thanks to Arthur," David continued. "Arthur Weasley is a good man. A year after Hermione started at that school of yours, I asked him to send me and my wife a few wizarding history books. Hermione went on and on about her best friend Harry. A poor little orphan who was also raised by Muggles, hidden away because he's some sort of savior in the magical world. Suddenly Hermione's entire existence seemed to revolve around this boy, about helping him survive again, prepare for another battle with this dark wizard. So Jean and I armed ourselves with knowledge. We read about your first war, about the Death Eaters and little Harry Potter. The Malloy name came up quite a bit."

Draco's posture stiffened, knowing what was to come.

"Not that I could forget that bookshop brawl between your father and Arthur. I read all about your infamous family. About what they stand for. How your father was quite the staunch supporter of some genocidal wizard who spouted off hateful rhetoric about people like my daughter. Rhetoric you used to parrot at her. I should show you the letters she'd send us home from school about a snotty little brat with a funny name who liked to belittle her. So you can stand in my kitchen all you like and try to play the doing, innocent boyfriend card, but I know better. I know that failed tattoo means you once believed people like me, my wife, and my daughter were scum."

Gods, but he wanted a poison right now. Something, anything, to take away the searing burn of indignation and guilt raging within him.

"I've not held those ideals for a long time now," Draco clipped.

"That's all well and good for you, and congratulations on achieving enlightenment, but it doesn't mean I want you anywhere near Hermione."

Draco nodded and looked away, eyes trained on the opposite wall. On one level, he understood, could see exactly where a man like David came from in trying to protect a loved one. But Draco told himself after their near-death experience in France that he would fight for Hermione, and he intended to keep that promise, no matter how excruciatingly uncomfortable that may make him.

"I'm going to assume you haven't read a more recent magical history book?"

"I think I've learned all I'll ever need to know about the wizarding world," countered David.

"More's the pity," drawled Draco, drawing on his anger from earlier. "Hermione is mentioned in

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quite a few of them. She's a savior in her own right, a household name, and is colloquially known as 'the Brightest Witch of Her Age' though she loathes the title. She has an Order of Merlin, First Class, the equivalent of a knighthood from your Muggle queen."

David blinked and looked rather impressed. "What's she doing with you then?"

"That is a question you can ask her, I suppose. Hermione is the most forgiving person I've ever met."

David snorted derisively. "Perhaps too forgiving."

The men shared cold glares.

"She seems quite taken with you and happy, I'll give you that. But know this: I won't need magic if I find out you've hurt her in any way."

Draco nodded to show he understood, even if he wanted to smirk in this Muggle man's face at the idle threat. "I hardly think it will come to that."

David finished the rest of the dishes in silence. "We'd better go back."

"I couldn't agree more," Draco said with a hint of a sneer.

I am okay with this. I am okay with this. I am okay with this.



Hermione fell into a somber mood when they returned to her home after dinner with her parents. Draco told himself not to make this about him, told himself not to dredge up how awkward the evening had been, but he just couldn't help himself.

"Are they always like that?" he asked her gruffly as they settled side by side on her couch.

"Like what?" she asked, blinking up at him.

Draco scoffed and tucked Hermione further against his side. "Dismissive of your career, ignorant to your brilliance, bringing up random acquaintances' achievements—"

Hermione cut him off with a sudden frustrated huff and sat up straight. "Rodney Bishop! Of all the stupid boys from school to bring up... Rodney Bishop used to eat paste!"

"There she is. Welcome back, Granger."

"So what if he has a PhD?" She snorted. "Perhaps his dissertation was on the psychology behind mankind's quest to lick glue off his fingers when he wasn't picking his nose... honestly,"

She jumped up and began frantically pacing in front of Draco. "And I'm sorry Mum, that I'm not on the same exact rigid life path as all these angelic, perfect children of your contemporaries, I thought it was important for me to have my own career aspirations and goals before choosing to settle down! Merlin, but this was not how I was raised at all! Why she insists on throwing it in my face that all the other women my age are just *not so thrilled* to be getting married and starting families ... ugh! I had it practically drilled into me as a child that nothing, *nothing* was more important than education and the pursuit of one's ambitions! Oh but now that such esteemed people as *Mrs. Elidiah* are in her ear about

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I'm sorry I haven't fully recovered to your beauty standards and haven't worn anything but pajamas, but—"

"Merlin, you have got to be kidding me! If it weren't for the fact that you were released mere *hours* ago from the bloody hospital, I'd throw you down on this couch and fuck you raw!"

She threw her hands up in frustration again. "Do that then! I'm not some weak little woman who needs you to take care of her because—!"

"You're missing the point!" he barked and stood to tower over her. "My entire life I've never been capable of taking care of you so let me do this at least!"

"I'm not asking you to!"

"Maybe I feel like I have to!"

"You don't have to prove anything to me Draco!"

"I DO!" he shouted and Hermione's mouth clamped shut at both the noise level of his response as well as the vehemence behind it.

"Don't you think I know exactly what made you fall to that Dementor? You were drowning in the memory of the worst day of your life and it almost got you killed! And I did that to you! Me!"

His chest tightened and the air thinned. Hermione deflated instantly and shook her head. "You did not do anything to me. Bellatrix was the one who tortured me, not you. You didn't do anything—" "Exactly!" he cried. "I didn't do anything and you almost fucking died, right there at my feet."

He ran a hand down his face. "It's eating at me, Granger, I can't stand it. You probably have so many awful memories of me... memories that cause you nothing but pain."

"Not anymore," she said softly and placed a hand on his arm. Draco wanted to shrug her off and stalk away, but he couldn't. Not when she gave him such a beseeching look, as if she knew exactly how he wanted to react and begged him to prove her wrong.

When he didn't bolt, Hermione stepped closer. "When I think of you now," she said, voice gentle, "I think of our countless hours at the coffee shop. I think of all the discussions, from the inane to the stimulating, and how I feel challenged, emboldened, and encouraged by you. I think of how you constantly surprise me."

She reached up to palm the curve of his face. "You saved my life," she whispered. "And even before that, I'll tell you again what I told you before our trip. You're a good man, Draco."

Draco closed his eyes. He could no longer bear to look at her while she said these things. "I wish that were enough," he replied.

Hermione removed her hand from his face to grasp at his fingers. "Come on, come lay in bed with me, we need to talk."

He followed her obediently and laid down on his side, facing her.

"Do you remember, way back in November, what I said to you after our dinner? After you apologized to me?"

"Some of it."

"I said that one day, when we were both ready, I would want to talk about that night the Snatchers

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Narcissa's facial features tightened and Draco knew she'd held back a physical display of disdain. "I'd like you to dine with me on week nights while I'm staying here."

"Fine."

"And you're to list me as your emergency medical contact with St. Mungo's."

"Fine. Are negotiations complete now?"

For a moment his mother looked like she wanted to say more, but changed her mind at the last minute and swept regally down the hall. Draco stared after her for a beat, wondering when things began to feel so suffocating whenever they were in the same room for too long. Draco still remembered the time in his life when his parents were the center of his whole universe. Was this strain a normal evolution of the parental-child relationship as one became an adult?

With a heavy mind and heart, Draco gathered a few essentials and flooded back to Hermione.

"You just missed Harry," Hermione said from her spot on the couch.

"You say that like I wanted to see his face."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Mhmm. You can snark all you like, but I know you two are close to friendly these days."

Draco scowled. "I think my 'Potter Stinks' badges need to come out of storage."

He dropped down onto the couch beside her. "Where's the horrid little beast?"

"*Crookshanks* is sulking in the upstairs guest room. Has been ever since Ginny returned him. It's the same after every time I go away for more than two days."

Hermione snuggled into Draco's side and sighed contentedly.

"I spoke to Ron, too," she said softly. "He apologized... for the way he spoke to me about you... and for the way he spoke to me in general. I think he's still trying to come to terms with... us. But he is trying. He even let me berate him for a good few minutes without interruption, it was rather cathartic."

Draco made no comment as he stroked up and down Hermione's arm, not personally caring about Weasley's opinion of his relationship and still harboring some ill will over the way he'd caused Hermione pain over it in the first place.

"Can we move to bed?" She coupled her request with a squeeze of his thigh and her hand continued its journey toward the front of his trousers.

"Granger," Draco warned in a delicate tone and removed her hand. "You're meant to be *resting*."

Hermione pouted up at him. "Please Draco," she braced a hand on his chest and propped herself up to kiss up his neck. "It's been *days* and I miss you..."

Draco closed his eyes and cursed himself for developing some sort of conscience.

"Granger, no, we can go to bed, but only if you're sleeping or—"

Hermione huffed and threw the blankets off her. "I am not made of glass!"

"I never said that, nor will you ever hear me say it. I just don't think it's a good idea to do... *that*... right now," Draco said patiently, but it only wound her up more.

She stood abruptly and threw her hands in the air.

"Well why not!? Is it because I look like a pale little ghoul with monstrous bags under my eyes? Well

not being grandparents yet, I suppose my life plan isn't good enough anymore!"

Draco stood and gripped her by the shoulders. "Breathe, darling," he murmured and collected her against her chest.

"You're bloody brilliant, you know," he said sincerely. "They should appreciate you as you are, love."

"I'm reaping what I've sown," came her hollow reply, a mournful echoing of his statement from earlier.

He held her at arm's length and gaped down at her, incredulous at such a thought. "Granger you can't be serious... you think you deserve to be treated like that?"

She gave a half-hearted shrug and Draco watched in horror as tears gathered in her eyes. "I told you before, ever since I brought them back from Australia... things are so strained between us. It's nothing like we used to be... and it's all my fault."

When her lower lip trembled, he pulled her back to him, unsure of how to make this right. Her silence in the face of having her successes overlooked at dinner bothered him still, but now he'd realized why. The futile effort of a child desperately wishing for their parents to bestow praise, the bid for approval lurking just beneath the surface as an adult with the same fervent desire, resonated with him in an uncomfortably familiar way. The way one simply stopped drawing attention to accomplishments big or small, life-changing or mundane, because the coveted reaction never occurred. Easier to retreat than set oneself up for yet another crushing disappointment.

Just another bitter shared experience between him and the woman in his arms.

Draco let her breathe shakily against his chest for a few minutes before tilting her chin up. "If I tell you there may or may not be an enormous chocolate cake with obscenely thick strawberry buttercream icing in your kitchen right now, will you perk up a bit?"

She rewarded him with a small smile and an eye roll. "You had Watson make it for me, didn't you?"

"Well I sure as hell didn't bake it, but I told Crick to tell him 'thank you' and that you would be over the moon and probably refuse to share with me."

Hermione broke away from him and dashed into the kitchen. "It's my birthday Malfoy, you're lucky if I let you lick my fork!"

"As long as you let me lick something else," he retorted and ducked as she threw a tea towel at his head.

Glad that she recovered from her bout of melancholy, Draco conjured her birthday present. He'd gone for a thoughtful rather than lavish gift and he'd be lying if he said he didn't regret it. Still, the way she'd squealed in delight that he'd thought to mat and frame the parchment declaring her centaur legislation law appeased him for the time being.

He'd hold on to the other gift he'd also commissioned for a different occasion. When was the right time to gift one's paramour with a white-gold necklace from which hung a brilliant sapphire the size of a chicken's egg? Although giving her birthstone jewelry on her birthday probably qualified as the best occasion for such a gift, something held Draco back from presenting it to her.

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Of course they'd wanted to meet at the Hog's Head. Draco had it all planned out, he'd get there early, slink into a booth in the back, draw as little attention to himself as possible and—

"Oh Malfoy! Over here!"

Ginny, fucking Weasley and her band, crass mouth.

Now that Draco had made nice with the Weasley parents and Potter and his wife, Hermione wanted to bring her other best friend (and ex-boyfriend, Draco thought bitterly) into the mix.

I am okay with this.

Ginny beamed innocently up at him as he approached her table.

"I have to stick with water, but I got you some Ogdin's, the rest of this group are shameful lightweights," she said conspiratorially and slid a glass toward him. Draco nodded gratefully at her and tossed back half the drink in one go. Ginny eyed him with sympathy.

"You can relax you know, this isn't like dinner with her parents."

Draco grimaced at her. "Heard about that, did you?"

She opened her mouth to reply, then narrowed her eyes at the windows of the pub.

"Oh no, the three of them. They're arriving together," groaned Ginny.

"And this is bad because...?"

"Ugh, just you wait, he does it every time."

Draco followed her gaze to see Hermione, Potter, and the Weasel King himself chatting amicably as they approached the door and entered all at once. Walking up to the table side by side, Hermione flashed a smile at Draco (one that definitely didn't warm his dead, black heart, no, not at all) but then her grin became rather fixed as she glanced uneasily at Ron.

Ginny pointedly looked away, Potter stared at his shoes, and Hermione's mouth set in a grin line, but Ron Weasley smiled like he just won the Quidditch World Cup, wagged his eyebrows, and gestured between himself, Potter, and Hermione.

"So a pureblood, a half-blood, and a Muggleborn walk into a bar..."

The entire group simultaneously rolled their eyes and groaned while Ron cackled in glee.

"Come on, that is funny! Malfoy's never heard that one, I reckon!"

Draco arched a brow at the chuckling red head, unsure of how to respond.

"Ron, no one, anywhere, ever, has ever laughed at that opening line," asserted Ginny.

"Yeah, sorry mate," Potter slid into his chair next to his wife and planted a kiss on her cheek. "I think you're on your own with that one. It doesn't even have a punch line and I don't even really qualify as a half-blood."

Hermione also greeted Draco with a peck on the cheek and if any of the assembled group were uncomfortable with the affection, they didn't make it known.

Hey Jude!9

"I won't be long, but I am returning, Granger."

She scowled. "I don't need a nursemaid, I'm *fine*. The healers said I should rest, but that doesn't mean I need—"

"It means actual rest, which means you actually need to stop puttering about and I know if no one's here to watch you, you'll have no problem disobeying healers' orders. Now go sit on the couch, Potter's Floo-calling you in 10 minutes."

He stuck his tongue out when she pouted and stepped into the fire. When he stepped through his own grate into the traveling parlor he was met with another scowling witch.

"Have a lovely stay at St. Mungo's did you?" Narcissa's shrill voice tore through the room as she hurried to Draco and threw a letter at him.

"A copy of your discharge notice arrived this morning. Would you care to explain why I had to find out my only son was hospitalized via a *discharge notice*?" Her eyes flashed dangerously and Draco took a hesitant step forward.

"Obviously I'm well, Mother, it was nothing to be concerned—"

"Don't!" she yelled and he fell silent. "Dementors, Draco! This letter said you survived a Dementor attack and hypothermia! Do not stand there and lie to me! I should have been alerted immediately, I should have been called to your bedside and ensured you were properly cared for! What if you had died? What if—?"

Her voice wavered but did not quite break. She whinked away from him and Draco felt a pang of guilt. He approached her and laid a cautious hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine now, I'm sorry, you're right," he said softly and turned her into a brief embrace.

"Will you tell me what happened?" She sounded as if she had a head cold, but Draco could not see her face.

Draco relayed the story of how he and Hermione had visited the fairy colony towards the end of their trip and the subsequent Dementor attack. When he finished, Narcissa stepped back from him, face impassive once more. "I see. Your letter says you were discharged yesterday. Where have you been?"

Draco set his mouth in a thin line. "Hermione's fine, thank you for asking." He bit out and his mother pursed her lips. "She was worse off than me, if you cared to know, so I stayed with her in hospital and made sure she settled in all right at home. In fact," Draco walked past her and moved toward the stairs, "I'm only here to pick up a few things and return to her."

"Draco!" Narcissa called and he froze on the bottom step.

"You are quite serious about her?"

He regarded his mother carefully and sighed, "Very."

Narcissa's head tilted from side to side, an idea sliding around her mind. "I'd like to meet her properly, then. Would you be opposed to dinner at my home once the renovations are complete?"

"That sounds agreeable, I'll ask her. We'll do this on her time, though, I'll not push. When she's ready, I'll let you know."

Remain Nameless

powerless to deny his wick when she looked so small and vulnerable.

Draco looked down into her hopeful face, rosy and bright once more. It didn't take much of a mental leap to picture that face standing before him under another joyous circumstance.

"Especto Patronum!"

The dragon burst forth and Hermione gasped in delight as it flew around the room and came to a stop before her. She extended a hand out toward its snout just as it dissipated.

"Your namesake," she confirmed, regarding Draco with pride. "You know which breed that is, don't you?"

Draco shook his head, having only ever seen dragons during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament in his Fourth Year, and only then from a great distance.

"A Ukrainian Ironbelly, the largest breed of dragon with scales of a metallic gray... it's the same breed we freed from Gringotts."

And me, Granger. You freed me, too.

"What did you think of to conjure it?"

Draco clenched his jaw, knowing he would have to skirt around the truth. He could tell her now, but was a hospital really the right setting for such a declaration? Hardly, he reasoned, and contented himself with how she felt in his arms.

"Something that made me... happier than I've ever been."

Certainly not a lie, but not even close to the whole story. Though Hermione furrowed her brow at his dodge, she let the matter drop and settled back against him.



"Malfoy! Did you replace my bed sheets?"

Draco froze in the kitchen, in the process of helping himself to some tea.

"Why? Are you allergic to silk?"

Hermione stomped into view, hands on her hips. "Don't you dare try to smooth talk your way out of this. You had no right to meddle in my things without my consent!"

"Hark who's talking, don't think I haven't noticed that you've swapped out all my toothpaste for that spearmint Muggle stuff!"

Her glare crumbled into a sheepish smile. "Fine, we'll call it even then." She turned on her heel to see to the rest of her unpacking from their trip.

"It's all right to admit you've developed a taste for the finer things in life, Granger," he teased and quickly downed his tea. They'd been out of St. Mungo's for a few hours and Draco still put off returning to his own home. But when he could delay no longer, he said his goodbyes to Hermione and promised to return later that evening. She tried to brush him off, but Draco insisted on not leaving her alone.

Hey Jude! 9

"Bigger, it's my turn to treat, isn't? Butterbeers all around?" asked Potter, getting back on his feet.

"A teeny tiny, Firewhisky for me?" asked Ginny sweetly and Potter frowned at his wife.

"You're pregnant so, no."

"Bigger. Well speaking of, I need the loo."

"I'll join you!" Hermione said and Draco realized too late what the rest of them were up to with this amateur attempt at coincidence.

Draco sighed and turned to Ron, the lone person left at the table with him.

"Did you know this was coming?"

The red head scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "I mean, no one in this group is known for subtlety, so I figured this would happen eventually. Merlin, I thought they'd at least let me have a drink first."

They both glared down at the table, Draco warring with an entire spectrum of emotions. Should he speak first? Wait it out in silence for Hermione to come back? Fake a medical emergency?

"My parents liked you," Ron said gruffly, still staring at a stain on the wood. "And they haven't come right out and said it, but I know Harry and Gin more than tolerate you. That's to say nothing for how Hermione feels about you, which I'm sure you uh... know already."

He shifted in his seat and coughed before continuing on. "And you did save her life," Ron's voice picked up in strength. "I owe you for that, at the very least."

"You don't," Draco interrupted harshly. "Owe me, for that... don't..."

Deep breath.

"Sorry for... you know, how I acted before, when we were younger."

Ron shrugged. "You were an absolute arse, honestly. Spouse you've turned out all right, if Hermione and half my family will vouch for you."

Ron turned, forcing Draco to look him in the eye. "So yeah, this is going to be weird for a bit but... yeah... look Malfoy, if you hurt her... well I'm sure you know there's a whole queue of people who'd be out for your precious blood."

Draco nodded and smirked. "Your threat, while laughable, has already been issued by Granger's father."

Ron barked out a laugh. "Met David did you?"

He scanned Draco from head to toe thoughtfully with a wicked grin. "Oh I bet he *lauded* you."

"Yes, he made that quite plain."

"Did you get the 'I won't need magic to end your existence' speech?"

Draco pursed his lips. "Yes, as well as a thorough dressing-down for all my past sins."

Ron sniggered. "Ah, don't let it bother you, even if you deserve it. Her folks mean well they just don't quite get what Hermione's been through."

The men lapsed into silence and Draco wished everyone would just return to the table now so he could exit this reality of having a conversation with the Weasels. *The things I do for you, Granger.*

"Your team had a great season," Ron said suddenly. "The Wasps have been a threat for the last

Remain Nameless

several years. That semi-final loss was tough, but the Chasers from Kenmare are brutal...”

Stifled quidditch chat used up the rest of their designated alone time together, Draco finding Ron surprisingly knowledgeable about the league as a whole. Oh sweet Circe’s tits, did he just internally admit to sort of not hating this conversation?

I am okay with this.

“Oh look Hermione! They’re both still alive!”

Ginny bounced back to the table with Hermione and Harry, all three of them wearing smug grins that made Draco want to hex them.

“Everyone good?” Hermione asked innocently, Draco rolled his eyes but Ron piped up with, “Sorry Hermione, it went so well that Malfoy and I have decided to elope. I’m sure you understand.”

The group howled in laughter while Draco scowled.

“All right, what have I missed?” asked a newcomer that Draco surmised was Padma Patil since she slid in next to Ron and immediately stole a sip of his drink.

“Ron was just announcing his impending marriage to Malfoy, so sorry you had to find out this way.” Ginny supplied, adopting a mournful tone and patting Padma’s hand.

Padma regarded the pair of men for a minute. “Your children’s eyes would be amazing, I’m sure, but your complexions are all wrong for each other,” she deadpanned.

Ron slung an arm around her and chorled. “Too right, besides I’ve a thing for dark-haired witches.”

Draco sat back and though he acted more of a quiet observer for most of the evening, relishing in the way Hermione’s hand drew circles on his thigh beneath the table as she interacted with everyone, he couldn’t help but feel included.

If Hermione envisioned this for their future as a couple spending time with her friends, well then Draco found he didn’t mind so much.

Hey Jude!9

“Yes Miss, my parents were half-bloods so we were left alone.”

“How fortunate for you, Trainee Healer Kane” came the chilly reply. “While you and your parents were reaping the benefits of your blood status, I, along with the man asleep in that chair, were suffering in ways you cannot even possibly imagine. You have no right to cast judgment on those whom you know nothing about so as someone who does have first-hand knowledge of my partner’s war time conduct, I’ll thank you to keep your baseless opinions to yourself. And if the rest of our conversations during my stay are about anything other than my immediate health, I will report you to the head healer for a gross lack of professionalism.”

Draco bit the inside of his cheek. *I love you.*

“I... I... of course. I’ll let Healer Simpson know you’re ready for the discharge paperwork...” The poor girl sounded close to tears, Draco heard hurried footsteps leaving the ward and the firm snap of the door closing behind her.

“You’re a rubbish fake sleeper, you know.”

Draco cracked an eye open and was greeted with the beautiful sight of her teasing smile.

“And you’re something to behold when you get all puffed up and prissy on my behalf.”

Her grin drooped and she wrung her hands in her lap. “I know you can fight your own battles, but she was—”

“Defend me any time you like, Granger, it was quite the turn on.”

They smiled at one another, and Draco’s eyes roved over her features, hungrily taking in the sight of her face, alive and happy:

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

They stared at one another a beat longer before Draco clambered into the bed and crushed her to him. He pressed his cheek to her hair and inhaled her comforting scent.

“Never again, Granger. No more blasted fairy colonics, understood?”

Her laughter came out muffled against his chest. “I’ve survived worse.”

Draco tightened his hold. “It’s not funny. I don’t know what I’d do if... you almost... damn it, Granger, this isn’t funny.”

Hermione pulled back to look up into his stern face. “Draco,” she said softly and took his face in her hands.

“Draco, I’m fine, I’m all right. Thanks to you. You were brilliant, I’m sure, and of course I wasn’t even there to see. You took care of me when I couldn’t... when I failed.”

She swallowed a lump in her throat and seemed on the verge of tears. “I’ve always struggled with my Patronus, and to fail at the moment when you needed me most... I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t you dare,” he said harshly. “Don’t you dare blame yourself. We made it out of there and that’s all that matters.” He gathered her tightly in his arms again.

“As long as you quit blaming yourself too. Your casting must have been very powerful to drive away so many Dementors,” reasoned Hermione. “Can I see it now?” She asked meekly, rendering Draco

When she opened her eyes again, she met his gaze and Draco's breath caught in his throat. The full impact of the evening, the weight of what Hermione publicly revealed, slammed into him with a brutal force. This veritable queen among women had declared to an entire crowd of people that she had chosen Draco to be at her side. She could have her pick of literally any wizard and here she stood, sharing a quiet moment at a place that meant so much to both of them. Good memories, horrifyingly violent memories, all the stunning and terrible history that the two of them had seen on these very grounds, Draco felt it all in that moment. He took her other hand and gently turned her to face him head on. Hermione shouldn't be the only one partaking in revelations tonight.

"It is odd, I suppose, to be standing out here with you," he began. "Odd that it should feel so natural. Yet at the same time, I can't tamp down the urge to check if I've still got my wand on me... Merlin, Granger," Draco chuckled darkly and shook his head, "that's how vulnerable I feel around you and it's bloody terrifying. But you also..."

He struggled to convey the gravity of her healing effects. "I don't feel broken with you, I don't feel like a failure with you. I actually *like* the person I am when I'm with you."

His throat bobbed, Hermione's keen eyes tracked the movement. "I suppose what I'm trying to say... what I'm doing a right terrible job of saying is—" He took a steadying breath, experiencing that exhilarating feeling from that suspended moment all those months ago in the dark hallway of her flat. Diving straight off a cliff ledge, willingly.

"From what I think I understand about love... it is equivalent to handing the other person your wand, knowing they could destroy you with it at any moment, but you hand your wand over regardless."

He faltered a bit, agonizing over how to properly express the depth of his feelings. "You... you are the only person, the only one that I... and I'd give you anything you asked of me, wand included."

His throat tightened then, and he wondered if the words would even make it out. But no stopping them this time. The stubborn little phrase rose up from his soul, clawed up his throat, and pushed past his lips.

"I love you. I love you Hermione."

There. Now his truth flew out in the world, given a life of its own.

Hermione beamed up at him and squeezed his hands, a sign that she would both accept and nurture that truth.

"I've never said those words, not to anyone," he confessed and averted his eyes in embarrassment.

"Draco." Her fierce tone forced him to look at her again. "I love you, too."

The wind stopped, the waters stilled, life all around them put on a temporary pause. Hearing the sincere echoing of his sentiments from her lips made Draco feel as if a Patronus Charm might just involuntarily erupt from his pocketed wand.

In her face he saw a mirror, a true reflection of happiness, wonder, and now, Draco knew for certain, of love. Grinning madly, he gathered her to him to seal the moment with a fervent kiss. Hermione's hands clutched his shoulders tight, inciting feelings of joy that she wanted and needed him in

the same desperate way he required her to fucking breathe.

"I love you," he gasped against her mouth.

"I love you," her instant reply followed by a soft peck to his lips. He cupped her face and angled her head back to deepen the kiss.

Had he ever smiled so much during a voracious bout of snogging? But for the Warming Charms wearing off, he would have made love to her right there on the shores of the lake.

"Apparition point... now," Draco panted, reluctantly pulling away from her delicious and talented mouth.

"Agreed," she said breathlessly, interlacing their fingers and towing him towards the front gates with purpose. "You remember that green satin number I bought in France?"

"How could I forget? You'll put it on for me tonight?" Fuck, the coy look she gave him made his cock ache again hard.

"Not necessarily. You see... I also bought it in black."

The second they reached the apparition point, Draco lunged for her and fiercely fused their lips together before grasping her even tighter and apparating them straight into her living room.

Hermione never did get around to donning her fancy lingerie that night. Instead, she and Draco traded amorous whispers and confessions while they sought to bring each other to blissful states of pleasure.

Now that he'd declared his feelings to Hermione, Draco found the little phrase that had once rendered him sick over a sink in his healer's office the easiest thing in the world to say. It helped that Hermione seemed just as pleased to both hear it and return it each time.

"I love you... gods Granger, I fucking love you," he groaned as she kissed his bare chest and tum-bled with his belt.

"I love you Draco..." she moaned when he sucked her nipple into his mouth and swished his tongue around the hardened peak.

"I love you... you smell like hyacinths and I bought... too many and put them all around my home to remind me... of you," he whispered while she deftly stroked him.

"I love you... I only went on that... blasted date with Anthony Goldstein... because I was afraid of what I felt... for you," she whined in his ear as he pushed two fingers into her dripping core.

"I love you... been wanting to tell... you for so fucking long..." he panted as he lay back on her bed and she straddled him.

"I love you. I was so sure you'd say it when *ohhh*," she cried out as she slid down onto the length of him, "when we were in France."

"I love you... yes Hermione... fuck yes, like that... gods I love you... my Amortentia smells like you... like you in my library?" he hissed out in between thrusts.

"Draco! Yes, I love you, yes yes yes! My... *ohhhh right there*... my Amortentia is you... is after you use the Muggle toothpaste," she said feverishly slamming her hips down in time with his rhythm.

"I love you... when you... when you... called me darling... the other night... when you were half

Remain Nameless

asleep... my heart almost stopped,” he increased the pace of his rapid movements into her perfect, tight cunt.

“I love you... I was afraid you’d...never tell me... and I obviously... Draco! *Plaeophlaeplae...* I love you, please... I’m so close... *I’m coming I’m coming*,” she became incoherent as she shifted up and down and rode out her orgasm with wild abandon.

As her body sagged in its post-climax state, Draco flipped them over and chased his own bliss as he pumped erratically into her: “I love you I love you I love you,” he chanted against the skin of her neck, and when he heard her repeat it back, he exploded inside her. Kissing the side of her face in reverence, he slowed his thrusts as he came down from his dizzying high.

He rolled off of and out of her, gathering her body against him as he did so. Hermione nuzzled his shoulder and let out a breathless laugh. “That was...”

“I know... I... I love you.”

He could hear the smile in her voice when she replied immediately. “And I love you.”

Gods, he’d been a stubborn sod hadn’t he? What the hell had he been so afraid of? Afraid of the pleasant shivers that he could see running through her body each time he said the words? Afraid of the warming glow of happiness that shot through his entire soul when her sweet voice said the words in return?

He should never utter a sentence to her again without declaring his love, and so Draco murmured the words to Hermione over and over until they both drifted off to sleep, intent on repeating them the second the morning sun woke them.

I have never been more okay with anything in my entire life.

Hey Jude!

“Hermione!” They’d smile at her, then their gaze would slide to the man at her side. “Malfoy.”

“Hermione.” A brief pause. “Malfoy.”

“Hermione... Malfoy?”

“Hermione... Malfoy?”

“Hermione... Malfoy?”

His brain decided to torture Draco by erasing the little pause of breath in between those two names, chanting repeatedly in time with his own heartbeat. *Hermione Malfoy, Hermione Malfoy, Hermione Malfoy*. Fuck, but if it didn’t sound so wonderful.



The ball finally wound down, and Draco could feel the relief rolling off Hermione in waves. People began bidding them goodnight at a higher frequency, reactions from the crowd growing considerably warmer towards Draco after he received friendly farewells from all the Weasleys and the Potters.

Potter staggered slightly as he kissed Hermione’s cheek and said he had one more stop for the evening, and a flushed Ron followed him as they giggled like First Years and headed in the opposite direction of the apparition points and Floos.

“Where are those two knobs off to?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly, the pair of them. They make a point to sneak into the Head’s office after every Hogwarts event so they can drunkenly spar with Professor Snape’s portrait. Harry said he can’t wait to inform him of our ‘scandalous debut.’ They love trying to get a rise out of him by adulating him for all his heroism.” She let out a reluctant titter. “As you can imagine, Professor Snape positively loathes these visits.”

The thought hadn’t hit Draco until that moment, but he realized that not once this whole night had he been sucked into horrifying memories of battle, death, or destruction. Perring down at the witch tucked into his side, he knew the natural way she exuded lightness had touched even a warped soul like him.

“Think we could sneak out onto the grounds for a bit? Take a turn around the Black Lake?”

She met his quiet question with an enthusiastic nod. They strolled arm in arm into the chilly October night air, Draco casting a Warming Charm over both of them. Per a habit of Hermione’s, she gave a lengthy rundown to Draco of how she felt the entire event had gone, much the way he imagined her to be after end-of-the-year exams.

When they reached the edge of the lake, Hermione grew silent, looking out over the dark water. The pearlescent moon above them reflected off the lake’s surface, as well as Hermione’s bright eyes and the sapphire at her throat. She inhaled and exhaled slowly, inviting the fall air into her lungs, and Draco watched her eyes flutter shut. He reached out and took her hand, letting her dwell on whatever memories had captured her while also offering any bit of solace he could provide.

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ally. He actually did know Theo's whereabouts: a family party for one of Sasha's brothers tonight to celebrate his birthday.

Astoria nodded, accepting his discretion. "I surmised as much."

They danced a few more turns in silence before Draco became overcome with curiosity. "And just who would have been your preferred partner for this evening, if Theo is not a real option?"

Astoria's turn to put the walls up. "As I said before, we have more in common than you previously believed."

As their dance ended, Draco stepped away and bowed politely. When he straightened up, he noticed Hermione approaching, a cold smile on her face. Draco held out his arm when she reached them and Hermione immediately hooked hers into the crook of his elbow.

"Hello, I don't believe we've met, I'm Hermione Granger," said Hermione imperiously, holding out her other hand to Astoria. Draco bit back a laugh at her blatant show of possessiveness.

My jealous little witch, stalking her damn.

"Oh yes, of course I know who you are!" enthused Astoria, beaming as she shook Hermione's hand, unperturbed by the territorial display. "Astoria Greengrass. My sister Daphne was in your year at Hogwarts. I'm ever so pleased to meet you!"

A bit of Hermione's icy exterior melted at the friendliness of the other woman. "Yes, well, pleasure to meet you too. Enjoying your evening?" She cast a sidelong look at Draco, who bit the inside of his cheek, both amused and incredibly aroused by Hermione's protective behavior.

"Oh yes, this is just wonderful! I think your fund is a fantastic step in the right direction and frankly, long overdue!" Hermione looked rather taken aback as Astoria launched into a passionate rant about the intersection of the magical and Muggle world and how Muggle Studios had in fact, been her favorite subject. By the time Astoria concluded her bright-eyed praise for everything Hermione had ever worked on, Draco could tell she'd more than mollified Granger.

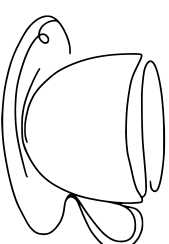
As Astoria gracefully swanned over to rejoin her parents, Draco finally let a chuckle slip. "Worried she was going to hook her little debutante claws into me?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes up at him. "Fine, she's a lovely woman, but can you blame me? The two of you dancing together was practically an advert for the glitz and prestige of the pureblood aristocracy. I'm sure your mother was salivating." Hermione finished bitterly.

Draco frowned, personally thinking Hermione probably wasn't wrong about Narcissa. "Never mind all that. I much prefer present company." That won him a genuine smile as she squeezed his arm.

"Right, well I could use your help if you don't mind making some more rounds with me. I'm beginning to suffer small-talk fatigue and you'll be in your natural element I imagine."

Draco spent the remainder of the gala at Hermione's side, her arm constantly looped through his. They received a broad range of reactions from the assembled guests (Draco's favorite being Professor Slughorn's rather insulting tone of incredulity for the entire time they were in his presence). While the reactions to their coupledom incited varied receptions and tones, the greeting never wavered.



Chapter Forty

November 2008

More than a month had passed since the inaugural gala for the *Hermione J. Granger Fund for Students of Non-Magical Parents*, and Hermione waited for the other shoe to drop. But as time rolled on from their sort-of public debut as a couple, Hermione had yet to experience any fallout from the shocking revelation.

Of course, she didn't rightly care about the public's opinion of her choice in romantic partner, but surely by now someone from the ball would have blabbed to the press? Hiring Dennis Creevey as the photographer had been an inspired choice on Hermione's part; the young man eager to help and a faithful friend. Hermione approved each picture he sold to various publications, none of them of her with Draco.

Hermione had been a bit more worried about Parvati spilling the beans, knowing she had a less-than-kind opinion of Draco, not to mention this sort of gossip exclusive would catapult sales of *Witch Weekly*. But to her surprise, Parvati's coverage of the event stayed in her lane: the fashion of the attendees with brief mentions of Hermione's opening remarks. She wondered if Padma might be the party responsible for keeping her sister in line.

If anything, Draco was the one doing his best to make their relationship the worst-kept pseudo-secret at Hermione's office. Since telling her, finally, that he loved her (Merlin, but she felt a stupid, giddy smile appear whenever she thought about it), she received some daily token of his affection during working hours. Her coworkers always smirked knowingly when they stopped by her office to see what had arrived each day.

Flowers at least once a week, lunch delivered if he knew she'd have a busy afternoon, luxury quills, stationary embossed with her monogram and new job title, boxes of tea when she'd complained about the Ministry quality, and once even a tub of her favorite strawberry ice cream from Fortescue's because she'd made an offhand comment during their morning coffee about her menstrual cramps.

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Heaven forbid Hermione complain about being showered with gifts, because gods, the *one time* she'd even hinted that all of this was rather unnecessary his face had fallen in such a pathetically adorable way she'd relented and negotiated a hard line of no jewelry for occasions that weren't Christmas. Gifts and words of affirmation, the two love languages of Draco.

I love you.

He said it *constantly*. For a man completely new to openly sharing his emotions, Draco seemed unable to contain them now. The charmed notebook that sat on one side of her desk glowed so often with a new message from him during the work day that she'd had to shut it in her top drawer lest it distract her every few minutes. With quidditch in the off-season, it kept Draco to his office most days, which meant when his hands weren't fiddling through player contracts or statistic reports, they jotted down quick notes to Hermione in his journal:

How was your morning? I love you.

Did the planning meeting go all right? I love you.

I miss you.

Please tell Weasley if he hails me in the street like that again or calls me "mate" in public one more time, I will not be held accountable for my violence. I love you.

Theo and Sasha want to get together this weekend, is that all right with you love? I love you.

Thinking of you.

Mother moved back to her home last night, would you like to come over for dinner so we can sully my dining room table again? I love you.

I cannot concentrate today Granger and it's all your ruddy fault. I cannot get the image of you in that little black number out of my mind and it's most distracting. I love you.

I wanted to have a blueberry scone delivered to you today, but I ate it and harbor no regrets. I do love you, though.

How is your day going? I love you.

I love you.

She'd always known him to be a bit on the self-centered side (though obviously much less so than the snotty, spoiled younger version) but the odd and amusing truth of the matter remained: Draco Malfoy was a needy boyfriend.

Before dating Draco, if you had asked Hermione for a list of turn-offs in men, neediness would have been close to the top of that list. Younger Hermione would assert that she wanted a partner as independent as her, someone who did not require her constant attention or validation.

But damn it all if this behavior didn't melt her heart and make her nausiatingly pleased that she'd somehow won such open devotion from a man she'd previously thought to be rather cold and unfeling. Should it turn her on this much to be the object of his unreserved affection? Perhaps not, but Hermione found herself no longer caring about her past expectations.

While she'd prepared for the worst after the gala, it would seem the universe still had a few surprises in store for her. Visits with her parents and Draco were still quite tense, but Hermione detected a slight thaw in their attitudes at the most recent luncheon.

as part of wizarding aristocracy.

"It's certainly been a surprising evening," Draco said flatly.

"Hmm, yes, I would have to agree with you," she answered. "I do confess it was quite the surprise to see you in attendance. Though I think the reason has since made itself known." Her eyes glinted with mischief and she smiled up at him.

"Her cause is a worthy one," Astoria continued, more seriously. "My parents were conflicted as to whether to accept the invitation, but I managed to convince them it would be in their best interest."

"I didn't realize the educational prospects of Muggleborn children were near and dear to your heart," Draco deadpanned.

Astoria narrowed her eyes. "I could say the same for you," she said coldly and Draco felt properly chastened. Before he could apologize, she shook her head and beat him to it.

"I apologize, that was presumptuous of me." She bit her lip and regarded Draco thoughtfully. "I think you'll find we have more in common than you previously believed."

This had to be the longest proper conversation he'd ever had with this woman and they'd "courted" for a few months. Draco cleared his throat. "Yes, well, perhaps the fault lies with me. I fear I wasn't the best, ah, partner, when we were uh... together."

Astoria let out a tinkling, feminine laugh. "Oh gods, that was a disaster, wasn't it?"

Draco winced and Astoria's expression turned plying. "I'm sorry Draco, but it's true. I'd be shocked if you even remember much of it at all. Please don't dwell on it, I don't hold any grudges. I think you were in a rather dark place during that time," she finished quietly.

"Perhaps, but still, you didn't deserve to be treated so poorly."

Astoria gave an elegant shrug of her shoulders. "We all have our demons. It does please me to see you doing well for yourself now, she's truly dazzling," she inclined her head in Hermione's direction.

"You make a lovely couple. Although my parents may be a bit disappointed," she confessed with a smirk.

Had she been this entertaining when they were together? Draco's recollections of their courtship were hazy at best, what with being under the constant influence of alcohol to cope with life.

"Forgive me for the personal question, but I admit I am curious. No escort for you this evening?"

Astoria bit her lip and took her time formulating a response. "Yes, well, my designated date for the evening had a conflicting engagement. You're well acquainted with Theodore Nott of course?"

"Theo?" Draco sputtered indignantly. "Theo was meant to escort you?"

"Hmm, indeed," Astoria said coyly. "Theo and I," she continued, seeming to weigh each word carefully, "we have a sort of... arrangement, you could say, when it comes to society events. As neither of us can bring the person we truly desire, we appear on each other's arms to appease my parents and his mother. Unfortunately he cancelled."

She tilted her head to the side and looked inquiringly up at Draco. "You wouldn't happen to know why, would you?"

Draco put his walls up. "If Theo hasn't told you, I'm afraid it's not my place to tell," he said loy-

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Weasley mariach blathered the entire time about what a lovely couple they made, overcome with tears for most of their dance together, leaving Draco at a loss for words. She also reiterated his invitation to the Burrow for any Sunday dinner. Draco, though touched by her offer, remained unsure whether he would accept in the near future. That many Weasley's at once made him anxious.

Fleur claimed his next dance, outdoing even Draco with her waltzing capabilities. She regarded him stiffly at first, a few minutes going by before she spoke to him.

"You treat 'ermione well yes?"

"I certainly endeavor to, Mrs. Weasley."

"Fleur is fine," she replied tersely. "Arthur told us what you did for 'er." She waved a dainty, manicured hand around, indicating the gala and by extension, the charity. "Zat is quite a lot. I am sure 'ermione is grateful. I theenk you are trying, Monsieur Malloy, and if you are good to her, I theenk we can be friends, d'accord?"

"Oui madame."

She narrowed her bright blue eyes at him. "I see you are very *darnant*, monsieur. Tread carefully!" She attempted a glare, but he caught a curve to her lips. By the time they parted, he'd won over another member of the Weasley clan.

Luna and Ginny occupied him for the next two dances. The former surprisingly steady in her steps and the latter pretending to fawn and swoon under his attentions. Draco was quite glad to be shot of Ginny and her theatrics when their required time together ended.

"Potter, take your wife off my hands and for Salazar's sake, learn to dance a proper waltz yourself," he hissed and quite literally handed Ginny to Harry.

"Oh thank you for indulging me Sir Malloy, I'm all of a flutter," she gasped dramatically and sighed, pressing her hand to her forehead. Harry only encouraged her by snickering and Draco suspected the Boy Who Lived was well on his way to being the Man Who Tossed His Dinner into the Hogwarts Shrubbery After One Too Many Whiskys.

Feeling his time being babysat by all of Granger's friends had blessedly come to an end, he turned to finally make his way back to the bar when a slip of a witch stepped into his path.

"Hello Draco," she said demurely.

He had a 50/50 shot.

"Good evening Astoria."

Her lips quirked as if she knew he'd had to guess.

"If you have one more dance in you, I'd like to claim it."

He raised a brow at her boldness and reluctantly accepted her outstretched hand. Quickly looking around, he noticed Hermione's attention occupied by Minister Shackbolt and his wife, which meant he could spare a few minutes.

Draco held Astoria stiffly and at a decent distance, in case Hermione's eye were to be on them at any moment, he wanted to ensure his behavior appeared far above reproach.

"Have you enjoyed the gala thus far?" asked Astoria, her lilting cadence commoted years of practice

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Her friends had shown to be her truest supporters in every sense of the word, going out of their way to make Draco feel welcome and included and though he would never admit it, Hermione caught him having an enthusiastic chat with Harry more than once and he'd laughed a real laugh at one of Ron's corny jokes. She kept this observation to herself for now, lest Draco fall into a petulant huff and refute such an accusation. Theo and Sasha were always enjoyable company, Hermione glad to see the bookish Theo come out of his shell more and more in her presence.

So when the other shoe did finally drop, Hermione found herself too content with her current circumstances to feel any real angst over it. Draco, on the other hand, had a right fit.

"How—how dare they!? This sort of invasion of privacy must be against press laws!"

The word had finally leaked to the world at large. A moving black and white photograph of Draco and Hermione sat just below the fold of the front page of that morning's Daily Prophet. The camera had captured them at the end of their daily morning routine before parting ways for work: Draco leaning down with a smug smile to press a lingering kiss to Hermione's cheek. His lips then drifted up to her ear to intone, "Have a good day, I love you."

Draco made himself a victim of his own perfect enunciation, as even without sound any reader could see exactly what he'd said. He stood up straight to peer down at her with a blazing look before the photo reverted back to the beginning of the public display of affection in an endless loop.

"We're technically in the wizarding world at that point. It's perfectly legal," Hermione said calmly as her eyes scanned the rest of the article. Just about every single major publication available to magical Britain littered her kitchen table and every single one of them featured the same photo of Hermione and Draco with accompanying headlines that ranged from amusing to offensive.

"*Pure of Blood and Pure of Heart: The Star-Crossed Romance of Our Time!*"

"*Heartbreaker Hermione Sings Disdy Draco!*"

"*Malloy's Muggleborn Mistress*"

"*Gold-Digging Golden Girl?*"

"*Gold-Digging Granger Enchants Malloy Hair!*"

"*Hermione Hermione and Death Enter Draco: Inside Their Forbidden Love!*"

"*Malloy's Muggleborn: Publicity Ploy or Real Romance?*"

"*Happiness in the Hair?*"

"*A Romance of Redemption: How Love Reformed Draco Malloy!*"

"You're being incredibly biased about all this."

Hermione snorted. "Oh please, this is nothing. Rita Skeeter labeled me a whore in print when I was 14 years old. Fourteen! A minor! So you'll have to excuse me if I can't muster any sort of reaction other than indifference. It's a rather lovely photo of us."

She executed a perfect Slicing Charm and smoothed out a copy of the photo, intending to frame it. It would join the other two pictures of her and Draco on her mantel: the one from their ill-fated walk into the fairy colony and the one Dennis had mailed of her waltzing with Draco at the gala.

"But—but—Granger, surely you're aware at the amount of vitriol you're about to bring on to

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yourself?"

She gave him a pitying smile at his naivety. "I'm a public figure. I've been one since my teen years. I have been called all sorts of awful things, some writers seeming a few quill strokes away from spelling out Muggleborn, frankly. I've also been lauded and adored for something as frivolous as wearing a nice dress to an event. I've experienced the entire spectrum of the magical community's opinions about my personal and professional life and my skin is much thicker for it."

Hermione took his hand and dropped a kiss to the back of it. "Let them gossip, or sneer, or applaud. I love you and no matter what these so called 'journalists' print or any 'fans' think of me, that fact will not be changing."

Draco frowned, but his expression softened. "I'm still going to have my solicitors contact all of these publications. The things they're implying about you..." he trailed off in disgust.

Hermione shrugged. "Calling me a 'gold-digger' or 'heartbreaker' wouldn't pass muster in a libel hearing. However, you should absolutely have them go after the ones that said you have me under the Imperius Curse."

She handed him two magazines and a daily. "They didn't even insinuate a crime, they outright accused you. Your legal team will have a patetically easy time with those."

She turned back to the paper in her hands. "Although," Hermione said with a heavy sigh. "I think it's time I take your mother up on that invitation for dinner to meet her properly."

"Why?"

"Because she's quoted in the Prophet about our relationship."

"WHAT?"

She wordlessly held up the Prophet and he snatched it from her hands. His gray eyes frantically whizzed across the pages, lips pursed, she knew, when he reached phrases like, "*a source close to the couple say a marriage contract is in the works*" or, "*the amorous duo hung off each other's arms at last month's gala*" and then she saw his brow furrow and surmised he must have reached his mother's comment.

"*The question on many readers' minds is most likely: what exactly does Narcissa Malfoy have to say about the relationship that has shocked the magical community? When asked to comment on her only son's blossoming romance with the infamous Muggleborn witch (for a listing of Hermione Granger's illustrious achievements, including an Order of Merlin, First Class, turn to page 6), for a summary of her previous romantic entanglements, turn to page 8), the controversial matchmaker of the Malfoy family had this to say: 'My son is a hard-working, upstanding member of society and Miss Granger is a formidable young woman.'*"

For a review of the trials of the entire Malfoy family following the Battle of Hogwarts, turn to page 7..."

Draco peered at her over the top of the paper. "She shouldn't have said anything. I'll owl her immediately and—"

"Tell her we'll see her for dinner this Saturday, if she'll have us."

A pregnant pause followed her pronouncement.

"Granger, are you sure? You don't have to—"

"I'm sure," Hermione cut him off decisively. "I've stalled long enough," she reasoned. "And this is

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am the witch who helped Harry Potter and countless others bring down Voldemort."

They glided into a seamless turn, working toward one end of the floor.

"I am the daughter of Muggles, ensuring no other Muggleborn is denied a fair shake in this world."

Draco led them backwards, returning to the center of the room.

"I am a fierce advocate for creature rights with more than a few welfare laws under my belt."

They spun leisurely through the last few bars of the song, revolving slowly on the spot.

"And I am the woman who is proud to be in the arms of Draco Malfoy."

Her heated gaze burned through him, and but for the large crowd watching their every move, Draco would have kissed her senseless in this moment. Hermione wet her lips, chin stuck out in defiance, daring him to contradict her statement, daring him to make a self-deprecating comment about his self-worth. But this time, Draco found he could only summon a feeling of immense pride at her words.

I love you

The song over, Hermione stepped out of his embrace and executed a perfect curtsy while he bowed. Eyes meeting again, Draco surely grinned like an idiot, but then, so did she.

As if emerging from a fog, other couples joined them on the dance floor. Hermione stepped into his arms again, this time for a less formal dance. Draco covertly peeked around at the rest of the crowd, trying to gauge the varied reactions of all present for Hermione's little publicity stunt.

He became uncomfortably aware that Hermione's friends completely circled them, forming a bit of a barrier amongst the dancing couples. The Potters looked stupidly smug. Molly Weasley dabbed at her eyes while her husband threw them an apologetic glance for her waterworks. Padma beamed and nodded encouragingly while the Weasel had the gall to throw Draco a thumbs up.

Seriously, one more disgustingly saccharine act of chumminess from Weasley and Draco would vomit.

Suppressing a lip curl and a sneer, he glanced around to see how others might be taking this surprising development between the guest of honor and her pureblood paramour. Cormac McLaggen looked furious, but also shifted his weight uncomfortably from side to side. He'd have to congratulate Ginerva on the efficacy of her boils hex later.

Astoria Greengrass looked mildly amused and curious, while her parents looked stricken. He wondered idly if they'd still been hoping for a marriage contract between their families. McGonagall's countenance still looked resigned, but Draco swore he saw a corner of her mouth lift when their eyes met. Maureen Tyler looked as if she'd been too slow with her Beater's bat and taken a bludger full in the face. Beside her, Wesley Macmillan appeared much the same.

Daring to seek out his mother, Narcissa displayed a study in impassivity, though her gaze never left Draco's. She briefly inclined her head at him in a show of recognition, the only reaction he would get for the evening. He would take it, for now. The rest of the room split between gobsmacked and indignation. Whether on Draco's behalf or Hermione's, he'd be wary of anyone who seemed put off by them appearing together.

As the song ended, Draco handed off Hermione to Arthur, and he took Molly in for a dance. The

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beside Flintwick. Hermione would dine next to McGonagall and Neville Longbottom, Draco thanking Merlin that someone had the foresight to keep Longbottom near Hermione and his mother as far from her as possible.

When dinner concluded, Draco's heart rate sped up again. He'd been almost relaxed at his table despite threatening to stab Weasley with his fork because the uncouth cretin made a comment about Malfoy not finishing his mashed potatoes and could he have them? Padma kept the peace by spooning her own unfinished meal onto her boyfriend's empty plate.

The plates, tables, and chairs vanished as the party-goers all stood to allow room for the makeshift dance-floor that appeared over the castle's stonework.

Draco watched Hermione delicately rise and walk down from the head table. She nodded at the orchestra conductor to begin the opening waltz. She approached Arthur Weasley, gave him an impish grin and then kept walking.

What in the blazes was she doing?

He threw a confused glance at Potter who was biting the inside of his cheek to hide a laugh, as was his wife. Ron stared at him, eyebrows raised, questioning how Draco didn't see this coming.

His throat went dry.

No, she wouldn't. Surely she wouldn't.

Hermione's measured and confident stride eventually landed right in front of him. Draco felt every single eye in the room on the pair of them as Hermione held up her small hand for him to take.

"Shall we?" Her light, teasing tone held a hint of a challenge. Draco accepted her hand and with it, the gauntlet she'd thrown.

All right then, if that's how you want to do this. Together it is.

Draco did not look left or right as he led Hermione to the very center of the parquet floor. Waltzing came laughably easy for him, years of being whacked round the shins by ancient dance instructors kept his posture perfect as he drew Hermione in by the waist. He clasped their hands together and held them aloft, Hermione using the contact to pull herself practically flush against him.

If she'd wanted an out, her proximity to Draco just snuffed it right out. There was no plausible excuse for their bodies to be this close unless they knew one another intimately—certainly not the waltzing position of two polite acquaintances or old school friends. She smiled cheekily up at him as Draco caught the tempo of the music and began leading her around the dance floor.

"No going back now, Granger?" he whispered down to her. "You realize everyone can see us?"

"Good, because that was the general idea," she asserted. "I'm sick of not showing the world exactly who I am."

"Oh?"

He twirled her expertly, finding her an excellent and graceful dancer in her own right. Despite his nervousness about all the glares they were probably catching, a large part of him also preened like a peacock that they made a stunning and picturesque couple.

"Yes," she said primly as she completed the turn beneath his arm and returned to his embrace. "I

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something I'd like to do, for you."

He flashed her one of his genuine smiles that always made her weak-kneed and then stood up to kiss the top of her head as he left to get dressed for work.

Hermione's mobile lit up with a text from Ginny.

G: Good morning Hermione! Oh I'm sorry should I refer to you by your new title now? Which do you prefer, Heartbreaker Hermione or Malfoy's Muggleborn?

H: Ha bloody ha. I've already had to talk Draco down from siccing every lawyer in his arsenal on every publication that ran the story.

G: Tell your "pale pureblood prince" that I will be personally making sure your "star-crossed romance" is old news by the end of the week.

H: Please don't do this. Harry can't possibly be on board!

G: I already talked it over with him and he's agreed. Besides this way we get to control the announcement and I don't have to endure photo spreads suggesting I've eaten one too many Cauldron Cakes.

H: I appreciate the gesture, I do, but you don't have to do this.

G: Too late my dear!

Two days later, all traces of Draco and Hermione were indeed wiped from the front pages, as that press space became solely dedicated to the revelation that the Boy Who Lived and his Quidditch Star Wife expected their first child.

Draco smirked as he leaned over Hermione's shoulder to read the paper. "Ginевра really is more cunning than I ever gave her credit for."

Hermione scoffed. "I still think this was all ridiculously unnecessary."

"Perhaps, love, but I don't know about you, but I rather hate that we're constantly photographed in the mornings now."

She scowled and turned the paper more violently than she intended. The story itself about their relationship didn't bother her, but the fact that now she couldn't even say goodbye to Draco on her way to work without flashbulbs going off irked her to no end. That small tender moment, one of her favorite parts of the day and now the press vultures would rob her of the privacy of that as well. Not to mention all the foul Howlers both she and Draco received on a daily basis.

Still, a small price to pay for finally feeling like she could openly be with Draco. She wondered if she would still feel the same after their dinner with Narcissa.



Never in her life had Hermione witnessed someone eat soup as slowly as Narcissa Malfoy. Honestly, at the current rate at which the woman daintily allowed the spoon past her lips, this first course could last anywhere from one hour to the next century.

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Hermione had hastily finished her own (admittedly, delicious) butternut squash bisque so as to have something to occupy her hands, and now felt quite out of sorts. Although, she'd felt that way for the entire evening.

It all started innocently enough. Draco and she had flooded to the Lestrangle Estate together, Hermione pushing the name of the home into a box at the back of her mind. Draco wore formal robes and Hermione followed suit, though part of her desperately wanted to show up in Muggle attire simply to prove a point. Alas, her conscience won out, and she felt that at least for Draco's sake, she should put in a proper effort with Narcissa and try to avoid pettiness when possible.

Narcissa greeted them, or rather greeted her son and stood back to let him make the expected introductions. Hermione had a momentary bout of panic. How did pureblood society ladies greet one another? But Narcissa merely held out a delicate hand for Hermione to briefly shake, and the panic subsided.

"A pleasure to finally meet you properly, Miss Granger," Hermione wondered if all ladies of her standing had to practice that light, airy tone or if it just came naturally.

"Please, call me Hermione. Thank you for inviting me to your home." *And not having me dragged through the front gates*, went unsaid.

Hermione attempted a small smile that was not returned.

"I've recently redecorated and made renovations to the East Wing. Perhaps a tour before we sit for dinner?"

Hermione nodded and Draco offered his arm and a reassuring smile as they followed the gliding gaze of Narcissa through the massive foyer. She couldn't help but let her gaze wander around the expansive hall, wondering how much dark magic these walls had seen in their day. If one were not aware of the deranged family that had once ruled from here, it would be hard to imagine, given the present atmosphere. Narcissa had quite obviously redone the impressive manor home in her own style. It felt light if still rather gaudy, most of the color scheme a mix of blues, greens, and creams, and Hermione spotted at least one of those paintings done by unicorns clipping their horns and hooves in ink.

Hermione didn't have much to offer by way of conversation during the tour, which was just as well, as Narcissa seemed perfectly content to rattle off her design inspirations and which vendors she'd used without pausing for questions. Compared to his mother's home, Draco's own manor seemed modest next to the historic Lestrangle Estate. Narcissa didn't elaborate on the history of the residence, but to Hermione's eye, a good many of the furnishings, artwork, and architectural style were centuries old.

The Malfoy family was one of the oldest pureblood lines in Britain, but Hermione had once read that the Lestranges weren't too far behind. They'd come over from France as well, roughly 200 years after Draco's ancestor rode in with William the Conqueror.

Had this manor also housed prisoners during the war? Hermione steadied her breathing and did her best to banish macabre thoughts of dark curses and cruel laughter.

Not until they entered the dining room did Hermione commit her first faux pas of the evening. Perhaps she could blame the relief of finally sitting down, but instead of standing beside her designa-

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news. Sort yourself out and get seated, I expect Miss Granger will be looking into the crowd for you, specifically, during her remarks."

Leaving a gaping Draco in her wake, she turned on her heel and rejoined the event. Recovering himself a moment later, Draco followed suit, heading to his designated dinner table for the evening. He bit back a groan as he approached his esteemed table mates: Ron and Padma, Harry and Ginny, Rolf and Luna. Granger really did lack all subtlety.

Ron gave him a quizzical look as he walked up, then looked over at a harried-looking McGonagall, then at a pink-faced Hermione pacing behind the podium. His stupid face split into a devious grin, eyes alight with mischief, looking positively Fred-and-George-esque.

"No bloody way," he chuckled at Draco. "Tell me you didn't. Tell me McGonagall didn't catch you."

"Shut it Weasel."

"What's going on?" asked Potter, who should hand in his Auror badge for being a beat behind Weasley.

Ron leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear, who immediately guffawed.

"How many house points did you lose for Slytherin?" Potter snickered.

By the time the group had settled down for the meal, the news of Draco and Hermione's indiscretion was known by the entire table. He sat between Ginny and Luna, the two witches constantly yammering in his ear, and Draco saw right through the pair of them as they tried to distract him from the gossip all around. The people at the neighboring tables weren't troubling to keep their stares or whispers to themselves at the sight of Draco Malfoy sitting friendly-as-you-please amongst the modern heroes of the magical world.

The lights dimmed and McGonagall gave a brief introduction for the witch that certainly did not need one. Hermione smiled bashfully at her former professor and the crowd as she took a deep breath and launched into her remarks.

Draco knew them so well by now he could have mouthed them along with her. She'd paced up and down his bedchambers almost every night the past two weeks reciting them at different speeds and cadences. He watched her eyes scan the crowd and then land on him, the slight quirk in her mouth and the calm settling about her eyes when she spotted him made his chest swell with pride.

Hermione confessed to loathing public speaking not academic in nature. She also confided that looking to him would ease her jitters, bolstering his ego once more. Ron would try to make her laugh, she'd said, and Harry had a way of recking sentimentality that tugged at her heartstrings and made her emotional. Draco held her gaze, trying his best to exude the reassurance and validation he knew she would need.

As she wrapped up her heartfelt speech on what this fund would mean to future generations, she also thanked McGonagall and then extended her gratitude to the numerous witches and wizards who had assisted with planning tonight's event. Draco realized with a jolt that last group included his mother. Scanning the head table, he saw Narcissa seated amongst some of the Hogwarts professors,

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Her kisses became softer, more languid, Draco following her rhythm and letting her take the lead. “No need,” she responded in between lip locks. “Ginny’s already hit him with a booby hex. He’s been walking rather funny the last few minutes.”

“She is definitely my favorite Weasley by far.”

Time passed in an incoherent haze of bliss with Draco’s palms full up with her breasts, Hermione’s hands raking her nails against his scalp, tongues tangling deliciously. No longer caring about any other obligations for the evening other than shagging the daylight’s out of Hermione, Draco bunched the hem of her robes up and lifted, intent on getting his hands on some of her skin.

If this fantastic outfit wasn’t so expensively crafted and required for the rest of her night, Draco would rip it off her in his lust-driven mission to worship her naked flesh. He’d finally succeeded in putting his hand up her skirts, feeling his way up her bare thigh while she panted into his mouth and writhed when—

“MISS GRANGER! MR. MALFOY!?” The piercing, shocked-beyond-belief yell of Minerva McGonagall made them spring apart.

A painful and excruciatingly embarrassed silence followed that, in Draco’s mind at least, lasted for several years.

“Sorry Professor! I mean, Headmistress!” squeaked a flustered Hermione. Draco looked down at the tips of his dragon-hide shoes, like a randy little Fifth Year about to get the detention of his life. A ridiculous thought for a grown man, but gods if McGonagall didn’t still exude that disciplinary aura over the pair of them at the moment. Draco snuck a sidelong glance at Hermione to see her eyes downcast, looking like a Head Girl in danger of losing her badge over this amorous offense.

McGonagall opened and closed her mouth a few times, her formidable mind seemingly unable to process the sight in front of her own eyes.

“Yes, well—if you two are quite finished, Miss Granger I came to collect you for your speech. The attendees are being seated for dinner now, so I expect you can begin in the next 10 minutes.”

“Oh gods, my speech,” she whispered, face going white for a different reason all together.

“Hey,” Draco called softly. “You’ve practiced a thousand times and it’s near perfect. You’re going to do great.”

Hermione gave him a nervous smile and nodded. She shot McGonagall another apologetic look and then swept past her back into the gala, head bowed and muttering under her breath. This left Draco alone with his former professor, who had just caught him with his hand up the dress robes and tongue down the throat of her favorite star pupil.

McGonagall eyed him with a distinct air of displeasure, lips pursed as she regarded him. Unwilling to bend under her stern gaze, he stood tall and straightened the sleeves of his robes. If she would chastise him for daunting to sully Hermione Granger, then he would defend himself. He met her face defiantly and to his surprise, she rolled her eyes.

“Oh don’t give me that petulant look, Mr. Malfoy, you misinterpret my ire completely,” she huffed then admitted reluctantly, “Professor Dumbledore’s portrait is going to be positively insufferable at this

ed chair and waiting for the gentleman in the room to pull it out for her, she went ahead and scared herself. Both Draco and his mother stared at her for a beat and she felt her face flush.

Draco busied himself with pulling out his mother’s chair and Hermione caught his eye to quickly mouth “sorry.” He dismissed it with a small smirk. She sat across the expansive table from Draco, of course, because who knows what sort of improper behavior might occur if he were seated next to her. Why he might even brush her hand! *Perish the thought.*

Hermione cast a quick look at the place settings, never more grateful for her mother’s blueblood lineage than right now. Mum’s Great Uncle Ernest had even been an Earl, not that the title would impress the likes of Narcissa Malfoy, but it meant Hermione at least knew when to use which cutlery for the proper course.

A house-elf appeared suddenly carrying a steaming tureen. “Hermione, I understand you work at the Ministry,” said Narcissa, fixing her with piercing blue eyes while the elf ladled soup into her mistress’s bowl.

“Yes, I am the Deputy Director of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

The elf approached Hermione next for her serving. “Thank you!” said Hermione brightly, thus making her second faux pas.

The little elf looked positively stricken at being addressed and cast a nervous glance at Narcissa who stared at Hermione with an odd look on her ever inscrutable face. Eventually Narcissa waved an impatient hand at the elf, who scurried around the table to serve Draco.

When she heard Draco murmur a quiet “thank you,” to the elf, Hermione couldn’t help the feeling of triumph that rose within her. If Narcissa heard her son, she made no mention.

“Where do you see your ambitions taking you next? From what Draco has told me you performed quite well at school in a variety of subjects.”

Draco laughed lightly and answered first. “That’s an enormous understatement, Mother. Hermione outpaced every student in our year by a wide margin. She could run for Minister this very minute if she truly wanted.”

Hermione’s blush this time originated from Draco’s effusive praise, something she cherished.

“And is that your ultimate goal?” Narcissa asked, again in that perfectly neutral tone.

“Not exactly,” Hermione said and took a sip of soup to gather her thoughts before she spoke. “Draco was teasing. Politics doesn’t hold much interest for me, I’d much rather work my way to the Wizengamot so as to write and enact new laws that bring about long overdue change or move my career outside of the Ministry and take on an advocacy role. I think there’s plenty of room for non-governmental organizations to have an influence on future policies and I think our world would benefit from new voices and groups that aren’t under the sway of outdated political factions or feuds.”

Draco eyed her with a distinct air of pride. The look in Narcissa’s eye seemed far more reserved as she dabbed at her lips with an embroidered serviette.

“Your future certainly does seem bright,” Narcissa commented and Hermione almost choked on

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her glass of wine at what could be interpreted as a compliment. "And rather busy. As such a dedicated and ambitious civil servant, it would lead one to believe you probably would not have an abundance of time for duties outside of your career."

If she hadn't known Draco so well by now, she might have missed the way his mouth tightened and his gray eyes narrowed infinitesimally. He was obviously privy to the true meaning of Narcissa's statement, while Hermione felt unsure of what to make of such a pronouncement, and so said nothing at all.

And thus continued the longest soup course of Hermione's life.

She decided to make a brave stab at conversation during the next course of roasted root vegetables with a dollop of sauce.

"I wanted to personally thank you, Mrs. Malfoy, for the planning assistance for the inaugural gala for my clarity last month. The event was quite lovely, I think, and a significant amount of funding was raised from the evening."

Narcissa inclined her head in her direction. "Of course, it was my pleasure. For future events you may attend with Draco, might I recommend my preferred tailor?"

"Oh," replied Hermione, surprised at the generous offer. "That would be lovely."

"Indeed," came Narcissa's crisp reply. "It would not do for any woman on Draco's arm to appear in robes several seasons out of date."

Hermione sliced the head off a carrot rather more forcefully than necessary. *I am no one's ornament. I am no one's arm candy.*

"Hermione is not just any woman, Mother," Draco inserted calmly, obviously sensing the rage rolling off Hermione's stiff posture in waves and attempting to thwart wands being drawn. "And she looked beautiful as always."

"Of course," Narcissa acquiesced and resumed her dainty consumption of her aperitif. Thick and tense silence reigned and Hermione wondered at how Draco must have grown up in this atmosphere. Daily, multiple-course meals that required formal clothing, conversations conducted in calculated and oddly circuitous language that masked anyone's true intent, it all felt rather stifling.

Draco took the conversational reins from thereafter, asking after various relatives (which didn't include Andromeda or Teddy, Hermione thought bitterly) and Narcissa's charitable endeavors. By the time dessert descended upon them, Hermione contemplated screaming into her ruffle.

"Draco, I took the liberty of instructing your elf to clean out the conservatory before I left your home."

"Thank you Mother, I'm sure it was necessary if you deemed it so."

"Of course dear, you really don't give those poor things much to do at all. And you know what they say about idle hands," chided Narcissa softly.

Good lord, thought Hermione, no wonder adolescent Draco had been so emotionally repressed with a vastly inflated sense of entitlement and anger issues. The familial dynamics at this dinner table were a psychological case study waiting to be published.

need to attend. But no, once again Draco fell victim to his own hubris. And now he lingered out in the Entrance Hall, approaching the verge of a breakdown because of his own foolish pride.

A rustling of fabric coming near had him standing to attention and sorting the hair he'd just been running his hands through. His mouth fell open when he saw Hermione round the corner and head straight for him.

"What are you doing out here? Your speech is soon!"

Hermione ignored his question and fixed him with a hard, blazing look. "Luna said I'd find you here."

She stalked up to him and Draco forgot about every other thing in the universe as she grabbed him by the collar and pushed her lips against his. He responded eagerly, hands clutching her waist and turning her against the wall.

"Gods Granger, do you know how incredible you look tonight?" he panted into her mouth. She kissed him hungrily, trying to pull him even closer than their bodies would physically allow.

"You look dashing as well," she whispered as he trailed his mouth down her neck, right to that favorite spot of hers at the juncture of her throat and collarbone that always had her mewling. He licked a line up the delicious column of her skin all the way to her chin and she moaned.

"Thank you for the necklace, it's too much."

"It's not enough," he growled, re-capturing her lips and plundering the cavern of her mouth with his tongue. His entire being lit on fire as she scrabbled her hands against the fabric of his dress robes and undulated her hips into him. Far too much rich fabric separated the two of them.

"I'm going to murder Cormac McLaggen," he whispered the threat, his hand coming up suddenly to grab and knead her breast.

"I'm going to rip him to fucking pieces. Him and every other man who looks at you tonight." He thumbed a nipple over her dress robes and she keened, pushing her chest further into his hand.

Hermione took his face between her hands. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm going home with you. I'd be on your arm tonight if you weren't so bloody stubborn." Draco frowned but her lips attaching themselves to his neck distracted him.

"That's why you sent the necklace isn't it?" she breathed in his ear, tongue tracing the shell. "Admit it, Malfoy. You want everyone to know."

She pulled back to look him in the eye, a challenge painted on her features. "Say it," she demanded huskily.

He couldn't hold it in anymore, his cock impossibly hard while his heart hammered in his chest.

"You're mine," he rasped into a rough kiss, gripping her hips with force.

"Yes," she moaned. "And you're mine."

Draco couldn't tell which organ derived more pleasure from this statement, his prick or his heart. "And if I see Astoria Greengrass eye you one more time, I'm personally escorting her out."

"Fuck, Granger, I love it when you get all possessive," he groaned. "I still think I'm going to hex McLaggen first."

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cheek, and others who leaned in a bit too close to speak with her, lingering touches on her arm or back.

Allez maie maie maie.

But no, that was incorrect wasn't it? She wasn't his, not really.

Yours. Gods Granger, I'm fucking yours. Yours yours yours yours, miserably unmelodiously yours.

He gripped his glass all the tighter, amazed it didn't break when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hello Draco Malloy?" came the chirping, ethereal voice of Luna Lovegood, on the arm of a bookish looking fellow with tousled hair and neat glasses.

"Hello Lovegood," he said politely, tearing his eyes away from Hermione and her flock of admirers.

"Luna, please. This is my husband, Rolf," Luna introduced the men and Draco shook his hand.

"You're sitting next to us for dinner?" she enthused, looking positively elated at the prospect. Draco knew that Rolf Scamander used to work in Hermione's department at the Ministry, Hermione the one responsible for setting up Rolf with Luna.

"Luna speaks very highly of you," said Rolf in a slow, methodical voice. Draco glanced at her, confused, but she beamed back at him in that guileless way of hers. He tried to focus on his conversation with Rolf, a rather interesting wizard who traveled extensively while he worked on a follow-up edition to his grandfather's famous text, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, but his gaze kept getting pulled away.

Oh. Oh he was going to fucking *encomble* Cormac McLaggen. The slimy, creepy asshole invaded Granger's personal space, speaking lowly with her, as she leaned back as far as her neck would allow, lips in a scowl. When the smarmy git gave her a winning smile and laid a hand on her forearm, Draco made a sort of strangled noise in his throat that he tried to mask with a cough.

Fuck this. He couldn't watch this, couldn't bear witness to other men like McLaggen thinking they had the right to even breathe in the same vicinity as Hermione.

"I'm sorry... Lovegood, Rolf, I've got to... go get some air," he set his glass on the bar and whined away without waiting for a response. Loosening his bowtie, he stalked out into the Entrance Hall, away from the crowds and the painful sight of the woman he loved who stood so close, yet so far away from him. He leaned against the stone walls and closed his eyes, trying to pull air into his lungs.

He knew what happened next on the schedule. Hermione would give her opening remarks, then there would be the dinner, then Hermione would open the dancing. Draco suggested dancing with Potter, but she'd waved him off and said she'd just pull Arthur Weasley out there, as Harry was an abysmal waltzing partner.

But then what followed would be Draco's undoing. He'd have to skulk in the shadows and watch man after man beg for a dance from the Golden Girl herself. Hands that weren't his on her waist. Hands that weren't his clasped in hers. Why did he have to be such a spectacular idiot? Why did he think he could handle this evening pretending he wasn't wildly in love with her? The Calming Draught had already worn off.

He should have just stayed away, told Granger this night was hers and hers alone and he didn't

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Finally, Narcissa seemed to remember that Hermione existed in the same room. "Hermione, I did wonder if your parents enjoyed the gala last month?"

"They weren't in attendance."

"Ah, of course," Narcissa responded knowingly, and for some reason this made Hermione's blood boil at the lingering subtext. *Ah, of course, poor helpless Muggles, aren't they?*

"Draco tells me they are Healers?"

"Dentists," Hermione corrected. "They heal diseases of the teeth and gums. Some light surgery is required for more complex patients, but a good deal of work is cosmetic and preventative in nature."

"I see."

Hermione wasn't sure how she could possibly understand, but decided to let it go. *You love Draco, you love Draco, you love Draco. You're doing this for Draco.*

"And both of them work in this profession you say? How modern," Narcissa remarked.

Again, a casual comment, uttered so gracefully and carelessly that to the uninitiated, would seem harmless. But having grown up with one half of her relatives speaking down their noses to her working-class father and as a Ministry official well-versed in the art of passive aggressive conversation, Hermione recognized the derision cloaked in politeness. The dig at her mother for being so gauche as to work ranked her.

"Yes, they are equal partners in their joint business," asserted Hermione.

"You did not wish to follow in their footsteps?" inquired Narcissa.

"No," said Hermione confidently. "My place is in the magical world." While it would be rather cliché to lift her chin defiantly after such a statement, she felt it rise a bit nonetheless.

The dessert course dragged on as well, accompanied only by the sounds of the gentle clink of spoons against bowls or cups set in saucers. By the time the elf cleared the table and Draco stated that he would escort Hermione home, she felt exhausted.

"Oh, Hermione, before you leave, I wanted to give you something."

Taken aback at her sudden friendliness, Hermione numbly accepted a small wrapped package.

"Draco told me you do so like to read. I hope you find this text to be instructive."

"I... thank you so much Mrs. Malloy, that is very thoughtful of you," Hermione said and beamed at the older witch. Perhaps Draco's mother was more supportive of her only son dating her than she'd previously thought.

Draco smiled happily at the both of them then pecked his mother's cheek in farewell and followed Hermione through the Floo back to her home.

She yawned as she walked through to her bedroom, shrugging off her outer robes. "Well, I don't think that was so bad," she said and unwrapped the book. "I think she's really trying. I mean the book was a lovely gesture, and I'm sure—"

Hermione froze as the wrappings fell away to reveal the cover of a book titled *Our Sacred Society: Etiquette and Customs*.

With trembling hands, Hermione opened the hardback to the introduction. Several phrases jumped

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out, Hermione finding it difficult to read as the words blurred in front of her eyes as they glazed over with angry tears.

“...important to set ourselves apart from those of lesser blood...”

“...witches, in particular, should set store by these sacred traditions lest they wish to invite ill-suited matches...”

“...the preservation of our way of life is of the utmost importance...”

“...detailing a witch's integral place in society to best support the continuation of a thriving pureblood community built on our ancient ideals...”

Her hands shook as she flipped through the pages at random. There were chapters on writing correspondence. Chapters on training and disciplining house-elves. Chapters on selecting formal robes. Chapters on appropriate conversational topics. Chapters on child-rearing.

That last chapter section dedicated an astonishing amount of particularly adamant ink on the notion that a pureblood woman's place was in the home, supporting her husband by breeding heirs.

“...wrong? Granger?”

Draco's voice floated into her awareness then as he approached her from behind. Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to brush away the wetness clinging to her lashes, but Draco span her around by the shoulders, alarmed at her emotional display.

“What is it? I thought you said—?”

His eyes flicked down to the book clutched in her hand and he tore it from her grip, anger clouding his features.

“You know,” he said in a low, dangerous tone, “I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but I see I was right to suspect her true meaning from that comment about your career.”

“Which comment?” asked Hermione distractedly.

“When she said you'd be too busy for duets outside of your career, based on your aspirations,” Hermione thought back to dinner. “Oh! I didn't think she meant anything untoward.”

Draco's eyes narrowed as he continued to glare down at the offensive tome. “She meant you wouldn't have much time for witty or motherly duets,” he snapped and turned on his heel back toward her living room.

Hermione stood stock still, her brain trying to catch up with such a statement.

Witty or motherly duets?

Wife.

Mother.

That should frighten her, yes?

Draco's wife.

A memory surged forward, insistent on holding her mind hostage. Passionate words he'd uttered on the brink of bliss. *I want you every day for the rest of my life.*

When she came to, she ran after Draco, his arm already reaching for the Floo powder.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

Draco laughed bitterly. “Why to return this disgusting book of course and inform my mother if she

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room. “Said it would be nice to have notable Muggleborn alumni in attendance.”

Draco followed the woman's anxious gaze and saw she stared at Hermione.

“Can't believe I'm in the same room as her,” she mumbled and sipped her wine.

Draco barely succeeded in hiding his smirk. So tough Maureen Tyler was statstruck by Hermione Granger?

“Are you not teammates with Potter's wife? Surely you could just ask her for an introduction?” drawled Draco, holding in a laugh.

Maureen shook her head frantically. “Christ, no! I don't want to come across as some creepy fan-girl!”

“Have posters of Granger up in your bedroom do you?” teased Draco.

“No, smartarse. She's just... yknow...” Maureen took a deep sip of her drink. “She's done so much for us Muggleborn witches. Right after I got my letter, I had my dad help me look up others like me and Hermione Granger just... I just couldn't stop reading about her. This powerful witch and she came from Muggles, just like me.” She trailed off and narrowed her eyes at Draco as if daring him to make fun of her. “You probably wouldn't understand that, but yeah, I really look up to her.”

Part of him really did want to laugh, but not for the reason Maureen would think. “I can arrange an introduction if you'd like,” he offered.

Maureen eyed him with skepticism. “You? You're chummy with *Hermione Granger*?”

Woke up next to her this morning, didn't I?

“We were at school together.”

Maureen snorted disbelievingly again. “Mmmhmm, think I'll take my chances. Maybe McGonagall will force her over here. Oi,” she said suddenly, her attention diverted. “Who's that fit bloke next to her?”

“Dean Thomas.”

“You go to school with him too?”

Draco grimaced. “What are you, just 20? He's too old for you.”

“Ugh, you sound like Mac. Speaking of, there's the old man!” She waved exuberantly at Wesley Macnair and his wife, who made their way over.

“Mo!” he greeted her with a fatherly hug. He nodded at Draco and looked puzzled. “Malfoy, Didn't expect to see you tonight.”

Draco silently seethed but shook the man's hand all the same. “Mother was on the planning committee,” he clipped.

Wesley shrugged and Draco remembered that Lara, his wife, was Muggleborn, explaining their attendance for the evening. Draco engaged in quiddich conversation with the group for a bit, but kept getting distracted.

Hermione made her way around the room, working the crowd and greeting as many guests as possible. Some of those guests happened to be of the male persuasion. Men who thought it appropriate to kiss Hermione's hand in greeting, some of the geriatric crowd even being so bold as to peck her

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likely have balked at the size and cost. This way, Draco didn't have to listen to her nonsensical protests and he was rewarded with the sight of jewelry he'd purchased dangling from her elegant neck and resting just above her décolletage.

Mine

"Mate," Ron leaned over and spoke to Draco in a hoarse whisper. Draco bristled at the friendly term, but denied himself the pleasure of jinxing him over it because they were in public. "Send me the name of your jeweler, yeah?"

Draco smirked and bit his tongue, longing to throw out a quip about Weasley's sheer inability to afford something as exquisite as the sapphire and white gold piece he'd specially commissioned for Hermione, but decided it served his best interests to play nice.

Potter chuckled on Draco's other side. "Blimey Malfoy, trying to compensate for something?"

"Really Draco," Padma chimed in, "the more observant in the room are going to start speculating about where that rock came from. Hermione is usually much more subtle in her taste."

Draco shrugged, the brief surge of smugness at the sight of Hermione wearing the necklace dissipating quickly.

"We're going to greet her now, just come with us," urged Potter. Draco shook his head, steadfast in his resolve to maintain his distance for the evening. Ginny quietly admonished her husband again and shot Draco an apologetic look as the foursome moved away.

Draco watched them go, a strange feeling in his chest. As they surrounded their friend, greeting her enthusiastically with hugs and light pecks, he named the feeling as envy. Oh how he wanted to approach her openly, wind his arm around her waist, press his lips to her cheek, let everyone on the fucking planet know that this witch, this magnificent witch, allowed him to be in her life, by her side.

Hermione's bright eyes lifted suddenly in his direction and Draco hastily turned towards the bar.

Conard

This night is not about you. This night is not about you and your pathetic, fucking emotions.

I am okay with this

"All right there?" Draco glanced to his right to find Maureen Tyler sidling up to the bar with a cheeky grin.

"Good evening Miss Tyler," he said in bemusement.

"All you posh types are the same. You can just call me Maureen."

Draco gave her a tight-lipped smile over his glass. "Enjoying the gala, *Maureen*?"

The younger woman fiddled with her wine glass. "Surprised to see you here, if I'm being honest."

"Oh? You're surprised to see me at a charity event?"

She snorted. "Yah, I looked you up, you've more money than God. Didn't realize causes for Muggleborns were even on your radar."

Draco frowned. "Yes, well I think the idea has merit, if you must know."

Maureen shrugged. "McGonagall invited me," she said abruptly, looking nervously across the

wishes to dine with us again she'll need to apologize to you first."

"No, Draco don't! Please!"

She rushed forward and laid a hand on his arm. "Please don't. It's fine, I'm—"

"It is most certainly not fine, she—"

Hermione held up a hand to silence him. "Please, Draco. I'm so tired of fighting every little battle just to prove my worth."

She wiped her eyes dry. "While I do truly believe this attempt at a gift was not given with cruel intentions, your mother's worldview isn't going to change overnight. I've accepted that fact." She stepped closer and took Draco's face in her hands. "But I love you and I'm not going anywhere."

He deflated under her touch and stepped away from the fireplace. Hermione pried the book from his hands and pointed her wand into the grate. "Incendio," she muttered and tossed the book into the roaring flames.

She watched the pages fuel and burn, a twisted satisfaction curling in her gut as the fire destroyed the book. If only dismantling bigotry could be so easy. "You can tell your mother thank you for having us over," Hermione stated firmly. "But if she asks after the book you can tell her exactly how I disposed of it."

As she settled into Draco's arms that night, Hermione recalled Arthur Weasley's words from a few months ago, when he'd warned her of certain expectations that would accompany dating a member of the Malfoy family. Well, if Narcissa Malfoy felt that a few thinly veiled comments and a book on pureblood traditions were enough to scare off Hermione, that woman had another thing coming.

I'm not going anywhere.



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Going out became a spectacle. Even with the Potter pregnancy taking some of the glare of the spotlight off Draco and Hermione's "fairy tale romance" interest in the "unexpected couple from opposite sides" had yet to truly wane.

And fucking Salazar, but the press practically salvaged over the whole "opposites" angle. Which, depending on the political leanings of the publication, either aimed to insult Draco for his past choices or Hermione for her heritage.

Attempting to take his witch out on a simple dinner date in the wizarding world more often than not left Draco ashamed for the glares he caught and Hermione angry and indignant on Draco's behalf. It hardly made for a romantic atmosphere. Draco found he had to shell out more Galleons than usual for private tables, and at that point they might as well have just dined at his home and enjoyed Watson's cooking.

Date nights once again relegated to the Muggle world. Truthfully, Draco didn't mind, but it still

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stung to know their combined notoriety meant the world he was born into couldn't seemingly stomach the thought of him loving Hermione Granger.

They also quickly learned that group outings with Potter and Weasley devolved into a circus. For as much as the public lapped up stories about Draco and Hermione's relationship (one magazine had a dedicated gossip column to watching the ring finger of Hermione's left hand) if they appeared out and about socially with Granger's friends, all bets were off for a quiet evening.

Which left Draco with a rather embarrassing discovery: Granger's friends were unerringly loyal and protective. Of both of them.

When Granger attended her Ministry Christmas gala with Potter instead of the conflicting Whisp & Wright party, it meant playing the dutiful gentleman escort to a pregnant Ginny who took a wholly unnecessary amount of glee in clutching his arm all night and frightening off gossip mongers with her well-timed glares.

It meant Dennis Creevey owed Hermione and asked her permission to sell some of his photographs from the gala to other publications and she agreed readily. Which meant that he flooded the press with new images of Draco sharing a friendly drink and a laugh with Ginny, dancing with Molly Weasley, and sitting at Potter's table during dinner. Ginny's initial read of the public opinion turned out to be spot-on. People ate up the idea of former foes uniting after all these years, inciting strange think pieces on Hogwarts inter-house rivalries and wartime romances.

But whether positive or negative, the fact remained it was a tight headache to deal with all the attention while just trying to have a night out at the pub. Padma floated the idea of re-instituting the group's former game nights at home, and to Draco's horror, everyone jumped aboard that bandwagon.

Because it also meant he had to endure several solid minutes of Theo laughing in his face when Draco invited him to the one being hosted by Hermione.

"I don't see what's so hilarious, Theo. Are you or are you not the same wizard who purchased a home in a posh Muggle neighborhood so he could entertain his girlfriend's family without arousing suspicion?"

Still chuckling Theo just shook his head. "Yeah mate, but I have no problem admitting I'm arse over wand-arm. Merlin... you didn't even sneer when you asked me to come to an event that would include Potter and multiple Weasleys."

Draco scowled, gave him a two-finger salute and promptly ended the Floo call.

Even if he was a smug prat about it, Draco felt grateful that Theo showed up at all, and it only bothered him slightly that his friend ingratiated himself almost immediately into the group. He'd brought cigars for Potter as an impending fatherhood gift, herbal teas for Ginny, and aged mead for the rest of the gathering.

"O'Malley, you have any more loaded friends that aren't wankers?" Ron called as he inspected the vintage bottle Theo brought along.

Draco mumbled derisively into his own drink, keeping his promise to Hermione that he not be too

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"He does it as a side gig," commented Harry. "As a tribute to Colin."

The one decision Hermione had made in the planning for tonight had been press coverage. She said she had a specific photographer in mind and the only member of the press allowed on the premises would be Parvati for *Witch Weekly*.

A piece of conversation murmured by Ron caught Draco's ear. "...Andromeda should have her hands full tonight. Minding that many Weasley grandkids."

"Teddy's helping her out, it'll be good for him," said Potter.

Ginny leaned across Draco to deposit her empty glass on the bar with a clarification muttered under her breath for his benefit. "Though this cause would mean a great deal to her, returning to Hogwarts is hard for her."

That saved him at least one awkward reunion this evening.

A light smattering of applause from across the Great Hall drew their attention, and Hermione finally graced the gala with her presence.

Fuck.

Draco's carefully thought-out plan for the evening: maintain his air of cool detachment as merely a wealthy patron of this new charitable initiative, in attendance because he thought the cause worthy and his mother served on the planning committee. He'd certainly dressed the part in his best black formal robes, complete with silk waistcoat and polished silver fascinings. He would make polite small talk with Hermione if she approached him at all in public.

Draco's carefully thought-out plan for the evening: now in imminent danger of being blown to smithereens.

Hermione looked incandescent in fine, flowing robes of midnight blue, richer in color than the night sky reflected in the enchanted ceiling of the hall above them. She moved with grace and poise through the admiring crowd of potential donors, smiling endearingly in that humble way of hers, as if she didn't deserve all the accolades and adoration from the people around her.

Lips that only he would kiss painted a deep merlot.

Hair that only he would stroke pulled off her face in a loose chignon.

Bare skin that only he would caress peeked out at the collarbone.

His heart clenched in his chest at the sight of her, to be able to see but not touch. This incomparably radiant witch outshone everyone in her orbit and beyond, as she swanned through the room. When she swept an errant curl off her shoulder, a flash of deep blue caught his eye. The ostentatious sapphire necklace gleamed around her throat.

"Oh my gods Malfoy, are you serious?" Ginny snorted, staring at Hermione's neck, the sparkling jewel easily visible even at a considerable distance.

A small victory, but Draco relished in it nonetheless. He may have refuted Hermione's idea to debut their relationship tonight, but that didn't mean he couldn't stake his claim in another way. He'd owed the necklace over a few hours ago with a note asking if she would do him the modest favor of wearing the piece tonight. A perfect strategy in a way, if he'd gifted it to her in person, she would most

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should ask her where she gets her maternity robes, she looks like a fertility goddess.”

“That’s Longbottom’s wife? Best of luck to them... not sure I’d trust him to hold a newborn.”

“Another word against Neville and I’ll hex your bollocks off. But speaking of hexes, look at all the women glaring daggers at poor Gabrielle.” Ginny snickered. “Fleur’s got her work cut out for her there... Merlin she’s worse about Gabby than mum was about me at that age. I think Madam Greengrass is seriously considering cursing the poor girl because her husband can’t keep his eyes where they should be...”

“The Greengrasses are here?”

He spotted a familiar trio of expensively-robed people across the hall. Madam Greengrass seemed to be chiding her husband underneath her breath, eyes constantly flicking to where Gabrielle Delacour stood some 20 feet away, chatting with Dean Thomas, Luna Lovegood and her husband, Rolf.

Draco frowned, noting a younger woman (Astoria?) standing beside her bickering parents looking about the hall in mild interest. The other sister (Daphne?) didn’t seem to be in attendance tonight and the witch who was maybe Astoria was dateless, a very rare sight for a pureblood woman of marrying age.

True to his prediction when he originally pitched this idea to McGonagall, a decent amount of pureblood families interested in parting with their Galleons to get a ticket to this gala made up the attendee list; no doubt calculating the excellent goodwill that accompanied donating to a cause championed by and named for Hermione Granger.

Remaining at the bar with Ginny, the pair contented themselves with crowd-watching for the time being. Ginny bemoaning that Harry always made the social rounds at these things, her husband too polite to give people the short-shrift. Eventually, the savior of the wizarding world graced them with his presence and eyed Ginny’s glass warily.

“It’s sparkling water, I daarned it for your little lush so she wouldn’t feel left out,” Draco drawled.

“Cheers Malfoy. Seen Hermione yet?”

He shook his head. “No, we got ready separately. She should make her entrance soon.” He glanced at his watch.

“Why didn’t you just escort her tonight?” Potter asked but Ginny elbowed him. “Leave it, Harry” she admonished quietly and Harry rolled his eyes.

They were joined a few minutes later by Ron and Padma and Ron grinned at the sight of Draco and clapped him on the back as the camera flashed again.

“Evening, Weasley,” Draco said stiffly, unappreciative of the enthusiastic greeting.

Ron had lately taken to being greatly amused as opposed to enraged by Hermione’s relationship with Draco, dialing up the clumsy behavior whenever they were all together and it exasperated Draco to no end, something that surely entertained the other man.

“Smart of Hermione to hire Dennis as the photographer,” remarked Ron. Ah, so that’s why the younger man looked so familiar. The younger Creevey brother.

“I thought he worked at the Ministry? Wasn’t Colin into photography?” asked Padma.

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grouchily. He’d take the piss out of Theo later for his over-the-top manners, his quieter friend clearly a bit nervous being amongst a new crowd without Sasha at his side. Even if Hermione insisted Sasha attend, Theo confessed he’d be even more on edge worrying about any accidental slips of the tongue or bursts of magic, especially as people got deeper into their cups as the night wore on.

A bit of a back and forth ensued about which game to kick off the evening with. The crowd favorite, a modified version of Exploding Snap, where instead of the cards igniting in one’s face, the deck spat out a card that stuck to the loser’s head demanding penance in the form of drinking—a shot, chugging the remainder of your current drink or someone else’s, etc.—eventually won out.

Potter and Weasley had the worst luck of the evening, but the two fools also relished in completing each challenge as fast as possible. Ginny lost the next round, but her pregnancy prohibited her from taking part in a drinking related punishment. The group instead devised embarrassing dares and challenges for her.

Thus far, she’d mostly been called upon to do impressions, her long-time friends requesting their favorites. Draco would begrudgingly admit she did a spot-on Slughorn as she improvised a scene in which she inducted Theo into the “Slug Club.” Her imitation of Snape having to endure the horror of accepting an Order of Merlin, First Class (Ron acting the part of an overly deferential Kingsley Shacklebolt) fell on the exaggerated side, but had everyone in stitches.

This time, Harry and Ron requested a different creative display. The men exchanged wicked smirks before announcing simultaneously, “Limerick!”

“And make it dirty!” chimed in Padma.

Ginny stood and threw her hair back. “My subject?”

“Malfoy!” called Ron gleefully, earning a glare from the blond and giggles from the rest.

Ginny grinned and rolled her eyes. “Too easy, it’s like you people don’t even want to challenge me.”

She turned to Draco with a smirking expression and coquettishly reticd:

“His eyes are the gray of an unwashed sock,

His smirk always seeking to mock.

He used to act like a git,

And he’s really quite fit,

But Hermione’s laid claim to his cock.”

The room exploded in laughter and applause (with the exception of a furiously blushing Draco and Hermione) as Ginny gave a dramatic bow and resumed her seat.

Their humiliation was short lived, as Ron took the opportunity to remind everyone of Ginny’s debut as a poet. “Merlin, Gin, that’s almost as bad as ‘his eyes are as green as a fresh-picked toad!’”

“His hair is as dark as a blackboard!” chimed in Harry and everyone dissolved into fresh laughter while Ginny fake pouted.

Theo caught Draco’s eye and raised a brow, Draco catching his meaning perfectly. *Old hands, eh?* Draco shrugged, then came to another mortifying realization. His comfortableness in their presence. Part of him (a tiny, minuscule part buried behind layers of pride, disgust, and angst) enjoyed

Remain Nameless

spending time with Granger's friends.

No one cruelly spewed venomous words seeking to wound fragile targets. No one called Draco a Death Eater or a ferret. No one taunted Theo for having a "Death Eater daddy" or sneered at him for dating a Muggle.

They ribbed Draco for being a rich ponce, but he knew it belonged in the same vein of teasing Hermione about her book collection, or Ron's loyalty to the Chudley Cannons, or Padma's strange obsession with Celestina Warbeck. Almost... affectionate in nature.

By the end of the evening, everyone save Ginny was thoroughly smashed, any semblance of game play forgotten on the coffee table. Theo and Ron had broken off into a heated debate about two different Muggle rock groups ("The Stones, mate I'm tellin' ya, the Stones by a mile, they've got like... an *edge* to 'em, ya know?" "Nah, yer mad, it's the Beatles, I swear, when 'Mione introduced me to 'em I saw like... different colors in *my mind*!")

Ginny began nodding off, her head in Harry's lap while he absently stroked her hair and chatted with Padma. Curled up on the loveseat, Hermione leaned against Draco, her hand splayed across his abdomen to draw *lazy* circles. In his buzzed haze, Draco delighted in purring scandalous phrases that only she could hear.

"Feel free to move that hand a little lower Granger," he drawled and her fingers momentarily stilled before resuming a firmer pattern.

"Just say the word love, and I'll throw you over my shoulder and haul you into the bedroom. I don't give one sodding fuck about what your friends think."

She tilted her head up to pout at him. "Language, Malfoy," she chided, her eyes not quite in focus.

"Nice try, darling, but we both know you love a bit of dirty talk. Want me to tell you how it feels when you come on my cock?"

Hermione rolled her eyes unconvincingly and moved her hand to rest atop his belt.

"You're incorra-incorrect—incorrectible," she struggled to get out.

"And you fucking love it, I bet if I showed my hand in your knickers right now I'd find you dipping for me."

Hermione bit her lip, her gaze glassy and filled with wicked intent. "I'm positively gagging for it," she breathed and moved to press a kiss to his neck, but he moved faster. Draco turned his head immediately and plied her lips apart with his tongue, tasting her mead-sweetened mouth. Her hand clenched on his belt, as he swallowed every delicious sound he knew she would be making if they weren't in a room full of people.

Unfortunately, their company eventually wised up to their reason for silence.

"Oi, break it up you two!" Ron's voice shouted from across the way and a pillow hit Draco in the side of the head, as Hermione buried her face in his shoulder in embarrassment. "Merlin's pants, you two were worse than Harry and Gin used to be."

"Fuck off Ron," came Ginny's sleepy reply, uttered without even opening her eyes. "I'm sure Nott will snog you if you ask nicely."

Hey Jude!9

For a split second, her frown faltered with a twitch to her iron jaw, but she quickly masked whatever emotions had tried to surge to the surface. "Yes, well... do excuse me, I need to ensure the corridors are empty. Some of the students are quite keen to sneak in tonight."

She patted his hand in an awkward way and then hustled off.

A frantic movement approached then and a tornado in the form of Ginny practically sprinted up to Draco's side.

"Laugh like I've just said something really funny."

"Pardon?"

"Laugh like my brother just tried to curse you but ended up burping slugs."

Draco couldn't help but snigger at the memory while Ginny latched onto his arm and guffawed heartily, though it lacked all sincerity. A flash to his immediate right let Draco know a photographer captured the manufactured moment.

Ginny threw a wink behind Draco, and he noticed a scrawny young man who looked vaguely familiar lower the camera and flash her a grin.

"What are you playing at Ginevra?" Draco asked with a frown.

She smiled widely. "All part of the plan, my dear friend."

"This plan being Granger's friends take turns babysitting me all evening?"

"No, you twat, I'm laying dum for the gossip-hungry public. Say is that Harry Potter's wife being friendly with the Malfoy heir? He must be a stand-up bloke after all! Rinsie, repeat, and then when you lay one on Hermione later in front of the crowd, we'll all applaud and dab our eyes."

He arched a brow at her. "If that's how you think this evening will proceed, I'm afraid you are going to be sorely disappointed. I'll give you this, the staged photo was a nice touch. We'll make a proper pureblood of you yet with that sort of society cunning."

Ginny barked out a laugh. "Hardly. No, that move was pure Weasley manipulation. I'm the best of the bunch, you know. Being the youngest gave me a distinct advantage over them all."

"Do tell," he motioned to the bartender for sparkling water and charmed it a champagne color for her.

"Cheers!" She clinked her glass against Draco's. "As I was saying, I watched every single one of my brothers' mistakes and instead chose to embody all their best qualities, thus making me the best of the lot. See, I have Bill's cool factor, Charlie's athletic ability, Percy's ambition, Fred and George's sense of humor, and Ron's loyalty."

She daintily sipped her glass and smacked her lips. "Excellent year," she quipped in a passable imitation of Draco.

She smoothed down the deep green fabric of her dress robes. "Thank Merlin for loose robes, the little goblin growing inside me is finally starting to show. At least my tits are bigger now." She glanced down at her chest as Draco pointedly looked away.

"Your complete and utter disregard for propriety astounds me."

Ginny shrugged. "I think I'm rather charming, personally. Oooh look how big Hannah's getting! I

Remain Nameless

paradigm-shifting ideas to the wizarding world at large and jumpstart her dream of a more equitable society. Draco wasn't sure where he fit into all this, if Hermione's grand vision for the future included him in any capacity.

A harried-looking Minerva McGonagall approached him then, pulling Draco briefly from his melancholy.

"Oh there you are Mr. Malfoy. You'll be pleased to know everything seems to be going smoothly thus far. I look forward to greeting our guest of honor when she arrives."

Draco inclined his head politely at the older woman. "The Great Hall looks wonderful, Headmistress. Allow me to once again thank you for letting my mother exercise her creative side and assist you with the preparations." In the distance, Draco spotted Narcissa imperiously directing several of the catering staff, completely in her element.

McGonagall waved an impatient hand. "Yes, well, her taste is impeccable and she took quite a bit off my plate."

She accepted a glass of gillywater from the bartender and then turned to appraise Draco. "If you'll forgive an old woman her sentimentality, I must say Mr. Malfoy that I am truly in awe of this accomplishment. I do hope you're proud of what you've achieved here tonight. Thanks to you, generations of young witches and wizards will benefit. And though I may not live to see it, I hope this initiative helps bridge the societal divide that has plagued our world for far too long. This is a fine thing, a fine thing indeed."

Draco had no idea how to eloquently respond to such high praise from the formidable witch, one not known for doling out compliments lightly. "That's... thank you, Headmistress... I... I really think it's Granger you should be praising."

McGonagall's mouth formed a thin frown. "Accept the praise for your work, Mr. Malfoy. You should allow people to believe the best of you."

Draco shrugged and averted his eyes. "I'm not so sure I've done much to engender such good faith from others."

"Professor Dumbledore believed in you. As did Professor Snape," she retorted gently.

"Perhaps, but neither one of them bothered to ask after my well-being during my Sixth Year. You were the only teacher, you know. The only one that entire year who asked me if I was all right."

He met her gaze then, knowing they both remembered that disastrous time at the school. What Draco had said was painfully true. When he'd skived off classes and missed assignments, McGonagall gave him detentions, and rightfully so, but there had been a few moments when she'd shown genuine concern for him, which was more than any other adult could say at that time.

"Mr. Malfoy, this is most unlike you to perform such subpar work, is something the matter?"

"Mr. Malfoy, I recently heard you've resigned from your house quidditch team, is something going on?"

"Mr. Malfoy, you're looking rather pale, are you sure you don't require the hospital wing?"

"Mr. Malfoy, I'm quite aware I am not your Head of House, but please do come see me during office hours if you have anything you wish to discuss, be it Transfiguration related or otherwise."

Hey Jude 19

"Huh?" said Ron distractedly and turned back to Theo. "Thought yer Muggle was a girl? You into blokes too? That's cool if you are but I'm in a serious relationship."

"Oh sweet Merlin, Ron, I think you've had enough tonight," muttered Padma and stood to collect her inebriated boyfriend. Everyone else followed suit shortly after, Hermione doling out tight hugs to all as they left, even a slightly surprised Theo, who clearly hadn't been expecting an embrace.

"You're handy when you're plonkered, did you know that?" Draco teased as Hermione waved her wand to levitate the many empty glasses to the sink.

"Shut it," she mumbled and staggered a bit on her way to the bedroom. "I absolutely do not want to discuss the fact that I let you sing me in front of everyone."

Draco smirked as he followed. "As I recall, you were a very willing participant."

Truthfully, he wasn't a man who enjoyed amorous displays in public, but you try telling his libido that when he's full up on strong mead and his witch is pawing at him in his lap.

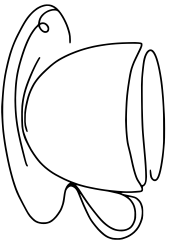
"Do you think Theo had a good time?"

Draco flopped on the bed next to her. "First she gets grabby then the anxiety sets in. You're a strange little drunk, Granger."

She huffed and he felt her cuts move against his cheek. "Well excuse me for caring if all our friends were comfortable."

Our friends.

I am okay with this



Chapter Forty One

Hermione didn't know whether she wanted to laugh, cry, or scream. She settled for a startling combination of all three, which was probably why Harry stood frozen in a mixture of concern and fear at the threshold of her bedroom.

"Hermione are you... what have you got on?"

An excellent question. "I—I—I have no bloody clue!" she shrieked and flapped her arms at her reflection in the mirror.

Hermione had arrived home from work that evening to a gift box on her kitchen table. She sighed as she lifted the lid and read the curt message penned by Draco's mother. They'd agreed to attend family holiday events together this year and Hermione acquiesced to accompanying Draco to his mother's infamous New Year's Eve gala. In an effort to be kind to Narcissa and in the Christmas spirit, Hermione further agreed to allow Narcissa's favored tailor design her dress robes for the event.

The rich fabric seemed to go on endlessly as Hermione lifted the heavy garment from the box and tried to put it on. This turned into more of a battle, as Hermione gracefully struggled with all sorts of under layers and discreet fastenings, and *buggering hell* where were her arms supposed to go?

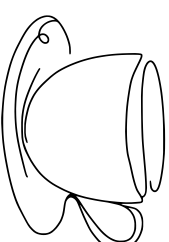
By the time she could poke her head through the top opening and furiously jab her wand over her shoulder to do up the lacing and buttons down the entire back (including the train, because Merlin forbid this outfit not have its own gravitational pull) Harry had popped through the Floo.

In her haste to try on her custom robes, she'd completely forgotten Harry was meant to come over to discuss Ginny's Christmas presents. Instead of calm, rational Hermione who would talk him down every year from going overboard on his wife's gift, her poor friend walked in on Hermione having a complete meltdown at her own reflection when she'd finally caught sight of herself.

"Is that for the Malfoy's party?" Harry guessed.

"Yes, Narcissa sent it over. And I look—I look—"

"Expensive?" supplied Harry.



Chapter Thirty Nine

October 2008

He absolutely did not need to be here this early in the evening, but if he'd stayed one second longer pacing his bed chambers like an agitated, caged animal, he'd either go insane or wear a hole through his wood floors.

Draco leaned back against the marble bar and cast his eye around the lavishly decorated Great Hall of Hogwarts. Leave it to Narcissa Malfoy to spare no expense, even if she might not openly approve of what Hermione's fund represented.

Draco's mother approached him a few weeks ago claiming if he thought he could pull off an inaugural gala at such a historic venue in such a short span of time then he was indeed, barking mad. Draco accepted the disdainful olive branch on his mother's part and immediately put her in touch with Minerva McGonagall to offer her services as part of the planning committee for the event. Hermione decided to hand the reins over for this, party-planning not being one of her joys in life, but Draco insisted that she at least deliver the opening remarks.

Draco had insisted on several things this evening, some of which he already regretted. She'd wanted to arrive at the gala on Draco's arm, a suggestion he resoundingly quashed. He argued their relationship announcement would pull the focus from Hermione and her cause for the evening, and he'd be damned if he let himself steal any of her thunder tonight.

He wished he hadn't been so vociferously against the idea now, nursing a glass of whisky and trying not to frown as guests filed in and sent glances his way that ranged from curious to aggressively suspicious. Susan Bones at least had given him a friendly wave and nod as she passed by on the arm of Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Hermione had done her best to convince Draco that she wanted to be seen with him, wanted the whole world to know about them, but Draco couldn't and wouldn't relent on this point. Tonight was not the night to get tongues wagging about their romance, but for Hermione to introduce her

Every open sneer, every furious glare, every heated whisper, every wipe of a hand against fabric after shaking Hermione's hand, none of it went unnoticed by Draco. No one had yet to be as openly hateful as Pansy, but the slights existed nonetheless, and Draco would make his displeasure known to the offenders via the sewing of a few longstanding monetary ties.

The thought of this future vengeance allowed him to move about the party with a pleased air. Well, that and the fact that he had the loveliest witch in the room on his arm. Hermione looked resplendent in her robes and she carried herself as if she'd prepared for this her whole life. But he knew his love well, and he knew the poise and cool elegance likely exhausted her nerves by this point in the evening.

A man of his word, he hadn't left her side all night, with the exception of when a few of her dances were claimed by other gentlemen. He breathed easy when she waltzed in the arms of the friendly Vronski, a few of her Ministry colleagues, and even Adrian Pucey. But when he noticed Boris Pliska making movements towards the end of her current dance, he was never more grateful in his life for the friendship of Theodore Nott. His friend interceded quickly, swooping in to take a turn about the dance floor with Hermione.

Theo, ever the astute friend, guided Hermione over to Draco at the end of their waltz. "I should probably find Astoria again, have either of you seen her?"

"I haven't, but perhaps she's in the ladies? I know I need to find one, I'll let you know if she's in there," suggested Hermione and they escorted her from the hall to the washroom.

Waiting for Hermione to return, hopefully with Astoria in tow, the silence of the empty corridor was shattered by what sounded like yelling and the slamming of a nearby door. Theo and Draco exchanged a panicked look, then drew their wands and followed the source of the commotion around a corner.

Muffled shouting came from behind the oak doors to one of the traveling parlours. When Theo and Draco burst into the room, they were greeted with quite the startling sight.

"—should be MINE! This—this—whole—bloody—life! It was always meant to be mine!"

Draco had never seen Pansy drunk before. Currently, she was so plastered that she was being physically held upright by both Adrian and Daphne while Astoria tried to reason with her.

"Pansy, please, let Daphne take you to our home, we can send your husband through later if you—"

"My husband," Pansy spat. "Is a... is a pig!" She dissolved into hysterical laughter then burst into tears again and slumped against Adrian.

"Come on darling, let's get you to a bed," coaxed Daphne and they attempted to move her to the fireplace.

Pansy suddenly noticed Draco and Theo howling inside the doorway. "Oooh there he is, the traitor... the filthy blood traitor... making your father proud are you? Sully your line!"

Draco narrowed his eyes maliciously. "Jealousy does not become you, Lady Pliska. Are you through embarrassing yourself this evening?"

"Draco, don't, she's not in her right mind," pleaded Astoria.

"Stay out of this Astoria," warned Draco.

"Yes, Greengrass, stay—stay out... couldn't hold onto him either could you, you stupid bint... but per—perhaps wasn't your fault... Draco has unsavory tastes these—these—days," said Pansy, then glared at a point behind him and Theo.

"Ah look—look who's graced us with her disgusting presence. Dirty little mudblood!"

Draco winced around to see Hermione frozen at the threshold. She seemed shocked rather than offended, but all Draco wanted to do in that moment was gather her up in his arms and protect her from ever hearing that slur ever again. But he had to deal with his odious ex-girlfriend and he'd rather Granger not be here to witness.

"Theo get Granger out of here."

"Draco but—!"

"Now, Theo?" Draco growled over Hermione's protest.

He heard Theo's soothing murmur as he swept Hermione away. Pansy continued her untinged rant. "My—my children—should be yours!" she regarded Draco with bulging mad eyes. "It was always supposed—supposed to be me! Me on your arm! Your heirs in my womb! Not that beastly little—"

"Insult Granger again in front of me and I'll hex you through that fireplace," he interrupted coldly.

"Draco, leave it, she's not well right now," said Astoria firmly. "Adrian, please, take her to our home, our elves can take care of her."

Adrian and Daphne finally succeeded in dragging Pansy through the Floo, leaving an ominous silence in her shrieking wake.

"You shouldn't have needed her, she's suffered enough," said Astoria.

Draco fixed her with an angry stare. "*Suffered*? She's the one who chose to drink tonight! She's the one who leapt into a marriage for status and wealth! Pansy made her bed," he retorted.

"Oh? And what were her other options? What options exist for a sole pureblood heiress under the thumb of her overbearing parents?" she argued back.

"Bit rich coming from you, a Greengrass. Your family is hardly the rebellious type. Your own sister is engaged to Pucey, for Merlin's sake," sneered Draco.

Astoria surprised him by smiling wistfully. "Daphne is lucky. Adrian is a good man and they were friendly before. She may not have chosen him on her own, but he'll treat her well and perhaps one day, they will be so fortunate as to love one another."

Draco's lip curled. "How lovely for Daphne. And I'm meant to feel sorry for poor, spoiled Pansy? She's reaping what she's sown."

Astoria quickly replaced her smile with a cold, incredulous glare. "You think she deserves to be treated in such a way by her own husband? The man is a well-known philanthropist and on top of that... well you heard Pansy didn't you? The poor woman has multiple children with a man she does not love. Do you think her husband allowed her a say in that decision? You think any witch deserves such a life? That could just as easily have been me."

Draco frowned and looked away, chastened. As much as he cringed thinking back upon his time

with Pansy, Astoria had a point.

"I know you have a difficult history with Pansy," continued Astoria gently. "But you'll never be in that position. Your freedom to choose Hermione is enviable to many, and I certainly don't begrudge you your happiness, but try, if you can, to remember that most in our circle are not so fortunate. My sister included." She paused here and took a deep breath.

"Daphne is the good daughter, the dutiful daughter. 'Dutiful Daphne and Willful Astoria' is what my parents always said. I'm not slighting my sister, she means well and obedience to our parents' expectations is simply in her nature."

"Not yours?"

"No," she spat harshly. "My parents grow impatient with this game with Theo. They expected a marriage contract months ago, but with none in sight..." she trailed off and hugged her arms around herself. "Do you know who my parents want to pursue instead? Marcus Flint."

Draco blanched. At Hogwarts, Draco needed to seek the approval of the older Slytherin, given his position as captain of the quidditch team, but found the boy rather distasteful. Rumors had always flown around the common room about his unsavory behavior towards witches, as in, he didn't care if they were willing in their affections.

"I see Marcus's reputation precedes him," she said hollowly, noticing Draco's look of fear.

She tilted her head curiously at him. "You've no idea do you? Why the women in my circle pursue you? Why they hope their parents approach Narcissa or you for a contract? Why I agreed to courting you even though you'd previously courted my sister?"

That earned her a wry and dismissive, "I'm sure the size of my Gringotts vault is attractive to many."

Astoria shook her head, her gaze plying. "You've no idea... before I... well, before all of... this, I'd honestly given up hope, and was willing to bend to my parents' wishes. I resigned myself to the life of pureblood wife. When my parents presented you as an option I jumped at the opportunity."

"Why?"

"It's well known among witches that Malfoy men worship their wives. Perhaps we never would have been a love match, but you would have treated me kindly. You did treat me kindly, even if you weren't exactly attentive. Or sober."

Draco winced, and Astoria laid an apologetic hand on his arm.

"You can forgive yourself, Draco, I told you before I bear you no ill will. But between you and the Marcus Flints and Boris Plisks of the world, I'd take you every time."

She dropped her hand, and Draco felt unease bubbling in his gut. "Astoria, are you in some kind of trouble?"

She shook her head and moved back from him. "No, I've a found way to rescue myself, as it were. My point is, if you can feel anything at all for Pansy... it should be pity."

Astoria checked the time on the clock on the mantel. "I've got to go, I'm running late already, I've not much time."

upon a bemused Draco.

This most pleasant interaction was unfortunately followed by a much more unsavory one.

"Hermione, may I present Baron Boris Pliska and his wife Pansy, whom I believe you already know," drawled Draco and she felt him tense at her side. The baron gamely kissed her hand, and Hermione repressed a shudder at the way his eyes raked up and down her form hungrily. The man had perhaps a few years on her own father.

"That's *Lady Pliska* to you," sneered Pansy and narrowed her eyes at Draco before turning her furious glare to Hermione.

"Granger," she titled. "Pansy seeing you at such a prestigious event. I'm surprised Narcissa let you through the front door."

She heard Draco's sharp inhale at her side but before he could burst into a furious public tirade, Hermione let out a tinkling laugh.

"Oh how silly Lady Pliska, but of course we didn't come through the front door!" She leaned forward conspiratorially, "We arrived via the Floo connection to the private quarters Draco keeps here. We'll be retiring there together after the fireworks later. I'm so looking forward to the spectacle!"

"Enjoy your evening Lady Pliska, Baron," said Draco, and though it's a perfectly polite dismissal, to the practiced ear his tone was the aural equivalent of the two-finger salute.

Obligatory socializing complete for the time being, Hermione was all too glad for the dancing to begin, even if it required her to be the center of attention again.

Since Narcissa is widowed and not remarried, Draco and you will be expected to open the dancing for the evening. Don't be surprised if immediately following, you are approached by other wizards to ask for a turn. You two aren't betrothed or married, so he has no official claim over you for the dancing.

When Draco placed a hand on her waist, she felt that familiar thrill at his touch, even if far too much fabric separated her skin and his fingertips. He gave her hand one reassuring squeeze before waltzing them deftly about the room, his silver eyes on her the entire time.

As they turned and glided across the floor, Hermione's eye drifted to two enormous silk banners hung along one wall. They depicted the two families Narcissa represented and the two bloodlines that ran through Draco. The Black family crest bore the same motto Hermione remembered from the tapestry hung in Grimmauld Place: *Toujours Pur*. Hung by its side, the Malfoy family's boldly stated *Sanctimonia Tunc Semper*.

Pansy Always Conquers

It does not, Hermione thought fiercely. It most certainly does not.



Draco had a running list in his head of every guest who, come the New Year, would suddenly find themselves without the usual financial support of House Malfoy.

Remain Nameless

at one end that supported a full orchestra, complete with conductor. Airborne silver platters passed by and through the guests, weighted down with all manner of decadent hors d'oeuvres, and though Hermione made sure to eat prior to the gala, *(I avoid all finger food. You'll have to save your public eating for the salad, plated meal, I'm afraid, advised Padma)* her mouth watered at the tray of smoked salmon crudités.

"Shall we go find Theo?" Draco's question broke into her inner musings about the unfair expectations placed upon women at all levels of society and she nodded, eager for some friendly company.

Theo nursed a glass of amber liquid with a pained smile on his face and Astoria Greengrass on his arm, sporting an equally tight smile. Both seemed to brighten when they spotted Draco and Hermione approaching.

"Oh thank Merlin," breathed Theo and shook Draco's hand and kissed Hermione's cheek. Astoria looked as perfect as ever in her sage dress robes, the physical embodiment of everything a pureblood lady of standing should be. Hermione tamped down her jealousy to the best of her ability at the other which's effortless grace, and reminded herself that Astoria, like Draco, had been bred for this life.

Besides, the young woman was nothing but kind to Hermione and immediately engaged her in effusive talk about the Hogwarts fund for students of non-magical parents. Indeed, she was so enthusiastic about the topic that Hermione considered inviting her to serve on the board by the end of their conversation.

Draco reluctantly had to pull them away from their genuine friends in order to make the rounds with other guests. He led her over to Daphne Greengrass and Adrian Pucey next, Astoria's older sister decidedly frosty in her reception of Draco but much warmer to Hermione, and Adrian stiffly polite. Hermione congratulated the pair on their recent engagement and then Draco swept her along to the next group.

On and on it went, as she made her way around the edge of the massive ballroom on the arm of the Malloy heir. Draco, adept at navigating all the political and conversational nuances of these brief meetings, would quickly pull himself and Hermione away at even a whiff of offense lobbed at Hermione and rewarded friendlier groups with longer visits. Blaise Zabini and his haughty mother were granted all of 30 seconds of their company.

It dismayed Hermione a bit to recognize a good portion of Ministry department heads and Wizengamot members in the crowd tonight. Nice to know the government leadership positions still belonged with many of the old families or their sympathizers, she thought bitterly. Still, many of those wizards and witches were more familiar with Hermione's career which allowed her to take the conversational reins for a bit.

Hermione's favorite reception came as a surprise. She immediately recognized the Bulgarian Ministry official, Vronski, and his wife Irina, as they had been a frequent presence in Viktor Krum's guest box at his quidditch matches. They were charmingly fascinated by all things English, and while they had respected Hermione's privacy when she attended Viktor's games, they occasionally drew her into lively conversation about her work for creature rights. They greeted her like an old friend, with tight hugs and wide smiles, which most likely broke several etiquette rules, and then bestowed this greeting

Hey Jude!

She made to sweep past him, but Draco grabbed her wrist. "Late for what? Where are you off to?" Astoria didn't answer and instead pried her wrist from his grip and gave him a small smile. She approached Draco and pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. "Tell Theo I'm sorry, would you? He's been nothing but lovely."

She stepped back and Draco noticed a determined glint in her eye, the look of a woman who had something both exciting and terrifying on the horizon, and she would press on no matter which obstacles stood in her path.

Astoria walked swiftly to the doorway, then turned to face him one last time. "I may find myself in need of some friends rather soon. May I count on you and Hermione?"

Draco nodded his assent and Astoria beamed, turned, and left.



Hermione felt sick to her stomach despite the fact that she'd drank maybe a glass of champagne and only taken dainty bites at dinner. Theo made to steer her back to the ballroom, but she shook her head and wrenched herself away from him.

"I need some air. Please."

He nodded and redirected their course to a grand sitting room with glass doors leading out to an impressive balcony. It was magically warmed, of course, but Hermione felt numb and cold despite the cozy atmosphere and picturesque snow-covered grounds laid out before her.

There was certainly no love lost between Hermione and Pansy. Indeed, Hermione only had unkind thoughts for the simpering twit of a woman before tonight. But to hear the desperation, the absolute misery in her voice when she spoke of her husband... Hermione could only feel unbearably sad for the life of her former childhood tormentor. She would not wish that type of existence on anyone.

Underneath all that pity, she noted a twinge of heartache at the callous way Pansy had tossed the insults about her blood in her face. She could only imagine how many of the assembled guests in the ballroom longed to throw that awful slur at her over the course of the party and but for Draco, would have no qualms about treating her like dirt.

"Chin up, Hermione," said Theo softly.

She slumped against the balustrade. Until this moment, she hadn't given herself even a second to relax her posture or expression all evening, the strain of standing rigidly and smiling tightly finally overcoming her.

"How can I ever belong here Theo?"

She wrung her hands in front of her and glared down at the rich fabric that draped her body.

"I feel so far out of my depth in this world, Draco's world," she tapped her head towards him, "your world. I'm so... exhausted at having to prove myself, prove my worth. The list of my accomplishments on my CV is most likely double that of any wizard in that ballroom. And it will never matter, not to

them. I'll always be the lowly Mudblood."

Theo raised his eyebrows. "Giving up, are we?"

Hermione tutted. "On Draco? Of course not! But sometimes, I must admit, I do fantasize about how much easier our lives would be if our backgrounds weren't in such opposition."

Theo approached her and stood at her side. "If I may, I have a rather selfish investment in your societal success." Hermione's brow furrowed.

"When I finally introduce Sasha to this world, she's going to need your support. Hell, I'm going to need your support. If two people as brave and in love as the two of you can't soldier through some misguided insults from bitter gossips, then what chance have I got?" Theo stated quietly. Indeed, he looked so forlorn that Hermione looped an arm through his and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I hate this," he continued, his voice as soft and measured as always in that particular "Theo" way of speaking.

Often Hermione had wondered what drew Draco and Theo together as friends besides their shared heritage. But more exposure to the wizard showed her a steadfast friend, one who'd known pain and could dole out silent support devoid of judgment during Draco's darker period of addiction.

It struck her then, the magnitude for kindness in this solemn, careful foil to Draco's more commanding presence. Draco, out of an enduring loyalty to his friend, had only given Hermione a scant picture of Theo's terrifying childhood. One of a withdrawn child, precise in his movements, keeping himself constantly to the edges of every conversation and every room he entered. A learned behavior, Draco once confided, necessary for surviving in the Nott household.

"This charade with Astoria... lying to almost everyone in my life except you and Draco. The things I have to keep from Sasha... Merlin, Hermione it's draining."

Hermione squeezed his arm. "Of course we'll support you and Sasha, anything you need. I'll help her any way I can, she's truly wonderful Theo."

He grinned down at her, just one positive comment about his girlfriend swung his mood right back around. "She is. She really is. Are you ready to return to battle?"

Hermione sighed and slid away from him. "As ready as I'll ever be I suppose."

She straightened up and worried her lower lip between her teeth. "Thank you for listening. I don't mean to whinge on about the unfairness of it all it's only—" she took a deep breath and voiced the fear that had plagued her all night. "I don't want to let Draco down."

"You could never." They both started at the sound of Draco's voice from the balcony doorway. He approached Hermione with a heated gaze that had Theo chuckling and taking his leave.

"Astoria left, she sends her apologies," Draco tossed over his shoulder to his departing friend.

"Everything all right?" asked Hermione, sliding her arms around his shoulders as he closed the distance between them.

"It is now," he breathed and kissed her soundly. A kiss that imparted such a thorough and earnest communication of his love that Hermione's inferiority complex and doubts crumbled away into nothing. He pulled away slowly and rested his forehead against hers.

sparkling icy blue. *Ice like her heart*, Hermione thought bitterly, and quickly chastised herself. Pettiness would get her nowhere. Narcissa greeted her son warmly and offered her face to Hermione, who performed the polite social ritual per Padma's instruction.

She eyed Hermione up and down appraisingly before her cool stare stopped dead on Hermione's neck.

"Did Draco give you that necklace?"

"Oh ah, no." Hermione didn't want to elaborate and make this moment any more awkward than it already was, but Narcissa glared at her throat like a woman possessed.

"Andromeda lent it to me for the evening."

Narcissa's eyes flashed up to hers at the mention of the disowned Black sister, startling Hermione with the depth of emotion displayed there.

"It belonged to my mother," she divulged evenly, and Hermione couldn't decipher whether the woman was furious, shocked, sad, or perhaps a confusing mix of all three.

Draco, probably sensing the dangerous turn in the atmosphere swiftly moved Hermione along into the ballroom while she stewed in a combination of both exasperation at Andromeda's power play and amusement at the audacity of it. That woman would be getting quite the curious owl from Hermione in the next week.

When they were a safe distance away, Draco chuckled under his breath. "I see Aunt Andromeda never lost her family's propensity for causing drama."

Hermione huffed, but couldn't deny her respect for the older witch. "Yes, I can certainly see how she may have influenced Sirius at any rate. I do wish she would have informed me of her true intentions with this necklace."

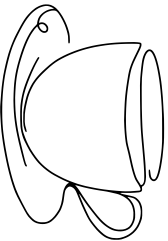
"It certainly becomes you," Draco intoned, catching her in a heated stare. He plucked two glasses of champagne from a passing tray and handed one to her. She accepted the beverage with a demure smile, Padma's instruction in her mind once more.

Ladies are expected to stick to champagne and white wine only. Red wine has too high a risk for spills and stains to the teeth, obviously. Hard liquor is considered too masculine and butchery too common.

While Hermione enjoyed champagne just fine, especially on the occasion of New Year's Eve, she certainly didn't plan to imbibe much tonight. She'd need her wits about her with this crowd. She sipped her drink and cast her gaze around the grand room, successful in repressing her snort lest Draco think she meant to mock him or his family.

Grandiose did not even begin to describe the ballroom of the Lestranger Estate. The floors beneath her feet gleamed so brightly, she could almost see her own reflection in them. Light sparkled all around and above them, bouncing and refracting throughout the space in the hundreds of crystal pieces that made up the countless chandeliers floating above, not to mention all the cumbersome jewelry glittering around the necks of every woman here.

Champagne towers glistened in every corner of the ballroom, the bubbly liquid cascading down in an endless stream of luxury. Her ears picked up a light tune, and Hermione saw a raised platform



Chapter Forty Two

December 31, 2008

Only Draco Malfoy could carry off all this flippery with a distinct air of grace. Any other man would have been uncomfortable, would have looked odd and unnatural buried under layers of silk, black velvet, gold brocade, and numerous brass buttons, but not Draco.

No, this man wore an honest-to-gods cape around his shoulders and somehow managed to appear in his natural element, as if he were born to be clothed in multiple layers of extraneous formality.

Born with a goblin-made spoon in his mouth.

Hermione thought she looked ridiculous, but Draco told her she looked beautiful in her formal robes. Draco also told her she looked beautiful that morning in her fleece pajamas with holes in the elbows, so perhaps he held a slightly skewed perspective.

Draco's confidence in her helped steel her for the night ahead to be sure, but Hermione took no chances and, determined to not make a fool of herself at Narcissa's New Year's Eve Ball, enlisted the assistance of Padma.

As studious in nature as Hermione at times, Padma schooled her in all the intricacies of the unspoken rules and regulations of comporting oneself at a society event hosted by pureblood royalty.

They arrived exactly on time, much to Draco's annoyance as he would have preferred to be fashionably late, but Hermione wanted the meet and greet portion with Narcissa over with as quickly as possible. A short receiving line had already formed at the door to the ballroom, but she and Draco moved right to the front of the queue.

Hermione swallowed nervously and allowed Padma's calm voice to echo in her mind, acting as her guide into this world of unmatched wealth and prestige.

You always greet the host family first, but since you're arriving with Draco, you two will obviously skip to the front of the receiving line to Narcissa. She will offer both sides of her face for you to kiss.

Narcissa looked regal as ever in robes of a similar design to Hermione's, though the color was a

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"Where you belong is at my side. I don't care if we're in the Muggle café or a grand ballroom, you belong with me," he intoned.

"I love you," she replied, the only words available to her in the moment. He kissed her again and stroked a long finger down her cheek to the top of her collarbone where his grandmother's necklace rested.

"Though you may be but a humble peasant," Hermione snorted at the playful insult, "this necklace looks quite at home around your throat. I'd lavish you with thousands of jewels if you let me, love."

Hermione rolled her eyes, not doubting for a second that Draco would absolutely follow through on that threat if she would only relent. "Well I certainly don't need all that. But if you like this Black family heirloom so much, what would you say to me keeping it on later? Just the necklace, you understand, nothing else."

His fingers strengthened their grip around her upper arms and his eyes darkened with a heady lust as he let out a long exhale. "I'd say you are in very grave danger of being apparated straight to bed, Miss Granger."

She tamped down the thrill of anticipation that coursed through her whole being and resisted the temptation to immediately give in to his unspoken promise of carnal pleasure.

"Later, darling, I fear your mother may actually murder us if we're not present for the countdown to midnight."

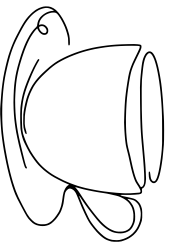
Draco let out a low growl and cursed under his breath the whole way back to the ballroom. Midnight edged closer and Draco and Hermione rode out the rest of the evening in each other's arms on the dance floor. When the orchestra conductor announced that the New Year was but 10 seconds away, Draco gathered her close, his intent to snog her thoroughly spelled out in the gleam of his eyes.

As the countdown hit "one!" the entire ballroom erupted in cheers and Draco leaned down to press a sweet, lingering kiss to her lips. He pulled back with a grin, but Hermione's eye caught once again on the banner behind his head.

Purity Always Conquers

She redirected her gaze to Draco, and with a sudden surge of what felt like triumph in the face of centuries of meaningless bigotry and hatred, captured his willing lips in a second kiss.

Bollocks to your purity. Love conquers all.



Chapter Forty Three

January 1, 2009

It was the first day of a brand new year and instead of waking up alone and slightly hungover like last year, Draco had Hermione wrapped around him while Crookshanks squashed his shins. Draco gave his lower limbs an irritable shake, dislodging the obstinate creature who had rendered his legs partially numb. The ginger football gave him a mischievous glare before flopping off the bed.

Hermione's comment to Pansy last night about retiring to private quarters within the Lestrage Estate was all bluster. They'd instead exchanged sliced goodbyes with Narcissa and immediately left for Hermione's home where she made good on her promise to let him shag her in naught but a goblin-wrought necklace.

She might try to downplay it, but Draco thought his girlfriend looked ever so enticing when nude and riding him while draped in expensive jewels. Said girlfriend stirred sleepily at his side then pressed a kiss to his shoulder.

"I'll fix the eggs and bacon, but you're responsible for your own coffee. I believe in you, I think you can finally master the brewing machine," she teased and Draco rolled his eyes.

Now quite at home in Hermione's kitchen he was more pleased than he intended to ever admit that he successfully made a pot of coffee all by himself. He picked up the morning copy of The Daily Prophet and flicked through it idly as Hermione approached from behind and slid her arms around his torso.

"Will your mother be pleased with the coverage in the society pages this morning?" she inquired and busied past him to fix her tea. Draco took a seat at the kitchen island and flipped toward the back sections of the paper.

But a several page spread and dozens of column inches detailing the ins and outs of the most infamous of pureblood holiday balls did not await him on the society pages. No, instead Draco found the press space usually dedicated to Narcissa Malfoy and her gala taken up by an announcement and

retreated from her, waiting for her to reveal her intentions first.

"Well, I... nowhere specifically or anything, I simply..." She trailed off, her mind whirring.

Cocks Malfoy, I'm not out here measuring the size of my ring finger, I only want to know if I'm on my own in feeling like this is the person I want to spend my life with and I'm not a trial run for whomever your dear mother would like you to ultimately wed.

Hermione wrung her hands in her lap, stifling all the dangerous words that threatened to emerge and declare the permanency of her love for the man across from her.

"I suppose the question plaguing my mind is whether you see a point in the future where we are no longer together?"

A beat of silence passed in which Draco's jaw tightened, his body grew taut with tension. A poised statue, emotions occluded and closed off, layers of protection built over the real Draco. When he finally spoke his tone was low and careful. "Are you asking me if I see an end date to being with you?"

She nodded, unable to trust her voice.

"No." His voice was firm, his eyes flashing steel. "No, Hermione. What I feel for you is... it certainly isn't fleeting."

The clouds over his eyes cleared, his posture relaxed. He peeled back the final layer and if she thought him beautiful before, absolutely nothing compared to the way Draco appeared when he allowed himself to be open and vulnerable.

He laid a hand atop her knee. "Every version of my future includes you. I'm yours in whatever capacity you'll have me," he promised softly.

I want you every day for the rest of my life.

Hermione slid her hands into his silken hair and pulled his mouth down to hers. "That suits me just fine since I have no intention of ever letting you go," she whispered before taking possession of his lips in a burning kiss.

While it may not have been a declaration of *forever* or *marriage* or *bonds* or *always*, it felt momentous enough to Hermione to warrant the giddiness taking hold of her. The joy bloomed outward and stole over her features, and she smiled so hard against his lips it soon became difficult for him to actually kiss her. Draco cupped her face and pulled back. His grin unfurled lazily, entrancing Hermione with the deliberate way his mouth curved upward and then widened, his eyes crinkling at the corners. A happiness that reflected her own.

"I love you," he said and Hermione welcomed the warm, comforting weight of his body over hers as he gently laid her head back onto her pillow. He made slow and purposeful love to her, and repeated those three words over and over until Hermione couldn't tell if her body flew or fell.

She could only breathlessly return the words, whisper his name, and clutch at his skin in her endeavor to possess every part of him he could give to her. Draco gasped her name into the side of her neck when he came, mere seconds after she'd done the same for him.

I want you every day for the rest of my life.

Remain Nameless

burst to the front of her memory.

Holy mother of Merlin, she'd almost shouted at her parents that she wanted Draco in her life, *forever*.

Forever.

He had to have caught the way she'd stumbled across the word, hastily amending it to "for the foreseeable future."

Forever.

What an odd concept.

While she'd obviously had first-hand experiences dealing with the likes of prophecies, Hermione still did not set much store by any sort of future-telling. She'd learned well the unpredictability of life, how the choices one made created such complex outcomes that the art of seeing into the future was laughable to her. But each and every time she imagined the life laid out before her, Draco existed by her side.

So why did she now fidget in bed, far more afraid that Draco had heard her slip of the tongue and not because she'd thought the word "forever" at all in association with him?

She loved Draco, unreservedly, madly, but then, she'd also loved Ron. But why had the thought of binding herself to Ron forevermore have her break out in a cold sweat? Why did replacing Draco into that thought stream not frighten the daylight's out of her? Instead, a nervous sort of fluttering took residence in her chest, a clenching in her abdomen.

The thought of being with Draco for years on end *excited* her.

Now what the bluddering hell should she do with that information?

"All right there Granger?" Came Draco's questioning drawl, causing her to jolt in his arms.

"Yes!" she squeaked in surprise. "Of course! Fine!"

"You're lying," he replied flatly.

Hermione swallowed her nervousness and gently prised herself out of his embrace. She sat up to face him and he followed suit, bare-chested and regarding her with such genuine concern, that her already rapid heartbeat quickened further. He was beautiful. And he was hers. But for how long?

"What I said to my parents," she began slowly. "I fear I may have come across too forward or presumptuous about... about us. I hope I haven't scared you off."

Despite the impassiveness of his marble face, she clocked a bob of his throat. "No, you uh... you didn't."

"Oh! Well good, I suppose. I didn't mean what I almost said. Actually no, I did mean it, but I hadn't meant for it to come out in such an undignified way. Or rather..." Gods, must she always engage in an epic struggle when expressing herself to this man?

"I love you," she stated bluntly, and took a moment to bask in the way his silver eyes lit up whenever she said those words. "But we've never discussed where either of us sees this relationship heading."

She let the words hang in the air between them, unsure if she was alone in feeling this deeply, this confidently, in the enduring nature of their affections.

"Where would you like it to head?" he asked woodenly and Hermione despaired at the way he

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accompanying story that made his face crack into a wide and incredulous grin. The bubble of loud laughter that burst past his lips caused Hermione to jump and whip around, spatula in hand.

"Astoria Greengrass, you sneaky, magnificent witch," he chuckled and handed the paper to a confused Hermione.

"Oh my gods..." she whispered in shocked awe and had to take a seat next to Draco. A black and white photograph of Astoria Greengrass and her brand new husband, Dennis Creevey, smiled up at them. Their arms were looped through one another's as an older couple beamed fondly in the background. The paper's caption identified them as Dennis's father and step-mother.

"They eloped... how wonderful!" Hermione enthused and eagerly read the details. Apparently, Astoria Greengrass had in truth shown up on the arm of Theo at Narcissa's party already officially Astoria Creevey. They'd been wed at a registrar's office in Muggle London at noon, with Dennis filing the paperwork to the Ministry of Magic mere minutes before the Hall of Records had closed for the day.

Several things fell into place for Draco as he thought back to his conversations with Astoria and he wondered how long the witch had needed to hide her relationship with a Muggleborn. A feeling of pride at her bravery swelled within him. Astoria knew what this would cost her and she'd pursued her own path regardless. She'd probably be disowned, and would have had to plan her exit from her estate for months.

"We should send them a wedding present! I have Dennis's address, I assume she's moved there by now," said Hermione thoughtfully.

"Let me take care of it, I've got several bottles of champagne I can send for them to celebrate properly."

Draco sent off almost a dozen bottles later that day, congratulating Astoria and her new husband on their recent nuptials and included a personal note to Astoria that if she needed any assistance, to please reach out to him and Hermione.

A week later, Astoria, per her lifetime of etiquette training undoubtedly, sent back a cordial thank you note for the champagne and the well-wishes. She also included a personal note addressed only to him.

In her perfect calligraphy, it read: *You're a good man, Draco Malfoy.*



February 2009

"Where the bloody hell are Ron and Padma?"

This question had been voiced no less than eight times and by a different person in each instance. Tensions in their private waiting room of the maternity ward of St. Mungo's were high to say the least. But then, it wasn't every day that Molly and Arthur's only daughter gave birth to the child of the savior of the wizarding world.

Remain Nameless

Of the assembled family, Molly and Fleur remained the most composed, sitting side by side as they jointly stitched a baby blanket for the newest Potter, a tradition of the Weasley grandchildren. The Weasley men were an entirely different story.

Though most assembled were already fathers, that didn't stop Arthur, Bill, Charlie, George, and Percy from taking turns pacing up and down the length of the room as everyone waited for news. It had been several hours already, and no one had yet heard anything about their sweet little Gin, the youngest of them all. If Ginny herself could see such behavior from her male relatives, her infamous Bat-Bogey Hex would definitely make an appearance.

Hermione performed this family waiting ritual at most births, though she'd usually been at Ron's side. Now it was an uncomfortable Draco next to her, bouncing his knee anxiously while she chewed her nails down to nothing.

The sounds of frantic pacing and anxious muttering came to a halt as the doors to the room burst open and a breathless Ron bounded in, tugging a grinning Padma behind him. Everyone stared at the newcomers, a few hours late and dressed in fashionable formal robes.

"Well it's about time!" admonished Molly. "We've not heard anything yet, so you two best get comfortable. Where were you? George tried to reach you hours ago!"

The newly arrived couple exchanged radiant grins, before Ron yanked Padma's hand up for all to see. "We're engaged!"

The room was stunned silent for all of five seconds before the gathered group collectively roared in delight and surged forward to envelop Ron and his new fiancée in congratulatory embraces. And this right here was why Hermione loved the Weasleys ever so much: their well of joy was boundless. Ron and Padma's announcement didn't detract from the impending birth of baby Potter, but rather added to the excitement of the atmosphere.

Hermione hugged Ron and Padma hard in turn, as Ron babbled about how they'd been out to dinner for their dating anniversary and he'd proposed at the restaurant of their first date and gods, he'd been so nervous he almost dropped the ring.

Ginny and Harry could not have picked a happier day to bring their child into the world.

A quiet cough behind them revealed a flustered Harry, hair in all directions like he'd pulled on it for hours and though anxiety rolled off him in waves, a happiness radiated outward that made him almost glow.

"It's a... it's a boy!" he announced with a nervous grin. "Gin's doing great... she did great, she's... she's perfect..." He trailed off in helpless amazement at his strong wife and then seemed to realize the room waited for the rest of the announcement.

"Right, well, it's a boy, a healthy boy, James—" His jaw tightened and Hermione's tears streamed down her face at the sight of her best friend unable to hold back the weighty emotion of introducing his child to his family.

Harry swallowed a rather large lump in his throat. "James Sirius Potter." His chin wobbled and Hermione sprang forward and grabbed him into a fierce hug and buried her face in his shoulder.

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wand waving about and it only spurred Hermione to further heights of anger and exasperation.

"And that! That night there needs to stop! I'm so sick of having to check myself around my own parents! I'm done, do you hear me, *I am done* with hiding around my own family. I can no more stop being a witch than I can stop breathing!"

A ringing silence descended, Hermione both mortified and relieved at having revealed her inner-most insecurities in such a dramatic fashion.

Her mother's eyes filled with tears. "Oh Hermione, darling, I'm so sorry. I don't—we don't—ever want you to feel that way about yourself."

The anger left Hermione in one fell swoop at the sight of her mum crying. She felt tears prick her own eyes, and she dashed them away impatiently. "I know why you react that way. I know modifying your memories... I know what I did was wrong in your eyes but you'll never understand what it was like... what I was protecting you from. And I hate myself every day for it," she finished in a broken whisper.

Before she could take more than a hiccup of a teary breath, both of her parents had enveloped her in a tight hug and suddenly all three Grangers were a mess of tears and apologies and emotions. The crushing relief Hermione felt as her parents messily embraced her threatened to overwhelm her as this moment she'd craved finally came to pass. This progress had taken years, and Hermione's heart wanted to burst as the walls erected between them tumbled down in an almighty crash.

Amidst the "I'm so sorry love," and "I didn't know how to talk to you about this," and the "We want to know everything, when you're ready," and more "sorrys" thrown in for good measure, Hermione remembered Draco still stood in the room witnessing this display of catharsis.

She pulled away from her parents, glad to note he'd stayed and not run screaming from the house. Her mother spoke first, eyes dry and voice clear once more. "Draco, my husband and I owe you an apology as well. I hope you'll let us begin again. Hermione speaks so highly of you and that should have been enough."

Draco's face wore a blank mask, but Hermione knew him well enough to know it merely covered whichever emotion he sought to hide.

"Of course, Missus, I mean Doctor—"

"Oh good gracious, that's enough of that, please call me Jean, I feel like you're addressing David's mother," her mum clipped and then drew a startled Draco in for an awkward hug.

"Ern, of course," he muttered, pink in the face when she pulled away.

Her father's apology was more stilted, but no less sincere, as was his friendlier handshake with Draco. He then fixed his wife with an irritated look. "I can't believe we invited the Templetons. Christ, Jean, they are the absolute *worst*!"

The three Grangers burst out laughing and Hermione felt lighter than she had in years.

Later that night, tucked into Draco's side in her bed, Hermione ran through the party's events in her mind when a sudden mounting panic set in. Draco had been awfully quiet the rest of the evening. While she'd initially chalked it up to the awkward confrontation, the recollection of her brazen words

Remain Nameless

Hermione cast her slightly manic smile their way.

"Well it's been *lovely* catching up with you all, but I need to steal my parents for a moment, do excuse us!"

Her parents had no choice but to follow her after that, and Hermione led them all up the stairs and into her parents' study and closed the door. No one spoke for a few tense moments as Hermione stared her parents down.

"Close with the Templetons are you?" Hermione threw out coldly.

Her mother sniffed and lifted her chin. "You know they've been long-time patients of ours for years, and we're really rather fond of—"

"Please, mum, don't insult my intelligence, I know for a fact you can't stand them for more than 10 minutes," Hermione retorted.

She felt Draco's presence at her side, and though she knew he'd keep silent and let her work this out, knowing she had his steadfast support buoyed her confidence.

"What was your plan then? Did you hope I'd swoon and throw Draco over and rekindle my relationship with him?"

When her parents remained silent but exchanged guilty looks, Hermione let out a disbelieving snort. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Daniel is a fine young man, Hermione," her dad interjected. "He comes from a good family, he has a good job, he's well-respected, he—"

"He was boring!" Hermione shouted. "He was so bloody boring! I was shot of him years before Draco was even in the picture! Do you understand how unbelievably insulting this was to Draco? To me? Even if I weren't completely in love with this man," she gestured vaguely towards Draco, "I'd hardly be tempted by the likes of him!"

Her mother had the decency to look ashamed of her rudeness, but her father remained firm.

"You think we were rude? What kind of slurs do you expect you'll be hearing at his mother's party?"

I'm sure it's whispered behind your back these days, but do you really think his people won't be disgustingly prejudiced towards you?"

"I EXPECT IT OF THEM!" she shrieked back, temper flaring. "I expect them to look down their noses at me! I expect them to gossip and sneer and regard me with open disgust on their faces because I dared to be with Draco. The bar is so disturbingly low for that crowd that if I make it through the evening without being openly cursed, I'll consider it a win! No offense Malfoy." She tossed in as an afterthought, but she'd apologize later for insulting his family.

"But you? My parents? I'm sorry, but the bar is so much higher for the people who raised me to be kind, and tolerant and to have ideas and beliefs of my own! Draco is going to be in my life forever—for the foreseeable future, if he'll still have me after all this!"

"Granger," Draco said quietly. "I think you'll want a Silencing Charm."

Hermione huffed and whipped out her wand, casting a non-verbal Silencing Charm at the study door over her shoulder without a second thought. Her parents both jumped back at the sight of her

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Harry clung to her tightly, his body shaking from the marvel of it all, and Hermione felt another pair of familiar strong arms wrap around both of them. "So happy for you, mate," said Ron gruffly.

The rest of the group let the three of them have their moment a few minutes more, before Hermione felt another pair of arms (Molly, she thought), then Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Percy, and finally George and laughter mixed with tears as relief settled over the entire party.

Harry yelled in delight when Ron and Padma clued him in to their engaged status, and Hermione wondered when these two idiot boys of hers became men. Harry, a father. Ron, a fiancé.

Harry settled some of the excited cacophony of the room and announced that Molly and Arthur can come back first to see Ginny and meet James. He returned periodically to bring several small groups of people in at a time, so as not to overwhelm his exhausted wife and newborn. Eventually, Harry approached Hermione and Ron.

"Gin wants to see you two next, alone, if that's all right Padma? Malfoy?"

Hermione grabbed both their hands as they walked into the hospital room to meet the youngest Potter. They found Ginny looking tired yet radiant, a bundle in her arms with a tuft of black hair peeping out of the top.

"Here they are, James," Ginny cooed softly to the infant. "This is your Uncle Ron and your Auntie Hermione. They're to be your godparents."

Hermione squeezed Ron's hand and covered her mouth with the other. As she met Harry's eyes through a blur of tears, she couldn't help ask, "Oh goodness... are you sure?"

"As if it would be anyone but you two," Harry replied quietly. Hermione leaned into Ron's shoulder and felt him quaking a bit and heard him utter "Blimey."

Ginny beckoned her over and Hermione gently accepted the swaddled James. Being around the Weasleys for so many years, she'd held a lot of babies in her day, but this one, this child, her *godson*... well this just took the cake.

"Of course he has your hair, Harry," Hermione sniffled.

"Oh yes, he got the Potter hair, but the Weasley lungs," asserted an amused Ginny. "Came into this world screaming like a banshee."

Hermione sat in the chair beside Ginny's bed, and the four of them took a few minutes to simply bask in the aura of this tiny wonder and all the hope he inspired. Harry left to fetch Draco and Padma at Ginny's insistence, but Hermione couldn't tear her eyes away from the angelic, sleeping child in her arms.

Inside her heart, she unleashed a desperate stream of wishes for baby James. That he never know suffering or pain or loneliness like his father. That he have the strength, wit, and sense of humor of his mother. That he have the endless capacity for love and kindness of them both.

At the sound of new footsteps Hermione looked up to find Padma and Harry had returned, and Draco frozen in the doorway. His face held a curious expression, one she'd not seen before nor was she able to decipher it as his gray eyes raked over her holding the baby.

The spell broke when Ron gruffly asked to hold his nephew and Hermione carefully transferred

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James into his arms.

"Congratulations Ginevra," offered Draco hesitantly, and Hermione knew he still felt a bit out of place. Ginny looked up from admiring Padma's engagement ring and beamed at him.

"Thank you! Would you like to hold him?"

Draco seemed shocked that she would even consider this and shook his head swiftly. "Oh, ah, no... erm, that's all right, I think the others probably... ah, would be better suited to... that."

"He's not a snitch, Malfoy, I'm sure you can manage to hold onto him," ribbed Harry and Draco glared as Ron guffawed.

"You and I are long overdue for a rematch, Potter," he retorted. "Regardless, I think mini-Potter is in good hands," he gestured to Padma, who'd just commanded James. "I did want to leave the new parents with a gift, though."

From inside his jacket pocket, Draco produced a shrunken gift bag, restored it to proper size and placed it on the bedside table. Hermione stared at him. He'd thought to get the Potters a gift on the occasion of their son's birth, without even consulting with her? And was it normal to be so turned on by this?

After they'd left St. Mungo's to allow Ginny some much needed rest before she and Harry could take their newborn home, Hermione couldn't help her curiosity.

"I didn't realize you got Harry and Ginny a gift. What was it?"

Draco stilled, seated on Hermione's bed and in the process of removing his shoes. "Nothing extravagant. Color-changing nappies. I'm sure they'll need them in the coming weeks," he chuckled. "They change color when the baby... uh... needs a changing?"

"I've never heard of those. Is that a common product for magical babies?"

"Erm, no. I uh... charmed them myself."

Draco's face flushed to the tips of his ears and Hermione showed her amazement at his thoughtfulness towards her dearest friends by tearing Draco's clothes off in record time and hiding him into her mattress.

Though perhaps her effusive praise at his kind behavior was rather premature.

A week later, the irate head of Ginny appeared in the Floo and screamed for Hermione.

"Where is that sneaking little ferret you shag?" she demanded.

Draco stood next to Hermione, arms crossed and a smug smile on his face that immediately aroused Hermione's suspicions.

"Hello to you too, Ginevra, and may I say motherhood seems to have really calmed that temper of yours."

"You filthy prat!" snarled Ginny, but in the background Hermione heard Harry roaring in laughter. "Do you know what happens to those nappies whenever James makes a mess?"

"Don't they just change color?" Draco charmed them, I thought," questioned Hermione and Draco snickered beside her.

"They don't just change color!" yelled Ginny. "They flash 'Potter Stinks' right across his little bot-

been a... a..."

But whatever compliment Hermione wanted to bestow upon Draco died on her lips.

"No," she whispered darkly. "No, surely not..."

"All right there Granger?" Draco's amused yet concerned voice seemed distant to her ears.

"Oh I don't believe this!" she seethed and glared across the crowded room to see her parents chatting away merrily with a couple their age and familiar young man.

"Old friends of yours?" Draco asked, following her stare as Hermione stewed in a mixture of rage and embarrassment. Catching her mother's eye, the woman had the audacity to beam at Hermione and wave her over.

"Not quite," clipped Hermione and drained her glass in one go. She snapped her head around to stare up at an alarmed Draco.

"If I cause a bit of a spectacle to make a point about the seriousness of our relationship will you lose respect for me? I promise to repay you in all sorts of naughty ways later."

Draco's concern melted into a wicked smirk and glinting eyes. "With an offer like that, do you really expect me to refuse you anything?"

"Good, because that is my ex-boyfriend and his parents."

Draco scowled. "Is that why your mother keeps looking over here and mouthing for you to join them?"

Hermione reached down and took his hand in hers, intertwining their fingers together. "Come on then," she said and tugged him along.

"Granger, I don't think I'm meant to be included in this reunion."

"Oh I'm well aware, but I think it's high time my parents realized we're a package deal, don't you?"

Draco's voiced assumption seemed correct, as her mother's features pinched slightly and her father's eyes narrowed when they saw her hand entangled with Draco's, Jean didn't bother to acknowledge her daughter's current boyfriend and instead gestured between Hermione and Daniel.

"Hermione dear, we were just talking about you! We weren't sure if you'd heard Daniel was back in town for the holidays and we know you'd love to catch up—"

"Oh but of course!" Hermione's falsely bright voice pitched several octaves higher than usual. "Daniel and I haven't spoken in years and haven't kept in touch at all. So wonderful that you'd have him and his family here tonight!"

Her parents' smiles became rather fixed. *Good, let them worry.*

To his credit, Daniel seemed mortified and shot guilty looks at Draco.

"So let's catch up then shall we?" She turned to the other three guests. "Mr. and Mrs. Templeton, Daniel, allow me to introduce my boyfriend, Draco."

Hermione turned her face up towards him with a sniping expression he'd surely never seen on her before in his life. He smirked down at her and she could tell he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. "Yes, it's been such an exciting time in my life and it still feels so new! That must be the reason my parents neglected to mention or even introduce him!"

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"Oh, not married yet, you say? You won't stay young forever, darling, could I introduce you to my nephew?"

"You want children don't you? Surely your parents need some grandchildren to spoil?"

"Whatever happened to that red-headed boyfriend of yours?"

"My niece has a temp job at the Weiford firm, maybe I could have her put in a word for you? What is it you do again?"

Rinse and repeat these mind-numbing, boundary-pushing, rage-inducing conversations for years on end and only because she loved her parents did Hermione even show her face at all. At least this year, she had Draco by her side to suffer jointly. Although, she thought bitterly, his good looks had already endeared him to most of the old biddies amongst the crowd, while several others did double-takes when they spotted him. Then, of course, the insulting incredulity in many of her parents' longtime friends' and associates' voices did *wonders* for her confidence.

"You're here with... Hermione? How did you two meet?"

Insert stock curious question about the origin of Draco's strange given name, then a question about how he made his living. Draco kept to his previous Muggle cover story of an estate and wealth manager and gods, but if this crowd of boorish social climbers didn't eat that detail right up.

"Oh, is that right?" They would say, eyeing Draco with new appreciation and giving Hermione a look that clearly said, "Better sink your claws into him now, sweetheart, and perhaps don't bother with a pre-nup."

If only they knew Draco's actual net worth. They'd combust on the spot.

Draco for his part, remained incredibly patient, his manner at peak old-world charm, and Hermione knew he'd practiced this type of social situation his entire childhood. Only her parents stayed steadfastly uncharmed by her boyfriend and his flawless way of exuding wealth and status ("your suit is custom, did you say? The fitting is positively flawless.")

Perhaps because every other guest seemed so taken with him, the only expression her mother could manage was pursed lips while her father couldn't seem to stop openly scowling. She'd thought in recent weeks they'd been warning to Draco, but apparently seeing all their Muggle friends fawn over him was too much.

After politely making the rounds Hermione dragged Draco to the sanctuary of the kitchen and poured herself another hefty glass of the Bordeaux. Draco leaned against the counter and ran a hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry," she exhaled after a long sip. "As unbearable as this is for me, I'm sure you'd kill for a Disillusionment Charm about now."

"Oh I don't know," he drawled. "I personally enjoyed when Mrs. Eldrich said one of her daughters was most interested in the 'estate management field' and asked if I'd like her number, whatever that means."

"Eugh!" Hermione let out and he chuckled. "She said it like I wasn't even standing there! If her airhead of a daughter can even spell 'estate' or 'management' I'll eat my wand."

She nudged his shoulder and settled in a lean next to him. "Still, thank you for coming. You've truly

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tom!"

Draco laughed so hard he doubled over, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"And Harry thinks it's the funniest thing he's ever seen, so well done, Malfoy!" seethed Ginny. "And George and Ron even want to meet with you and see if they can't produce a similar product to sell at the shop! Merlin, all you men are beyond immature!"

Draco calmed down enough to apologize, slightly placating the overtired new mother, who eventually admitted it was rather clever, in an evil sort of way.



March 2009

"Sir, SIR!"

The insistent voice of Crick startled Draco and Hermione from slumber. The elf stepped back from Draco's side of the bed as they both bolted upright, Hermione's wand already in her hand.

"Crick! What the blazes are you doing?" thundered Draco, clutching his chest.

"Theodore Nott is in the Floo, sir," explained Crick quickly. "Says it's an emergency and to bring Miss Granger if she's here."

Draco and Hermione exchanged panicked glances before grabbing the first sets of clothes within reach and bolting down to the traveling parlour. They found the distressed head of Theo in the fireplace.

"Draco! Oh thank Merlin, Hermione's with you."

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

Theo's head pulled slightly back. "Just come through, please, it's Sasha... I... I... please just come through."

He trailed off as his head disappeared from the flames and Hermione's heart hammered in apprehension as Draco tugged her through the Floo. They landed on the other side in the living room of a sumptuously decorated home, and Hermione knew this was Theo's Muggle residence in Belgravia and not Nott Manor given the large flat-screen television hung on the opposite wall.

Hermione had never seen the calm and reserved Theo so agitated before, and judging by the look on Draco's face, he hadn't either. Theo paced anxiously, his face pallid and sickly, and his eyes slightly red-rimmed.

"Where's Sasha?" Hermione asked, concerned that she wasn't immediately within sight. At the sound of his girlfriend's name Theo let out a choked half-sob and flung himself onto the sofa.

"She's there," Theo finally said, and jerked his thumb towards a closed door. "She... she locked the door. Says she doesn't want to see me right now." His breaths came in sharp spurts. He looked up at Draco with wide, hysterical eyes, tears gathering and threatening to spill.

"I told her... I told her everything and she... she... thinks I'm mad. Or actually," he gulped some

Remain Nameless

more air, “she thinks she might be mad... or that I bewitched her or...”

He seemed unable to produce anything else and Draco exchanged a look of grim worry with Hermione.

Draco conjured a glass of water and approached his friend, shoving the glass into his shaking hands. Theo took desperate sips as a few tears leaked out. “Theo, come on now. Tell us how to help.”

Draco’s voice pitched low, staying calm and methodical and Hermione briefly wondered if Theo used to help him this way during his poison withdrawal episodes.

He just shook his head at Draco and Hermione bit her lip, concerned with the bombshell dropped by Theo. “You told her you were a wizard? You told her about magic?” she asked. Draco shot her puzzled look at her brusque tone but she ignored him.

Theo leaned forward on his knees and pushed out a shaky breath. “Yes, I told her what I am. It all just came to a head tonight... we were talking about her moving in here and getting married and I had to tell her, I had to before this went any further and—”

“Did you show her any magic? Did you use your wand in front of her?” Hermione interrupted.

“Yes.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully and tried to think of the best way to impart the unfortunate news. “Theo, I’m not sure how familiar you are with the bylaws of the Statute of Secrecy as it pertains to relationships with Muggles, but... well...”

She sees now that for two exceptionally intelligent people, she and Theo had both been phenomenally naïve here. Hermione had assumed after their heart-to-heart on New Year’s Eve that Theo would have done his due diligence.

But love made fools of all, even careful, meticulous Theo. Blinded by his feelings for Sasha he’d not bothered to do his research.

Hermione surmised that Theo, raised pureblood, also might not have thought to research this at all. Because this world and its laws had always served him, been tailored to his blood group, so why would they fail him now? Because now Hermione had to be the messenger of how the design of his world will make his and Sasha’s lives that much harder.

“Well the law states that should a magical being reveal the world of magic to a non-magical human during the course of a relationship, if they are not already wed, the couple must have a marriage on file with the Ministry of Magic within 60 days or risk the Obliviation of the non-magical partner.”

Hermione held her breath as the words hung ugly and booming in the air between them all. When Hermione dated Daniel, her curiosity had gotten the best of her as she wondered what it would be like to be a witch married to a Muggle. How would the reveal of her true abilities, logistically, take place? This had led her to the Ministry Law Library and the horrifying discovery of the difficulties placed in front of couples with only one magical spouse.

Theo looked, if it were possible, even more defeated. “Sixty days?” he repeated numbly.

“Yes,” Hermione confirmed sadly.

“Or they’ll Obliviate her?”

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coming round to tea soon? Hermione would of course be welcome as well and you could meet Teddy properly instead of amidst all this hubbub.”

Draco agreed and wondered if it would be appropriate to extend an invitation to his aunt to the Malfoy New Year’s Ball. He ultimately held his tongue, deciding it would be best not to spring a reunion on his mother, even if she were the one at fault.

“I think that would be lovely... Aunt.”

The word felt foreign on his tongue, but the way Andromeda and Hermione both beamed at him made the strange situation worthwhile.

Later, after they’d left the Burrow weighed down by their personal Weasley sweaters (Draco’s was a muted silver “to match his eyes”) various Christmas presents and several plates of leftovers, Draco took a minute to sort through his feelings about the evening.

Christmas Eve and he had Hermione in his bed, outfitted in ridiculously garish pajamas depicting dancing gingerbread men, arm flung over his bare chest. Tomorrow he’d present her with a stunning pair of ruby earrings, shag her brains out, then they would spend Christmas luncheon with his mother, then head to her parents’ home for dinner. Neither he nor Hermione seemed particularly thrilled about the tension that would surely accompany both visits, but knew this necessary time spent with their parents could eventually thaw both sides’ moderate negativity toward their relationship.

“These pajamas are hideous,” Draco drawled, running a hand down Hermione’s sleeve.

He heard her giggle. “Just you wait, darling. Next year I’m gifting you a matching set.”

Next year

“And I will be burning both sets.”

She giggled again then yawned. “Happy Christmas,” she said sleepily and squeezed him.

“Happy Christmas Granger. I love you.”

“I love you.”

Contentment. He only knew contentment.



December 28, 2008

Hermione sighed and swirled her Bordeaux gently around her glass. At both formal and family events, she kept herself to a strict two-drink maximum rule, but Merlin, her parents’ party tested her resolve.

A few years ago, the Grangers reinstated their traditional colleagues/neighbors/friends holiday get-together hosted in their home. It was the sort of event that made Hermione want to drink herself into a stupor. Besides the chattering and slightly rowdy group of hygienists (people she almost considered aunts and uncles), most everyone else set her teeth on edge.

“What is it you do again, dear?”

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ter or your husband. That... that they died because of—”

“Please,” she held up a hand. “Please, don’t.”

Draco felt silent, choking on all his monumental inadequacies and guilt accumulated from years of poor choices.

“If anything, I should have sought you out sooner,” she said and gave Draco a tired smile. “But I didn’t want to intrude on your life. I did not want you to feel as if you were under any obligation to meet me.”

“I would have welcomed it,” Draco replied seriously. “And I do apologize... my mother—”

“Is a grown witch and any quarrel between us need not concern you. You have no cause to apologize to me, Draco.”

He couldn’t look at her anymore. “Thank you,” he said gruffly and fiddled with a cuff link.

“Hermione is a lovely witch,” Andromeda offered after a few beats. Draco met her gaze and found a teasing expression but it quickly flipped to something more sincere.

“If you ever wanted to... talk with someone... about her, or about anything at all, I’m more than willing to listen. As someone who has shaken the yoke of the twisted ideals that shaped us, I have a firsthand understanding of how difficult it must have been for you to overcome your upbringing. I’m sure you’ll find, as I did, that having the right partner by your side makes all the difference and their blood makes no difference at all. I was ever so fortunate to have Ted.”

“I consider myself fortunate as well,” he quietly replied. “Time with her is a gift.”

Andromeda eyed him with a pleased and distinct air of pride. “Speaking of gifts,” she said louder and peered at a point over Draco’s shoulder. He turned to see Hermione approach and tried not to feel a twinge of jealousy when she effortlessly hugged his aunt. “I have something for you my dear!”

She produced a velvet jewelry box that made Hermione go scarlet when she opened it to reveal a goblin-made necklace of amethyst and alexandrite. “Oh Andromeda... I couldn’t possibly accept this!”

“You can and you will, darling, and since I knew you’d say that, rest assured this is a loan and you’re just borrowing it. I’d always hoped to hand this down to Nymphadora but well... you remember what she was like. Would have laughed right in my face!”

Andromeda and Hermione shared a laugh at the reminiscence of his late cousin and Draco felt the pang of unresolved grief once again.

“You’ll wear it to the New Year’s event with Draco? It’s the perfect piece for a gala of that caliber,” she insisted and Hermione beamed.

“Of course, I would be honored! Thank you for thinking of me.”

Andromeda waved her gratitude away with a delicate hand. “Thank you for the poetry books! I’m delighted to add to my collection. Did Teddy thank you for the advanced defense theory books you sent?”

Hermione nodded earnestly. “He did, of course, he’s such a polite boy.”

Andromeda swelled with pride. “Good.” She turned back to Draco. “Would you be amenable to

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“I’m afraid so. I’m sorry Theo.”

“Well bollocks to that!” Draco spoke up, making the other two jump. “Fuck the Ministry. Theo, quit moping, there’s no need to lose your sanity over this.”

Theo buried his face in his hands and shook his head back and forth furiously. “No, Draco, no, this isn’t something to fuck around with.” He lifted his head to lock eyes with Hermione desperately. “If it were found out, it’s Azkaban for me, yeah? And Obliviation still, for her?”

Hermione nodded and swallowed a lump in her throat. It would be a short sentence, but a sentence nonetheless. Theo dropped his head back in his hands but Draco would not be so easily deterred.

“That’s rather harsh though isn’t it? Couldn’t they just remove her memories of Theo telling her about magic?”

“Then how is Theo meant to explain his time away in prison? I agree it’s all rather barbaric, and I’m in no way defending the law, but what I imagine the Obliviation Squad does is remove any memories related to magic and would probably implant a false one of them breaking up so none of her relatives ask too many questions about his sudden disappearance from her life. Otherwise, you’d be asking the Ministry to hunt down and modify the memories of all her Muggle family and friends.”

Draco scowled and shook his head stubbornly. “No, this is ludicrous. You’re not going to Azkaban, and Granger and I won’t tell anyone about this, so there’s no risk involved. You can simply—”

“No!” Theo cut him off sharply and jerked his gaze up. “No Draco, I’m in no position to play fast and loose with Ministry laws. Not only would I lose my job, but I only barely avoided a sentence after the war—”

“How?” Draco asked, bewildered. “You never took the Mark. Why would they—?”

Theo broke in with a bitter laugh. “You think that mattered to a justice-hungry Ministry in the days just after You-Know-Who fell? No, no, they took one look at my surname and it would have been a cell for me but for the testimony of the Greengrass sisters and the mocking written statements about what an utter failure of a pureblood I was by the Carrows.”

Theo’s usually kind face twisted into an ugly grimace. “Not all of us had the likes of Harry Potter swooping in to save the day.”

Draco scowled right back. “I never asked Potter for anything.”

Hermione broke up their tense staring match. “Theo, you said Sasha’s still in the bedroom? Did you ward the door?”

Theo shot her a sharp glare. “I’ve done nothing but throw up a Silencing Charm for the purposes of this conversation. She’s locked in there of her own volition. I have *never* used magic on her and I never will,” he said so vehemently that Hermione took an involuntary step back from him.

“Theo?” Draco cut in sharply. “No one is accusing you of anything untoward.”

His brown eyes sent an apologetic look to Hermione. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Draco placed a tentative hand on his friend’s slumped shoulder. “Why confess? Why now?”

Theo ran a tired hand down his face. “I had to, you don’t understand I...” he sighed brokenly. “If I’m asking her to live here... to share her life with me... she deserves to know the truth. She deserves

to know what she's signing up for."

"Yes, but Theo—"

He cut Draco off. "Do you both remember Hagrid's class in Fifth Year? How I was one of the only ones who could see the thestrals?" He turned to Draco suddenly. "Do you know why? Did you ever bother to wonder?"

"I'm sorry mate, I don't know what—"

"Do you remember my Aunt Georgiana?"

Draco's brow furrowed at the abrupt and unrelated question. "I think... yes? When we were little didn't she used to sneak us extra chocolate biscuits? She doted on you at parties, but we were... what, maybe 7 or 8?"

Theo didn't immediately answer and instead stared off into the mid-distance for a few beats. "She was pretty and kind and sweet and she was murdered in front of my eyes when I was 9 years old," said Theo hollowly and Hermione let out a horrified gasp and Draco's face lost all color.

"My father... my father claimed he caught her... caught her with a Muggle man. Who knows if that were even true?" Theo wiped his eyes on his sleeve impatiently. "But it didn't matter to a monster like my father. Just a whisper of an association with a Muggle and he went off in a rage."

Theo stared unseeing at the floor and Hermione's heart broke, but knew it would be a mistake to interrupt now, even if it were to comfort him. "He made me watch. Me and my mother. He threw the accusations in her face and then cursed her. My favorite aunt... his own sister... and she was only ever kind... Father took her away... made it look like a tragic accident... staged a scene... maybe he killed that Muggle too, I wouldn't know."

Theo drew in a ragged breath. "That is my family legacy. That is where I come from. Can you understand that? I had to tell Sasha everything, she deserved to know... deserved to know the twisted truth before she agreed to be herself to me at all."

Another awful silence descended and Draco met her eyes across the room helplessly. "Theo," Hermione spoke softly. "I have some resources that could help. You were hoping I could speak with her, weren't you?"

He met Hermione's eyes for a moment, and she saw the trust imbued in his intense and desperate stare.

"Please," he rasped.

"Right," Hermione clipped and tied her hair back resolutely. She snatched up two coasters from the coffee table and transfigured one into a pen and the other into a notepad. Hastily scribbling down half a dozen titles, she thrust the list in Draco's direction.

"Draco, go to mine and grab these titles from my library off the living room. They should all be filed under my 'Muggle and Muggle relations' section. Leave everything outside the bedroom door while I speak with Sasha. Theo, go through and wait at Draco's."

She waited until the men had gone before she removed the Silencing Charm and stowed her wand out of sight.

"Tactful as ever," Draco grumbled and straightened his lapels as he stood.

Draco caught Potter's eye as he weaved his way through the crowded sitting room. A young boy in a scarlet sweater with matching hair sat at his side, chattering at a rapid pace about the new broom he hoped to receive for Christmas. Draco gave a tiny shake of his head, indicating he's not ready to meet his young cousin just yet. He owed his aunt the first of these awkward reunions.

Draco harbored eternal gratitude at meeting his aunt in the Weasley home and not accidentally happening upon her in a public setting. Her resemblance to Bellatrix startled him at first, but then the older witch smiled, an expression rooted in genuine joy instead of feral madness, and it transformed her features into those of an entirely separate person.

Andromeda had hair in a softer brown than her sister, her waves neat with streaks of light gray as opposed to the gleaming dark curls of Bellatrix. She looked at Draco as if she knew his thought process and gave him a few moments of silence to come to terms with her presence.

"Hello Draco."

"Hello... Mrs. Tonks."

Draco had no idea how to address this woman, his blood relative, and immediately regretted greeting her so formally when he spotted a flicker of emotion in her eyes.

She may have defected with a Muggleborn commoner decades ago, but there was still an austere air of upper-class pureblood in Andromeda Tonks. It was in the rigidly yet elegance of her posture, and Draco knew that when she spoke, her cadence would be crisp from a childhood's worth of diction lessons.

"You do favor your father, it is a rather extraordinary likeness," her keen eyes narrowed as they swept over his face. "But there is some Black in you. The set of your brow is completely Narcissa, as is the shape of your eyes."

"I inherited her hands as well, I'm told," he offered. "Had I practiced more, I may have rivaled her skills on the piano."

Andromeda looked briefly touched. "She kept it? The Blather?"

Draco nodded. "I took lessons on my birth gift my entire childhood. My thank you for such a grand gift is long overdue, I fear."

Her eyes tightened. "Yes, well, that is hardly your fault. It pleases me to know it was used as intended."

An awkward silence filled the air, Draco feeling the weight of literal decades of missed bonding between them. This felt so wrong, that his first introduction to his aunt should take place in a home owned by neither of their families. Is the gulf too wide? Are the wounds too deep?

"I..." Draco began uncomfortably and tugged at his collar. "I'm sorry."

Andromeda pursed her lips in confusion and it was so similar to his own mother that his heart clenched. "Whatever for dear boy?"

Draco swallowed the anxious bubble of nervousness and grief that suddenly lodged in his throat. "For everything," he replied hoarsely. "That we have to meet like this. That I never knew your daugh-

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him as a lost cause?

Hi, hello, I'm Draco, the nephew you've never met because you committed the grave sin of marrying a Muggleborn and my mother decided the family image was more important than sisterly bonds?

He probably shouldn't open with that.

"Oh my gods," Hermione suddenly whispered and drew Draco's attention to two wizards across the room.

He recognized Oliver Wood immediately, having kept tabs on his Keeping career for Puddlemere, and they'd exchanged a friendly word or two at various quidditch matches and events through the years.

The brawny Scot had one hand being shaken by Arthur, and his other interlaced with the dragon-taming Weasley (Chadwick? No, Chase? No, Charlie? Yes, Charlie). Molly's tears streamed down her cheeks as the foursome spoke quietly before she threw her arms around the two young men and broke down completely.

Every other conversation in the room broke off at this scene, and when Oliver and Charlie finally prised themselves from the clutches of Molly, turned sheepishly to face everyone. Charlie went almost as red as his hair. "Ern, happy Christmas, all. I think most of you know Oliver?"

George and Angelina roared with delight and bolted out of the seats to embrace their brother and old quidditch captain. By the time the newly arrived couple made it to Draco and Hermione, even Oliver had a pink face after being greeted with wild enthusiasm by every single Weasley, Weasley-romantic partner, and child.

Hermione hugged Charlie tight and Draco barely made out her, "I'm so, so proud of you, Charlie," and his quiet response of, "Told you, didn't I? You gave me that much needed kick in the arse." She continued chatting with the pair, even making arrangements for a dinner together in the New Year.

To Draco's annoyance, Ron took Hermione's empty seat, the food on his plate piled dangerously high.

"No idea what Charlie was so worried about. Honestly, who cares if he likes blokes? I mean, 'Mione brought *you* to Christmas. No offense mate."

"Gee Weasley, you sure know how to make a man feel welcome," Draco drawled.

Ron waved his fork around, bis of potato flying off. "Come off it, you grouchy git, you know what I mean. We all like Oliver."

"Again, your ability to insult a guest without even trying is truly astounding."

Ron shrugged, mouth bulging with brussel sprouts. He at least swallowed his food before speaking again. "Well consider it my peace offering and Christmas gift to you that I stopped Mum from knitting a ferret onto your sweater. George told her it was your favorite animal. Oh, and Andromeda's in the kitchen, wants a word with you."

He casually dropped that information on Draco as if it didn't have the power to upend Draco's entire world.

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She knocked lightly on the door. "Sasha? It's Hermione, may I come in?"

Silence for a moment before she heard a snifle. "Yeah," came Sasha's soft voice and Hermione opened the door.

Sasha sat forlornly on the edge of a large four-poster, her usual gleaming smile replaced with a glum look of numbness. Her normally bright and lively eyes seemed devoid of emotion, as if she'd wrung every last tear through them and they now needed a rest from exuding anything.

"I've sent Theo to Draco's. Would it be all right if I sat with you for a bit?"

Sasha nodded and Hermione sank on to the bed carefully, keeping a deliberate distance between them.

"Theo was very upset," Hermione began cautiously. "How are you feeling?"

Sasha stared back at her for a moment. "It's all true then. What he said it's...?"

Hermione nodded to the question left hanging between them.

"And... and you're one too? A... a...?"

"I am a witch, yes," Hermione replied plainly. "Does that scare you?"

Sasha shook her head rapidly. "No. I mean... a bit yeah," she uttered a nervous laugh but sobered quickly. "And Draco?"

"A wizard."

She shifted uncomfortably and clenched her hands in her lap. "How would I know if... how would I know if Theo had umm... done... something to me? Used magic to make me... like him or love him? How can I trust what I feel?"

Hermione's heart broke for the second time that night. "Well, firstly, there are laws against using magic on non-magical people such as yourself. I don't know how far Theo got in his explanation of our world to you, but we are only allowed to use magic on or around you for emergency purposes. Second," she took a quick breath, "there is no spell of any kind that can force the feeling of love. There are several banned potions and enchantments that encourage attraction or lust or obsession. There are unlawful curses that force you, physically, to do things at the behest of the caster. But what you know of your own feelings for Theo... that is real. It cannot be reproduced by magic."

Sasha's eyes filled with tears and she gulped in a relieved breath. "Thank you Hermione... I feel so awful... I accused him immediately of that and oh God, the way his face just... but he'd lied to me! About everything! How could he do that? His mother... my God his mother is actually still alive and she still sees her!"

She shot off the bed and paced frantically in front of Hermione.

"I mean... one minute we're talking about me moving my things into his home and whether it makes more sense to have a spring or fall wedding... and the next he's trembling and nervous and... and... pulling out a sick, wailing it about like a nutter and then the side table became a daschund and then back to a table again and then—and then—"

She rubbed furiously at her streaming eyes and took a huge breath.

"Then he drops it on me that his mum isn't dead after all, but all the bits about his father are true..."

my God, no they're even worse than true... all those nights he woke screaming and I had no idea that... I mean you can't fake that sort of thing, those details... the way he suffered as a kid..." She trailed off and stared at Hermione in horror. "A war... he said there was a war. That his father... that the goal of this secret war was to kill non-magical people... people like me."

She sank back down on the bed miserably and stared at the floor. Hermione's mind raced, but she found herself unable to offer any good words or helpful gestures of comfort. She opted to let Sasha voice her thoughts in her own time.

"I always found Theo so odd, you know," she began slowly. "We'd be out at the pubs and drunk blokes would say things... or even just walking down the street in broad daylight... the typical racist shit." She let out a hollow laugh.

"We stick out a bit as a couple, I'm sure you've noticed. But any time some arsehole had the nerve to comment on our mixed relationship, I'd get infuriated and he just... well he'd get mad on my behalf, obviously, but it really seemed to roll right off his back, almost like he didn't quite get why we should take offense."

She let out a slightly more hysterical laugh. "And now I'm to learn that it's not just my skin color but my blood... *my blood*, Hermione. I'll be little better than a second-class citizen in his world too. Lucky me, eh?"

Hermione reached over and took her hand as Sasha squeezed her eyes shut and a few tears leaked out.

"My parents are like you, non-magical. Muggles, as they're colloquially known. I've seen how overwhelming this can all be to learn but I'll help you any way I can. You're not alone."

Sasha let go of a shuddering exhalation. "And Theo? How do I even begin to fix things with him?"

Hermione took a fortifying breath and relayed the unfortunate news once more about the laws governing romantic partnerships between wizards and Muggles.

"I've got to marry him... or they'll wipe my mind?" Sasha summed up sadly.

"I'm so, so sorry."

Sasha swallowed a lump in her throat, then stared earnestly at Hermione. "What would you do? If you were me?"

Before Hermione could answer, a soft knock sounded against the door. She swept past Sasha and found that Draco had left her requested reading materials in a neat stack on the floor. Hermione scooped everything up and laid it neatly on the bed.

"I'm not excusing Theo, I'm not, but our laws, as outdated as they are, strictly prohibit sharing the secrets of the magical world. What I would do if I were you, is gain as much information as possible before making a decision."

Hermione gestured to the stack of books and brochures. "That's a good place to start. If your intent is to be fully informed, it's only right that you know some of the recent history, our current political climate, there's a quick debrief on the Statute of Secrecy there, a short guide to our Ministry, the basics of magical lineages, a primer on magical-Muggle relations, and a leaflet on marriage rites."

His first visit to the Weasley abode and the loudness of it all took Draco by surprise. There were people simply everywhere, of all ages and sizes and hair colors and a veritable litter of children and toddlers running amok, and for some reason, absolutely no one seemed fazed by his presence.

He'd not been sure what to expect, but certainly not a slew of casual, "Oh hey, Hermione and Malfoy are here!" followed by handshakes for him and hugs for her and "Happy Christmas" thrown about. They were greeted as a couple, then whichever family member had just spoken would have to bustle off after a rogue child or fetch another drink or incinerate the obnoxious floating mistletoe that screamed phrases like, "Oh go on, give her a snog!" or, "Mind your tongues now, there are little ones present!"

Aside from George Weasley introducing himself repeatedly to Draco over the course of the evening (Draco knew he waited for him to slip up and accidentally call him by his deceased twin's name) no one gave him a second look. No hushed voices or sidelong glances with simply too much activity and chaos in the atmosphere to devote any drama to Hermione dating a Malfoy.

For the first year in quite some time, the Burrow hosted Christmas Eve dinner as opposed to Christmas Day dinner. With most of the children grown and having to juggle in-laws as well, Molly made the executive decision to round everyone up for Christmas Eve instead.

The dining room had no chance as an option for a seated meal with too many actual Weasleys and assorted friends (the Longbottoms, Lee Jordan, Luna and Rolf, the Patil's parents, the Dalcours, etc.) so Molly hollered at everyone to fix themselves a plate and grab seating wherever they could find. Narcissa would have had a coronary at the informality of it all. Some of the young ones sat *on the floor*, for Salazar's sake.

Personally, Draco didn't mind, since it kept Hermione flush by his side on a worn loveseat. He had a glass of mulled wine in one hand and a plate of delectable roast turkey balanced on his knee and Merin, how did Weasley stay so thin and gangly with the way his mother cooked?

Hermione finished chuckling and waving at tiny Roxanne Weasley bouncing on Angelina's knee to give Draco an appraising smile. A sudden thought occurred to her and she leaned closer to whisper.

"I'm sorry I didn't think to mention it earlier, but Andromeda and Teddy will be here soon. Will you be all right?"

Draco frowned at his plate and took a fortifying sip of the warm drink to sort through his thoughts and feelings about coming face-to-face with estranged members of his family. "I believe so," he said slowly. "Will they be all right with me being here?"

"You've nothing to fear," she insisted. "I'm sure Teddy has no concept of who you are and Andromeda isn't prone to dramas. I'm sure she'd be eager to meet you though."

Please tell Draco his Aunt Andromeda loves him already.

That's what his only living aunt wrote to his mother all those years ago. Would those sentiments still hold true now? After what happened to Andromeda's husband, her daughter and son-in-law, could she look at Draco and still see her nephew? Or would she see a younger version of Lucius and dismiss

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fitted to her snugly, but weren't too tight. She suspected her struggle for air had more to do with her anxiety than the garment itself.

"Yes, I just... I don't think I'm cut out for this. All these little rules and traditions and..." she couldn't quite put into words how it made her feel inadequate. "It's a lot to take in at times and it all comes so naturally to Draco."

"Well," said Ginny slowly. "I've got to be honest here Hermione, I thought you would be a bit more prepared for this sort of thing I mean, it's *the Malfoy's*."

Hermione brushed an errant curl out of her face, still feeling wrong-footed. "I'm aware there's all these old-fashioned expectations, but Merlin, I'm probably going to have to ask him for a list so I don't embarrass myself at the party."

"I can help with that. Parvati has covered a lot of pureblood society events," offered Padma sincerely.

"Oh Padma I was joking!" Hermione let out an incredulous laugh but the other two women remained stoic.

She let out a frustrated groan and collapsed on the bed next to them, her robes making a loud *famp* as the fabric cushioned her. "But I've never had to endure this sort of pompous nonsense before! Nor has Harry or Ron, and though I'm loathe to admit it, the three of us are rather famous in this world."

Ginny shook her head plyingly. "No, the three of you are *celebrities*. You're famous, yes, but as a *celebrity*. Malfoy and his family are *royalty* in our society. Even with the dubious reputation. See the difference?"

Gods, it was like dating a member of the House of Windsor, a rather apt comparison she realized with a sinking feeling. *Bollocks*.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to envision navigating a room full of people that probably felt she should return to her proper place beneath their well-heeled feet instead of clutching the arm of the sole heiress to a name and fortune once the envy of all in the magical world. They'd look for any misstep, one tiny slip in etiquette that would prove them right, that she didn't belong and never would.

But she'd sideline her inferiority complex because as much as it pained her, this was Draco's heritage. If he could grin and bear it through uncomfortable dinners and teas with her Muggle parents, then she could smile and waltz in the face of barely restrained bigotry. Let them smirk and sneer and gossip. At the end of the day, Draco loved her, the witch with no magical lineage to boast of and no pretentious etiquette training under her belt. She could do this, put in an honest effort and do her very best not to make Draco suffer any more guilt than he'd probably already feel.

Besides, if all else failed, she could whisper some carefully chosen words into Draco's ear and he'd apparate her straight to bed and vanish these robes right off her body.



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Sasha stared hard at the pile of resources as if willing them to hold the answer to the very personal and life-altering decision she would need to make soon.

"We've been talking about marriage for a while now but this... this is mad," she intoned, her voice low and almost disbelieving. "I'll have to lie to my parents... my brothers... to *everyone*."

A hollow pain ripped through Hermione. It was a double life she was all too familiar with and it was more often than not, tiring.

"Sasha," Hermione called softly to pull her out of her misery reverie. "I can't tell you what to do here. No one can. So you need to do your research and think, truly think, about what Theo means to you and how your wants and needs align. Think of this as an opportunity to come to full and complete honesty with one another before committing to a marriage. I'll admit the magical element is perhaps not something you expected to have to discuss with a future spouse, but think of it as one more trust issue like pre-nups, finances, or in-laws or living arrangements, that would need to be addressed prior to any wedding."

The other woman seemed to absorb Hermione's practical phrasing of the problem and nodded. Then she sprung off the bed and wrapped Hermione in a fierce embrace.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I don't know how to face him right now."

"Take a few days," Hermione said soothingly. "Call me with your questions if you're more comfortable, all right? I won't hold anything back."

Before she left, Hermione made Sasha a cup of strong tea and saw that she was comfortable back in Theo's bed.

When she arrived back at Franklin House, she found an ashen-faced Theo seated in the armchair right in front of the Floo and a stoic Draco in the one beside his friend.

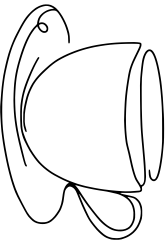
"Is she—?"

"She's calmer now," Hermione interrupted the anxious Theo. "I've left her with everything I think she'll need and she's sleeping there tonight but said she'll go to her parents' in the morning."

Theo nodded sullenly as Draco leapt to his feet. "I think it's best if you stay here for a few days," Draco said bracingly. "Come on, I'll put you up in the guest room next to the library."

When they'd settled back in bed, Hermione clung to Draco a little tighter through the night, letting the comforting sound of his even breathing in slumber soothe her frayed nerves. The miserable image of Sasha's devastated face wouldn't leave her alone, thrusting her back into the pain and guilt she'd felt after removing her parents' Obliviation. To be sure, Sasha would be signing up for a complicated life, but perhaps to her, Theo was worth the effort.

Hermione indulged in sweeping her fingers gently through Draco's hair. She was no stranger to a complicated life herself, to say nothing of the man beside her. And as long as he remained beside her, Hermione thought as she finally drifted off, they'd handle any more complications life threw their way. Together.



Chapter Forty Four

Hermione picked up her mobile. Never before had she needed to have the device constantly on her person, but she'd promised her friend to answer any and all concerns, day or night.

"You're famous," Sasha stated bluntly when Hermione answered. "You're a war heroine."

"One of many."

She'd fielded a call every night this week from Sasha. It seemed the other woman would spend her day reading some of the materials Hermione gave her, then would call Hermione in the evening with all the questions she'd stored up as she took in more information.

"Nice try, Hermione," said Sasha flatly. "But you helped end a war. You and two of your friends."

Hermione scowled into her mobile. "That's a massive oversimplification, but it unfortunately means I do attract rather a lot of attention in the wizarding public."

"Right, like I said," chuckled Sasha. "You're famous."

The first night's line of questioning began with the second wizarding war and the Battle of Hogwarts. Each night carried a different theme as Sasha studied the different facets of recent and ancient magical history.

The third night's topic was blood hierarchy.

"This pureblood shite... is this actually real? People really believe all this? This is barking, truly?"

"Very real," Hermione affirmed sadly.

"I'm... I'm tired of this. Theo and I... we've already had the hard conversations about skin color but I just...," she sighed and seemed to hesitate before asking, "How did you and Draco move past the blood issue?"

Her question caught Hermione off guard and stunned her silent for a moment.

"I read about his family too," confessed Sasha. "I know why he and Theo are friends."

"We've talked about it," divulged Hermione. "At length. You should do the same with Theo if you're up to it. It takes a lot of mental and emotional fortitude to overcome that type of brainwashing."

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"Yes! Do you know what Malfoy asked me last week?"

"Err... should I?"

"He asked me if I thought the silver material of my robes would clash horribly with the gold brocade waistcoat he was having made."

"And, um, would it?"

Hermione threw up her hands in exasperation. "Gold brocade, Harry! Gold. Brocade. I can't do this, look at me! I'm one ornate hat shy of looking like the Tsarina!"

Harry sank onto her bed next to Crookshanks (leisurely giving himself a bath atop Hermione's discarded work robes) and pushed his glasses up his nose.

"I feel like I'm supposed to know what that means, but I confess you've lost me. Want me to fetch Ginny?"

Hermione nodded, unable to tear her eyes away from the stranger in the mirror as she heard Harry get up and move back toward the living room.

"Harry," she called over her shoulder. "You should get Ginny the 'Mummy and Me' broom she's had her eye on. And a Harpies kit for your future little one."

She could hear the smile in his voice when he called back his thanks and left through the fire. Not 10 minutes later, Ginny now stood frozen at her threshold, a wide-eyed Padma at her back.

"Oh wow, Hermione, Harry wasn't kidding when he said you were wearing a 'dress robe thingy that is just so Malfoy.'"

Hermione narrowed her eyes as the women giggled and came closer to inspect the finery, carefully avoiding the train. She truly hadn't been exaggerating with her quip about the Tsarina; she's fairly certain she appeared straight out of a Romanov portrait. The bell sleeves extended almost to the floor, which meant an inksome amount of shaking her arms back if she wanted to do anything with her hands. The gorgeous material, a combination of silks, satin, and silver brocade, draped her frame well and created a decent silhouette, if a bit more shapeless than she'd normally wear.

"It's a beautiful piece, truly," Padma insisted as she circled Hermione.

"I know that, I do, but it's just..."

"Not you?" guessed Ginny and she nodded.

"This is a very traditional robe," said Padma. "Not the sort of thing Parvati would feature. Her column the last few years has been about building up more unknown designers, especially Muggleborn ones," she flashed Hermione a grin. "Still, she'd kill to get her hands on a custom piece like this one. Trust me, Hermione, this is the epitome of fashion for a woman in the upper echelons of pureblood society."

Hermione frowned and tried not to feel like an imposter. A silly little Muggleborn girl playing dress-up for her betters. She wondered if that would be the impression of the other guests.

"Can you breathe all right in it?" asked Ginny, and lowered herself and her protruding belly delicately onto the bed next to a still-bathing Crookshanks.

Hermione pressed a hand to her sternum and took a few deep breaths. The top half of the robes

Remain Nameless

"Hermione, I certainly don't need the money."

"It's not about need, it's about what's right. I will take another look at the budget for the upcoming year and make a final determination from that number to give you the correct salary. But based on what I can quickly estimate in my head, I'd say you were off by about 7,000 Galleons at least."

"I couldn't possibly—"

"Astoria, stop. You've come this far and if you are to be successful in your career as a witch then you need to learn to negotiate for what you are owed."

Astoria regarded her thoughtfully for a minute then a slow grin overtook her face. "Thank you for the advice. Have I successfully bullied you into taking me on?"

Hermione laughed and extended her hand for Astoria to shake. "You've got my endorsement, but I will of course write to the Board of Directors tonight. They'll need to officially vote on anything I decide, though I do have final say, I prefer this fund to run as democratically as possible."

"Thank you," Astoria murmured and her eyes glistened briefly before she cleared her throat and pressed on. "Now, I've been thinking about the inaugural orientation that's approaching in August and—"

Hermione lost track of time as she sat with Astoria and hashed out a proper schedule of events for the first-ever families to benefit from the fund that would be visiting Hogwarts in a month and a half.

She didn't notice Draco approaching until he playfully drawled, "And what are you ladies gossiping about?"

Hermione scowled up at him. "We are not *gossiping*."

Draco frowned as he looked over the table now littered with parchment. "Granger are you seriously working at my birthday party?"

"Hush, Draco, we're in the middle of a staff meeting," clipped Astoria. "Fetch Dennis for me, would you? We need to discuss his role in the organization."

Draco raised an eyebrow at her dismissal and did as she bade as petulantly as possible. "Crewey?" he called across the way. "Your cheeky brat of a wife requires your presence!"

Astoria ignored him.

As Dennis joined their impromptu planning session, Hermione was quickly reminded of why she liked him, and how his affable personality would make him a perfect fit for the role she and Astoria envisioned.

"Dennis, which title do you like better, Family Outreach Coordinator or Outreach Liaison?"

"Oh! Well I think it's important to have the word 'family' in the name, yeah!" he threw out and grinned. The cheery and outgoing Dennis had been languishing away in the Ministry at a dead-end job in the Department of Magical Transportation, and he was desperate for a career switch that would allow him to interact with people again as opposed to repairing and securing Floo networks.

Plus, being the younger sibling of another Muggleborn student gave Dennis a unique perspective. Before he'd received his own Hogwarts letter, he was just along for the ride as Colin went through this monumental change. How many other siblings of Muggleborn witches and wizards suddenly found

themselves embroiled in this new reality; simultaneously fighting jealousy and wonder at their sibling's newfound abilities?

Though Dennis eventually got his own chance to flourish in the magical world, how many other siblings existed like Harry's Aunt Petunia; bitter and afraid of this new disruption to their family life?

Dennis's ultimate goal was to make sure the whole family felt accepted by the magical world, and Hermione marveled at the thought of a future where instead of causing strife, the reveal of the world of magic would inspire closer bonding.

By the end of the evening, they'd settled on the new positions to be created: an administrative assistant specific to Astoria, an admin for the charity as a whole, a volunteer coordinator, and full-time treasurer. For now, Astoria was content to conduct business by owl, or via Floo. She'd also be presenting Hermione with a list of prospective candidates once the Board approved their plan and the job listings posted in the Daily Prophet. As if that weren't enough, the woman had already taken the liberty of thinking about the future physical headquarters.

"I confess before tonight I did some preliminary research and looked into leasing office space in Hogsmeade. We can get a discounted rate as a non-profit organization, and I think we'd want to be headquartered there rather than Diagon, given the proximity to the school."

When their guests had left and Hermione regarded Draco with the momentous turn in the running of her school fund, Draco eyed her with surprise-tinged pride.

"That must have been difficult for you. I know you want to have your hand in everything, but you were going to run yourself ragged, love. I'm glad you've let them help you," he said sincerely.

Sometimes, Hermione mused, ceding of control didn't necessarily need to be a bad thing. With everything that she'd been taking on her shoulders lately, having Astoria and Dennis carry some of the weight would free up some of her time to dedicate to her other passion projects. When was the last time she'd researched freedom for house elves?

And isn't that the lesson she constantly tried to instill in Draco? That it was perfectly all right, and healthy in fact, to need other people?



July 2009

Normally, Hermione would have made a polite excuse to not attend Padma's bridal robe fittings, but as she was in the wedding party, such tasks were not so easily avoided. To be fair, this was less about Padma and more that attending wedding planning related events with her friend also meant tolerating the less palatable presence of her twin, Parvati.

Parvati had yet to make a snide, passive aggressive comment about Hermione's relationship with Draco, but she knew it would only be a matter of time. The afternoon thus far had actually turned out rather pleasant, given the surprise reveal of Padma's robe designer. Hermione knew Parvati had

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pulled some strings via her position at Witch Weekly to have the illustrious Anjana Nehru agree to design and fit her sister's two wedding outfits. The young witch was not only a rising star in the fashion world, but had made a name for herself by ensuring the bulk of her pieces were worn by Muggleborn men and women (like herself) or couples of mixed magical heritage.

"Oh, goodness, you're Hermione Granger," gushed the other woman and stuck her hand out to shake.

"I've admired your designs for years," Hermione gushed right back, shaking her hand warmly.

"Oh, that's mind-boggling coming from you, thank you!"

Mrs. Patil broke up the bonding as she cheerfully ushered Anjana into Padma's bedroom to have the bride-to-be try on her ceremony outfit.

"Hermione, I have very little doubt that woman is going to convince you to wear a piece of hers at your next gala with Malfoy," commented Ginny with a grin.

"I'd be honored," Hermione replied immediately. "But something from her is most likely not in my budget, even if it's a few seasons old."

"Hermione, that's not how this works," huffed Parvati, impatiently. "You wouldn't be paying her for the robes. You're famous and she makes money off you merely mentioning to the press that you're wearing her designs. Besides," Parvati inspected her nails, "I'm sure you could put some of that Malfoy gold to good use."

Hermione was saved from addressing Parvati's presumptive rudeness that she'd be willing to frivolously spend Draco's money by the arrival of Padma in her first wedding look. The women ooh and aahed appropriately and Hermione, for one, didn't have to fake it. Padma looked breathtaking in the bejeweled, bright red garment, a combination of wedding saree and witches' robes. Both Mrs. Patil and Anjana held the train and let it flutter delicately to the floor as the other women circled Padma to admire all the intricate detailing and beading.

Hermione beamed at her friend, Ron's future wife, grateful that they'd found each other. Though he whinged day and night to her and Harry about the extravaganza that would be the Patil-Weasley nuptials attended by hundreds of guests in India, Hermione knew deep down he couldn't be more pleased with his choice of bride and the hoopla surrounding the wedding made Ron feel special.

Padma smiled reverently at the robes draping her body and ran her hands down her sides. "I'd love for my future daughter to wear this one day. Or at least use the fabric."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Padma are you saying you're...?"

"Oh gods no!" She laughed. "But no more Contraceptive Charms the night of this wedding. I want to give James some cousins!"

Ginny chuckled. "Don't let Harry hear you talking about babies. He's already angling for a second one so James can have a sibling!"

Though Hermione was beyond excited for her friends becoming parents, the talk of children always had her feeling like a passive observer in the conversation.

"You and Draco would have the prettiest babies, Hermione," blurted Padma suddenly.

Astoria had done her homework. From inside her purse she pulled out a shrunken copy of the funding agreement that had been publicly filed with the Ministry, the Board of Directors list, and the charter and bylaws recently put into place by Hermione herself.

She took a deep breath and then confidently looked Hermione in the eye. "I had excellent NEWT scores and those accomplishments have been gathering dust in a drawer in my parents' home since the day I received them. I have never had to work for a living, nor would it have been expected of me to pursue a career. Obviously I was meant for marriage to some pureblood wizard and then my purpose in life would eventually shift to mother."

Astoria shook her head. "What my parents never knew was that from the time I was a young girl and they'd instilled in me that I would one day enter an arranged marriage, I began an extensive study of betrothal contracts. I wanted to know exactly what awaited me. What I found and read was horrifying. I'm sure you can imagine. Witches hardly gained much through marriage, and I knew when the eventual day came that I'd be approached by suitors, I would be prepared. I would exploit any and every contractual loophole if I wasn't pleased with my parents' choice for me."

"Fortunately, that day never came," she shot a smile in the direction of Dennis. "So what I am telling you is that you are looking at a woman with endless amounts of spare time, who achieved good marks at Hogwarts, who is familiar with contracts and fund agreements, who sat at her mother's knee and learned to plan society events, and who recently married a Muggleborn and understands the struggle he, his brother, and his father went through in coming into our world."

She gestured to the table. "I've looked through the funding documents and I've seen the official amount of Gallions collected. Hermione, you have more than enough to hire a full-time staff of at least five. You're going to need at least that if this program is to be executed properly. And I'd like to put myself forward as your first permanent hire."

She thrust a copy of her NEWT scores and then a separate parchment on which was written an extremely thorough job description into Hermione's hands. But what caught Hermione's eye (besides the impressive level of detail Astoria had thought to include) was the title of the job itself. Administrative Assistant.

Hermione quickly read through Astoria's job proposal then looked up at her with a small frown.

"Astoria I cannot hire you as an administrative assistant."

"Oh," her features fell in disappointment and Hermione shook her head.

"I cannot hire you for that position because the duties and responsibilities you've outlined so thoroughly here are akin to that of... well I'd say the title of Associate Director. You're talking about taking over the day to day running of this entire program... Astoria, I'll need to hire *you* an admin."

Her cheekbones flushed a light pink. "Oh, well, that's really unnecessary. I don't care about the title—"

"Astoria if you are to work for me in this capacity you need to accept the proper title for the job duties you perform." Hermione's eyes scanned the job pitch again. "As well as the proper wage. You're rather underselling yourself here."

"I'm so sorry"

Astoria waved her apology away. "No, it's all right, I understand, I do." She met Hermione's eyes earnestly. "It's not because of Dennis or his blood. She's mad that I kept this from her... that I didn't come to her for help... that I didn't have faith that she would have tried to intervene with my parents on my behalf. She feels like she's failed as my older sister."

Hermione reached over and laid a comforting hand on her knee. "She's accepting your letters at least?"

"Yes," Astoria nodded. "We've been writing to each other. It will take some time, I'm sure, to build that trust again, but it's more than I can say for my parents. Her wedding will be in December, so perhaps by then..." she trailed off and looked out over the grounds.

Hermione retracted her hand and waited for Astoria to gather her thoughts.

"I did want to speak to you on another matter entirely," said Astoria suddenly, her tone now brisk and excited.

"Oh?"

"Yes. About your fund for students of non-magical parents. I'd like to help!"

Hermione beamed. "That's wonderful! I'd been meaning to ask you for some time now but I'm just so busy with work these days. There are a number of volunteer positions open and—"

"No Hermione, I'm not looking to volunteer. I want you to hire me."

Hermione blinked in surprise. "Hire you?"

"Yes," Astoria affirmed. "I think I'm right in assuming you've got far too much on your plate and this fund is much too important to our world for you to not give it more attention day to day."

Hermione opened and closed her mouth a few times, unsure if she should be affronted or ashamed. "Hermione, listen to me," Astoria continued, taking advantage of Hermione's speechlessness. "I meant no offense. Your ideas are the foundation of this entire movement. Your legacy is what will drive it forward. You yourself exist as a living inspiration to Muggleborn witches and wizards and I'm now also telling you that this wonderful vision of yours will not succeed unless you have dedicated help. Let me be that dedicated help. And Dennis, too, actually, he'd like to be involved as well."

"I..." Hermione faltered unsure of how to proceed. This fund of hers had been a long-time dream come true. A program she'd wished desperately for as a young witch, new to the world of magic. She'd closely guarded these ideas and hopes for so long, never thinking they'd see the light of day.

Then along came Draco, supporting her greatest ambition to try and create a more equitable magical society. And he hadn't mocked or scorned her or accused her of naïve idealism. If Hermione had learned anything from the genesis of her eponymous clarity, it was that only with the kind assistance of passionate people would it succeed and sustain momentum for years to come. She owed it to future generations of magical families to swallow her own pride here.

Though the fund may have her name across the top of it, it wasn't about her. Not anymore. Hermione stuffed her ego down and smiled at Astoria.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Oh!" Hermione flushed, completely caught off guard and more than a little uncomfortable. "Thank you, but we're umm... that's not something... we're not..." she took a steadying breath. "We've not discussed anything like that," she finished lamely.

She knew Padma meant well, meant to compliment her, but there's nothing she loathed more than people commenting on the current or future state of her womb.

"How long have you been together?" asked Parvati and Hermione was surprised by her sudden interest in her relationship. Whenever they were all out in their large group of Hogwarts friends, Parvati seemed more than content to pretend Draco did not exist.

"Since last April, so about a year and four months now."

Parvati raised an eyebrow. "Odd he hasn't broached the whole children subject, don't you think? I'm sure there's some old Malfoy doctrine decreeing the provision of heirs with white-blond hair by a certain age for him."

"Odd that you feel it's your place to broach the subject at all," chimed in Ginny with a frosty glare at Parvati. But the other woman remained unbothered in her blatant nosiness.

"Pureblood men like him don't often casually date for so long. There's usually a betrothal contract by now. Wonder what his mother has to say about that."

Hermione bristled at the way she'd reduced her relationship with Draco to "casual."

"Yes well, we're a somewhat unconventional couple and he's rather uninterested in following those outdated customs," said Hermione evenly.

"I just find it interesting is all," sniffed Parvati. "He seems the type to demand those customs be followed."

"That's enough Parvati," snapped Padma. "Draco's my friend too. Now stop postering Hermione and help Anjana with the bustle, I'll need your help before the reception."

Ginny shot Hermione a look that quite clearly asked, "Would you like me to hex her for you?" But Hermione only repressed a snort and shook her head. She'd handled worse comments about her relationship with Draco and she knew there'd be plenty more for as long as they were together.

"How's your research paper coming along?" chirped Ginny, changing the subject. "And did Paulo send you any more of that wine?"

The distraction tactic deployed by her friend worked, and Hermione talked enthusiastically about her recent collaborative effort with the celebrated Mermish scholar she'd met in Venice, Paulo Pescara. Ginny did her the courtesy of listening attentively to the central points of their joint paper based on Hermione's previous presentation building on Paulo's decades of discoveries on the ancient mermaid colonies in the Mediterranean.

It was an extracurricular activity outside of her day job at the Ministry, but to have this published in a peer-reviewed journal could potentially do wonders for Hermione if she ever wanted to secure funding for any future private research. Hermione then rewarded her patient friend by divulging that yes, her kind and insightful co-author had in fact shipped her several bottles of Italian wine from one of his son's vineyards. Ginny promptly invited her and Draco over for dinner the following weekend.

Remain Nameless

Hermione soldered through the rest of the afternoon, even delightedly accepting a business card from Anjana with a whispered, “owl me, please, for any formal events on your social calendar,” before she flooded home.

With Astoria and Dennis officially hired and the young married couple off and running with their agreed-upon ideas for her Hogwarts fund, Hermione now had more time on her hands to pursue her varied passion projects, social commitments, and Ministry workload.

She’d intended to respond to Paul’s most recent correspondence, as she was left to her own devices for the evening, but concentration failed to ensnare her. Draco was working tonight, attending the Wasps match against the Falmouth Falcons (his favorite match of the season, as he’d grown up a supporter of the Falcons), and without him or her work to distract her, Hermione couldn’t help but dwell on the impertinent conversation with Parvati.

She and Draco didn’t owe anyone an explanation for the progression of their relationship; Hermione was secure enough in their affection for each other. But Parvati’s harsh view of Draco, while misinformed and a little cruel, unfortunately conjured several questions in Hermione’s mind.

Did Draco want to marry her?

Did he want to have a child or children with her?

She remembered well that night in December after the mortifying debacle that was her parents’ holiday party.

“Every version of my future includes you. I’m yours in whatever capacity you’ll have me.”

While yes, that memory of his words caused a happy sigh to leave her lips, what did it actually mean for their future? Would they just continue on as they were, indefinitely? Happy and in love, to be sure, but in separate homes?

She’d once reached this point long ago with Ron, except they’d actually taken the step of moving in together. But every time they’d discussed marriage or children, one of them would demur and suggest putting the discussion to a future date. Hermione would always feel a knot of tension release in her chest whenever they would, once again, successfully avoid speaking seriously about committing to an engagement.

But with Draco...

He’d become the comfort and familiarity that she sought in relationships while maintaining a spark of excitement and passion that kept her craving his presence in her life.

The difference between the Draco she’d befriended at the café and the Draco she currently waited on to arrive back from a long night of work was night and day. He’d stomped (literally) back into her life a closed off, self-floating man treading water; one who didn’t think he deserved love or happiness. Draco had emotionally developed leaps and bounds beyond that melancholic persona over the course of their friendship and subsequent relationship. Earning his trust and ultimately his love and showing him that yes, you can be vulnerable and still be worthy of these good things in life was a privilege.

And he’d had a profound effect on her, too. She’d also been content to glide through life, stalled in her career, languishing in the familiar comfort of old friendships, uninspired to put herself out there

Hey Jude!9

across her hips bones and kept up an eager assault with his tongue until her lower body thrashed and her cries filled the cavernous room.

Draco sweetly pecked her thigh then lowered her leg back to the floor and stood, towering over her. His eyes gleamed with a clear intent to please and be pleased.

“Turn round for me and place your hands on the shelf in front of you.”

She faced the studs and heard the clink of his belt buckle, the unzipping of his trousers, then his voice in her ear.

“On your toes.”

Hermione stood as tall as she could and it took a few attempts before Draco could fully breathe himself within her.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

She could no longer make sense of any of the written words in the titles of the books inches from her face. Draco had thoroughly obliterated her ability to perform basic reading comprehension.

His vocalizations pitched lower as he thrust harder and faster while hers pitched higher.

“I... Draco... don’t stop... love you... *Draco!*”

It had been the perfect start to the day.

Now, she sat out on Draco’s verandah, overlooking the lush acreage behind the estate, in the midst of pleasant dessert course conversation with Astoria. The younger woman chattered away rapidly about newlywed life, enthusiastic in her burgeoning relationship with her new Muggle in-laws, and paused only to take dainty sips of tea or another delicate forkful of the sumptuous tiramisu made by Sasha.

Sasha had joined the men for this course; their group a polite distance away so they could smoke the cigars brought by Theo. Though Hermione loathed the smell of cigar smoke, she couldn’t deny that Draco looked rather dashing as he brought it away from his lips to puff out a gentle stream of smoke. She also admired the way his long, deft fingers firmly held the cigar in his hand, a man confident in his status. Gods, she was hopeless.

“She’s really something, isn’t she?” Astoria’s light voice was amused as they watched Sasha blow some impressive smoke rings, easily outdoing the men.

Hermione chuckled and turned back to Astoria, showing her lust for Draco aside for the time being. They’d only just made love in the bath not an hour before their guests arrived and yet Hermione already wanted to drag him back to his bedroom.

“And her desserts!” gushed Astoria, taking another bite off her plate. “You’d think Theo would be a stone or two heavier by now!”

Hermione laughed, having had the same thought herself after being treated to several of the wondrous confections made by Sasha.

“How is Daphne’s wedding planning coming along?” Hermione asked.

Astoria’s face fell. “Oh, fine I suppose. We haven’t...” she put down her tea cup and fiddled with her hands in her lap. “We haven’t seen each other since my marriage to Dennis,” she confessed sadly.

desk. The click of his shoes drew closer.

"Granger, honestly, how do you go through life this vertically-challenged?"

He rounded the corner. "And really, leaving your wand, I mean—"

He stopped when he saw her at the end of the row. She wore nothing but sheer, blush-colored knickers.

"Happy birthday," she said with a grin.

"Indeed," Draco exhaled and stalked towards her. He backed her into the nearest shelf and pinned her there with his hips. For a few frantic minutes, he kissed her breathless with his hands buried in her hair.

Hermione felt him grow hard against her and trailed her hands down to his belt buckle, but Draco intercepted her. He took both her hands in his and held them above her head, pressing their bodies even closer together. He interlaced their fingers and ground into her, the friction against her bare-ly-covered core making her writhe desperately in search of relief.

Draco kissed along her jaw, down her neck, then sucked the skin of her collarbone. He could perform that same pleasant journey as many times as he liked, and at varying speeds, and it never failed to make her whimper.

Gods how she wanted to touch him; to grab, caress, and clutch at him in a manic display of pure need.

She flexed her hands but he tightened his hold.

"Can I trust you to behave and keep your hands up here? Or do I need to restrain you with magic, since I do have my wand on me?"

He increased the intensity of his grinding against her pelvis and she understood the implication perfectly: any disobedience and he'd stop all delicious contact.

"I'll behave."

"Good girl, see that you do."

He tested her resolve immediately, releasing her hands and palming her breasts with practiced brushes of his thumbs over her nipples. His lips and tongue followed his touch, and she arched into his mouth, nonsensical pleas tumbling out of her in an unstoppable stream. But her hands stayed put.

"So good for me," he murmured as he kissed down to her navel, tugging her knickers off as he went.

Draco knelt before her and gently lifted her leg and rested it over his shoulder. Now the torture commenced along the skin of her inner thigh with open-mouthed kisses and nips and *Melina*, how she wanted to grab him by the hair and shove his face between her legs, but it wasn't her birthday. And Draco always rewarded her patience.

He finally licked at her center, dragging his tongue up her slit and circling her clitoris, and the pressure building within her boiled over embarrassingly quickly. Only Draco could make her forget that she was pressed stark naked against a library shelf, sweating and shaking all over precious first-edition tomes that could fetch a disturbing number of Galleons at an auction. He played his large hands

without a concrete direction. Draco reminded her of all the ambitions she'd cloaked behind layers of casual acceptance of the world around her. No one was really interested in Mermish tunes so why bother? No one would ever support house elf freedom so why bother? A Hogwarts introductory curriculum for Muggleborn children would never be instituted, so why bother?

You should bother, he'd essentially said. You care about this, so either make it happen or put your all into at least attempting to make it happen.

He challenged her ideas, because gods that man loved an argument with her, and because he knew she could rise to the challenge. His unwavering and honest support of her ambitions and ideals, though at times perhaps at odds with his own personal world view, was everything she'd ever imagined in a life partner.

This was all before even mentioning the sex. Good lord, she could write several tomes-worth on how fantastic the sex was with him and it wouldn't be long enough to describe all the ways Draco made her feel adored and empowered in the bedroom.

Hermione closed her eyes and told herself to take a step back, to filter out all the societal expectations on women her age, all the familial expectations from Draco's mother, and all the invasively rude assumptions from everyone else. What did she want?

In her heart of hearts, what did forever look like with Draco?

When Hermione opened her eyes, her fireplace lit up green and the man himself stepped out of the flames. Draco looked tired, his eyes strained from peering through omnioculars for hours on end, but the second he spotted her on the couch his whole face brightened.

"Hello," he approached and pecked her lips. "The Falcons won and I had to pretend to be upset."

He gestured her near empty mug of tea. "I could do with some of that, any left?"

Hermione shook her head and moved to get up. "No, I just made one for myself, let me go and—"

But Draco waved her off and went through to the kitchen. "I've got it, love. If I put on a full kettle will you take some more?"

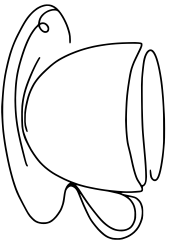
Hermione sank back down into the cushions. "Yes," she replied, dazedly.

When he later returned with a mug of his own and a fresh one for her, he kissed the top of her head and settled down next to her.

"How was Padma's robe fitting?" he asked her.

Hermione grinned and gave him a brief re-telling of her afternoon with the rest of the bridal party all the while a joyous thought ran in a continuous stream through her mind.

I think forever could look like this.



Chapter Forty Six

August 2009

What was the proper reaction or facial expression to have when seeing one's dream realized? Hermione couldn't say, nor could she have properly prepared herself for the sight before her.

She stood on the front steps of Hogwarts, looking down upon the vast grounds, and everywhere she looked she saw Muggle parents and family members and young, eager magical children.

Down by Hagrid's hut, she saw Rolf Scamander introducing a group of children to nifflers and crups while Hagrid himself showed off a unicorn in the paddock.

Out over the quidditch pitch, Hermione spied an airborne Maureen Tyler as she gave a flying demonstration with a few of her Harpies teammates.

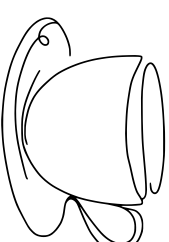
Dennis's father, Mitchell, bustled past her with a group of Muggle parents, beginning the tour of the first floor of the castle.

Dennis was sat down on the shore of the Black Lake, a casual and inviting atmosphere with blankets on the grass as he entertained the non-magical siblings and answered their questions, encouraging the children to toss bits of bread to the giant squid lurking beneath the surface.

Behind her, inside the entrance hall, Hermione heard Astoria and Dean Thomas talking logistics for the luncheon to be served inside the Great Hall. They'd poached yet another disillusioned Ministry worker away from the government in Dean, who'd jumped at the chance to become the volunteer coordinator for the fund. He'd already pitched several wonderful ideas to attract more volunteers, like offering extra credit to Hogwarts students for Muggle Studies (soon to be renamed Understanding Non-Magical People) and an internship program for Seventh-Years.

This was real.

Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat and promised herself that she would invite her parents to attend the orientation next year. She knew they'd have loved something like this and perhaps it would help build further understanding between the three of them about what Hermione wanted to



Chapter Forty Five

June 2009

It was only for a brief moment, but Hermione had the strangest sensation, akin to an out-of-body experience. For just a minute, she allowed her mind to wander away; carried along on a thread until she felt as if she viewed the scene around her as an outsider. Draco and she hosted a dinner party for his recent birthday with some of their friends and only half of them were pureblood.

She'd only acquiesced to leaving Harry, Ron, and the rest out for tonight because she already knew that the dinner at the Burrow the next evening would include a birthday cake made by Molly Weasley herself, just for Draco. Let him try and refuse that woman's determination to lavish him with maternal affection and criminally delicious chocolate gâteau.

Draco had allowed Hermione to plan a simple get-together with the restricted guest list of Theo, Sasha, Astoria, and Dennis. He resolutely refused to allow any Potters or Weasleys on his property for his birthday.

"I'd rather not spend the evening fighting the urge to stab Weasley over his abominable table manners and for the last time, all I asked for this year was to slag you in the Transfiguration section of my library." She'd already delivered that present this morning.

Hermione knew he'd meant the slagging quip as a throwaway joke, but she hadn't forgotten his confession about his Amortentia scent being partly made up of her in his library. Earlier, as Draco sat at his desk answering a few letters, Hermione wandered down a row and around the corner, out of his line of sight.

"Malfoy?" she called after a few minutes. "I need a few of those tiles from the top shelf and I've left my wand in your room."

She had not left her wand in his room.

"Would you be so kind as to reach them for me?"

Hermione heard a sigh and the scraping of the chair legs on the floor as he pushed back from the

"Er... what?"

The other three laughed warmly. "Ah, I see she's yet to gift you with her rant on blood diamonds," chorled Ron. "Unless it's a family piece, you better make sure the stones in that ring are ethically sourced."

Ron's brow furrowed. "Family vaults likes yours though, mate... why not use heirloom jewelry? I bet you'd have your pick of about a dozen Malloy or Black betrothal pieces just gathering dust at Gringotts."

Draco shook his head, as he'd already considered and negated this plan.

"Given the history and blood supremacy views of the people who wore those rings, I highly doubt it'd be appropriate for Granger. I don't think she'd appreciate that legacy on her hand, do you?"

"Fair point," conceded Ron.

"I think you should design it yourself," suggested Ginny. "Knowing you put that kind of thought behind it... well I think that would mean an awful lot to her."

It appeared Granger's overly sentimental friends did have a use after all. "So I need to think up a design on my own, and commission an ethically sourced ring to present to her?" Draco summed up and the rest of the group nodded.

"And no public proposals," Ron said suddenly. "She hates that kind of attention."

"I wasn't born yesterday Weasley, obviously I'm not about to ask her via the quidditch stadium scoreboard," he snorted.

"When do you plan to do it?" asked Ginny.

Draco stood abruptly. "Well I've got what I came for. Cheers, you lot. And if I find out anyone here told Granger about this little conversation I've got your demises all planned out," he threatened and strode toward the fireplace.

He heard three disbelieving scoffs behind him. "I'm sure we could handle any dastardly revenge plot from the likes of you, Malloy," snorted Ron, unimpressed.

"Not if I write to Molly and let her know you ruined this for me and Granger," Draco volleyed back.

Stupefied silence.

"I hate that Mum likes him," he heard Ron mutter as he disappeared through the Floo.

accomplish as a witch.

She'd shed enough tears this morning when a huge bouquet of flowers arrived from Harry and Ginny. Harry himself penned the card, writing that this program would have made all the difference to a scruffy-looking orphan from Little Whinging with bad hair and taped glasses. Draco vowed to hex Harry and his stupid glasses for making Hermione cry the next time they all met up.

Ron and Padma had sent champagne and Ron's note brought more tears, but this time from laughter, when she read: *"Still overindulging aren't you Hermione? I'm sure your program is great and all, but if it doesn't include looking these kids in a girl's bathroom with a fully grown mountain troll to force a few friendships, then I think you've still got some work to do."*

Seeing as the staff had everything in hand and thanking all the deities for the resourcefulness and ambitions of Astoria, Hermione decided to find Draco. She knew just where he would wander to, and was therefore unsurprised to find him seated with Wesley Maczair in the quidditch stands, observing the awed little ones on the pitch.

Draco gestured vaguely to the stands across the way where another man sat, looking delightedly up at Maureen as she skillfully flew around. Even from a considerable distance, there was no mistaking that he was tall and broadly built with neat lines of well-defined muscles.

"Do you know that man over there?" Draco asked Wesley as Hermione joined them.

"Yes, that's Mo's father. He's a real decent bloke, loves watching her fly."

Draco's brow furrowed. "He's a Muggle, right? What does he do for a living?"

"Let's a weight-lifting coach. Mo grew up going to the gym every day from when she was just a wee thing. How do you think she got into such good shape? That man knows his strength-training"

"I'll say," Draco muttered and Hermione saw an idea forming behind his eyes as he lapsed into silence.

"Well I'd better go find the wife," said Wesley as he stood. "She'll be wanting to have you two over for dinner soon, I expect."

"Oh how lovely! Please tell Lara thank you for all her assistance with scheduling the Hogwarts Express trip!" Hermione said in parting and Wesley saluted her.

Hermione contented herself with watching the excitement of the soon-to-be Hogwarts' students on the grass below, most faces wide-eyed in wonder at the thought of one day being able to actually fly.

"If I were a team owner, I'd hire that man straight off," Draco piped up suddenly, and Hermione saw he still looked across the way at Mr. Tyler.

"Even though he's a Muggle?"

Draco shrugged. "An expert is an expert. Imagine an entire squad trained by him..."

Draco didn't often talk about the complexities of his job or quidditch with Hermione, despite her insistence that she wanted to hear about his work.

"Is that something you'd like to do one day? Own a team?" she asked, latching on to what he'd revealed in his statement about Maureen's father.

To her surprise, a flush rose to his cheeks. "I mean... yes, one day. Scouting is nice and all, but since

my dream of being a professional player was never realized... yeah. I've given a lot of thought to one day being an owner."

"What's stopping you?"

Draco snorted. "Certainly nothing on the financial front. But no owners have been eager to sell in the last decade, really. Although there are rumors the Falmouth Falcons owner is looking to retire from ownership and none of his children want to take on the team. But still, they'd have to be willing to sell to *me*... but it doesn't matter anyway. It's just a silly childhood dream of mine."

Hermione stared at him peevishly. The occurrences were fewer these days, but she sometimes still detected that Draco held back from fully pursuing things he truly wanted in life, as if he still felt he needed to be punished.

"I think you should have a chat with Mr. Tyler. Couldn't hurt right?"

Draco shrugged but Hermione pressed on. "Oh, go on, have Wesley introduce you. I've got a couple more groups to observe so you'll be left to your own devices anyway."

She poked his cheek and wandered off to check in with more of the volunteers, hoping Draco would take her suggestion to heart.

Hours later, Hermione waved goodbye to their first ever group of visiting families, as the Muggle family members were escorted down to stay in Hogsmeade and the incoming students being shown to the dormitories. This part of the introduction to the magical world had been an unmitigated success and she hoped the tours of Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley would prove just as fruitful.

Draco caught up with Hermione just outside the Entrance Hall, having just concluded a lengthy chat with Mr. Tyler.

"I gave Len my card. We'll see what happens I suppose."

Hermione shot him a grin. "On first name basis already are we?"

Draco playfully nudged her shoulder with his own. "Yes, yes, you continue to be right about all things."

The easy smile on his face warmed her heart and seized her with a sudden surge of affection. She reached down and intertwined their fingers.

"I don't quite know how to thank you for all this..." Hermione said quietly. "It's everything and more... it's exceeded my wildest expectations and I... I just..." She took a steady breath and held his gaze. "Thank you."

Draco shook his head and gave her a small smile. "No love, this is all down to you. Your vision, your desire to see something this comprehensive become reality. This is your legacy, Granger, relish in it."

They walked a bit further into the castle, finding themselves in a deserted corridor off the front hall. "Although," Draco mused. "I'm thinking the Creeveys are going to find themselves with another exorbitant delivery from my personal cellar quite soon. Would that make you feel better?"

Hermione nodded emphatically. "Oh yes, I truly couldn't have asked for a better team. But even so," she brought them to a halt. "I couldn't have done this without you," Hermione insisted. "I love you... so much..."

Neither Potter disappointed him then, both indulging in eye rolls. "I simply thought it wise to seek the opinion of those closest to Granger on her preferred ring style."

Ginny and Harry exchanged a look; the look of a married couple who could conduct an entire conversation with but one specific glance. "Go on, we need him," Ginny urged Harry.

Harry grimaced and cast an uneasy glance at Draco. "Don't leave and don't get offended. If you want to do this right for Hermione you'll listen."

With that cryptic pronouncement, Harry stood and abruptly disappeared. Draco blinked at the sudden disappearance and then demanded of Ginny, "And just where has the idiot gone to—?"

But Potter had already returned with a pop and he wasn't alone. Ron Weasley stood with him looking confused and to Draco's utter disgust, friendly.

"Oh hey Malloy. Hey Gin." The ginger git didn't bother with any other pleasantries and instead made himself quite at home by going through to the kitchen.

"Excellent you've got tea on. Padma's at Parvati's tonight... think they're talking about bridesmaid dresses or some other wedding planning stuff..."

The sounds of various cupboards being opened and rummaged through could be heard out in the sitting room. "You still have those chocolate biscuits? We're out at ours."

"Cupboard above the stove," called Ginny. Draco silently fumed at the couple in front of him, both of whom looked infuriatingly nonplussed at his glare. It was bad enough he'd debased himself in front of Potter but apparently his humiliation needed to include the Weasel King himself before he could seek the advice he needed.

Ron ambled back into the room with a mouth and hand full of biscuits, a mug of tea, and an affable grin that Draco so very desperately wanted to hex off his face.

"So," he settled in an armchair and through a mouthful of chocolate crumbs asked Draco, "Harry said something about you needing help with a gift for Hermione?"

"Yeah, a rather permanent gift that'll live on her left hand," quipped Ginny with a sigger.

"Shut it Ginevra."

"Do you want our help or not?" interjected Harry.

"I came to *you* Potter. You and your wife! Isn't that enough? I didn't come here to be mocked and I certainly didn't come here for you all to unite against me and tell me I've got the wrong end of the broomstick or that I'm not good enough for her or—"

"I got as far as ring shopping," Ron interrupted quietly. "For Hermione." He cleared his throat and looked eyes with Draco.

"Obviously things didn't work out for us... the timing was never quite there to go further but yeah," Ron sighed and sat back in his chair. "I put a lot of thought into the ring I'd get her."

Draco exhaled slowly and swallowed his pride. "What do you think she'd like?" he asked the other man gruffly.

"No diamonds," Ron said quickly.

"Unless they're conflict-free," Ginny piped up.

Draco internally blamed Granger for making him so soft that he let the moment occur without a single quip or sneer.

Ginny beamed at her husband then at Draco. "Say goodnight to Uncle Draco, James!" And she actually lifted a tiny fist in Draco's direction in a mockery of a wave.

Draco cocked an eyebrow and drawled, "When your sprig is capable of speech, he may address me as Mr. Malfoy."

Ginny chuckled and swept the infant down the hall to the nursery, though Draco heard her murmur to her son, "Uncle Draco is a dramatic little thing but Auntie Hermione thinks he's fit so you'll just have to endure his posh nonsense."

Draco decided it was best for his emotional health to not dwell on the fact that the offspring of a Potter and a Weasley would eventually refer to him in any sort of familial way. This line of thinking also reminded him of the reason he'd sunk so low as to show up here in the first place, and behind Granger's back no less.

He'd told Hermione he needed to attend an after-hours meeting with the coaches of the Wasps to discuss bringing up a reserve player or two to the starting lineup, and though he loathed lying to her, he hoped the ends would justify the means in this instance.

When both Potters had settled on the loveseat across from him and all three had prepared their tea to their liking, Draco cleared his throat and launched straight into his mysterious request to meet with the couple without Hermione. *I am okay with this.*

"I want it made crystal clear from the outset. I am not seeking your permission nor your approval. I simply thought it... prudent to ask your advice on how best to approach Granger about... about..." Fucking Salazar, he couldn't even say it, how in the blazes was he supposed to ask her if he couldn't even say it aloud to Potter.

But then Ginny gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh my gods Malfoy," she whispered from behind shaking hands.

Harry looked between Ginny and Draco, obviously confused. "Erm, what does my wife know that I don't?"

Ginny dropped her hands and shot him a withering look of disbelief. "Honestly, are you serious Harry? Malfoy here is feeling a little *weak in the knees* for Hermione."

"Ah... okay..."

"As in one knee. He's going to go down on one knee in front of her."

"Okay?"

"He wants to propose to her, you dolt!"

"Oh!" Harry flushed in embarrassment at being a beat behind. Merlin's sack, this man was in line to be head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in a few years?

"Well that's ah... that's great, I suppose? What do you need us for?" Harry asked.

Draco sighed and inspected his nails to buy some time. "Do not mistake me, Potter. I do not need you for anything"

She tugged him forward then dragged his head down to capture his lips. Draco responded eagerly, and they soon found themselves in the exact same position from the inaugural gala the year before: pressed against the stone wall and blissfully unaware of their surroundings and snogging each other senseless.

Indeed, they were once again so unaware that neither noticed Minerva McGonagall pass by with a scoff and a muttered, "You'd think the novelty would have worn off by now..."



December 2009

Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade would not be in the cards for Hermione this year and she'd do well to accept that fact.

While happy for Ron and Padma and though their wedding in India may have been her favorite (don't tell Ginny), the subsequent media circus made it quite impossible to be seen anywhere in wizarding public for the time being. If the commotion and press attention, positive though it may be for now, didn't abate soon, then everyone in her life would either receive her horrid attempts at knitting or she'd have to brave the hustle and bustle of the Muggle shopping world near holiday time.

Although, owl-order catalogues could help, especially if it meant she could pick out magical gifts without hearing, "Miss Granger, when do you and Mr. Malfoy plan to make things official?" shouted at her or have strangers shove photographs of her with Draco from the recent crop of pictures from Ron and Padma's extravagant nuptials under her nose for her autograph.

Part of her felt slightly bitter that Ron and Padma had embarked on a month-long honeymoon to Japan immediately following the wedding and therefore did not have to suffer the press attention that the rest of their family and friends now endured. Still, Hermione was beyond ecstatic for her friends and wondered if by the time they'd returned for Christmas whether Padma would already be expecting the next Weasley.

The fall had swept by in the blur and excitement of her best friend's wedding, and now with their return from India, Hermione and Draco finally found themselves with a weekend free of obligations. And when Hermione didn't have anything pressing to occupy her, her idle thoughts constantly wandered back to the same subject.

In hindsight, Hermione probably shouldn't have tested Draco's patience immediately following a tattoo removal session, but her curiosity ate at her.

His forearm rested in a bowl filled with essence of murtlap; an idea of Hermione's that accelerated the healing process somewhat. Draco had a faraway look on his face as he seemed unable to concentrate on the novel in front of him, his gaze flicking back to his arm every few minutes.

So when Hermione suggested that now would be an excellent time for a proper introduction to his house elves so she could plan for their Christmas gifts, she shouldn't have been surprised when the

Remain Nameless

immediate reply was a surly, "For fuck's sake Granger, whatever for?"

"Language, Malloy, and I just want to properly meet them, I don't understand why this is a big deal."

Draco sighed and shook his head, exasperated. "But you've already met Crick. Many, many times. He's not exactly a sociable personality."

Hermione rolled her eyes, undeterred. "Well of course not, he only exists to serve the household and we wouldn't want to give elves ideas above their station," she tossed out bitterly. Draco merely fixed her with an indifferent stare, not rising to the bait.

She decided to go a different route. "Please?"

He made a show of cleaning off his arm and rolling his sleeve back down and then heaved a dramatic sigh. "The things I do for you, Granger," Draco muttered under his breath. "Crick!"

The elf appeared instantly. "How may I be of service sir?"

Draco sighed again and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Hermione wants to talk with you so—"

Hermione shot him a glare, causing him to hastily edit his wording so it wouldn't come out as an order.

"—if you wouldn't mind indulging her for a bit, Hermione would like to speak with you."

"And Watson as well," she chimed in.

At this statement, an uneasy look passed between Draco and Crick. Crick seemed to be looking for permission that Draco seemed hesitant to give. Finally, Crick gave a brisk nod and Draco relented.

"If Watson wouldn't mind, she'd like to have a proper introduction to both of you, apparently. Erm, that is, only if he feels up to it."

Crick leveled Hermione with an unreadable stare. "I shall ask him."

After he'd gone, Hermione turned to Draco with a puzzled frown. "I don't understand," she said. "Is there a reason you can't call him? You always send Crick off with instructions."

Draco looked uncomfortable. "I am unable to call Watson."

A pop signaled the return of Crick, this time with a second elf. If Hermione had to guess, she would say Watson was younger than Crick, though the two appeared so similar that she recognized that they must be closely related.

Watson bowed to Draco and then Hermione.

"My brother, Watson," said Crick and his hands made a flurry of movements as he spoke.

The elf turned to his brother this time. "This is Miss Granger," he said, and his hands once again gestured in a series of odd moves.

Watson nodded his head and looked up at Hermione with a wide smile. "Of course I know Miss Granger, lovely to meet you." But Watson did not speak. Crick interpreted the gestures and movements of Watson's rapidly moving hands and facial expressions and it dawned on Hermione. Watson communicated via signing.

"I always enjoy your cooking," said Hermione warmly, Crick continuing to act as an interpreter.

"Thank you," translated Crick from Watson's signs, puzzling Hermione. She was familiar with a

Hey Jude!9

Scratch, scratch.

"What is customary in your family?"

Draco snorted. "A courtship period sanctioned by both sets of parents followed by contractual negotiations between families and then a formal betrothal announcement. So, in effect, the exact opposite of anything I or Granger would want."

"What do you think she would want?"

Draco frowned as he considered how Granger would ideally like to receive a proposal. Should he involve her father? Will he need to ask his permission for her hand? No, he could hear her little rant in his head already about feminism and autonomy and how she certainly didn't need any man's permission to decide whether she wanted to marry Draco.

"I know what she wouldn't want. I think."

Scratch, scratch.

"I can give you general advice, of course, but perhaps your question about her preferences might be best posed to the people who know her best."

Shit. Once again, Draco would be indebted to Harry fucking Potter.

I am okay with this



The Potters' cozy cottage was much too twee for Draco's taste and while certainly more of a home than that dreary Grimmauld Place, it was apparently in the genes of both the Potter and Weasley families to not own a single piece of matching furniture. Said hideous furniture also had garish crocheted blankets in any and every color draped haphazardly over it all.

And the walls. The walls were so busy that Draco had to actively stare at one for a good thirty seconds before he could even discern the paint color beneath the myriad framed photos, assorted knick-knacks, and quidditch paraphernalia that adorned just about every inch of available space.

"Remind me never to hire you as a decorator, Potter," Draco sneered in greeting.

He shrugged in that careless way of his and it killed Draco a tiny bit inside that it was no longer so easy to rile Potter up. He needed to craft more biting insults in future. Unfortunately that future wrecking of Potter's emotional stability must be sidelined for the time being, because Draco had come to this tacky abode in need of a favor.

Draco still took a small amount of pleasure in flourishing his wand to cast an obvious *Sonambula* before folding himself to sit on one end of a lumpy sofa.

"Er... do you want tea or something? Gin's just going to put James down then she can join us."

"Tea is fine," Draco said tersely and inspected a scratch on the leg of the coffee table.

Ginny strolled in from the kitchen, arms full up with her blanketed infant. As Potter passed by to fix tea, he pressed a kiss to his wife's cheek, then bent down to delicately peck the top of his son's head.

Remain Nameless

the horrible awful sins of his past, but gods, if he didn't have to suffer a panic attack every time he even thought about removing his shirt, then he'd jump at this small modicum of absolution.

And fuck, the glorious way she'd phrased it. *"I simply wanted you, for once, to have the choice. It's your body."*

Marry me.

Draco sucked in a breath. "When can we start?"

With his simple acquiescence, she squared her shoulders and started prattling about researching proper outpatient facilities and the types of aftercare he'd need, throwing around odd words like "dermatologists," "laser surgery," and "anesthesia."

But Draco barely heard a word.

That beautiful, wondrous, haunting vision that allowed him to conjure a corporeal Patronus always liked to lurk just at the edge of his mind, and only with practiced Occlumency could he ever fully suppress it.

Oh but it flew free now. It ran rampant across his vision and he could only nod mutely and agree with whatever Granger said because he was on another planet.

A white dress, a wide smile. Hermione's hand clasped in his as some faceless bonding official waved a wand around and declared them bonded for life.

Tattoo removal will take about anywhere from six months to a year over multiple sessions, Granger stated, poring over another book, and he'd need weeks of recovery in between sessions.

A year. He can do that, he thought to himself. It'd be well worth the wait if he could find a way to have a clear forearm on his wedding day.

Well fuck. Now he needed to plan a marriage proposal.

I am okay with this.



May 2009

"You seem agitated today."

Draco immediately ceased bouncing his knee and glared at Healer Browning.

"I am not *agitated*. I simply..."

Truthfully, there was nothing simple about the way he felt at all. He sighed and carded a hand through his hair.

"You're married," Draco stated bluntly to Browning.

"I am. Forty-one years next month."

Draco nodded and chewed on his bottom lip for a moment.

"How does one... well... how do you propose to someone?"

"Are you considering proposing to Hermione?"

"Yes."

Hey Jude!9

few signs from British Sign Language, and this "thank you" looked quite different.

"Pardon me for asking, but I am curious," Hermione began and she heard Draco snort from somewhere behind her. "Your sign language is different from the ones used by humans."

"Yes," signed Watson. "It was invented by my mother and brother."

"Pardon? You don't use the ones created by humans? Are you saying there isn't a universal signing guide?"

"No, miss," signed Watson. "Deaf elves are rare. Most masters have no use for an elf they cannot summon. My mother and Crick came up with a system of language so they could give me the meal instructions for the day."

"But that's brilliant!" Hermione enthused and Watson gave her a tentative smile. "Would you be willing to teach me?"

Once Crick finished signing her eager request, both elves immediately looked to Draco.

"It's fine," he replied shortly. "You can..." he struggled with his wording as Hermione bit back a smile. "Can... work with Granger or... whatever. You don't need permission, if that's what you'd both like to do or... it's your choice, I suppose... I'll just... be in my chambers..." He trailed off awkwardly and exited the library muttering under his breath, "Daff, she's bloody daft..."

Hermione turned back to the two elves with her excited grin returned by Watson. She summoned a quill and parchment.

"Perhaps we could begin with your alphabet?"



Hermione joined Draco in bed later, head reeling. What Crick, Watson, and their late mother had accomplished without any sort of formal guidance, resources, or reference books astonished her. There was complexity in the simplicity of their invented signs, created for the original purpose of ensuring Watson could fulfill a household duty, but obviously also with the intention for a mother and a brother to communicate with their loved one.

Though the two elves were extremely forthcoming with their sign language, they remained evasive on their familial history, and Hermione eventually backed off on the personal questions. Still, she gathered a lot from what they did not say. There was an unfortunate paucity of research on elves and elf magic, which Hermione had come to learn was intentional on the part of wizards.

"Well, how did your little tutoring session go? Are you fluent yet?" asked Draco, looking up from the book in his lap.

"Hardly," Hermione replied tartly. "I've got the alphabet down, but it'll take much more time before I can form proper phrases and have conversations."

"Hm," he said, non-committal, and tossed the book onto the nightstand.

Hermione shifted closer to him, intent on continuing the conversation. "Why did you never tell

me?"

His lips formed a slight frown, an expression that Hermione always read as his tell for when he found a situation awkward.

"Crick is rather protective of him, as you can imagine," he offered haltingly. "Elves aren't generally openly discussed in the magical world. Talking about the help is considered rather gauche."

She looked thoughtfully at him, unable to stop her curiosity from spilling forth. "And you don't mind? That he can't be summoned or communicated with directly?"

Draco averted his eyes, clearly not keen on this topic. "Granger, I have elves to make me dinner and keep my house, not to engage in conversation. What do I care as long as he makes a good meal?"

His answer, elitist though it may have been, gave Hermione a bit of hope that he wasn't as unfed-ling as he pretended to be about the welfare of Crick and Watson.

"Do you know how Watson lost his hearing?" pressed Hermione and Draco shook his head.

"I finally asked... he caught an ear infection as a young child. His mother didn't want to alert Mr. Franklin, your house's previous owner, to the fact that her child was sick because in those days, a sick elf meant a dead elf. They weren't permitted to St. Mungo's—still aren't, actually—and most masters wouldn't trouble themselves to seek treatment. She had no way of healing him, even with her own magic. Luckily he survived the infection but lost his hearing permanently. When Mr. Franklin found out, he even tried to help, but it was too late for any potions or human medicines. Your predecessor here was quite the eccentric wizard."

She left out her personal observations that Crick and Watson still harbored a great loyalty and affection for their deceased master, less in the vein of Winky's slavish devotion to the Crouch family or Kracher's obsession with Walburga Black, and more on a level of deepest respect. Though she burned to know more about the reclusive Franklin, Hermione was wary of appearing nosy about the private man's personal affairs. The elves clearly held him in high esteem, so she repressed her urge to pry.

"Not only did Watson lose his hearing," continued Hermione. "But apparently the infection also damaged the same neural pathway in elves that intertwines with the human-elf summoning bond. That's why he can't be called. His hearing loss is a separate side effect, but that bond severance could have been catastrophic with the wrong owner."

"I see."

He settled onto his back but Hermione couldn't stop her thought stream from pouring forth. "I mean, it's just so barbaric that but for the cleverness of his mother and benevolence of a wizard and your decency to keep him on... who knows what would have become of him..."

She felt Draco shift beside her. "Hardly makes me a decent person... I already told you he came with the deed and obviously knows his way round the kitchen... don't make me out to be a savior," he muttered.

Ignoring Draco's discomfort, Hermione laid her head back on the pillow, her mind whirling with ideas as she felt that familiar call to action deep within her to reignite her advocacy.

by his side while he watched Potter, Granger, and Weasley out of the corner of his eye. They'd be a few tables away, quite ignorant to his glare, the three of them chattering away or plotting an exciting bout of rule-breaking and looking so Merlin-damned happy in the presence of one another that it made his lip curl as his heart secretly ached.

"Malfoy, sorry, I didn't mean—"

Potter came to his senses first but Draco cut him off.

"And I'll thank the two of you not to waste your time and mine. Don't you think I've tried everything short of chopping off my own arm?"

He didn't add that when he used to get high on certain potions he'd even gone so far as to dabble in some questionable Transfiguration.

"Draco," Hermione piped up, "Seamus gave me the idea and I called Harry over just to confirm my theory. We can remove the rest of your Mark if you go through one of the standard Muggle processes for tattoo removal." She gestured to his arm. "It's the one step no one would have considered and Voldemort counted on that. He wouldn't have thought any of his followers capable of lowering themselves to using Muggle means to remove it."

Draco stared back at her and opened and closed his mouth several times. All those long nights he'd cradled his arm and glared at the besmirched skin. All the research into theoretical potions and glamourous and skin-altering charms. He swallowed the combination of hope and misery that lodged in his throat.

"I can... we can... get rid of it? You won't have to see it anymore... when you look at me?" He voiced desperately.

Hermione's eyes shone and she turned briskly to Harry with a dismissal. "Thanks Harry, for your help."

Potter, astute enough to recognize the emotional turn in the conversation, nodded at the both of them before taking his leave.

"Draco," Hermione approached him slowly. "I need to make something very clear. I love you. I will love you with the remains of that Mark on your arm. I realize now my... rashness may have come across poorly."

She came to a stop in front of him and took his hand with a gentle squeeze. "I love the man you are today and I will love that man tomorrow, bare forearm or not. I simply wanted you, for once, to have the choice. It's your body."

Marry me.

The thought burned right through his brain, cried out in his heart, and imprinted onto his soul. She stared right fucking through him with those brown eyes as she patiently waited for him to form any sort of response. She probably assumed he needed time to work through some complicated emotions about using Muggle methods to remove his Mark, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

Because of course he'd get rid of it. He'd walk through fucking Fendryre if it meant erasing the horrifying brand from his skin. Of course, removing it wouldn't come close to atoning or erasing all



blood doesn't allow for just any ink to remain. I found a few books that confirms he's right: wizarding artists will add a few elements with magical properties to the ink prior to either needling or branding with a wand, and then they've got to perform a complicated combination of transfiguration and charms as the ink flows for the rendering to become the desired design. It's really quite fascinating and I'd love to watch a magical tattoo artist at some point to see how it's done."

She paused for breath and slid a book towards Potter.

"Now, in regards to the Dark Mark, I've found the spell for ritualistic marks, as well as the imbued charm for Summoning and Apparition. The glowing of red or black is a simple enough feature, but the Apparition feature he used to summon his followers to his exact location is fantastically complex and more than a bit Dark. However... ah! Here it is!"

She walked quickly around the desk and shoved another text under Harry's nose. "Read this passage there. Do you see? That's why Sirius's tattoos looked so blurry and why Draco's Mark never fully faded even though Voldemort died. If you want the ordinary ink removed, you have to resort to the barbaric methods of Muggles."

Harry looked up at her and blinked after a few long moments.

"Of course... and his followers would never know... because they'd be ignorant to Muggle methods, or would claim to be anyway."

"Precisely! The magic in the Mark died with Voldemort, but remember in Fourth Year when Professor Snape said it was back and growing stronger? Because Voldemort hadn't truly died yet thanks to his horcruxes. The Mark was tied to Voldemort's magical core and life force but now, with that completely gone, the tattoos should have been removable by basic magical methods. Which means his sick mind thought of a way to ensure his followers would always bear his Mark lest they wish to commit a blasphemous act against his teachings."

Harry nodded as he read further along in the book in his hands. "And so in keeping with his way of preaching blood supremacy while simultaneously defying it."

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "Those last few years when your visions of him were strongest... did you ever see a Death Eater initiation ceremony?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "Never saw one of those, but I imagine it—"

"There was a spell. Similar to Moismortide. Then a lengthy incantation from his hissing mouth and a Vow element to it on my end, but I can't recall the exact phrases because after he'd dipped his wand in some ink and placed it to my skin I thought I was going to die because it burned so badly."

It came out of his mouth harsh and acidic and louder than he intended and Harry and Hermione both jumped and snarped their heads in his direction.

"Now if you two have quite finished discussing one of the worst things to ever happen to me as if I'm not standing mere feet from you, perhaps you'd like my insight? The one carrying this permanent shame on his arm?" Draco thrust his arm towards them, seething in a mixture of anger, guilt, and a familiar prickle of envy.

He'd felt as if he were back at Hogwarts, in the library with the useless forms of Crabbe and Goyle

"I'm going to publish a book."

Hermione announced this a week later from one of the plush reading chairs in Draco's library. Draco looked up from the end-of-year closeout report for the Winbourne Wasps. "Based on your research with Pescara? I thought you were still waiting to hear back from that Rames journal about final publication?"

"No, not on the Mermish research. I'm going to publish a book on elven sign language."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think you have rather enough on your plate at the moment?"

"You misunderstand me. I'm not writing the book. Crick and Watson are. I'm then going to shop it around and use all the unnecessary clout behind my name to see this thing published. They can list me as editor or contributor or some other such nonsense, but those two will be the authors. Do you understand how fascinating this is from a communication sciences and linguistics perspective?"

She'd had only two more lessons with the elves, trying to be mindful of their personal time, but the idea that rooted in her brain suddenly became more about recording their system of communication rather than learning it just for herself. Hermione had already pitched the idea to Crick and Watson, and though Crick took some cajoling, Watson seemed thrilled with the prospect of publishing their book of signs.

The more she spoke with Crick, the more Hermione suspected that he'd received some sort of education in scientific theory and language development. Whether it stemmed from textbooks, journals, or tutelage under Mr. Franklin, Hermione could only guess, as the elf had no interest in specifying "You think I'm mad, don't you?" she asked Draco suddenly.

"Ah, well, not exactly," Draco hedged. "But you realize there's never been a book or writings of any sort by an elf in the magical world before, yes? This may be another uphill battle for you, Granger. Especially if Watson is as rare as you believe he is, I'm not sure there's really a market for this type of book."

She knew he wasn't trying to discourage her, and had raised rather salient points, but Hermione felt this could be an important step in bridging the empathy gap between wizards and elves.

"All the more reason for me to see this through. Especially since... since I'm no closer to securing freedom for them... I suppose I can at least do this..." she trailed off, slightly defeated.

"You really need to stop downplaying your achievements, love," Draco countered sternly. "Those Welfare Laws are leaps and bounds beyond what was in place before."

"They don't go far enough," she intoned hollowly then stood to pace in front of the fire. Draco did her the courtesy of putting aside his parchment and giving her his full attention.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley and I worked together on the precise wording of the proposed laws. He's rather brilliant you know, he's got his law degree from both a magical and a Muggle university. This

was my first big project for the department and gods, we worked so many hours on that proposal... a comma didn't get put down unless we both agreed it to be necessary. We were so, so careful."

She wondered if Draco knew yet that showing him this side of her was much more intimate than even giving her body to him, far more vulnerable than being physically naked in his presence. Hermione never did well with showcasing her flaws. *She, so the Brightest Witch of Her Age is human after all?* The constant pressure to keep that veneer of brilliant infallibility could wear anyone out.

She finally stopped her frantic pacing to meet his patient gaze. Draco might never fully comprehend her stance on elf rights, but he would never laugh at her or mock her intelligence. Hermione took a deep breath and ploughed on, revealing her greatest shameful failure.

"Do you know how Justin and I had to frame those laws? We practically lifted the language from Muggle animal welfare laws!" She hadn't meant to raise her voice, but found her long-buried frustrations had boiled over after being repressed for years.

"I remember drafting those arguments with him... it made me sick to my stomach. I wanted to campaign for their outright freedom but the best we could do was have them treated on par with pets. With animals," she finished bitterly.

"By the time we presented to the Wizengamot, Justin and I had our arguments down pat. Of course, our request for testimony from some of the freed elves at Hogwarts who earned wages was denied, but that was to be expected. We carried on with the rest of our arguments and I remember one of the elder pureblood members agreed with us. I was... shocked. I thought, goodness, finally, I'd made some inroads with these stubborn families. But do you know why he agreed with me? Beaten livestock will yield bad product. Much better to ensure they're well and able to perform their intended service."

Hermione hugged her arms around her middle. "These laws were meant to be a stepping stone, a foundation to build other legislation on. But every measure thereafter was swiftly shot down, as the courts felt these went far enough. I'd set out to free them and all I came away with was a guarantee that their owners couldn't torture them. I simply granted them non-lethal slavery."

She dashed at her eyes then, furious that she'd succumbed to tears. Draco shot out of his chair and wrapped her in his comforting embrace immediately, a silent gesture she appreciated more than he would ever know.

"They deserve a choice. That's all I ever wanted to achieve. I'm not trying to *upend societal paradigms* or stomp on *sacred traditions*. Elves should be given a choice in this life. I wish more people could appreciate that," she murmured all this into his chest. "But I don't think many do."

Draco tilted her chin up and held her gaze. She could see the thought process occurring behind his serious eyes, as he contemplated very hard on some notion, weighed and counter-weighted responses, sifted through ideas, balanced different emotions, warred with preconceived beliefs, and when his mouth set in a grim line, she knew he'd drawn some definitive conclusion. Whether he'd share it with her was another matter entirely.

He blinked once and his expression cleared.

Hermione then took off for the towering shelves of books while Draco stood confused in front of the fireplace.

"Granger, what are you—?"

"How was the Dark Mark branded on your arm?" she questioned brusquely from her place amongst the stacks.

Draco's mouth snapped shut and he clamped a hand reflexively over his sleeve-covered arm.

"I beg your pardon?"

She returned to his desk carrying an impressive armful of tomes. She opened one on spells used in ritualistic makings and carvings, tracing a finger along the table of contents. "Your Mark. What was the ceremony like? Which spells did Voldemort use?"

She buried her head in the book while Draco stared at the top of her hair. His grip twitched on his arm.

"Oh it was a right laugh," he growled bitterly. Hermione's head snapped up at his tone. "Yes, quite a fond memory. Granger, would you like to hear the happy tale?"

Her face fell immediately. "I—I wasn't thinking, I just... I'm sorry, this has all been rather insensitive of me."

She abandoned her pile of research and approached him. She laid a hand on top of the one covering his arm and offered contrite eyes. "Forgive me, please. Will you let me see it? I think I've had an idea."

He clenched his jaw and looked away, the goodness in her eyes unbearable to him in the moment. Draco felt her unbutton his cuff and roll his sleeve to his elbow, then the brush of her fingertips as she caressed the skin of his forearm.

"Unbelievable that he thought to... and no one would have known... the implication alone would have been ludicrous..." she murmured to herself.

Potter chose that moment to stroll through the Floo, his eyes widening behind his glasses at the odd scene before him. Draco realized then why she'd thought to call her friend: the leading living expert on the twisted inner machinations of the Dark Lord's mind.

"Ern, hi. What's going on?"

Hermione dropped Draco's arm. "Harry! Listen, I've had an idea. Do you remember all those awful tattoos Sirius had? They were all from Muggle places, weren't they?"

"Course I do," chorled Harry. "And yes, he quite proudly found the shoddiest Muggle tattoo parlours just to further piss off his parents."

"I think Voldemort used non-magical ink as part of the Dark Mark ceremony."

Silence fell once she'd voiced this theory and Harry threw an uneasy glance at Draco, who answered him with a challenging glare.

"Ern... like just regular ink you mean? What's the difference?"

She bounded over to the desk and flicked through a few of the books. "Obviously I don't have any tattoos, but Scamus mentioned that without the proper spellwork, something about the magic in our

together. Narcissa required their attendance at her dinner table or for afternoon tea regularly. Draco was often dragged to the Burrow for Sunday meals. They'd already had a couple stilted, yet pleasant, teas with Andromeda. To say nothing of her (all right, *fine*, their) friends who also insisted on a slice of time.

Hermione was wont to cave to these social demands, and Draco was wont to follow wherever she led, which is how he found himself as the sole representative of Slytherin house in their current setting.

It was a rather boisterous Friday evening at the Hog's Head, as fifteen or so of their Hogwarts classmates had taken over the back half of the pub, much to Aberforth's chagrin, even if they collectively bought a whole lot of alcohol.

Many of the assembled group had tears of laughter rolling down their faces, as Scamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas regaled them with their latest drunken adventure and mishap at a Muggle tattoo parlour.

Scamus rolled up his shirt sleeve to show off his recently acquired body ink: an oddly misshapen gray hippopotamus.

"He kept shouting 'a hippogriff, I want a hippogriff mate!' at this poor Muggle bloke, but we were so far gone he assumed this guy wanted a hippopotamus," recalled Dean.

Hermione wrinkled her nose in distaste as she regarded Scamus's arm. "Why's it so blurry and faded? I thought you said this was a new tattoo!"

Scamus looked puzzled at her question. "Plain ink, innit? If you've got magical blood in your veins it won't take quite right without the right spellwork. Me cousin owns a magical tat place so I'm having him fix the shape and colour for me. Better him than sittin' through rounds of Muggle laser removal, seems right painful!"

Hermione nodded thoughtfully and sat back in her seat as chatter resumed around her. Draco, usually quiet and reserved during these nights out anyway, contented himself with observing her. The "I'm having a rather brilliant thought and must think this through every angle possible" look occupied her face and Draco knew it was only a matter of time before she shared it about.

She'd now reached the frantic muttering stage.

"No... no surely not... unless he wanted a guarantee, an absolute guarantee it wouldn't ever go away... massively hypocritical... borderline brilliant, to be honest... still, it's disgustingly evil... but why...?"

She looked swiftly at Draco, then grabbed him by the forearm and pulled him to standing.

"We've got to go. Ron, is Harry home?"

"He has a newborn, Hermione, he's only ever home," Ron lamented wryly and Padma swatted his arm.

"Great, thanks," she muttered distractedly and pulled a confused Draco through the Floo back to his library.

She conjured her other Patronus. "Take this message to Harry Potter, please: Hi Harry, please meet me in Malfoy's library as soon as possible. Not an emergency, but an urgent question."

"You're too good for this world, Granger," he said and kissed her temple.



Two days before Christmas, Draco asked Hermione a question she'd never in her life thought she'd hear from him.

"What would you consider a fair wage?"

"Sorry?" she asked distractedly, looking up from her draft outline for the table of contents for the signing book. There were months of modeling and sketching work to be done to capture both hand gestures and facial expressions, but Hermione needed a way to organize the content first.

"What would you consider a fair wage for work done by house elves?"

"Well," she began slowly, putting her work aside for the moment. "It would depend on the work they perform, obviously. They need a fair wage on par with the amount of work they do for a family. Whether that be cooking, cleaning, gardening, child care, general household maintenance... the amount of work needs to be taken into account as do the hours involved. Most elves don't have a set working schedule, so obviously, they aren't paid overtime even though they're expected to work round the clock. They'd also need proper sick leave and days off."

She sighed and fiddled with her pen. "Yes, I know it sounds complicated but it's what is right. And unfortunately, too many in our world see this as burdensome work and can't see past the inconvenience of treating elves the way they deserve."

Hermione offered him a small smile, pleased he'd shown an interest in her project, then bent her head over her notes again.

"Would you be willing to help me draft a contract? I know it would be more work for you, but I've no clue where to begin."

Her head snapped up again at his odd question. "A contract? For what?"

"An employment contract. To present to Crick and Watson."

She stopped breathing. Her pen fell from her slackened grip. He'd said the statement so decisively, so clearly, that there could be no mistaking his perfect articulation, but Hermione's brain refused to process Draco's pronouncement. After several long moments of silence during which Hermione repeatedly reminded herself that she had not entered a fantasy realm, Draco's face flushed.

"Er... or I could inquire with my solicitors instead? I'm sure they have the necessary expertise to—"

"This isn't funny Malfoy," she said sharply.

"What isn't?" He looked genuinely confused.

"Don't... just... you can't... you're not..." Hermione leapt out of her chair and came to a halt in front of him. She stared to gauge his sincerity, searching his entire face to detect any trace of mockery or deceit but found none.

"You're serious?" she whispered hoarsely. "You'd... you'd pay them? Property?"

Draco drew a piece of parchment towards him. "Well we'd have to agree to terms, first. And actually that set me to thinking about your book as well. The other day I asked their preferred surnames, as I highly doubt they'd take mine, even though that's traditionally how it's done, and then I thought perhaps they'd prefer 'Franklin' but that's a bit offensive as well isn't it? The point is, they'll need proper, full names to be listed as authors, especially when you've said their given names are some famous Muggle historical reference and Crick sent me back a note with this—"

Hermione tried to pick up the parchment with the words *Crick Eileen* and *Watson Eileen* in neat script, but her hands shook too hard. Draco, groping along his desk for a pen, didn't notice.

"—and once you start the publishing query process—and yes I'm aware you're months out from even a submission draft—you'll want to list their names as such. But I digress, I'd meant to have a sample contract sent over, but wasn't sure if the considerations, legally, might be different given their status as part-human and—"

"Stop. Please s-stop."

Draco's head jolted towards her in concern at her fanatically breathless tone.

"Why are you crying?" he asked in alarm.

Hermione couldn't catch her breath because there was a hole in her chest and now she knew why. She felt so stupid then; so hopelessly naïve and furious with her past self for having the audacity to mock people who claimed they'd found their "other half" or "missing piece" or some other clichéd tripe because the man in front of her was quite possibly her soulmate and she'd happily duel anyone who dared contradict her.

Actually no, upon further thought, there was nothing "possibly" about this at all.

This wasn't a feeling; this was a veritable, definite fact and she knew, sure as her hair frizzed in humidity, sure as magic ran through her veins, and sure as the sky was blue, that her soul cried out to only ever be connected with his.

He ran his large, soothing hands up and down the sides of her arms and through the buzzing sound in her ears had awareness of phrases falling from his beautiful lips like, "breathe, love," and "please, tell me what's wrong," and "I'll get you some water." She finally zoned in on the sound of his hypnotic voice and returned to reality.

Hermione's cheeks felt wet and Draco appeared perturbed, but she had trouble recalling a moment when she'd felt this centered with herself while simultaneously anchored to another person.

"No," she finally got out and he looked relieved that she could form words again. "No, I don't... I don't need water... I don't need anything."

She threw herself in his arms and he held her up easily. "Draco," she said seriously. "This is... to be honest I'm still coming to terms with the brilliance of this idea and the fact that you would do something like this for me."

He gave her a soft smile at her praise, but shook his head. "Not just for you. What you said to me the other night? About choice, and not being given one?"

with baby James, Ron, Astoria, and Dennis waited inside the drab office with the bonding official.

And as James Potter made occasional grunting noises and several of the room's occupants stifled sniffls (specifically Hermione and Astoria, and though he'd deny it later, she heard some suspicious sounds from Ron), Theo and Sasha became husband and wife.

From beginning to end, the entire process took all of ten minutes, but to the newly wedded couple, their joyous expressions signified that this was the most momentous ten minutes of their lives. The happy pair profusely thanked everyone who took time out of their work day to bear witness, and Draco offered to foot the bill for a wedding brunch. Ron immediately changed his tune about returning to the joke shop straight away.

Hermione regarded the entire assembled group fondly; an odd mix of backgrounds and social classes sharing a meal and celebrating an unlikely union.

Astoria had Sasha in stitches as she confessed to all the horrible society events Theo had taken her to over the past year while they both conducted their fake courtship scheme and Hermione could tell the two women were well on their way to becoming fast friends. She'd never seen Theo smile so much.

Two weeks later and the smile still seemed a permanent fixture on Theo's once serious face. The Notts returned from their Moroccan honeymoon as blissful newlyweds and Theo delighted in being the scandalous talk of wizarding society. A flurry of quills raced to dedicate as much print space as possible to the saga of one of the former most eligible and wealthiest pureblood bachelors in Britain and his new Muggle wife.

"You're a trendsetter," he smugly informed Draco over lunch one weekend. "First your relationship inspires the young Greengrass heiress to run off with her secret, Muggleborn beau, next you encourage your childhood friend and fellow Sacred-Twenty Eight member to wed a Muggle. Where will you lead this rebellious contingent of purebloods next Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco scowled in response. "I hardly think it's appropriate to refer to myself and Granger as a *brill*."

"Hm, true, that is rather offensive, despite what my dear mother would say on the subject. Which, as it turns out, is an awful lot for someone who claims to never want to speak with me again, and yet the letters keep arriving. And speaking of mothers, yours sent us a rather lovely set of crystal champagne flutes with her well-wishes."

Draco shared a surprised look with Hermione as she wondered if she'd ever be able to puzzle out the motives and actions of Narcissa Malfoy.



Some days, Draco missed the time in his life when only he and Hermione were privy to their relationship, despite the lovely feeling of the world at large knowing she'd chosen him.

Hermione's parents had changed their tune about him, but that also meant they wanted more time

Remain Nameless

Theo isn't going to mind, we'll be quiet and cast a Silencing Charm or eight.

I miss you. I love you. I miss every part of you, please for the love of Merlin come see me tonight.

Of course I'm being a good friend! I've yet to hex his mouth shut even though he won't stop harping on about all the ways he cannot live without his girlfriend. He's honestly hopeless. Now are you coming over tonight or not?

It's not rubbing his nose in our relationship if he doesn't know it's happening.

I do not strut about with a stupid self-satisfied smirk on my face after we shag, don't be ridiculous.

I really hate sleeping without you, you know. I love you.

You absolutely do hog all the blankets, you're rather rubbish at sharing.

All right, I take it back, please please let me have you tonight. I love you.

I'd be so good to you Granger. I know you miss me too. I know you miss my tongue all over your gorgeous cunt. I know you miss my cock inside you. I know you read this message and are probably very, very wet for me right now. I want to hear all those pretty little noises you make when you come. Fuck, I miss you coming all over my fingers, my face, my cock.

Damn it Granger, my balls have been blue this whole bloody week, and I don't care how many stones you ply me with each morning I. Need. To. Fuck. You.

Hermione rolled her eyes at his theatrics even if it simultaneously amused and aroused her to be needed in this way.

She felt the strain now, more than ever, from being pulled in so many different directions both physically and emotionally. Still, she couldn't deny the thrill it gave her when Draco stepped through her Fluo the day after Theo reunited with Sasha and dramatically announced, "Longest bloody week of my life."

He dragged her to bed and made good on all his salacious written promises.



April 2009

In a cramped Ministry office on a Tuesday morning, Hermione dabbed at her eyes with a monogrammed hand kerchief as Theo and Sasha were wed by a bonding official.

They arrived at the Ministry together, flushed and nervous but with barely contained excitement etched on their smiling faces. Sasha's head turned this way and that, keenly interested in the casual, every day magic around her at the Ministry, as opposed to fearful of its unnaturalness.

Though the flying memos and people in robes with wands fascinated her, it would only be for a few moments before her gaze reverted back to Theo; her intended husband more wondrous to her than the world of magic she'd only just discovered.

Draco may have rolled his eyes and called her a "meddlesome little thing" but the rushed aspect of the marriage rankled Hermione and so, in an effort to make the event special, she'd roped in a few guests available on short notice to witness the brief ceremony.

Despite Draco's surly thoughts on the matter, Theo seemed sincerely touched that Harry, Ginny

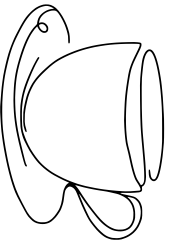
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He swallowed and glanced away. "I know the feeling all too well. And I don't want... I can't be a man who... who could do that to someone else."

Hermione cupped his chin to force his gaze back to her. "I love you."

She meant it more than she could ever possibly mean anything, but it still felt like an inadequate response to convey the depth of affection she held for this man.

I love you with all of my soul.



Chapter Forty Seven

January 1, 2010

According to Draco's watch, the hour now approached one in the morning, but he doubted even a well-brewed Sleeping Draught could dull his energy. They'd just returned from his mother's New Year's gala and Hermione had already disappeared into her bedroom to change into comfy pajamas, while Draco dithered behind her, still in his dress robes and cloak.

Crookshanks peered up at him through one yellow eye from an armchair. *Go on then, are you waiting for a formal invitation? You're already dressed the part.*

Draco finally followed her into the bedroom and saw she'd only made it as far as hanging her velvet, midnight-blue cloak in the closet. He leant against the doorway and cleared his throat to get her attention.

"Are you quite tired?" he asked.

"Not quite, I've still got that party adrenaline. I'll fix some tea, see if that might make us a bit sleepier."

Draco bit his lip and carded an anxious hand through his hair. "Do you think instead we could take a walk?"

She stared back at him for a few moments. "Now?"

Draco nodded.

"It's... rather late, no? And I think it's snowing."

Of course she would make this more difficult than it needed to be.

He offered a soft smile, one he only tried to deploy when he wanted to get his way.

"Please? I think it'd be nice to clear our heads after the boorishness of the evening. It was rather unbearable this year without Theo and I could do with some fresh air. Besides, doesn't it just warm your girlish, sentimental heart to take a wintery stroll with a charming and well-dressed gentleman not even an hour into the new year? Who knows when you'll get this chance at such a romantic setting again?"

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but if you allow Theo to tell you his story, you can decide for yourself if that's enough for you."

The fifth night's topic was magical genealogy and inheritance of abilities.

"If we have kids will they be like Theo?"

"You won't know until they're about 6 or a little older. It's impossible to know until they begin having instances of accidental magic and it won't be officially confirmed until they receive their Hogwarts letter."

"And if they're Muggle?"

"Then they will live just as fulfilling a life as their own mother," Hermione stated firmly. Sasha didn't respond for a few moments. "Thank you, Hermione."

On the sixth evening, Sasha called with a confession.

"I caved and called Theo. I wanted to hear it from him that... that being a Muggle doesn't matter to him. That he wanted me for *me*. That I'm not a rebellious phase or a fetish or a social experiment or... or... just a way to prove his horrible dad wrong. I wanted to know if we had kids and they didn't have magic... that he'd love them just the same. That it didn't matter if my blood or their blood wasn't 'pure.'"

"What did he say?"

"He said... well he said a lot of things... but he told me, 'You are pure in all the ways that truly matter.'"

Hermione thought she heard a quiet snifle as Sasha said goodbye and hung up.

On the eighth night, Sasha called with a statement.

"I want to do it. I want to marry Theo. The first available slot at your Ministry."

While Hermione felt beyond relieved that some happiness could be wrung from this harrowing situation, the week-long stint as a de facto Muggle Liaison Officer and pseudo relationship therapist had run her ragged.

She'd handled the heavy daily conversations with Sasha, anxious few Floo calls from a concerned Theo, several messages from Harry and Ginny about visiting baby James, double date night requests from Charlie and Oliver, a new project in her department on werewolf legislation, a letter from Headmistress McGonagall with questions about volunteers for the launch of the orientation portion of her fund at Hogwarts, and Padma wanted her at the fitting for her wedding robes, and... Hermione. Was. Exhausted.

Not to mention the constant whinging in written form courtesy of Draco and their two-way journals.

I know I love Theo an awful lot, but this type of mooping is rather extreme.

How unethical are unsolicited Charming Charms?

What about Draught of Living Death? Just until this is resolved?

Theo is driving me mad with all this sad Muggle music he insists on playing day and night. I'm going to blast this stupid device thing to bits.

Granger. Please. Come over tonight. Please love

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“Granger-Malfoy?”

“Sorry?”

“My new last name. It will be Granger-Malfoy.”

His body instinctively tensed at her statement. Perhaps an overreaction, but all the same, her pronouncement felt like the sting of rejection, as if she sought to soften the blow of introducing herself publicly as a Malfoy.

Bitter anger should not be his initial reaction, but Draco could sense it building within him all the same. He’d already acquiesced to the Muggle ceremony, to her keeping her townhome until they married, and now to further denigrate himself, she’ll not take his name. Not fully anyway.

I am okay with this.

“I understand,” he said stiffly. Healer Browning will need an extra five hours with him this month. Logically, he did understand, and he’d sat through more than one rant from Hermione on how sexism lay at the core of the expectation that only the bride give up her name. Still, her decision dredged up those sinister, lurking insecurities that loved reminding him he’d never truly be worthy of her.

“I don’t think you do,” she said quietly. Hermione threaded her fingers through his, and Draco stared at the ring on her fourth finger, willing the sight of it to remind him that she’d accepted him for eternity. The emerald side faced up today. She probably scheduled which days she showed the amethyst and which days she flipped to the emerald. The odd and fond thought settled him slightly.

“I’m proud of you, do you hear me? I’m proud to be marrying you. But Draco, no matter the surname, I was always going to keep mine.” She squeezed his hand. “I earned my place in this world as a Granger. A Muggleborn surname with no notable magical ancestors to boast of, and I want to honor the name that I’ve made for myself by keeping it.”

And what could he say to that? How could Draco respond to her passionate plea that she grant her own family name equal billing to his when it came from such an earnest place? Especially a surname like hers, while not “pure” from a lineage perspective, but pure in a way that mattered more in the grand scheme of things. History books would list her surname preceding an exhaustive list of noble accomplishments and daring deeds. He’d be lucky for his name to escape the moniker of “villainous” and it would in all likelihood be forever recorded next to phrases such as “obscenely wealthy” and “morally dubious.”

Come to think of it, marrying Hermione would probably be the only positive anecdote associated with his familial line.

“But I want to honor my husband too, so I’ll be Hermione Granger-Malfoy,” she stated.

It did sound lovely to his ears, but the little dream he’d had more than a year ago when his brain decided to chant *Hermione Malfoy* died a silent death inside him. So he nodded and kissed the back of her hand and gestured for them to move on to other planning tasks, even as the vestiges of feeling slighted remained, taking up a not insignificant portion of his chest.

Perhaps for this reason, Draco decided on a demonstration of his devotion to his future wife. Yes, a gesture that showed him capable of contributing equally to their domestic life beyond the vast

amounts of gold at his disposal.

In his most recent session with Browning, the healer introduced Draco to the concept of love languages. Apparently, there were five common ones: gifts, quality time, physical touch, words of affirmation, and acts of service. A rather broad framework, the healer cautioned, but Browning asked Draco to think about the ways that he preferred to show Hermione that he loved her.

He obviously excelled in four of those areas, but acts of service was a bit of a foreign concept if he were honest. Browning earned every single Gallion Draco had ever paid him when he did not laugh when Draco asked if “acts of service” meant “as in... pretending I’m her servant and doing her household chores?”

In retrospect, he really should have summoned Crick to summon Watson to supervise. That way, he’d be less likely to burn Hermione’s home to the ground. Currently, a very real danger.

Cooking a meal from scratch would be just like Potions, Draco theorized. Cooking a surprise dinner for his fiancée would be the height of romance, Draco theorized. Presenting his gorgeous witch with a delicious meal he’d prepared so she wouldn’t get stuck with the task (again) after a long day of work would ultimately prove his worth as a spouse, Draco theorized. French onion soup would be an easy first-time cooking experiment, Draco theorized. Quite a simple dish, with ingredients he had easily prepped: butter, white wine, onions, garlic, thyme, a few different stocks, freshly grated Gruyere and a baguette.

All of Draco’s “theorizing” earned him several new welts on his hands, the complete destruction of one of Hermione’s soup pots, and plumes of smoke hovering over the burners.

The stove contraption perplexed him. Without a visible flame, how did one regulate the proper temperature when not boiling a kettle? And how the ever-loving-fuck did one “brown” onions? There should be a standard amount of set minutes for them to brown, or a specific number of sirs with the spoon, and what shade of brown was brown enough for a damn onion?

Brown did not mean black and these onions were not only black but forever encrusted to the bottom of the pot and the top of the stove. *Shit.*

Crookshanks had given up his post of casually bathing in that disgustingly public way only cats seem to enjoy from his spot on a kitchen chair, and high-tailed it out of the scene of the crime. *Traitor.*

“Oh my God, Draco! What happened?” came the shrill cry from behind him. He whirled around to see Hermione in the threshold, wand already out and siphoning off the smoke threatening to set off her alarm system.

She hurried over to the stove, frantically banishing smoke and looking aghast at the state of her cookware and utensils. Draco shuffled back out of her way, still clutching a large metal ladle that had partially melted and hopping the floor would somehow swallow him.

“Were you trying to... cook?” she asked incredulously, peering into the decimated pot and poking the burnt heap of onions with her wand.

“Yes,” he said shortly. “I thought you’d appreciate the... effort.”

She frowned at his answer but then flew into a brief panic. “Your hands!” she gasped, vanishing

the unrecognizable ladle. "Stay still!"

Draco's face went as red as his smearing hands as Hermione summoned burn paste and dittany to heal his physical wounds. He doubted any salve existed to soothe the internal wounds, so his destroyed pride remained unsavagable.

When she'd finished rubbing the ointment into his skin as gently as a healer would treat a reckless toddler, she directed him to the couch so she could finish rectifying her crime scene of a kitchen.

Great, now he'd just created more servant work for her.

"How are your hands?" she asked, once she'd finished and plopped in an armchair across from him.

"Fine."

"Would you like to discuss why you felt it necessary to almost burn your skin to the bone performing a task you'd literally never tried before using Muggle technology you've never learned to operate?" Crossing his arms and glaring felt like the childish option, but he so desperately wanted to employ it here.

"As I said before, I thought you would appreciate the effort that went into providing you with dinner after you'd spent the day hard at work."

Hermione sighed, and he bristled at the way it indicated exasperation with his well-intentioned actions. Then again, he had royally cocked up her stove and almost set her home ablaze.

"Draco... you have a live-in cook that you pay. Why did you suddenly feel the need to demonstrate your cooking skills?"

He scowled and looked away. "Can't a bloke just do something nice for his fiancée without some ulterior motive?"

She didn't take the bait.

"Is this because I want to hyphenate my name?" Hermione asked quietly. "Or because I won't move in until just before the wedding?"

He considered other versions of the truth but instead set his jaw and clipped, "Both."

"Draco, I've told you my reasons for both of those decisions and neither had to do with doubting you or not wanting to spend time with you. I'm keeping my home until we're married because—"

"—because it's the first time you felt like you had a home after Hogwarts and it's the only place that's ever truly been yours," he finished for her. "Trust me, Granger, I get it. If anyone can understand that experience, it's me."

He ran his hands through his hair and leaned back against the sofa. "I'm trying not to have a complex about every stupid wedding decision but," he chuckled darkly. "I suppose the alternative is giving Mother free rein, and I doubt that's what either of us would truly want."

Draco patted the spot next to him on the couch and Hermione joined him. "I'm sorry about the kitchen."

"It was a very sweet gesture, but you have nothing to prove to me, Draco. I'm quite secure in my decision to marry you and it certainly isn't for your cooking acumen." She laid her head against his

and gift our offspring with all my deeply ingrained complexes and fucking absurd amount of issues."

"Language, Malfoy."

"And I'd have to give up cursing."

Her lips twitched.

"Making a family with you would be the honor of my life. But if that's not something you want..."

I'd never force the issue, love. You will always be enough for me."

Hermione still looked dismayed, eyes searching his desperately, looking for any hidden feelings, any unvoiced desires.

"I'm not looking for the right answer, Draco. I'm looking for *your* answer. I don't want you to feel as if you're missing out on the life you truly want."

"The life I truly want is already right here, in my hands." His fingers trailed down her face, down the sides of her neck, then moved back to anchor in her hair. "What I'm trying to articulate, is that this is a choice we'd make together when we're both ready. If you're ready the day after we're married, then I'd trust you to make sure I don't completely cook it up."

Draco had a feeling she needed to throw out one last attempt at self-sacrifice at the altar of his happiness. He at least repressed a smirk when Hermione immediately proved him right.

"And if I'm never ready? You'd be all right with your line ending?"

Draco chuckled at her dramatic phrasing and pecked her temple. "Granger, I will gladly be the last of my line, I could not care less for that legacy rot. I don't want to have a child for the sake of having one. I'd only ever want to have a child if it were with you. I don't need children to live a fulfilling life."

Hermione finally smiled and hugged him firmly around the middle. Whichever choice they eventually made would be theirs and theirs alone, and for Draco, only that mattered.



The other night's discussion of future progeny had ended happily with a cheeky suggestion by Draco that they practice making them anyway.

Days and nights sped by as they checked off item after item on Granger's little list of wedding things they must discuss and reach some sort of agreement on before facing Mother. Though Draco had agreed to about every suggestion posed by Hermione, he'd not foreseen a conversation about notices sent to relatives he didn't care for and publications he didn't read to turn into a spectacular source of angst.

Tonight's task: selecting invitation wording, which then morphed into crafting the formal post-wedding announcement (something Draco knew Narcissa would insist upon) of their union. Draco thrust a sample parchment at her, wording copied from most other announcements he'd read before with their names and bonding date inked in.

Hermione scanned it quickly, then took out a pen and made a quick edit.

Remain Nameless

child would be judged and scorned through no fault of its own. Could Draco live with that? Live with burdening an innocent child with the sins of his past? What right did Draco have to saddle a newborn with the weight of his name, fated to be judged by their world before it could even draw its first breath?

Panda. Trainor. Couard. What do you deserve in this world? I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

Thinning air, a humming in his ears... it'd been so long he'd almost forgotten the sensation of impending panic. He clutched the edge of the countertop for support and before he could blink, Hermione's hands were stroking up and down his back.

"Draco. Please, talk to me."

Her. Anchor. Tether. His lifetime. Grab it, hold it, stay, stay, stay, please, please don't leave. I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

He should not want it.

But oh gods, a child with Hermione, how fucking mind-altering and wonderful a concept. She'd be such a good mother. She wouldn't let him—wouldn't let them—fail. He succeeded in steadying his breathing and released his grip on the marble.

"Draco. This marriage will only work if you feel comfortable telling me what you want."

Her. She's still here, follow her voice. Hermione loves you. I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

What did he want?

The second his mind asked the question, he received sudden and absolute clarity.

Two beautiful options appeared before him and for once in his miserable damned life, both choices were fucking glorious.

He saw himself with Hermione; a child with his hair and her eyes tugging on her hand, her belly swollen with another one yet to come, maybe with her wild curls this time.

Then he saw an alternate, just as thrilling, just as fulfilling path. Hermione, hair streaked with gray, (his still a perfect white-blond) only the two of them, existing in peace, still strolling to the café for blueberry scones, hand-in-hand.

Draco—no, not just him—they had two choices. And both... both were fantastic. Either path held contentment. Either road led to an amazing fucking life.

The knot of tension in his chest ripped apart, destroyed by the notion that he could finally look forward in his timeline with something other than trepidation, without waiting for an axe to fall.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry with relief and surely looked quite mad.

He cupped Hermione's face with his large hands. "I want what you want."

She frowned, looking concerned. "Draco that's not how this should work, you can't just cave to my wishes because you think I'll—"

"No Granger, that's not what this is, I swear."

The foggiest of panic gave way to the joy of certainty. His thumbs traced twin tracks down the apples of her cheeks, his touch upon her smooth skin calming him fully. Draco collected his stray thoughts of all the delightful different future timelines with this incredible woman.

"To be honest, parenthood scares the ever-loving-shit out of me. I'd probably be right terrible at it

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shoulder.

Draco sunk into the peace of this moment, feeling the earlier shame and worry dissipate along with the shadows of smoke from her kitchen.

"Have we decided about everything? No offense love, but we haven't even met with my mother yet and I've already got full-fledged decision fatigue."

She laughed softly. "None taken, I feel rather the same. But... well..."

Hermione sat up straight to peer into his face. "There's just one more thing," she hedged, and Draco braced himself for further indignities.

A deep inhale and a steady exhale. A rather serious sentence teetered on the precipice of her mouth.

"I was thinking about the bonding ceremony and the wedding vows and I want to... I want to soul-bond with you."

Soul-bond.

His skin prickled as her incomprehensible and wildly fantastical statement floated into his ears then slithered down within him and coiled like a vice around his heart.

Soul-bond.

But surely she'd hadn't said something so preposterous. Draco shifted to look down at her. He needed to see those words come out of her mouth in order to believe them.

"Soul-bond?" he echoed weakly.

"Yes. If you're not opposed to the idea."

She looked nervous, yet resolute. He desperately searched her face and found it showcased earnestness, and not a reluctant concession she'd be making to please him, but something she actually, truly wanted. Draco hadn't even broached the topic with her, nor would he have broached it in any discussion, no matter the bride.

Afraid to dream it was in the realm of possibility for a man like him, it hadn't come up, not once, in their discussions of the wedding ceremony. Which meant Hermione had, of her own volition, thought about soul-bonding, researched the magic required, and come to the conclusion that she wanted him in that enduring of a way.

An archaic concept, rooted in very ancient magic and historically practiced in pureblood maternal affairs, but even amongst the Sacred Twenty-Eight it fell out of fashion during the last century or so. Soul-bonding, while revered, was thought of as overly sentimental by most of these families, whose marriages often had motivations in aligning family dynasties or fulfilling longstanding betrothal contracts.

Soul-bonds were fairytales; whimsically romantic and not available for people with possibly compromised souls like Draco Malfoy.

Did Granger have any idea the seriousness of her suggestion? No one alive even knew if the bonding worked, and Draco wondered if the Department of Mysteries studied it. As someone who thrived on dealing in facts over beliefs, Draco hadn't much dwelled on souls, or an afterlife, or other realities

Remain Nameless

beyond his current existence. To twine one's soul to another showed a willingness to not only physically tether one's self during your time here on earth, but to commit to a blending of your magical cores, putting faith in your magic to recognize its bonded counterpart in another life. Should other lives even exist.

While not banned by the Ministry, they were considered borderline taboo ceremonies, straddling the line between light and dark magic. Ministry-conducted marriages didn't list it as an official option, and couples needed to seek special dispensation via a government-registered soul-bonder.

Supposedly, the ritual could protect against blood curses from appearing in your future descendants, and could even bolster your own spellcasting. But to soul-bond meant to willingly submit every single part of you to another; reduce yourself down to the most basic elements only to then be recreated with the co-mingling of your intended's magic. One did not enter a soul-bond lightly, as again, the long-term effects weren't quite known.

And Hermione had just declared her intent to bare her innermost self, everything that resided within her, and share part of her being with his in an indelible connection that had the potential to last infinite lifetimes.

She couldn't possibly know what she'd just offered, but Draco's fiancée wasn't the type to half-arse a single thing. Still, he had to be certain.

"Hermione... love, have you thought about everything involved in that type of bond?"

One surefire way to discover the true opinion of Granger: ask if she knew all the information on a subject.

"Of course! I've thoroughly researched the history, spell theory, and specific versions of the incantation. I've never seen one personally—Harry and Ginny avoided it for obvious reasons—so I've only ever witnessed the standard wedding bonds. I'm aware this type of ceremony is rather rare these days—no one's even sure if it actually works, you know, the supposed original incantation is so ancient and obviously it can't be proven—I mean, there's no evidence-based body of research on what happens after death. The concept of one having a soul is, of course, established at least in the magical world, as we have ghosts, and the unfortunate horrifying way the Dementor's Kiss affects us. That's before we even approach the sinister aspects of soul magic, horcruxes and unicorn blood as examples, obviously, and—"

She had thought about it. At length.

"—really it's more symbolic than anything else—which I suppose most magical marriage rites are symbolic in nature—but this would be a little more intense with the brief connection of magical cores with intent to bind, and the bonder has to be very precise and an extremely powerful caster, and officially registered with the Ministry to be able to perform this type of ceremony. Did you know Professor Flitwick is qualified? I remember once he mentioned it in Sixth Year during a lesson on—"

He grabbed her by both hands and yanked her to standing as he crushed his lips to hers.

"I take it you're not opposed to soul-bonding then?" She murmured amusedly when he let them resurface for air.

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He ignored the insidious and self-defeating thoughts that threatened him, reminding himself that she'd never seek to damage him with cutting words, but the sting of "your family was supremely fucked up and by extension, you are still supremely fucked up" lashed against his sense of calm.

Hermione didn't give him any time to convey a reaction, though. "I'm sorry!" she blurted suddenly. "Love, I'm sorry. That sounded so awful."

She closed the distance swiftly and threw herself in his arms, Draco eagerly accepting both her unnecessary apology as well as her physical affection.

"Of course you'd be a good partner, I'm sorry, I'm just... I'm so lost when it comes to this," she admitted, and pulled back out of his hold.

"I mean," she huffed a self-deprecating laugh, "I've got a timeline for everything in my life, but when it comes to children, I just can't seem to figure out the right time. Maybe there isn't one for me."

She took a steadying breath, one he recognized as her precursor to a statement or idea she hesitated to voice but needed to nonetheless.

"So I suppose we should establish right now, before any vows have been taken, whether that is a deal breaker for you, if I'm never ready for a child. Because I couldn't... couldn't live with keeping you from living the life you truly want."

Draco's initial reaction almost came out as a derisive snort. Short of some oddly evil and out of character act like murdering Narcissa in cold blood, there'd be no future of his without Hermione involved.

But her follow-up question stole any response he might have made.

"Do you want to be a father?"

It shouldn't have surprised him, that she'd turn the question around on him, because obviously he'd need to have some sort of opinion as well. But fuck if it didn't slam like a barreling, out-of-control train through his psyche, smashing through his meticulously crafted mental and emotional walls.

Fatherhood, in general, made him more than a little uncomfortable. And that self-knowledge combined with Hermione's reasonable question led Draco down a sudden road of horrifying self-examination that threatened to undo several months of healing in one fell swoop.

Oh gods, Draco had the worst example of fatherhood, how would he know what to do? How did one learn to parent? What the fuck did you do when it cried? He had zero experience handling children. How the hell did you instill discipline? Lucius, a night failure on that front, had somehow been far too indulgent and far too stern in one dysfunctional paternal package.

Draco cringed thinking about how he heard the never ending spiel about his "specialness" growing up, and look at how terrible he'd turned out. But good parents told their children they were special, right? Lucius managed to straddle a line of contradiction with Draco; in one breath he'd been hailed as some anointed, perfect specimen of a pureblood heir and in the next dismissed with a chilling aloofness and warned to uphold the reputation of their ancient line lest he risk disinheritance.

How the hell was he supposed to be a father? Beyond the abysmal application of the practical skills, gods, any child of his would be absolutely doomed, cursed to bear his rotten surname. The

It dawned on him that they were quite the pair of perfect idiots. Because to not have seriously considered this monumental question when they'd be married by summer's end was such a farcical oversight on the part of two otherwise rather intelligent people.

"Well," she started. "I'm not... opposed to the idea. Of children. I think."

A non-committal answer from a normally disturbingly decisive person left Draco unfortunately in charge of driving this conversation. A conversation that, again, they definitely should have already conducted, given all the things they'd experienced together: war, sex, panic attacks, sex, near-death experiences, sex, hospital stays, sex, crying jags, sex, awkward family dinners, sex, Weasley's terrible sense of humor, sex, uncomfortable and undignified uses of one another's lavatories, sex, holidays, sex, silly arguments, sex, etc.

"Did you want to... expand on that?"

Salazar fucking Slytherin he'd even quoted Healer Browning, just appoint him Head of Hufflepuff House already.

A measured inhale and exhale between her perfect lips.

"Right well, I know you've been raised with certain... expectations when it comes to children and child-rearing and I swear Draco, I'm trying to push my preconceived assumptions aside and not have that be a factor. It isn't fair for you to think that my hesitation has anything to do with you or your family. I know that you wouldn't expect me to... take up the sole responsibility of caring for a baby while you continue on in your career. That doesn't mean I wouldn't want to take some time, perhaps a year or two, to be a mother. But that's not the immediate path for me."

She paused for a nervous breath, and Draco could see she had more to say and gave her an encouraging nod and smile. Of course he knew all this about Granger already, or could have guessed as much, but this type of decision needed to be voiced aloud, not left to linger in presumptions and guesswork.

"But if it's not only a question of 'when' but a question of 'if'... to be honest, I'm not entirely sure. I don't... I don't have an answer for you just now and... I have so many career goals I've yet to accomplish and if I'm to be a parent I'd want any child of mine to have my undivided attention in those early years—which are so crucial to development—and God knows how my parents did this and kept on in their dental practice."

Another anxious inhale before she continued.

"I don't want additional eyes and I don't want governesses. I'd want to raise any child of ours, but I don't know how to do that and balance my career trajectory and private research and charitable pursuits."

Draco frowned, puzzled at the way she'd phrased the entire act of parenting as a solo endeavor. He could easily follow her breathily rambling by this point in their relationship, but the thought path confused him.

"Do you not think I'd help in that way?"

"I... well I mean, that's not really traditional in your family, is it?"

He rested his forehead against hers. "I didn't dare hope that any woman... let alone you, would want to tether themselves to a soul such as mine."

Hermione pressed her hand over his anxious and rapidly pounding heart. She placed a gentle kiss to the middle of his chest, then one to the thrumming pulse of his neck, one to each cheek, one to his lips, and Merlin, if this witch didn't already own his whole soul.

She pulled back to study his face. "You truly want this too? I know I... I've asked for a lot of non-traditional elements all along and this seems almost antithesis to a lot of choices I've made but I... I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

"Gods, yes, Granger. Yes I want this—I—I—"

Draco's facial muscles twitched suspiciously and before he could give that reaction the chance to fully form into something embarrassingly sentimental, he leaned in to kiss her again. Their lips touched briefly before Hermione gasped and pulled away.

"Oh! I forgot!" she ran through to her bedroom and sprinted back clutching a worn, leather-bound tome.

"I found this in your library a few weeks ago to research the rites properly—there's even some runes work involved—and I left the others at yours, and I'd meant to cross-reference everything if you'd agreed to the ceremony."

Draco chuckled and took the book from her hands. "Your track record of thievery continues."

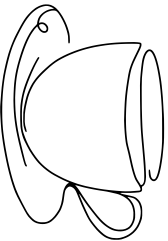
He ran his fingers lightly over the cover, marveling at what he held in his hands: instructions for conducting a solemn and sacred ceremony that would allow him the privilege of joining the very essence of him to the innermost part of her.

I hope there are a hundred billion lifetimes with you.

"Could you... could you tell me one more time?"

She smiled broadly, his favorite smile of hers. The one that meant uncontained happiness, joy so overwhelming it might very well spark out of the ends of her hair and shroud him in a haze of protective, warm light.

"Draco Malfoy, I want to have a soul-bonding ceremony with you... so long as you promise me to never, ever attempt to cook without my direct supervision again."



Chapter Forty Nine

“Narcissa Malfoy is my future mother-in-law.”

Ginny made her say it out loud three times in succession and found it increasingly hilarious each time Hermione finished that preposterous sentence.

Ginny, self-dubbed maid-of-honor, launched herself into the midst of Hermione’s wedding planning for the Muggle ceremony with surprising zeal. Certainly more enthusiasm than she’d shown her own wedding to Harry, wherein she’d handed the planning over to a more-than-willing Molly and made statements like “I’ve never heard the term ‘servicette’ in my life and I certainly don’t care about its shape, size, or color; just someone make sure Harry is at the end of the aisle.”

Hermione strongly suspected her wedding to Draco served as an excellent excuse for Ginny to leave baby James in Harry’s care for a few hours every now and then. Ginny and Jean got along like a house on fire, and when Molly also showed enthusiasm for lending help with planning the Muggle ceremony, Hermione found herself surrounded by three overly excited women who asked her seemingly simple questions that somehow required very specific answers.

What would the wedding colors be?

“Purple.”

Yes, but which shade of purple?

“Oh! Um maybe more of a blue-ish purple?”

Like a hyacinth?

“That’s fine, yes.”

Now it’s perfectly fine not to have traditional wedding attendants, but how did she envision the procession? Who’s responsible for the rings?

“Uh... just me and Mum and Dad? And the rings would just be kept by the officiant?”

What about the music? You can’t very well walk down an aisle in silence!

“Something simple, perhaps just a pianist? Or a guitarist?”

Hey Jude 19

“Pardon?”

“Your heirs, Mr. Malfoy.”

Oh.

In lieu of an actual answer, Draco coughed and shuffled some parchments on his desk, then picked up a pen and clicked it a few times.

“If you’d like,” piped up a different voice. “We can add a blanket clause stating any heirs sired during the marriage also receive an equal portion of assets to your mother and wife upon your passing. Does that sound reasonable Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco made a mental note to send that particular solicitor a flat-out disturbingly large Christmas bonus next year. “Thank you for the elegant solution, I think that would be wise.”

As the embers died from the end of the Floo call, Draco stared into the empty grate and wondered how best to bring this up with Hermione. In all the flurry and excitement of planning ceremony details, they’d yet to discuss this particular subject.

A thought and a memory tried to peek out from one corner of his mind, but Draco slammed the mental door shut, locking it all behind layers of cautionary phrases such as “not something you deserve” and “you’ve got nothing to offer in this role.” Just as he’d done a year ago when he’d been blindsided by the sight of Hermione holding an infant in her arms. Granted, it was a Potter by way of a Weasley, but Draco had still needed to hastily secure away dangerous notions regarding a future time that she’d be holding their child.

Before he could truly spiral, Draco threw up his Occlumency shields and successfully avoided thinking too hard about how disastrous he’d be as a parent.

I am okay with this



Hermione beamed the following week when he told her about his updated will and rewarded him with a quick kiss.

“Very proactive. See? Wedding planning isn’t so painful.”

Draco shrugged and folded himself onto one of the stools behind her kitchen island. “I thought you’d be pleased to know your practical streak has rubbed off on me.”

“About time,” she teased over her shoulder, and continued on with cooking dinner.

“And in that vein we should probably discuss, ah,” he took a breath and in that one tiny, minuscule intake of air, drew on every shred of wisdom Healer Browning had ever tried to impart into his thick skull about open communication in a committed relationship. “...children.”

She froze. The hand stirring the wonderful smelling stew paused in its task, even her hair (an almost sentient-like extension of her) seemed to come to a complete stop. Hermione turned around and Draco saw that she did not have an answer to the question left hanging between them.

Remain Nameless

if... if you and your mother do the bulk of the planning? I'll weigh in on things if you like... but I frankly don't know the first thing about Muggle ceremonies."

"It's pretty simple really, well not all of them, but the standard non-denominational ceremonies resemble the basic bonding ceremonies. We exchange vows and rings and there can be a reading or two, and an officiant presides over everything and signs off on the marriage certificate. So really it's very straightforward but obviously no bonding magic or wands needed. Then a reception follows with a meal and some dancing if we want."

She spoke in her small voice. The one she used when unsure of how the information she said would be received. She uttered it as meekly and quickly as possible, as if trying to get the worst of it over and then deal with any fallout. But he'd never want to stifle her cultural customs, even if he couldn't quite grasp how he should feel about participating in a Muggle tradition.

He cleared his throat. "I'm not opposed to it, love." He moved closer and dropped a reassuring kiss to her temple. "I don't know what's expected of me for... that type of ceremony but I do know you're not paying for it either way."

That successfully flared her back to life.

"Absolutely not Malfoy! I have plenty of my own savings and my parents already offered to pay for this!"

Draco snorted. "You are aware of what happens when you marry me Granger? You'll be one of the wealthiest women in our world. A peasant no longer."

"I'm not taking your gold!"

"Hush, it will be *our* gold. You will have a key to all my vaults at Gringotts and I won't hear another word against it."

Hermione rolled her eyes which Draco took as a sign of defeat and squeezed the tops of her knees in appreciation.

She settled back into planning with new zeal, while Draco wondered which notion aroused him more: that his future wife could not care less about the contents of his vaults or that she wanted to marry him twice.



March 2010

During their recent Floo call, Draco's group of solicitors and financial advisors raised a rather astute point about updating his will now that he was to be married. Draco agreed with the prudent suggestion, immediately dictating that all his assets be equally distributed between Hermione and Narcissa (should his mother outlive him). Hermione would inherit Franklin House and after deliberating internally for a few minutes decided on a tidy sum each for Crick and Watson.

"And for your heirs?" one of the advisors spoke up.

Hey Jude!9

Which type of font for the invitations?

"A... um... cursive?"

And the flowers, which would she like in her bouquet? And for Draco's boutonniere? What about floral arrangements for the ceremony arch? And the flowers for the reception tables? Ohh and centerpieces?

"Oh, I suppose... something purple?"

Yes, but which shade of purple?

She often felt like a failure of a bride. She and Draco had already discussed the rather important things ad nauseum, but how was she supposed to muster boundless enthusiasm for colors and flowers and fabrics? Ginny tried to assure her that of course Hermione couldn't fail at being a bride.

"It's easier to be excited over someone else's wedding," shrugged her friend. "Trust me, what you're feeling is completely normal. If you really can't be arsed to form an opinion, just let your mum decide."

With Draco reticent to weigh in on the first ceremony and Jean and Molly all too eager, she took Ginny's expert advice and practiced nodding vigorously while smiling. She ignored the sinking feeling in her stomach at the thought that two Weasleys and zero Malfoys seemed interested in helping Hermione's mother.

Of course, she'd been the one to insist on the additional wedding, but if Draco could have a reaction other than to cough awkwardly or demur and sputter every time she voiced a question or asked his opinion it'd be much appreciated.

"So, how was the engagement dinner?"

Hermione huffed out a laugh and checked her mother was sufficiently embroiled in a discussion on centerpieces with Molly.

"I'm sure my parents had to be the first willing Muggles to ever set foot on the Lestranger Estate." She'd not told her parents this morbid fact.

"Bleak," agreed Ginny. "Did Narcissa receive you in all her pureblood heiress finery? Oooh did she wear a goblin-made tiara or flowing cape of unicorn hair? I bet her vaults are full of that sort of stuff."

Hermione chuckled and painted the picture for Ginny of the supremely awkward start to the evening. Dr. and Dr. Granger wore their best suit and cocktail dress respectively and Narcissa received them in formal robes. If she noted her son elected to wear a tailored Muggle suit leaving her the sole person dressed in magical fashion, she made no mention.

Hermione felt a twinge of guilt at the memory, wondering if her soon-to-be mother-in-law took that as a perceived slight instead of Draco hoping to make the Grangers feel more at ease. Especially since her father had joked the entire time leading up to this occasion that he'd planned on wearing his best scrubs. The ones dotted with molars wearing sunglasses. He'd earned glares from both Jean and Hermione as a reward for his attempt at humor.

"Dad mostly just left Mum in charge of the conversation which was for the best, to be honest, she has more patience for the whole high society charade. But gods Ginny, you could just feel that condemnation dripping from his mother's every syllable, still..." Hermione picked at a stray scrap of tulle,

Remain Nameless

"it could have gone much worse. At any rate, I caught Draco and Dad exchanging several significant glances when our mums started comparing overly detailed notes about gardening, so maybe it wasn't a total waste of time."

Checking again that Molly and Jean still paid them no mind, she leaned closer to Ginny and whispered a fear of hers.

"I'm not sure Narcissa plans to attend our Muggle ceremony," she confided to a wide-eyed Ginny.

"What makes you say that?"

"Our most recent wedding planning session with her..."

Hermione was all too happy to hand over a bulk of vendor confirmation to the well-manicured hands of Narcissa Malfoy. Once she and Draco finished drafting their initial preferences for the bonding, they faced his mother as a united front.

Hermione brought a neatly stacked pile of parchment to the polished cherry dining table in one of the lesser dining rooms of Narcissa's home. Narcissa brought several gorgeously-bound leather notebooks. The jade green book seemed to contain names of vendors or businesses she trusted. The blood-red book held all her acquaintances by name and address. The black book recorded personal notes and lists. The ocean-blue book served as her calendar and recorded personal appointments.

Narcissa threw out the names of caterers, florists, pastry chefs, decorators, photographers, and day-of help in rapid succession. She'd listened as Draco carefully articulated their vision in each of these areas for the wedding then would make the appropriate mark in the appropriate notebook pertaining to each facet.

"And the marriage rites?" she eventually inquired as they discussed the ceremony schedule. "The Black family ones haven't been used in several generations, so I will need to visit Ginegotts to retrieve the scrolls should you select that set."

"No need," said Draco quickly. "We've decided on a soul-bonding ceremony."

Narcissa blinked once at them, then made a small note in the black book.

"Your father and I were soul-bonded," she commented quietly as she rounded off her note. The soft-spoken comment surprised Hermione, and she felt Draco's hand twitch in hers beneath the table.

"You were?" he blurted out. "I didn't know that."

"Mum," said Narcissa as she flicked through another notebook. "Yes well, the press coverage never made mention, as we didn't allow any journalists at the ceremony portion."

"But I thought... I thought you and Father were an arranged match?"

"And so we were. Now, have you selected an appropriate and qualified bonder?"

Hermione could see that Draco wanted to interrogate his mother further, so she jumped in, "Professor Flitwick. I've already had an owl from him saying he'd be delighted and we'll be meeting with him tomorrow."

She felt a rush of sympathy for Draco, but knew once his mother shut down a topic, it would only cause him further frustration by not having his questions answered. And getting detailed now would only stretch this interminable afternoon on until nightfall or possibly the next century.

Hey Jude!9

thing legally? If they just signed a piece of paper couldn't they just go do that right now? Why even bother with the ceremonial aspect? It certainly didn't seem very binding to Draco.

Hermione fidgeted from her spot on the couch and her nervousness became a tiny stab at his heart. She'd replied so firmly when he asked her about the ceremony, she envisioned after they'd settled on the August date that he knew she truly desired this.

"I've been thinking and this is something I'd like to do for my parents. My Muggle heritage is very important to me, and though I was hardly the type of girl that fantasized about her wedding day growing up... any time I did visualize my wedding I always saw myself with my parents on each arm... walking me towards my future spouse in their back garden. Nothing lavish just... just my parents escorting me into this new phase of my life."

She hugged her knees to her chest. "They missed out on quite a lot with me, so a simple, traditional wedding is the least I can do, but more than that... it's what I'd prefer. I want to honor the non-magical side of me by celebrating that core part of my ancestry with my new husband."

He'd be a monster to deny her this.

"However," she peered at him through her long lashes, bottom lip drawn briefly between her teeth.

"I'm not so selfish that I would deny you your familial history either, Draco. You've every right to want a traditional magical ceremony and I have no intention of depriving your mother the opportunity to plan something more to her taste. So," she took a deep breath. "Let's do both."

"Both?" Draco echoed blankly.

"Yes," Hermione affirmed. "We'll have it on a different day." She flipped open her planner. "How about the week before?"

"Ern, uh... that's fine."

Her head snapped up and she stopped writing. "You're uncomfortable with this," she stated baldly.

"No! I simply don't... I mean... I've no idea... I mean... Granger, you realize you're having us plan two weddings, yes?"

"I'll do the Muggle one on my own," she claimed quickly. "And actually my Mum will be a big help, she's so excited you know, she's been sending me bridal magazines practically daily, and I think she'd love to bond with me over all the planning—so you wouldn't have to do anything and we could just focus on the preparations for the bonding ceremony on the 14th—and my parents already said they'll cover the costs and it wouldn't be much anyway if we host it at their home—the gardens are so lovely there in late summer and I don't expect you to even want to help—"

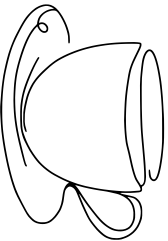
Oh gods, they weren't even married yet and he was already disappointing her.

"—it's nothing too odd, I promise, you know there's actually a lot more overlap in cultural wedding traditions than you might think, it's all rather derivative, and I—"

"Granger."

Draco placed a hand on top of her knees in what he hoped served as a gesture of comfort to help stem her anxious babbling.

"I'm not opposed to a Muggle ceremony in addition to a wizarding one. Perhaps it might be best



Chapter Forty Eight

February 2010

Growing up, Draco never really gave much thought to the activity of wedding planning. He would have been given very little say in the whole ordeal.

After the requisite courtship period, he'd be presented with a betrothal contract from his intended's family (or vice versa), and then the negotiations would begin between parental units. Narcissa would ensure some clause or other about heirloom jewelry or house elves be included. Lucius probably would have a purity check done on the bride's line and also amass future blackmail material should they prove uncooperative. The bride's family would counter with compensation requirements based on how many heirs the marriage produced and whether they were male or female, and it would all go round and round on a carousel of horrific yet meaningless divvel forever recorded on official parchment and probably then sealed with a blood rite.

Circumventing all that tedium, Draco's time as a bachelor now had an official end date: August 14th of this year. Well, technically, his bachelorhood comes to an end the Saturday before, on August 7th.

He'd not quite come to terms with the event that would occur on August 7th.

"I'd like a Muggle ceremony."

Mother will be appalled, perhaps, fatally. This initial thought ran through Draco's mind and rendered him temporarily speechless.

Here lies Narcissa Malfoy. She survived the Dark Lord living in her manor only to meet her end upon hearing the news that her only son is to be wed by Muggles in Muggle attire as he takes Muggle oaths.

He'd marry Granger on the bloody moon if she wanted, but every version of a ceremony in his head looked familiar, magical.

"And what does that mean... exactly?" Draco asked cautiously, trying to thread that fine line of curiosity devoid of condescension. He'd no idea how Muggles married one another, but reasoned it probably didn't involve dress robes or bonding rites or protective enchantments. Did it even mean any-

HeyJude19

"Lovely. Now Hermione, I've scheduled your bridal robe fitting for the—"

"Oh that won't be necessary," Hermione swiftly interceded. "I'm having Anjana Nehru design my ensemble, and she'll be designing my parents' and Draco's robes as well."

Narcissa blinked again and made a note in the green book and then the blue book respectively.

"Would you... that is, I'd love for you to be included as well," Hermione awkwardly offered, drawing strength from Draco's squeeze of her hand. The blue book received another line via quill. Whether she actually needed to continue recording a thought or simply sought to buy herself more time to consider Hermione's offer remained unclear.

"Her designs are quite modern," Narcissa eventually remarked. "And rather singular. Please let me know of the fitting date."

Draco shot her an encouraging grin that never failed to make her smile in return at the sheer boyishness of the expression. The buoy of confidence from her fiancé emboldened her to bring up the topic of the first ceremony.

"We realize that it might pose some... challenges, so we're keeping the guest list for the first ceremony rather small, but I wanted to ask if anyone from your side of the list would like to attend that as well?"

"The first ceremony?"

"Yes, the Muggle one. At my parents' home."

Draco broke in quickly, "It's the Saturday before, Mother. On the 7th."

"I shall keep that in mind."

It did not escape Hermione's notice that not one detail about the first wedding (not even the date) had been recorded in any of the varied notebooks on the table.

It did not escape Hermione's notice that the owl she'd sent two weeks ago asking Narcissa the same exact question about guests for the August 7th ceremony received a curt reply of, "Thank you, I shall keep that in mind."

It did not escape Hermione's notice that Narcissa deftly dodged every single one of her mother's questions and comments about the August 7th ceremony at the engagement dinner.

Ginny's concerned voice brought Hermione back to the present.

"Have you brought this up to Malfoy?" she asked.

"Not directly," said Hermione with a small head shake. "I don't want him to think I'm constantly questioning his mother's motives, and I certainly don't want to add to his list of worries. If she attends, wonderful, and if not..." Hermione trailed off helplessly but Ginny came to her rescue.

"And if not he'll have a group of people supporting him regardless," finished Ginny fiercely and resumed their previous task of cutting lengths of ribbon as Hermione discreetly dabbed at her eyes.



Remain Nameless

April 2010

Since their formal introduction more than a year and some months ago, Draco had slowly come to know the woman he now referred to as “aunt.” A moniker he no longer feared, given that it could now be associated with a less terrible individual.

Andromeda enjoyed literature (both magical and Muggle), a shared passion with Granger that led to Draco at times passively observing the rapid conversation between the two women during their luncheons. She spoke easily and often of her late husband and daughter, and Draco wondered if she did this for his benefit, to give him back pieces of a life he’d missed through no fault of his own, or if she simply needed to share everything possible about two people that had once comprised her entire world. Or perhaps a bit of both.

The elder Black sister presented a stern brow and could be stiff in her comportment, but laughed easily, especially around her grandson, prone to showering Teddy with the indulgent smiles Draco remembered receiving from his own mother during his childhood.

With Teddy home for the Easter hols, Draco took advantage of the rare opportunity, at Hermione’s urging, to invite both his aunt and cousin round for tea. Teddy, a peculiar-looking boy with bubblegum pink hair, answered Draco’s polite questions about his first year of schooling quietly, but seemed more comfortable chating with Hermione, someone he’d known since birth.

Andromeda, when not busy lawning over Teddy’s exam scores, couldn’t contain her excitement about Draco and Hermione’s upcoming wedding.

“A soul-bonding! Oh how romantic,” she gushed. “Who’ll be the bondy?”

“Professor Flitwick and oh gods... Andromeda... you should have seen...” Hermione became overcome with giggles while Draco scowled.

“You should have seen Draco’s face. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen him so uncomfortable,” Hermione teased and his aunt’s eyes darted between them amusedly.

“I was not *uncomfortable*, merely taken aback by the display of ah... emotion,” he countered.

“The poor man burst into tears! Can you *imagine*? He kept trying to get out the words about what an honor it was to bond two former students—”

“—called us a ‘rare and unexpected pair,’ mind you—”

“—yes but he meant it as a compliment—”

“—to you, surely. He seemed rather overcome at the sight of us even sitting next to one another and when Granger brought up the soul-bond—”

“—he came around his desk and he—he—he hugged Draco round the middle!”

The four of them devolved into laughter at the thought of their tiny and beloved Charms professor embracing a mortified Draco. The moment of mirth had only just died down when a sudden movement behind his aunt’s head caught his eye.

“Mother?” Draco called to the figure frozen at the threshold of the verandah.

Now that they’d actively involved Narcissa in the wedding planning, she felt more comfortable popping by Franklin House unannounced with either updates or questions and indeed, Draco could

Hey Jude 19

Granger, daughter of David and Jean Granger, for the Howler to arrive.

Draco expected it, of course, but it still disturbed his Thursday evening as he worked at his desk in the Franklin House library. Crick and Watson had returned his initial contract offer and the uppy little things had the gall to write in several additions. Draco suspected Hermione’s influence, but ultimately decided to just sign off on the bloody thing and have done with it. Because of course he’d allow the brothers to tend their own personal portion of the garden and reap any profits from the sale of any bounny harvested.

Just as Draco finished making a copy of the contract to owl to his soliciors, the ominous scattier habinger of verbal abuse entered the library.

As he predicted, about every other word was “Mudblood” or some variation thereof, though the volume at which it came shrieking out of the envelope waxed and waned as Pansy detailed all the various and countless ways in which Draco was sullyng his line, spurning his heritage, and ensuing a shameful legacy.

Grateful at least, that the Howler had found him alone and not with Hermione, he waited out her disgusting diatribe until every last drop of venom had been wrung from the enchanted parchment, instead of instantly banishing it.

Finally, the tirade ceased, leaving behind a few embers and more than a few regrets on Draco’s part, and he glared at the ashy remains of the red envelope on his desk. He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, then pulled a sheaf of parchment towards him.

Pansy

I received your letter. I'm sorry to hear you feel that way about the Slyther house. Do not address my father or any other member ever again. Given your feelings about my designs for marriage Granger, I'm not sure we ought ever to proceed again, but I hope one day you can forgive me for not feeling you off the report you delivered when we were younger.

If you ever need any assistance please make use of me. You ought to report me, but I would never write to you. I ought you nothing but happiness Pansy, and I report to your lord yourself so need to help. I'd do what I could for you.

Draco

Remain Nameless

"If you could wait on that front, I think Hermione and I would prefer to decide a few things amongst ourselves first."

A slight flaring of her nostrils.

"Am I to be involved at all?"

"Of course, Mother, I'd simply like the opportunity to discuss with my fiancée about the level of pomp and circumstance we're comfortable with before rushing ahead with plans."

An unfolding of her hands.

"Perhaps I could host your engagement ball?"

"No balls, no galas," Draco said firmly. He had no need to consult Hermione on that decision as he knew full well she'd loathe the concept but would hesitate to refuse Narcissa.

A pursing of her lips. "A formal dinner then?"

"Fine," Draco conceded. "You'll include her parents?"

A soft clucking of her tongue.

"I suppose that meeting must take place at some point."

Draco couldn't resist a sly answer this time. "Yes, I'd prefer not to have to conduct introductions on the wedding day," he replied dryly.

An arched brow at his insolent tone.

"May I place an announcement in the Prophet?"

He considered the implications momentarily before determining this acquiescence to be relatively harmless. "You may."

He stared at his mother for a few silent beats, questions running wild through his mind and begging for release in one loud emotional outburst.

Are you happy for me? I'm so disgustingly happy, can't you tell? Do you know what Hermione means to me? Do you know that for once in my life my future looks blindingly bright? Do you know how jealous I am of the way Hermione spoke with her parents this morning? Do you know Aunt Andromeda is absolutely on the guest list for this wedding? Do you care that I don't know how to tell you any of this? How hard is it for you to even congratulate me? When will I be good enough?

"Right well... I'll leave you to your reading," Draco clipped and turned away. He'd only taken five steps when he heard her voice, softer than he'd ever heard it before.

"Draco? Would you have time to stay for tea?"

He whirled around in surprise to see his mother's chin set, but an open desperation in her blue eyes.

"Of course, Mother."



It only took two days after the item in the Daily Prophet announcing the recent engagement of one Draco Lucius Malfoy, son of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Malfoy (née Black) to Hermione Jean

Hey Jude!9

see parchment samples clutched in her hand, probably for place card settings for the reception.

It lasted for an infinitesimal moment, a mere blip of time, but as he locked eyes with Narcissa, the mask slipped. It afforded Draco the brief ability to see straight through his mother's near-constant façade.

She had the look of a parent who'd just now noticed her only child was very much no longer a child. Instead, she now observed an adult with values and principles antithesis to not only her own upbringing, but to what she then in turn taught Draco. Compounding this confusing swirl of grief, the surprising sight of a sister she'd not seen in years was taking tea with her only child, and looking quite at home in his company. How well did she really know her own son?

As quickly as it had been rendered transparent, the mask resumed its former state of opaqueness.

"Pardon my intrusion. I'll let you get back to your guests."

She spun on her heel and before either Draco or Hermione could act, Andromeda shot out of her seat.

"Cissy, wait! Please!" Andromeda called and hurried after her retreating sister. Another call of "Cissy?" echoed around the three remaining at the table. After a few minutes, Andromeda still hadn't returned, and Hermione turned to Draco with a suggestion.

"Perhaps you'd like to take Teddy flying over the grounds? He can borrow that new broom model the Wasps just sent you, the uh, aerial... uh..."

"The Aerial Assault," Teddy and Draco chorused and then shared nervous grins. Draco still didn't quite know how to relate to his newfound cousin, but quidditch was as good a place to start as any.

He directed Teddy down to the broom and equipment shed at the far end of his lawns then doubled back into the house under the pretense of grabbing his flying gloves. Hermione pursed her lips as he passed, fully aware of his snooping intentions.

He stepped quietly through the ballroom and cast a quick Disillusionment Charm on himself, ignoring the little voice in his head that sounded suspiciously Granger-like that admonished him for the slightly underhanded tactic. He crept through his own house, but couldn't find any source of noise and wondered if either they'd gone somewhere else or cast a Silencing Charm. As he passed by the music room, a flicker of movement caught his eye and he paused in the doorway.

Andromeda and Narcissa sat together on the Bluthner piano bench, arms around one another in a shaking and desperate hug. Andromeda faced away from him, but Draco could hear a whispered, "I know... I know..."

He'd never seen his mother cry in front of anyone other than himself before, and those instances had been limited to post-Azkaban visits of Lucius. Those tears she would shed quietly and quickly dab away with one of Draco's proffered handkerchiefs, an embarrassing display of weak emotion that she sought to hide.

The tears now streaming down his mother's face and onto the robes of her sister fell thick and fast, an unstoppable stream of grief, regret, and perhaps even insurmountable guilt. Narcissa made no move to wipe them away.

Remain Nameless

Draco left the sisters to their private moment then, hoping if he flew fast enough on his broom that he could blame his own wet eyes on the speed of the wind.



Wednesday, July 21, 2010

Draco ran his fingers reverently back and forth across the skin of his forearm. His left forearm. His mostly unmarred left forearm.

He still had some discoloration to his pigment, but the grisly symbol of a snake protruding from the mouth of a skull no longer held court there, taunting him with memories of horrors gone by. Now it was just his arm.

"How do you feel when you look at it now?"

Draco looked up at Healer Browning's question. "I feel... as if I can finally... finally be someone worthy of loving Hermione. Of marrying someone like her."

"Did you not feel that way before?"

Draco shifted in his seat as the floating quill scratched its way across the parchment and filled the silence.

"No, I did. I do. It was only... this was something I wanted off my body before our bonding."

"Did she not love you when you still bore your Mark?"

"She did but... well it was rather revolting and she had to see it all the time... this reminder of the terrible person she wants to bind herself to, Merlin knows why—"

"Draco, I'd like to remind you that your negative self-talk is an impediment to your healing."

Draco opened and closed his mouth quickly, an acerbic barb on the tip of his tongue, but he only bobbed his head to acknowledge Browning's calm admonishment. Because of course the older man was right. Draco cast his eyes back down to his arm.

"I also wonder what my father would have to say if he could see this and I often wonder... if he would ever have accepted my relationship with Hermione. If he would disinherit me or... or maybe have come round eventually."

"You could write him a letter."

"He's dead," Draco replied blankly.

"I'm aware, Draco," said Browning gently. "But letter writing even without the intent to send may help you to sort out how you feel about your father and help you decide what you can and cannot forgive or reconcile about his behavior and your relationship. It is merely an exercise, but you may find it cathartic rather than trying to talk about it. You do not have to show it to me or to anyone else."

Draco nodded, mulling the suggestion over. Browning had recommended journaling to Draco in the past, but he found it cumbersome to write about his feelings and didn't want a written record of his past traumas that he might accidentally re-read.

Hey Jude!9

"And where do you think you're off to?" She tugged him down by his tie for a lingering kiss. "I thought we might celebrate our engagement again."

Fuck, he will buy her jewelry and propose every day from now until the end of time if it made her this insatiable. Unfortunately, he had a rather important task ahead of him.

"Though you are more tempting than you know, I think it'd be best if I inform my mother in person of our new relationship milestone."

"Ah," she replied and let go of his tie. "Would you like me to come with you?"

Though touched by her offer, Draco thought it best to handle this conversation solo, in case Narcissa's initial reaction was in any way unkind.

"I think I'd like to tell her alone, if that's all right."

Hermione nodded and pecked his lips. Draco knew she understood that he'd like to protect her in this one instance. He Flooded into one of the sumptuously decorated parlors of his mother's estate, and a house elf immediately greeted him.

"Mistress is in the south parlor, young sir."

Draco nodded and made off down the hall, but turned around after a few strides. "Sorry, what was your name?"

"Whimsy, young sir."

"Thank you Whimsy."

The little elf blinked once at him, then disappeared with a crack.

He found Narcissa seated primly on a chaise longue, a slim volume in her hands. Draco paused at the threshold and suddenly, he was a child again, approaching his austere mother to report some news or other to her. She'd set aside her reading material and then give him her full attention, hands folded neatly in her lap while she waited for Draco to detail his recent exam scores or perhaps relay a message from Father.

He shook off the reverie and approached to peck her cheek. "Hello, Mother."

A small smile graced her features, possibly a genuine one.

"Hello, and to what do I owe this pleasant surprise? It is so rare for you to visit unannounced and on your own these days."

Draco ignored the underlying barb of her seemingly light remark.

"I've asked Hermione to marry me. She said yes."

He might as well have told her it had recently ceased snowing outside and despite the nip in the air, the weather would improve as the afternoon wore on.

"Which ring did you present her?"

"I had one made for her."

A slow blink of her eyes.

"I see. Has a date been set?"

"Not yet, I only proposed last night. We've yet to discuss any formal plans for the wedding."

She released the faintest of sighs. "I suppose I can begin making some inquiries."

Remain Nameless

“Yes,” she whispered, voice and body quivering.

“Marry me,” he spoke into the skin of her hip.

“Yes.”

“Marry me,” he intoned against her inner thigh.

“Yessss...”

Draco crawled back up her body. “Marry me,” he pressed the demand against her lips before thrusting inside her. “Oh, yes... yes...”

Eventually they left the bed, or at least Hermione did.

The rest of the morning passed in a flurry of Floo calls to her various loved ones to inform them of the joyous news while Draco remained in bed and pretended not to eavesdrop. He heard the requisite squeals of delight from Ginny, Padma, Molly, and Astoria, and gruff congratulations from her male friends. When he was sure the living room was devoid of any red-heads or Potters in the fireplace, he snuck to the kitchen to finally partake in some coffee.

Hermione glowed with happiness while she bustled around with a mug of tea and informed her parents via her Muggle device. Draco could hear her mother’s shriek of glee through the receiver. As she spoke excitedly through her phone, Draco noticed her eyes kept drifting down to the ring on her left hand. She would look at it for a second as if to confirm it truly existed, then give in to a small smile. Draco flipped through the morning paper and listened to Hermione’s half of the conversation with her parents. It rather sounded as if all three Grangers competed to see who could talk over whom, so palpable was everyone’s excitement.

“No! No date yet!” A tinkling laugh. “We only just got engaged last night! Or well, today, really—the coffee shop—yes the one where we met—oh Mum, it was lovely it was snowing and everything—still in our party robes—yes on one knee—no I didn’t know beforehand—only a little bit, I swear, and he cried too, you know—I’ll send you a picture after our call—no actually, anarchist and emerald—a flip ting!—oh just wait, it’s beautiful Mum, he had it made for me—I’m sure Ginny has some ideas—didn’t even let me ask her just went ahead and claimed she’d be my maid of honor—Mum, that’s thinking rather far ahead, don’t you think?—yes of course—yes they all know, surprised you didn’t hear Molly’s scream all the way from the Burrow—would you mind terribly?—I don’t think I have their numbers—of course, yes—yes you can tell them—thanks Mum—thanks Dad—me too—I’m very happy—of course, yes—yes I’ll tell Draco—I love you, too—yes—I’m sure it’s fine—we’ll see you then—love you too.”

The easy rapport built once more between Hermione and her parents puzzled him in a way that made him uncomfortable, forcing him to repress stray thoughts of familial relationships and their evolution.

“Mum and Dad invited us over for dinner tomorrow, is that all right?” she asked once she’d hung up, pulling him from his reverie.

“Sure, love,” he replied, draining his coffee then buttoning up one of the spare sets of robes he kept in her closet. She eyed him appreciatively then arched a brow.

Hey Jude!9

Browning’s voice brought him out of his musings.

“That’s our time for today. Please contact me if you need to, otherwise I’ll see you next month.”

“Oh, er actually, I’ll have to skip next session. We’ll still be traveling then... Italy, on our honeymoon.” Metlin, what a strange word to say aloud. *Honeymoon*.

Browning made a small note on his parchment. “Then I will see you in September.”

Draco hesitated from his seat on the couch, unsure if his next move would be considered inappropriate. Just as he’d already stood, preparing to take his leave with his task unfinished, his traitorous mouth forged ahead without permission.

“It would mean a lot to Hermione—” he began then faltered. “No, sorry, that’s not it.”

Draco cleared his throat and straightened up to look Browning full in the face. “It would mean very much to *me* if you would attend my wedding.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the thick cardstock to hand to him. “All the details are there and please bring your wife, of course.”

Browning accepted the invitation solemnly. “Thank you, we would be honored to attend,” he replied neutrally.

Draco rocked back and forth on his heels for a moment. He thought for a minute there Browning might have had a reaction that conveyed an emotion other than clinical stoicism, but apparently not.

“Right, well, please officially respond by Monday or my mother will have my head. Or Granger will. Metlin help me the day those two discover that if they unite their powers they could rule the entire world.”

He gave a grim smile and turned to leave.

“Draco,” Browning called softly. “I... I am immeasurably proud of you.”



Saturday, July 31, 2010

The sigh before Draco could only be classified as objectively absurd. And not only because George had passed out on a stretch of lawn behind Nott Manor, nor because Charlie and Oliver snored softly wrapped in each other’s arms in a bench seat, nor even because Dennis had curled up like a cat at the foot of a marble sculpture of some ancestor of Theo’s.

No, Potter and the Weasel embroiled in a drunken endeavor to teach an equally sozzled Theo how to conjure a Patronus probably topped the chart of current ridiculousness in Draco’s direct line of sight.

Let it never be said that Draco’s stag night hadn’t included enough alcoholic beverages.

Draco quite firmly requested a night in, having no interest in any public drunken shenanigans making their way to the front page of every gossip rag a mere week before his first set of nuptials. He’d also firmly requested that only Theo be present for this auspicious occasion, yet his traitorous and supposed “friend” saw fit to inform Potter who then told Weasley who then probably told every

Remain Nameless

customer who came to his shop and so the stag night for Draco Malfoy included a guest list that would make every single one of his deceased forebears roll mutinously in their marble tombs.

Theo pulled out all the quidditch strops, combining the vast collection of both his own racing brooms and Draco's stash of prototypes acquired through work that made the jaws of every male present drop. Indeed, Draco was certain Oliver would be adopting the latest Sun Streaker model as his own child.

The quidditch scrimmage eventually turned into broom racing which turned into drunken air-robotics that would have made Ginevra jealous and Hermione a nervous wreck, which somehow then morphed into inebriated spell-casting one-upmanship from any men still on their feet. All in all, Draco could begrudgingly admit he almost enjoyed his existence at the moment.

His beautiful fiancée on the other hand, had been cooed by the combined corrupting influences of Ginny, Sasha, and Padma to traipse about the Muggle club scene. But based on the messages Draco received earlier in the evening in his two-way journal, he had to wonder if the women had even left Hermione's home.

The most recent missive had come in an hour or so ago in the form of a rather crudely drawn male appendage with a note written in Ginny's hand: "Ferret, settle a bet, is this artistic rendering an accurate size approximation of your flesh wand which is, in your future wife's words, 'a cock so glorious it'll make your eyes cross?'"

He could only hope those women had a ready supply of Hangover Potion for the following morning.

In the middle of the sprawling lawns before him, beads of sweat ran down Theo's brow as he produced a thin stream of vapor from his wand again.

"Aargh, blast it all!" he finally slumped deflated on the ground, panting.

"Chin up mate," enthused Ron who, to Draco's horror, only became more jovial with each drink consumed. "We can't all be little Patronus prodigies like this git here." He playfully shoved Potter who staggered inelegantly and almost collided with a hedge.

"That you even got a misty form is great for your first couple times," consoled Potter.

He then pushed his glasses further up his nose and raised his wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

The infamous stag of light burst forth and galloped gracefully across the grass. Ron shouted the spell too and soon a Jack Russell terrier bounded along beside it. Not to be outdone, Draco cast as well, adding the soaring Ukrainian Ironbelly dragon to the mix. A quiet peace fell over the party, as the three conjured creatures gambled about aimlessly for a time before fading away.

"What were you thinking? When you conjured it?" Theo asked the group at large.

No one spoke for a beat before Harry gruffly broke the silence. "When Ginny told me she was pregnant."

Ron cleared his throat. "When Padma agreed to marry me."

All three sets of eyes turned to Draco instinctively.

"When... when Granger..." Draco heaved a dramatic sigh and moved away from the others.

Hey Jude!9

She pulled back to gaze at him. "Ethically sourced gemstones. Wait... you asked... you asked *Ron*? *Ron bloody*?"

Yes, the stupid git knows, he'd only been ogling Hermione's left hand at every opportunity since fucking June and then waggling his eyebrows at Draco.

"Oh... er yes. And Potter and Ginevra..."

Her mouth opened and closed a few times and Draco thought he might have temporarily broken her brain with this information. "You—you told my friends?"

"Yes, I had the unfortunate idea to ask their assistance with your ring preferences."

Though she'd been moved to delicate, quiet tears once or twice during this momentous evening, the notion that Draco consulted her bothersome friends on the engagement ring spurred her to noisy, gasping watery works. Draco sighed and gathered her against his chest and let her cry it out and barely cringed when she basically used one of his best shirts as a handkerchief.

When Hermione collected herself, she looked up at him through streaming eyes. "We're getting married," she suddenly breathed, as if the idea had only just occurred to her.

"Yes Granger, you did agree. That is, if you still want me?" he asked cheekily.

"Draco," she replied as she pushed him back down and moved over him, "I want you every day for the rest of my life."



Draco woke to the delightful sensation of Hermione's mouth against his neck and her hand wrapped around his rapidly hardening cock.

"Good morning to me," he chuckled sleepily.

"Mmm, and me," she murmured and guided one of his hands in between her thighs.

"Fuck," Draco groaned and turned on his side to kiss her deeply. "Gods you're already so wet."

He anchored his free hand in her sleep-tousled curls and pressed her bodily back down into the mattress, their hands moving to caress one another while hips ground together desperately.

"Of course I am," Hermione responded breathily. "I was over here thinking about how you looked when you proposed to me."

Heaved at her neck, then moved steadily down to her breasts, accepting one eagerly into his mouth when she arched her body up.

"Is that so?" He murmured against her nipple. "Perhaps I should ask you again, just to be sure it still has the same effect."

Draco worshipped her silently for a few minutes, his tongue and teeth savoring the taste of his fiancée.

His fiancée. Merlin.

"Marry me," he breathed along her bare chest.

he eased them up to sitting, chuckling when Hermione pouted. Merlin, if he hadn't already been sure of his choice in a spouse, the fact that she'd rather shag him than gawk over pricey jewelry sealed his fate.

He watched her cradle her left hand in her right and gaze fondly at the new addition to her finger. After a few moments, she looked up at him and beamed.

"Is it an heirloom? It's so beautiful, I love amethyst."

Draco brought her hand up and kissed her fingertips. "Not an heirloom. I had it designed specifically for you." He tapped the purple stone. "And it's not just amethyst."

Draco gently removed the ring from her finger. He held it up by the band in front of her eyes. "See the dual band? They separate..." He pried one gold band from the other and maneuvered it up and over to reveal a different gem altogether. "And flip."

He slipped it back onto her finger and Hermione stared in awe at the engagement ring that now displayed a sizeable emerald. The combination of the two different stones might perplex others, but Draco knew Hermione would grasp the significance.

"Purple and green," she whispered. "It's... magic, yes? You chose the two colors that represent magic in its most basic forms?"

Green, traditionally the color of much "Dark" magic, and purple, the color of royalty and nobility. Taken together, they suggested the duality of magic: the noble and the ignoble, the creative and the destructive.

"Yes," Draco murmured. "Magic in its purest form is neither light nor dark. What matters is the person wielding it. And you, Granger, are the most naturally magical person I have ever known."

Hermione stared again at her ring in reverence, a new appreciation in her eyes as well as a new set of tears she hastily wiped away. "Oh Draco... it's perfect, I love it," she whispered. "I love you."

Before he could continue his explanation of all the care he'd put into this small object, she'd thrown off her cloak and made quick work of his, lips melded to his once more.

"So many blasted buttons," she huffed, frantic in her need to rid Draco of the rest of his clothing and cursing all the ornate fastenings of his dress robes.

"Wait, Granger..." He finally succeeded in prying her off him again. He shrugged off his robes and grabbed his wand to flick open all buttons, leaving him in his shirt and trousers. Hermione hummed in approval against his mouth as he wished his wand again to allow her robes to fall in a heap to the floor. She scrambled to straddle him and Draco skimmed his hands along the ruby-red satin corset she'd been apparently hiding from him all evening.

But he had one more point to make about the ring. "Before I shag you through this shoddy mattress, can I tell you one more thing?"

Hermione made some sort of exasperated growl against the skin of his neck, but stopped running her tongue along his pulse point.

He should be made a damn prefect of Hufflepuff at this rate.

"The amethyst and the emerald... they're uh... damn, what did Weasley call them? Ethical?"

"When Granger sucked me off for the first time."

The angry shouts from Harry and Ron followed his sprinting form while their hexes bounced off his hasty Shield Charm, as he shot off across the dark grounds with Theo's peals of laughter sounding through the night air.



Saturday, August 7, 2010

Draco stood in front of the full-length mirror of his bedroom and gazed upon the reflection of a man in full wedding regalia. He inhaled and exhaled deeply, preparing himself for the monumental event about to take place out on the grounds. He'd be married to the love of his life in but a few hours.

A hand clapped his shoulder. "This is a happy day for our family."

Draco turned and met the approving face of his father.

"Here," Lucius handed Draco a glass of his preferred brandy. "Let us share a drink before the ceremony."

Draco grinned and accepted the glass. His father never let him partake in this drink with him, and it pleasantly surprised him, this sudden keenness to share. But as Draco tipped the brandy down his throat, he discovered it tasted rather bitter and that he didn't care for it much at all. Lucius offered him a cold smile, a strange gleam to his eyes.

"I am pleased in your choice of wife, Draco," said Lucius. "She will honor our family name and I hope we can expect an heir soon."

Suddenly, he stood next to Lucius under a lavishly decorated arch in the gardens of Malfoy Manor. Hundreds of jewelless bodies sat with their heads turned towards him, a sea of guests that stretched on and on in an endless stream. A flurry of strings sounded through the air, igniting Draco's excitement. His bride would appear soon. A jumpy twinge occurred in his stomach and his throat tightened, but Draco brushed it off. Probably just wedding jitters.

A woman in white wearing an opaque veil floated down the aisle towards him and then grabbed his hands forcefully.

"Your bride, Draco," said Lucius from just behind him. "The purest in the land."

Another uncomfortable swoop in his stomach and his throat burned again. He coughed to clear his throat but it only grew worse. Lucius lifted the veil to reveal Pansy Parkinson, who smiled widely. Draco looked to his father in confusion, then turned back to his bride only to see Daphne Greengrass in front of him. He blinked again and the bride became Astoria. Another shift in the facial features and the woman in front of him turned into an odd amalgam of all three women.

"Does the wife I've selected for you not please you, Draco?" hissed Lucius. Draco tried to back away from both his father and the chilling smile of the unfamiliar woman but found his feet would not move. The burning in his throat increased.

A movement just beyond his father and the gruesome, blurry-faced bride caught his attention. The figures of Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood resolute, glaring at Draco in cold disapproval and deep disgust.

"Hermione!" Draco choked out, desperate for her to understand. She was meant to be his bride. Why wouldn't she help him? He sank to his knees and massaged his pained throat.

"Do be serious, Draco," drawled Lucius. "The Muggleborn would never have you. And no son of mine would lower

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himself to such filth. Not when I've just handed him everything he ever wanted."

Draco coughed uncontrollably and looked into the malicious face of his father, as the horrible truth dawned on him of the freely given brandy.

"Poison...?" Draco gasped. "You—you p-poisoned—me-me?"

"Yes," Lucius sneered, his face inches from Draco's. "And wasn't it just too easy?"

Draco shot upright in bed with a gasp and clawed at his own throat. He threw his legs over the side of his bed and immediately went into deep breathing exercises.

He's dead he's dead he's dead you're fine you're fine you're alive Hermione's alive I am okay with this I am okay with this.

Deep breath. And another. And one more. *I am okay with this.*

He never did sleep well without Granger, but she'd insisted on spending the last few nights leading up to the wedding apart per tradition or some such nonsense. And wouldn't it just be Draco's luck to suffer a particularly stressful bad dream the morning of his Muggle wedding ceremony. The one he'd been flippanant about so his nerves about fucking it all up wouldn't swallow him whole.

And to dream of his father...

A silly nightmare easily dismissed, but Draco found his feet leading him to an ornate box that rested atop his mantel. With a whispered recitation of his family's misguiding motto and a press of his thumb against the polished silver, the clasp unlatched and he opened the hinges.

He plucked the signet ring from the box and held it up in front of his eyes. Draco hadn't worn it since the day he'd been asked to remove it along with any other personal effects as he was placed in a holding cell before his trial before the Wizengamot at the age of 18. When the session ended with his handed-down sentence of mandatory healing and a two-year travel ban, he'd found it waiting with the rest of his things along with an item he hadn't left there: his hawthorn wand, courtesy of Potter, he'd surmised.

While he greeted his wand with a welcome grip, he shoved the Malfoy family heirloom deep into his robe pockets then stowed it away in this little antique coffin of goblin-made silver, never to be worn again. His father had worn his signet ring every day of his life; Draco never saw the fourth finger of Lucius's right hand without the ring, like his father before him. Draco had been gifted his own personal signet the summer after his Fourth Year. He remembered his obnoxious youthful habit of twirling and twisting the jewelry around his finger, constantly drawing attention to the dark "M" that signified his exalted place in the wizarding world, heir to a noble and ancient house.

What would Lucius say to his son now? Disgusted that Draco would so coldly spurn his legacy? Puzzled by Draco's hesitance to proclaim his family name as one worthy of praise and admiration? Would his father ever have come to recognize that the Malfoy name had only ever been associated with the power behind the throne, synonymous with scheming and an obsession with purity?

Well perhaps after today, and most especially after next week, the Malfoy name could come to signify something else entirely.

Draco knew it was an exercise in futility to imagine his late father's reaction to the day's schedule

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eyes for him.

"If you'll have me, there is nothing I desire more in this world than to call you my wife. Hermione Granger, will you marry me?"

A few tears tracked down her pink cheeks, but her smile stretched wide with unrestrained joy. She swept her gaze over his face, focusing in on different features in turn, as if she wanted to memorize the whole of him; a thrilling and flattering manifestation of her overly studious nature as Hermione took mental notes and categorized Draco as something important, something to be remembered and reflected upon later. It was an intense scrutiny done in love, and though she had yet to answer his life-altering question, Draco felt no reason to fear a rejection. Finally, she exhaled shakily but replied firmly.

"Yes, Draco. Yes, I'll have you."

He yanked her towards him so quickly he almost toppled them both backwards onto the icy pavement. Hermione responded eagerly to his enthusiastic kiss and Draco's heart soared at the mind-boggling fact that he was kissing his fiancée. *His future wife.*

"I love you so much," she breathed against his lips and Draco finally gave up the fight with his composure. He rested his forehead against hers and drew in ragged breaths of the night air. Relief battled with elation and stole any response he might have made, and he succumbed to the weight of this perfect moment.

Hermione's trembling fingers tenderly swiped at his cheeks and when dry once more, she pressed her lips to both in turn. Draco made to tangle his hands in her hair to reclaim her mouth, but realized he still clutched the open ring box in his hand.

"Sorry, here." Draco plucked the ring from the case and tried to jam it onto her finger but Hermione laughed and pulled it away. "No, wrong hand, wrong hand!" she said and shoved her left hand towards him.

He nudged them both to standing and slid the ring onto the correct finger this time. Draco looked down at their joined hands and ran a thumb reverently along the shining stone that now signified Hermione's acceptance of him as her intended.

He met her gaze again to find her smiling mischievously and the next second she'd apparated them straight into her bedroom. Hermione knocked him flat onto the bed, both of them still in their slightly wet underwear and snow-covered shoes. The empty ring box fell from his hand onto the floor as Hermione took possession of his mouth and ran her hands wantonly through his hair.

Though Draco wanted nothing more than to relish in this fantastic reaction to their brand new engagement, he'd honestly expected a different sort of response from Hermione.

"But—don't you—want to—hear about—or even look at—your ring?" He mumbled in between kisses, Hermione unwilling to let their mouths remain apart for more than a breath or so at a time. She pulled away to answer him.

"Don't you want to see the needlessly complicated lingerie I've been wearing all night?"

Draco groaned because the answer to that glorious question is only ever "of course," but he spent a fair amount of time designing this blasted thing and he needed a proper fawning from her. Reluctantly

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"This meaningless Muggle café saved my life on more than one occasion." He stepped closer to the windows, fingers poised just an inch from the glass before falling back down to his side.

"When I needed a routine, a simple task to get me out of bed in the morning, I could come here. When I needed to just begin my day without the awful reminder of my horrible past written on the scowling faces of the public, I knew I could seek refuge here."

Draco swallowed and turned to face her instead of the reflection.

"And when I needed something good in my life, in you came to steal my favorite table and disrupt my carefully crafted control." His lips quirked briefly, "But I was so... numb. I thought that's all life could be, that numbness would keep me alive and that would be enough. And didn't you burst into my world to prove, and not for the last time, how very wrong I was."

He gave a low chuckle. "I really should have seen you coming, but Merlin, I don't even think Tre-lamey would have predicted you barreling your way into my life the way you did."

Draco took her hand. "Because I've always seen you, Granger. Even when I was young and stupid you drew my eye."

Hermione's blazing eyes held his and Draco could see she knew exactly where this disjointed monologue would go. Because of course she could, clever witch. This woman would always be several steps ahead of him and Draco didn't care so long as she allowed him to continue trailing after her.

Though Hermione had completely seen right through him, her natural intelligence was only out-slitted by her capacity for compassion. She'd let him say all the words he needed to say.

"Not only are you impossible to ignore, you are simply an impossible person," Draco stated quietly, unable to speak louder even as part of him wanted to shout for the entire street, the entire world, to hear.

"You love me. Do you know how ridiculous, how improbable that is? No, love—" he shook his head and gave her a wry smile when he saw her mouth open furiously, a defense of him and their relationship on the tip of her tongue. "I've accepted it as fact, but you'll have to indulge me when I say it's improbable."

Hermione squeezed his hand instead, a glossy sheen already forming over her eyes as he ploughed ahead. "You deserve more than I could ever give to you, but what little I do have to offer is yours and it is yours forever."

Steady on, now. Keep breathing.

Draco sunk down on one knee in the snow before her, not caring that his trousers will come away cold and soaked. He'd wait down here forever if she wanted.

Hermione only took in the sight for a brief moment before she swiftly lowered herself down onto the wet pavement too. The look in her eyes was clear as day: *we are equals in all things*. Though Draco would happily prostrate himself before her, she would not accept any sort of elevation of her at the expense of him.

Draco pulled the small jewelry box from his breast pocket and propped it open to reveal the ring inside, and though the creak of the hinges echoed loudly around the empty street, Hermione only had

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of events, but his mind buzzed with lingering questions, threads of hypothetical conversations, and dream-tap scenarios that ended in a multitude of outcomes ranging from the overly saccharine to the depressingly bleak.

With sleep no longer in the cards, he finally took Browning's advice and wrote a letter:

Father

I wish you were here on my wedding day. What the best of fate. Father was often forced throughout the entire process for the wedding ceremony would have been cancelled. I wish you were here on my wedding day. What the best of fate. Father was often forced throughout the entire process for the wedding ceremony would have been cancelled. I wish you were here on my wedding day. What the best of fate. Father was often forced throughout the entire process for the wedding ceremony would have been cancelled.

I think Professor misses you very much

I want to tell you about the woman I am going to marry. She's off to get an education, but she's beautiful, generous, to help her poor and poor mother, you would marvel all her wonderful traits in pairs of looking her blood and strength.

I live thenceforward deeper with every hour in my body and the unity of vibration I have for this night could only be qualified as sublimely pure. If no words you were able to know how greatly I mean that statement. Then again, I doubt if much of the well-known or perhaps my writing this to you with a guarantee of silence on your end is all for the first.

I never knew what you really got when you looked at me. Was I nothing more than an heir? At first I wanted to ignore the name I was in and get out of it. But I always wondered how I never asked. Perhaps I was too afraid to even answer. Or, at times, I myself.

I want to tell you about me. I don't know that you would recognize me now. I have become a loneliness and people could never realize it but I
 survived alone

survived

[illegible]

You would say, "I'm just but I did not do these things for pleasure. She merely showed me what I was capable of doing, all on my own. I am trying with you. I don't know if there will be a day in the future when I am not trying with you. When you struggle I can meet I paid the price for your struggles, again and again and maybe one day I could forgive that but I cannot and will not forgive you for abandoning Nathan. If the Lord loved you, if the Father love you and handed it up and you did nothing, then could you?"

*I'm just I am a man with an understanding of the concept of willingly trading my soul to another person. I want to know something will be well
 I've learned I've already done that and I refuse to do the same thing in the same way again*

You left your gun things up for now, and perhaps our damaged partners should come to that point, but you could have put a stop to our damage. If I'm proved to be nothing in my investigation, let's just let it come with the other side of all the blood and guts, because in time I'll know the face of a woman who goes and pretends to be her spouse. I'll not be a slave for death's again, and if I ever have a child with it, then, you can not afford that, will be given the me thing you never give me, a chance, it does in all things.

I miss you. I have so many regrets in this life. So very many. I find it might surprise you to know that one of those regrets is never telling you that I love you.

Dear Sir,

Brace

Remain Nameless

As he signed the letter, he hesitated for only a moment before dropping the signet ring into the envelope and sealing it. Draco looked up from his writing desk to see the rising sun pecking over the horizon. He summoned his journal and penned a brief message to appear in Hermione's companion journal: *I love you. Don't ever let me go another day without telling you. I love you.*

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Hermione rolled her eyes, but Draco could tell she was on the verge of breaking, so he laid it on even thicker.

"Think of it Granger, the snow's falling lightly on our hair, the streets are deserted, we're the only people out and about, the stars are twinkling above us as we ring in the new year with a brisk chill in our lungs, but kept warm by our affection for one another."

She finally broke and snorted. "Good lord, who are you and what have you done with the man who wouldn't even hang a stocking on the fireplace with me because it was, and I quote, '*not a proper place to stick old socks. I don't care how traditional this is for Christmas.*'"

He ignored her barb and terrible impersonation of his voice and grinned when she re-donned her cloak.

"Thank you for humoring me," Draco said once they'd made it down her from steps. It was indeed snowing and Hermione cast a Warning Charm over both of them. She looked up expectantly at him and Draco canted his head down the street.

"Let's head this way, give the café a night time visit."

Hermione tucked her arm through Draco's elbow. "If you're craving a scone, I hate to tell you this, but I'm fairly certain they're closed at the moment."

"I told you Granger, I just fancied a walk is all. Your acquiescence is appreciated. Your cheek, as usual, is not."

She chuckled and nudged him lightly. "Liar."

They walked in companionable silence until they reached the familiar destination of their weekday morning rendezvous. Draco brought them to a stop in front of the darkened windows, and his determined and solemn reflection stared back, even as his pulse quickened. Hermione unwound her arm from his and approached the windows to peer inside.

"Hmm, the bakery case looks empty. Guess you'll have to wait until tomorrow."

She turned toward him with a teasing smile, but Draco could only stare back at their reflections stoically, trapped both by her beauty and the fluttering anticipation of the impending act he'd rehearsed countless times inside his head. Part of him wanted to freeze the two of them here and now, encased in the simple comfort of her presence, forever watching her smile, a bright beacon against the dark backdrop of the night as the occasional sparkling snowflake dusted her hair and cheeks.

The soft, swirling snow tickled down around them in that singular way winter snow tended to deaden all earthly sounds in a thick blanket of silence. The natural stillness of a dark January night surrounded them in the sort of hush quietude that could convince you that nothing else existed but for that which lay in the immediate vicinity. The reflected couple cut a fine picture of magic, draped in full robes and cloaks they appeared ethereal, belonging to another world entirely, but always belonging together.

But moving past this moment was a necessity, even as the trepidation of his mind warred with the certainty of his heart. Just as Hermione's brow furrowed in concern at his solemnity, Draco finally found his voice.

bed here, alone.

If hadn't stopped Draco from sending dozens of messages through their two-way journals. She knew he was trying so hard to respect her space and had yet to beg she come sleep with him at least. Part of her liked once again having that anticipation build by being apart a few days before their soul-bonding ceremony, but a larger part of her argued she needlessly deprived herself for a silly tradition. They were already married anyway for Merlin's sake.

As if he'd heard her thoughts all the way from Berkshire, the fireplace lit up green and Draco stalked out.

"Damn it all Granger, you are my wife and this is bloody ridiculous!"

Before she could so much as open her mouth, he commanded it with his own. Pushed up against an empty stretch of wall, she only came to her senses once he'd moved his lips down to her neck.

"Draco, Ginny's here!"

In her periphery, she caught a flash of red hair and heard a snort of laughter. Draco did not seem to care about another presence in the room, only pausing his attentions to her skin to toss a cursory greeting over his shoulder.

"Evening Ginerva, best be on your way unless you want a show."

"As much as I would enjoy that, I don't think Hermione is an exhibitionist. Enjoy your evening with Mrs. Malfoy."

"It's Granger-Malfoy," Draco corrected, and Hermione couldn't remove his outerwear fast enough as Ginny's parting gruffaws rang in her ear.



Wednesday, August 11, 2010

Draco found Narcissa in one of the smaller dining rooms of the Lestranger Estate. He'd taken the last few days to focus on quidditch match updates and player statistics at the office, but he'd mostly spent his time dreaming up ways to seduce his wife. Which meant today's arduous task occurred later than he'd liked, but Draco could put it off no longer. He'd not go into his soul-bonding ceremony with this hanging over his head.

Narcissa circled the large, handsome table, occasionally leaning forward to pluck up a place card and swap it for another. A few days before the magical wedding and apparently the seating chart for the reception still required some tinkering.

"We missed you at our wedding this past Saturday," Draco announced in lieu of a greeting.

Her shoulders stiffened, technically an emotional reaction.

"I hardly doubt my presence was missed at your... other affair."

"Aunt Andromeda attended. She seemed to think, as I did, that you'd attend as well."

"Yes well, my sister has always been the unorthodox sort."

"Why didn't you come?" If she'd meant to distract him it wouldn't work. Not for this, he wouldn't allow a dodge or a deflection.

"Did you really want me to attend? I was under the impression it was meant to be a rather quiet celebration, and I sought to avoid any contentious confrontations what with all the Weasleys in attendance. I didn't think you or Hermione would appreciate any uncomfortable public displays."

"Uncomfortable? For whom Mother? For you? Would it have been any more or less uncomfortable than receiving sympathy from strangers who naturally assumed I was an orphan?"

Her head jerked up at this and she looked stricken. An angle she hadn't considered. Draco didn't luxuriate in this sad triumph nor did he let his gaze waver, silently pleading with her.

"I am sorry. For what it's worth."

The contrition, while welcome, did not do much to soothe his disappointment.

"No," Draco shook his head. "No, that's not good enough."

She set her mouth in a tight line at her apology not having immediately wiped the offense away.

"Draco, I have accepted your choice of wife, I have eagerly assisted in planning your soul-bonding with her, what more would you ask of me?"

"That you show a willingness to change! We weren't asking you to snap your wand in half and denounce all magic, we were asking that you exist amicably in the company of my wife's family for a mere few hours!"

He sighed and took a deep breath and then continued calmly. "That ceremony... it was important to Hermione. It was important to me. Damn it all Mother, do I really need to spell out for you that I wanted you to show up on the happiest day of my life?"

Narcissa sniffed and lifted her chin, and Draco recognized the defense mechanism she sought to employ even before she opened her mouth to throw out self-deprecation disguised by haughtiness. A tactic he knew well that he'd almost entirely shed from his own arsenal.

"I'm sure it was a very happy occasion despite my absence, surrounded as you were by your new family and friends."

Draco nodded in concession but didn't rise to the bait. "It was very happy. I can admit perhaps some of the fault lies with me for downplaying the significance while we were planning, but I didn't think I'd need to beg you to attend. I suppose I just assumed..."

He trailed off and took a fortifying inhale. "While yes, it was a very happy occasion because I had an aunt and new in-laws and irritating friends look at me with pride in their eyes for once... I didn't have my mother."

She finally relinquished her hold on the place card, setting it down on the table. Her hands unnecessarily smoothed down her pristine robes. One of the few nervous tells she possessed.

"Your aunt stopped by my home after the ceremony. Merlin," Narcissa chuckled softly. "I'd forgotten how she sounded when she'd become worked up. So do not worry, darling," her mouth set in a bittersweet smile, "I received the proper scolding for my transgression."

While grateful to his aunt for her intervention on his behalf, it pained Draco to have been the cause

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of even more strife between his mother and her sister, especially with their relationship only recently repaired.

Perhaps Draco could prove that he truly did want to share all the aspects of his new life with her. It had taken him far too long to realize what his mother feared. Change did not mean leaving her behind.

"I want to show you something," Draco murmured. He rolled up his left sleeve and held his arm tentatively in Narcissa's direction for her inspection.

Her eyes widened at the sight before her. With rapid steps, she closed the distance between them and took his arm in her hands to peer at the now unmarked, if a bit blemished and discolored, skin.

"But how?" she breathed. "I thought no glammers would hold."

"It's not a glamour."

"Then—?"

"Hermione," Draco said, voice tight. "She's really rather brilliant, you know. She caught on to a theory, saw it through to the logical, researched conclusion, and the end result is that thanks to Muggle methods, I am now free of that madman's mark. I'm clean again. Whole."

He stepped away from her trembling fingers ghosting their touch along his arm to pull his sleeve back down.

"That's how Hermione makes me feel, Mother. All the time."

Her turn to surprise him. She took his face in her hands.

"Draco, I am proud of you. I have always been proud of you."

Her blue eyes swept over his face. "I only ever wanted good things for you."

She dropped her hands. "I hope you can forgive me if I've not... exhibited that more fully."

His family wasted so many years, so much time, wrapped up in locking away all sentiment, and it had come close to irreparably tearing them apart. So Draco didn't waste another moment in pulling his mother into a hug and saying exactly how he felt.

"I love you."

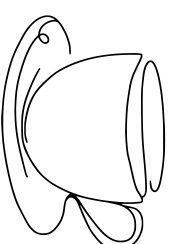


Saturday, August 14, 2010

Another wait at the end of an aisle for Hermione to join him.

This time he hadn't needed a meltdown in Theo's presence to get his arse to stand in front of a crowd in anticipation of his bride. The guests today, almost entirely magical, absolutely dwarfed the amount from last week, but such were the inclinations of the mother of the groom.

No just a Malfoy wedding, but a Malfoy *son-in-law* wedding. An ancient and revered ceremony for an ancient and revered bloodline. A far more palatable way for Narcissa to show her pride in their heritage. She'd delighted in inviting almost 400 people to celebrate her only son and his "tightly accomplished



Chapter Fifty One

Tuesday, August 10, 2010

Hermione looked around her crowded living room. Boxes, bins, and suitcases holding all of her possessions and recollections of her time in the townhome took up almost the entire space, save for her sofa. Her friends had come through in stages throughout the last two evenings to help her pack it all up. She'd officially have everything moved to Franklin House in two days' time.

"You'll miss it, won't you?" asked Ginny softly.

Hermione nodded and turned on the spot, taking in her bare walls, empty mantel, lonely shelves devoid of objects or decorations, a home stripped of all evidence she'd once resided here.

"Let me put on a kettle before I go," Ginny said with a comforting squeeze to her shoulder.

Alone with her memories, she indulged in a wistful smile at the thought of this stage of her life coming to a close. She saw the hallway where she'd shared her first kiss with Draco. The burn mark on the hardwood from when Harry sent off startled sparks from his wand in a panic with a younger Teddy, terrified of babysitting alone and mortified when the child threw a tantrum because Harry wouldn't let him fly. The scratches on the corner of the wall from when Crookshanks felt particularly sassy. The dent in the ceiling from when Ron decided it would be brilliant to experiment with miniature trick Bludgers indoors.

Remnants of a previous life. Despite the sometimes lonely nights, she'd never regret this stage of independent living in a home she'd bought for herself, with her own savings, with her own preferences and no one else's in mind.

She wondered how Draco fared at the office the last two days and then at their home without her. Hermione still met him at the café both today and yesterday morning, but returned to the townhome at night to pack away the remainder of her belongings and shore up plenty of work before they'd depart on their honeymoon. But her husband of all of a few days had a certain way actually make that several ways, of convincing her that work could wait in the mornings, so she'd opted to retire to her

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“Better?”

She hummed in approval. She felt a large hand on her back ease her forward a bit and then sweep her hair over one shoulder. Draco untied the clasp of her grandmother’s pearls and out of the corner of her eye, she saw the necklace float over to the wardrobe. Her mother’s diamond earrings received the same treatment.

The only thing left to be removed was her dress.

Draco began with the buttons up the back of her bodice. Though with each deft flick of his fingers the garment loosened around her chest and ribs, Hermione found she could only take shallow breaths with each undone button.

His knuckles skated in light patterns along her skin as he let the top half fall away from covering her. The cool metal of his wedding ring surprised her, a sensation she’d not felt from him ever before. The realization of the significance of said ring called forth intertwining emotions of desire and fondness for the man she’d agreed to share her life with today.

“Will you stand up for me so I may take off your dress?”

Hermione nodded, allowing him to return to his original script of savoring her. With her arms free from the short sleeved, wide-necked top, Draco already had a preview of the sheer white corset beneath.

He stood behind her and tugged the zip of her skirt down, and with a light shimmy of her hips, the wedding dress worn by her mother, and now by her, pooled around her feet. Draco came around her front and offered his hand so she could step out of the pile of fabrics. Another wave of his hand sent the dress floating to hang over the back of an armchair.

Hermione remained completely still as Draco circled her in careful, measured steps. He dragged a hand along the curve of her backside, up and around to her midsection, his palm coming to a rest on her hip when he reached her front again. Gray eyes swept up her frame, cataloging her every feature, inspecting the lace detailing of her bridal lingerie, and finally staring her fill in the face. With purpose, as she’d written and said to him.

His eyes and hands had already spoken for him, but Hermione appreciated it all the more when he verbalized his assessment of her.

“You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

Draco made her fall in love more than once over the course of the night.

She fell when he kissed every inch of her, when he murmured he loved her, when he made her come sobbing his name, when he finished inside her gasping hers, when he thanked her for marrying him, when he made her squeal with laughter by tickling her ribs because he said he missed the sound, when he promised to wake her in an hour or so for another go, when he succumbed to slumber with but a few flutters of his pale eyelashes, when he shifted in his sleep to tighten his hold on her.

The experience of falling never stopped and she knew it never would.

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wife.” Draco bit back a smug grin as he overheard his mother chattering away to more than one guest on the subject of the bride.

“Did you know Hermione’s parents are specialized Healers? Yes, they’re quite prominent in their field.”

Professor Flitwick bounced on his heels just behind him, humming to himself. A pleasant breeze swept around the grounds of his estate, of the home he now shared with Hermione. Today, the site of a soul-bonding ceremony, tomorrow the place where he’d convince his wife to make love beneath one of the willow trees, or perhaps she’d read with her head in his lap, or maybe they’d stroll the grounds and inspect Watson’s garden, or she’d work on new legislation while he flew above, or any other millions of tomorrows they’d spend here together.

Visions and versions of the future time together blurred in front of Draco’s eyes, all with Hermione. The strings started up, some traditional orchestral piece favored by his mother. He’d been ambivalent on this song before, but now it would take on a whole new meaning should he ever hear it again.

The flaps of the bridal tent near the edge of the garden rustled, and Ginny stepped through followed closely by Theo. Fulfilling their duty as the chosen magical witnesses to the bonding, the pair took the measured walk down the aisle of rose petals beneath their feet. Per tradition, their robes represented their familial lines and embroidered with their crests; Theo’s an emerald green and Ginny’s a scarlet red.

They each carried a wand in hand, though not their own. When they reached Draco and Flitwick beneath the ceremony arch, Ginny placed Hermione’s vinewood wand on a velvet pillow atop the altar in front of their bonder, and Theo followed suit with Draco’s hawthorn wand. The two wands joined the other objects necessary for today’s ritual: a silver knife and a strip of cloth.

All Draco needed now was his partner.

Draco’s pulse quickened when he noticed both her parents seated in the front row. Shouldn’t they be back in the bridal tent preparing to escort their daughter? Archaic though it may seem, an important part of the bonding ceremony involved one party being escorted to or with the other. Not in the vein of giving away a person as a possession or property, but rather a symbolic shepherding of a loved one into this next phase of their life journey.

Hermione had an independent streak a mile wide, but surely if she’d meant to walk this metaphorical path alone she would have said something? They could have just walked together if that were the case.

The flaps moved and Potter appeared, holding one side open. Weasley appeared next and held the other side. What the fuck were those two morons up to? Oh gods, were they about to charge up here and smugly inform Draco in front of all these people that Hermione had changed her mind?

He quelled that insane thought, confident she wouldn’t ever perform such cruelty. He trusted her with anything. With everything.

A blink of his eyes later and Hermione emerged from the mouth of the tent, linking one arm with Potter and then one arm with Weasley.

Oh.

Those absolute twats.

Leave it to these three to make a profound statement in a silent yet screaming fashion. A calculated, opportunistic move he hadn't thought her two friends capable of coming up with let alone agreeing to perform in public.

Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley escorting Hermione Granger to be soul-bonded to Draco Malfoy? Those idiots had to know how this gesture would be reported, dissected, and analyzed from every possible angle and probably combust the quills of more than one member of the press.

But to Hermione, he suspected, this meant so much more than a visual stunt. Though she'd enter a magical bond today with him, Draco could concede that the two wizards flanking her also occupied a significant portion of her heart and soul.

It was only right now that he spent more than an instant considering it, that the two boys who'd saved her from a mountain troll, who she'd in turn save countless more times, her first friends in the magical world, would obviously be the ones to accompany her in this choice to experience a type of magic most never even witnessed let alone participated in during the course of life.

She'd left her curls free and loose today, his favorite version of her wild hair. Had he ever told her that? He should tell her. Today. Every day.

Her long, fitted white gown trailed behind her into a lengthy train of light, rippling material, a sheen to it not unlike Potter's Invisibility Cloak. It fastened about her shoulders like a cape, studded with shining stones he could clock from his spot at the altar.

He couldn't quite make out her expression from this distance, but the assembled friends and family all seemed to sputter out a collective gasp of awe at her beauty.

On the arms of her best friends, Hermione glided towards him.

She glided past Hagrid in the back row, a man Draco personally tormented for most of his childhood who now would grudgingly shake his hand and had recently stopped making jokes about insulting hippogriffs.

She glided past Wesley and Lara Macnair, seated next to Maureen Tyler and her father. Mr. Tyler had persuaded Draco to come observe one of his training practices in the near future, or participate if he liked. Maureen said Draco wouldn't last five minutes into the workout.

She glided past a whole swathe of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw alumni, a group that now held a few people Draco was forced to label as "friends." It didn't rankle him like it should. Luna and Rolf sat with this group, Luna's stomach rounded with her impending twins. They'd invited Draco and Hermione to the birth blessing ceremony, to take place the next full moon of course, and all guests would need to arrive barefoot.

She glided past Crick and Watson. Their book on elf sign communication was currently in a bit-dingy war with three different publishing houses. Draco now knew enough signs to trade a few polite phrases with Watson, but Hermione could already conduct full blown conversations with him.

She glided past the cadre of Hogwarts professors. Draco wondered if this moment was truly sur-

"Say that again."

"Say what again?"

"Fuck."

Hermione pursed her lips, an admonishment on the tip of her tongue when she registered the sincerity in his eyes. Not mockery. Not amusement at his proper little swot saying a lewd word. Not ill-natured teasing at her discomfort.

Lust.

She indulged his request.

"Fuck."

He pounced.

Flat on her back with the familiar hard lines of his body atop hers, Hermione helped him shed his tie and suit jacket, eager to finally experience all of her spouse after ogling him in his black wedding suit all afternoon and evening.

Feeling bold now that she'd blown apart his plan to take her slowly, she yanked his ear to her lips. "I want you to fuck me."

The noise he made, a sputtered desperate groan of both disbelief and arousal, sent a thrill through her veins, a thrill only encouraged by the hands touching her in ways that signified he would absolutely make good on her sultry request.

Draco vanished his own shirt then resumed feasting on the skin above her breasts with sloppy, greedy kisses sure to leave welts and marks of possession. *Good.*

"Do you know what it's like to hear those filthy words come out of your pretty mouth?"

But as he pressed her further into the mattress she winced with a hiss and clutched the back of her head.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just my hair. I swear there's about a hundred blasted pins keeping it in and stabbing me."

Her mum and Ginny had been a bit overzealous with sticking bits of metal in her hair in an effort to keep her curls contained for hours on end.

He frowned then heaved himself off her. Draco sat up against the headboard and patted his lap.

"Come here love."

Hermione crawled toward him, intending to straddle him when he shook his head.

"No, other way, turn around."

He parted his long legs so she could scoot back in between, back resting against his bare chest. Draco trailed his fingers up her arms, to the sides of her neck, and then she felt them digging through her styled hair. Some of the tension that often accompanied a tighter chignon lessened and she realized Draco had removed a pin. His delicate touch reached into her curls over and over, and with each pin removed, he dropped a soft kiss to either her neck or shoulder.

When her tresses were free once more, tumbling down her back in waves, Draco combed his fingertips through from scalp to ends, banishing the lingering ache around her temple.

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"I remember," he cut in and her head snapped up. He looked like every word out of her mouth would heal him, would satiate a desire for hearing confirmation of affection he'd long been denied and long craved. She would never deny him that again.

"I once told you that I thought you had a lot to offer someone as a partner. I was wrong. I was so wrong. Draco, what you have to offer is boundless. To overcome what you have, and to still carry such passion and love in your heart... love that you hid away for far too long. You should never have felt the need to, so please, do not ever, not for one single second, hide away that love again."

Her throat felt tight, but she ploughed on.

"Before you ever told me you loved me, I already knew. Because you'd shown me in hundreds of ways. You continue to show me in countless ways. You love me every time you support my ambitions... every time you disagree with me and force me to think about my opinions."

She heard a low chuckle.

"You love me every time you let me comfort you and every time you choose to confide in me. You love me every time you look at me."

She met his gaze then, and Hermione finally lost the battle with her tears, but the surrender felt right, felt natural.

Draco's thumbs wiped them away in an instant and Hermione no longer needed to read her next lines from the notebook. She had the rest memorized.

"You look at me with purpose," she whispered and his hands fell away from her face.

"There are more dimensions to you than you know. Dimensions and layers that you have trusted me to accept and protect. I promise to guard what you've given to me with the utmost care, because... because it is the most precious thing in my possession. It is my absolute privilege to discover each and every side to you, Draco. I love you."

He released a stuttering breath. "I love you."

Hermione closed the book and Draco tugged it from her hands.

Draco slid off the bed and knelt before her. He undid the straps of each of her shoes and freed her aching feet from their fashionable prison.

Sitting back on his heels, he took one foot in her hand and kneaded her sore arch, forcing a contented sigh out of her mouth. He bent his head and kissed her ankle, his fingers skated up to her calf as his lips soon followed. Tasting and touching her, inch by sinful inch, until she could no longer see the man laying waste to her sanity as he disappeared beneath her dress. When he reached her inner thigh, so very close to where she needed him most, he withdrew completely.

He started the process all over again with her other foot. As he repeated the trail from ankle to calf to knee to thigh once more, Hermione wanted to combust with need.

"Not that I'm complaining, but what happened to the man who said, 'I'm rather impatient to fuck my wife?'"

Draco's ministrations against her skin ground to a halt. He pulled out from beneath her skirts with a blazing stare.

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real for this group of adults that remembered their contentious childhood relationship. He wondered what Snape's portrait had to say about all this.

She glided past Healer Browning and his wife. Perhaps today, after a drink or two, Draco would discover what it looked like when the healer smiled.

She glided past Astoria, Dennis, and Sasha. Draco briefly cast his gaze towards Theo, stood to his left, as he recalled their pre-ceremony conversation. *"It's early days, obviously, and Sasha has brothers but I... well we talked it over and she agreed. That you'd be godfather. When the baby's here, I mean, that's usually how this goes, you wait for the baby and then ask the godparents but I—"* Draco hadn't let Theo finish the question and instead pulled his friend towards him and into a tight embrace.

She glided past Aunt Andromeda and Teddy. Draco predicted the Christmas season might look a bit different this year, should his mother prove good on her word to put an effort in with their only remaining immediate blood relatives.

She glided past the innumerable Weasleys. A family that had every right to shun him, yet after a healthy and not unwarranted period of suspicion, had folded him into their circle of chaotic affection. Truly, they'd embraced "let bygones be bygones" almost to an extreme and not once made Draco feel as if he were anything less than welcome in their lives.

Each and every family member related to him in their own unique way. Molly strong-armed him into extra helpings at every meal she cooked for him.

For Arthur, Draco planned to buy an obscenely large television set for his shed of Muggle oddities. Bill volunteered to imbue their wedding rings with protective enchantments.

Charlie quietly thanked Draco for recommending his jeweler for engagement rings and delighted over their shared dragon Patronuses (Charlie's was a Hebridean Black).

Perry offered Draco Ministry positions he had no intention of applying for on several occasions.

George gleefully informed him he'd added a range of realistic ferret masks to the shop to join their growing collection of muskeld themed merchandise.

Ron, who Draco considered addressing by his given name on occasion, especially if they were in the throes of quidditch chats, could be... tolerable. It felt less like a purposeful irritation when he referred to him as "mate" these days. Padma's amiable demeanor also generally served to make the Weasel's presence more palatable.

And finally, Ginevra.

As an only child, Draco did not know how it felt to have a sibling. Perhaps Ginny could tell him if she recognized that type of bond between them? Now was not the time to ask the woman serving as one of their magical witnesses if she felt the same. Maybe in a decade or so, he'd toss it out and catch her emotionally off guard. Knowing her though, she'd probably beat him to it.

Hermione had almost reached him.

She glided past her parents. His Muggle in-laws. Draco would attend his first ever live football match with David in the upcoming month. Jean had given him his first denial cleaning before the other wedding, mildly annoyed at his perfect teeth. Draco now knew where Hermione learned that

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frustrated huff at being unable to find anything wrong with his physical appearance. Like mother like daughter.

She glided past his mother. A peculiar-colored stone caught the sunlight and Draco bit back a laugh at the sight of his mother's ears adorned with enormous, glinting red rubies. Her unspoken and subtle acceptance of her new daughter-in-law, while extravagant (Merlin, who makes a point via jewelry besides a Black sister?) warmed Draco's heart.

Narcissa certainly had more work to do to earn Draco's full trust, to say nothing of how Hermione still felt. It might well take years, but Draco already knew that both women were at least open to working towards a relationship with one another, provided his mother refrained from foisting any more outdated etiquette books on Hermione.

She'd not had the opportunity to glide past a few people.

Pansy and her husband had sent their formal regrets in response to their invitation. That he'd received a reply at all, and a cordial one at that, gave Draco the tiniest wisp of hope.

Lucius was obviously also not in attendance. Before Draco had taken his place at the end of the aisle, his mother approached to unnecessarily fuss over his robes. She then presented him with a pair of cufflinks, silver with a black "M" engraved. "Your father's," she explained quietly. "He would have wanted you to wear these on your wedding day." She'd taken a brisk inhale as she placed them in his hand. "While this gift is a week late, perhaps you could wear them today?"

Draco suppressed the urge to fiddle with the cufflinks at his wrist as the united front stood before him with three sets of suspiciously glassy eyes.

A trio of people he'd once mocked, scorned, and envied. Sometimes all at once. Each of Hermione's friends left her with a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Potter moved first. He gave Draco a firm handshake and a muttered, "Congratulations, mate."

Weasley followed with a simple yet disarming offering. "Take good care of each other, yeah?"

Only Hermione remained.

Once more she mouthed "Hello," upon reaching him and once more Draco could not summon the reaction to return the silent greeting. Draco took the hands of his witch and led her up the short steps to stand before Flitwick.

Standing upon an elevated podium behind the altar so their audience could see the tiny wizard, Flitwick launched into the prepared remarks regarding the solemnity and sacred nature of the ceremony about to be performed by himself and witnessed by this fortunate group of people.

Draco, again, did not hear a word.

His soul rattled the cage bars of his corporeal form, screaming for release, let it fly to her, let it join with its true home, it had no use for patience and could not understand the need to wait any longer.

Draco raked his eyes over Hermione's face, hungry to commit these moments to memory, desperate to tell her without spraking that he wanted this, wanted her, for every moment in every lifetime in every timeline.

He wanted every smile from her, but most especially this one. She could not stop smiling. Her face

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four-poster bed. Hermione blinked and looked around the surprisingly fragrant bedroom, unsure of what to make of the petals scattered everywhere.

"Draco did you...?"

Draco ran a hand down his face as he surveyed the vast amount of purple and white hyacinth plants and petals covering almost every available surface.

"No, of course not. Crick, however, is more than aware of my ah, affinity for the blasted flower and correctly deduced that I associate it with you and... well apparently the old thing is a romantic at heart..." He trailed off and started banishing them in doves while Hermione sank against the mattress in mirth.

He joined her once the room no longer reeked from the overabundance of sickly sweetness and the air a tad easier to breathe. Finally alone with each other after their long and exciting day, Hermione tugged him towards her by his tie. True to his promise from their bathroom romp earlier, Draco's lips slid against hers in an unhurried manner.

She could lose herself in him, a pleasant relinquishing she didn't care to fight. But she had one last task to complete before she could succumb to his taste and touch.

Hermione pressed a hand to his chest and eased him back. "Before you make me rather incoherent, may I give you your wedding present?"

"I have a feeling what you've got on under this dress is gift enough, love."

She laughed and pecked his lips. "Consider my expensive lingerie a bonus then."

When her laughter died away, she met his patient stare and steeled her nerves. "I wanted to do something just for you, just for us. I was so proud standing up in front of my family and friends today and pledging myself to you. But everything I really wanted to say could never be contained in standard marriage vows."

Hermione reached over to the nightstand for her beaded bag and fished out her journal. "Instead,

I wrote something in permanent ink in here. It'll have appeared in your journal by now. They're not exactly vows, per se, more... thoughts on... why I love you. You can... you can read privately if you want to later or—"

"Read them to me."

She glanced over at the man sitting flush to her body on their now shared bed.

"You want me to read this to you? Now?"

"Yes."

Her gaze roamed over his tense form; Draco's hands clenched on his thighs, his tightened jaw and rigid posture. His gray eyes burned with unabashed longing for the verbal affirmation she held in her hands.

She lowered her eyes to the words she'd agonized over, not quite prepared to have to say them aloud.

"Draco. You probably don't remember, but I once told you that I thought you had a lot to offer someone as a partner—"

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Hermione huffed and crossed her arms. “I know it sounds rather silly, but is it possible to apparate us to the front steps of the house?”

“It’s possible to apparate us straight into bed, so yes.”

She gripped his arm and gave him an expectant look, and a moment later they reappeared on the front steps of Franklin House. Hermione looked everywhere but at Draco, her hands alternately scrunching and then smoothing the skirt of her dress. Draco waited her out, knowing by now that she only needed to find the right words to convey a self-conscious thought. She preemptively waved her wand at the doors to open them.

“Will you carry me over the threshold?”

“Sorry?”

“Please don’t laugh.”

“Again, not a promise I can make.”

She inhaled a breath of the beautiful, clear country air that surrounded her new home.

“But it’s just a Muggle wedding night tradition and I know, *I know*, how odd it sounds, but I always pictured my husband picking me up and carrying me over the threshold of our home on my wedding night.”

Hermione finally looked up at her endearingly confused husband as he rubbed the back of his neck, no doubt questioning her sanity.

“Er... okay?”

She braced herself for him to scoop her behind her back and knees, but before she could properly explain, Draco moved forward, hoisted her from her midsection, and slung her over his shoulder, and she found herself facing his lower back with her bum in the air.

“No! Not like some sort of caveman! Draco put me down!”

As he deposited her back on the ground, she gave him a more thorough instruction of how he should bend to pick her up from beneath her knees and arms and she could hold him around the neck. He complied with her odd demand.

“Didn’t you ever wonder why this type of carrying a person is called ‘bridal style’?”

“That question has literally never entered my brain.”

To his credit, Draco did not snirk at her as she tightened her hold around him and he carried her through the doors of the manor house. She rewarded his restraint with a soft kiss to the side of his neck.

“Now what?”

“To bed please.”

“All the way up the stairs?”

“Are you saying I’m too heavy?”

“No you tiny daff thing, I’m just rather impatient to fuck my wife.”

Hermione giggled and nuzzled the side of his face. “Oh go on then.”

A turn and a pop and the next second she found herself gently deposited on the edge of the

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would not allow for it. It shook the corners of her mouth, trembled at her lips, displayed her teeth. A spasm of facial muscles attempted to prevent tears from leaking. It failed.

A snirk curled the edges of his mouth and he pinched the skin of her hand.

Caught you, Granger

She blew out a frustrated laugh that only Draco heard beneath Flitwick’s projected voice.

Flitwick unfurled their official bonding parchment and called forth Ginny and Theo to perform their duties as witnesses.

“Who stands for this witch?”

“I, Ginevra Molly Potter, do bear witness today for Hermione Jean Granger-Malfoy.”

Ginny directed her wand at the document, her name flashing in gold along the bottom.

“Who stands for this wizard?”

“I, Theodore Aloysius Nott, do bear witness today for Draco Lucius Malfoy.”

Theo mimicked the act and Flitwick signed his own name before rolling up and sealing the scroll. He turned to Draco and Hermione to remind them of the vows they would now recite, though Draco required no prompting.

“I, Draco, pledge you, Hermione, my love, fidelity, and all my worldly goods.

I vow to honor our union in both word and deed.

As my magic calls to yours, so shall my heart, so shall my soul.

I stand before you as your equal and ask that you accept my magic as a sign of my devotion to you and my faith in you.

I humbly recognize the balance that must exist in the universe.

For there is no light without darkness, no healing without pain, no joy without grief.

It is my solemn vow that I will bear all of this with you, and should you ever need, I will bear it for you.

I bind my soul to yours, this promise given freely, for this life and all the lives to come.”

Hermione repeated her vows, voice clear and strong with just a touch of her competitive nature lurking at the edges of each statement. *Malfoy’s not the only one who memorized the entire passage.*

Flitwick presented the silver knife to Draco first. His parents had used the same knife for their bonding, though their engraved runes had been scrubbed for him and Hermione to choose their own. They’d gone with four symbols: love, protection, faith, and strength.

Draco cut a neat line down the center of his palm, then gripped his Hawthorn wand in hand. Hermione without even a wince, sliced hers as well, then grasped her vinewood wand.

They joined the wands at the tip, Draco surprised in the steadiness of both their hands. Flitwick, with a flourish of his wand, sent the binding cloth to wind around their hands. It snaked from Draco’s wrist, around his gripped wand, then around Hermione’s to tie firmly at her wrist. Draco could feel the smooth wood dig into the thin gash in his hand, his blood dripping onto the cloth.

A low hum of an incantation issued from their former professor’s mouth. Repetitive, droning Latin mixed with variations of the language found within most spellwork, the words accompanied by short,

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blunt movements of Flitwick's wand. The older wizard's eyes closed, beads of perspiration gathered on his balding head, as he concentrated on the precise ancient phrases to initiate and seal the bond.

Beams of every color spilled forth and the strangest sensations coursed through every part of Draco as they swirled around them. He hadn't known what to expect from the actual bonding step, and through the haze of whirling brilliant colors, he focused his gaze on a wide-eyed Hermione.

During several instances in his life, Draco had been acutely aware of the magic in his veins. When he'd been a young child and experienced bursts of accidental magic, he remembered feeling both scared and proud that this natural power ran through his being.

At age 11 when Olivander handed him a wand made of hawthorn with a core of unicorn hair, he remembered the jolt of his magic sparking to life, finally at one with an instrument with which it could channel his energy.

Now, another stark awareness of his abilities sprang to life and crawled up his spine, imparting a simultaneous sensation of both comforting warmth and cooling chill. His wand turned hot in his grip, but he knew it would not burn him.

The cognizance of his own powers never felt sharper, more familiar, but suddenly another power pulsed within to join with his. The feeling was akin to an intrusion at first, abrasive and knocking against his own will, almost combative.

But the magic whispered to him, told him to open himself, to allow more into his life force, to give of himself in return. Acceptance as he released. The magic would find the balance for them.

Little by little, the foreign sensation felt less like an invasion. The strands of this new feeling receded and instead of letting it go, Draco grabbed tighter. A chase ensued between his magical core and this new entity, as they alternated between the advance and the retreat. Finally, a mutual melding occurred, a harmonious comingling that settled along every nerve of his body.

When Draco took his next inhale and exhale of breath, a soothing calm overtook the atmosphere within and around him. In front of him, connected with him, Hermione exuded serene contentment, and the look that passed between them in an endless loop read as completeness.

Finally whole, finally home.

Flitwick, panting for breath, issued his final ceremony edict to the newly bonded couple.

"Magic to bind and now magic to heal."

He removed the cloth from around their hands and wands and Draco lifted Hermione's hand in front of his eyes.

Draco cast his first spell with rejuvenated abilities to knit Hermione's skin back together and clean off any evidence of a wound. He pressed a kiss to the center of her mended palm. She did the same for him in return.

"I now declare you bonded for this life and all the lives to come."

Along with the new sensation of fresh magic within him, he felt something flowing down his face. Tears.

He wanted this smile of hers too. A smirk curled the edges of her mouth and she pinched the skin

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"Come along, you can have a proper meltdown about that epiphany later. I've got 10 Gallions invested in you dipping Hermione during your first dance."

Those absolute heathens.

I am okay with this



Hermione generally wanted to gag when couples referred to one another by their marital status instead of their actual names, but if Draco whispered, "I love you, wife," one more time in her ear she'd tear off his wedding clothes in full view of everyone.

Of course if she did that, she might only be rewarding some of the more forward behavior of a few elderly aunts. As the reception wore on and Hermione experienced smile fatigue and rampant soreness in her feet as her Cushioning Charm diminished in efficacy, she thought longingly of absconding with her new husband away from curious eyes, invasive questions, and one too many prying glances at Draco.

Hermione kept her opinions on Narcissa's absence to herself, and Draco stoically bore all the well-meaning condolences from guests at his "orphan" status, even as her parents tried their best to immediately change topics on his behalf.

Andromeda and Moly on the other hand, seemed most prone to acting the mother hen, but had thus far contained themselves and only indulged in rather long hugs as Draco and Hermione finally started the tedious task of thanking guests and bidding goodnight.

They'd started the process more than an hour ago.

Harry and James, dressed adorably in a tiny suit, were the final straw for Draco in the endless parade of farewells required before their release from the wedding.

Hermione kissed both Harry and James on the cheek, the smaller Potter squealing a giggle and burying his face in his father's shoulder.

Harry shifted James in his arms and held him out towards Draco, making the toddler giggle harder.

"Here Malfoy, do you want to hold your nephew?"

Draco instead reached out a large hand and ruffled the already messy black hair of James.

"One day Potter, I am going to have a Time Turner built, go back to our Third Year and show you this memory just to witness the look of pure rage and disgust on your moronic pre-teen face."

"You'd have much better luck getting a rise out of Fifth Year me. Moody little bugger."

Hermione thought it best to call it a night after that based on Draco's eye roll.

Away from prying Muggle eyes inside the house, Draco held out his arm to apparate them to his home. No, their home.

She reached for him, then pulled back suddenly. "Promise you won't laugh at me?"

"Granger, you know I can't be held to impossible standards."

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nificant and obvious bulge in his trousers. It probably wouldn't take very long with the way she'd riled him up, perhaps a shallow thrust or two past her lips and he'd spill down her throat...

"Knock knock love birds!"

One surefire way to kill his erection: the chirping voice of Ginevra.

"If you're quite finished," she called through the door, "I've spun a tale to all your curious guests about fixing the missing bride's hair and makeup!"

Draco yanked the door open and glared at the unwelcome intrusion.

"Which it appears Padma and I will need to do as it stands," she broke off with a snicker as she noticed the dazed and rumpled Hermione behind him. "Married all of two minutes and you already reek of dirty deeds. Come along Mrs. Granger-Malfoy."

She reached around Draco and tugged Hermione out by the arm and shoved her lightly down the hall. With Hermione out of sight, Ginny turned back to Draco with a calculating expression.

"Hm, face a bit pink, lips swollen, hair tousled but not too messy... suit still buttoned correctly... tie still in place..."

Draco ignored her and proceeded to wash his hands instead.

"Ah!" she crowed in triumph. "I knew it! Hermione just received some marital benefits, eh?"

"You'd think motherhood would have tempered some of that crudeness. Classy as ever, Ginevra."

"Well her benefit is mine too, I'm getting paid out big time for this little tryst."

Draco raised a brow at her reflection in the mirror. "Are you reproaches actually gambling during our wedding?"

"Oh, there's quite the scandalous amount of betting going on here involving all sorts of predictions around your nuptials. This particular pile of gold revolves around why no one could find hide nor hair of the new couple. Ron and Dad abstained from the bet here, but the rest of the men were all rather rude, they went for full on shagging. The women were far too romantic, they all put in for heavy snogging. But I said you'd be a gentleman and let the lady get off."

"Tell me again how you are not the Potter with an Auror badge?"

"The pay is shite. Now, downstairs with you, I've got gold riding on how many old Muggle biddies try and pinch your bum."

Draco scowled and vowed to stick very close to his new bride. "You're an awfully shameless lot."

"Quite. Think you could kiss at least eight sets of wrinkled knuckles? That particular over/under is a rather hefty sum for the victor."

"Spit the pot with me and I'll get you twelve sets."

"That's the spirit. Welcome to the family, Malfoy."

Draco recoiled in disgust. "Not sure which wedding you just attended, but I'm fairly certain I married *Granger* today."

"Oh you sweet, naïve fool. You just married *Hermione*. My parents have adopted people for far less."

His face registered a mixture of dawning horror, confusion, and incredulity as the reality of that statement set in. Ginny would have none of this, and physically pushed him towards the stairs.

of his hand.

Caught you, Malfoy.



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The after-party, or perhaps by this hour it could be considered the after-after-party, was still in full swing in their ballroom when Hermione and Draco could finally pull themselves away. They'd made the innumerable rounds for final farewells, and even with their clear intent to leave the reception, it had still taken George and Ron debating their latest invention to divert enough attention for them to slip upstairs. Draco hoped the professional cleaning crew hired by Narcissa had experience in getting burn marks off floors and walls left by *Blazing Booze* ("spit flames up to 20 feet long in the shape of your choosing?").

Draco noted with relief that their chambers had a distinct lack of flower petals when he and Hermione could finally retire. He wondered if he'd offended Crick by telling him, in no uncertain terms, to please keep any and all hyacinths out in the garden from now on.

Hermione sat on the edge of their bed and patted the spot next to her. Draco sank down beside his wife and allowed her to draw him in for a gentle kiss that soon deepened into a preview of the more carnal acts to follow. But Draco disengaged before this tempting woman and her supple lips could distract him any longer.

"It's tradition in my family for the groom to gift his bride something rather extravagant. My father gifted my mother the rose garden at Malfoy Manor. But I thought you might like something different."

With a nervous clearing of his throat he picked up his journal off the bedside table. "You wrote your own version of vows to me and I wanted, I *needed*, to do the same for you."

Hermione's chin quivered and he might have succeeded in a repeat performance of happy tears if he could but suppress his constant urge to annoy her.

"And of course, it only seemed right, since—"

"Draco Malfoy don't you dare say it right now—"

"—turnabout is fair play."

She uttered a watery laugh, tears staying put for the time being.

Draco never thought himself particularly good at writing out personal thoughts or feelings. But he knew Hermione would never judge him for this, and would appreciate the show of vulnerability. She would not think him weak. After the intense experience of the bonding ceremony, Draco felt a renewed strength within him, and it did not take much internal coaxing to forge ahead. But then, she'd always made him brave.

He opened to the proper page and removed the postcard from Venice that still served as his bookmark. She let out a soft gasp at the sight. "You still have the postcard I sent you?"

"Yes."

"That feels like ages ago doesn't it?"

She shot him a wistful smile and while Draco could now look back upon that time in their relationship with fondness, he preferred the here and now.

"Hermione, I have always been committed to you. I had no need of vows or spells to tell me what I already knew. I think I was yours from the second you fed me that scones in public."

He couldn't resist teasing her, just a little. She immediately took the bait. Merlin, he'd never tire of riling her up.

"You goaded me into it!"

"And weren't you all too willing, letting me suck on your fingers in front of all and sundry?"

"Oh my gods, it was hardly anything remotely salacious until you turned it around on me!"

"It was indecent, I'm sure we scared several Muggle children that day."

They laughed together, overcome with the absurd memory of the mutual ridiculousness of their past selves. When they'd calmed down, Draco tucked a curl behind her ear and returned to his written words.

"The life you've built with me is more than I could ever have imagined," he stated quietly. "I may have changed quite a bit, but I'll always be selfish and greedy, though it now manifests in different ways. I will always covet more of you. I will always desire more time with you. We bound our souls together today for this life and any others to come and I am telling you that it will never be enough for me. I know how that sounds and I don't care."

He lifted her wrist to his lips for a quick kiss of gratitude.

"Thank you for seeing me, really seeing me, as I am. Not who others wanted me to be, nor who they feared me to be, but for who I truly am. And who that is..." He paused to swallow the lump in his throat.

"Or who that was... was a man who thought himself no longer needed in this world. But you made me want to try to carve out a place for myself that I'd earned through my own contributions, with my own deeds, with my own name... and I think that... I think that I've mostly succeeded... in becoming a good man."

He couldn't help the brief peek up at her. A silent request for validation. She sweetly reassured him, knowing exactly what he needed to hear.

"You did Draco. I always knew you could."

He nodded and read his last few lines to her. "I promise to keep trying. You have given me more love and happiness than any one man has a right to, and for this gift I can but say thank you. Know that I will love you, Hermione, always."

"I love you."

He pulled her in for a kiss, but she broke it soon after to lean back, suspicion and skepticism etched on her features.

"What's that look for?"

"I know you did something extravagant too. Out with it."

clit before plunging two fingers inside her.

"Yes... awfully sentimental for a man who... a man who thought the Muggle ceremony... *oh right here...* ceremony would be... superfluous... *yes Draco...*"

"Been chatting with Theo have you?"

"Well he's... he's... my friend too."

Draco stilled his fingers within her. "As your husband I'd like to request that any time any part of me is inside of you that you refrain from speaking of other men."

"You brought him up first," she whined and tried bucking her hips, but Draco's other hand held her by the waist in place. He smirked as Hermione attempted a sort of thrashing movement to encourage some friction but both his grip and the amount of tulle pinned beneath her wouldn't allow for it.

Hermione went completely still and just when Draco thought he'd finally get her to beg, the little cheat grabbed him by the belt and palmed him through his trousers. He let her rub up and down his length a few times before conceding defeat and resuming the pace with his fingers inside her.

Her hands fell away as she grabbed the counter beneath her for dear life, and Draco prepared himself for his favorite sight in the entire world. He leaned in to hover his mouth just above the corner of her parted lips, the tip of his nose pressed against her cheek.

"Come for me, wife... I'm going to take care of you like this for the rest of our lives... be a good girl and come for me..."

Something he should have already known, but withholding pleasure could never compete with whispered praises and demands if he wanted to hear her plead, if he wanted to feel her clench even tighter around his digits.

"Oh please... *please*... I'm so close..."

Yes, he could tell.

"You want to be a good wife, don't you love? Show me you can be good... come all over my fingers..."

Hermione showed him perfection.

She threw her arms around him, chanting a breathy refrain of "I love you I love you I love you," into his neck as she rode out her high.

When she'd returned to earth, Hermione reached for his belt once again, but Draco took her hands in his.

"No, this was for you."

"We'll be quick, let me just—"

"Absolutely not," he protested and helped her down off the counter and smoothed down her dress. "When we consummate this marriage I will be taking my time. So let's go fulfill our social obligations because once this wedding is over I'm not letting you leave our bed for quite some time. Days, even."

Hermione drew him in for yet another heated kiss.

"Are you sure I can't at least take care of you? It hardly seems fair," she frowned and eyed the sig-

fixed on his glowing bride.

A camera clicked and flashed and still Draco did not tear his gaze away. Flower petals rained down upon the newlyweds (not grains of rice because Granger said they were bad for the birds), and while the overall effect assuredly looked lovely, he kept his eyes on her. They walked back down the aisle, arm in arm, and Draco's long stride ensured they made quick work of it.

The second they stepped over the threshold of her parents' home and out of sight, Draco tightened his grip and apparated them away. They instantly reappeared in the Grangers' upstairs guest bath, and Draco wasted no time in hoisting Hermione atop the sink and claiming her lips.

These were not kisses for public consumption.

These were kisses of tongues and teeth and moans and roaming hands as Draco stepped between the layers of Hermione's dress to part her legs and encourage the ultimate close proximity. Draco teased out her tongue with his own and when she panted into his mouth he allowed her a brief reprieve and moved down to her neck.

His hands slid over the front of the satin material to knead her breasts, approval of his touch exhibited with her heeled feet digging into his back. As Draco dropped sin disguised as worship along the delectable skin of her collarbone, Hermione came to her senses for a moment.

"Draco... we're meant... meant to be... receiving our guests," she said, though her tone of voice suggested she much rather Draco keep sucking a love bite just beneath her ear.

"Ask me if I care," he whispered threateningly.

He took her lips once more, intent on silencing her the usual way, with the added maneuver of reaching his hands down the top of her bodice so as to thumb over her nipples.

"And we need... need to... take our... pictures."

But even as Hermione said it, she still bunched up the material of her dress to press herself fully against him. Draco rocked into her for a few euphoric moments, relishing in her wanton sighs as he rubbed against her core with an achingly hard cock.

"You look fantastic, did you know?" he groaned.

She went for his neck this time, licking along his pulse point. "So you like my dress then?"

He removed his hands from her chest and gave her a once-over.

"Mrs. Malfoy if you didn't look so bloody beautiful I'd rip it straight off."

"That's Mrs. Granger-Malfoy, if you please, and either way I'm still your wife."

He jerked his head back to stare her full in the face. Wife. *His wife*.

"Wife," he echoed, tasting the term of endearment on his tongue. "Wife," he whispered against her lips. "Wife," he crooned into her ear. "Wife," he muttered in the crook of her neck. "Wife," he gasped into the valley between her breasts.

All the while, his fingers trailed underneath the skirts of her dress, skimming along the heated bare skin of her inner thighs and reaching his absolute favorite destination of inside her knickers.

Hermione threw her head back against the sink mirror and showed her hips forward desperately. "Oh... oh gods... *Draco*," she mewled when he teased her wet slit, giving the barest of strokes to her

He never could get anything past her.

"Fine, there's a chateau in France with our names on the deed that awaits your inspection, approval, and signature."

She gasped and it amused him far too much.

"Draco! You cannot go around buying us extra homes without consulting me first!"

"Even if the library is double the size of the one we have here?"

Oh how he adored putting Hermione in an ethical conundrum. Her lips may have pursed, and her brow scrunched, but her expressive eyes always gave her away. Draco could see the delicious way she struggled to harbor indignation over his clandestine purchase while trying not to appear too thrilled by the prospect of this surprise.

"I suppose... should I approve, mind you... that it's a rather thoughtful gesture. But promise me no more secret properties, please?"

"Of course, love. But how do you feel about private islands for anniversaries?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm going to have my hands full with you, aren't I?"

"Now that, Granger, I can promise."



An undetermined amount of time later

Tangled sheets and sweat, followed by sleeplessness and shivering. It would be dramatic stuff indeed if it weren't so commonplace these days. Draco finally stopped trying to find a comfortable sleeping position and settled onto his back. Gray eyes opened and stared to his left before immediately narrowing in accusation.

These days, the tangled sheets, sweat and sleeplessness derived not from harrowing nightmares, but vigorous bouts of lovemaking. The shivering that often followed born not from convulsive tremors, but instead from Hermione's penchant for pulling the covers over her body and away from her husband's as she slept.

"You are absolutely rubbish at sharing. Give me my portion of the blankets back you little thief."

A sleepy chuckle sounded through the air and Hermione breached the gap to struggle into Draco's side. He took advantage of her closeness to reach a hand down to cup her bum and gave it a firm squeeze. Hermione giggled and rolled away from him.

"You're not getting your lecherous hands anywhere near me until I've had tea and something to eat," she protested.

"Tired you out last night, did I love?"

"Mmmm, something like that."

"Fancy some scones?"

"Oh gods yes, that sounds wonderful."

Remain Nameless

Draco leaned over and pecked her lips then rolled out of bed to get dressed and complete his errand. As he emerged fully clothed from the bathroom he found Hermione sitting up in bed, topless with the sheets pooled to her waist, curly hair simply everywhere. This was his life now and fuck if it wasn't fantastic.

"Are you happy?" She asked suddenly, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

"If you could see the sight in front of me right now, you would know that to be a stupid question."

She huffed and crossed her arms over her bare chest, but her lips twitched all the same.

"I only meant to ask... are you happy with the decision we made last night?"

Last night... last night had been a beacon of glorious, curative light in the dark and cloud-ridden tapestry of his life, as memories of Hermione often were.

He'd come through the Floo, finally home after a several hours-long meeting with the Falcons' coaching staff. Loosening his tie, he trudged up the stairs, and passing by Watson saw the elf sign, "Would you like a cup of tea before bed, Sir?"

Draco signed back, "No, thank you, have a good night," and Watson smiled and continued on his way.

Draco reached the bedroom to find Hermione shuffling anxiously in front of their bed, clenching and unclenching her hands and muttering to herself. The second he spied Draco, Crookshanks shot him an unblinking stare and sauntered out of the room. *"Your turn my dear chap, I've put in my time tonight."*

"All right love?"

"Yes," she squeaked, looking startled at him having approached. Draco waited the beat out in silence before she caved, as he knew she would. "No. Fine, I've just been doing a lot of thinking."

"I can see that. What about?"

She paced a few more rounds and he bided his time, letting her come to terms with the thoughts and emotions swirling in her head.

"I received my reminder notice from the Apothecary today. My refill of my Contraceptive Potion for next month is ready to be picked up."

She paused here, but Draco made no comment, confused as to where this conversation was going.

"I have the last dose left, you see. My current prescription for this month. I was meant to take it this morning so it would protect us for the next 30 days."

She exhaled slowly and met his gaze with a determined glint. "I didn't take the potion."

Draco wrapped a long arm around one of the bedposts to steady himself.

"Which means?"

"Which means if you make love to me right now I could very well find myself pregnant."

He couldn't move towards her fast enough.

Though Hermione quickly reminded him that while she'd theoretically already be fertile, every witch's body was different and it could take some time. Draco waved aside her cautious tempering of expectations and they'd made love several times last night. To know that this woman considered him fit to give her a child and then embark on the journey of parenthood together would probably inspire

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"I am," she replied, beaming at him.

The officiant proffered the rings that rested on the open pages of her ceremony book to the couple. Draco plucked the snaler gold wedding band off the page and held it to her fingertip. He then repeated the easiest words he'd ever been asked to say, and even though his voice trembled, he knew the culprit to be awe, rather than nerves.

"I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, take you, Hermione Jean Granger, to be my wedded wife.

I give you this ring as a sign of our love, trust, and marriage. I promise to care for you above all others, to give you my love, friendship, and support, and to respect and cherish you throughout our life together."

Draco slid the ring all the way past her knuckle, then thumbed over where it came to rest. Where it would remain forevermore.

Hermione's voice sounded higher-pitched than usual, but rang out for all to hear.

"I, Hermione Jean Granger, take you, Draco Lucius Malfoy, to be my wedded husband.

I give you this ring as a sign of our love, trust, and marriage. I promise to care for you above all others, to give you my love, friendship and support, and to respect and cherish you throughout our life together."

The smooth feel of gold pushed against his skin, placed there by a woman he'd surrender his magic for if she asked it of him, but knew she never would.

The next pronouncement from the officiant may not have included the phrase, "I now declare you bonded for life," but Draco felt the indelibility of their vows nonetheless. He dared someone, anyone, to try and tell him they weren't already bound together eternally and see which curses left his wand.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss to seal your union."

Hermione let out a startled laugh when Draco wasted no time in yanking her towards him to follow the delightful instruction. Draco was careful not to disturb her artfully styled chignon with eager fingers, but Hermione did not grant him the same courtesy. After the second of surprise at his enthusiasm, her eyes smoldered and she threw her arms around his neck and thrust her hands into the hair at the back of his head.

He'd kissed her countless times before this moment, but the tingle of blissful peace that rippled through him when he pressed his lips to hers and cupped her face felt new in a way he could not describe.

With an incredible amount of restraint on his part, Draco kept the kiss moderately brief, only allowing for a gentle and momentary dip of his tongue between her parted lips. She broke away with a light giggle as someone (probably Weasel, the scoundrel) let out a wolf whistle. Draco pressed another kiss to her temple and he heard a shaky exhalation of "I love you."

Draco did not care that they were in front of an entire crowd of people and that the look on his face had probably turned feral. This woman had just married him, happily it would seem, and he intended to immediately show her how much he appreciated this recent development in their relationship. Hermione tucked her arm through the crook of his elbow and faced their guests, but Draco's stare

Remain Nameless

There.
Right there.

His whole fucking world came towards him, willingly. Eagerly, according to the expression on her face. What had he been running from?

His face felt odd. Tight. Pinched. He'd be required to move his mouth soon, but no longer felt confident in its ability to function properly. Should he smile? Is he already smiling? Why did configuring his face into a basic human expression require this much mental and physical energy?

When the family unit reached him, Draco took a determined step forward. Each of her parents kissed Hermione on her blushing cheeks. Her father offered Draco a sincere handshake that he returned but did not feel and some gruff approval that Draco did not hear. Her mother pecked his cheek but it registered no sensation and whispered something sweet that he did not catch. Hermione passed off her bouquet to her mother and reached for him with both hands.

Hello, Hermione mouthed.

A white dress. A wide smile. And she stood in front of him with her small hands clasped in his and *it's real* and he put every Dementor in the universe on fucking notice with the way he felt right now.

Distantly, perhaps on some other planet, Draco heard the measured and booming voice of the officiant, welcoming the guests to bear witness to this union and delivering some rote speech on the importance of today's occasion. Everything surrounding them that should have triggered his senses failed to make an impact beyond a blur.

Only Hermione offered clarity; her sweet face an entreaty to slip into a hypnotized state wherein he would only ever feel cherished. Though no vows had yet been spoken, the firm way she gripped his shaking hands offered an eternal promise of safety in her love.

Breathing felt difficult in a way he hadn't experienced before—not a loss of breath that signified impending panic, nor a struggle for air that warned of too much exertion or stress, but in a way that his lungs felt foreign, every part of his body untethered because Hermione had rendered him undone.

His physical form had cracked wide open and his heart and soul laid bare for all to see. Draco would go through with the official soul-bonding next week, lest he wish to be murdered by Narcissa, but he no longer believed it necessary. His soul already belonged with Hermione now, and if the bonding ceremony felt even a tenth this euphoric, then he might shatter from sheer ecstasy.

His bride bit down on her lip to hide a giggle and urgently squeezed his hand.

“...to marry Hermione?”

The words of a question seemed to enter his ear in disparate pieces, and he realized he'd quite missed what the officiant had asked him.

“Sorry, could you repeat that?” Draco had to ask, and heard some light laughter as his face flushed.

The older woman smirked, but again delivered the request in a professional monotone: “Are you Draco, free, lawfully, to marry Hermione?”

Draco, free, lawfully, to marry Hermione?”

“I am,” Draco firmly replied this time.

“Are you Hermione, free, lawfully, to marry Draco?”

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every Patronus he ever cast from this day forth.

So if Hermione thought he'd changed his mind this morning, he needed to thoroughly disabuse her of that ridiculous notion.

“It's enough that you'd want a family with me. You are enough for me. Remember what we discussed? We agreed to try. If it happens, it happens, and we'll see this through together.”

He buried his hands in her hair and kissed her so thoroughly that he felt her on the cusp of succumbing to yet another round in bed, when she pulled away and giggled. “Your evil persuasion tactics will not distract me. Off to the café with you.”

She shoved him lightly away and sunk back against the mattress and pulled the sheet around her body.

“You love me,” he smirked down at her.

“Prat,” she threw back and stuck her tongue out childishly.

Draco had just crossed the threshold when he heard her call out, “I love you!”

Hermione never let him leave their home without saying it to him.

Arriving in the Muggle world, he entered the coffee shop, already bustling with patrons. The elderly owner worked the till today and given the events of last night and this morning, Draco never had more affection for an acquaintance in his entire life. After she'd taken his order and accepted his payment, Draco decided he'd been aloof and nameless for long enough.

“Thank you so much...”

“Elsie,” she supplied.

He thought it over for a moment, then ploughed ahead.

“This is a long time coming but,” he held out his hand to the woman, “I'm Draco.”

Elsie shook his hand and let out a matronly chuckle. “Oh I know that dear, your wife sends us a Christmas card every year.”

Draco grinned. “She's good like that.”

“Odd for you to be on your own, she well this morning?”

“Quite. I offered to pick up our favorites and let her have a bit of a lie-in.”

She smiled toothily at him. “Oh you are a keeper aren't you? There's an extra scone in it for you, dear,” she said and handed a paper bag and the beverages to Draco.

He made his way across the busy weekend thoroughfare toward the alley from whence he came. Overcome with a sudden sense of sentimentality, Draco looked back at the little coffee shop that had meant so much to him and Hermione, from their chance meeting, to their budding friendship, to his marriage proposal, to countless mornings of falling even more in love long after she'd agreed to be his wife.

He shook his head with a fond smile at the serendipitous name emblazoned across the shop's windows: A Fresh Start Café.

The younger version of Draco had snorted decisively at the saccharine and far too on-the-nose name, but today, Draco could only summon immense gratitude at what both those words and that

place meant to him.

He twisted into apparition, appearing the next moment in the traveling parlor of the home he shared with his wife and climbed the stairs to their bedroom.

Draco didn't know what awaited him and Hermione in the years to come. He only knew that right now, he had a beautiful woman waiting in bed for tea, scones, her husband, and if they were very, very lucky, a new addition to their lives together.

A fresh start.

FIN

What if what if what if?

I am okay with this I am okay with this I am okay with this

The sound of music dragged him out of his fear of ineptitude and thrust him back into the reality of his impending marriage. A familiar tune pricked his ears and it took a real effort to hold in a loud laugh. Because the song being delicately played by the pianist and the guitarist was instantly recognizable to Draco as the instrumental back-half of "Layla."

Leave it to Granger to select a wildly inappropriate song for the occasion of their wedding. He immediately conducted their imaginary argument in his head.

"Merlin, Granger, you can't be serious? It's about an infamous love triangle. On what planet is that suitable for a wedding?"

"Oh who cares? It's such a beautiful melody and you love it! I don't give a flying fig what people will say. I love this song and you love this song and that's that!"

Good lord, she even won the made-up rows inside his own mind.

But his amusement at his own pathetic state of constantly besotted was short-lived.

She appeared, flanked in the doorway of the house by her parents. The guests all stood and finally turned their backs to Draco in favor of a far more appealing sight.

There.

Right there.

Not forty feet from him.

There in the sweet upturn of her lips that signified genuine joy.

There in the rise and fall of her chest; fluttering breaths that comported a touch of nerves.

There in the cinched-in bodice of her mother's altered wedding dress. The same one from her picture above the fireplace, now adorning Hermione's figure. A pristine white dress that accentuated her lovely shape; a shape he'd know blind with curves he'd grab and knead and clutch onto for dear life.

There in the way she held her bridal bouquet, a collection of flowers overly familiar to him. The same type of narcissus flowers his father would gift his mother on special occasions. A mother she'd sought to include, just for him.

There in the upward tilt of her chin, set high in that determined way of hers. It was slightly haughty and too endearing by half and screamed, "I know bloody well what I'm getting into, thank you very much."

There in the bright gleam of her eyes. Eyes focused on nothing but him. Excited, glowing eyes, the only ones capable of piercing him acutely. Eyes flecked with a golden color that inspired a madness wrapped in the embrace of desire, a love entrenched in willing foolishness. Draco's long list of poor life choices weighed on him, and some days that weight felt heavier than others. Two of three Unforgivable Curses had left the wand currently stowed away in his inside jacket pocket. But if you told him that to arrive at this particular moment—with those eyes seeking his—that he'd need to re-commit every last despicable act, re-feel every painful second, re-live every moment of torture? He'd accept and without hesitation, grateful for every regrettable second that led him here.

Remain Nameless

With nothing more to be said between them, Theo pulled the doors open and escorted Draco to his proper place: the end of an aisle waiting for his bride, alone but for their officiant.

The matronly woman with her sharply cropped haircut and overall demeanor reminded him so strongly of Madam Hooch that it succeeded in settling some of Draco's nerves. But he experienced another pang of regret as she reminded him of another task Hermione had taken on solo: masterfully creative Charms work on some papers for both Draco's Muggle identity and so they could celebrate in her parents' garden.

The officiant regarded the stiffly standing Draco with a knowing grin. "Steady on lad, I've presided over dozens of these things. Just repeat back what you're told and it'll all be over soon."

He might've nodded or acknowledged her in some way if he knew how to operate his body at the moment. Occlumency would help with this next bit, but Draco knew he'd ultimately regret sinking into the numbness. Hermione didn't deserve a vacant groom.

Uncomfortably aware that a large number of eyes watched him, and though tempted to sneer or scowl, he repeated to himself that most attendees did not know the first thing about him. To them, he was merely Hermione's unfamiliar and mysterious fiancé. The non-magical sector openly stared, but with curiosity devoid of malice.

Draco heard an elderly woman in the second row of seats gossip loudly to her neighbor: "He's *French*, you know, and from old money. Looks like that boarding school paid off for our Hermione. And no parents in sight, the poor dear, but I suppose that means no troublesome in-laws, eh?"

"Oh yes, the poor thing," her friend replied, also in a carrying voice. "Fills out that suit rather nicely, doesn't he? And, as you said, *French*."

The contingent of magical folk in attendance included far too many Weasleys and he could already see Molly dabbling at her eyes while keeping a physical hold of her husband, who appeared so overex-cited by all the Muggles surrounding him he quite literally bounced up and down in his chair.

Aunt Andromeda sat next to Teddy (hair a white-blond today, which Draco thought might be the shy boy's way of accepting him) but with an open chair on her other side. She craned her neck behind her every so often, and Draco stifled down the rising feeling of disappointment once more.

The eyes of a certain group of guests sparkled with amusement at the sight of him awkwardly holding the attention of far too many strangers and doing his best not to scream. Draco willed himself not to look at either Potter or Weasel, but Ginny's knowing eyes and gleeful curl to her mouth set off warning bells in his mind. *The fuck is that look for, Ginerva?*

This odd purgatory in which he now existed, this strange limbo between fiancé and husband, felt like a gulf that would never be breached. Moving forward in time meant making vows he fully intended to keep to a woman he intended to cherish, but what if he failed? What if he gave Granger everything he had and it wasn't enough? What if she hated living with him? What if they devolved into one of those stereotypical married couples, miserable in their togetherness but too afraid of loneliness to call it quits? What if he avoided all this risk and really did apparate away and leave Potter and co. the messy task of obliterating an entire crowd and then hunting him down for a proper dismemberment?

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of you. What do you think Hermione would say if she could hear you right now? Or your healer?"

Gods, Theo might accidentally motivate Draco into taking his place at the end of the aisle prematurely if it meant he didn't have to sit through this stream of self-righteousness.

"Probably some type about how I need to stop thinking myself undeserving of happiness."

Theo blinked in surprise. "So he is capable of listening then. We need to work on your follow-through though."

They shared wry grins, but Theo turned serious again.

"I used to think like you, you know. And I always thought we were quite the pair. Never destined for happiness. And that if we ever did manage to secure just a little bit of happiness that eventually it would all come crashing down. But I was so very wrong."

He trapped Draco in a shared stare. "No more Dark Lords, no more overbearing fathers, no more impossible choices. You're out of obstacles and you're well out of excuses. You can enjoy your life now, I promise mate, the only thing in your way is your pendant for melancholy. You're such a broody little thing, you know."

"And you're a meddling wanker."

Theo barked a laugh and stood to give Draco some breathing space. "You know I... well we've known each other since birth but I..." Theo coughed and fiddled with a cufflink. "I've seen everything you've had to overcome and I... well it's quite admirable really. What you've done for yourself despite... despite the burdens placed upon you."

Draco couldn't look at Theo, but he could study the tips of his shoes, which seemed as good a place as any to stare. He glanced up again when he heard the rustling of the curtains.

"My mother... is she... have you seen her at all?"

Theo peeked out again, but Draco already knew the answer even before his friend turned around with a grim look. "I'm sorry, mate, I don't think she's coming."

"Right," Draco nodded. "That's fine. It's fine, it's—"

"It's shite," asserted Theo, bluntly. "It's disappointing and I'm sorry. But Hermione is choosing you today. Never forget that, yeah?"

Theo twisted his own wedding band around his finger. "Sometimes... sometimes we have to choose our family. And that doesn't make those people any less important to us just because we may not share blood."

"Are you including yourself here?"

"If I am?"

A question quietly spoken with a resolute stare, an offer of brotherhood delivered with a stiff spine and an expression that dared Draco to deny him. He wouldn't, of course.

"You know, we probably do share blood."

"Good thing we're not getting married then, eh?"

"I'd probably be enough for my mother to show."

Theo snorted then held out his hand. Draco grasped it and allowed himself to be yanked to his feet.

Remain Nameless

"You really should eat," Sasha admonished quietly. He could only shake his head. He'd found eating a rather cumbersome task the past few days and had trouble forming full sentences. Speaking for a reasonable length of time seemed to require more breath than usual, his lung capacity refusing to cooperate and retreating into a sensation of restricted airflow.

"I shouldn't... we shouldn't... fuck me, how did I ever convince myself that... fuck. I should just... apparate away... hide out in fucking... Estonia or... Peru or... fuck."

Sasha rolled her eyes and moved away with a muttered, "drama queen, honestly."

Theo made a show of peering out the curtains at the presumably assembled crowd awaiting a groom currently in danger of disappearing altogether and starting a new life on the run, possibly as a Muggle.

"Well, Potter's here, so if you do a runner, you've basically assured the entire weight of the DMLE will be thrown into your capture and mutilation," drawled Theo, giving Draco a pointed look before continuing his survey of the guests.

"Oh look and there's Ginevra. Actually I might be more afraid of her than Potter... and there's Weasley, he'd probably get his entire brood involved in your torture... I believe that's your Aunt Andromeda, and we all know crazy runs in the Black family... this is before even mentioning your wife-to-be, who I've yet to see for obvious reasons, but I know for a fact she would hex every last inch of you if you were to break her heart in this public of a venue..."

"She'd be fine... better off," Draco rasped. Theo let out a sort of frustrated exhale and pulled the curtains shut. Draco didn't miss the concerned look shared between Theo and Sasha.

"Love, can you give us a minute? I just saw Astoria and Dennis arrive if you want to grab seats by them."

She squeezed Draco's shoulder as she passed by, but his nerve endings didn't even register the sensation of touch. Theo hauled an ottoman over to sit directly in front of Draco and added another splash of firewhisky to the tea cup. He raised a brow and Draco begrudgingly took a sip, a bit irritated that it actually did serve to take some of the edge off.

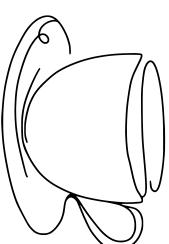
"Draco... it's going to be fine. This is something good, mate, for once this is something good. Hermione is willing to marry you twice, isn't that ridiculous in the best way? What's got you like this?"

Draco shook his head back and forth, feelings of shame and guilt roiling in his gut and at extreme odds with his true wants.

"How can I... how can I go through with this? How can I shackle her to me? It's not—"

"Stop. Just stop Draco." Theo scooted forward in his seat and clenched and unclenched his hands a few times. Draco wondered if he'd meant to lay one on his arm or some other display of physical comfort. An aberration from their general habits of friendship, which would take the form of stiff handshakes, or perhaps a clap on the back every now and then.

Theo clasped his hands together instead. "I'm not sure where you picked up this martyr complex, where you think earning Hermione means constant self-sabotage but it has got to end. There are people out there who showed up today for you. For you and Hermione. Because they believe in the two



Chapter Fifty

"It's just jitters mate, it'll pass. This is normal."

"No, no. Theo, no. This is not normal, I am not normal, I do not feel normal."

I am okay with this. I am okay with this.

"Hmm, and what happened to the wizard who insisted, 'Oh it's just a Muggle ceremony, I'm not that fussed about it, I won't be nervous.'"

Draco had said that. Several times. Verbatim. But he really didn't need reminders from Theo of what an idiot he'd been on today of all days.

"Do you write down every stupid thing I say?"

"No, because if I did that, I'd have to build a whole new wing to my already overflowing library."

If Draco had the wherewithal to glare at his friend, he'd have done so, but currently all his energy was being directed into willing his body not to throw up.

"Have you eaten anything?" asked Sasha as she pinned a boutonniere to Theo's suit lapel. A symbolic gesture as they'd forgone a formal bridal procession with attendants. Draco would stand alone.

Draco gave a sort of feeble grunt and motioned vaguely at the tray of tea and untouched sandwiches. Hermione's mother had dropped off about an hour ago.

"Right, well that's stupid," she clipped and poured him a cup of tea to which Theo added a measure of firewhisky from a flask.

Draco was holed up in the Grangers' sun room with the Notts as babysitters, and would soon be expected to march out the French doors and take his place at the end of an aisle in front of a crowd of mostly Muggle strangers.

Sasha shoved the cup into his numb hands. "Hold still," she ordered unnecessarily and pinned a sprig of flowers to his jacket too. Flowers he hadn't bothered helping to select because he was a complete and utter fuckwit. Gods, he'd let his fear of the unfamiliar override supporting Hermione in planning *their* fucking wedding like the selfish idiot he'd somehow always find a way to be.